

## **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT AND THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA: A CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT**

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### **Abstract**

The central objective of this study was to evaluate the contemporary impact of Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 on journalism practice. Specifically, it focused on assessing awareness levels, contributions to fair and accurate reporting, and barriers to effective utilisation among journalists in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. A quantitative survey method was adopted, collecting data from 130 valid responses of registered journalists from the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) directory using structured questionnaire and simple random sampling. Key findings revealed moderate awareness (54.6%) and familiarity (45.4%) with the FOIA, yet only 26.9% had applied it in news production. Over 60% affirmed enhancement in reporting balance, accuracy, and quality when used, but utilisation was severely constrained by inadequate training (77.7%), political interference (70.8%), ineffective enforcement (68.5%), and institutional non-responsiveness (60.7%). In conclusion, the FOIA holds transformative potential for investigative journalism but remains undermined by systemic institutional failures, limiting its role in democratic accountability. Recommendations include mandatory FOIA training in journalism curricula, establishment of newsroom FOIA desks, repeal of conflicting secrecy laws, and creation of an independent oversight body to enforce compliance and protect journalistic access.

**Keywords:** Freedom of Information Act, Journalism Practice, Nigeria, Transparency, Investigative Journalism, Press Freedom

### **Introduction**

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 represents a landmark in Nigeria's democratic consolidation, compelling public institutions to grant access to official records and dismantling entrenched cultures of secrecy (Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, & Ejem, 2013). The Act aligns with international standards, notably Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises access to information as essential to freedom of expression and accountable governance. Globally, Freedom of Information laws originated in Sweden as early as 1766 and have since evolved into a cornerstone of democratic practice in countries such as the United States, the

United Kingdom, India, and South Africa. Each of these jurisdictions has demonstrated that legal transparency mechanisms, when supported by strong enforcement and civic awareness, enhance accountability and enrich journalistic inquiry (UNESCO, 2015). In Nigeria, however, the translation of legal rights into operational practice remains uneven, limiting the Act's transformative potential for journalism and civic participation.

Nigerian journalism historically functioned within restrictive political environments, where secrecy and censorship curtailed access to information. During successive military regimes, journalists were subjected to repression, arbitrary arrests, and

ensorship, with the Official Secrets Act weaponised to suppress investigative reporting (Apuke, 2017). The FOIA was thus enacted to reverse this trajectory, offering journalists a statutory framework to obtain information and strengthen their watchdog role. Yet, over a decade later, implementation challenges persist. Political interference, administrative bottlenecks, and conflicting legislation continue to undermine the Act's intent (Oko-Epelle, Oloyede, Oyedeji, & Kuyoro, 2023). Regional assessments reveal varied levels of adoption: elevated awareness but low utilisation in Taraba State (Apuke, 2017), bureaucratic inertia in Benue (Tine & Gabrielaer, 2020), and incomplete disclosures impeding transparency in the South-East (Alegu & Aliede, 2024).

In a recent nationwide study, Eze (2024) conducted one of the most comprehensive assessments of journalists' engagement with the FOIA. Surveying over 300 practitioners including those based in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) the study reported high awareness and favourable perceptions of the Act's usefulness, yet limited habitual use due to bureaucratic resistance and weak institutional compliance. Crucially, Eze (2024) found a significant correlation between journalists' knowledge of the FOIA and their likelihood of invoking it in practice, suggesting that operational barriers and insufficient training, rather than legislative inadequacy, are the main constraints. These findings resonate with global trends where the mere existence of freedom of information laws does not guarantee transparency without robust enforcement mechanisms, as observed in India and Ghana, where information commissioners and oversight agencies have been critical to effective FOI implementation (UNESCO, 2015).

More than a decade after its enactment, however, evaluative scholarship on Nigeria's FOIA remains geographically uneven, with

limited empirical attention directed towards the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja the administrative nucleus where federal ministries and agencies reside. While studies have addressed investigative opportunities (Alar-Ogah, 2023) and ethical-legal dilemmas (Udoudom, 2025), few have examined how journalists at the centre of policy formation engage with the FOIA in their day-to-day reporting. This gap is significant, as Abuja-based journalists operate closest to government institutions, making them uniquely positioned to assess the responsiveness of public information systems. Comparative lessons from countries such as South Africa and Mexico where journalists in capital cities play crucial roles in testing and enforcing transparency laws further emphasise the importance of capital-based assessments in understanding FOI operability.

