

## **MEDIA LIAISON: AN ASSESSMENT OF PRESS UNITS PERFORMANCE IN RIVERS STATE-BASED UNIVERSITIES**

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### **Abstract**

University information units play a crucial role in bridging the gap between academic institutions and the media, ensuring that accurate and timely information flows between journalists and the public. This study dives into the dynamics of media liaison and information sharing within journalism; focusing on the information units of select universities in Rivers State, Nigeria. The goals were to explore the structure of media liaison, evaluate how effectively information is disseminated, and pinpoint the challenges faced in communication between university information units and journalists. Grounded in agenda-setting theory and the two-way symmetrical model of Public Relations, the study utilized a descriptive survey design. Data were gathered from journalists based in Rivers State and officials from university media units. To collect these data, structured questionnaires and interview guides were employed. For analysis, simple percentages, weighted means, and thematic templates were used. The findings revealed that while university information units have formal media liaison structures, they often struggle with internal bureaucracy. Their interactions with journalists tend to be reactive, primarily happening during institutional events or crises. Although social media has enhanced the speed and reach of information sharing, issues like bureaucratic delays, insufficient funding, limited professional training, and restricted access to information still hinder effective communication. The study concludes that improving media liaison practices is vital for boosting institutional transparency, enhancing journalist satisfaction, and fostering credible journalism. Recommendations include granting more operational autonomy to information units, implementing regular media engagement strategies, investing in capacity-building initiatives, and increasing funding for digital communication tools.

**Keywords: Media assessment, media liaison, press units' performance, Rivers State University**

### **Introduction**

In the world of journalism, media liaison and the way information is shared play a crucial role, especially within institutions where communication structures shape the accessibility, credibility and flow of public information. Media liaison focuses on building a well-organized and strategic relationship between organizations and media professionals. Typically, this is handled by public relations or information units that manage press interactions, issue official statements, and provide insights into what is happening within the institution (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). In the realm of journalism, these liaison efforts are essential because reporters rely on trustworthy institutional

sources to inform the public about governance and administration, while also fostering transparency and shaping public discourse.

Universities, as hubs of knowledge, play a pivotal role in society and engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, including students, staff, policymakers, local communities, and the media. Institutional information units serve as the official channels for sharing decisions, celebrating academic achievements, disseminating research findings, and addressing crises. These units have a dual purpose: they not only facilitate journalists' access to reliable information but also help manage the institution's reputation through strategic messaging (Eze, 2024). Therefore, effective dissemination practices are vital for maintaining public trust and ensuring that universities stay accountable and visible in the public domain.

In recent years, the rise of digital technology has significantly impacted the communication landscape of higher education institutions. It could be argued that social media platforms and online news outlets have accelerated the speed and reach of institutional messaging, allowing universities to connect directly with the public while also influencing journalistic practices (Kent & Taylor, 2002). However, despite these advancements, those managing institutional communication still face challenges, such as bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate funding and limited professional training can really slow down the flow of accurate information and strain media relations (Babbie, 2021).

This issue is especially evident in Nigeria, where universities navigate complex socio-political and administrative landscapes that shape their public communication strategies. In Rivers State, institutions like the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education have dedicated information and public relations units. These units are tasked with connecting with journalists and sharing important institutional updates. However, there are growing concerns about how effectively these units respond to media inquiries, engage with journalists, and utilize modern communication tools to promote transparency. Scholars have pointed out that weak relationships between institutions and the media can lead to misinformation, diminished trust in the media, and a lack of public awareness regarding university activities (Ogunyemi&Adesina, 2020).

In light of this, the study aims to evaluate the media liaison and information dissemination practices within the information units of universities in Rivers State. It looks into the structure, strategies, challenges, and overall effectiveness of these units, contributing to a better understanding of how institutional communication can strengthen journalism and public accountability in Nigeria's higher education sector.

### **Statement of the Problem**

University information units are meant to act as vital communication bridges between academic institutions and the press. If professionally managed, journalists can access accurate and timely information about university activities, policies, achievements, and crises through effective liaison. However, Adewusi and Jegede (2025) highlight that some university information units in Nigeria struggle with being weak, bureaucratic, inconsistent, or hard to reach when it comes to their relationship with the press.

