

## **PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES: THE CYBERCRIME ACT 2015 AND ITS IMPACT ON JOURNALISM IN RIVERS STATE.**

**Isaac, .N. Wonwu<sup>1</sup>, Dr. C .J. Njoku<sup>2</sup> and Prof. R .N. Amadi<sup>3</sup>**

*Email: Isaacwonwu@yahoo.com<sup>1</sup>, justice.njoku@ust.edu.ng<sup>2</sup>, amadi.richard@ust.edu.ng<sup>3</sup>*

**<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, <sup>2&3</sup>Department of Public Relations, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria**

### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of journalists in Rivers State regarding the provisions of the Cybercrime Act 2015 and to assess the impact of the Act on their journalistic practices. The problem motivating this study lies in the growing concerns over journalists' limited engagement with the Act, amid rising incidences of cybercrime and the urgent need for media actors to play a proactive role in public sensitization and enforcement monitoring. Despite the crucial role of the press in shaping digital awareness, evidence suggests that journalists may lack sufficient understanding, confidence, and institutional backing to effectively interpret and report on cybercrime-related issues. The objectives of the study were to: assess the level of awareness of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 among journalists in Rivers State; examine journalists' perceptions of the Act's effectiveness; determine the impact of the Act on journalistic practices; explore the approaches adopted by journalists in promoting the Act, and identify the challenges faced in reporting cybercrime-related issues. Anchored on the social responsibility theory, the study adopted a mixed research method. The population comprised 500 registered journalists from print, television and radio stations in Rivers State, and the census method was used to select the entire population due to its manageable size. Both primary and secondary data were utilized through the instrumentality of questionnaire and interview guide, and the research instruments underwent face and content validity checks by experts. Test-retest method was adopted to ensure reliability. Simple percentage analysis was employed for the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used for the qualitative responses. The study found that The study found that journalists in Rivers State generally perceive the provisions of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as ineffective, ambiguous, overly complex, and susceptible to misuse. The study recommends that the National Assembly should consider a stakeholder review of the Act involving journalists, legal experts, digital rights groups, and cybersecurity professionals. This participatory reform process will help clarify vague provisions, ensure press freedom safeguards, and enhance enforceability. The study concludes that despite the strategic role of journalists in promoting digital safety and legal compliance, their effectiveness is undermined by inadequate legal literacy and training.

***Keywords: Cybercrime, Cybercrime Act 2015, Journalism, Perception***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Journalists are adept professionals meticulously trained in the nuanced art of gathering, processing, and disseminating information of public interest from diverse sources, presenting it with precision to ensure comprehension and retention among audiences. This information encompasses reports, news, and occurrences pertinent to the quotidian lives of individuals within society. It spans a wide array of topics, including government affairs, politics, international relations, meteorological conditions, accidents, environmental issues, criminal activities, business, labor, technology, transportation, and education, among others.

Omego and Ochonogor (2013) characterize journalists as individuals who diligently collect or process facts regarding events, occasions, or individuals through astute observation, critical reasoning, verification, and systematic organization into coherent news narratives, thereby furnishing the

audience with an accurate account of events. The fundamental purpose of journalistic reporting is to disseminate information for public consumption, thereby contributing to societal advancement (Samuel & Otikor, 2018). Nwabueze (2005) contends that journalists are tasked with presenting news that is not only effective but also conveyed in a manner that captivates the audience, enabling them to assimilate and comprehend the information for the betterment of society.

Historically, Rivers State has consistently demonstrated a commitment to publishing verifiable facts, eschewing the suppression or falsification of information to serve ulterior motives. Journalists in this region have adhered to their ethical codes, irrespective of the parties involved. They endeavor to provide accurate accounts of events as they unfold, thereby upholding the statutes and ethical standards that underpin journalism in Nigeria. Nevertheless, various factors—including the proliferation of social media platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, alongside logistical deficiencies, inadequate training, insufficient staffing, low remuneration, and substandard working conditions—appear to compromise the integrity of journalistic reporting and adherence to cybercrime legislation in Rivers State.