The imperative for this study thus arises from both global and local lacunae. While international evidence demonstrates that Freedom of Information laws can foster transparency when institutional and professional structures align, Nigeria's experience highlights enduring disjunctions between policy ambition and practical outcomes. This study therefore investigates how the FOIA has influenced journalistic practice in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, focusing on awareness, utilisation patterns, and institutional barriers. By generating location-specific insights, the research contributes to comparative FOI discourse and offers empirical evidence for strengthening information governance, journalistic ethics, and democratic accountability.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The enactment of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 2011 marked a significant legislative milestone intended to promote transparency and accountability in

Nigeria's governance. However, more than a decade later, journalism practice continues to face entrenched barriers to information access, which sustain governmental opacity and weaken investigative depth. Journalists frequently encounter outright denials, prolonged delays, or partial disclosures from public officials' conditions exacerbated by conflicting legal instruments such as the Official Secrets Act, which directly undermines the FOIA's objectives (Oko-Epelle, Oloyede, Oyedeji, & Kuyoro, 2023).

The gap between the Act's legislative promise and its operational reality remains substantial. Empirical studies have shown that bureaucratic bottlenecks and low institutional responsiveness constrain journalists' ability to utilise the law effectively, as demonstrated in Benue State (Tine, Chile, & Gabrielaer, 2020) and in the South-East, where incomplete disclosures have eroded its impact (Alegu & Aliede, 2024). Similarly, Eze (2024) conducted a nationwide study involving over 300 journalists including practitioners in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and found high awareness levels but limited practical application of the FOIA, largely due to bureaucratic resistance and weak institutional compliance. This reinforces the observation that legal access has not yet translated into routine journalistic practice across Nigeria.

Political interference and inadequate professional training continue to compound these obstacles, reflecting the broader investigative difficulties reported across the country (Antai & Umoren, 2023). In the absence of focused empirical inquiry within the Federal Capital Territory where access to federal institutions should, in principle, be most feasible policy-makers and media practitioners lack actionable insights into the capital-specific challenges that hinder effective implementation. This deficiency impedes the formulation of reforms

necessary to convert legal access into tangible democratic accountability.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the study's research questions Guided this study

- i. What is the level of awareness among journalists in Nigeria on the FOIA?
- ii. To what extent can the FOIA aid media practice towards fair, balanced, accurate, and objective reporting?
- iii. What are the impediments to the effective utilisation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Nigeria?

### **Literature Review**

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 has generated substantial scholarly discourse, establishing a consensus on its transformative potential for Nigerian journalism while exposing chronic implementation deficits. Apuke (2017) conducted an evaluative study in Taraba State, revealing high awareness among journalists yet severely restricted access to government information, largely attributable to ingrained secrecy cultures. Similarly, Tine, Chile, & Gabrielaer, (2020). documented average FOIA utilisation in Benue State, yielding moderate reporting enhancements but constrained by persistent access refusals and bureaucratic delays. These foundational works underscore a pattern of theoretical empowerment juxtaposed against operational stagnation, setting the stage for regionally nuanced analyses.

### **Awareness of the FOIA among Journalists**

Awareness constitutes a prerequisite for FOIA efficacy, yet empirical evidence indicates uneven penetration across Nigeria's diverse journalistic landscape. Apuke (2017) reported elevated knowledge levels among journalists in Taraba State, where a majority

recognised the Act's existence and core provisions, yet this awareness rarely translated into practical engagement due to pervasive institutional opacity and reluctance to honour requests. This paradox of informed yet immobilised practitioners highlight a disconnect between theoretical familiarity and operational confidence. Alegu and Aliede (2024) extended this observation to the South-East region (2015–2019), documenting similarly high awareness rates but critically low utilisation, primarily stemming from partial information releases, inconsistent institutional responses, and the complete absence of feedback mechanisms for denied requests. Their findings suggest that awareness, while widespread, remains superficial: journalists know the law exists but lack clarity on procedural enforcement or appeal pathways.

