

Press Reportage of President Yar'Adua's Ill-health: A Study

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Abstract

This study was carried out with a view to examining the frequency and prominence of coverage given to President Musa Yar'Adua's ill-health by Nigerian newspapers. The major concern of this study was to find out whether there was any relationship between the newspaper coverage of this issue and public perception of it. The study found that the Nigerian press demanded a handing over of government from President Yar'Adua, as news about a demand for his handing over dominated the agenda of the newspapers during the period. It was also inferred that the newspapers coverage of the issue with their use of banner headlines and image frame through the use of pale-looking photographs, was proportional to the perception held by the public about it.

Key words: Press, Reportage, Agenda-setting, Framing, Ill-health.

1. Introduction

The press is an important institution in any society. They perform many functions, both for individuals and for the society. Okunna, (1999), states that the media inform, entertain, educate, promote culture, integrate people, serve as a forum for public debates and discussions, motivate and mobilize people.

Public perception of issues and events in any given society is largely shaped by the media. The fact that certain issues are covered by the media gives credibility and credence to such issues, and further moves such issues from media agenda to public agenda (Nwabueze, et al. 2010).

Pietikainen (2005) cited in Nwabueze (2010: 113) buttresses the power of the media to shape public opinion and perception of events when he observes that "news is one of the most influential public spaces of contemporary society, perceived as offering trustworthy and accurate stories about the world, its events and people". The mass media do not only set the agenda for public discussion through frequent and prominent coverage of issues; they also frame the agenda through the use of language, words, captions, specific photographs, and story angles.

According to Anaeto et al. (2008: 89) "The agenda setting proposes that the facts which people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media present to them." He states further that the significance which they (people) ascribe to the same issues tend to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to such issues in the media.

Framing of news, according to McQuail (2005: 379), is "a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items of fact". Just as the media determine what dominates public discussion through priority and frequency of coverage of an issue; they further determine how they set agenda or how topic should be viewed. News presentation with specific choice of words or from specific perspectives or angles plays instrumental role in agenda setting and news framing.

Enough evidence exists that the health sector in Nigeria has suffered dramatically over the years. A study produced by the Amsterdam Institute for International Development (AIID) on Nigeria's health sector, cited in Rodney, (2010:221), observes that Nigeria's health indicators have stagnated or worsened during the past decade:

Life expectancy is 44 years; lower than the African and developing country average, and infant mortality is, almost double the developing country average. An estimated 3.5 million Nigerians are infected with HIV and access to prevention, care and treatment is minimal. The burden of healthcare financing lies mainly with individuals with

private expenditures equaling 70 percent of total health expenditure and out-of-pocket expenditures totaling 90 percent of private expenditures.

This actually gives a picture of bad health scenario of Nigeria. Healthcare gulps the larger part of an average Nigerian's finance, and since health is no man-made, that of President Yar'Adua is no exception.

2. Statement Problem

It is a common saying that health is wealth. This underscores the primacy of sound health in one's life. The ill-health of President Yar'Adua, which took him out of the country for almost three months, nearly resulted into chaotic political crisis. Presidential functionality was put on hold as Yar'Adua did not hand over power to the Vice-President before leaving the country. This led to people's agitation and concern; thus crisis was imminent.

In reaction to people's concern over the vacuum created by the absence of the President from the country, Nigerian media started beaming their editorial searchlight on his health-facilitated foreign trip as well as its implications. Thus, the press was expected to play crucial roles in bringing about an end to the crisis generated by the President's ill-health. This could be achieved through agenda setting and agenda framing.

3. Objective of this study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the level of prominence given to the President's ill-health by the Nigerian press.
2. To understand the effectiveness of agenda setting power of the media.
3. To examine the dominance of President Yar'Adua's image in the newspapers.

4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What was the frequency of coverage given to President Yar'Adua's ill-health by the press?
2. What was the press' degree of prominence given to the President's ill-health?
3. What image of the President was dominant in the reports?

