

AN ASSESSMENT OF THEMATIC CONTENTS OF NIGERIAN NATIONAL DAILIES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS APPROACH

Aderogba Adeyemi ¹ 

¹ Osun State University (Nigeria)
draderogbaadeyemi@gmail.com

Abstract

The Nigerian media industry is one of the most vibrant and diversified media industries in the African continent. The industry has a relatively long history. This study aims to examine the focus of the print media in line with agenda-setting function of the mass media in the face of all of the challenges facing the country. The importance attached to subjects covered by the selected newspapers is determined by the frequency of coverage. Content analysis is the research method adopted for the study. It was discovered that that economy, politics, sport, and international news were regarded as the most important subjects with 26.5%, 23.6%, 7.4% and 5.9% of the newspapers' contents respectively. The share of newspapers' content on terrorism was 1.4% while corruption has a meager 0.9% share. There is a need for re-orientation of media practitioners in the face of the current challenges of Nigeria as a nation. The press.

Keywords: Corruption; crime; economy; politics; press

1. Introduction

The press is regarded as the mirror of the society because it reflects the true condition of the nation. Nigeria, just like most of the developing nations, is bedevilled by mirage of problems. The problems facing the country include under-development, political instability, acute poverty, terrorism, dearth of infrastructural facilities, high crime rate, high level official corruption etc. It is therefore of interest to examine the level of attention the press accords specific problems of Nigerian society through the reportage of the issues. The press is indeed one of the most important institutions of the modern society and it plays a vital role in re-shaping shade of opinions in the society and it has tremendous influence on it. Dennis and Merrill, 1999) cited in (Adeyemo, 2015, p.1) believe that the press is a carrier of culture, a source of information, education and entertainment and that the press affects us in so many ways.

The press is perhaps one of the few professions in Nigeria that the constitution of the country gives specific attention. Section 22 of the constitution provides that, "the press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be freed to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people". (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). Even though the press is not powerful without limit but the fact that it does has a measure of influence on the society is incontrovertible. The press is therefore expected to always contribute its quotas to the development of the country at all times.

¹ Corresponding author: Aderogba Adeyemi <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0357-1891>

1.1 Historical Background of the Nigerian Media

Nigeria, (Federal Republic of Nigeria) is a federal constitutional republic comprising 36 states and Federal Capital Territory - Abuja. Nigeria is a developing country with a fairly vibrant and resilient mass media (Odunlami, 2004, cited in Oso, 2011, p. 6). The very first newspaper emerged in Nigeria in December 3, 1859 with the establishment of *Iwe Irohin fun awon ara Egba ati Yoruba*. Even though the development was rather slow and not steady for some decades, it was not too long before the Nigerian press established its vibrancy. The press has always been very vocal on issues pertaining to the development of the country starting from the attainment of independence to other areas of development of the country. Nigerian mass media is either government-owned or private-owned.

There is an enhanced awareness of the role of the mass media in development in Nigeria today. The mass media has indeed played a significant role in strengthening the society. Haruna, and Ibrahim, (2014, p. 102), emphasise “the important role of the mass media in achieving developmental goals and targets”. Mass media is the mirror of the modern society, in fact, it is the mass media which shapes our lives.

1.2 The Current Challenges

Right now, Nigeria is at a crossroad as the general survival of the country is under constant threats from several quarters. Boko Haram terrorists, bandits, Fulani herders’ militants are ravaging the northern part of the country and there exists constant incursion of these marauders in the southern parts of Nigeria (Ojo, 2020; Omitola, et al., 2021). Boko Haram terrorists that first surfaced in Nigeria in 2009 occupied 24 local Government Areas between 2011 and 2015.

The terrorists’ violent activities reached the peak in 2014. And at that time, prices of crude oil (the mainstay of the Nigerian monoculture economy) had started falling in the international market in 2014. This tremendously compounded Nigerian economic problems. Activities of the press as well as issues that attracted its attention during the period covered by the study were of significant interest.

2. Literature Review

The importance attached to some of the topics identified in the statement of the problem, that is, economy, politics, corruption, government and terrorism could be determined by the review of pertinent literature.

2.1 Economy

The economy is an essential aspect of life in any society as it has a direct impact on people’s well-being. There is a correlation between people’s economic well-being and the level of citizens’ economic information and enlightenment. In democratic societies, economy and economic perceptions are so important to the media of mass communication and their audiences at all times, especially during electioneering campaigns. Scholars have linked politics, voting patterns, and public opinions to a clear understanding of the economy and economic perceptions (Fogarty, 2005).

