



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Power, lies and threats: the dangerous game of discrediting journalists

By 'Fisayo Soyombo

October 2023

Trinity Term

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation



A Nigerian journalist stands defiant against coordinated discrediting of journalists – an ongoing threat press freedom. (Image: Generated by DALL-E)

Two days before the crucial Nigerian presidential election of February 2023, the website for the [Foundation for Investigative Journalism](#) (FIJ), which I founded and lead, went dark.

On the front end, nothing was visible, and similarly, the back end was inaccessible to my editorial staff. In the span of a minute, I vacillated between an array of emotions: shock, surprise, dejection, and anger. Destroying is always easier than building; I knew it would take several hours to restore what had vanished in a flash.

FIJ's tech team set about troubleshooting the problem; their findings were ludicrous. It appeared that someone irked by an article exposing Landwey, a real estate investment firm exposed by FIJ for receiving payments for housing projects that were not delivered, had discredited FIJ by contacting DigitalOcean, the host of FIJ's website, to claim we plagiarised his newsletter.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In my 19 years in journalism, not once had I been accused of plagiarism. But not only had the accusation been made, DigitalOcean believed it (or pretended to) and acted on it by yanking my organisation's website off the internet.

It was an act of journalistic discreditation taken too far. It wouldn't be the last.

A global phenomenon

From Africa, where authoritarian regimes often get away with media suppression, to the Americas and Europe, where press freedom varies by country, journalists continue to suffer coordinated discrediting in the line of duty.

When freelance Nigerian journalist Peter Nkanga kicked off his investigation for BBC News programme *Africa Eye* in early 2021, he could scarcely have predicted what was coming. The episode aimed to give international exposure to the work of so-called “Ordinary President” Ahmad Isah, a Nigerian media personality and “activist” famed for getting justice for the oppressed via his live radio shows.

The original pitch was to spotlight how an ordinary citizen was filling a void left by the state. But by the time the curtain was drawn on the investigation, Nkanga would go from the story’s lead reporter to its lead subject.

While filming Isah’s everyday work life, Nkanga was shocked to capture the Human Rights Radio personality physically assaulting a woman. In true Broadcasting House style, the BBC’s final edit [showcased both the good and the bad](#) – the whole truth.¹ The viewing public was aghast.

Isah [tendered a public apology](#), writing: “Please, I’m a human being. I’m bound to make mistakes. Please forgive me.”² But away from the public eye, Isah was less humble and hatched a plan to turn the tide against Nkanga. He went on his own radio show to discredit the journalist, claiming Nkanga had been plotting to kill him.

He shared the journalist’s phone numbers and home address. Thousands of listeners and followers, including many for whom Isah had secured justice in the past, went after Nkanga. He was inundated by threatening messages. Now fearing for his life, Nkanga gathered his young family and fled town – and journalism – for good.

The discreditation campaign launched against Mexican journalist Daniel Sanchez, who exposed corruption and tax fraud by Interconecta, a video surveillance company contracted by his state governor, did not arrive as swiftly. The story had been live for two years when his website host DigitalOcean (one, and the same) asked him to pull it down, because someone had filed a copyright infringement

¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN5sINAjyYM&t=8s>

² Available at: <https://saharareporters.com/2021/05/19/brekete-family-shows-ahmed-isah-apologises-slapping-woman-live-tv#:~:text=Ahmed%20Isah%2C%20the%20host%20of,who%20appeared%20on%20his%20show>

claim. Sánchez, a journalist at *Página 66*, a small investigative news outlet in Mexico's southern Campeche state, provided clear evidence to DigitalOcean to no avail. Their final verdict was to pull the story down or take down the entire website. Reluctantly, Sanchez complied.

Alex Crawford, the internationally acclaimed Sky News special correspondent, has risked it all reporting from war zones. She famously [rode with Libyan rebels](#) as they reached Tripoli's Green Square in August 2011 as strongman Muammar Gaddafi's government began to disintegrate.³

While reporters with the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and every other international media retreated, Crawford was the only one to advance with the rebels, transmitting footage via an Apple MacBook Pro connected to a mini-satellite dish, powered by a charger attached to a pick-up truck's cigarette lighter socket. Would such a daredevilry insure Crawford against any form of discrediting? Not quite.

