

Comparative Analysis of the Prominence Nigerian Newspapers Accorded Selected Political Crisis Situations

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Abstract

Studies on newspapers coverage of politics and violence have largely concentrated on the extent of reportage in terms of frequency and magnitude of reports but scarcely consider the relationship between the placement of reports in terms of positioning and the space allotted such reports in and among newspapers. This paper thus compares the levels of prominence some Nigerian newspapers accorded some selected political crisis situations. Content analysis via coding sheet was used to collect data from five national dailies on their reportage of three political crisis situations between 2005 and 2011. The more a political issue is deemed a crisis situation, the more newspapers are likely to show equal and prominent attention to it but newspapers are hardly similar in the front page placement of such a newsworthy issue in the period of coverage irrespective of the prominence they accord such an issue.

Keywords: Nigerian dailies, political crisis, prominence, placement of reports

1. Introduction

There is an understandable relationship between the media and politics. Newspapers for example have been very instrumental or influential towards the independence of Nigeria on 1st of October, 1960. Moreover, in the cause of military interventions that plunged Nigeria into a civil war between 1967 and 1970, many journalists have been either jailed or killed (Duyile, 2007). Nevertheless, the media, through the like of newspapers have remained strong and have continued to be a veritable source of information and political consciousness. According to McQuail (2010), the mass media remain an unavoidable part of any political complexities. In democracies, the media have a complex, but important connection to sources of power as well as the political structure system, as they (the media) provide channels by which the state and powerful interests address the people, as well as provide platforms for the views of political parties and other interest groups.

Because of the indispensable role the press performs in any society, governments and the political class use the press as a means of propaganda in order to mould people's opinions on certain issues. In Nigeria, for instance, government is deeply involved in press activities as it engages in ownership of certain media outfits such as radio, television, and newspapers at both the federal and state levels, with the sole aim of promoting its (government's) programmes and policies. Apart from direct government ownership, certain politicians and public office holders establish and run private newspaper, radio and television outfits to primarily promote their own agenda and, perhaps, to also make profit. Just as the press is important to the political class, so is politics to the press as it cannot ignore political activities in its widest coverage. As a matter of fact, media content, the world over, is dominated largely by politics, economy and entertainment. And of these, politics tends to enjoy the widest coverage in most countries. This means that the Nigerian press, for example, cannot ignore politics

because it is, as it were, the biggest and most lucrative industry or enterprise in the country today. It is worthy of note that the bulk of the advertisements in the media in Nigeria today is from government and the political class. Thus, the press also needs government and political activities to survive. McQuail (2010, p.241) has summed it up thus: "Politics cannot do without the media, and the kind of (news) media we have would struggle without politics."

The press as a vital organ of the society is supposed to perform its traditional function of informing, educating and sensitizing the citizens. During crisis situations, the press through newspapers, for example, is supposed to act as a catalyst for conflict resolution and peace building. Therefore, Nigerian press is ideally expected to play a major role during political crisis situations in the country. Highlighting the significant role of the press in political crisis periods in Nigeria, Adedimeji (2005, p.121) says: "Among other agencies or social organs that have risen to the challenge of redressing the wounds of conflicts and addressing the problems engendering violence, the media tower high." The question of newspapers coverage of political crisis is therefore vital because of the antecedents of the press in any society.

1.1 Political crisis situations

Politics, simply put, is the struggle for gaining and using power to control the resources of a nation or a city. One of the key words in this definition is "struggle" and where there is a struggle, people are bound to be offended and some toes are bound to be stepped upon, thus making conflict inevitable in any political setting (Abimbola, 2008). Defining political violence, Honderish (1989), cited in Alanamu (2005, p.3), says:

Political violence, roughly defined, is a considerable or destroying use of force against persons or things, a use of force prohibited by law, directed to a change in the policies, personnel or system of government, and hence also directed to changes in the existence of individuals in the society and perhaps other societies.

The political crisis situations used in this paper, in order of occurrence, are: the third term agenda of former President Obasanjo; late President Yar'adua's illness and absence in office; as well as the 2011 post presidential election violence that was most evident in the North.

