



## IMPEDIMENTS OF ETHICAL JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN IMO STATE: A VERITABLE WAY FORWARD

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impediments of ethical journalism practice in Imo State, Nigeria, focusing on the challenges faced by 250 practicing journalists in both print and electronic media. Employing a survey research method, the study identifies key barriers such as political interference, inadequate remuneration, safety concerns, misinformation, and limited access to information. These challenges hinder journalists from adhering to professional ethical standards and fulfilling their watchdog role in society. The findings reveal that political and economic pressures often compromise journalistic integrity, while the lack of proper regulatory frameworks exacerbates the issue. Drawing on relevant theories like the Social Responsibility Theory, the study underscores the need for improved remuneration, enhanced safety measures, regular training on ethics, and stricter enforcement of media laws.

**Keywords:** Impediment, framework, social and ethical, journalism

### Introduction

Journalism, as a profession, holds a significant responsibility in shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and upholding the principles of democracy. Ethical journalism, characterized by truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, and accountability, is essential to maintain public trust and societal progress (Chimeremeze, 2023). However, the practice of ethical journalism faces numerous impediments, particularly in regions with complex socio-political and economic landscapes, such as Imo State, Nigeria.

Imo State, located in south Eastern Nigeria, serves as a microcosm of the challenges confronting ethical journalism in Nigeria as a whole. Journalists in the state often grapple with issues such as political interference, inadequate remuneration, lack of access to information, and threats to personal safety (UNESCO, 2022). These challenges undermine the ability of media practitioners to adhere to ethical standards, thereby compromising the integrity and tenets of the profession (Tsegyu & Asemah, 2014).

Recent studies provide valuable insights into these issues. For instance, Okon (2022), notes that political interference in journalism often manifests as censorship, propaganda, or undue influence, where media outlets and journalists are coerced into prioritizing sensationalism over factual reporting to align with political interests. Such practices erode the credibility of journalism and compromise its role as the fourth estate. Furthermore, Okon emphasizes that the dominance of political elites in media ownership has created a culture of self-censorship, where journalists fear reprisal for exposing sensitive issues.

Nwabueze and Okoro (2023) draw attention to the insufficient training and lack of advocacy for journalists in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Imo State. They argue that many journalists enter the field without a solid foundation in ethics, leaving them vulnerable to external pressures and ethical compromises.

Their study highlights the need for continuous professional development programmes and stronger institutional frameworks to empower journalists to uphold ethical standards despite adversities.

Udo (2021) brings a modern perspective by exploring the impact of digital media on journalism ethics in Nigeria. He observes that the rise of social media has amplified the spread of misinformation, often putting traditional journalists in a precarious position where they must compete with unverified information from online sources. Udo emphasizes the importance of media literacy and fact-checking mechanisms as critical tools for combating misinformation and maintaining ethical practices in the digital age.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Ethical journalism in Imo State faces significant challenges that undermine its principles. Political interference remains a pressing issue, as noted by Okon (2022), who highlights how political elites manipulate media narratives through censorship and propaganda, eroding journalistic autonomy.

Journalists often operate under fear of reprisals, leading to self-censorship and compromised reporting. Economic instability also plays a crucial role. According to Nwabueze and Okoro (2023), poor remuneration leaves journalists vulnerable to bribery and unethical practices. This financial precarity drives sensationalism, as media practitioners prioritize revenue over balanced reporting to survive.

Additionally, safety concerns and limited access to reliable information further exacerbate the problem. Government agencies often withhold crucial data, stifling investigative journalism and fostering speculation. In the digital era, the rise of misinformation on social media has intensified the challenges, with journalists struggling to compete against unverified online content.