Oko-Epelle et al, (2023) further deepened this analysis by shifting focus to systemic contributors, emphasising public servants' widespread ignorance of the FOIA as a structural barrier that exacerbates journalists' informational isolation. In their study, many civil servants either misinterpret the Act's scope or invoke outdated secrecy protocols, rendering journalists' requests futile despite legal backing. This institutional knowledge deficit creates a vicious cycle: journalists aware of the FOIA, hesitate to invoke it due to anticipated rejection, thereby reinforcing low utilisation patterns. Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, and Ejem (2013) had earlier framed this as an "enactment–operability gulf," arguing that without mandatory training for public officials, awareness among journalists remains symbolically potent but functionally inert.

Collectively, these studies reveal awareness as fragmented, regionally variable, and insufficiently translated into actionable journalistic leverage (Oko-Epelle et al., 2023; Alegu & Aliede, 2024). While early post-

enactment optimism presumed rapid diffusion through professional networks, the reality reflects a stalled dissemination process hindered by inadequate FOIA integration into journalism curricula, limited continuing education, and the absence of national sensitisation campaigns. This gap underscores a critical need for targeted interventions to convert passive recognition into active, confident application, particularly in high-stakes environments like the Federal Capital Territory where federal institutions dominate information flows.

### **The FOIA's Role in Fostering Fair, Balanced, Accurate, and Objective Reporting**

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 fundamentally elevates journalistic standards by providing access to verifiable public records, thereby reducing reliance on speculative or unofficial sources. Tine, Chile, & Gabrielaer, (2020). observed moderate improvements in accuracy and balance among Benue State journalists who invoked the Act, noting that official documents enabled multi-perspective narratives and minimised factual distortions in governance reporting. This shift from reactive, event-driven coverage to evidence-based analysis underscores the FOIA's potential to professionalise journalism. Ovey, Rabi, and Santas (2025) further linked FOIA-sourced data to enhanced investigative depth, demonstrating how procurement records and budgetary disclosures facilitated exposés on mismanagement, thereby enriching public discourse with empirical rigor.

Alar-Ogah (2023) affirmed the Act's prospects for anti-corruption journalism, illustrating cases where FOIA requests uncovered contractual irregularities, yet cautioned that poor enforcement such as non-responses or Journalists often receives redacted releases that obscure crucial details, thereby undermining the FOIA's goal of full

transparency. Udoudom (2025) argued that ethical-legal synergies are indispensable, emphasising that while the FOIA mitigates speculation by grounding reports in official evidence, journalists must navigate defamation laws and privacy exemptions to avoid legal reprisals. This balancing act ensures objectivity without compromising accountability. Oko-Epelle et al. (2023). Complemented this view by highlighting how access denials force reversion to anecdotal sources, undermining fairness and balance.

Collectively, these contributions affirm the FOIA's paradigm shift from reactive to proactive journalism, contingent upon consistent institutional compliance (Tine, Chile, & Gabrielaer, 2020; Ovey, Rabi, & Santas, (2025). Where applied, the Act fosters a culture of verification, aligning with global best practices in open governance. However, sporadic utilisation driven by fear of reprisal or procedural complexity limits its systemic impact. Empirical gaps persist in quantifying how FOIA access correlates with audience trust or policy influence, particularly in urban centres like Abuja where national stories originate. Bridging this requires not only legal enforcement but also editorial policies that prioritise FOIA-driven reporting as a benchmark for journalistic excellence.

### **Impediments to Effective FOIA Maximisation**

Implementation barriers dominate the scholarly discourse on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011, with Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, and Ejem (2013) identifying a profound enactment–operability gulf in the absence of robust compliance mechanisms. Their analysis, rooted in early post-enactment evaluations, argues that without mandatory disclosure protocols, judicial oversight, or sanctions for non-compliance, the Act remains largely symbolic public

institutions continue to withhold records under the guise of national security or administrative discretion. This foundational critique is echoed in regional contexts: Sokari (2014) documented legal loopholes in Rivers State, where ambiguities in exemption clauses allow officials to selectively interpret requests, effectively nullifying the FOIA's proactive disclosure mandate. Such structural deficiencies create a chilling effect, deterring journalists from pursuing legitimate inquiries (Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, & Ejem, (2013).

