

Local Media Coverage of Illegal Mining Activities, Challenges of Coverage and Audience Perception in Taraba State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined local media coverage of illegal mining in Taraba State, Nigeria, focusing on the frequency, prominence, and depth of reports. A sample of two radio stations, two TVs, and two newspapers was analysed. The study also explored challenges journalists faced in covering illegal mining and assessed audience perceptions of media coverage. The sample for the study selected using purposive sampling technique in all three methods (content analysis, survey, and interviews) of data collection. Using triangulation techniques—including content analysis, surveys, and interviews—findings revealed low reportage on illegal mining. Few stories were published, with minimal prominence, rarely appearing as headlines or detailed reports. Most coverage consisted of short news items and public service announcements. Journalists cited inadequate funding, poor logistics, and insecurity as major obstacles to reporting illegal mining. Audience perception was largely negative, with many believing the media had failed to raise awareness or hold stakeholders accountable. The study concludes that the media should enhance coverage by increasing the frequency and depth of reports to boost public awareness and influence policy measures against illegal mining.

Keywords: Illegal mining, Local Media, Coverage, Perception, Challenges, Taraba State

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an essential aspect of human life, fundamental to our existence from the moment we are born until we die. It serves as the foundation upon which societies are built and sustained. The need to communicate is deeply rooted in human nature and necessary for survival and interaction (Sharma, 2017). Throughout history, human beings have depended on communication as a means of maintaining family bonds and fostering social interaction across different levels of society. Over time, people have developed diverse methods for exchanging information within their communities. In ancient civilizations, forms of expression such as cave paintings, carvings on stones, and symbolic inscriptions served communicative purposes. In many traditional African societies, oral communication channels—like town criers, smoke signals, symbolic objects like leaves, cultural festivals, and folk songs—were widely used (Kargbo, 2022). These indigenous communication methods were vital in transmitting messages and sustaining cohesion within ethnic and local communities.

Communication occurs at different levels, such as interpersonal and group, at the heart of communication is often technology (Chen, & Shi, 2024) and as societies have evolved and technology has progressed, communication has grown beyond interpersonal interaction to encompass broader forms, commonly referred to as mass communication. This form of communication involves the dissemination of information to large,

diverse, and geographically dispersed audiences through mass media platforms such as radio, television, and newspapers (Okunna & Omenugha, 2013). Mass media play a central role in mass communication and are highly influential in shaping public opinion and policy in contemporary society. Due to their significant impact, the media are often described as the "fourth estate," suggesting their role is comparable to that of the three traditional branches of government—executive, legislative, and judiciary. This view echoes the sentiment expressed by former U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, who once remarked that if he had to choose between a government without the press or a press without a government, he would unhesitatingly opt for the latter (as cited in Shadrach, 2017, p. 1).

Traditionally, the mass media provide information and education to a large audience, link the government with the governed, provide entertainment, and transmit culture. Other notable roles of the mass media are surveillance and social mobilization. In this regard, the mass media serve as a watchdog of society, guarding against any shady practices that can put public health at risk as well as bringing the public together to fight a common enemy (Welzenbach-Vogel, et al, 2021). This underscores the strategic place of the mass media in safeguarding the environment, particularly against illegal mining. Kpienbaareh et al. (2020) demonstrated the significant role of mass media in the fight against illegal gold mining in Ghana known as galamsey, the study revealed that the media through their agenda setting role have significantly exposed the illegal mining operations in Ghana, leading to arrest, prosecution galamsey operators as well as the seizure of their equipment. However, whether the media give

adequate attention to environmental issues, particularly illegal mining in Nigeria remains a vital question that requires an illicit answer. This study assesses the mass media's coverage of the fight against illegal mining in Taraba State.

Problem Statement

Humanity's greatest friend and enemy could be the environment. A healthy environment supports life, economic activities, and the general wellbeing of the people, while a degraded environment contributes to a high mortality rate, a short life span, acute disease, and poor food production, among others (Pona et al., 2021; Remoundou et al., 2009). Sadly, our current world is in-crisis, human-made environmental catastrophes is multiplying and relentlessly push human society into what seems to be its endgame (Cottle cited in Olausson, 2024). According to the WHO (2022), making the environment healthier can prevent about 13 million deaths a year and avoid 13% to 37% of the world's disease burden. Thus, the environment makes or marsh humanity; however, this will depend on the attitude and behaviour of man towards the environment. Sadly, humans have continued to demonstrate poor attitudes and actions towards the environment in different ways. Engaging in illegal mining is one example. In many local communities in Nigeria in states like Zamfara, Osun, Plateau, Niger, Kebbi, and Edo, illegal mining of precious stones, coals, diamonds, etc. is a common phenomenon that has become a major source of livelihood among locals and a source of wealth for some politicians and their foreign allies whom they jointly sponsored the crime through the provision of excavators and market contact, among others