5. Literature Review

5.1. President Yar'Adua's Ill-Health at a Glance

President Yar'Adua embarked on series of health trips abroad. The last was when he left Nigeria on 23 November, 2009 for Saudi Arabia to receive treatment for pericarditis. For weeks, he was at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital, Jeddah, as reported by the (TELL Magazine of March 8, 2010, P 25.)

Yar'Adua was not seen in public again, and his absence created a dangerous power vacuum in Nigeria. In December 2009, Oluwarotimi Odunayo Akeredolu, President of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), stated that Yar'Adua should have handed over power to Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan in an acting capacity during his illness, a statement that was backed up by the NBA National Executive Committee. On 22 January 2010, the Supreme Court of Nigeria ruled that the Federal Executive Council (FEC) had 14 days to decide on a resolution about whether he "is incapable of discharging the functions of his office". The ruling also stated that the Federal Executive Council should hear testimony of five doctors, one of whom should be Yar'Adua's personal physician, (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

On 9 February 2010, the Senate determined that presidential power be transferred to Vice-President, Goodluck Jonathan, and that he would serve as Acting President, with all the accompanied powers, until Yar'Adua returned to full health. The power transfer has been called a "coup without the word" by opposition lawyers and lawmakers. However, others felt the power vacuum would lead to instability and a possible military takeover. Consequently, Yar'Adua died on 5 May 2010, at the Aso Rock presidential villa. An Islamic burial took place on 6 May 2010 in his hometown.

5.2. History of the Nigerian Press

The credit for establishing the first newspaper in Nigeria went to Rev. Henry Townsend, a Clergyman of the Church Missionary Society faith, who, in 1859, founded a community-based newspaper named *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba*, which is literally translated as 'a newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba people. It was the first newspaper to be published in African language (Daramola, 2003:135).

According to him, the paper appeared fortnightly. It was first published as a vernacular newspaper, but later an English edition was added. Trade reports, particularly cotton statistics and general news, featured in the newspaper. Record also had it that the Townsend's newspaper educated the growing public about the history and politics of the nation.

From the foregoing, it could be affirmed that the history of the Nigerian press started with the missionary factor. The Paper's founder consequently had a mission of religious evangelism; based on the mandate given him by the Church Missionary Society of England (CMS), which sent him (Kadiri, 2008:17). According to her, the missionaries had the objective of evangelizing and converting Africans to Christianity. She however, added that *Iwe Irohin* helped immensely to increase the level of education and social awareness of the generality of the people then. Evaluations made on the paper confirmed its pioneering qualities.

She states further that *Iwe Irohin*, no doubt, laid the foundation and became the pioneer of newspapers in Nigeria from what was then known as pre-colonial Nigeria. The newspaper ceased circulating in October 1867, after 8 years of existence, following the disagreement of the people of Egba with the Paper and the resultant burning of the printing press by a mob, Daramola (2003).

After *Iwe Irohin*, came The *Anglo-African*. The *Anglo-African* became the second of the twelve main newspapers, which made its debut in early Nigeria and pioneered the alien dominated press. The proprietor and editor of the Paper, Robert Campbell brought the *Anglo-African* newspaper to life on June 6, 1863. According to Daramola (2003), its news coverage was more than that of Henry Townsend's.

One of newspapers that follow in quick succession was *Lagos Time and Gold Coast Advertiser*. It was established by Richard Blaise in 1880. The newspaper flagged off the beginning of revolutionary press in Nigeria Kadiri (2008). According to Daramola (2003), it was always attacking the extravagant spending of the colonial government.

From 1880, journalists and newspaper men that grew up were men who had tasted the bitter pill of racial discrimination and segregation in either England or United States of America, Daramola (2006). He states further that these people were therefore prepared to wrestle power from the British colonial masters on that ground. The newspaper was used as a tool against the draconian laws that the colonial rulers were using. The Paper championed the cause of freeing the country from the shackles of colonialism. It educated the people on the evils of colonialism and implored them to shun anything that has to do with colonialism in all its ramifications.

The period from 1891 to 1930 was known as the period of serious nationalism and agitation for representative government. It was the era marked by petition, confrontation and critical appraisal of colonial administration by the newspapers of the period, Kadiri (2008).