In Rivers State, journalists frequently face challenges with issues like delays in getting official communications, limited access to important university events and inconsistent sharing of information can really hinder journalism. These obstacles can restrict media professionals from reporting accurately and promptly on matters related to higher education institutions. Often, when communication is not timely, it can lead to assumptions, spread misinformation, or even harm the reputation of the institutions involved. Again, with the growing reliance on digital platforms, there

is an increasing need for real-time communication. University information units are feeling the heat to adapt to these new media trends. However, there are valid concerns about their skills, professionalism, funding, and how well they engage with journalists.

Even though university information units play a crucial role in public communication, there is a surprising dearth of research, specifically looking at how these units in Rivers State handle media relations and share information, and how their practices impact journalism. This study aims to bridge the gap between what we expect from university information units in supporting journalism and the actual challenges of accessing information, effective communication, and media engagement in Rivers State universities.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to:

1. Explore the nature and structure of media liaison practices used by university information units in Rivers State.
2. Evaluate how effective the information dissemination strategies are for these university information units.
3. Find out how well university information units help journalists access reliable and timely information.
4. Identify the challenges faced by university information units in managing media relations and sharing information.

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What kinds of media liaison structures and practices are in place within university information units in Rivers State?
2. How effective are the strategies these units use to share information?
3. To what degree do they provide journalists with timely and trustworthy information?
4. What significant challenges stand in the way of effective media liaison and information sharing in universities across Rivers State?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Media Liaison in Journalism Practice**

The power of the media lies in its ability to raise awareness. Nowadays, media liaison has become a crucial part of modern journalism and institutional communication. It generally refers to the strategic interaction between organizations and the news media, aimed at sharing information and shaping how institutions are portrayed (Black, 2016). Media liaison is often seen as a structured communication effort that falls under public relations. Scholars argue that it should be viewed as a management function rather than just a tactical one (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This perspective aligns with strategic communication models that highlight the importance of two-way symmetrical communication, where organizations not only send out messages but also listen, negotiate, and build relationships with media stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

In practice, media liaisons take on various roles, such as drafting press releases, organizing press conferences, preparing for interviews, and responding quickly to media inquiries (L'Etang, 2013). They also create fact sheets, media advisories, annual reports for select organizations, press kits, newsletters, company magazines, brochures, and handbooks (Hasan, 2010). These interactions often determine how journalists access information, which in turn influences their story choices and framing.

Recently, media liaisons have increasingly found themselves working within mixed media environments, where traditional journalists share space with bloggers, influencers, and citizen journalists (Van Leuven, Wasserman, Schultz, & Kleinnijenhuis 2022). This shift is shaking up the traditional media relations landscape, pushing professionals to rethink how they engage across various platforms. Media liaison officers play a crucial role here, acting as the bridge that connects journalists with accurate, timely, and newsworthy information, all while protecting the interests of their organizations.

At its core, journalism aims to equip citizens with the trustworthy information they need to thrive in a free society (Onyeso, Eze & Okeh, 2025). The practice of journalism encompasses the professional routines, norms, standards, and ethical responsibilities that shape how news is produced (McQuail, 2010). Traditional scholarship highlights journalism's duty as a socially responsible entity that meets the public's information needs. Meanwhile, modern journalism research places this practice within the context of economic pressures, digital distribution, and audience engagement.

Key professional norms in journalism, like accuracy, fairness, verification, and independence play a significant role in how institutional sources are utilized and understood (Peters & Witschge, 2014). Journalists act as gatekeepers, determining what information makes the news, which sources are trustworthy, and how stories are framed (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The dynamic between journalists and institutional sources is not just about being antagonistic or cooperative; it is a complex interdependence (Cook, 1998). Journalists often depend on institutional press officers for access to data, interviews, and documents, especially in newsrooms with limited resources. On the flip side, media liaisons are eager for media coverage to boost their organization's visibility. Yet, this relationship isn't without its challenges. Journalists often criticize the closeness of PR for potentially undermining editorial independence and the quality of news, while PR professionals push back against journalism's confrontational approach during crises (Ettema & Glasser, 1998).