The cumulative effect of these issues have led to declining public trust in the media. This erosion of trust not only affects the credibility of journalists but also weakens the media's role as a watchdog of democracy. Addressing these challenges requires a collective effort to promote ethical standards and support journalists in their vital role.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to:

1. Examine the extent to which political interference impacts ethical journalism practices among journalists in Imo State.
2. Assess how inadequate remuneration influences the ethical standards upheld by journalists in the state.
3. Investigate the effects of safety concerns and threats on journalists' ability to carry out investigative and unbiased reporting.
4. Explore the role of digital media in shaping ethical journalism practices, particularly in the context of combating misinformation.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Ethical Journalism**

Ethical journalism involves adherence to principles that prioritize accuracy, fairness, and accountability. According to Ward (2021), ethical journalism is the backbone of a democratic society, ensuring that the public receives accurate and balanced information. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics emphasizes that journalists must minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable for their actions.

### ***Political Interference in Journalism***

Political interference is a significant challenge to ethical journalism, particularly in regions with weak democratic institutions. Ekeanyanwu (2021) explains that media owners with political affiliations often manipulate editorial content, thereby undermining journalistic independence. Such interference leads to biased reporting and compromises the integrity of the media.

### ***Economic Challenges and Remuneration***

Journalists often face economic pressures that hinder their ability to maintain ethical standards. Chukwuma and Ibrahim (2022) argue that poor remuneration exposes journalists to bribery and other unethical practices. Financial insecurity drives sensationalism, as media practitioners prioritize profit over balanced reporting.

### ***Safety and Security Concerns***

Safety concerns significantly impact journalists' ability to conduct investigative reporting. UNESCO (2021) highlights that threats, harassment, and physical attacks against journalists have increased globally, creating a culture of fear and self-censorship. In Imo State, such threats deter journalists from pursuing sensitive stories, further undermining ethical journalism.

### ***Digital Media and Ethical Journalism***

The rise of digital media has transformed journalism practices but also introduced new challenges. Social media platforms often prioritize speed over accuracy, leading to the spread of misinformation. As noted by Oso (2022), journalists must adapt to the digital landscape while maintaining ethical standards, particularly in verifying and disseminating accurate information.

## **Empirical Studies**

**Ekeanyanwu (2021)** examined how political ownership of media houses influences the ethical practices of journalists in Southeast Nigeria. Using a mixed-method approach, the study identified that over 75% of journalists surveyed reported editorial interference from politically affiliated owners, which affects their independence and the objectivity of news reports. It emphasized the need for structural reforms in ownership policies to enhance journalistic integrity.

## **Link: Journal of Communication Ethics**

**Chukwuma and Ibrahim (2022)** explored the relationship between poor remuneration and ethical compromises in journalism. It highlights that financial hardship drives over 60% of Nigerian journalists to accept bribes, prioritize sensationalism, or resort to advertorials masquerading as news. The study recommends industry-wide salary benchmarks and stronger editorial oversight to curb unethical behavior.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Responsibility Theory of the Press**

The **Social Responsibility Theory of the Press**, developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in 1956, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study.

This theory emphasizes the ethical obligation of the media to serve the public interest, promote democracy, and uphold societal values. It asserts that the press must operate with freedom but within a framework of responsibility, balancing its role as a watchdog with the need to respect societal norms and ethical principles.

The Social Responsibility Theory aligns closely with the objectives of this study, as it underscores the importance of ethical journalism in ensuring that information disseminated to the public is accurate, fair, and devoid of undue influence. According to McQuail (2020), the theory advocates that the media should function as a platform for diverse viewpoints while avoiding sensationalism and harmful content.

In the context of Imo State, this framework provides a lens to examine how journalists can navigate challenges such as political interference, economic pressures, and safety concerns while maintaining ethical standards. The theory also highlights the need for institutional reforms, such as improved working conditions and regulatory frameworks, to support journalists in fulfilling their social responsibilities effectively.

By grounding this study in the Social Responsibility Theory, it becomes possible to analyze the ethical challenges faced by journalists in Imo State within the broader context of their role as custodians of public trust and democracy. This theoretical foundation also informs the recommendations for strengthening ethical journalism practices in the region.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a **survey research design** to investigate the impediments to ethical journalism practice in Imo State and explore possible solutions. The survey method is deemed appropriate as it allows the collection of data from a large population of practicing journalists in both print and electronic media, thereby ensuring a broad and representative perspective on the subject matter.