President Obasanjo's alleged third term agenda: In 1999, after winning the presidential election, and completing his first term, Obasanjo sought and won another term of four years. Yet, he contemplated that a third term in office was right and feasible if there was a constitutional amendment. The third term agenda became public knowledge in the last quarter of 2005 but after a tedious debate on the constitutional amendment bill, the National Assembly, on May 16, 2006 rejected the agenda, thus ending the third term agenda and also the amendment of other relevant clauses in the constitution (Oyebode, 2006; Olurode 2006; Momoh, 2006).

President Yar'Adua's absence and constitutional crisis: President Yar'Adua became ill while in office and subsequently had to travel for medical attention in Saudi Arabia. This was not long after his assumption of duty as president on May 29, 2007. There was a long absence from office as a result of his medical trip which plunged the country into a constitutional crisis. A controversy about whether it was right for the Vice President Jonathan to become the acting president or not, pending Yar'Adua's return ensued. Applying *the doctrine of necessity*, the National Assembly, on February 9, 2010 jointly passed a resolution that the vice president should become the acting president even without documented permission as contented under Section 145 of the 1999 Constitution.

President Yar'Adua finally died on May 5, 2010. This naturally brought about the end of the political crisis.

Post 2011 elections violent protests in the northern part of Nigeria: After the 2011 Presidential election on April 16 which was won by the only southerner in contest -Jonathan, there were violent clashes, dominantly in northern Nigeria. Leading contenders for the exalted position, at that time, were the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) candidate, Muhamadu Buhari; the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP); Nuhu Ribadu of the of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); and the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) candidate, Ibrahim Shekarau. Worst hit were Bauchi, Adamawa, Katsina and Kaduna States (*Sunday Sun*, May 15, 2011).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Newspapers are a very important part of the political landscape of most nations, and Nigeria is no exception, this has been so since 1859, after the establishment and publishing of what many consider as the first newspaper in Nigeria –*Iwe Irohin* (Duyile, 2007). In view of such assertions, one may rightly wonder the extent to which some of the contemporary political crisis situations may have been prominently covered by national dailies, given their real or imagined geographical scope and circulation. This paper therefore investigates the extent to which national dailies in Nigeria accorded prominence to the third term agenda of President Obasanjo's; late President Yar'adua's illness and absence in office; as well as the 2011 post presidential election violence that was most evident in the North.

2. Objectives of the paper

The following objectives are set to be achieved in this paper, thus:

1. To ascertain the extent to which national dailies in Nigeria prominently reported the third term bid; Yar'Adua's illness and absence in office; as well as the post-election violence.
2. To determine any significant differences in the level of prominence each of the selected national dailies accorded the selected political crisis situations.

To achieve these objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses were raised. The research questions were: to what extent did the selected national dailies in Nigeria prominently report the third term bid; Yar'Adua's illness and absence in office; as well as the 2011 post Nigerian election violence? And, are there any significant differences in the level of prominence each selected national daily accorded the selected political crisis situations? The hypotheses were: there are no significant differences between the national dailies in their allocation of front pages to the reportage of the selected political crisis situations; and, there are no significant differences between the national dailies in their allocation of large spaces to the reportage of the selected political crisis situations.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is theoretically anchored on the agenda-setting theory. The agenda-setting theory, according to (McQuail, 2010), was postulated by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 and 1993. The theorists noted that there are two levels of agenda setting: the first being that the press reflects reality, while the second is that the media shape reality. While the latter is about frames –how the mass media re-construct reality in order to in-turn shape opinion about reality, the former is about the prominence the media accord certain issues above others. Generally, the agenda-setting theory encapsulates the role of the mass media towards influencing critical topic selection and critical discourse on issues that concern the public, and as a result of such critical topic selection

via attributing prominence to them, make such issues to become part of the overall agenda for society's action. The theory indeed states that if certain issues are most prominently covered by the conventional media, the large heterogeneous populace, to a significant level, will consider such issues as more important to them and the society. This forms the basis for this study considering the prominence accorded selected political crisis situations by some Nigerian national dailies.