After her story about the different mafia factions holding sway in Tripoli, including two at loggerheads in the Libyan capital, Crawford was shocked to see a revoiced and mistranslated version of it on an Arabic channel. "It obviously reached quite a lot of people," she recalls. "And that was followed up with a Twitter campaign claiming that I had misinterpreted what was going on and linking it to the initial report that I did when Gaddafi was first toppled, and saying that I was an agent of the West, you know, an American and a spy. All of that sort of stuff."

Women and children first: gendered harassment

Brazilian journalist [Daniela Pinheiro resigned](#) her position as editor-in-chief of *Época* magazine in 2019 after an army of trolls began posting her daughter's photographs online in response to her story on then-President Jair Bolsonaro's daughter-in-law.⁴ Daniela is one of many journalists who have seen threats directed at their loved ones on account of their reporting.

Women and journalists of colour are particularly vulnerable to these attacks, according to research by Tow Center fellow and media researcher Jacob Nelson. [His](#)

³ Foster, P (August 22, 2011) *Sky News in the frontline as Libyan rebels advance*, The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/aug/22/sky-news-libyan-rebels>

⁴ Marina, A., Eduardo, S. (July 19, 2022) *As many journalists come under attack, TRF launches a free tool to monitor online abuse*, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/many-journalists-come-under-attack-trf-launches-free-tool-monitor-online-abuse>

[2023 study](#), based on in-depth interviews with 37 media workers in the U.S. and Canada, found abuse forced many to leave online spaces.⁵ “A number of women journalists who described facing intense online harassment said that they made it a point to take periodic breaks from social media as a result or disengaged from social media altogether,” he wrote.

[In Pakistan](#), journalists, particularly women, face social media harassment “instigated by government officials” and then amplified by pro-government X accounts, bots, and trolls. Types of harassment include threats of rape and physical violence, the release of personal details of women journalists and analysts, and gender-based slurs.

After reporting on corruption at the highest levels of government in Azerbaijan, Khadija Ismayilova had a camera hidden in her home to [film her intimate moments](#) with her boyfriend in 2012. Still images were sent to her as part of an extortion attempt, but Ismayilova continued reporting and the footage was released to her colleagues in the media.

If you cannot imagine a worse form of targeted discreditation, remember that for too many the consequence of committing the “crime of journalism” is death. According to UNESCO’s [Observatory of Killed Journalists](#), 34 journalists were killed in 2023 alone, bringing the total figure killed in the past three decades to 1,615.

Different tactics, same calculated pattern

It’s not just the character or physical safety of journalist that comes under attack, but the credibility of their stories. The consequences are no less deleterious.

In Nkanga’s case, Isah’s strategy was to give his cult-like following the impression that the journalist nursed a deep-seated vendetta against him and was scheming to kill him. The majority of Isah’s audience believed the concoction that Nkanga’s investigation was motivated by malice and not the attempt at truth-seeking it was.

“It is an experience that should be used to teach journalism students the difference between the theory they learn in classrooms and the reality of journalism in Nigeria,” Nkanga said.

⁵ Jacob L. Nelson (January 2023) “*Worse than the Harassment Itself.*” *Journalists Reactions to Newsroom Social Media Policies*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21670811.2022.2153072?journalCode=rdij20>

For Sanchez, claims of plagiarism were levelled against him to DigitalOcean by one “Humberto Herrera Rincón Gallardo” – a deeply injurious claim for any journalist to receive. As “proof”, Gallardo linked to a third-party site that had published a replica of Sánchez’s piece with a falsified publication date and fake byline.

In FIJ’s case, the chief executive of Lanwey, Olawale Ayilara, began his campaign by leaking a private letter he had penned to me in which he repeatedly addressed me as “Senior Fisayo” – a reference to the fact we both attended [African Church Grammar School, Ita-Iyalode, Abeokuta](#).