5.4. Press Performance in Democratic Ideals.

Writing on political communication systems and democratic values, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) in their book "The Crisis of Public Communication" say democracy is a highly exacting creed in its expectations of the mass media. It requires that the media perform and provide a number of functions and services for the political system. And to meet its expectations of media performance in democratic ideals, the Nigerian Government in her 1999 constitution, section 22, empowers the press to watch on the Government. Section 22 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria States;

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.

5.5. Roles of the Press in Nigerian Democratic Rule

In the words of Curran (1996), classical liberal thought argues that the primary democratic role of the media is to act as a public watchdog overseeing the state. This watchdog role, according to him, is said to override in importance all other functions of the media, and to dictate the form in which the media should be organized.

He however, posits that only by anchoring the media to the free market is it possible to ensure the media's complete independence from government. He opines that once the media becomes subject to public regulation, it will lose its bite as a watchdog.

The media of mass communication have, and can play great roles in the development of political and democratic ideals in developing countries including Nigeria. The media are multipliers of sources of knowledge, raise levels of resources of knowledge and levels of aspirations Isola (2008).

As channels that disseminate contemporary ideas and refine traditional practices and values, the mass media assist in reshaping conflicting societal norms Okoro (1995) as cited in (Isola, 2008: 121). He said: "The mass media are recognized as agents capable of instituting a level of enlightenment and uprightness needed to transform a society's social and political orientation".

Isola (2008:125) also states that: "The establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development."

Commenting further on Bussiek's submission, Isola (2008) states that journalists have to self – sensor themselves to ensure that democratic ideals are maintained and sustained. He says the mass media should cultivate and sustain a friendly attitude with a legitimate government and criticize when it is necessary while carrying out their watchdog functions.

5.6. Theoretical Framework.

5.6.1. Agenda-Setting Theory

The concept of agenda-setting holds that the media may not tell us what to think, but media certainly tell us what to think about (Baran, 2002:385). Based on their study of the media's role in the 1968 US Presidential election, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw wrote in 1972, as cited in Baran (2002):

In choosing and displaying news, editors newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position... The mass media may well determine the important issues---that is, the media set the "agenda" of the campaign. (p. 176).

Also in his analysis of powerful influence of the media, Bernard Cohen (1963), similarly states: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.

Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media, especially on political communication systems around which the health issue of late President Yar'Adua revolved. As stated earlier, the orientation of this theory was used as a framework for data collection, analysis and interpretation in this study.

5.6.2. Framing Theory

The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic (Fairhurst, et al. 1996). The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Framing is an important topic since it can have a big influence and therefore the concept of framing expanded to organizations as well. Framing, as a media effect, describes the influence on the public of the news angles, interpretative frameworks and 'spin' that contextualize news reports and event accounts (McQuail, 2000:426).

Thus, a frame refers to the way media and media gatekeepers organize and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audiences interpret what they are provided, Semetko, et al.(2000). He state that frames are abstract notions that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence the perception of the news of the audience, this form of agenda-setting not only tells what to think about, but also how to think about it.

Okunna and Omonugha (2008: 83), quoting Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), propose five types of frames which the media often adopt in treating news:

- (1) Conflict frame: This reduces complex social and political problems to simple conflicts, with emphasis placed on the performance and style of the combatants.
- (2) Human interest frame: This places emphasis on the personal and emotional side of an event, issue or problem.
- (3) Economic consequences frame: This places emphasis on the economic impact or implication of an issue or event for the nation. This frame is used to make an event relevant to the public.
- (4) Morality frame: This adds a religious or moral charge to an event. It is often used in responses to by news sources rather than expressed views of journalists.
- (5) Responsibility frame: This presents the crisis such that the responsibility for causing it resides with the government, an individual or group.

