



Advanced Environmental Journalism and the Politics of Pollution Reporting in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Environmental pollution in Nigeria is severe and well documented, yet less is understood about how online newspapers construct pollution narratives and frames and the professional conditions under which journalists produce such reporting. This study examined dominant narrative patterns, predominant frames, journalistic practices, and the political, institutional and professional factors shaping environmental pollution coverage in selected Nigerian online newspapers. A qualitative design combining content analysis of 120 environmental and pollution-related stories from *Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *Premium Times*, published between January 1, 2022 and September 30 2026, with in-depth interviews with seven environmental journalists was adopted. Findings reveal six dominant narratives: institutional failure, lived hardship, ecological catastrophe, contested causality, solution-seeking and economic loss, and eight interacting frames, including responsibility, human impact, governance, ecology, economics, justice, solution and conflict. The interviews further indicate that environmental journalists rely on verification, multiple sources and documentary evidence, while working within constraints associated with limited resources, information access, political and institutional pressures, and deadline demands. The study demonstrates how newspaper narratives and frames intersect with the professional conditions of environmental reporting, providing an integrated account of the politics of pollution reporting in Nigeria. It recommends stronger institutional support for specialist environmental reporting, improved access to regulatory information, source diversity and investment in relevant data and investigative journalism skills.

Keywords: environmental journalism; pollution reporting; framing theory; Nigerian newspapers; narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Human existence depends on environmental components such as air, water, soil and other means of livelihood, which are indispensable to human survival. Around the world, environmental pollution has become one of the most challenging crises of the 21st century, which is evident in climate change, biodiversity loss and public health emergencies. The industrial smog of Beijing in China, the microplastic pollution in the Atlantic Ocean, the industrial effluents and open burning of waste in Onitsha, down to the refuse dump site in Uyo Village Road in Akwa Ibom State, are all indicators that pollution is no longer a local problem but a global political issue. This highlights the importance of environmental journalism. According to Hansen (2023), environmental journalism emerged as a specialised beat, saddled with the responsibility of translating complex scientific realities into public knowledge and holding power to account for environmental degradation, serving as the watchdog of society.

In Nigeria, the call for advanced environmental journalism is critical and urgent. As of 2026, Nigeria is Africa's largest oil-producing country and one of the world's most polluted countries. The Niger Delta region alone has recorded over 13,000 oil spills in the last 50 years, with NOSDRA reporting 1,086 spills in 2022 and 1,323 spills in 2023. Communities in Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States have lost farmlands, drinking water sources and fisheries to acute pollution. Beyond oil, major cities such as Port Harcourt, Lagos, Kano and Onitsha face severe air pollution from industrial emissions, open burning and vehicular fumes, while



plastic pollution clogs waterways in almost all Nigerian cities. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) estimates that air pollution-related illnesses result in over 114,000 premature deaths annually in Nigeria.

Advanced environmental journalism goes beyond the routine reporting of environmental events. While conventional journalism reports that "an oil spill has occurred," advanced environmental journalism interrogates why it occurred, who is responsible, who suffers, what the science says, and what policy failures enabled it. It employs investigative tools, data journalism, environmental justice frames, solution narratives and digital multimedia to uncover systemic failures. Batta (2020) and Senam (2021) opine that this form of journalism requires resilience, ethical depth and technical knowledge of environmental science, law and politics. However, there is politics in pollution reporting in Nigeria.

The politics of pollution reporting has to do with the visible and invisible forces that shape what is reported, how it is reported, and what is silenced. According to Ekanem and Edet (2023), 68% of oil spill stories in Nigerian newspapers were sourced solely from government regulatory agencies, with little independent verification. Similarly, polluters are often framed as development partners rather than culprits, while affected communities are framed as saboteurs. This political filtering, where journalists practice self-censorship, embrace press statement journalism, or succumb to brown envelope syndrome for survival, defeats the essence of advanced environmental journalism. The politics of pollution reporting is obviously seen when the institutional interests surrounding environmental degradation are considered. Pollution reporting can involve competing claims by government agencies, petroleum companies, local communities, environmental organisations, scientists and other stakeholders. Emphases from each of these groups may differ, such as causes, responsibilities and solutions. Decision-making now lies with journalists to decide which sources to consult, whose claims to foreground, which evidence to verify and how competing interpretations should be presented

The challenge, therefore, concerns not only whether pollution is reported, but how it becomes news and the journalistic processes through which it is interpreted. Nigerian pollution reporting has prominently employed human-interest, economic, responsibility and conflict frames, while scientific and expert perspectives have received comparatively less attention (Odoemelam and Hasan, 2021; Reuben et al., 2025). Editorial policy has also been identified as influential in shaping environmental framing (Reuben et al., 2025). At the professional level, journalists operate among government agencies, regulators, corporations, communities and experts whose interests and interpretations may differ. Access to information, newsroom resources, deadlines, professional expertise, editorial priorities and source relationships can consequently shape reporting practices. Meanwhile, digital journalism offers opportunities through data, visualisation, geospatial technologies and crowdsourcing, while also increasing the speed and competitive pressures of news production (Elega et al., 2024).

Although existing Nigerian studies have provided useful evidence on environmental coverage, including thematic treatment, framing, source use and the representation of specific environmental issues (Odoemelam & Hasan, 2021; Reuben et al., 2025), these dimensions have largely been examined separately from the professional conditions under which environmental journalism is produced. Consequently, less is known about how recurring pollution narratives and frames intersect with journalists' sourcing practices, evidence use and negotiations with competing institutional and stakeholder interests. This study addresses this gap by combining qualitative analysis of pollution-related stories from four Nigerian online newspapers with in-depth interviews with environmental journalists. By examining narrative patterns, frames, journalistic practices and the political, institutional and professional factors surrounding pollution reporting within the same study, the research extends previous work beyond the analysis of media content alone and provides a more integrated understanding of advanced environmental journalism and the politics of pollution reporting in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In advanced democracies, environmental journalists go beyond event reporting to deploy investigative techniques, scientific data, environmental justice frames and resilience narratives to hold governments and corporations accountable for pollution. The Nigerian Constitution under Section 22 charges the press to hold



government accountable, and this mandate should ordinarily extend to holding oil multinationals and regulatory agencies accountable for the perennial oil spills in the Niger Delta, industrial effluents in the South-East and plastic and air pollution in Lagos and other big cities in Nigeria.

In reality, the practice of pollution reporting in Nigeria appears to be trapped in the politics of survival. The Nigerian press operates within a difficult political economy where ownership is tied to political interests, where many media houses depend on advert patronage from government and oil companies, and where journalists are poorly remunerated and exposed to threats. Also, it is observed that the voices of victims and scientific experts are marginalised while government and oil company sources dominate the narratives.