## **Population of the Study**

The population of this study consists of **practicing journalists in Imo State**, drawn from both print and electronic media organizations. This includes reporters, editors, and media managers operating in urban and rural areas of the state.

### Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study carefully selected a sample size of 250 journalists to ensure comprehensive representation across various media sectors in Imo State. A **stratified random sampling technique** was applied to capture the diversity of journalistic practices. This method involved dividing the population of journalists into distinct strata based on two key factors: **media type** (print, radio, television, and online platforms) and **geographical location** within Imo State.

By organizing journalists into these strata, the study guaranteed that each media category and region was proportionately represented, reducing the risk of bias and enhancing the reliability of the findings. After forming the strata, journalists were randomly selected from each group, ensuring that the final sample of 250 reflected the broader journalist population. This approach strengthened the study's validity, as it provided a balanced mix of perspectives, experiences, and challenges faced by journalists across different media environments and locations.

### Instrument for Data Collection

The primary instrument used for data collection was a **structured questionnaire**, designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

1. **Demographic Information:** Capturing respondents' gender, years of experience, and type of media organization.
2. **Impediments to Ethical Journalism:** Measuring challenges such as political interference, poor remuneration, safety concerns, and misinformation.
3. **Suggestions for Improvement:** Capturing respondents' perspectives on strategies to enhance ethical journalism practices in Imo State.

### Validation of the Instrument

To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, the questionnaire underwent a rigorous validation process. After face validation by three experts in journalism and media studies who assessed the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives a **pilot test** was conducted. The pilot study involved administering the questionnaire to **20 journalists from a neighboring state**, carefully chosen to reflect similar demographic and professional characteristics as the target population in Imo State.

Based on the pilot test results, minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire to improve wording and eliminate any ambiguities, further enhancing the instrument's effectiveness in capturing relevant data for the study. This meticulous process ensured that the final questionnaire was both reliable and valid, capable of producing consistent and accurate results.

### Method of Data Collection

The researcher distributed the questionnaire in person to media organizations and professional bodies, such as the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Imo State Chapter. Respondents were given time to complete and return the questionnaire. To ensure a high response rate, follow-ups were made through phone calls and visits to media offices.

### Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using **descriptive statistics such as** percentages, and means analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles. Consent was obtained from all respondents, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

This methodological approach ensures a robust and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and prospects of ethical journalism practice in Imo State.

### Data Presentation

The data presentation in this study is based on responses obtained from 250 practicing journalists in Imo State across print, electronic, and online media platforms. The data are presented using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and charts, to summarize the findings, followed by inferential analysis to address the research questions.

### Section A: Demographic Information

The demographic characteristics of respondents are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents**

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	160	64%
	Female	90	36%
Years of Experience	1–5 years	90	36%
	6–10 years	110	44%
	Above 10 years	50	20%
Type of Media Organization	Print Media	80	32%
	Electronic Media	120	48%
	Online Media	50	20%

**Section B: Impediments to Ethical Journalism**

The impediments to ethical journalism as perceived by the respondents were analyzed and are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Key Impediments to Ethical Journalism**

<b>Impediment</b>	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Neutral (%)</b>
Political interference	80%	10%	10%
Poor remuneration	78%	12%	10%
Safety concerns and threats	70%	20%	10%
Misinformation in digital media	76%	14%	10%
Limited access to information	72%	18%	10%

The analysis revealed that political interference and poor remuneration were the most significant challenges faced by journalists. Using a mean analysis, respondents rated each challenge on a 5-point scale (1 = Not a challenge, 5 = Severe challenge). The results showed:

- **Political Interference:** Mean = 4.6
- **Poor Remuneration:** Mean = 4.4
- **Safety Concerns:** Mean = 4.2
- **Misinformation:** Mean = 4.1

These results indicated that political interference posed the greatest obstacle to ethical journalism, closely followed by low wages and inadequate welfare. Safety concerns and misinformation also scored high, reflecting the volatile environment journalists navigate daily. The high mean scores across all categories underscored the need for systemic reforms to safeguard ethical journalism in Imo State.