The above theoretical analysis of framing shows that news presentation is a function of certain knowledge structure and socio-cultural maps of journalists covering events. The concern here is whether it could be established that such frames as discussed above may have come to play in the coverage of the President's ill-health. Could it also be established that the press whipped up sentiments through framing of the illness, as evidenced in news stories, to influence the public and policy makers towards the resolution of the crisis generated by the ill-health of the President? Reactions to the above concerns through research constitute the kernel of this study.

6. Research Method

The method considered most suitable for this kind of study with the stated objective (focus) is content analysis. This method is also considered most suitable because the researchers analyzed the already manifest content of the three

newspapers as regards their coverage of President Yar'Adua's illness. Editions of three Nigerian Newspapers that were selected within six (6) months-December 2009 to May 2010, within which the critical ill-health of the President lasted, constitute the universe of this study.

A total of two hundred and sixteen (216) editions of three purposively selected Nigerian newspapers were sampled for this study. The selected newspapers were: *The Punch*, *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* Newspapers. These newspapers were selected based on their perceived availability and accessibility in the Achieves and on the fact that they are considered as sources of news for large readership.

6.1. Data Analysis Technique

Descriptive statistics is employed by using data distribution method. With the utilization of descriptive statistics, bar charts and pie charts were used to give graphic analysis of the facts gathered from the contents of the three selected newspapers. Descriptive analyses of the graphic statistics presented in the charts were supported with qualitative analysis in order to corroborate statistical information contained in the figures.

7. Findings

7.1. The Nigerian press gave a high degree of frequency to the coverage of news about President Yar'Adua's ill-health.

Figure 1 represents the total number of stories on the President's ill-health in the selected 216 editions showing how frequently the issue was reported in the newspapers. It indicates how many news items were carried on the President Musa Yar'Adua's ill-health by the sampled newspapers within the six months period of the study. The fact that as much as total news items of 508 on President Yar'Adua's ill-health were reported in just 216 editions, as obtained from the finding of this study, confirmed the large coverage of the issue by the press.

7.2. The dominant nature of stories on the President Yar'Adua's Ill-health as reported by the Nigerian press were straight news

Figure 2 (see appendix) presents the different news items reported by the Nigeria newspapers on the ill-health of President Yar'Adua. As reported, **straight news report** dominated the columns of the three newspapers as there were 295 news stories representing 58% of the total 508 news items on the issue. The Nation had the highest straight news report with 119 summed up to be 55%. *The punch* recorded the higher number of straight news stories having 101 with 60% of its total news items. Daily Trust came last having recorded 75 straight news with a percentage of 60%, out of its 124 total news items.

Other type of story that also had a relatively high report was **picture**. Most of the stories were accompanied with pictures. Next to picture was **editorial**. While the total straight news report and picture in the three newspapers were 295 and 80 with 58% and 16% respectively, that of editorial was 62 with 12%. However, there were little **feature** stories on the president ill-health as a total number of 40 feature stories representing 8% were recorded across the three newspapers. **Letters** and **cartoons** which were also part of total news items had 21 and 10 representing 4% and 2% respectively.

7.3. Nigerian Press Demanded a Hand Over from the ailing President Yar'Adua

A finding of the study as presented in figure 3 shows that a demand for a hand over topped the theme of the three newspaper reports as it recorded the highest frequency of report with 209 news items representing 41% of the total news items. Disclosure of health status and constitutional crisis shared the remaining percentage with 35% and 24% of 178 and 121 news items respectively. It is obvious however, that demand for a handing over of government from the ailing President dominated the theme of the newspapers' reports. Although when compared and treated individually, demand for a disclosure of the President's health status topped the theme of discussion in both the *Daily Trust* and the *Punch* newspapers having 54 and 57 news items out of their 124 and 169 total news items based on their frequency of coverage respectively, the *Nation* newspaper demanded President Yar'Adua's handing over of power as it reported an overwhelming 108 news items with 50 percent on handing over.