The problem therefore is that while pollution continues to devastate livelihoods and health in Nigeria, the journalism that should critically interrogate this crisis seems compromised by political and economic pressures. Again, there seems to be a paucity of scholarship that interrogates the politics behind the framing, sourcing, and narrative pattern of pollution news, and how journalists themselves negotiate Brown envelope, ownership pressure, and safety concerns in the digital era. Seemingly, this creates a lacuna between the normative role of advanced environmental journalism and the actual practice on the field.

Owing to the above, this study therefore seeks to interrogate the practice of advanced environmental journalism and dissect the politics of pollution reporting in Nigeria with a view to proposing a resilient, ethical, and critical model for reporting pollution under political and economic pressure.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. examine the dominant narrative patterns employed by Nigerian online newspapers in reporting environmental pollution;
2. ascertain the predominant frames used in the coverage of pollution-related issues by selected Nigerian online newspapers;
3. determine journalistic practices employed by environmental journalists in reporting pollution in Nigeria; and
4. examine the political, institutional and professional factors that influence environmental journalists in reporting pollution in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dominant Narrative Patterns in Environmental Pollution Reporting

Recent Nigerian scholarship suggests that environmental pollution is not simply reported as a technical environmental problem; it is constructed through recurring narrative patterns that determine what receives attention, whose experiences become visible and how responsibility is interpreted. Okorie's (2024) analysis of *Vanguard*, *The Punch* and *The Sun* found uneven attention to pollution issues and identified differences in the treatment of air, water and other forms of pollution, while also reporting a generally negative slant in air-pollution coverage. Similarly, Reuben et al. (2025) found that reporting of oil spillage and gas flaring in *The Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* was predominantly event-driven, with stories organised around particular incidents rather than sustained environmental processes. This suggests that the newsworthiness of pollution is often activated by identifiable incidents, visible damage or immediate public controversy rather than by the gradual accumulation of environmental harm.

A prominent pattern, therefore, is event-centred environmental narration, in which pollution becomes newsworthy when a spill, flare, industrial incident, protest, regulatory action or visible environmental damage occurs. This pattern can produce episodic rather than explanatory reporting, concentrating attention on what



happened while giving comparatively less space to the historical, structural and cumulative dimensions of pollution. Sundaya and Chukwu's (2024) analysis of Nigerian newspaper reports of pipeline vandalism similarly demonstrates the competition between economic and environmental narratives: economic losses and national-resource concerns can occupy the foreground while environmental consequences are comparatively backgrounded. In the Nigerian context, this is significant because pollution is frequently embedded within oil production, illegal refining, pipeline vandalism, mining, industrialisation and questions of economic survival. Consequently, the environmental dimensions of these activities may become secondary to narratives concerning production, revenue, security or economic loss.

Another discernible pattern is human-centred and consequence-oriented narration, where pollution is communicated through its effects on livelihoods, health, communities and local environments. Such narration makes complex environmental problems more accessible by translating pollution into observable human consequences, including damaged livelihoods, unsafe environments and threats to wellbeing. The literature also points towards accountability and conflict narratives, particularly where communities, corporations, government institutions and environmental actors have competing interests. Reuben et al. (2025), however, found limited use of expert voices in oil-spillage and gas-flaring reports, suggesting that Nigerian environmental narratives may privilege immediate events, victims, organisations and official statements over sustained scientific interpretation. Other possible narrative tendencies include crisis, blame, remediation and community-resistance narratives, particularly where pollution generates protests, legal disputes or demands for compensation and environmental restoration.

The literature indicates a Nigerian environmental-news narrative characterised by episodicity, human consequences, economic significance, conflict, responsibility and environmental damage, with variations according to the issue and publication. Ogadimma et al. (2025) identify the broader problem of inadequate environmental reportage in Nigeria, while Obasi and Msughter (2023) found that none of the newspapers examined in Ebonyi State maintained a dedicated environmental column or desk for monitoring environmental hazards. These conditions help explain why pollution may receive intensified attention during crises but limited sustained narrative development afterwards, and consequently support examining not merely how frequently Nigerian online newspapers report pollution, but the narrative structures through which pollution is made meaningful to the Nigerian public.

Predominant Frames in Environmental Pollution Reporting

Framing research demonstrates that environmental pollution acquires meaning through the selection, emphasis and interpretation of particular dimensions of an issue. Recent Nigerian evidence identifies several recurring frames, including environmental, human-interest, economic, conflict, morality, accountability, responsibility and public-health frames. Reuben et al.'s (2025) study of oil spillage and gas flaring found that the newspapers relied substantially on event-based accounts, eyewitnesses, press releases and organisational sources, while expert environmental voices received little attention. This indicates that the predominance of a frame is closely connected to the sources and definitions of the problem that journalists select for inclusion. The prominence of particular sources may consequently determine whether pollution is presented primarily as an environmental crisis, economic loss, governance failure, community grievance or corporate responsibility issue.

The environmental and human-impact frames are particularly important in the Nigerian setting because pollution is experienced through damaged ecosystems, contaminated water, disrupted livelihoods and health concerns. Ikpegbu and Ajaegbu (2025) found the environmental frame to be dominant in their analysis of climate-change editorials in *The Guardian* and *The Punch*, alongside attention to public health and other dimensions. Although climate change is broader than pollution, the finding demonstrates the capacity of Nigerian newspapers to connect environmental problems with ecological and human consequences. Matuku and Mishra (2025) similarly identified threat to human lives and livelihoods, human causes, climate justice and adaptation/remedies among the prominent frames in *Punch* and other African newspapers. These findings suggest that environmental reporting can simultaneously define pollution as a threat, identify its human causes, highlight affected populations and present possible responses.



The economic frame is equally consequential. In a country where petroleum remains central to national revenue and industrial activity, environmental pollution frequently intersects with production, employment, energy security, revenue and economic losses. Sundaya and Chukwu's (2024) study illustrates this tension by showing how Nigerian newspaper reports of pipeline vandalism construct both economic and environmental meanings. Consequently, pollution may be framed not only as ecological degradation but also as an economic threat, a cost to national development, a disruption to production or a consequence of resource exploitation. The accountability and responsibility frames further shift attention towards corporations, government agencies, regulators and other actors whose actions or omissions may contribute to environmental harm. Conflict and morality frames may similarly emerge where communities contest corporate or governmental responses to environmental damage.

The literature therefore suggests that Nigerian environmental reporting operates through interacting frames rather than a single dominant interpretive structure. Event, human-interest, environmental, economic, conflict, morality, accountability, responsibility, public-health, scientific and solution-oriented frames can coexist, with their prominence depending on the pollution issue, source availability, editorial priorities and news values. Examining the predominant frames in Nigerian online newspapers is consequently necessary because online journalism permits greater space for hyperlinks, multimedia evidence, expert commentary, data visualisation and continuing updates, potentially producing framing patterns that differ from conventional newspaper reporting.