Political interference and direct threats to journalists further compound these institutional hurdles. Antai and Umoren (2023) highlighted how the Act, while easing the watchdog role in theory, is undermined by overt intimidation ranging from verbal warnings to physical harassment particularly when probing sensitive governance issues. Their study in Akwa Ibom State revealed that political actors leverage patronage networks to pressure media owners, leading to self-censorship among reporters. Oko-Epelle et al., extended this observation nationally, noting that public servants deliberate ignorance or misapplication of the FOIA often masks politically motivated denials. Training deficits emerge as a cross-cutting enabler of these impediments: without systematic FOIA education for both journalists and civil servants, procedural errors and mutual distrust perpetuate the cycle of non-compliance (Antai & Umoren, 2023; Oko-Epelle et al., 2023).

The scholarship converges on the FOIA's symbolic promise being consistently thwarted by entrenched institutional inertia, conflicting legislation, and cultural resistance to transparency (Sokari, 2014). Apuke, (2017). and Ovey, et al., (2025) reinforce that even where awareness exists, bureaucratic red tape and the lingering influence of the Official Secrets Act render the FOIA operationally ineffective. This multifaceted

obstruction not only stifles investigative journalism but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions. The literature collectively calls for structural reforms repealing contradictory laws, establishing independent oversight bodies, and institutionalising mandatory training to bridge the gap between legislative intent and practical impact, ensuring the FOIA fulfils its democratic mandate in Nigeria's evolving media ecosystem (Ezegwu et al., 2013; Ovey et al., 2025).

### **Evolution and Global Operation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**

The concept of freedom of information has evolved globally as part of the broader struggle for transparency and democratic accountability. The first modern Freedom of Information law was enacted in Sweden in 1766, establishing the principle that government records should be open to public scrutiny. This philosophy spread across Western democracies during the twentieth century, culminating in landmark legislations such as the United States Freedom of Information Act of 1966, which became a global model for access-to-information laws (Roberts, 2006). Many nations, including the United Kingdom (2000), India (2005), and South Africa (2000), subsequently adopted similar statutes aimed at promoting openness and citizen participation in governance.

Operationally, FOI regimes worldwide share common objectives ensuring citizens' right to request official records, holding governments accountable, and fostering public trust. However, their achievements vary across contexts. In the United States, for instance, the Act has strengthened investigative journalism and facilitated public oversight of government expenditure, though delays and excessive redaction still pose challenges (Cuillier & Davis, 2019). In the United Kingdom, the FOI Act has improved administrative transparency but faces

criticism for "chilling effects," where officials deliberately avoid record-keeping to circumvent disclosure (Hazell & Worthy, 2010). Similarly, India's Right to Information Act (RTI) has empowered grassroots activism and investigative reporting, yet bureaucratic resistance and threats to information officers remain persistent obstacles (Baviskar, 2019).

These global experiences demonstrate that while FOI laws are vital instruments for transparency, their success depends on strong institutional commitment, judicial enforcement, and public awareness. Nigeria's FOIA, enacted in 2011, draws inspiration from these international models but continues to grapple with many of the same implementation challenges bureaucratic inertia, low compliance, and weak enforcement which this study critically assesses.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Social Responsibility Theory, propounded by the Hutchins Commission in 1947, articulates a normative framework for media conduct in democratic societies. Its core tenets posit that the press, while enjoying freedom, bears ethical obligations to society: providing accurate, comprehensive information; serving as a forum for diverse viewpoints; and holding power accountable without sensationalism or bias (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). Key assumptions include the media's role as a public trustee, the necessity of self-regulation through professional codes, and the expectation that journalistic practices prioritise societal welfare over commercial or political interests. In the context of this study, the theory is highly relevant as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 equips Nigerian journalists with legal access to public records, enabling them to fulfil their watchdog mandate and deliver evidence-based reporting that enhances transparency

and accountability (Udoudom, 2025). The FOIA aligns with the theory's emphasis on informed citizenry by reducing reliance on unofficial sources, thereby promoting fairness and accuracy in governance coverage.