When discussing institutional image and reputation, it is important to note that image reflects the immediate perceptions stakeholders have of an organization, while reputation is about the long-term assessment. This text emphasizes how media relations can not only highlight important issues but also amplify certain voices in public discussions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). A well-crafted media liaison strategy can boost an institution's visibility and influence over the agenda.

Recent research has also delved into image repair and crisis communication, revealing that how institutions respond through news and social media can greatly impact their reputation (Benoit, 2015). Engaging effectively with the media during crises can help lessen reputational damage, while poor communication can lead to increased distrust among stakeholders.

Moreover, this sheds light on how organizations engage with journalists, how news production practices shape the portrayal of institutions, and how these mediated representations affect institutional reputation, legitimacy, and public trust.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is grounded in two key theories: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations.

**Agenda-Setting Theory:** Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, the Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that the media doesn't dictate what people should think, but rather what

they should think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through selective coverage and emphasis, media outlets play a significant role in determining which issues gain prominence in the public eye. In the context of university information units in Rivers State, this theory illustrates how media liaison officers strategically frame and prioritize institutional information before sharing it with journalists. By issuing press releases, organizing press briefings, and managing events, these units aim to shape media narratives and influence public discussions about institutional policies, achievements, including crises. This is pertinent for managing institutional image, as information units craft narratives that present universities as credible, innovative, and socially responsible entities. Thus, the theory serves as a robust framework for understanding and the foundation for examining how media liaison practices influence journalism outcomes and shape public perception.

**Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations:** The Two-Way Symmetrical Model, introduced by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt in their influential book, *Managing Public Relations* (1984), highlights the importance of mutual understanding, dialogue, and balanced communication between organizations and their audiences.

In contrast to one-way communication models that prioritize publicity or persuasion, the two-way symmetrical model encourages feedback and reciprocal communication. This theory is particularly relevant in university media liaison practices, where it emphasizes the need for open interactions between information units and journalists. Effective liaison goes beyond just sharing information; it also involves actively seeking feedback from media professionals and the public.

In the context of Rivers State universities, embracing a two-way symmetrical approach could boost transparency, foster trust between institutions and media outlets, and enhance journalism by providing access to reliable and verified information. This model is also in tune with modern digital communication trends, as social media platforms enable interactive engagement between universities and their stakeholders.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a descriptive survey design, which was fitting as it allowed the researchers to outline current practices, perceptions, and relationships between university information units and journalists without altering any variables (Kothari, 2014). The study involved two groups of participants, totaling 80 respondents who are reporters and members of the Correspondents' Chapel of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) River State Council, selected through a census method. Additionally, six participants were recruited, primarily heads and assistant heads of media units from the three universities involved in the study, using expert case sampling. In this study, interviews were conducted with six participants using interview guide, alongside input from 80 journalists using a structured questionnaire, to gather data. The focus was on three key universities: the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT), Rivers State University (RSU), and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE). These institutions were selected due to their significant roles in the higher education landscape of the state and their active information/public relations units.

To ensure the content was valid, three experts in Mass Communication and Public Relations from the universities involved reviewed the instruments. Their insights were invaluable in rephrasing, clarifying, and ensuring the relevance of the items. A pilot study was carried out with 10 journalists and five PR officers from outside the chosen universities, utilizing the test-retest method. The reliability of the instruments was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha method, which indicated an internal consistency index score of 0.70.

For the analysis, numerical data were processed using simple percentages and weighted mean scores based on a four-point Likert Scale, while qualitative data were examined through Miles and Huberman's thematic template, which includes data reduction, display, and conclusion.

## Data Presentation

### Results

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	51	63.8
	Female	29	36.2
Age Range	18-25 years	3	3.8
	26-35 years	21	26.3
	36-45	37	46.3
	46 years and above	19	23.6
Profession	Journalist	80	100
Years of Experience	1-5 years	9	11.25
	6-10	26	32.5
	11-15 years	30	37.5
	16 years and above	15	18.7

The majority of respondents (63.8%) were male, while 36.2% were female. All were journalists (100%), confirming that the study captured media practitioners who interact frequently with university information units. The high representation of respondents aged 36–45 years (46.3%) indicates experienced professionals.