(Achor et al., 2022; Jaiye, 2013; Ogbonnaya, 2020; Ogunnowo & Ojakorotu, 2023). In Taraba State, specifically, over 20,000 legal and illegal mining sites were recently unraveled by the Special Task Force on Environmental Protection, Public Safety, and Deforestation Prohibition. It was reported that several communities and families have shunned farming and taken to illegal mining (Tyopuusu, 2023).



Raided Leather Quartz mining site in the Gashaka LGA of the state.



Illegal mine shaft of precious stones at Nyaja, Zing, LGA of the State



Illegal miners arrested at Akwana, Wukari LGA, Taraba State



Illegal mining site at Arufu, Wukari LGA

Source: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/09/unregulated-mining-activities-degrading-taraba-lands-task-force/>

Illegal mining has severe implications for the present and the future, which include soil erosion, damage to agricultural land leading to poor harvests,

climate change, contributing to global warming, and flooding (Idowu et al., 2011). Also, illegal mining sites have become dens of criminals, where kidnappers and terrorists hide after perpetrating the heinous acts, as well as use proceeds from the act to continue perpetrating other crimes (ENACT, 2020; Zabyelina & Van Uhm, 2020). Illegal mining is therefore anti-development and should not be overlooked or joked with by stakeholders, especially the mass media. How the media reports environmental activities, including illegal mining, will significantly determine the attitude of citizens and stakeholders towards environmental wellness (Ogadimma et al., 2023).

Several prior studies (e.g., Emenyeonu, 2018; Nwabueze et al., 2015; Obasi & Aondover, 2023, etc.) had earlier decried the inability of the mass media in Nigeria to dedicate ample time and space to fight environmental health problems, including illegal mining across the country. These studies further revealed that the mass media are eager to report crises that occurred as a result of poor environmental actions rather than taking proactive steps to educate and warn the public to avert the crisis. This suggests that the mass media place more emphasis on straight-forward breaking stories about environmental issues than investigative and interpretative environmental stories. Furthermore, it has been observed by prior studies (e.g., Obasi & Aondover, 2023, etc.) that the selection of environmental issues by the mass media in Nigeria is often skewed to issues like waste management, climate change, and flooding (Popoola, 2014). Issues like illegal mining activities have not received adequate attention from the media.

Interestingly, most of the prior research evidence regarding media coverage of environmental issues focused on national media outlets, especially newspapers. Without cognizance, there are several local media channels in indifferent states and communities in Nigeria, including Taraba State. These local channels have become major sources of public information and opinion-shapers in their respective settings, where illegal mining activities are on the rise. According to this premise, it has become important to investigate how local media outlets in Taraba State cover illegal mining activities.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What is the local mass media's coverage in terms of frequency, prominence, and depth of illegal mining activities in Taraba State?

RQ2: What are the challenges that local mass media face in covering illegal mining activities in Taraba State?

RQ3: What is the perception of the mass media audience towards illegal mining activities reported by local mass media in Taraba State?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Local media, environmental reporting, and illegal mining in Taraba State

The mass media is often classified into five tiers by scholars in Nigeria. The first tier is international media, which encompasses global media channels like British Broadcast Corporation, Voice of America, Cable Network News (CNN), and other global media outlets. The second tier, known as national media, includes media with head offices within the

country and who majorly report issues affecting the nations across the various states. The national media frequently has correspondents across the country and, in some cases, also reports global issues, especially when they affect Nigeria. The third tier of mass media is the regional media, which consists of a few media outlets in different states that cover issues within their region, such as the southwest region and the northeast region, among others. The local media are the fourth tier. This category of mass media is domiciled within a state and primarily reports issues that affect their host states. Local media are different from the five-tier media, which is the community media. While community media is often owned and operated by members of a given community to meet their information needs and champion community development, local media are owned by the government and private individuals for the good of the entire state and its proprietors (Chiakaan et al., 2023; Nyiam, 2020; Okunna, 2013).