The introduction of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 represents a substantial legal initiative by the Nigerian government aimed at countering the escalating tide of cyber threats and criminal activities online. As custodians of public information and vigilant overseers of society, journalists are expected to fulfill a pivotal role in informing, educating, and mobilizing the populace regarding such critical legal frameworks. However, in Rivers State, the degree of awareness and engagement among journalists concerning the Cybercrimes Act 2015 is alarmingly inadequate. This deficit in awareness not only obstructs effective reporting and public education on cybercrimes but also contributes to the feeble enforcement and implementation of the Act throughout the region.

In light of the burgeoning rate of internet usage and the concomitant risks of cyber fraud, defamation, identity theft, and misinformation, numerous journalists in Rivers State lack a comprehensive understanding of the specific provisions, legal ramifications, and civic responsibilities delineated in the Cybercrimes Act 2015. This knowledge gap undermines the press's watchdog function, diminishing their capacity to scrutinize cybercrime-related issues, hold stakeholders accountable, and advocate for digital safety. Furthermore, in the absence of proactive journalistic engagement in cybercrime reporting and public enlightenment, the broader societal comprehension and adherence to the Act remains minimal.

Given the escalating digital penetration and the increasing sophistication of cybercriminals, there exists an urgent necessity to assess the level of awareness, perception, and involvement of journalists in Rivers State concerning the Cybercrimes Act 2015. This study, therefore, The study aimed to gauge the opinions of journalists in Rivers State on the effectiveness of the Cybercrimes Act 2015. The research questions of the study were to:

- a. How do journalists in Rivers State perceive the provisions of the Cybercrime Act 2015?
- b. How has the Cybercrimes Act 2015 impacted journalistic practices in Rivers State?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

The Social Responsibility Theory of the press emerged in 1947 through the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission in the United States, formally known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press. This commission was chaired by Robert Maynard Hutchins, who believed that while freedom of the press is essential in any democratic society, it should come with a responsibility to serve the public good. In their report titled *"A Free and Responsible Press,"* the commission argued that media should not only be free from censorship and interference but also be accountable to society. The report stressed that the press has a moral obligation to provide truthful, accurate, and comprehensive news that contributes to societal progress and democratic participation.

Building on these foundational ideas, Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm in 1956 formally codified Social Responsibility Theory in their influential book *Four Theories of the Press*. They described it as a normative theory that combines press freedom with professional

accountability. The theory holds that the media should serve as a watchdog while also adhering to ethical standards, promoting social harmony, and reflecting the plurality of voices in society. The major assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory are anchored in five core principles. First, the media must act in the public interest by providing information that is fair, accurate, and comprehensive. Second, journalists are expected to uphold high professional standards, including objectivity, truthfulness, relevance, and respect for human dignity. Third, the media should operate within a framework of ethical self-regulation, using professional codes of conduct and internal mechanisms to guide their work. Fourth, media content should be inclusive and pluralistic, representing the diversity of opinions, identities, and social groups within a community. Finally, the media must be accountable to the public, not just to media owners, political elites, or advertisers. The social responsibility theory provides a compelling theoretical lens. The theory supports an investigation into how journalists in Rivers State perceive their role in reporting on cybercrime and whether they believe the Cybercrimes Act enables or constrains that role. One of the key expectations of Social Responsibility Theory is that journalists should provide the public with accurate and balanced information, especially on issues that affect public safety, such as cybercrime. By assessing how journalists report on the Cybercrimes Act, the study can reveal whether they see themselves as fulfilling their duty to inform and educate the public about digital threats, online fraud, and cyber-security laws. The theory also encourages ethical standards and self-regulation. Therefore, the study can examine whether media organizations in Rivers State have adopted internal guidelines or editorial policies when reporting on cybercrime-related issues. It also provides an opportunity to explore whether journalists feel free to report objectively on the Act without fear of censorship or political intimidation, and whether the law itself protects or threatens their freedom to report responsibly.

### **Conceptual Review**

An "Act" in legal and jurisprudential discourse primarily denotes a codified law promulgated by a legislative authority, commonly referred to as an Act of Parliament or legislature. In contemporary scholarship, the notion of an Act transcends mere legal drafting; it emerges as a normative instrument that encapsulates legislative intent, societal purpose, and institutional authority. According to Xanthaki (2015), a legal Act is meticulously structured around essential components such as the title, preamble, commencement clause, territorial extent, and substantive provisions, which collectively endeavor to convey the lawmakers' intentions. She underscores that in the absence of a lucid structural framework, the legislative objective becomes nebulous, thereby complicating judicial interpretation.