**Table 2: The nature of media liaison practices between university information units and journalists in Rivers State**

S/N	Elements of scale	Response in Mean Score				WMS	Decision
		SA	A	D	SD		
1.	The university's information unit maintains regular contact with journalists	80	123	30	4	2.96	Accepted
2.	Media briefings are frequently organized	60	51	68	14	2.41	Rejected
3.	Press releases are promptly issued	68	60	58	14	2.5	Accepted
4.	There is a formal structure for media liaison	108	90	32	7	2.96	Accepted
5.	Journalists receive adequate official information	64	66	62	11	2.53	Accepted

Table two shows that most respondents agreed that formal structures exist for media liaison, and that the university maintains regular contact with the press (WMS = 2.96). However, majority of respondents believed that press briefings are not regular.

**Table 3: Participants views on media relations strategies of university media units**

No.	Participants	Response	Analysis
1.	Participant 1	Our interactions are mainly during big events, or on need basis; but we are working on proactive engagement with the press.	The participants are of the opinion that they invite journalist during important events, but not all the time.
2.	Participant3	We interact during convocations, matriculations and emergencies	
3.	Participant 4	We invite journalist when the need arises, not all the time.	

**Table 4: The effectiveness of information dissemination by university information units**

S/N	Elements of scale	Response in Mean Score				WMS	Decision
		SA	A	D	SD		
1.	Communication channels are efficient and responsive	132	78	22	10	3.02	Accepted
2.	Journalists easily access official information.	88	87	50	4	2.86	Accepted
3.	Information released is accurate and factual	96	93	42	4	2.93	Accepted
4.	Use of social media has improved dissemination	152	111	6	2	3.38	Accepted
5.	Delays reduce media trust in university news	128	108	10	7	3.16	Accepted

Majority of the respondents agreed that social media use has enhanced dissemination, with high mean score (3.38), while bureaucratic delays still reduce timeliness and media trust.

**Table 5: Participant view on the effectiveness of information dissemination by university information units**

No.	Participants	Response	Analysis
1.	Participant 2	Any piece of information in the public domain must be validated by the school authority; hence every information released is adjudged factual and must represents the official position of the university	Participants acknowledged that social media has increased their reach; but any information released is vetted to represent the official position of the institution. However, that the approval protocols from university management often delay communication.
2.	Participant3	The University has leveraged on the social media to improve the dissemination of information to both journalists and the general public	
3.	Participant 4	Every release must pass through the registrar's office, which often delays urgent responses.	

**Table 6: challenges affecting media liaison and information dissemination**

S/N	Elements of scale	Response in Mean Score				WMS	Decision
		SA	A	D	SD		
1.	Bureaucracy hinders communication	156	93	14	3	3.32	Accepted
2.	Limited funding affects performance	152	99	10	4	3.31	Accepted
3.	Lack of collaboration between journalists and PROs	112	93	26	8	2.98	Accepted
4.	Inadequate training affects professionalism	160	96	6	2	3.3	Accepted
5.	Media liaison improves university image	132	114	12	3	3.26	Accepted

The most significant challenges identified were bureaucratic bottlenecks, inadequate funding, and insufficient training. Despite these, respondents strongly agreed that media liaison enhances institutional reputation.

**Table 7: Participant view on the challenges affecting media liaison and information dissemination**

No.	Participants	Response	Analysis
1.	Participant 6	Delayed response occasioned by institutional bureaucracy is a major challenge.	Placing the role of managing university reputation in the hands of unqualified personnel, in addition to institutional bureaucracy, inadequate funding, lack of training of media officers and provision of modern gadgets and infrastructure are the major challenges of media liaison in tertiary institutions.
2.	Participant 3	Lack of proper funding and the provision of modern working gadgets for media officers, including proper training are some challenges affecting media liaison	
3.	Participant 4	The recruitment of non media professionals and in some cases unqualified personnel as image makers affect media liaison activities in the institution	

### Test of Hypotheses

Using Pearson's correlation analysis:

Hypothesis:

There is a significant relationship between the effectiveness of media liaison and journalists' satisfaction with information dissemination.

