A free press is a critical part of democracy and a progressive state. Across Nigeria there is a wealth of talented journalists doing important work to produce high quality independent journalism, holding those in power to account. However, freedom of the press is coming under increasing pressure. This briefing focuses on the Niger Delta, where independence of the regional media from political influence has degraded over the past 20 years. It is now at the point that politicians effectively have control over the output of many journalists and media houses in their state. This briefing explores how state governments in the Niger Delta exert control over local and regional media outputs, and the consequences. It is based on research that tracks the evolution of this relationship between 1999 to 2019, through interviews with local journalists, publishers, and government officials.

Key messages

- Freedom of the press in the Niger Delta has come under significant threat by successive state governments that use the political and coercive power of the state to influence local journalists and media outlets, threaten their safety and wellbeing, and control the public narrative.

- Many local media outlets and journalists are coerced into maintaining positive coverage of the state government, or risk losing their livelihoods—or lives. Under such high levels of pressure, it can be hard for even the most credible journalists and activists to retain independence.

- Biased journalism impedes a healthy civic space, democracy, and development as it limits the availability of accurate information in the public domain. Citizens rely on this to hold their representatives to account.
Introduction

In the colonial and military era, the Nigerian press was noted for its progressive outlook, but in the years leading up to the transition to civilian administration in 1999, it started to decline into a sector dependent on ‘cash-for-coverage’, and has since become increasingly susceptible to political control. The research behind this brief explores tactics employed by successive state governments to target the local and regional press, since they were their main critics, and more vulnerable to influence than larger national and international outlets. This trend has had implications on democracy, inclusive development, security and stabilisation in the region, and the country writ large. This brief summarises research exploring the influence of institutions, actors, and politics on freedom of press, and the consequences for security and stabilisation. It concludes with recommendations to address the challenges identified, and support press freedom.

Methodology

The research focuses on journalists and media houses based in the Niger Delta. The press in Nigeria operates at three levels: (1) international with reporters in the country, (2) national, typically based in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja, with local offices, and (3) local media outlets—covering state or regional stories. The focus here is on local media outlets and local correspondents of national media outlets. Interviews were conducted with active and retired journalists across Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states, and with individuals who operated within the government media apparatus. This includes newspaper, magazine, radio, and television, but not digital outlets. A historical analysis tracks the influence of subsequent state governments from 1999 to 2019, in the three states.

Findings

In the Niger Delta, media is often used as a tool to promote political interests. This is done through controlling the flow of information that reaches journalists, rewarding them for providing favourable coverage of individuals and administrations, and penalising reporting of governance, security, and stabilisation failures.

The first civilian state governors in 1999 actively sought to control the press through subtler tactics than their military predecessors. They established the system of rewards and punishments that have since become a permanent and more entrenched feature of state institutions, and the political economy of power in the region.

How state governments control the press

Specific positions created within the state government ensure control over publicity and the information released to the press. Typically, the Commissioner for Information coordinates vetted government information, which is shared with the media by the Chief Press Secretary (CPS), and more recently, variations of Special Advisors on Media and Digital Media.

The CPS is the interface with journalists, and manages the levers of power that ensure favourable coverage, including rewarding journalists with monthly stipends, political positions, property, and extravagant entertainment. They also punish dissent by withholding state news flows, blocking entry to press conferences, cancelling accreditation, stopping state advertising, and putting pressure on private companies to do the same.

The CPS also has access to other organs of the state, such as security agencies, the judiciary, and the business environment, which have been leveraged to discredit or rewrite reports of insecurity, and
enforce their power over the public narrative. Over time, this has evolved in sync with political and financial dynamics, gradually eroding freedoms, and concentrating power with state governors.

**Factors that enable this system**

A major factor that has enabled this evolution is the condition of media service, which lacks a good employer-employee working relationship. The national press does not pay well and the local press pays even less or not at all. Both are guilty of owing months or years of journalists’ salaries, and it is common for editors to tell journalists “You have my meal ticket”, meaning a press identity card that can get you into press conferences to corruptly make money. As a result, reporting now relies heavily on information from government, while coverage depends on rewards in what has become a “cash-for-coverage” industry. This compromises journalistic independence on the one hand, and constitutional rights and accountability of office holders to citizens on the other.

**Consequences for journalists and freedom of the press**

Research participants consistently recounted examples where the state government punished the local media through:

- surveillance and harassment of reporters and editors using security services.
- kidnapping, torturing, forced detainment, and disappearance.
- bringing lawsuits for defamation and libel from state government, aides, cronies, and supporters.
- inducing false confessions, linking journalist to crimes reported.
- discrediting journalists' integrity with false accusations of crimes such as corruption.
- biasing and bribing the judiciary in cases between the state and the media.

This has had the following consequences for freedom of the press in the Niger Delta:

- the erosion of journalistic ethics and the quality of reporting.
- the proliferation of outlets and journalists solely to generate incomes.
- pressure on media outlets to succumb to payments on offer and forfeit independence.
- biased and unbalanced sources of information on current affairs and government performance.
- a concentration of power in state government hands, especially the governor.

**Conclusion**

Over time, local media outlets in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states have become dependent on the state government for information and funding. They are coerced to maintain positive coverage, or risk their livelihood—or lives. In this system, even some of the most credible journalists and activists have succumbed to the pressure. Most informed observers conclude that the local press has lost the independence required for a political system where citizens are well informed, and can hold their representatives to account.

State governments have tightened their grip on civic space and dissenting voices, and are free to deploy their underhand tactics without coverage or repercussions. The federal government turns a blind eye as it relies on similar tactics, pioneers new ones, and, through the House of Assembly, is pushing for legislation to increase their control over the media (see SDN’s 2021 report, Civic space monitoring baseline in Rivers State). There is little incentive for those in power to reverse this trend, but rather to increase their hold on power by supressing dissenting voices in the press.

The research on civic space in the Niger Delta focused on the evolution of local print, television,
and radio media, yet people increasingly get their news and information online. Digital media outlets are thriving in Nigeria, in part due to the decline in local media, which presents opportunities to both expand and restrict freedom of the press. Recent trends imply it will be key to the political toolbox going forward, with some governors already supporting networks of online commentators. Further research is needed into the influence of government over the growing digital media industry.

**Recommendations:**

The government of Nigeria should implement strategies to nurture press freedom, but trajectories outlined in this report, along with other examples of assaults on civic space, limit the likelihood of the government acting on this. Therefore, the following recommendations are some of the key steps that civil society and the international community can take to improve the situation:

1. Review the proposed amendments to Nigeria's Press Act, and advocate for improvements to avoid further stifling the press.
2. Advocate and campaign for release of journalists held without charge or trial.
3. Strengthen protections and access to legal aid for journalists and media houses, including increased visibility of international journalist protection or safety bodies.
4. Support media outlets to design sustainable financial models that increase independence.
5. Improve ethics, standards, and codes of conduct for journalists and media outlets via training.
6. Support trade unions to improve the employment conditions of their respective media sectors.
SDN supports those affected by the extractives industry and weak governance. We work with communities and engage with governments, companies and other stakeholders to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights, including the right to a healthy environment. Our work currently focuses on the Niger Delta.

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