The major difference among the various tiers of media is their geographical reach and coverage. For instance, issues within a particular state are likely to receive more attention from the local media. Many states are not visible in the national media landscape due to many factors; thus, the local media remains pivotal in understanding what happens in such states. In Taraba State in particular, there are a number of local media outlets, including television outlets like Taraba Television (TTV) and Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) Channel 6, Jalingo. These local channels have played a significant role in reporting issues throughout the state, including the environment. Radio stations include Taraba Broadcasting Services, Rock FM, FM, and Shimo. These local channels have played a significant role in reporting issues throughout the state,

including the environment. This is in line with previous submission by previous scholars (Degeling & Koolen, 2021; Drope et al., 2023) that local media play significant role in safeguarding the environment through their reportage and framing of environmental issues like climate change and illegal mining.

Environmental reporting is a genre of journalism. According to Nwabueze (2015), environmental reporting is a specialized form of journalism that deals with the collection, collation, and writing of news, features, analyses, and interpretative reports on environmental issues. Environmental reporting encompasses coverage and presentation of issues, trends, or developments in the environment, such as flooding, climate change, deforestation, waste management, toxic waste, pollution, and policies (Ogadimma et al., 2023). The aims of environmental reporting are to draw the attention of the public to potential environmental risks, educate them, and motivate them towards health-friendly environmental practices (Bednářová et al., 2019; Ogu, 2020). Environmental reporting also seeks to set an agenda for public discourse and policy formulation aimed at improving the quality of the environment (Schimberg, 2024). It serves as a platform for environmental discussion, linking key players such as community members, government officials, and non-governmental and developmental partners involved in promoting the environment (Ajman, 2024). Hutchen et al. (2024) explain that environmental communication and journalism inclusive relies heavily on developing specific messaging that can affect and direct public perception of the risk. Environmental reporting is gaining popularity around the world and in Nigeria due to the

mirage of environmental challenges facing humanity and the role of communication in bringing about social change.

This study focuses on illegal mining is simply surface mining activities that were conducted outside the framework of the law. This means this form of mining is unregulated and is often carried out against the law. It can take the form of a subsistence activity or a large-scale organised crime led by syndicates or cartels (Dozolme, 2018). As stated by Amosu and Adeosun (2020), illegal mining activities take place in mostly rural areas, or villages, and the villagers are hired to dig for minerals using crude methods that sometimes collapse, resulting in several deaths. Illegal mining might look lucrative to some, but its potential risks are numerous. Its government loses huge revenue, illegally endangering the lives of miners. Most times, illegal mining leads to the formation of craters on the land, which are wide and deep, and when it rains, the craters become very dangerous because of the acidic and poisonous metallic residue from the mining operations (Amosu & Adeosun, 2020). Furthermore, the phenomenon contributes to problems like flooding and climate change, which affect crop production. Illegal mining triggers insecurity, which is a significant concern. Most mining sites have become the hiding places of criminals like terrorists, kidnappers, and drug traffickers (Vanguard, July 24, 2024). This development overstretches the security system. Ogbonnaya (2020) corroborates that illegal gold mining drives rural banditry and violent local conflicts in some parts of Nigeria.

Illegal mining has thrived in Taraba State without much effort to mitigate it until recently, when the state government, under Dr. Agbu Kefas, issued an executive order banning all illegal mining (Dungs, 2023). The governor

also set up a task force charged with surveillance against illegal mining in the state (Aworinde, 2023). The success of the implementation of the Executive Order hinges on the corporation of the mass media. The media needs to partner with the government to sensitize the populace about the Executive Illegal Mining Prohibition Order as well as mobilize the populace to support it. This task is more suitable for local media channels because of their ability to reach the locals, including those in rural areas where illegal mining is prevalent.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The agenda-setting media theory, the social responsibility theory, and the development media theory were used in this study to explain the role of local media in reporting illegal mining activities in Taraba State. The agenda-setting media theory was propounded by Donald Shaw and McCombs in 1972. The theory's premise is that the mass media have the capacity to make the subject of discussion public. Through the selection and frequency with which mass media gives particular issue prominence in society (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and applying the agenda-setting theory to the current study, it is believed that local media in Taraba State have the role of setting agendas regarding the activities of illegal miners. This can be realized through constant reporting and reporting of the issues, as well as the treatment the subject matter receives from the editors. The assumption is that if the issue of illegal mining is given significant coverage and placed in a prominent part of the news bulletin or newspaper, such as the headline and cover page, the people and stakeholders will

automatically give the needed attention, and actions to mitigate the crime will be taken.