While we had attended the same school, he was disingenuous in failing to reveal that our paths had never crossed. The use of “Senior Fisayo” was designed to make his followers believe we had shared history, and that my reporting was fuelled by some unknown, long-held grudge. In truth, our common alma mater was only brought to both our attention after the publication of the story.

Taking on powerful people

Behind every scheme to discredit a journalist is a struggle for power, typically involving a powerful individual who cannot accept being exposed. These individuals will stop at almost nothing to obfuscate the truth, misrepresent the journalist, or remove the story from the internet.

As Nkanga noted: “Any individual who rises beyond the state as the symbol of justice, or an individual who takes on the toga of ‘saviour to the people who have lost faith in government and the institution’, will fight journalists back with all they have.” Power may be present in the form of wealth, influence, or position.

“It is annoying because we discovered a side to Isah that he did not want the public to know,” he said. “This is about the infallibility of man: when you want to hide your imperfection but it gets exposed, it rattles you and you’re desperate for a way out.”

In Mexico, Sánchez had published an investigation into the questionable track record of a video surveillance company, Interconecta, contracted by the state governor. Sifting through financial audit records, Sánchez discovered that the company, a subsidiary of the tech multinational Grupo Altavista, had been linked to cases of corruption and tax fraud.

Years before the spurious copyright infringement claim was laid, Sánchez began receiving peculiar weekly calls and texts in August 2018 from individuals claiming to

be lawyers. They wanted him to take the article down. When he did not comply, they seemed to give up.

They were back two years later via a different route: a so-called local marketing expert calling himself “Humberto Herrera Rincón Gallardo” emailed Sánchez to claim his article infringed on European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Citing the Compliance Department of the European Union, the email asked him to remove references to Grupo Altavista and its founder Ricardo Orrantia.

After consulting with and receiving the backing of Artículo 19, a press freedom organisation, Sánchez stood his ground. When this failed, Sánchez’s accusers roped in DigitalOcean as the next plan.

In the case of FIJ, we published [a straightforward news report](#) about a Nigerian entrepreneur resident in the United Arab Emirates who paid N37 million (US\$24,400) to property developer Landwey for a terrace that was due in November 2020. One-and-a-half years later, in April 2022, it still had not been delivered.

It was a simple consumer protection piece, but it spotlighted Landwey’s chief executive Olawale Ayilalara, a young Nigerian billionaire backed by a host of monarchical and political forces including traditional ruler, the Ooni of Ife Adeyeye Ogunwusi, and Lagos State governor Babatunde Sanwo-Olu.

Landwey ignored FIJ’s requests for comments before and after the publishing of the story. Instead, they embarked on a string of paid online promotions defending their name. Their next move was to send an emissary – someone claiming to be a former classmate – imploring me to withdraw the story. When that failed, Landwey, just like Gallardo, turned to DigitalOcean.

...With powerful accomplices

A cross-border investigation by Forbidden Stories, [The gravediggers: how Eliminalia, a Spanish reputation management firm, buries the truth](#), exposed the alleged complaint by Gallardo to DigitalOcean had links Eliminalia, a Spanish reputation management company hired by Grupo Altavista.⁶ The firm offers private clients

⁶ Phineas, R., Shawn, B., Kira, Z., Lilia R., David, P., Lorenzo B., Joaquin G. (February 17, 2023) *The Gravediggers: How Eliminalia, A Spanish Reputation Management Firm, Buries The Truth*. Available at: <https://forbiddenstories.org/story-killers/the-gravediggers-eliminalia/>

content-deletion services, to have articles like Sánchez's removed. Gallardo told Forbidden Stories, "the use of my name in the case brought against the Página66 portal was completely improper and without my knowledge or consent."

Sánchez is one of hundreds of journalists, bloggers, and newsrooms worldwide whose works were deleted, modified, or hidden from the internet between 2015 and 2021 by Eliminalia.