Journalistic Practices in Environmental Pollution Reporting

Environmental reporting in Nigeria is increasingly shaped by a tension between conventional journalistic routines and the specialised demands of environmental journalism. Oduolowu, Arowolo and Ogboye (2026) observe that the environmental beat in Nigeria is predominantly covered by general-assignment reporters, whose role conceptions shift as they negotiate the demands of environmental communication. This is important because pollution reporting requires more than routine event coverage: it may demand scientific interpretation, field investigation, verification of environmental claims, engagement with affected communities, interpretation of regulatory information and sustained follow-up. Where reporters operate without specialised environmental beats, coverage may consequently depend heavily on immediately available sources and conventional newsroom routines. This arrangement can also make environmental reporting vulnerable to deadline pressures and competing newsroom priorities.

Obasi and Msughter (2023) provide particularly relevant Nigerian evidence. Their study of environmental hazards in Ebonyi State combined questionnaires, interviews and content analysis and found that none of the media organisations examined had an environmental column or desk dedicated to monitoring mining-related hazards. Such an organisational arrangement encourages environmental stories to compete with other assignments rather than receive continuous specialist attention. It also helps explain the prominence of episodic reporting and the limited institutional capacity for follow-up investigations, specialist sourcing and sustained environmental surveillance. Professional practice is therefore inseparable from newsroom organisation, available resources and the extent to which environmental reporting is treated as a specialised beat. It may also affect journalists' capacity to cultivate specialist sources, interpret technical evidence and maintain relationships with communities experiencing prolonged environmental degradation.

Nevertheless, Nigerian environmental journalism is not confined to conventional reporting. Elega, de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita (2024) demonstrate the emergence of data journalism, geojournalism, interactive storytelling, interviews, crowdsourcing and geospatial technologies in Nigerian environmental communication. These practices can strengthen pollution reporting by allowing journalists to visualise environmental damage, analyse spatial patterns, combine multiple sources and involve citizens in information gathering. Other relevant practices include investigative reporting, solution-oriented journalism, explanatory reporting, documentary evidence, expert consultation, community-based reporting and digital verification, although their adoption may vary across news organisations. Such practices are particularly significant for online newspapers because digital platforms provide opportunities to combine text, photographs, video, maps, datasets, hyperlinks and user-generated information in ways that can deepen environmental narratives.



The emerging literature therefore portrays Nigerian environmental journalism as a field undergoing professional and technological transition. Traditional practices such as event reporting, interviews, official sourcing and eyewitness accounts coexist with data-driven, participatory and digitally enabled forms of environmental storytelling. These developments make journalists' own accounts essential for understanding how pollution reporting is actually produced, including how journalists select sources, verify environmental claims, engage affected communities, use digital tools and negotiate competing professional expectations.

Factors Influencing Environmental Pollution Reporting

Environmental pollution reporting in Nigeria is shaped by interacting political, institutional, professional, economic, technological and situational factors. The evidence does not support treating journalists' reporting decisions as purely individual choices. Rather, the nature of coverage is partly conditioned by newsroom structures, access to information, editorial priorities, professional resources and relationships with government, corporations and affected communities. Obasi and Msughter's (2023) Nigerian study is particularly instructive: its assessment of media practitioners and newspapers found limited institutional engagement with environmental hazards and the absence of dedicated environmental desks. Such institutional arrangements can restrict continuity, specialisation and investigative depth. They may also determine whether environmental issues are treated as sustained beats or as occasional stories competing with politics, crime, business and other high-news-value subjects.

Political and institutional influences are particularly important where pollution intersects with powerful economic and governmental interests. Environmental stories may involve government agencies, regulators, oil companies, mining operators, political authorities and communities whose interests do not necessarily coincide. In such circumstances, access to official information, institutional cooperation, editorial policy and relationships with powerful sources can influence what becomes reportable and how it is presented. Reuben et al. (2025) found that editorial policy, rather than the newspapers' geopolitical location, explained differences in framing of oil spillage and gas flaring, while expert environmental voices received little attention. This suggests that institutional news-selection practices can shape environmental narratives independently of the physical location of the publication. Political sensitivity, regulatory dependence and relationships between media organisations and powerful actors may further influence the visibility and treatment of particular pollution issues.

Professional and resource-related factors also matter. Limited environmental specialisation, inadequate training, newsroom workload, financial constraints, access to transport and field locations, availability of scientific expertise and the difficulty of obtaining reliable environmental data can affect journalists' ability to investigate pollution beyond immediate events. Ogadimma et al. (2025) identify the broader inadequacy of environmental reportage in Nigeria, while Elegba et al. (2024) demonstrate how data-oriented environmental journalism requires new technological and organisational capacities. These conditions create a distinction between what journalists may consider professionally desirable—investigation, verification, expert consultation and follow-up—and what newsroom circumstances permit them to accomplish. Safety concerns, particularly when reporting activities involving powerful commercial interests, environmental conflicts or insecure locations, may further affect journalists' willingness and ability to undertake field-based investigations.

Finally, source access, safety, technology and professional role perceptions constitute important contemporary influences. Digital journalism provides opportunities for crowdsourcing, geolocation, data analysis and multimedia storytelling, but these practices depend on technological competence, reliable datasets and organisational support. Thus, pollution reporting in Nigeria should be understood as the outcome of interacting professional and structural conditions: editorial policy, institutional organisation, political relationships, source accessibility, expertise, resources, safety, technology and journalists' interpretations of their professional responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

Entman's (1993) Framing Theory explains how media select and emphasise aspects of reality, thereby shaping



problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and suggested remedies. It recognises that journalists cannot report every dimension of complex issues and that headlines, placement, language, photographs, quotations and story structure can make particular aspects more salient. Different frames may therefore produce different interpretations of the same pollution incident as an environmental, health, economic, political, corporate-responsibility or human-interest issue. The theory is relevant to this study because it examines how Nigerian newspapers construct pollution through dominant narratives and frames, including whose voices, causes, responsibilities and solutions are emphasised amid competing interests among governments, corporations, communities, activists and scientists.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design combining qualitative content analysis of newspaper stories with in-depth interviews. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how environmental pollution is represented in Nigerian online newspapers and how environmental journalists describe the professional, institutional and political conditions surrounding pollution reporting. The content analysis focused on the meanings, narratives, frames, sourcing patterns and journalistic practices evident in the selected stories, while the interviews provided additional insight into journalists' experiences and practices in reporting environmental pollution.

Selection of Newspapers

The study focused on four Nigerian online newspapers: *Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *Premium Times*. The newspapers were purposively selected because they are established Nigerian news publications with accessible online editions and archives and provide regular coverage of public-interest issues, including environmental and pollution-related matters within the focused period. Selecting these four newspapers also enabled the study to examine pollution reporting across different established online news platforms rather than relying on the coverage of a single publication.