Similarly, the social responsibility theory finds significance in the study. The theory is one of the normative theories of the press developed by Siebert et al. in 1956. The theory was premised on filling the lacuna inherent in both the authoritarian and libertarian theories of the press. The theory holds that the media should have the freedom to report issues in society without interference, as in the authoritarian press theory; however, the theory adds that such freedoms come with a sense of responsibility for wellbeing (Okunna & Omenugha, 2013). Thus, journalists are guided by a set of ethics such as objectivity, balanced reporting, and avoiding sensationalism, among others. The social responsibility theory can serve as a useful lens for local media in Taraba State to engage in the fight against illegal mining. With the theory in mind, the mining industry is expected to understand that they have the responsibility to promote the health of the populace by reporting the illegal activities of miners in the state.

The third theory is the development media theory. The theory was propounded by Denis McQuail in 1984 as an addition to the four previous normative press theories. The theory was designed to guide journalism practice in Africa, where there are significant developmental needs. The theory is premised on the fact that the mass media should partner with the government through their reporting to promote development (McQuail, 2009). In this case, the mass media is expected to align their programmes with the developmental needs of their community and relevant government policies geared towards championing development. In

application to the issue of illegal mining, we hypothesize that the media should prioritize the fight against illegal mining by providing investigative and interpretative reports on the subject, as well as publicizing the executive order regarding illegal mining and the mandate of the task force against illegal mining in the state.

Study setting

The study setting is Taraba State. The state is situated in the northeastern region of Nigeria. The state lies roughly between latitudes 6°30" and 9°36" north and longitude 9°10"50" east. The state's total population is 4.1 million (<https://tarabastate.gov.ng/index.php/about-taraba-state/>), and it has sixteen (16) local government areas, with Jalingo serving as the state capital. Taraba State covers a land area of 59,400 square kilometers, which is fertile for all kinds of farming activities. Similarly, the state is known as “Nature’s Gift to the Nation” due to the presence of several natural resources in the state, such as lush forests, diverse mineral deposits, and rich tourist attractions like the Gashaka Gumti National Park, which is considered one of the biggest natural parks in Africa (Bala & Fada, 2017).



**Map of Nigeria
Showing Taraba
State in green**

Source:

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343664587>

The study focuses primarily on the state's mass media. There are two public television stations: TTV, which is owned by the state government; NTA Channel 6, which is owned by the federal government; one public radio station (TSBS), which is owned by the state government; two private radio stations known as Rock FM and Shimo FM; and two private newspapers known as Taraba Truth and Fact and Taraba News.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used triangulation designs using content analysis, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires as tools for data collection.

Content Analysis

News reports, features, documentaries, commentaries, and discussion programmes that focused on illegal mining activities in Taraba State as reported by newspapers (Taraba Truth and Fact and Taraba News), radio (Rock FM and Shimo FM), and television (Taraba TV, or TTV, and NTA, Channel 6, Jalingo) between June 1, 2023, and June 1, 2024, were analysed. The content categories include frequency, prominence, and depth, where frequency was measured by quantifying the reoccurrence of reports and programmes. Prominence in newspapers was determined by the placement of reports: front-page reports were coded as most important, back-page reports as important, and inside-page reports as least important. For the radio reports, prominence was gauged by radio slot time, where Morning Drive (6:00 AM–10:30 AM) was considered most important, Afternoon Drive (3:00 PM–7:00 PM) was more important, Midday (10:00 AM–3:00 PM) was important, and Evening (7:00 PM onwards) was the

least important. Similarly, television time slots were used to determine the prominence of reports, where Prime Time (8:00 PM–11:00 PM) was considered the most important, Morning (5:00 AM–9:00 AM) was more important, Daytime (9:00 AM–4:00 PM) was important, and Late Night (11:00 PM onwards) was the least important. The depth of coverage was measured by the form of the reports, where investigative reports, documentaries, and commentaries were considered to be of deep depth. Interpretative pieces, editorials, and discussion programmes are medium-depth; straight news reports are moderate-depth; and public service announcements are shallow-depth.