Eliminalia's clients pay handsomely to have their digital pasts removed, according to Forbidden Stories reporting. Haces Barba paid €110,000 for the removal of some 300 articles from the internet. AMR Bauxite, a French mining company accused of tax evasion in 2020, paid €155,000. Similarly, Adar Capital Partners, a company founded by Zev Marynberg, an Israeli-Argentine banker accused of laundering money for Hugo Chávez's regime, hired an Eliminalia partner, paying nearly €400,000, highlighting the lucrativeness of the business of discrediting journalists and censoring their articles from the web.

When DigitalOcean contacted FIJ to take our Landwey story down, I was not aware of Eliminalia or the Forbidden Stories investigation. But I did find the allegations suspicious. On Thursday, February 23 when [FIJ's website](#) became inactive, we reached out to our web hosts, only to be told they had missed two emails from DigitalOcean accusing us of copyright infringements.

As we would later learn, the problem was not that the emails were missed, but that DigitalOcean had not conducted any investigation into the claims made against us, or given us due course to prove our ownership of the story. They had just one instruction: take the story down.

The first email, dated February 16 and signed by the Security Operations Centre of DigitalOcean, claimed FIJ's Landwey story "was the subject of a notification of claimed copyright infringement pursuant to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)".

"DigitalOcean takes seriously the DMCA notices it receives and expects its customers to do the same," it said. "Accordingly, no later than 3 days from today, you must certify in writing that you have removed or disabled access to the material identified in the attached DMCA notice. If we do not hear from you within 3 days, we may disable access to the Droplet without further notice."

Someone claiming to be “Luis Felipe Colina” – all the way over the ocean in Venezuela, had supposedly sworn under penalty of perjury that he had detected infringements of his copyright interests by FIJ.

He claimed our original Landwey story was his, and had been first published in [a private newsletter he circulated on April 1](#).^{7,8}

The second email from DigitalOcean, dated February 22, gave us an additional 24 hours to pull the story down. When we didn’t, DigitalOcean simply pulled our entire website down.

In fact, the letter of DMCA law does not require DigitalOcean to disable entire websites; only to disable access to the specific story in question. Furthermore, DigitalOcean were mandated by the law to restore our story after our explanation, unless they received superior notice from the complainant. They did not receive any such notice – at least not that they shared with FIJ – but declined to restore the site, instead writing to inform us that they would no longer host our outlet.

Nothing added up: an American tech company relying on hearsay from Venezuela to ostracise a client in Nigeria over a complaint that does not stand up to scrutiny against the 1998 United States copyright law?

First, why would a Venezuelan who isn’t a journalist or a real estate aficionado be writing about a Nigerian real estate company? Secondly, [Colina’s “newsletter”](#) was a patent fake: there is no edition of the newsletter other than the one copying our article, and its “subscribe” icon remains unresponsive to date. It is impossible for anyone to subscribe to Colina’s past or future newsletters because they simply do not exist.

Finally, [the website](#) on which this newsletter was supposedly hosted does not exist. Any attempt to access the site yields a 404 Not Found error.⁹ Why would DigitalOcean advance the complaint of non-existent website against an existing investigative reporting outlet?

DigitalOcean did not respond to emailed requests for comment.

⁷ Available at: <https://fij.ng/article/21-months-after-taking-n42m-wale-ayilaras-landwey-fails-to-give-uae-based-nigerian-his-property/>

⁸ Available at: <https://iberonewsltd.com/docs/n42m.HTML>

⁹ <https://iberonewsltd.com/>

The fall out

Discrediting power struggles yield very different results: from downed websites in my own case to career-ending death threats in the case of Nkanga.

“The threats were sometimes direct, in terms of people identifying and telling me what car I drove, where I lived, and that I would be killed,” Nkanga recalled. “The threats came all over the world.” Some were delivered via text messages; others came via social media – X, in particular.

Isah had [claimed online](#) and on radio that Nkanga planning to kill him, and that he had also attempted to set him up with his wife.¹⁰ After those claims were made, Nkanga started to receive calls from around the world: Germany, France, Malta, the U.S., the UK. The text messages came in their hundreds.