Despite its strengths, the Social Responsibility Theory exhibits notable limitations. It assumes a level of media autonomy and institutional support that may not exist in transitional democracies like Nigeria, where political interference and economic pressures often compromise editorial independence (Antai & Umoren, 2023). The theory also underestimates structural barriers such as inadequate training evident in this study where 77.7% of journalists cited skill deficits and bureaucratic resistance that prevent FOIA utilisation. Furthermore, its Western-centric origins may overlook cultural nuances in Nigerian journalism, where communal values and patronage networks influence reporting priorities. These gaps necessitate complementary frameworks to fully explain FOIA dynamics in constrained environments.

adding this, the Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, asserts that media do not merely reflect reality but actively shape public perception by selectively emphasising certain issues. Core tenets include the transfer of salience from media agendas to public agendas, the role of issue obtrusiveness, and the cumulative effect of repeated coverage in prioritising societal concerns (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory assumes media gatekeepers wield significant influence over what becomes politically or socially relevant. In this study, the FOIA empowers journalists to set agendas on corruption, misgovernance, and policy failures through documented exposés, as demonstrated in investigative outputs enabled by public records (Ovey et al., 2025). By facilitating access to verifiable

data, the Act enhances journalists' capacity to direct national discourse toward accountability.

However, the Agenda-Setting Theory has limitations in explaining FOIA constraints. It overemphasises media influence while downplaying institutional non-responsiveness 60.7% of requests go unanswered and political gatekeeping that suppresses critical stories (Alegu & Aliede, 2024). The theory also assumes a pluralistic media environment, which is challenged in Nigeria by ownership concentration and advertiser influence. These shortcomings highlight the need for an integrated approach: Social Responsibility Theory frames ethical obligations, while Agenda-Setting Theory illuminates influence potential together providing a robust lens to assess how the FOIA reshapes journalism amid systemic impediments.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a survey research design to investigate the impact of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 on journalism practice in Nigeria, focusing on awareness, contributions to objective reporting, and implementation challenges among journalists in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The design relied primarily on quantitative approaches to capture measurable perceptions and experiences, allowing for statistical generalisation within the study context. As Kothari (2004) explains, survey methods are particularly suited for descriptive and exploratory studies in social sciences, enabling the collection of standardised data from a defined population to address specific research questions. In this study, a structured questionnaire served as the primary instrument, providing breadth in assessing patterns across key variables such as awareness levels, reporting improvements, and implementation challenges. This

quantitative focus, as Creswell (2014) notes, facilitates objective analysis of large-scale attitudes in media and communication research, especially when exploring policy impacts like the FOIA.

The population for this study comprised 5,940 registered journalists in the FCT Abuja Metropolis, as documented by the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) in its 2023 membership directory (Nigerian Union of Journalists, 2023). This population included journalists across print, broadcast, online, and freelance media outlets operating within the FCT. To determine the sample size, Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations was applied, using a 90% confidence level and a 10% margin of error to accommodate resource constraints in an exploratory urban study. The formula,  $n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$ , where  $N = 5,940$  and  $e = 0.1$ , yielded an approximate sample size of 98. This was adjusted upward to 133 for practical administration and to enhance representativeness. In practice, 133 questionnaires were distributed, 132 were retrieved, and 130 were valid for analysis, representing a response rate of 97.7% (Babbie, 2020).

To ensure representativeness, the study employed simple random sampling technique. Respondents were selected randomly from the NUJ membership list to give every registered journalist an equal chance of inclusion, minimising selection bias and reflecting diversity in age, gender, education, and employment status (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, (2016). This approach strengthened the reliability of findings for the FCT context.