In-depth Interviews

The researcher conducted further in-depth interviews. A total of twelve journalists were sampled purposefully, and only journalists reporting environmental issues were selected. The participants were interviewed to ascertain the challenges associated with reporting the activities of illegal miners in the state. The face-to-face interview approach, with the aid of the IDI Guide, has two items as follows: How long have you been reporting environmental issues? What are the main challenges you faced in relation to the reporting environment, particularly illegal mining activities, in Taraba State? The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.

Questionnaire

The study also sought to examine the audience's perceptions regarding illegal mining in Taraba State. To achieve this, the researcher designed a

structured questionnaire comprising five items, which were developed based on insights from relevant literature and expert consultations in the fields of communication and environmental studies at the Taraba State University, Jalingo. The questionnaire included Likert-scale questions ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5), addressing key aspects such as awareness creation, accuracy of media reporting, informativeness of coverage, public trust in media content, and media accountability roles. A total of 150 respondents participated in the survey. The sample size was considered adequate for exploratory analysis of perceptions within the state. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who were residents of areas affected by or familiar with illegal mining activities, including local community members, media consumers, and civil society participants. This approach ensured that the respondents had relevant knowledge or exposure to the issue under investigation. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical tools, including frequency and percentage distributions, to summarise the responses and provide insights into the prevailing audience perceptions regarding the role and effectiveness of the local mass media in covering illegal mining in Taraba State.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Content Analysis

Table: 1. Frequency of Media Reports on Illegal Mining by Selected Local Media Outlets in Taraba State

Media Outlet	Type	Frequency of Reports	Percentage (%)
<i>Taraba Television (TTV)</i>	State-owned TV	37	42.0%
<i>NTA Channel 6, Jalingo</i>	Federal TV	14	15.9%
<i>Rock FM Radio</i>	Private Radio	7	8.0%
<i>Shimo FM Radio</i>	Private Radio	3	3.4%
<i>Taraba Truth and Fact Newspaper</i>	Newspaper	11	12.5%
<i>Taraba News Newspaper</i>	Newspaper	15	17.0%
Total		88	100%

The Table above presents data reports on Illegal Mining by selected local media outlets in Taraba State, Nigeria. The result revealed that out of 88 total media reports on illegal mining in Taraba State, the majority—37 reports (42%)—came from the state-owned Taraba Television (TTV), indicating a stronger focus on public interest issues due to its government-oriented mandate. NTA Channel 6, a federal station, followed with 14 reports (15.9%), while the print media contributed moderately with 15 reports (17%) from Taraba News and 11 reports (12.5%) from Taraba Truth and Fact. In contrast, private radio stations—Rock FM and Shimo FM—recorded very low coverage, with only 7 (8%) and 3 (3.4%) reports

respectively. This suggests that state television was the most proactive in reporting illegal mining, while overall media coverage across all platforms remained limited, pointing to a general lack of sufficient media attention to the issue within the state.

Table: 2. Levels of Prominence of Media Reports on Illegal Mining in Taraba State

Media Category	Level of Prominence	Criteria Used	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Newspapers	Most Important	Front Page	11	40.7%
	More Important	Back Page	2	7.4%
	Least Important	Inside Page	14	51.9%
Total			27	
Radio	Most Important	Morning Drive (6:00 AM – 10:30 AM)	4	40%
	More Important	Afternoon Drive (3:00 PM – 7:00 PM)	1	40%
	Important	Midday (10:00 AM – 3:00 PM)	0	10%
	Least Important	Evening (7:00 PM onwards)	5	50%
			10	100%
Total			10	100%
Television	Most Important	Prime Time (8:00	8	15.7%

		PM – 11:00 PM)		
	More Important	Morning (5:00 AM – 9:00 AM)	14	27.5%
	Important	Daytime (9:00 AM – 4:00 PM)	18	35.3%
	Least Important	Late Night (11:00 PM onwards)	11	21.5%
Total			51	100%

The data in Table 2 reveals how different media in Taraba State assigned prominence to reports on illegal mining. In the newspapers, out of 27 reports, 11 (40.7%) were given the highest prominence by appearing on the front page, 2 (7.4%) appeared on the back page, while the majority, 14 (51.9%), were placed on inside pages, indicating a generally low prioritisation of the issue. For radio, of the 10 reports identified, only 4 (40%) were aired during the most important slot (Morning Drive), 1 (10%) during the Afternoon Drive (more important), none during Midday (important), while half (50%) were aired during the least important slot in the evening, suggesting a tendency to push the topic to less-listened periods. Television, which had the highest number of total reports (51), allocated only 8 (15.7%) to the prime time slot considered most important. Meanwhile, 14 (27.5%) were aired in the morning, 18 (35.3%) during the daytime, and 11 (21.5%) at late night. This shows that while television had broader coverage, much of it occurred during periods of moderate or low audience attention, with only a small proportion aired during peak hours.

