

# Are journalists truly safe? Communicating the Risks Faced by Investigative Journalists in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study examined the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria. The Hazard Barrier Target Model was used as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, in which 353 journalists in Nigeria were surveyed through a Google questionnaire. Results showed that some of the risks journalists face are physical threats, violence, loss of job and other traumatic situations, risk of legal battles, intimidation, and harassment, among others. Results also showed that some of the impacts of the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria include self-censorship, low engagement in the act of investigative journalism, poor quality of reports on issues worthy of in-depth investigation, and social and professional isolation. It was concluded that the identified risks in the study are some of the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their job and that these risks to a large extent has led to negative impacts on investigative journalism practice in Nigeria. The practical, policy, and scholarly implications of the study were highlighted.

**Keywords:** Journalists, risks, safety, journalism, investigative journalist

## 1. Introduction

One of the essential duties of a journalist is to report issues of local, national and international interests for the general consumption of the public. In the act of doing so, the journalist is expected to verify all information before disseminating to the public with a view to ensure the contents of the information are accurate. This act sometimes requires in-depth investigation (Kurfi, 2018; Prager & Hameleers, 2018). Unlike the regular journalists who fact check his reports the investigative journalist goes beyond that in order to dig why certain things are the way they are. This is why his job is crucial especially to the general public who are always interested in knowing why certain things happen. Undoubtedly, the job of investigative journalists in any given society is very important. Because of the nature of their job people depend on them to reveal the unknown. In doing this, most of the time they engage in series of investigations, which in most cases expose them to potential risks. Chinweobo-Onuoha et al. (2021) noted that all jobs carry inherent hazards and present distinct obstacles. They also observed that occupational hazards are present in various professions, with the only variation being the type and severity of the risks. While carrying out their professional duties, journalists are subjected to varying degrees of occupational hazards, such

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as life-threatening situations, physical assaults, harassment, and the abduction of their family members.

According to Kurfi (2018), the reason why journalists are skeptical in venturing into investigative journalism is because it requires personal initiative, dedication and patience and there are enormous risks associated with it. In similar vein, Olorunyomi (2017) asserts that the practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria is not really inspiring and that investigative journalism is in decline because of the impunity they face on daily basis as they go about their jobs.

Investigative journalists in Nigeria face countless impunity. For instance, The Lagos Chapter of International Press Centre, reported that “officers of the Nigeria police attacked Francis Ogbonna, a cameraman with Arise Television, on Sunday, October 11, 2020 in Abuja while he was interviewing protesters on an #EndSARS rally in Abuja” (IPC, 2020). According to The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) during the ENDS SARS saga, 12 journalists and five media outlets were attacked (Onyeji, 2020). Shibayan (2023) reported that from 2014 to 2018 there was a considerable surge in the attack on journalists with 178 incidents. Then between 2019-2023 there was a substantial increase, with a total of 597 journalists attacked. These statistics are worrisome, even despite the fact that Nigeria is a signatory to many international treaties on human rights. As well as the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that guarantees freedom of expression (PEN International, 2013).

Notwithstanding the reality that journalists serve as society's guardians, when performing their duties, they too must feel safe. One of the most fundamental human needs is safety. It is the right of every man to be truly safe (Murthy, 2018). According to Talabi et al. (2021), there is a possibility that safety will affect people's performance. Like everyone else, journalists require a sense of safety. It is imperative that they ensure their lives and the lives of their family members are not in danger. They have to make certain that their workplace is not a death trap. They must believe that a certain beat does not imply a lack of confidence in their safety. According to Murthy (2018), journalists' ability to perform their jobs well depends on their safety. Based on this assertion, journalists need to feel safe before they can perform optimally. In other words, journalist who works in an unsafe environment has the propensity to perform abysmally.

Empirical evidence has shown that investigative journalism in Nigeria is seriously declining perhaps because of the unsafe nature of it. The number of Nigerian journalists that have died in recent times in the act of carrying out investigative reports is alarming, hence prompting the Nigerian Union of Journalists from all quarters to call on the government and security operatives in the country to end further attacks and reopen investigations of past assaults on media practitioners (Kabir, 2021). Despite all the calls to end impunity against journalists globally and in particular Nigeria the issue has continued unabated.

The need for this study stemmed from the dearth of literature specifically focusing on investigative journalism, and more importantly, the limited number of studies, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, on the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria where the study was carried out. Hence, there is a need to fill the gap.

### **1.1. Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their jobs.
2. Ascertain the extent of risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face.