The threats were so weighty that Nkanga turned off his main telephone line, only for Isah to respond by releasing his second phone number to the public. The BBC segment aired in May 2021, but Nkanga received threats for more than a year afterwards. “I recorded some of these threats, so I still have the evidence,” Nkanga said. “People called to say they knew where I lived; some told me about my family.”

Nkanga said he would have worried less if the threats came from the government. In that case, he reasoned, he would have eventually been charged in court, where it would be easy to prove there was no credible case against him. But the threats came from taxi drivers, hotel receptionists, motorcycle riders, security guards, artisans, car washers, cobblers – all of whom listened to Isah’s show.

In any case, Nkanga understood how threats worked. An independent, bilingual investigative journalist, he had been West Africa Representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), working to protect or secure the freedom of journalists across Africa who were facing threats or outright persecution from mostly state but sometimes non-state actors.

He knew that if a mob of Isah’s followers got a hold of him, there would be at least bodily damage done... more likely, death. He was similarly aware of Isah’s wide-ranging influence and connections in security services, transportation, housing, and

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.mynigeria.com/NigeriaHomePage/NewsArchive/Presenter-of-Brekete-show-who-hit-interviewee-on-air-apologises-440098>

other sectors of the economy. “It would be easier to deal with if the threats were directed at me alone,” Nkanga said. “But my family has been threatened too.”

Crawford didn’t have to relocate her family like Nkanga, but she described her Libya discrediting experience as “scary” for herself and her hosts. “I was still in Tripoli, which was very anarchic at that time – still is, but definitely was then – so it felt quite scary, I think, because the people who were looking after me, who were friends of friends, said that I should leave. They moved me to a different hotel and kept on moving me until they took me to the airport. It all felt a bit out of everyone’s hand,” she said.

How to prevent discrediting

In short, there is little to nothing a journalist can do to prevent discreditation. It is often a response of the rich and powerful to courageous reporting – the soul of public-interest journalism.

However, there are levers that may limit the fallout of discrediting and many are held by newsrooms and their editors: clear values, legal expertise, strong moral support, and a willingness to listen to reporters’ misgivings.

Nkanga’s first instinct was to expunge footage of Isah’s physical assault from the documentary. “I told the BBC to expunge the scene of Isah’s assault on the woman, as it would put me in jeopardy with him and his followers,” Nkanga said. “But they didn’t listen. I was not involved in the post-production; the producer said he did not think so. BBC assured me that they had my back in the event of any backlash, but it turned out to be an empty promise.”

Marc Perkins, head of the BBC Africa Eye, said: “As Peter was an employee, I am not really sure what I can share with you about this case.”

Alex Crawford faced the brunt of a coordinated discrediting machinery in 2020, following her documentary about the world’s largest waterfall at the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe titled, [Why Victoria Falls is at risk from climate change](#). Crawford reported on how long-term shifts in weather patterns were impacting water levels. When she interviewed Edgar Lungu, then president of Zambia, he said: “It is a serious problem and I get surprised when people trivialise it by saying

[climate change is] not real. Probably, they are living in a different world. But this world we live in, in Zambia, we are feeling the effects of climate change very adversely.”

Not that she needed a presidential endorsement for the piece; the waterfall had fallen to its lowest level in 25 years, leading Crawford to observe, “if we’re not careful, we’re going to lose this site entirely.” Despite describing the falls as “one of the most spectacular visual feasts you’d ever see”, tourist managers in the region were irate. “There was a sustained – really sustained – attempt to try and discredit the whole story and say that [the drying] was seasonal,” Crawford said. “They [put out a thing](#) on social media: LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. And it was shared really bizarrely by some journalists. [A] very small group of people who ran a grand tourist industry around Victoria Falls [...] said I had ruined the economy.”

It did not end on social media; they also sent legal letters to Sky News and Crawford’s editor, claiming she had fabricated information. Of course that was false, but Crawford acknowledged the fallout might have been lessened if she had captured some of the voices that subsequently ganged up against her.