7.4. The Degree of Prominence Given to the Coverage of President Yar'Adua's Ill-health by Nigerian Newspapers was High

It was revealed that though the majority of news stories were hidden in the inside pages, a sizeable amount appeared on the front pages and a few on the back pages. This is noteworthy however, that 84 stories representing 17% out of the total 100% of total news items appeared on front pages with major and minor headlines. It is also noteworthy that the *Nation*, out of its 72 sampled editions, had on its back pages 22 news items with major headlines out of 215 total news items, 12 of which were accompanied with photographs as shown in figure 5 (See appendix).

7.5. The press used emotional image frame to draw public attention and generate concern for the President's Ill-health through the use of haggard-looking pictures

Figure 5 give a graphical analysis of how the three newspapers gave prominence to the news items through their use and placement of photographs of President Musa Yar'Adua. As shown, a total number of 80 photographs were used in the editions of the three newspapers sampled. That 14 and 13 photographs appeared on front and back pages respectively, which are the two most focal parts of any newspaper, coupled with the fact that picture speaks volume calls for a concern over public attention the media tried to draw to the issue.

The image frame used for President Yar'Adua in the three newspapers portrayed him in a thought-provoking, emotional and highly sensational way through the use of pictures that gave him an image of a weak, inactive, helpless, haggard and critically ill person. The construction and strategic placement of emotional headlines most of which were accompanied with big and trouble-looking photographs with the image of a thin, skinny, lean, gaunt and lifeless person, vividly show that the image dominant in the three newspapers' report of president Yar'Adua was that of a disease-ridden and critically ill person.

7.6. The Nigerian Press treated the issue of President Musa Yar'Adua's Ill-health in-depth.

As shown in figure 6, the three newspapers treated the issue of President Musa Yar'Adua's Ill-health in-depth. This is obvious in 211 different news items summed up to be 42%, out of 508 with 100% that occupied multiple columns. That 139 news items representing 27% also occupied double columns corroborates the finding that the Nigerian newspapers treated the issue of President Musa Yar'Adua's ill-health in-depth.

7.7. The Press used soft tone in their reportage of the President's Ill-health

The finding, as presented in figures 7, shows the comparative analysis of the tone of the news items about President Yar'Adua's ill-health. As gathered from the analysis of contents of the three newspapers, it was revealed that the tone was generally soft. This is evident from 308 news items representing 61% out of 508 total news items. The figure shows the *Nation* to be most tender in tone as it recorded the highest number of news items with soft tone which is 120 representing 56% of its total news items compared to *Daily Trust* and the *Punch* that had 97 and 91 news items of their total news items with soft tones respectively.

7.8. The Direction of the Coverage of President Musa Yar'Adua's Ill-health by the Nigerian Newspapers was unfavourable

Although 160 news items representing 31% and another 151 news items also with 30% out of the total news items on the issue were moderate and favourable respectively, the general direction/slant of news items about President Yar'Adua' ill-health was unfavourable. This is shown in figure 8 by 197 news items representing 39% of the total news items that did not favour the President. That *Daily Trust*, a paper whose operation is based in and owned by a Northerner, hardly carried news items which did not favour the President, as 99 out of its 124 total news items were favourable and moderate, is noteworthy.

7.9. The inference that can be drawn on the relationship between media report of the President's ill-health and public perception of the issue is that it made the public to perceive the President as losing grip of control

The inference that can be drawn from the intensive coverage of this issue by the Nigerian newspapers with placement of major headlines and big, pale photographs of President Musa Yar'Adua on the front and back pages of the three newspapers, and the in-depth report indicated by 211 news items that occupied multiple columns is that it made the public to perceive the President as losing grip of control, incapacitated and deficient in strength. What could be inferred from the use of such big headlines as; "Yar'Adua: Outrage grows" (The Nation, January 11, 2010); "Resign on health grounds, Obasanjo tells Yar'Adua" (The Punch, January 22, 2010); "Respect constitution, Senate urges Yar'Adua" (The Punch, January 28, 2010); "Anxiety over Yar'Adua" (The Nation, March 22, 2010); "Only

doctors can decide Yar'Adua's return date" (The Punch, December 10, 2009); "Yar'Adua should hand over to VP now - Akunyili" (The Punch, February 4, 2010), among others, (See appendix), and their placement with big photographs on the front pages of the newspapers is that it made the public to perceive the issue in line with the perception of the press and consequently demand a hand over of government from President Yar'Adua to President Goodluck Jonathan.