Scholars have persistently highlighted the significance of legislative purpose as a guiding principle in the interpretation of an Act. This emphasis has propelled the advocacy for purposive interpretation among jurists and legal theorists alike. As Barak (2005) elucidates, the purposive approach empowers the judiciary to transcend mere literal interpretation, focusing instead on the spirit and intent underpinning the enactment of the law. This methodology aligns with the traditional "mischief rule" in statutory interpretation, which seeks to unearth the societal problem that the law aims to address. In this light, Acts are perceived not merely as legal texts but as instruments of public policy devised to rectify deficiencies within existing legal frameworks.

Beyond statutory Acts enacted by legislatures, legal theorists also scrutinize the concept of the "juridical act"—a deliberate legal action executed to engender legal consequences. Van der Kaaij (2016) defines a juridical act as a conscious and lawful manifestation of will aimed at creating, modifying, or extinguishing rights and obligations. Drawing upon speech-act theory, she contends that an Act should be comprehended not solely as a normative declaration, but as a performative act which, once articulated within the confines of legal rules, engenders tangible legal effects. Her scholarship delineates the distinction between the form of an Act and its operational efficacy within legal contexts, demonstrating that the legitimacy of an Act resides in both its procedural formulation and its legal performance.

The theoretical underpinnings of the concept of an Act are profoundly entrenched in legal positivism. Kelsen (1960) posits that an Act acquires its legal authority through its congruence with a superior norm within a hierarchical legal framework, often referred to as the "Grundnorm" or basic norm. This hierarchical structure ensures that every legal Act derives its legitimacy from an established and recognized legal framework. Similarly, Hart (1961) accentuated the notion of the "rule of recognition," which delineates the criteria employed by a society to ascertain what constitutes valid law. In Hart's paradigm, a legislative Act is deemed valid when it has been enacted in accordance with procedural rules embraced by the legal system, such as passage through legislative bodies and formal assent by executive authority.

Conversely, legal realism proffers a divergent perspective. It contends that the actual impact and significance of a legal Act cannot be fully grasped without considering its application and enforcement in practice. Pound (1910) introduced the concept of "law in action," asserting that the true measure of a law's efficacy resides in its practical ramifications rather than its doctrinal elegance. Following this line of reasoning, contemporary realist scholars assess how Acts are interpreted by courts, enforced by regulatory agencies, and experienced by the public. For instance, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 in Nigeria can be scrutinized not merely through its statutory provisions but also by examining its implementation by law enforcement and its interpretation by the judiciary.

In recent scholarly discourse, journalism has been extensively characterized as both a professional and institutional endeavor tasked with the collection, verification, interpretation, and dissemination of information deemed to be of public interest. Contemporary scholars underscore that journalism fulfills a pivotal role in democratic societies by enlightening citizens, facilitating public discourse, and holding power accountable. This multifaceted function of journalism has evolved in concert with social, technological, and political advancements, particularly in the digital epoch.

According to Deuze (2019), journalism is fundamentally a public service activity anchored in core professional values such as objectivity, truthfulness, independence, immediacy, and accountability. He posits that journalism transcends mere transmission of facts, incorporating ethical deliberations that influence the information disseminated. Deuze further contends that the journalistic profession is distinguished by its unwavering commitment to producing verified, accurate, and timely news that serves the public good.

Schudson (2011) elaborates on this perspective by delineating journalism as "the business and practice of producing news" (p.2), accentuating both its professional ethics and institutional function. He characterizes journalism as a mode of knowledge production structured around storytelling, verification, and relevance. In his view, journalists are not merely conveyors of information but interpreters of reality who influence societal understanding of events and issues. Consequently, journalism emerges as a mechanism for democratic representation and transparency.

Hanitzsch (2019) enriches the conceptual framework of journalism by illuminating its cultural dimensions. He defines journalism as a global, socially constructed practice shaped by local norms, values, and expectations. From this vantage point, journalism is not a monolithic model but is practiced diversely across regions, contingent upon political systems, audience behavior, and media regulation. Nevertheless, certain global norms—such as fact-based reporting and public accountability—continue to delineate the core identity of journalism across borders.