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3. Find out the impacts of the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

Galvao (2023) observed that the foundation of a free and democratic society is investigative journalism. It is a critical genre of reporting that probes deep into complicated issues and uncovers untold accounts, going beyond the daily news cycle. Investigative journalism is vital to holding influential organisations responsible and providing citizens with accurate information in a world full of disinformation and propaganda. Through their reporting, investigative journalism has played a tremendous role in exposing corruption, holding government officials accountable, and informing the public about significant issues in Nigeria despite the several bottlenecks facing them, such as government censorship and intimidation (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023).

Investigative journalism extends beyond objectivity journalism by conducting a more thorough search and investigation (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023). Investigative journalism is a specialised form of journalism where reporters engage in thorough investigations into certain subjects, typically focusing on crimes, government misconduct, or corporate unethical activity (Nworgu, 2012; Fab-Ukozor, 2003). Also, Hunter (n. d) writes that: "Investigative journalism involves exposing to the public matters that are concealed – either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding. It requires using both secret and open sources and documents." Amponsah (2024, p.23) also noted that "investigative journalism involves activities that focus on issues, cases, or violations because they can (potentially) harm society or information deliberately withheld, hidden or kept secret by individuals, corporate, institutional, or governmental interests." From these definitions one can infer that investigative journalism is a risky venture because the investigative journalist is interested in exhuming fact or uncovering what has been hidden which may not go down well with those who are trying to conceal their crime, misbehaviour or corrupt act. In an effort to cover their track they may resort to using whatever means in stopping the investigative journalist whose job is to bring hidden secret to public knowledge. The watchdog role of the investigative journalist has made his job unsafe with the propensity of facing countless backlash and impunity (Msughter & Abba, 2017). Undoubtedly, this can lead to low engagement in investigative journalism as Anyadike (2013) in a study conducted in Rivers State reported that investigative journalism is practised in Nigeria but its level of practice is abysmally low due to myriads of problems bedeviling the practice. After examining 470 journalists in Nigeria, Talabi et al. (2021) found that practicing journalism is challenging for them due to the physical and psychological hazards associated with their jobs. Høiby and Ottosen (2016) evaluated how front-line journalists' performance was affected by safety. Their findings showed that reporting is greatly impacted by safety concerns. They contend that journalists spend less time in conflict zones because of safety concerns, which lowers the calibre of the stories they cover. According to Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2016), there are significant concerns about journalism's future because of the hazards involved.

According to a study by Gever et al. (2023), journalists covering IPOB activities in South East Nigeria encountered safety risks both offline (physical attacks, harassment, damage to working devices) and online (verbal abuse, threat of attack, personal messages of harassment, and reputational threats). Issues with safety have an impact on journalistic professionalism. Igbashangev et al. (2024) noted in another study that journalists are essential to the dissemination of information and the maintenance of social transparency. However, journalists confront serious hazards and threats to their safety in many parts of the world, which makes it difficult for them to

carry out their professional obligations in an efficient manner. Corroborating this, Flavia et al. (2023) in their study revealed that reporters who investigate sensitive issues such as political scandals, corporate malpractice, organised crime or national security issues face risks to their personal safety. A survey of investigative journalists worldwide by the Committee to Protect Journalists found that more than 60% of them had faced threats, attacks or legal action because of their work exposing wrongdoing.

Dorff et al. (2022) found that journalists' detailed reporting suffers when they are subjected to threats, particularly when it comes to language selection. Miller (2021), on the other hand, found that harassment had a detrimental impact on journalists' attitudes towards journalism and how well they carry out their jobs with a sample of thirty-two American journalists. The study of Nasir and Abdur (2018) revealed that security risks in Pakistan have a negative effect on journalists' ability to do their jobs well. The implication of the safety concerns of journalist is that it will affect their job greatly and a lot of issues will go unreported and such things can hinder development just like Muyideen and Akeem (2020) reported that Nigerian journalists are faced with numerous insecurity issues which if not checked can lead to retrogressive development. Similarly, Shakilah and Kazaara (2023) in their study found that countries with a weak rule of law or limited press freedom pose an even more serious threat. For instance, journalists in Honduras, Mexico, India, Nigeria and the Philippines investigating corruption have often been murdered with a high degree of impunity for the perpetrators.

The fact that many journalists have been attacked and killed with impunity in recent years has caused fear and uncertainty, hence leading to self-censorship, which has resulted in superficial journalism and subsequent weakening of press freedom and the watchdog role of the media (Ola, 2020). The United Nations General Assembly recognised the wide-ranging effects of impunity, particularly when it comes to crimes against journalists, when it passed Resolution A/RES/68/163 during its 68th session in 2013. The resolution called for Member States to take decisive action against the current impunity culture and designated November 2, 2013, as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists (IDEI). The date of the resolution was selected to honour the two French journalists who were assassinated in Mali on November 2, 2013 (UNESCO, 2023).