It can be deduce from above that out of the 88 items analyzed across the various categories of the media only a total of 23 stories, representing 26.1% of the total stories on illegal mining within the stipulated period of the study, were given high prominence by the local media in Taraba State.

Table: 3. Depth of Coverage of Illegal Mining Reports by Media in Taraba State

Media Type	Genre/Format	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Depth Level
Newspapers	Interpretative Stories	8	9.1%	Medium
Newspapers	Editorials	0	0	-
Radio & Television	Discussion Programmes	9	10.2	Medium
All Media	Straight News	56	63.6	Moderate
All Media	Public Service Announcements (PSAs)	15	17.1%	Shallow
All Media	Investigative/Documentary/Commentary	0	0	Absent
Total		88	100%	

Table 3 shows the depth of coverage devoted to illegal mining issues by media outlets in Taraba State. The analysis reveals that the majority of the reports, 56 out of 88 (63.6%), were presented as straight news stories, reflecting a moderate level of depth, with minimal analytical or background content. A further 15 reports (17.1%) were public service announcements (PSAs), categorised as shallow depth, indicating limited journalistic effort or exploration of the issue. Only 8 interpretative stories

(9.1%) and 9 discussion programmes (10.2%) across newspapers, radio, and television demonstrated medium depth, offering some level of explanation or engagement. Notably, there were no investigative reports, documentaries, or commentaries recorded, signifying a complete absence of in-depth journalism on the subject. Similarly, no editorials were published in the newspapers, further underscoring the lack of critical institutional commentary. On a general note, the findings indicate a superficial treatment of illegal mining by the local media in Taraba state.

Interview Analysis

The interviews were designed to understand the challenges local journalists faced while reporting on the activities of illegal miners. The interviews revealed the following themes: poor logistics and funding, as well as security threats. All the participants attested that their stations do not have the financial strength to consistently cover environmental issues, especially the activities of illegal miners in the state. Respondent 1 asserts:

... I know the problem of illegal mining and its implications for the state, as well as the need for reporting such stories; however, we cannot shy away from the truth; there is poor funding to champion that cause. This station struggles to pay even salaries. How do you expect the management to be able to finance environmental journalism, such as reporting illegal mining?

Furthermore, Participant 4 adds:

The economics of the media is the major problem; we need to run a cost, and sometimes targets are given to us, so we run to advertisers and sources that will bring money to the station at the

expense of serious issues of public concern, like reporting illegal mining activities in the state...

Corroborating, participants 11 categorically state:

Reporting issues like illegal mining necessitates not only cars and gadgets like recorders, cameras but also security to protect one's life. All these are issues, which is why most of us do not even think of the necessity of reporting such issues...

In the same manner, participants 10 opined that:

Reporting illegal mining activities is a very risky thing, considering the cartel involved in the business; one can be killed in the act. This alone is scary, seeing that there is now significant assurance given to journalists here who are interested in reporting such sensitive but important issues...

Questionnaire Survey Analysis

Table: 4. Audience Perception of Local Media Coverage on Illegal Mining in Taraba State

Survey Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
The local mass media in Taraba State has created adequate awareness about illegal mining activities.	46 (30.6%)	76 (50.6%)	8 (5.3%)	7 (4.7)	13 (8.7%)

I believe the local mass media in Taraba State accurately represent the issue of illegal mining.	98 (65.3%)	18 (12%)	20 (13.3%)	8 (5.3)	6 (4%)
The coverage of illegal mining activities by local mass media is very informative.	21 (14%)	8 (5.3%)	31 (20.6%)	16 (10.6)	12 (8%)
I trust the information presented by the local mass media regarding illegal mining.	33 (22%)	29 (19.3%)	41 (27.3%)	23 (15.3)	24 (16%)
The local mass media hold the government and stakeholders accountable for illegal mining.	86 (57.3%)	24 (16%)	11 (7.3%)	11 (7.3)	18 (12%)