According to Wall (2015), cybercrime refers to "criminal acts committed using the internet or other forms of computer networks as a primary means of commission." He differentiates between cyber-dependent crimes, which can only be perpetrated using computers (e.g., hacking, malware attacks), and cyber-enabled crimes, which are traditional offenses augmented by digital tools (e.g., online fraud, cyberstalking). Wall's distinction has become foundational in cybercrime scholarship. Brenner (2010) defines cybercrime as "any harmful act committed from or against a computer or network." She emphasizes the transnational nature of cybercrime, highlighting that it frequently involves perpetrators, victims, and digital infrastructure situated across disparate jurisdictions. This global

scope complicates enforcement and regulation, rendering cybercrime uniquely challenging for law enforcement agencies.

Taylor, Fritsch, and Liederbach (2019) present a comprehensive definition, describing cybercrime as “the use of computer technology to commit criminal offenses, including the targeting of computer systems or the use of those systems to facilitate illegal activity.” Their perspective underscores the dual role of computers, serving both as instruments and targets within the realm of cybercrime.

The emergence of digital technologies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries precipitated the advent of novel forms of criminal activity within cyberspace. As offenses such as identity theft, cyber fraud, data breaches, and cyberterrorism proliferated, the international community acknowledged the imperative for legal instruments capable of addressing these transnational threats. This recognition culminated in the establishment of the first significant international treaty on cybercrime—the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime—adopted by the Council of Europe in 2001 and coming into force in 2004. The Budapest Convention sought to harmonize national legislations, enhance investigative methodologies, and bolster international collaboration against computer-related crimes (Council of Europe, 2001). While initially European in scope, it swiftly acquired global significance, influencing legislative reforms in numerous countries, including those beyond Europe such as the United States, Australia, and various African nations.

In Africa, the impetus for regional harmonization of cybersecurity frameworks culminated in the adoption of the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention) in 2014. This convention delineated legal measures aimed at fostering cybersecurity, safeguarding personal data, and mitigating cyber-enabled crime within member states (African Union, 2014). Although ratification by African Union countries was sluggish, the Malabo Convention inspired national governments, including Nigeria, to formulate or revise cybercrime legislation that could adeptly address the escalating scale of digital threats.

Within Nigeria, the urgency for a comprehensive cybercrime law became increasingly pronounced as the nation’s digital landscape expanded. By the early 2000s, Nigeria had become internationally synonymous with various forms of online fraud, notably the “419” scam, inciting global criticism and economic apprehensions. Prior to 2015, Nigeria operated without a specific legal framework to systematically and effectively tackle cyber offenses (Olayemi, 2014). Although several disparate laws existed—such as provisions in the Criminal Code, the Evidence Act of 2011 (which was amended to acknowledge electronic records), and the Nigerian Communications Act—none directly addressed the intricate challenges posed by cybercrime in the digital age (Chukwudi & Njoku, 2017). In response to both domestic and international pressures, the Nigerian government undertook substantial efforts to devise a more effective legal framework. In 2011, the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), in concert with relevant stakeholders, commenced the development of a national cybersecurity strategy alongside coordinated legal reforms. This initiative resulted in the drafting of several cyber-related bills between 2011 and 2014. However, many of these proposals encountered legislative impediments, preventing their passage through the National Assembly (Council of Europe, 2021).

A pivotal moment occurred in February 2014 when the Cybercrime Bill was formally presented to the Nigerian National Assembly. The bill gained traction amid escalating incidents of cyber-enabled fraud, hacking, and terrorism, compounded by mounting pressure from the international community to fortify Nigeria’s digital legal framework. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act was ultimately enacted into law by President Goodluck Jonathan on May 15, 2015, marking Nigeria’s inaugural comprehensive legislation addressing cybercrime (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine the opinions of journalists in Rivers State on the effectiveness of the Cybercrime Act 2015. The quantitative aspect employed a survey research design, targeting all 500 registered journalists in Rivers State as provided by the Nigeria Union of

Journalists (NUJ), Rivers State Chapter. A census approach was adopted due to the manageable population size, eliminating the need for sampling. Data for the quantitative component were gathered through a structured questionnaire comprising 30 close-ended items, divided into two sections: Section A addressed demographic variables, while Section B focused on psychographic elements related to the five research questions. These included awareness of the Act, valued offenses, perception, implementation level, and factors affecting implementation.