There are limited studies in Nigeria to the best of the researchers' knowledge that have examined the extent of the risks investigative journalists face in the course of their job as well as the impact of the risks on investigative journalism. The majority of the reviewed studies are conducted outside Nigeria, despite empirical evidence revealing that Nigeria is not immune to the widespread impunities that investigative journalists face. This study, in particular, looked at the safety concerns faced by investigative journalists, unlike most of the previous studies that looked at the issue in general. Therefore, this study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap.

## **2.1 Theoretical Foundation**

This study is based on the Hazard-Barrier-Target (HBT) model. This model was initially derived from the research conducted by Haddon (1966, 1973) and subsequently enhanced by the use of the management oversight and risk tree (MORT) approach (Johnson, 1980). The Hazard-Barrier-Target (HBT) model is an energy model that explains how a potential danger can be averted from causing harm to a susceptible target by implementing various forms of barriers between the danger and the target (Wiersma, 2004). The Hazard-Barrier-Target Model consists of three interconnected concepts: hazard, barrier, and target. The HBT-model serves as the foundation for safety thinking and the concepts of safety and risk management (Guldenmund et al., 2022). This model has been

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utilised in applied science to elucidate precautionary actions that individuals can adopt when confronted with perilous circumstances. Similarly, this model can also be applicable in the context of this study, where the safety of journalists is significantly endangered due to their investigative work.

Schuppa et al. (2006) state that any source that has the potential to harm a target could be the main hazard. In this case, the focus may be people (e.g., coworkers, locals, clients), the environment/ecosystem, or physical assets. On the other hand, barriers are any actions that can stop or lessen a hazard's attack on its target. According to the concept, workers who are faced with risk or danger should rely on their own ingenuity, expertise, and domain knowledge to make sure they consider all relevant HBT relations and are aware of the proper barriers to control them. In light of this study, investigative journalists should take initiative in order to avoid dangerous situations when they happen.

Schupp et al. (2001) did note that targets are vulnerable to the effects of hazards. In the study context, investigative journalists are bound to face hazard as demand by their job. But as the model suggest they need to form a barrier as a way protecting themselves from the danger of the job. The theory is relevant because it provide the basis for the understanding that job comes with its own hazards and on that same note worker (investigative journalist) need to be proactive to stay safe from the potential hazards.

### **3. Method and Procedure**

#### *Design/Population*

This investigation used the descriptive survey research design method. This approach was considered appropriate because of the nature of the issue under investigation, which requires getting good amount of data from journalists on the issue under discourse (Alaekwe et al., 2024). In Nigeria, there are no comprehensive lists of journalists working at various levels. Hence, based on the procedures of Scholl (1996) and Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez (2017) the researcher drew up a national list of journalists and confirmed the information from federal, state and private media outlets in Nigeria. Two independent research assistants compiled the list and it was verified by the researchers. Therefore, this formed a database of 4328 journalists. Meaning that, the population of this study consists of 4328 journalists in Nigeria.

#### *Sample/sampling technique*

The Survey Monkey online sample size calculator statistical tool was used to determine the sample size of 353 at a 95% confidence level and 5% error margin. This study utilised the respondent-driven sampling (RDS) chain referral technique to select the respondents for the investigation. This approach was used because it allowed the researchers include only those needed for the study. The researchers carried out the RDS procedure by sampling earlier participants, referred to as 'seeds', who possessed the characteristics of interest. In this study, Nigerian Union of Journalists zonal executives were the seeds. The initial seeds that were identified using snowball technique were directed to contact and recruit others from their existing network. Progressively, successive sets of participants then recruited journalists from their social networks for participation. This exercise continued until we gathered the required number ( $N = 353$ ) of respondents between April to July 2024.

*Research Instrument*

Google questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. The questionnaire helped to elicit quantitative data. The questionnaire was structured around close-ended questions to generate responses from respondents. The contained 12 questions are related to the research questions. The self developed questionnaire was structured in 4-point Likert-scale format from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

*Validity/Reliability of Instrument*

The researchers employed a face validity check by an expert to verify that the instrument generated the necessary response to answer the study questions. The instrument was subjected to two experts to ensure that necessary modifications and observations were made as regards the instrument. For the reliability, a pilot test was carried out with 17 journalists. The Cronbach’s alpha was used to test the reliability of the research instrument on 7 items with the application of SPSS version 21. According to Laerd Statistics (2018), the Cronbach alpha is the most common measure of internal consistency. The results of the Cronbach alpha showed .90 level of internal consistency. The implication is that the instrument is reliable.