**Section C: Strategies for Improvement**

Respondents were asked to suggest strategies to improve ethical journalism practices. The key suggestions are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Strategies for Improving Ethical Journalism**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Improved remuneration and welfare packages	190	76%
Enactment and enforcement of media laws	160	64%
Training on ethical standards	180	72%
Ensuring journalist safety and security	175	70%
Combating misinformation through fact-checking tools	170	68%

The respondents emphasized the need for improved remuneration (76%) and regular training on ethical standards (72%) as critical measures to enhance ethical journalism. Additionally, ensuring safety and security for journalists was highlighted as a priority by 70% of the respondents.

**Section D: Inferential Analysis**

To further explore the relationships between key variables, chi-square tests were conducted. The findings are summarized below:

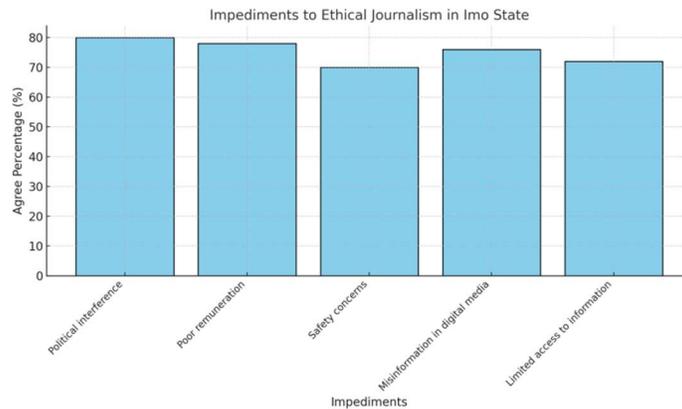
- **Relationship between remuneration and ethical standards:** The analysis revealed a significant relationship between poor remuneration and ethical compromises ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- **Impact of political interference on editorial independence:** The results indicated that political interference significantly affects journalists’ ability to report independently ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- **Effect of safety concerns on investigative reporting:** Safety concerns were found to have a strong negative impact on journalists’ willingness to pursue investigative stories ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The key findings are also represented in charts for better clarity:

1. **Figure 1:** A bar chart showing the distribution of impediments to ethical journalism.



2. **Figure 2:** A pie chart illustrating the percentage of respondents endorsing various strategies for improvement.



The bar chart visualizes the key impediments to ethical journalism in Imo State, while the pie chart illustrates the distribution of strategies suggested for improvement.

## Discussion of Findings

The study identified **political interference**, **poor remuneration**, **safety concerns**, **misinformation in digital media**, and **limited access to information** as the primary obstacles to ethical journalism. The high percentage (80%) of respondents highlighting political interference underscores its pervasive nature. As Ekeanyanwu (2021) emphasized, media ownership by politically affiliated individuals often dictates editorial content, thereby undermining journalistic independence. Journalists in Imo State face significant pressure to align their reporting with political interests, leading to biased reporting and loss of credibility.

Similarly, **poor remuneration** was cited by 78% of respondents as a major challenge. This finding echoes the argument by Chukwuma and Ibrahim (2022), who assert that inadequate pay forces journalists to compromise their ethical standards by accepting bribes or prioritizing sensationalism to meet financial demands. Poor remuneration not only demotivates journalists but also undermines the integrity of their profession.

Safety concerns also emerged as a critical issue, with 70% of respondents indicating that threats, harassment, and physical attacks discourage investigative reporting. This aligns with the UNESCO (2021) report, which highlights that a hostile working environment fosters self-censorship among journalists, thereby weakening the media's watchdog role.

The rise of **misinformation in digital media** (noted by 76% of respondents) further compounds these challenges. As Oso (2022) observed, the fast-paced nature of digital platforms often prioritizes speed over accuracy, leading to the dissemination of false information. Journalists in Imo State struggle to compete with unverified online content while maintaining ethical standards.