To enhance depth, the qualitative component featured in-depth interviews with 15 prominent journalists from various media categories. For print media, participants were selected from National Network, Port Harcourt Telegraph, Tides Newspaper, and Beacon Newspaper. For radio, journalists from Nigeria Info 92.3FM, Wazobia FM 94.1FM, Treasure FM 98.5FM, Naija FM 92.3FM, and Today FM 95.1FM were interviewed. For television, participants were drawn from NTA, AIT, RSTV, and Silverbird. These interviews explored nuanced perspectives on the Cybercrime Act's implementation, challenges, and relevance to media practice. The face validity of the questionnaire was ensured through expert review, while reliability was established using the test-retest method and measured with Cronbach Alpha. Quantitative data were analyzed using weighted mean scores, with a cut-off point of 2.5 used to determine acceptance or rejection. Qualitative responses from interviews were thematically analyzed to provide rich contextual insights that complemented the survey findings.

### Analysis of Research Question 1

**Research Question One (1):** How do journalists in Rivers State perceive the provisions of the Cybercrime Act 2015?

**Table 4.12: Showing Item One (1) of Research Question Two (2):** The provisions of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 are considered relevant for addressing online criminal behavior.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 12                | 15                     | 3                 | 30         | 1.74       | Disagreed |
| Agree (3)             | 14                | 7                      | 2                 | 23         |            |           |
| Disagree (2)          | 88                | 70                     | 64                | 222        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 69                | 72                     | 69                | 210        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The responses show a generally unfavorable perception among journalists regarding the relevance of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 in tackling online criminal behavior. With the mean score indicating disagreement, it is evident that the majority of respondents do not view the provisions of the Act as effective or adequate in addressing cyber-related offenses. This perception may stem from either limited understanding of the Act, dissatisfaction with its enforcement, or concern over its practical impact. The result underscores a critical gap between the legislative intent of the Act and how it is perceived by media professionals tasked with informing the public and scrutinizing legal developments.

**Table 4.13: Showing Item Two (2) of Research Question Two (2):** The Act is perceived as a useful legal framework for protecting digital spaces in Nigeria.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 22                | 15                     | 7                 | 44         | 1.88       | Disagreed |
| Agree (3)             | 24                | 26                     | 6                 | 56         |            |           |
| Disagree (2)          | 68                | 56                     | 60                | 184        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 69                | 67                     | 65                | 201        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The analysis indicates a prevailing sense of skepticism among journalists regarding the effectiveness of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as a legal tool for safeguarding digital spaces in Nigeria. The overall mean score points to disagreement, reflecting limited confidence in the Act's capacity to adequately address the complexities of cyber threats. This perception may be influenced by concerns over implementation, legal clarity, or perceived misuse of the law. The outcome highlights the need for stronger legal education, reforms, or more visible enforcement strategies to align the Act's intent with public and professional trust, especially within the media sector.

**Table 4.14: Showing Item Three (3) of Research Question Two (2):** The current provisions of the Cybercrimes Act are viewed as vague and open to misinterpretation.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 24                | 25                     | 17                | 66         | 2.06       | Disagreed |
| Agree (3)             | 22                | 36                     | 16                | 74         |            |           |
| Disagree (2)          | 68                | 45                     | 58                | 171        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 69                | 58                     | 47                | 174        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The analysis suggests that journalists hold divided views on the clarity of the Cybercrimes Act 2015, with a notable portion perceiving its provisions as vague or subject to misinterpretation. However, the overall response trend, as reflected in the mean score, leans toward disagreement. This indicates that while concerns about ambiguity exist, they are not dominant across the entire sample. The outcome points to the presence of legal uncertainty for some journalists, yet not a unanimous consensus. It highlights the need for clearer legislative language, explanatory guidelines, or sensitization programs to ensure consistent interpretation and application of the law within the media community.