8. Conclusion

The tendency of Nigerian press to concentrate on issue they consider topical and controversial makes other issues that should ordinary command press attention, but which probably do not have a serious element of crisis, to suffer journalistic treatment. The reason for this could be simply because the press seems to take delight on the conflict frame which tends to sell more than other frames as this was manifested through the various contents of the three newspapers studied.

The study has made revelations on how media agenda setting, as a result of frequent reportage and strategic placement of news items on the focal pages of newspapers, can make an issue equally important among the people; and how framing creates an image of a person (President Yar'Adua) involved in an issue. Although it may not be affirmatively stated that the coverage of the issue led to the Senate passage of the motion that eventually saw the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the Acting President, it could however, be inferred.

9. Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered:

1. Nigerian press should de-emphasize unnecessary concentration on crisis stories. .
2. The press should avoid unnecessary in-depth coverage of a particular issue at the expense of other equally important ones.
3. Nigerian press (journalists) should be guided by the principles of social responsibility theory of the media.
4. The Nigerian Press Organization (NPO), the Nigeria Press Council (NPC), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and other relevant journalism regulatory bodies should ensure proper monitoring of the activities of the media practitioners to ascertain compliance with the ethics of the profession.
5. Nigeria as a whole, should imbibe good records keeping culture. This recommendation goes to the government and other authorities concerned. This is borne out of the problem encountered in obtaining the editions of the newspapers needed for this study.

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Figure 1
 Number of Stories on the Coverage of President Yar’Adua’s