Selection of Newspaper Stories

A total of 120 environmental and pollution-related stories published by the four selected newspapers constituted the newspaper corpus. Thirty stories were selected from each newspaper. The study covered the period from 1 January 2022 to 30 September 2026. The stories were identified through web searches of environmental and pollution-related reports published by selected newspapers, and the retrieved stories were reviewed for their relevance to the objectives of the study. The selection was purposive rather than statistically representative, as the objective was to obtain substantive textual material suitable for qualitative interpretation.

The selected materials comprised online environmental reports in forms available within the newspapers' digital editions, including straight news reports, investigative reports, special reports, features and other relevant analytical or archived reports. The selection focused on stories in which environmental pollution constituted a substantive aspect of the report and which provided material relevant to the study's concerns, including the causes and consequences of pollution, attribution of responsibility, affected communities, institutional or regulatory responses, competing stakeholder positions, evidence and expert perspectives, and possible responses or solutions. Stories in which pollution or an environmental issue was only mentioned incidentally and did not constitute a substantive part of the report were not included in the analytical corpus.

Unit of Analysis

The individual published online newspaper story constituted the unit of analysis. Each of the 120 selected stories was read as a complete analytical unit, with attention to headlines, leads, narratives, sources, evidence, attribution of responsibility, causes, consequences and responses to pollution. These elements were analysed as parts of the story rather than as separate units. Where an online report contained an update or substantially



repeated information from an earlier report, it was treated as one story rather than counted as a separate analytical case. The analysis therefore focused on the distinct stories retained in the 120-story corpus.

Data Collection and Qualitative Content Analysis

The selected stories were retrieved from the online editions and archives of the four newspapers and read closely using the study objectives as analytical guides. Attention was given to recurring narratives, frames, sources, evidence, attribution of responsibility, affected communities, causes, consequences and proposed responses. Similar meanings and patterns across the stories were grouped and interpreted to identify the dominant narrative patterns and frames reported in the findings. Relevant excerpts were retained to illustrate and support the interpretation. The analysis was qualitative and interpretive, focusing on how pollution was represented rather than on counting the frequency of individual words or categories.

In-depth Interviews

In addition to the newspaper content analysis, the study conducted in-depth interviews with seven environmental journalists who had experience in environmental reporting and were considered relevant to the study's focus on journalistic practices and the conditions surrounding pollution reporting. The journalists were purposively selected based on their involvement in environmental journalism and their familiarity with the reporting of environmental issues covered by the selected newspapers. The selection included journalists working in or reporting from Akwa Ibom State, as well as other journalists whose professional experience was relevant to the study. The interviews sought to obtain journalists' accounts of their reporting practices, source selection, verification processes, professional experiences, and the political, institutional and professional factors that may shape environmental reporting. The interview material was analysed thematically alongside the findings from the content analysis. The interviews provided contextual and experiential perspectives that helped to explain issues emerging from the analysis of the newspaper stories, particularly the professional practices and conditions surrounding environmental pollution reporting.

Data Analysis

Data from the newspaper stories and interviews were analysed thematically and interpretively. Newspaper data were organised around recurring narrative patterns, frames, sourcing, evidence, responsibility and responses to pollution, while interview data were examined for themes relating to journalistic practices and the political, institutional and professional conditions of environmental reporting. Findings from both sources were considered together to provide an integrated interpretation of pollution reporting in Nigerian online journalism.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation in the journalist interviews was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were observed in reporting interview responses, and identifying details were not disclosed as anonymity was required by the respondents. The newspaper stories analysed were publicly available online and were used solely as research material, with the publications and relevant stories appropriately identified in the study.

FINDINGS

Dominant Narrative Patterns

Table 1: Narrative Themes in the Coverage of Environmental Pollution

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative quotation
1. Pollution as institutional failure and the implementation	Regulatory neglect and weak enforcement; unmet promises and unremediated harm; public money and institutional capacity; law, litigation and	"a highly conflicted and compromised environmental regulatory system" (Essen, 2024)

gap	compensation as accountability routes	
2. Pollution as lived hardship: livelihood, bodily harm and deprivation	Livelihood disruption (farming, fishing, trading); embodied and public-health harm; deprivation, exclusion and gendered exposure	"I don't want to die young" (Saint, 2024)
3. Pollution as recurrent and cumulative ecological catastrophe	Alert-style reports of fresh spills; accumulated legacy and chronic exposure; damage made visible through measurement	Over 500 spill sites "not visited by any joint investigator" across eight years (Jeremiah, 2024)
4. Pollution as contested causality and disputed responsibility	Sabotage and theft versus equipment failure and ageing infrastructure; cause deferred to joint investigation; distributed and systemic causation; attributed claims and evidential caution	"The investigation concluded that it was an act of sabotage" (Kumolu, 2022) versus "operational failures of oil firms" (Akintayo, 2022)
5. Pollution as a problem awaiting a solution: remedies, advocacy and prevention	State programmes and enforcement action; prevention, forecasting and early warning; behavioural, corporate and citizen remedies; technological and scientific remedies	A clean-up described as "though very slow, is a departure from the past" (Egbejule, 2022)
6. Pollution as economic loss and development trade-off	Monetisation of environmental harm; extraction, income and environmental cost; pollution as public cost	"In practical terms, everyone pays" (Kehinde, 2026a)

Theme 1: Institutional failure and the implementation gap. Stories in this theme repeated a recognisable sequence: pollution is identified, a law, budget line or official promise is shown to exist, and enforcement or follow-through is shown to be missing. Vanguard's reporting on methane placed Nigeria's problem in "a gap between policy ambition and outcomes on the ground" (Kehinde, 2026b), while Punch reported residents of an Ogun community who said a recycling firm remained in their neighbourhood despite regulatory relocation orders, with noise and pollution beginning to "tell on our children and aged people" (Adewole, 2023). The same sequence structured The Guardian's follow-up on an Ogoni spill (Godwin, 2026b) and Punch's account of a Delta community still drinking from a polluted river despite budget commitments (Ayantoye, 2026). Fiscal variants interrogated environmental funding, and legal variants pursued pollution through courts and compensation claims.

Theme 2: Lived hardship. Here, pollution was narrated from inside households and livelihoods. Farmers, fishers and traders appeared as the people who lose income first (Mojeed, 2025; Nwaoku, 2024). Residents' own words carried the storyline: "We drink, cook, wash and fish there" in Punch's Delta water investigation (Ayantoye, 2026); "We find it difficult to breathe" in The Guardian's Rivers investigation (Godwin, 2026a); and "our seafood is gone" in The Guardian's report on a Bonny spill (Nwaoku, 2024). Harm was also narrated through the body, in stories linking soot, gas flaring and heavy metals to illness, and through deprivation, where sanitation, drainage and clean water were absent. Gendered variants recurred in Premium Times, where women farmers were the principal witnesses.