**Table 4.15: Showing Item Four (4) of Research Question Two (2):** The Act is perceived to contain sections that could be used to suppress journalistic freedom.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 86                | 75                     | 80                | 241        | 3.3        | Agreed   |
| Agree (3)             | 76                | 66                     | 54                | 196        |            |          |
| Disagree (2)          | 10                | 11                     | 2                 | 23         |            |          |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 11                | 12                     | 2                 | 25         |            |          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |          |

The data reveals a strong perception among journalists that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 contains sections that could be used to suppress journalistic freedom. This widespread agreement suggests significant concern within the media community regarding the potential misuse of the Act, particularly in ways that may target press activities under the guise of regulating cyber offenses. The high level of consensus also reflects broader fears about legal overreach and the erosion of free expression. This finding underscores the need for a review of specific provisions within the Act to ensure they are not only clear and precise but also aligned with constitutional protections for media freedom.

**Table 4.16: Showing Item Five (5) of Research Question Two (2):** The legal language and structure of the Act are considered too complex for easy understanding by media professionals.

| Four Likert Scale  | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total | Mean Value | Decision |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------|------------|----------|
| Strongly Agree (4) | 87                | 81                     | 70                | 238   |            |          |

|                       |            |            |            |            |      |        |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------|--------|
| Agree (3)             | 77         | 72         | 55         | 204        | 3.35 | Agreed |
| Disagree (2)          | 9          | 5          | 5          | 19         |      |        |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 10         | 6          | 8          | 24         |      |        |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b> | <b>164</b> | <b>138</b> | <b>485</b> |      |        |

The responses clearly reflect a strong consensus among journalists that the legal language and structural composition of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 are overly complex and difficult to interpret. This perception cuts across all media categories—radio, television, and print—indicating a widespread concern within the journalistic community. The high level of agreement suggests that many media professionals face challenges in fully grasping the implications of the Act for their work. This complexity may hinder effective compliance, limit accurate reporting on cybercrime-related issues, and foster uncertainty in professional decision-making. The finding underscores the need for simplified legal communication and targeted legal literacy programs to bridge the understanding gap between law and journalism.

### Analysis of Research Question 2

**Research Question 2 (2):** How has the Cybercrime Act 2015 impacted journalistic practices in Rivers State?

**Table 4.17: Showing Item One (1) of Research Question Three (3):** Conducting interviews (in-person, phone, or virtual) as regards cybercriminals has been negatively impacted due to the Cybercrime Act 2015

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 82                | 75                     | 54                | 211        |            |          |
| Agree (3)             | 44                | 67                     | 71                | 182        | 3.16       | Agreed   |
| Disagree (2)          | 38                | 10                     | 4                 | 52         |            |          |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 19                | 12                     | 9                 | 40         |            |          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |          |

The responses show a strong consensus among journalists that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has negatively affected their ability to conduct interviews related to cybercriminal activities. The high level of agreement suggests that many journalists are either cautious or deterred from engaging with cybercrime suspects or sources due to fears of legal consequences or misinterpretation of their intent. This perception is shared across all media types—radio, television, and print—indicating that the chilling effect of the Act is not limited to a particular platform. The findings highlight growing concerns about press freedom and investigative access in the digital era, emphasizing the need for clearer legal boundaries and protective mechanisms for journalistic practice within the framework of the Cybercrimes Act.

**Table 4.18: Showing Item Two (2) of Research Question Three (3):** The Act has positively enhanced the nature of press conferences and public events organized by journalist in order to curb cybercrime.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 32                | 22                     | 4                 | 58         |            |           |
| Agree (3)             | 24                | 10                     | 21                | 55         | 2.00       | Disagreed |
| Disagree (2)          | 68                | 70                     | 64                | 202        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 59                | 62                     | 49                | 170        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The responses indicate that journalists largely do not perceive the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as having positively influenced the organization of press conferences and public events aimed at curbing cybercrime. The overall pattern reflects skepticism or a disconnect between the law and its practical impact on media-led public engagement. This suggests that the Act, while serving as a legal instrument, has not effectively empowered or encouraged journalists to take proactive roles in public education or collaborative awareness efforts. The finding highlights the need for more inclusive and supportive frameworks that position journalists as key stakeholders in cybercrime prevention beyond legal enforcement.