.4. Methodology and Data Analysis

Through the use of coding sheets, the content analysis research design was adopted. Content analysis research design is suitable for this type of study as according to Wimmer and Dominick (2006) and Bordens and Abbott (2008), content analysis is used to study the recorded information. The population of study comprised the editions of *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* between November 1, 2005 and May 30, 2011. Through the systematic sampling technique, 500 editions of the newspapers representing the three political crisis periods investigated were picked. The sampling process is shown in Table 1. The units of analysis included news stories, feature articles, opinions, editorials comments, interviews, pictures, cartoons, letter/text messages to the editors as well as advertorials See also (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2005). The result of the test of validity and reliability of coders and the coding sheet as calculated through the use of the Pearson correlation coefficient r was **0.6**. According to Buda and Jarynowski (2010) **0.6** is a high validity and reliability score.

4.1 Prominence accorded the selected political crisis situations

The data on the newspapers' coverage of President Obasanjo's third term bid show that only 16.8% of the coded items appeared on the front page; while 83.2% of the coded newspaper items appeared on the inside page (See Table 2). In relation to the Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office, data show that only 18.6% of the coded items on Yar' Adua's illness was on the front page of the newspapers, 81. % of the newspaper items was on the inside pages and only .4% of the coverage was on the back page (See Table 3). Data in relation to the post-election violence show that 6.2% of the coverage is placed on the front page, while 93.8% of the coded newspaper items were on the inside pages. Only .3% of the coverage is on the back page (See Table 4). These data show that majority of the press items on the President Obasanjo's third term bid, Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office, as well as the post-election violence are simply placed inside or at the back. However, the order of assessing prominence in the reportage of the political crisis situations shows that Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office was more prominently reported, with 18.6% of the coverage placed on the front page. Indeed, literature show that out of the three political crises situation studied, the Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office, was the most controversial and complicated, followed by President Obasanjo's third term bid, at 16.8%; and then post-election violence, with the least number of front page coverage at 6.2%.

The order of assessment of space/size of the entire reportage shows that 25.7% of the coverage of President Obasanjo's third term bid was allocated large spaces; this is followed by 25.2% of the large spaces the newspapers allocated to the Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office, and not just last but also the least, is that only 7% of the coverage of the post-election violence is allocated large spaces (See Tables 5-7). These findings imply that the more an issue is considered important but complicated and controversial, the more there would be a higher tendency to place its coverage on the front page of newspapers. Also, findings show that

such complicated and considerably controversial issues are then given more space and size in their reportage as compared to others. This study may not be the first to make such a conclusion; however, the study shows that newspapers and indeed, the mass media, do understand the value of their reportage to society, and also take colour from the environment and reflect the complications thereof. This study therefore confirms the assumptions of the agenda setting theory McQuail (2010) which explains that the mass media reflect reality as well as build on that reality to reshape it.

4.2 Possible significant differences in the prominence newspapers accorded selected political crisis situations

The test results for Hypothesis One showed that there are no significant differences between the number of front page stories and other pages in the reportage of the *Nigerian Tribune* and *Daily Trust*; *Daily Trust* and *The Punch*; as well as *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust*; However, the test also showed that there are significant differences between front page stories and other pages in the reportage of the *Nigerian Tribune* and *The Punch*; *The Sun* and *Nigerian Tribune*; *The Punch* and *Sun*; *The Sun* and *The Guardian*; *The Guardian* and *Nigerian Tribune*; *The Sun* and *Daily Trust*; as well as *The Guardian* and *The Punch*. Therefore, Hypothesis One (There are no significant differences between the national dailies in their allocation of front pages to the reportage of the selected political crisis situations) is largely rejected. The implication of Hypothesis One test results is: though the newspapers considerably have a cumulative 18.6% of the coverage of Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office on the front page; followed by President Obasanjo's third term bid, at 16.8%; and then post-election violence, with the least number of front page coverage at 6.2%, there are significant differences in the particular allocation of front page stories among the selected newspapers. Therefore, it implies that, rarely would newspapers equally consider and place stories on the front page even if the stories are generally considered prominent.