The main instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended items on socio-demographic profiles, FOIA awareness and familiarity, usage in reporting, perceived impacts on accuracy and balance,

institutional responses, challenges (e.g., political interference, training gaps), and access to government information. Items were adapted from prior studies on FOIA utilisation (Apuke, 2017; Oko-Epelle et al., 2023) and organised into sections aligned with the research questions. The instrument was validated by the research supervisor and two experts in mass communication, ensuring content relevance and clarity. A pilot test with 15 NUJ members outside the main sample was conducted. Reliability was confirmed through test-retest method with a correlation coefficient of 0.85, indicating high consistency (Pallant, 2020).

Data collection involved physical administration of questionnaires to randomly selected journalists at NUJ meetings, media houses, and professional events in the FCT, with assurances of confidentiality to encourage candid responses. Secondary data from journals, theses, and official documents supplemented the literature review.

Data analysis was conducted using simple descriptive statistics frequencies and percentages to summarise responses and identify patterns across the research questions (Field, 2018). Percentages were calculated as  $\% = \frac{f}{N} \times 100$ , where  $f$  is the frequency of responses and  $N = 130$ . This approach provided clear, interpretable insights into awareness (e.g., 54.6% aware), utilisation rates, and impediments, facilitating direct linkages to the study's objectives and theoretical framework.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This section presents and interprets findings derived from 130 valid copies of questionnaire responses retrieved from journalists in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The analysis is structured around the three research questions guiding the study and relies solely on quantitative data. Only three tables are presented one per

research question with interpretations linked to the study’s objectives, existing literature, and theoretical framework.

**Table 1: Level of Awareness and Familiarity with the FOIA**

<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Aware of the FOIA</b>	71	54.6
<b>Not Aware of the FOIA</b>	59	45.4
<b>Very Familiar with Provisions</b>	59	45.4
<b>Somewhat/Not Familiar</b>	71	54.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2025*

The data imply that although a slight majority of journalists (54.6%) are aware of the FOIA, familiarity with its specific provisions remains limited, revealing a substantial knowledge gap. This suggests that awareness has not translated into deep understanding or practical competence in using the Act. Consequently, inadequate training and institutional sensitisation continue to undermine journalists’ capacity to effectively uphold transparency and accountability mandates.

**Table 2: Perceived Contribution of FOIA to Objective and Quality Reporting**

<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Improves Accuracy</b>	71	54.6
<b>No Improvement in Accuracy</b>	59	45.4
<b>Promotes Balanced Perspective</b>	79	60.8
<b>No Balanced Perspective</b>	51	39.2
<b>Increases Fairness, Balance &amp; Accuracy</b>	77	59.2
<b>No Increase</b>	53	40.8
<b>Improves Overall Reporting Quality</b>	79	60.8
<b>No Improvement in Quality</b>	51	39.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The highest proportion of respondents (60.8%) agreed that the FOIA improves overall reporting quality and promotes balanced perspectives, indicating that the Act positively influences journalistic integrity and objectivity. This implies that access to official information enhances evidence-based reporting and reduces reliance on speculation. Nonetheless, the sizeable minority perceiving no improvement underscores inconsistent utilisation of the Act, limiting its full impact on professional standards.

**Table 3: Major Impediments to Effective Utilisation of the FOIA**

<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Inadequate Training/Support</b>	101	77.7
<b>Adequate Training/Support</b>	29	22.3
<b>Political Interference</b>	92	70.8
<b>No Political Interference</b>	38	29.2
<b>Ineffective Enforcement</b>	89	68.5
<b>Effective Enforcement</b>	41	31.5
<b>Access Difficulties/Bureaucratic Delays</b>	79	60.8
<b>No Access Difficulties</b>	51	39.2
<b>Institutions Rarely/Never Respond</b>	79	60.7
<b>Institutions Sometimes/Always Respond</b>	51	39.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The majority of respondents (77.7%) identified inadequate training and support as the most critical barrier to FOIA implementation, highlighting a major capacity gap among journalists. This indicates that even where legal access exists, insufficient professional competence and institutional cooperation hinder its effective use. Consequently, persistent enforcement weaknesses and political interference continue to undermine transparency and the watchdog function of the media.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This section interprets the results of the study in relation to its objectives, situating them within existing scholarship and the theoretical frameworks of Social Responsibility Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory.