Theme 3: Recurrent and cumulative ecological catastrophe. Two variants were evident. Alert-style reports told of a fresh spill, often on the word of an advocacy group and with little context. Longer reports presented harm as accumulation: eight years of regulator-recorded spills (Jeremiah, 2024), a commission's estimate of the cost of cleaning decades of spills in Bayelsa (Nnodim, 2023), industrial wastewater and oil pollution, abandoned barite mines (Saint, 2024) and gas seepage from abandoned installations (Godwin, 2026a). A third



variant made damage visible through measurement, as in satellite mapping of mangrove mortality (Guardian Nigeria, 2025a).

Theme 4: Contested causality and disputed responsibility. Spill stories rarely closed the causal question. Operators or industry-linked sources attributed spills to sabotage, theft or vandalism, while communities, advocacy groups or regulatory data pointed to equipment failure, corrosion or ageing pipelines. In Vanguard's Bayelsa report, the community's explanation was that "the pipeline failed due to corrosion and equipment deterioration rather than sabotage" (Oyadongha, 2026), set against a regulatory finding of induced corrosion that the community disputed. The Guardian's Bodo report set a joint-investigation finding of equipment failure against Shell's oil-theft account, in a story that also recorded "the total breakdown of trust between the people and the industry" (Godwin, 2022). Some stories deferred causation to a joint investigation. Contestation was not confined to oil: flood and waste stories redistributed causality from rainfall or residents' conduct towards drainage, planning and refuse-collection systems. A related pattern was epistemic caution: Punch's gas-flaring investigation reported that "No doctor could say with certainty that gas flaring killed these children" (Akogun, 2026), and Vanguard's heavy-metal story routed toxicological claims through a politician (Umoru, 2023).

Theme 5: A problem awaiting a solution. In this storyline, the pollution problem was a brief preface to remedies. The institutional variant reported programme launches, enforcement actions and policy statements. The preventive variant reported flood outlooks and early warnings. The behavioural variant reported awareness and corporate campaigns: Vanguard's World Environment Day report stated that "The fight against plastic pollution requires deliberate action" (Onuoha, 2025), locating the remedy in awareness and clean-up rather than in the production of plastic waste. Community-led remedies were rarer: Premium Times' account of residents replanting mangroves "with little or no attention from the authorities" (Udegbumam, 2022) reversed the usual direction of initiative, and technology-based remedies appeared in reports on pollution-monitoring platforms.

Theme 6: Economic loss and development trade-off. Environmental harm was translated into money or set against economic survival. Data-driven reports converted flaring, spills and floods into revenue, remediation cost or GDP loss. Vanguard's later flaring report extended the loss to electricity, cooking gas, health and damaged farms and fisheries (Kehinde, 2026a), so that monetisation was not the end of the story. In extractive-livelihood reports, income from mining, logging or industrial recycling was shown beside its environmental cost, producing a trade-off structure rather than a perpetrator-and-victim structure.

Across themes, coverage frequently moved from incident to structure. Short alert and announcement stories confined the storyline to one event or initiative, whereas longer investigative and analytical stories connected the event to regulation, infrastructure, public finance and livelihoods, so that a spill, leak or flood became part of a persistent condition. Themes also overlapped within stories: a spill report could combine the catastrophe, contested-causality and hardship storylines.

Negative and deviant cases. The Guardian's Ogoni follow-up (Godwin, 2026b) reversed the usual sequence of government announcement and solution by finding worsening pollution after a federal intervention. Punch's report on the closure of 25 facilities (Adejoro, 2025) and reports on emission registers and vehicle-emission testing presented the state as an active regulator, so institutional failure was not a universal representation of government. In the Nembe report (Kumolu, 2022) and a corporate plastic-waste campaign (Onuoha, 2025), an industry-linked actor defined the terms of the story, which ran counter to the community-centred storylines of Theme 2. Several short reports offered no structural explanation at all.

Predominant Frames

Table 2: Frames Identified in the Coverage of Environmental Pollution

Frame	Sub-frames	Illustrative quotation
F1. Responsibility and blame-	Corporate culpability; third-party and community attribution; state and regulatory responsibility; distributed, multi-actor responsibility; individualised	"failures of strategy, prevention, response and remediation by oil



attribution	behavioural responsibility	companies" (Nnodim, 2023)
F2. Human-impact	Health and bodily harm; livelihood loss; water and food insecurity; displacement and dispossession; personalisation through named or quoted residents	"instead of fish, we get abandoned slippers, plastic bottles and other debris" (George, 2022)
F3. Political and governance	Regulation and enforcement; public finance and budgets; policy announcement and state capacity; institutional coordination; official complicity	"abysmally low release of funds" (Omolaoye, 2025)
F4. Environmental and ecological	Ecosystem and habitat damage; land, water and air contamination as physical fact; scientific and remote-sensing visibility of damage	"pinpointing where crude oil spills have caused the most acute damage" (Guardian Nigeria, 2025a)
F5. Economic and development	Monetised harm; livelihood income versus environmental cost; pollution as public cost or externality	"This has cost the country over \$4.6 billion" (Ulebor, 2023)
F6. Justice and accountability	Environmental justice and rights; compensation and litigation; sanctions as accountability; unequal protection and citizenship	"recover the insurance pollution indemnity claim" (Onoyume, 2024)
F7. Solution	Prevention and early warning; remediation and restoration; regulation and enforcement; awareness and behaviour change; technology and monitoring	"early warning is only impactful when properly communicated" (Ewepu, 2025)
F8. Conflict and contestation	Causal and blame contestation; community–company or community–regulator dispute; threat and intimidation of environmental actors; competing livelihood and environmental interests	"afraid to return to the field" (Oritse, 2024)

The analysis indicates that no single frame predominated across the corpus; dominance was linked to newspaper and story form. The **responsibility frame** was most often dominant in Vanguard and organised oil-spill and data-based reports in Punch. It assigned blame in several directions: to oil companies through regulatory data and commission findings (Nnodim, 2023); to third parties, where the headline itself carried the operator's explanation (Kumolu, 2022); and to distributed actors in waste, flood and mining stories. Responsibility was also individualised in behavioural stories on plastic, refuse dumping and vehicle emissions, where producers and regulators received little scrutiny.

The **human-impact frame** led Punch's feature and investigative reporting and much of Premium Times' livelihood coverage. It worked through named residents and concrete objects: a fisher's net returning plastic debris in place of fish (George, 2022), farmers unable to drink well water after spills (Mojeed, 2025) and a flood-hit community warned that borehole water was poison (Godwin et al., 2022). Punch's sanitation investigation compressed deprivation into the phrase "homes double as toilets" (Chima, 2024).