**Table 4.19: Showing Item Three (3) of Research Question Three (3):** The Act has negatively affected the way journalists monitor social media, press releases, and news wires

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 72                | 62                     | 64                | 198        | 3.03       | Agreed   |
| Agree (3)             | 84                | 50                     | 34                | 168        |            |          |
| Disagree (2)          | 12                | 27                     | 20                | 59         |            |          |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 15                | 27                     | 20                | 60         |            |          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |          |

The responses reflect a general agreement among journalists that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has negatively influenced how they monitor social media, press releases, and news wires. This suggests that the Act may be creating a climate of caution or apprehension, leading journalists to second-guess the use of digital content in their reporting. Concerns about legal consequences, particularly regarding the sharing or referencing of unverified or sensitive information, appear to be shaping newsroom behavior. The result underscores a broader impact of the Act on day-to-day journalistic processes, particularly in the digital space, where speed and accuracy often intersect with legal risk.

**Table 4.20: Showing Item Four (4) of Research Question Three (3):** The Act has positively impacted journalists' on how they file for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 12                | 22                     | 64                | 98         | 2.23       | Disagreed |
| Agree (3)             | 14                | 20                     | 34                | 68         |            |           |
| Disagree (2)          | 82                | 67                     | 20                | 169        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 75                | 55                     | 20                | 150        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The responses indicate that journalists do not generally believe the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has positively influenced the way they file Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Despite a portion of agreement, the overall trend leans toward disagreement, with the mean score falling below the threshold for a positive consensus. This suggests that the Act has not made any meaningful contribution to improving access to public information for journalists. Instead, it may have introduced additional layers of caution or complexity, particularly when digital records or sensitive cyber-related data are involved. The finding underscores a disconnect between cybersecurity legislation and transparency frameworks like the FOI Act, pointing to the need for clearer alignment and better institutional support for press access to information.

**Table 4.22: Showing Item Five (5) of Research Question Three (3):** The Act has positively impacted the practices of investigating leads and verifying facts on cybercrime.

| Four Likert Scale     | Radio Journalists | Television Journalists | Print Journalists | Total      | Mean Value | Decision  |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Strongly Agree (4)    | 32                | 37                     | 32                | 101        | 2.24       | Disagreed |
| Agree (3)             | 25                | 25                     | 20                | 70         |            |           |
| Disagree (2)          | 62                | 52                     | 48                | 162        |            |           |
| Strongly Disagree (1) | 64                | 50                     | 38                | 152        |            |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>183</b>        | <b>164</b>             | <b>138</b>        | <b>485</b> |            |           |

The data reflects a general perception among journalists that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has not significantly enhanced their ability to investigate leads or verify facts related to cybercrime. Although a number of respondents acknowledge some degree of positive impact, the overall response trend indicates skepticism. This suggests that the Act has not translated into practical tools, protections, or resources that support journalistic inquiry into cybercrime issues. Rather than serving as a facilitator for investigative work, the Act appears to be viewed more as a legal boundary than as an empowering framework, highlighting the need for improved legal literacy, access to credible sources, and institutional collaboration to support fact-based cybercrime reporting.

### Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that journalists in Rivers State generally perceive the Cybercrime Act 2015 as ineffective, ambiguous, and restrictive. Quantitative results consistently indicated disagreement with positive statements about the Act, while qualitative interviews reinforced these sentiments. Journalists expressed doubts about the Act's relevance in addressing modern cybercrimes, citing outdated provisions and poor enforcement mechanisms. These findings align with those of Ojebode and Akinwale (2021), who observed that many Nigerian journalists perceive the Cybercrime Act as a legal instrument prone to misuse due to its vague definitions and poor enforcement. Similarly, Oloyede and Ajibola (2020) reported that journalists often interpret such cyber laws as threats to media independence and digital freedom.

The study also found that many journalists consider the Act vague, particularly in its terminology. Terms like "cyberstalking" and "cyberterrorism" were viewed as poorly defined, leaving room for selective interpretation and potential legal intimidation. These concerns mirror the conclusions of Agbaje and Oyesomi (2019), who noted that the ambiguity of certain terms within the Act creates a fertile ground for government agencies to intimidate or silence dissenting voices in the media. In line with this, Idowu (2022) emphasized that the use of cyber laws to stifle dissent and discourage watchdog journalism has increased, especially during election seasons.