“I think I should have met with those people who had been trying to get a hold of me. I spoke to the man from the tourist board and did a long interview with him, but he wasn’t the one who was really complaining. He seemed to have fallen out with the rest of them, and I probably should have met others.”

In the case of Tripoli, Crawford considers it “a big mistake” that the story was published while she was still in the country. “I probably should have held it until I was out of the country,” she said. “It made me feel much more vulnerable being in the country; it made everyone nervous.”

Sánchez felt not much could be done to prevent discrediting: “In the third world, very little can be done,” he said. “We require the support of international civil organisations to protect us in some way. My case, for example, was very little known in Mexico; it became more widely known after publication by an international network of journalists.”

The most effective tool against journalistic discrediting: you

Ironically, powerful people who attempt to discredit journalists often enlist the services or support of other journalists, or benefit from their willingness to be amplifiers of claims.

When Crawford was discredited by Zambia-based tourism workers, she was shocked to see other journalists circulate the claims against her. “I think first and foremost, other journalists shouldn’t join in with the targeted discrediting unless they’ve got absolute, concrete proof that the journalist has deliberately misled the public,” she said. “Other journalists should not be partaking in it because journalism as a whole is really under fire. Take your pick of the number of world leaders who will say that what you’ve reported is fake or you’ve got it wrong. And they’ll say it because that has become an acceptable thing amongst the general public.”

Nkanga agreed, adding this was the minimum demand to make of fellow journalists. He also wished there were more proactive support from the community when he was attacked. “I did not get support from journalists,” he said. “I felt a sense of disillusionment because I had more or less dedicated my life to defending journalists. But, in my own time of need, I got support from only few people – the likes of Omoyele Sowore and Kadaria Ahmed who gave me some money when I didn’t have a dime. Apart from those two, I did not get support from anywhere.”

Something else Crawford thinks is aiding in the discrediting of journalists is the absence of “some sort of quality control”. “Anyone can pick up an iPhone [...] and call themselves a journalist the next day because they are reporting (in inverted commas) the news,” she said.

“[Bilal Kareem](#), who had something to do with banking or minor finance work in America, decided he was going to Syria as a journalist,” Crawford recalled. “He was actually tweeting on world events from Idlib. But does that make him a journalist? No. He’s someone who’s in Idlib and can give an eyewitness account of what’s happening there. [...] There’s such a vagueness about what constitutes journalism that anyone can set themselves up as journalistic and can be extremely partisan.

“[We] would have an RT reporter, reporting from Aleppo in the middle of the bombardment, saying things that are clearly incorrect. And I know they’re not correct because I was also in Aleppo and he was giving an entirely distorted misinformation of everything that was happening there. And there were loads of other people out there who also thought I was doing that.”

So how do we get round that? Crawford is not exactly sure, but feels there needs to be a bit more of a value and definition in being a journalist.

Angela Quintal, Africa Programme Coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), said: “It’s not like the media houses can stop it.” The problem, she explained, “[is that] what we’re seeing nowadays is large-scale [...] campaigns to discredit journalists”.

CPJ is often more concerned about journalists who lack the backing of big media houses; those who cannot expect access to frequent training and modern-day tools. “It is important that journalists themselves take precautions in terms of their digital safety,” she said. “Too often, journalists are pretty lackadaisical and quite negligent about their presence on social media and how they use their phones. Organisations can train their journalists and provide them with the tools for this.”

Crawford said she wanted the industry to draw inspiration from journalists and media houses who have supported her in moments of discrediting, for example Channel 4 and the BBC. “About Libya, I noticed the Channel 4 people tweeting and saying, ‘Alex isn’t like that and you’re putting her in danger when she’s in the country’, and the BBC Monitoring unit getting in touch with me saying, ‘This has happened quite a lot to people, if you need some help, come and talk to us and we’ll try and sort it’,” she said.

“Generally, we need to be a bit more collegiate and a little more supportive of one another and the industry. Otherwise, there will be no industry anymore.”