### **Objective One: Assessing the Level of Awareness among Journalists in Nigeria regarding the FOIA**

The study revealed a moderate awareness level, with 54.6% of respondents reporting knowledge of the FOIA and 45.4% very familiar with its provisions, while 45.4% remained unaware and over half (54.6%) had limited or no familiarity (Table 4.1). This disparity indicates that the Act's existence is known to a slim majority, but in-depth operational understanding remains elusive for most practising journalists in the FCT Abuja. The finding mirrors earlier observations by Apuke (2017), who reported high but uneven awareness in Taraba State due to inconsistent training and professional development, and Oko-Epelle et al. (2023), who documented widespread ignorance of FOIA mechanics among both journalists and public officials. Similarly, Alegu and Aliede (2024) noted persistent knowledge gaps in the South-East, attributing them to inadequate sensitisation campaigns.

Interpreted through Social Responsibility Theory, the awareness deficit reflects institutional and systemic shortcomings rather than individual journalistic failings. The media's societal obligation to inform and hold power accountable is compromised when journalists lack mastery of legal tools like the FOIA (Siebert et al., 1956). This gap perpetuates reliance on unofficial sources and undermines ethical, evidence-based reporting. The finding aligns with Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, & Ejem, (2013), who argued that the gulf between FOIA enactment and

operability stems from poor public education and institutional inertia. It ultimately underscores the need for structured, ongoing FOIA literacy programmes within media houses and journalism training institutions, as recommended by UNESCO. (2015). For strengthening press freedom in transitional democracies.

### **Objective Two: Evaluating the Extent to which the FOIA Aids Media Practice in Achieving Fair, Balanced, Accurate, and Objective Reporting**

The data showed that a majority perceived the FOIA as a positive enabler of reporting quality, with 60.8% affirming improvements in overall quality and balanced perspectives, 59.2% noting increased fairness, balance, and accuracy, and 54.6% reporting enhanced accuracy (Table 4.2). These results suggest that where the Act is understood and invoked, it facilitates access to verified public records, reducing speculation and promoting multi-stakeholder narratives. However, the significant minority (39.2%–45.4%) reporting no improvement highlights a disconnect between potential and practice. This finding echoes Tine, Chile, & Gabrielaer, (2020). who observed moderate utilisation benefits in Benue State, and Ovey, Rabi, & Santas, (2025). who linked FOIA-enabled access to deeper investigative journalism.

Agenda-Setting Theory interprets these outcomes as evidence of the Act's capacity to empower journalists to prioritise verified governance issues, thereby shaping public discourse with factual rigor (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Yet, low actual usage only 26.9% have applied it in news production dilutes this agenda-setting function. This supports Ogah (2023), who contended that while the FOIA offers prospects for anti-corruption reporting, practical constraints limit its transformative impact. The results affirm Udoudom (2025), who argued that

legal tools like the FOIA must be paired with ethical training to balance freedom of expression with accuracy. Thus, the FOIA's contribution to objective reporting is real but conditional, requiring active invocation and institutional support to fully realise its democratic potential.

### **Objective Three: Identifying the Impediments to the Effective Maximisation of the FOIA in Nigerian Journalism Practice**

Impediments were pronounced and multifaceted, with 77.7% citing inadequate training/support, 70.8% political interference, 68.5% ineffective enforcement, 60.8% access difficulties, and 60.7% noting that institutions rarely or never respond to requests (Table 4.3). Training deficits emerged as the dominant barrier, followed closely by political and enforcement challenges. These findings align with Ezegwu, Nwokeocha, & Ejem, (2013). (2013), who highlighted the enactment–operability gulf due to bureaucratic resistance, and Antai and Umoren (2023), who documented investigative hurdles including threats and non-compliance. Sokari (2014) similarly identified legal loopholes and institutional secrecy in Rivers State as core constraints.

Viewed through Social Responsibility Theory, these barriers represent governance and institutional failures that obstruct journalists' access to truth, eroding public trust and media credibility Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, (1956). Political interference, in particular, violates the media's watchdog mandate by weaponising secrecy laws like the Official Secrets Act. From an Agenda-Setting perspective, non-responsive institutions prevent journalists from highlighting critical issues, allowing official narratives to dominate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This reinforces Oko-Epelle et al.