The Table above shows the audience perception of local media coverage of illegal mining in Taraba State. For the first survey item, which assessed whether the media has created adequate awareness about illegal mining, a

significant majority of respondents—76 (50.6%) disagreed and 46 (30.6%) strongly disagreed. Only a small proportion either agreed (4.7%) or strongly agreed (8.7%), suggesting that most people do not perceive the local media as effective in raising awareness on the issue. Similarly, responses to the second item, which evaluated the accuracy of media representation of illegal mining, revealed an even more critical perception. A combined 77.3% of respondents (65.3% strongly disagreeing and 12% disagreeing) expressed disbelief in the media's accuracy, while only 9.3% held a favourable view (4% strongly agreeing and 5.3% agreeing). In the third item, which queried whether the media's coverage was informative, the responses were more mixed but still leaned negative. Although 20.6% were undecided, 14% strongly disagreed and 5.3% disagreed. Only 18.6% agreed or strongly agreed, indicating limited confidence in the informativeness of the coverage. Regarding trust in the information provided by the media, responses were more evenly spread. A total of 41.3% (22% strongly disagreeing and 19.3% disagreeing) showed distrust, while 31.3% (15.3% agreeing and 16% strongly agreeing) expressed trust. The remaining 27.3% were undecided, suggesting a notable level of uncertainty among the audience. Lastly, on whether the media holds the government and stakeholders accountable, an overwhelming 73.3% disagreed (57.3% strongly and 16% simply disagreed), while only 19.3% believed the media was fulfilling this watchdog role. This points to a widespread negative perception that the media in Taraba State is falling short in challenging authority and addressing the accountability aspect of illegal mining activities.

DISCUSSION

Research question 1: What is the local mass media's coverage in terms of frequency, prominence, and depth of illegal mining activities in Taraba State?

The first focus of this study was to determine the coverage of illegal mining activities by local mass media outlets in Taraba State based on frequency, prominence, and depth. The study revealed that the mass media did not give adequate attention to reporting the issue of illegal mining activities. The result obtained from the content analysis revealed that only a total of 88 items related to illegal mining were reported by all the local mass media within the period studied. This implies that the subject rarely appears in the mass media. In addition, the result showed that the mass media did not place significant importance on the issue of illegal mining activities in the state. This is based on the fact that the majority of the newspaper stories on illegal mining appeared as inside stories, which are considered least important; similarly, stories via radio stations predominantly appeared during the evening (7:00 p.m. onwards), which was also considered least important because many people at the time were not likely to tune to the radio. However, the stories that appeared on television were broadcast during the day (9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.), which is also ranked below the most important times of television slot time. Regarding the depth of the reports, the study revealed that the mass media have not provided significant, in-depth stories of illegal mining in Taraba State. The outcome of the analysis further revealed that the majority of the reports of illegal mining by the local media took the form of straight news,

which is regarded as moderate depth, followed by public service announcements (PSA), which are considered shallow depth. The findings align with prior studies by Emenyeonu (2018); Nwabueze (2013); Obasi and Aondover (2023); Ogadimma et al. (2023); Oso (2006). These studies generally focus less attention on environmental issues than on sports and other political matters. The studies further argued that even when media report environmental issues, the focus is often on breaking news or the crisis of flooding, and such stories often take the form of straight news, with a focus more on political actors or spokespeople than thorough investigation and engagement with diverse stakeholders. Similarly, Pezzullo (2024) reported the inadequacy of environmental journalism, and that the media's reportage of environmental crisis is often reactionary by nature. The media's lack of adequate attention and significance to environmental issues, including illegal mining, undermines efforts to mitigate the problem, and it also pinpoints the failure of the media to uphold the principles of social responsibility and serve as a watchdog of society. This aligns with prior findings by Morris Price and Nerlich (2024) that absent or side-lined reportage of certain environmental issues might hinder opening up debate on certain issues to a wider group of stakeholders and publics, thus constraining effective governance.

Research question 2: What are the challenges that local mass media face in covering illegal mining activities in Taraba State?