*Method data collection and data analysis*

The questionnaire as an instrument for data collection was distributed using links shared on WhatsApp status as well as groups, direct messages, Facebook, and Twitter handles of respondents within a period of thirteen (13) weeks. After consistent persuasion, responses started coming within this period. Regarding ethics, the researcher obtained consent of the journalists before the commencement of the administration of the instrument. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses as no identifier was attached to the questionnaire. Also, they agreed that the study could be published in a journal on the understanding that their identities were kept secret. Mean analysis and standard deviation were used in analysing the data with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. The collected data was presented in tables.

**4. Results and Discussion**

This section focuses on presentation and analysis of data. The analysis was based on the 337 responses received from the journalists that filled the online questionnaire. The response rate stood at 95% which is perfect for the study analysis.

**Table 1.** Respondents’ responses on the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their jobs

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}$	Std. Dev.	Decision
1.	Physical threats and violence are some of the risks investigative journalists face	3.2	.89	Accept
2.	Lose of job and other traumatic situations are risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the	3.3	.85	Accept
3.	Risk of legal battles is a risk investigative journalists in Nigeria tend to face	3.4	.81	Accept
4.	Intimidation and harassment are the likely risks investigative journalists in Nigeria are bound to face	3.3	.88	Accept
<b>Grand mean and standard deviation</b>		<b>3.3</b>	<b>0.85</b>	

The results as presented in Table 1 above show that, respondents agreed to all the items on the table with a mean range of 3.2 to 3.4. The grand mean rating of Table 1 is 3.3, which is agreeable and implies that the highlighted items on the tables are some of the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their jobs. The standard deviation ranged from .81 to .89, which showed

that the respondents were not far from each other in their responses with regard to their responses on the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their jobs.

**Table 2.** Respondents' responses on the extent of risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}$	Std. Dev.	Decision
1.	Investigative journalists face risks to a large extent when carrying out their jobs	3.4	.80	Accept
2.	Most often when investigative journalists engage in investigation there are potential risks always awaiting	3.2	.81	Accept
3.	Investigative journalists in most of the times do not face risks in carrying out their jobs	2.3	.95	Reject
4.	As far as it is investigative journalism the propensity of potential risk will always be there	3.4	.82	Accept
<b>Grand mean and standard deviation</b>		<b>3.0</b>	<b>0.84</b>	

The results in Table 2 above indicated that respondents agreed to items 1, 2 and 4, while they disagreed on item 3 with a mean range of 2.3 to 3.4. The grand mean rating of Table 2 is 3.0, which is agreeable and implies that investigative journalists in Nigeria face risks to a large extent when carrying out their job. The standard deviation ranged from .80 to .95 which revealed that the respondents were not far from each other in their responses with regard to the extent of risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face.

**Table 3.** Respondents' responses on the impacts of the risks face by investigative journalists in Nigeria

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}$	Std. Dev.	Decision
1.	The enormous risks most times encourage self-censorship	3.2	.82	Accept
2.	Low engagement in the act of investigative journalism	3.3	.78	Accept
3.	Poor quality of reports of issues worthy of in-depth investigation	3.2	.78	Accept
4.	The impact may lead to Social and Professional Isolation	3.2	.72	Accept
<b>Grand mean and standard deviation</b>		<b>3.2</b>	<b>0.77</b>	

The results as presented in Table 3 above show that, respondents agreed to all the items on the table with a mean range of 3.2 to 3.3. The grand mean rating of Table 1 is 3.2, which is agreeable and implies that items 1-4 are some of the impacts of the risks face by investigative journalists in Nigeria. The standard deviation ranged from .72 to .82, which showed that the respondents were not far from each other in their responses with regard to their responses on the impacts of the risks face by investigative journalists in Nigeria

## Discussion

The goal of this investigation was to examine the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria. The results from objective number one, which was designed to identify the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face, revealed that some of the risks they face are physical threats and violence, loss of job and other traumatic situations, risk of legal battles, intimidation, and harassment, among others. Undoubtedly, this is so because of the nature of investigative journalism. Most of the time, they are victims of violence and, in extreme cases, death. Regrettably, investigative journalists have been at the receiving end in the course of their job. This may likely affect their output at the detriment of the general public whose right is to know what is actually happening in society. This finding is consistent with the study of Talabi et al. (2021), who revealed that journalists in Nigeria face physical and emotional job risks that make journalism practice difficult. In a similar vein, the finding of this study corroborates the study of Høiby and Ottosen (2016) who found that safety concerns significantly impact reporting negatively. In view of the finding, Pate and Dauda (2020)

pointed out in a study that the FOI Act, which gives journalists the freedom of information, did not make provision for the safety of journalists. As Chinweobo-Onuoha et al. (2021) noted, there is hardly any job that does not come with risks, but the level at which investigative journalists face life-threatening risks can make them rethink the watchdog role they are expected to play in society. It is glaring that the finding of this study has been able to show relationship with previous studies.