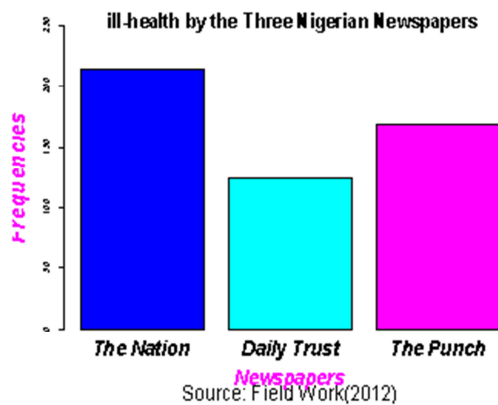


Figure2
 The Nature of Stories on President Yar’Adua’s Ill - Health

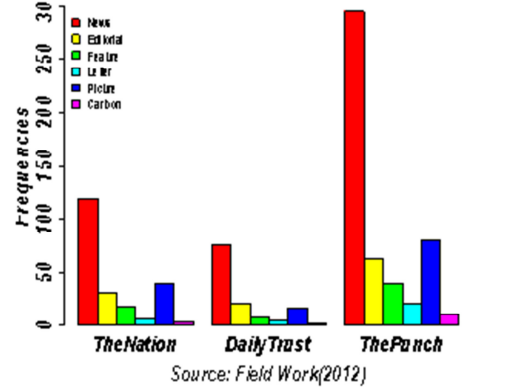


Figure3

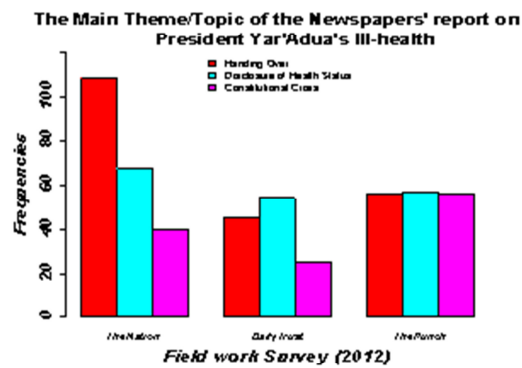


Figure4

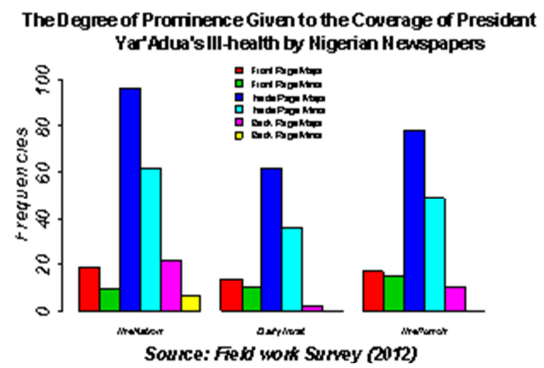


Figure5

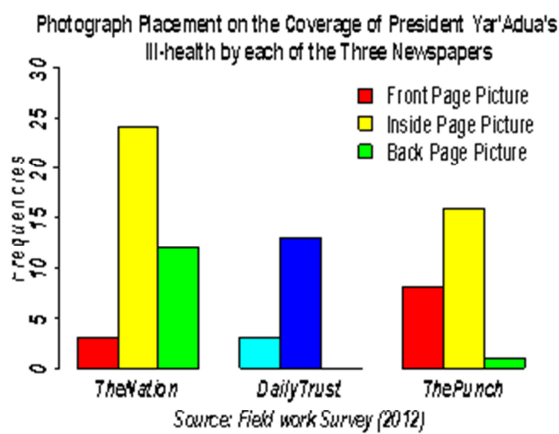


Figure6

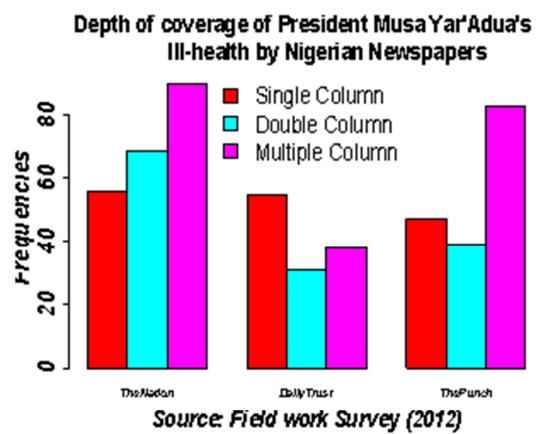


Figure7

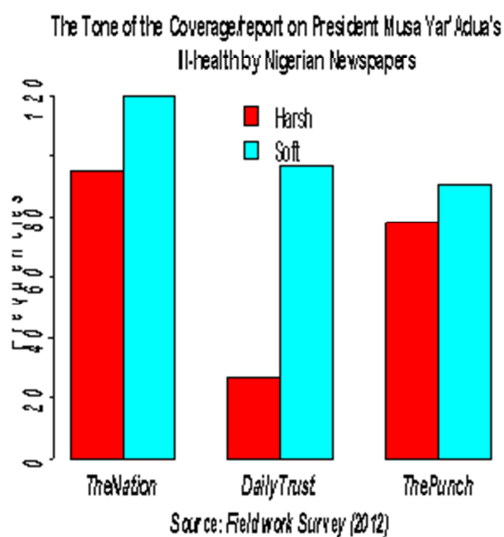
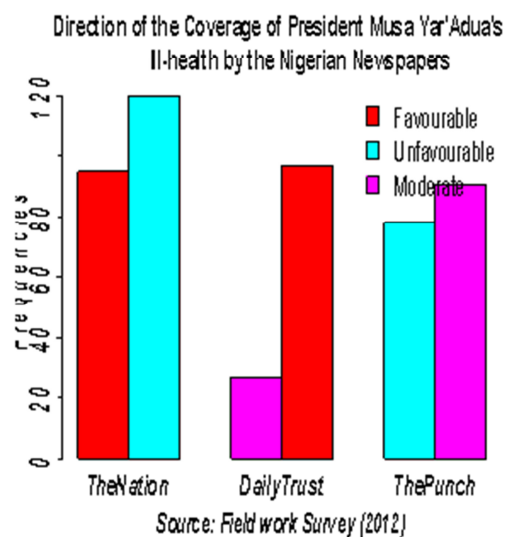


Figure8



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