The second goal of this study is to understand the challenges that mass media practitioners, particularly reporters, face in relation to the coverage of illegal mining activities in Taraba State. The interview data provided an

answer to the above question. It was revealed that the local mass media in Taraba State faced several challenges militating their adequate coverage of illegal mining activities in the state. The major challenges reported were poor funding, leading to poor logistics like a dearth of cameras and vehicles for movement to various sites, and insecurity. It was pinpointed that reportage of the environment, particularly illegal mining, is very risky due to the fact that several criminals, such as kidnappers and terrorists, are involved in illegal mining or hide in the mining sites, which are often in rural areas and bushes. Also, it was revealed that illegal mining is often run by cartels who could be after anyone trying to expose their shady. Based on that, most of the journalists reported being fearful of engaging in investigative reporting of illegal mining activities as they were not sure of their safety. The findings corroborate the assertion of Uzochukwu et al. (2015), who state that mass media coverage of the environment in Nigeria is fraught with a lot of challenges, including material resource challenges, whereby media houses in the country, especially those at the local level, struggle with both poor finances and obsolete technologies essential for effective coverage of the environment. Agba (2003) previously argued that environmental reporting is an expensive task that However, a variety of Nigerian media houses struggle to pay staff salaries regularly, as well as remain on air or in print at all times. This phenomenon has implications for environmental reporting and interventions. Where journalists' welfare and the provision of adequate facilities for reporting sensitive issues like the environment are lacking, they cannot carry out their social responsibility roles or partner effectively with the government to promote the environment, particularly in the fight against illegal mining. Prior

studies, particularly UNESCO-IFJ (2024), reported that journalists covering environmental issues including illegal mining face challenges of serious physical attacks, murders, and abductions caused by both state and non-state actors.

RQ 3: What is the perception of the mass media audience towards illegal mining activities reported by local mass media in Taraba State?

The third goal of this study is to determine how the local mass media audience in Taraba State perceives media coverage of illegal mining activities. The results of the relevant data collection revealed that the audience generally has a dominant negative perception about the coverage of illegal mining by local mass media in the state. Data in Fig. 3 revealed that 98% of the respondents did not perceive the media's reportage regarding illegal mining as accurate. Only 38% regarded the media's report as informative, and only 29% trusted the local mass media's reportage of illegal mining activities. Furthermore, the majority (86%) of respondents did not believe that the media is serving as an active watchdog regarding the issue of illegal mining, as they failed to hold the government and key players responsible for the illegal mining activities across the state. Similarly, the majority (72%) believed that the media generally has failed to set an agenda that can mitigate the incessant phenomenon of illegal mining in Taraba State. The findings support a prior study by Ajaero et al. (2016) in southeast Nigeria, which showed that, generally, audiences perceived mass media reportage of the flood as not too effective in influencing people's attitudes. In contrast to previous findings, Arikebi et al. (2023) in the south-south region of Nigeria reveal that the majority

of the audience acknowledges the media's significant effectiveness in managing environmental health issues, citing it as a valuable tool for raising awareness, educating, and advocating for societal change. The disparity in the findings could be attributed to geographical differences and other variables.

CONCLUSION

Taraba State has more natural resources than any other Nigerian state. However, the state is one of Nigeria's most impoverished. Illegal mining plays a key role in the state's problems. The mass media, through their coverage, are expected to bring the issue to the public's consciousness and influence policies and social change to mitigate the problem. However, this study revealed the ability of media outlets domiciled in the state to adequately cover illegal mining activities, as they failed to provide adequate time and space to report the issue. Due to the media's inability to frequently report illegal mining activities, they have failed to uphold the agenda-setting theory assumptions. Similarly, the media had not significantly demonstrated their upholding of the tenets of social responsibility and developmental media hypotheses. This is because they have failed to maximise their freedom to serve as watchdogs regarding the nefarious activities of illegal miners, and they have not adequately demonstrated support for the state government in its effort to end illegal mining in the state, especially with an executive order against illegal mining in the state. The implication of the poor coverage of illegal mining activities in Taraba State is that the public will remain under-informed

about the subject matter, leading to a lack of interest in the issue. This development will undermine governmental efforts to end the menace.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made to enhance media coverage of illegal mining activities and other related environmental and public health issues in Taraba State:

The mass media in Taraba State should increase the frequency with which they report illegal mining activities in order to create more awareness and set a public agenda regarding the problem.

The media should give more importance to illegal mining activities. This can be done by presenting the stories on cover pages, headlines, and prime time.

Also, the media should provide better treatment of the stories, from straight news to other genres like commentaries and investigative reporting, which provide a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The media outlets should prioritise environmental reporting, especially illegal mining activities, by providing needed resources such as vehicles, cameras, and better welfare packages for journalists reporting the issue.

To access funding, local media in Taraba State should partner with international organisations supporting environmental investigative reporting.

There is also a need to improve local journalists' safety, particularly as they embark on reporting illegal mining activities in the state. This will require the partnership of media outlets and security agencies.

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