The **political and governance frame** led stories on regulation and budgets, most visibly in The Guardian and Punch's policy pieces; pollution appeared as a matter of enforcement, funding and institutional coordination, with lawmakers and officials as principal voices. The **environmental and ecological frame** led spill alerts, disaster reports and measurement-based stories, presenting contamination as physical damage to water, land, mangroves and marine environments. The **economic frame** dominated data-driven reports in which flaring, spills and floods were expressed as revenue, remediation cost or GDP loss, and recurred as a secondary frame where livelihoods were set against extraction.

The **justice and accountability frame** was seldom dominant but was decisive where present: decades-long litigation, a \$1 billion indemnity claim (Onoyume, 2024), rights-based appeals and residents claiming equal protection irrespective of housing status. The **conflict frame** was likewise usually secondary, becoming



dominant in accounts of intimidation of environmental workers (Oritse, 2024), a community–factory dispute and Lagos waste blame-shifting (Akoni et al., 2026). The **solution frame** was most often dominant in The Guardian and in institutional announcements and forecasts in Vanguard and Punch, presenting pollution as manageable through programmes, early warning, technology or behaviour change.

Framing devices: voice, silence, language and evidence. Frames were sustained by who was quoted, who was missing, how stories were worded and what counted as evidence. Three source structures were evident: institution-centred stories in which officials and lawmakers defined the problem and its remedy; community-centred stories in which residents acted as witnesses; and advocacy-mediated stories in which NGOs and coalitions spoke for communities. In a fourth, less common structure, an industry-linked actor supplied the technical account. Blood-sampling findings on heavy-metal exposure, for instance, were relayed through a senator who said investigators "took samples, even blood samples from people in Bayelsa" (Umoru, 2023), rather than through an independent scientist.

Silence was patterned. Operators were repeatedly named but unheard; community voices were absent from forecast, policy and climate stories; and regulators or state agencies sometimes did not respond to reporters' enquiries. Language was calibrated to source: the strongest alarm vocabulary was usually attributed to advocacy groups, while institutional reports used a neutral or supportive register. Headlines and bodies could frame differently: two flood reports carried headlines that foregrounded rain or residents' conduct, while the body located causes in drainage, planning and warning systems (Ogundepo, 2023).

Evidence ranged from reproduced official claims to regulatory datasets, laboratory, satellite and medical evidence, and reporters' own field observation. A minority of stories marked the limits of their evidence, most clearly where residents linked illness to pollution but clinicians would not confirm causation (Akogun, 2026). Where scientific claims were relayed through non-scientists, the analysis recorded them as attributed rather than independently verified.

Recurring frame pairings were visible across the corpus: the responsibility frame with governance and justice frames in spill and regulatory stories; the human-impact frame with the environmental justice frame in community features; the environmental and ecological frame with the responsibility frame in spill alerts; the economic frame with the governance frame in data-driven reports; and the solution frame with the governance frame in forecasts and programme launches. These pairings indicate that frames operated not in isolation but as clusters that collectively shaped how pollution problems were defined, attributed and addressed within different story forms and across different newspapers.

Journalistic Practices in Reporting Pollution-Related Issues

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from the interviews
Story identification and field investigation	Community leads; direct observation; site visits	Pollution stories commonly originated from community complaints, local correspondents, agency reports and social media leads, followed by field investigation where possible.
Source triangulation	Communities; government; companies; experts	Journalists routinely consulted multiple actors to establish different perspectives and corroborate claims.
Evidence verification	Documents; regulatory records; previous reports; photographs	Participants emphasised corroborating allegations with documentary, regulatory and other independent evidence before publication.
Clear and	Distinguishing fact	Respondents sought to separate verified information from



contextual presentation	from allegation; accessible language	allegations and explain technical environmental issues in accessible terms.
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The interviews indicate that pollution reporting generally follows a verification-oriented process rather than immediate publication of claims. Journalists described beginning with community complaints, observations or institutional information and subsequently visiting affected locations, consulting different sources and examining documentary evidence. Respondent 1, for instance, explained that “photographs and direct observation are important” and that technical claims should be supported with documentary evidence. Respondent 2 similarly described community reports as starting points that require further investigation rather than immediate publication. This approach was reinforced by Respondent 7, who emphasised distinguishing “verified facts, allegations and expert interpretations” when presenting pollution stories.

Considerations Guiding Sources, Evidence, Angles and Methods

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from the interviews
Source credibility and independence	Expertise; direct knowledge; proximity; competing interests	Journalists assessed what sources knew, their relationship to the incident and whether they had interests that could affect their accounts.
Evidence triangulation	Community testimony; official information; technical expertise	Different forms of evidence were combined to establish both the human and technical dimensions of pollution.
Public-interest orientation	Livelihoods; health; water; environmental effects	The consequences of pollution for affected communities frequently shaped story angles.
Accountability orientation	Institutional response; assessment; remediation	Some journalists extended reporting beyond the incident to examine subsequent responses and remediation.

Source selection was principally guided by credibility, relevance, expertise, independence and direct knowledge. The respondents recognised that proximity to an incident does not necessarily confer technical knowledge of its cause. Consequently, community accounts were commonly complemented by official records and expert interpretation. Respondent 3 noted that a resident may explain the effects of pollution on everyday life but may not be able to establish its scientific cause. The respondents also indicated that story angles frequently extended beyond the incident itself to its effects on livelihoods, health and the environment. In some cases, journalists examined whether affected communities had been informed, whether assessments had been conducted and whether remediation had begun. As Respondent 5 observed, such questions move environmental reporting “from event reporting towards accountability reporting.”

Factors influencing reporting of Environmental Pollution

Political, Institutional and Professional Factors Shaping Reporting

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from the interviews
Political influence and	Powerful interests; politically sensitive environmental issues	Pollution stories may involve government agencies, political actors and companies with significant interests.



sensitivity		
Institutional constraints	Funding; staffing; newsroom culture; editorial priorities	Limited resources and competing newsroom priorities restrict the time and capacity available for environmental investigation.
Information-access barriers	Delayed or restricted official information	Difficulty obtaining documents and timely institutional responses was repeatedly identified as a reporting constraint.
Professional requirements	Accuracy; fairness; independence; legal and technical knowledge	Ethical standards and professional competence were viewed as essential to responsible pollution reporting.

The interviews show that pollution journalism is undertaken within a complex political and institutional environment. Respondents identified the involvement of government agencies, politically influential actors and companies as factors that can affect access to information and reporting conditions. Institutional limitations were equally prominent, particularly inadequate funding, competing assignments and differing newsroom commitments to investigative journalism. Respondent 3 observed that some organisations encourage investigative journalism whereas others prioritise “speed, audience engagement and daily output.” Professional competence was also considered important because pollution reporting frequently involves scientific, regulatory and legal information. Respondents therefore stressed accuracy, fairness, independence and the ability to interrogate technical claims rather than reproduce statements from interested parties.