Furthermore, there was strong agreement among respondents that the Act could be used to curtail journalistic freedom. Several journalists cited instances where the law had been invoked to threaten or detain reporters covering politically sensitive topics. This is supported by Umechukwu and Ibe (2023), who found that legal provisions under the Cybercrime Act have been used disproportionately against investigative journalists, especially those exposing corruption or criticizing powerful individuals.

Another significant finding was the complexity of the legal language, which discouraged journalists from engaging deeply with the law or reporting on cyber-related issues. This aligns with Okoro and Okoro (2020), who argued that the legalistic jargon embedded in cybercrime regulations often alienates non-legal practitioners, limiting their ability to engage or comply meaningfully. These complexities have led to general avoidance of cyber topics, further reducing the depth of investigative journalism.

The study also showed that the Act has negatively impacted key areas of journalistic practice. Journalists reported a decline in investigative interviews and digital monitoring due to fear of legal repercussions. Public engagement and Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were equally hindered, as the law's punitive tone discouraged proactive information-seeking and led to secrecy among public officials. These observations are corroborated by Ogunyemi and Adegoke (2021), who

found that restrictive laws reduce the willingness of journalists to file FOI requests and diminish the accountability function of the press.

Additionally, the study found that increased legal scrutiny surrounding digital content has made fact verification more cautious, sometimes resulting in self-censorship. This echoes the findings of Adeyemi and Bello (2022), who concluded that fear of litigation has made many journalists in Nigeria overly cautious, resulting in reduced transparency and less dynamic reporting. The chilling effect has created a media atmosphere where autonomy is compromised in favor of legal safety.

While the Act has encouraged more cautious reporting, it has simultaneously fostered self-censorship, reduced transparency, and limited journalistic independence. This paradox was also highlighted by Eze and Nwachukwu (2023), who argued that cybercrime legislation, while ostensibly created for digital safety, can inadvertently suppress freedom of expression and the watchdog role of the media.

In conclusion, this study's findings align with multiple related studies and underline a consistent theme: the Cybercrime Act 2015, though intended to combat digital criminality, suffers from vague terminology, poor implementation, and an intimidating posture that has stifled press freedom. The predominant gap in the reviewed literature and in practice is the lack of legal clarity and protective provisions for journalists—a gap the current study seeks to address by advocating for clearer definitions, stronger journalistic safeguards, and simplification of the law's language to reduce misuse and enhance understanding among media practitioners.

### **Findings**

In line with the research questions, the paper found the following:

- i. The study finds that journalists in Rivers State generally perceive the provisions of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as ineffective, ambiguous, overly complex, and susceptible to misuse. There is significant concern among media professionals that the Act, while well-intentioned, is failing in practice due to legal vagueness, inconsistent enforcement, and its potential to suppress press freedom.
- ii. The study found that the Cybercrime Act 2015 has predominantly had a negative impact on journalistic practices in Rivers State. The Act has imposed legal and ethical constraints that have limited investigative interviewing, discouraged public sensitization, complicated the monitoring of digital content, restricted access to cyber-related public records, and undermined the confidence and freedom of journalists to verify and publish sensitive information.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the perspectives of journalists in Rivers State on the effectiveness of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 in curbing online criminal activities. Findings revealed that while journalists recognize the importance of the Act, their ability to promote it is hindered primarily by inadequate training and limited legal literacy. Other factors such as fear of governmental reprisal, lack of institutional support, and public disinterest were found to be minimal barriers. The study concludes that for the Cybercrimes Act to achieve its full impact, targeted capacity building for journalists and stronger collaboration between media organizations and cybersecurity stakeholders are essential. Strengthening journalistic competence in cyber law will not only improve media reporting but also enhance public awareness and compliance with digital safety regulations.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In line with the research findings, the paper recommend the following:

- i. The National Assembly should consider a stakeholder review of the Act involving journalists, legal experts, digital rights groups, and cybersecurity professionals. This participatory reform process will help clarify vague provisions, ensure press freedom safeguards, and enhance enforceability.

- ii. Media regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Press Council and civil society organizations should jointly develop legal support frameworks and ethical guidelines to protect journalists' investigative roles while complying with cybercrime laws.

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