The test results for Hypothesis Two showed that there are no significant differences in the large spaces allocated to stories in the reportage of *The Sun* and *The Guardian*; *The Guardian* and *Nigerian Tribune*; *Nigerian Tribune* and *Daily Trust*; *The Sun* and *Daily Trust*; *Sun* and *Nigerian Tribune*; *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust*; *The Guardian* and *The Punch*; as well as *Nigerian Tribune* and *The Punch*. However, the test also showed that there are a few instances where there are significant differences large spaces allocated to stories in the reportage; these are: *Daily Trust* and *The Punch*; as well as *The Punch* and *The Sun*. Hypothesis Two is largely accepted. There is a different implication to the test results of Hypothesis Two. Hypothesis Two test results imply that as much as 25.7% of the coverage of President Obasanjo's third term bid are allocated large spaces; followed by 25.2% allocated to the Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office, and 7% allocated to post election violence, so similar is the pattern in the allocation of space/size to the political crisis situations among the selected newspapers. In turn, this further means thus: newspapers are far more likely to equally consider the allocation of large space/size for a news story if the issue in the news is considerably prominent. This finding confirms the assertion by Adedimeji (2005, p.121) that the mass media are very steadfast in the rise towards challenging and redressing the wounds of conflicts and addressing the problems that engender violence in the society, thereby equally giving attention and allocating adequate and almost equal space to the reportage of issues of considerable prominence.

5. Conclusion

Findings from this study revealed that the more a political issue is deemed a crisis situation, the more the press is

likely to show equal and prominent attention to such an issue. This is reflected in the manner the five selected Nigerian newspapers reported the three selected political crises situations - Late President Yar' Adua's illness and absence in office; President Obasanjo's third term bid; and the 2011 post-election violence. Besides, the front page placement of a newsworthy issue will hardly be similar among a distribution of national dailies throughout the duration of the issue of coverage irrespective of how prominent newspapers may consider an issue to be prominent. Indeed, rarely would newspapers equally consider and place stories on the front page even if the stories are generally considered prominent. Also, space/size of a news story is a stronger determinant of prominence across an array of national newspapers' distribution than front-page placement. Newspapers are far more likely to equally consider the allocation of large space/size for a news story if the issue in the news is considerably prominent.

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Table 1: Breakdown of sample size of newspaper editions

S/N	Political Crises	Periods of Study	Total Editions	Sampling Interval	Sample Size
1.	President Obasanjo's Third Term Agenda	November 1, 2005 to May 31, 2006	212 x 5 (1,060)	5.0	42 x 5 (210)
2.	Power vacuum created by President Yar'Adua's absence from office	November 23, 2009 to May 23, 2010	182 x 5 (910)	5.0	36 x 5 (180)
3.	Violent protests in the North over 2011 Presidential Poll Result	April 17, to May 30, 2011	44 x 5 (220)	2.0	22 x 5 (110)
	TOTAL		447 x 5 (2,235)		100 x 5 (500)

Table 2: Placement of reports -OBJ third term agenda

Placement	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Front page	12	6	21	10	11	60	16.8
Inside page	67	44	89	39	59	298	83.2
Back page	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	79	50	110	49	70	358	100

Table 3: Placement of newspaper reports -Yar'Adua's illness

Placement	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Front page	14	12	11	16	25	78	18.6
Inside page	123	38	68	51	60	340	81
Back page	1	0	0	1	0	2	0.4
Total	138	50	79	68	85	420	100

Table 4: Placement of newspaper reports -Post election protests

Placement	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Front page	8	5	7	2	0	22	6.2
Inside page	171	22	105	26	10	334	93.5
Back page	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.3
Total	179	27	113	28	10	357	100

Table 5: Space/size of newspaper reports -OBJ third term agenda

Space/size	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Short	47	33	57	23	25	185	51.7
Medium	14	15	25	8	19	81	22.6
Large	18	2	28	18	26	92	25.7
Total	79	50	110	49	70	358	100

Table 6: Space/size of newspaper reports -Yar'Adua's illness

Space/size	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Short	114	27	35	7	37	220	52.4
Medium	12	15	24	28	15	94	22.4
Large	12	8	20	33	33	106	25.2
Total	138	50	79	68	85	420	100

Table 7: Space/size of newspaper reports -Post election protests

Space/size	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Short	152	21	98	6	7	284	79.6
Medium	24	3	7	13	1	48	13.4
Large	3	3	8	9	2	25	7
Total	179	27	113	28	10	357	100