Effects of Resources, Access, Deadlines, Ethics and Source Relationships

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from the interviews
Resource constraints	Transport; fieldwork; documents; expert consultation	Limited funding can restrict travel and access to the evidence required for detailed investigation.
Deadline pressure	Speed versus investigative depth	Tight deadlines may reduce the time available for verification and follow-up.
Information-access difficulties	Delayed institutional responses; unavailable documents	Limited or delayed access to official information can create evidentiary gaps.
Source relationships	Access versus dependence	Relationships facilitate information gathering but may create expectations or dependence.
Editorial support	Story priority; time and resources	Editorial priorities influence the space and resources allocated to environmental investigations.
Professional ethics	Verification; fairness; independence	Ethical standards function as safeguards against unsupported allegations and excessive dependence on sources.

The final research question revealed that these factors do not operate independently. Limited funding can restrict field investigation; delayed institutional responses can extend the reporting process; and tight deadlines can encourage reliance on readily available information. Respondent 2 explained that when newsroom support

is inadequate, journalists may have to depend heavily on telephone interviews, while Respondent 6 noted that unavailable official responses can create gaps in a story. Deadline pressure was similarly identified as a recurring challenge, particularly when editors require immediate publication. Nevertheless, respondents consistently positioned professional ethics as a safeguard against these pressures. Source relationships were regarded as useful for gaining access but potentially problematic where they create expectations of favourable treatment or excessive dependence. As Respondent 1 stated, “Maintaining independence is therefore very important.”

DISCUSSION

Research Question One: What dominant narrative patterns are employed by Nigerian online newspapers in reporting environmental pollution?

The six recurring narratives suggest that Nigerian online newspapers construct pollution as a problem that extends beyond the immediate environmental incident. The movement from institutional failure to lived hardship, ecological recurrence, contested responsibility, possible solutions and economic consequences indicates an interpretive pattern in which pollution is connected to the conditions that produce it and the consequences that follow. Rather than treating spills, contamination or flooding as isolated events, the coverage places them within continuing questions of governance, livelihoods, infrastructure and accountability. This is significant because it gives pollution a public meaning that is simultaneously environmental, social and institutional. The narrative pattern therefore reflects an attempt to make environmental harm intelligible through its effects on everyday life and the institutions expected to prevent or address it.

The prominence of institutional failure and lived hardship is particularly revealing. The former directs attention towards the distance between official responsibility and practical outcomes, while the latter translates environmental degradation into experiences of disrupted livelihoods, health concerns, water insecurity and food vulnerability. The two narratives consequently work together: institutional weaknesses become more consequential when expressed through their effects on communities. This corresponds with Obasi and Msughter (2023), who called attention to inadequate media engagement with environmental hazards in Ebonyi State, and with Ogadimma et al. (2025), who emphasised the need for greater innovation and attention in Nigerian environmental reporting. The present pattern adds an important dimension by showing that institutional scrutiny can extend to remediation, budgets and litigation, thereby connecting environmental reporting with questions of whether responsible institutions actually respond to harm.

The recurrence of contested causality also suggests that pollution reporting is not always organised around a settled explanation of responsibility. References to sabotage, theft, equipment failure and corrosion introduce competing accounts through which responsibility becomes a matter of contestation. This is more than a narrative choice; it reflects the difficulty of reporting environmental problems where corporations, regulators, communities and other actors may offer different explanations of the same event. Entman’s (1993) framing perspective helps explain how selecting explanations gives events different meanings, while the Political Economy of the Media draws attention to the unequal institutional interests surrounding environmental information. The implication is that uncertainty over causation can become part of the story itself, potentially keeping responsibility open to public debate rather than allowing the coverage to settle prematurely on a single explanation.

The coexistence of solution-oriented and economic-loss narratives further shows that the newspapers did not construct pollution solely through damage. Remediation, enforcement and early-warning measures introduce possibilities for intervention, while revenue losses, damaged livelihoods and public costs establish why the problem matters beyond the affected location. Elega et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate the value of data and geojournalism in making environmental problems more visible. What emerges, therefore, is a form of pollution reporting in which harm, responsibility, consequence and response are interconnected.

Research Question Two: What predominant frames are used in the coverage of pollution-related issues



by selected Nigerian online newspapers?

The eight frames indicate that pollution was presented through several competing but interconnected ways of making the issue meaningful. Responsibility, human impact, governance, ecology, economics, justice, solutions and conflict do not operate as isolated categories; rather, they allow the same event to be interpreted from different angles. A pollution incident may simultaneously raise questions about who is responsible, who suffers, what institutions have done, what has been damaged and what should happen next. This layered framing is important because it suggests that online newspapers do not give environmental events a single, fixed meaning. Instead, meaning emerges from the interaction of frames, with their prominence shaped by the nature of the incident, the actors involved and the form of the report.

The relationship between responsibility, human impact and governance is particularly important to understanding the coverage. Responsibility frames direct attention towards actors and causes, while human-impact frames demonstrate the consequences of those actions or failures in tangible terms. Governance framing then places both within questions of regulation, institutional response and public administration. This pattern is broadly consistent with Reuben et al. (2025), whose work highlights the influence of editorial choices and the limited presence of expert voices in environmental reporting. It also complements Matuku and Mishra (2025), who identify human life and livelihood as important dimensions of African environmental coverage. The present study consequently suggests that environmental journalism becomes more consequential when institutional questions are connected to the experiences of people affected by pollution rather than presented as separate concerns.

The coexistence of economic, ecological and human-impact frames also complicates the assumption that economic considerations necessarily displace environmental concerns. Sundaya and Chukwu (2024) associated Nigerian newspaper coverage of pipeline vandalism with strong attention to economic losses and comparatively less ecological emphasis. In the present corpus, however, economic consequences appeared alongside environmental degradation and human suffering, particularly where pollution affected livelihoods, public resources and extractive-sector interests. This suggests that economic framing does not have a uniform effect on environmental meaning; its significance depends on the other frames with which it is combined. From a Political Economy of the Media perspective, this intersection is understandable because environmental reporting operates within wider relationships involving the state, extractive industries, communities and media institutions.

Justice, solution and conflict frames further indicate that the coverage frequently moved beyond explaining pollution towards questions of accountability and possible intervention. Litigation, compensation, sanctions, remediation and early warning give environmental problems a normative and practical dimension, while conflict framing exposes disagreements over responsibility, interests and appropriate responses. This accords with Entman's (1993) argument that framing influences how problems, causes, consequences and remedies are made salient. The important point, therefore, is not merely that these frames occurred, but that their combination allowed pollution to be understood simultaneously as environmental damage, human suffering, institutional responsibility and a matter requiring public response.