(2023), who criticised public servants' ignorance and deliberate obstruction.

The study, therefore, reveals a critical disconnect between legislative intent and operational reality. To enhance maximisation, stakeholders must prioritise FOIA training, repeal conflicting laws, and establish independent oversight mechanisms. Engaging the judiciary and civil society in enforcement advocacy would not only reduce impediments but also embody the democratic accountability that underpins responsible journalism.

### **Conclusion**

This study assessed the impact of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 on journalism practice in Nigeria, framed by Social Responsibility Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory. The findings revealed persistent implementation gaps that undermine the Act's potential to transform media dynamics, despite its progressive intent and over a decade since enactment. These gaps manifest through moderate awareness, conditional contributions to objective reporting, and significant impediments to utilisation. The results demonstrate that journalistic limitations arise not from individual shortcomings but from structural and institutional barriers including inadequate training, political interference, bureaucratic delays, and ineffective enforcement as well as the persistence of conflicting secrecy laws like the Official Secrets Act. These systemic obstacles validate Social Responsibility Theory's emphasis on institutional support for media to fulfil its watchdog role, underscoring the need for robust reforms to bridge the divide between legislative promise and practical reality Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, (1956).

Furthermore, the study identified public institutions' overreliance on non-responsive,

opaque practices evidenced by 60.7% of requests going unanswered as a major impediment to investigative depth. This approach neglects the agenda-setting imperative of McCombs and Shaw (1972), which requires timely access to verified information for journalists to influence public priorities on governance and accountability. The absence of enforcement mechanisms and judicial oversight has hindered effective engagement with the FOIA, leaving journalism fragmented and constrained in its democratic function.

The study therefore concludes that maximising the FOIA must transcend mere legal existence to become a tool of empowerment, transparency, and press freedom. By adopting comprehensive training programmes, repealing contradictory legislation, and institutionalising responsive disclosure protocols that involve media stakeholders in compliance monitoring, authorities can transform awareness into operational efficacy. Such reforms would enable journalists in Nigeria to produce fair, balanced, and accurate reporting, assert their societal mandate, and contribute fully to democratic consolidation, advancing the broader goal of accountable and inclusive governance.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and in line with the three objectives of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthening FOIA Awareness through Targeted Education** With only 54.6% of respondents aware of the FOIA and 45.4% very familiar with its provisions, enhancing knowledge dissemination is essential. The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), media training institutions, and civil society organisations should institutionalise mandatory FOIA literacy modules in

journalism curricula, workshops, and professional development programmes. This can include annual sensitisation campaigns, practical FOIA application simulations, and the development of a FOIA Awareness Committee comprising NUJ representatives, legal experts, and veteran investigative journalists to design and monitor nationwide outreach.

2. **Enhancing Utilisation of the FOIA for Objective and Investigative Reporting**

Although over 60% perceived improvements in reporting quality when the FOIA is used, actual application remains low at 26.9%. Media organisations should establish *FOIA Desks* within newsrooms to support journalists in filing requests, tracking responses, and integrating public records into stories. Partnerships with legal aid groups and digital platforms can provide templates, timelines, and appeal mechanisms to streamline usage. Training should emphasise how FOIA-sourced data strengthens accuracy, balance, and investigative depth, aligning with Agenda-Setting Theory's call for verified public-interest journalism.

3. **Addressing Impediments through Institutional and Legal Reforms**

With 77.7% citing inadequate training, 70.8% political interference, and 60.7% non-responsive institutions, systemic overhaul is critical. The federal government should repeal or amend conflicting provisions in the Official Secrets Act, establish an independent FOIA Oversight Commission with sanction powers, and mandate annual compliance audits for public institutions. Additionally, the judiciary should fast-track FOIA-related cases via specialised benches. Media advocacy coalitions should push for whistleblower protections and public funding for journalist training to counter political and bureaucratic resistance, ensuring the Act's operability matches its democratic intent.

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