Findings also revealed that investigative journalists in Nigeria face risks to a large extent when carrying out their job. From the data gathered, one can see that investigative journalists in Nigeria face great risk at all times they engage in their job. This may be attributed to the Nigerian working environment, where investigative journalists' safety is not prioritised. Even though one of the goals of investigative journalism is to correct social ills in society, they (investigative journalists) face countless safety challenges on a frequent basis, as indicated in Table 2. This may even linger for a longer time if the safety of investigative journalists is not prioritised and taken seriously. This finding is in consonance with that of Gever et al. (2023), who in their study revealed that journalists covering IPOB activities in south-east Nigeria faced safety challenges both online and offline, ranging from physical attacks, harassment, and damage to working devices. Similarly, Igbashangev et al. (2024) found that in as much as journalists play a role in promoting transparency in society. They still face significant risks and threats to their safety, which in some way hinder their ability to fulfil their professional duties effectively. Also confirming the finding is the study of Muyideen and Akeem (2020), who revealed that Nigerian journalists are faced with numerous insecurity issues on a frequent basis, which, if not handled, can contribute to retrogressive development in the country as well as serious shortfall of investigative journalists in no distant time. The implication is that corruption and other social ills will skyrocket which can even lead to chaos in society. This is to tell you how the safety of investigative journalists is for the interest of all and not to the journalists alone.

Additional results showed that some of the impacts of the risks faced by investigative journalists in Nigeria include self-censorship, low engagement in the act of investigative journalism, poor quality of reports on issues worthy of in-depth investigation, and social and professional isolation. Because of the apparent risks involved in investigative journalism, journalists want to play it safe by carrying out self-censorship, and at other times, it has the propensity to affect the quality of reports they churn out all in the name of playing it safe. As even confirmed by the finding, some journalists are withdrawing from it because of the danger attached to it. Additionally, it promotes social and professional isolation, as no one wants to be caught in the crossfire of investigative journalism. This finding may not be unconnected to the study of Kurfi (2018), who revealed that the great risks involved in investigative journalism are the reason journalists are sceptical about venturing into it. Also confirming this is the study of Olorunyomi (2017), who found that investigative journalism in Nigeria is in decline because of the impunity they face on a daily basis as they go about their jobs. By implication of the finding, the impact of the risks of investigative journalism is negative. In line with this finding is the study of Dorff et al. (2022), who found that when journalists are exposed to threats, it negatively affects their detailed reporting. Also, Miller (2021) revealed that harassment negatively affects how journalists perform their duties and their attitude towards journalism. In a similar vein, Nasir and Abdur (2018) found that in Pakistan, security threats negatively impact the job performance of journalists. The findings of the study strongly agree with the postulation of the HBT model that this investigation was anchored on. Risk are bound to come hence journalists must create a barrier that will ward them off the potential hazards. The barrier could be in form of covering their tracks, protecting their sources, keeping family and friends completely out of the picture and so on.

The study has some limitations. First, the fact that it made use of only one method may not have given enough depth to the findings. The use of mixed method would have given more depth in the finding. Secondly, the study did not consider looking at the current state of investigative journalism in Nigeria. Hence, future researchers should look at this issue using multiple methods as well as examining the current state of investigative journalism in Nigeria.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In line with the results, it is therefore concluded that journalists agreed that the identified risks in the study are some of the risks investigative journalists in Nigeria face in the course of their job and that these risks they encounter it to a large extent on a frequent basis, as such it has led to negative impacts on investigative journalism practice in Nigeria. Based on the results, it is therefore recommended that there is need for journalists training to enable them handle some of these occupational hazards they face in the course of their job. Secondly, in as much as they encounter these risks on a frequent basis they should device means in safeguarding themselves against the hazards. Thirdly, the negative impacts of the risks of investigative journalists should not be discouraged from carrying out their watchdog role in society. This study has practical and policy implications. The practical implication is that this study's findings have been able to point out the danger investigative journalism as a specialised form of reporting face in the Nigerian society as a result of the risks involved. The information of this study could serve as a guide to policymakers in Nigeria to take drastic measures in putting out policies that can safeguard investigative journalists as they go about their jobs. On scholarly implication this study has added to the literature on global discourse on the safety of journalists' particularly investigative journalism in Nigeria.

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