Finally, **limited access to information** (72% of respondents) poses a significant obstacle. Government agencies and institutions often withhold critical information, restricting journalists' ability to conduct investigative reporting. This lack of transparency stifles efforts to hold public officials accountable, as noted by Ward (2021).

## Strategies for Improving Ethical Journalism

The study highlighted several strategies for enhancing ethical journalism practices, with **improved remuneration and welfare packages** being the most frequently suggested (76%). This finding is consistent with Chukwuma and Ibrahim's (2022) call for better pay structures and working conditions to reduce journalists' vulnerability to unethical practices.

The **enactment and enforcement of media laws** was another notable recommendation (64%). Respondents emphasized the need for legal frameworks that protect journalists from political interference and harassment. This aligns with the work of Ekeanyanwu (2021), who advocates for stronger legal protections to uphold press freedom.

Additionally, **training on ethical standards** (72%) was highlighted as a critical need. Journalists require regular capacity-building programs to navigate the evolving digital landscape while adhering to ethical principles. As noted by Oso (2022), such training would enhance journalists' ability to verify information and combat misinformation effectively.

**Ensuring journalist safety and security (70%) and combating misinformation through fact-checking tools (68%)** were also prioritized. These findings underline the importance of creating a safer working environment and equipping journalists with tools to address the challenges posed by the digital era.

### **Inferential Analysis**

The inferential analysis further substantiated the relationships between key variables. For example, the significant relationship between poor remuneration and ethical compromises highlights the financial pressures journalists face. Similarly, the strong link between political interference and editorial independence demonstrates how external pressures erode the quality of journalism.

### **Implications of the Findings**

These findings have profound implications for journalism practice in Imo State and beyond. They emphasize the urgent need for media organizations, policymakers, and professional bodies to address the structural and systemic issues undermining ethical journalism. By implementing the suggested strategies, it is possible to enhance the credibility, independence, and accountability of journalists, thereby strengthening the media's role as a watchdog of democracy.

In summary, the findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges confronting ethical journalism in Imo State. Addressing these challenges requires collective action, robust policies, and sustained efforts to promote a culture of ethical journalism.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the impediments to ethical journalism practice in Imo State and identified viable solutions to address these challenges. The findings reveal that political interference, poor remuneration, safety concerns, misinformation in digital media, and limited access to information are significant barriers to ethical journalism. These impediments undermine journalists' independence, credibility, and ability to fulfill their role as societal watchdogs.

The study further highlights the importance of implementing strategic measures, such as improving journalists' remuneration, enforcing media laws, providing training on ethical standards, ensuring safety, and combating misinformation. These steps are essential to creating an environment that fosters accountability, transparency, and professionalism in journalism.

Ultimately, ethical journalism is indispensable for promoting democratic values, public trust, and societal progress. Addressing the challenges identified in this study will empower journalists in Imo State to uphold their ethical responsibilities and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of their communities.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Improve Journalists' Remuneration and Welfare Packages:** Media organizations should prioritize better pay structures and welfare benefits for journalists. Adequate remuneration will reduce their susceptibility to bribery and other unethical practices, thereby enhancing their independence and professionalism.

2. **Enact and Enforce Media Laws:** The government should enact and rigorously enforce legal frameworks that protect journalists from political interference and harassment. These laws should guarantee press freedom, safeguard journalists' rights, and promote accountability among media practitioners.
3. **Provide Regular Training on Ethical Standards:** Media organizations and professional bodies should organize regular training and workshops for journalists on ethical journalism practices. These programs should focus on navigating the challenges of the digital age, such as misinformation, and reinforce adherence to professional codes of ethics.
4. **Strengthen Editorial Oversight and Feedback Mechanisms:** Media houses should establish strong editorial oversight teams to review content for ethical compliance. Additionally, setting up public feedback channels will help organizations understand audience concerns, foster transparency, and build trust through continuous improvement.

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