Variable	N	R	p-value	Decision
Media Liaison Effectiveness × Journalists' Satisfaction	118	0.72	0.001	Significant

Interpretation:

Since  $p < 0.05$ , the hypothesis is accepted. This implies that effective liaison practices positively influence journalists' satisfaction with university information dissemination.

## **Discussion of findings**

From the findings the results showed that university media liaisons often operate within a rigid structure that doesn't allow for much independence. The results indicate that these media units are closely monitored and directed by management. While press briefings do happen, they are not as frequent as one might hope. The press is typically invited only when necessary, particularly during significant events like matriculation and convocation, including demonstrations or protests. This aligns with what Ogunyemi and Adesina (2020) found: many university Public Relations units in Nigeria are stuck in bureaucratic systems that do not promote proactive engagement with the media. Ekwueme and Okoro (2018) also point out that timely and transparent communication is key to building public trust in educational institutions.

The study highlights the need for strategic communication planning and a bit more professional freedom to enhance media relations and responsiveness. After all, managing information and the university's image effectively requires thoughtful, proactive contributions from the designated department. These findings resonate with Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetrical Model, which emphasizes the importance of dialogue and ongoing interaction. Unfortunately, current practices do not prioritize this method of communication, as the feedback loop between journalists and university information units is still pretty weak. The study also shows that while information dissemination is moderately effective in terms of clarity and credibility, social media has broadened the reach. However, the approval processes from university management often slow down communication. Plus, the limited use of digital platforms indicate a disconnect between traditional communication methods and modern expectations.

However, this shows some ability to sway media narratives through press releases and official statements. It could even be said that their somewhat limited proactive engagement has hampered their capacity to consistently shape the conversation. The study pointed out that bureaucratic delays, insufficient funding, lack of training, and limited access to key officials are significant hurdles that seriously impede effective media relations. These challenges echo previous research that emphasizes the structural and institutional obstacles to effective communication in Nigerian universities. This aligns with Kunczik (2019), who noted that public institutions frequently encounter managerial bottlenecks that obstruct effective communication.

Based on these insights, the study reached the following conclusions:

1. University information units have operational media liaison systems, but they are bogged down by internal bureaucracy.
2. Information dissemination strategies in these units primarily rely on social media platforms to improve the spread of information.
3. Ongoing bureaucratic hurdles continue to hinder the effectiveness of university information units.
4. Deficiencies in funding and training remain significant obstacles.
5. There's a notable positive correlation between the effectiveness of liaison efforts and media trust.

## **Conclusion**

University information units play a vital role in supporting journalism by providing access to reliable and timely information; however, their current practices only partially meet this expectation. The disparity between what is anticipated and what is actually delivered highlights the urgent need for more strategic, proactive, and tech-savvy communication methods. Enhancing media liaison systems will not only bolster journalism practices but also improve institutional transparency, public trust, and reputation management within the higher education sector.

The study concludes that effective media liaison is essential for modern journalism and public information management in higher education institutions. To cultivate and sustain better relationship with the media, universities have formal mechanisms in place, but these are often bogged down by institutional red tape and a lack of professional freedom. While social media has sped up communication, there's still a gap in strategic planning and professionalism. To build a trustworthy public image and promote better relationships with journalists, universities need to focus on strategic communication, enhance their capabilities, and implement institutional changes that empower information units to operate more independently and responsively.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings the study recommends the as follows:

1. Universities should give their Public Relations and Information Units more leeway to quickly issue press releases and respond to media inquiries without getting stuck in bureaucratic delays.
2. Information units ought to host regular media briefings, interactive sessions, and press luncheons to keep proactive relationships with journalists, not just during major events.
3. Regular training workshops on digital communication, crisis management, and media relations should be organized for information officers to boost their professionalism and responsiveness.
4. University administrations need to allocate enough budget support to information units to ensure effective public communication, logistics, and the use of modern ICT tools.
5. Strengthening partnerships between the media and university press units is essential to build trust and facilitate smoother information flow and collaboration.

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