Research Question Three: What journalistic practices are employed by environmental journalists in reporting pollution in Nigeria?

The interview findings used to answer this question point to a reporting process in which credibility is constructed progressively rather than assumed at the point of receiving a tip. Community accounts, observations and institutional information serve as entry points, but journalists described the need to test such information through additional sources and documentary evidence before publication. This suggests that environmental reporting in Nigeria involves a form of evidentiary negotiation: journalists must translate local experiences of pollution into claims that can withstand professional scrutiny. The importance attached to distinguishing verified facts, allegations and expert interpretations is particularly significant because pollution stories frequently involve technical causes that affected residents may experience without being able to establish scientifically. The practice therefore strengthens the journalist's intermediary role between commun-



ities, institutions and expert knowledge. It also resonates with Oduolowu et al. (2026), who describe Nigerian environmental journalists as occupying a mediating role between local environmental knowledge and wider public discourse while combining fact-based reporting with advocacy.

The interviews further suggest that source diversity is not simply a professional routine but a means of managing the uncertainty surrounding environmental claims. Community testimony can establish lived consequences; official sources can provide institutional positions; and experts can assist with technical interpretation. The value of triangulation therefore lies in bringing different forms of knowledge into the same account rather than treating one source as sufficient. This is important in a field where corporate, governmental and community actors may have competing interests in how pollution is explained. Reuben et al. (2025), for example, reported limited attention to expert opinion in newspaper coverage of oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State. The interview evidence points towards an awareness among journalists of precisely this evidentiary problem, although it does not necessarily mean that expert sourcing is always achievable. The finding consequently suggests a professional orientation towards corroboration that is valuable for environmental journalism but dependent on access to appropriate sources.

The emphasis on public-interest and accountability angles also indicates that environmental reporting is not confined to documenting the occurrence of pollution. Journalists appear to consider what the incident means for livelihoods, health, water, environmental conditions and subsequent institutional response. This broadens the news value of pollution from an isolated event to a continuing public issue. Okorie (2024), whose study of Nigerian newspaper coverage identified varied framing approaches to environmental pollution, similarly points to the need for environmental reporting that contributes to informed public discourse. Elega et al. (2024) extend this possibility by demonstrating how data journalism, geojournalism and crowdsourcing can provide additional ways of collecting and contextualising environmental information, particularly where official data are limited. The interview findings therefore suggest that effective pollution journalism depends not only on finding a story but on progressively establishing its evidentiary, human and institutional dimensions.

Viewed through the Framing Theory perspective, these practices matter because journalists' choices about sources, evidence and angles influence which aspects of pollution become salient to audiences. Verification determines which claims enter the news narrative; source selection determines whose knowledge is legitimised; and the decision to pursue remediation or institutional response shifts the story towards accountability rather than mere event description. The finding therefore supports the view that journalistic practice is itself part of environmental meaning-making. This is particularly relevant against the concerns raised by Obasi and Msughter (2023) about weak media engagement with environmental hazards in Nigerian mining communities.

Research Question Four: What political, institutional and professional factors influence environmental journalists in reporting pollution in Nigeria?

The findings used to answer this question show that environmental journalism is shaped not only by what journalists consider professionally desirable, but also by the conditions under which reporting takes place. Political sensitivity, institutional priorities, limited resources, information-access difficulties and deadline pressures collectively create a gap between the depth of reporting journalists may seek and what newsroom circumstances allow them to accomplish. This is important because constraints on environmental journalism do not necessarily operate as direct prohibitions; they can work more subtly by determining how much time, transport, documentation, specialist assistance and editorial attention a story receives. The result is that the quality and depth of pollution reporting may depend as much on the organisational environment surrounding the journalist as on individual professional commitment. This helps contextualise Obasi and Msughter's (2023) concern that environmental hazards in Nigerian mining communities receive insufficient sustained media attention.

Resource and access constraints appear particularly consequential because environmental investigation is often more demanding than routine event reporting. A journalist may need to travel to affected locations, obtain records, consult specialists and wait for institutional responses before a claim can be adequately established.



Where funding or newsroom time is limited, readily accessible telephone interviews and official statements can become more practical than prolonged field investigation. Elega et al. (2024) provide an important parallel: their examination of Eco-Nai+ shows how data journalism, crowdsourcing and geojournalism can help address information gaps where open environmental data are limited. This suggests that technological and collaborative approaches may partly compensate for conventional reporting constraints, but they do not remove the underlying institutional problem of providing journalists with sufficient time and resources. The implication is that environmental reporting capacity is partly an organisational question rather than simply an individual skill.

Political and source-related pressures add another layer to this environment. Pollution stories can place journalists between communities seeking recognition, companies protecting their interests and public institutions responsible for regulation or response. Maintaining access to these actors can therefore be professionally useful while simultaneously creating the possibility of dependence. The interview evidence indicates that journalists recognise this tension and regard independence, fairness and verification as safeguards. This is consistent with Oduolowu et al. (2026), who describe environmental journalists in Nigeria as negotiating between objectivity and advocacy while attempting to communicate environmental issues in ways that can stimulate public response. It also helps explain why professional competence matters beyond technical knowledge: ethical judgement becomes necessary when information is incomplete, contested or supplied by actors with identifiable interests.

From the perspective of Political Economy of the Media, these findings illustrate how journalistic autonomy operates within material and institutional relationships rather than in isolation. Editorial priorities, available resources, relationships with sources and access to information all influence which environmental stories can be pursued and how deeply they can be investigated. This complements Sundaya and Chukwu's (2024) observation that the prominence of economic considerations in Nigerian reporting of pipeline vandalism is connected to the country's dependence on oil and the losses associated with the sector. The present findings extend that argument from media content to the conditions of production: the political and economic significance of pollution can shape not only *what* is reported, but also the circumstances under which journalists can report it.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian online newspapers construct environmental pollution through layered narratives and frames connecting institutional failure, community hardship, contested responsibility and economic loss. Journalists apply verification-oriented practices within significant political and resource constraints. Advancing environmental journalism requires stronger institutional support, specialist capacity and sustained commitment to accountability reporting beyond episodic event coverage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nigerian online newspapers should establish dedicated environmental desks staffed by specialist reporters to shift pollution coverage from episodic event reporting towards sustained, investigative and accountability-oriented environmental journalism.
2. Media organisations should institutionalise source diversity protocols that require environmental reporters to incorporate independent scientific and expert voices alongside community testimony and official statements in pollution reporting.
3. Government agencies and media institutions should collaborate to improve journalists' access to environmental data, regulatory records and timely institutional responses so that information barriers do not compromise the depth and accuracy of pollution reporting.
4. Newsrooms should invest in training environmental journalists in data journalism, geospatial tools and digital verification methods to strengthen evidence-based pollution reporting within the resource and deadline constraints of the Nigerian online news environment.



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