Economic news coverage is also essential to citizens as it determines the level of economic information available to them. The availability of such information could influence how citizens make informed economic decisions. The tone of economic news largely depends on the focus of the mass media. The tone may either be positive or negative depending on a lot of other factors which may include but are not limited to economic indicators and contextual influences. According to (Fogarty, 2005, p. 151), some mass media scholars argue “that the news media generally overemphasize the negative and downplay the positive”

2.2 Politics

Politics is a central focus of the press coverage any time any day. In Nigeria, press is linked with the attainment of Nigerian independence and of the development of democratic political culture. Ekeanyanwu (2007) affirms this notion by linking the development of the political culture of Nigeria with the press. Dr. Nnamidi Azikwe's newspapers were established to advance his political interest. Even though several scholars have argued against the positive role of the press in the entrenchment of democratic rule in society, nevertheless democracy can hardly survive without the press as they facilitate the seemingly flow of information which happens to be an essential ingredient of democratic development (Coxall, Robins & Leach, 2003). Mass media is "a major weapon in the battle for public opinion" (Perloff, 2013, p. 5). Gandouz (2019) asserts that "media as an efficient tool for reshaping public minds of the citizens".

The fact that the mass media have a tremendous influence on public opinion is incontrovertible. In advanced democratic societies, political communication, quite often than not, has helped in mobilizing public opinion in support or against government policies. For example, this happened in America when President Bill Clinton tried to introduce "a sweeping plan to reform health care" a lobbying group representing 270 insurance companies employed the services of pollsters, political consultants, and advertising professionals. They bombarded the airwaves with advertising and other communication messages, and poll results that eventually defeated Clinton's health reform package (Perloff, 2013).

2.3 Corruption

Corruption is like a cancerous cell that spread fast across the body, it is multi-dimensional and it is very difficult to contain it. According to Jain (2001, p. 73) "Corruption refers to acts in which the power of the public office is used for personal gain in a manner that contravenes the rules of the game". In terms of types of corruption, Fadairo, Fadairo and Aminu (2014) identify the following: political, electoral, institutional, bureaucratic or cultural corruption. In terms of forms, the researchers listed the following: accepting and giving bribes, embezzlement, theft, extortion, all forms of abuse of power, favouritism, blackmailing, using influence or paying for it, nepotism, accepting undue advantage, document forgery, misappropriation of funds, etc.

No doubt, corruption has a devastating effect on the development of any nation. Countries with a higher-level of corruption are prone to high-level poverty and low-level economic growth. Corruption is the bane of Nigerian development. It is the major reason why the national economy has been at the low ebb. (Ogbeidi, 2012; Adeyemi, 2013, Transparency International, 2014; Amundsen, 2017).

Corruption has aggravated the poverty level among the populace. Over 70% of the Nigerian populace are living below the poverty line (Onyeizugbe & Onwuka, 2012). Nigeria is said to be having the largest number of people living in abject poverty in the world, as the country recently overtook India which previously occupied that position.

Mailafia (2015) opines that Nigeria is the current poverty capital of the world. Most of the problems facing the country could be traced to corruption. Nigerian democratic system which would have helped to fast-track development in the country is also corrupt ridding.

2.4 Government

Government and the press are two institutions, though inseparable but independent, they both work hand in hand. Government in a democratic system and indeed in any other system desires to carry the people along by proper management of information. (Although in a communist system, the government only releases whatever information they wish into the

public domain). Accountability and transparency are two essential ingredients of a democratic governance. Government in a democracy is required to be transparent and accountable to the people by making news and information about their activities available. Relationship in a democratic setting is expected to be tripartite in nature. The press serves as an intermediary between the government and the people.

Media freedom is ideal in any political system as it provides good ground for good governance but unfortunately, media bias in favour of the government is prevalent even in democratic societies (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014). Public opinion is vital in any democratic setting and it is the people that play a major role in deciding who should govern them. Public opinion is one of the reasons why the government takes information management very seriously. In fact, public opinion is the target of the news management activities of the government (Pfetch, 1999).

On the one hand, governments at various levels in democratic system, are not always readily transparent as they seek to limit transparency. On the other hand, “media organizations face their own challenges in developing the skills and resources to explore open government on behalf of the public”. (OGP, 2015, p. 4.). Government news takes a good chunk of the news stories in Nigeria’s national dailies.

2.5 Terrorism

There is no one acceptable definition of terrorism except that terrorism is a criminal act perpetrated by an individual, group of people, or even a state, with the intention of forcing their desires on other people or another state. Cooper (2001, p. 884.) asserts that “terrorism is the intentional generation of massive fear by human beings for the purpose of securing and maintaining control over other human beings”. The terrorists employ the instrumentality of violence with the intention of coercing others to succumb to their demands. The term ‘terrorism’ according to US Federal Law cited in Schinkel (2019, p. 180.) means:

premeditated politically motivated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

Terrorism is an old phenomenon. In fact, it is as old as the world. Schinkel (2019, p. 176) posits that “...each era is characterized by its own type of terrorism”. Terrorism has however taken a new dimension recently. 21st century terrorism is a world-wide phenomenon and it is widespread. In fact, no country is immune to criminal acts today. There are numerous active terrorist organizations that are widely recognized across the globe. The following are some of the world-dreaded terrorist organizations: Al-Qa’ida, ISIS, also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). These are two of the most ruthless terrorist organizations in the world operating in Bahrain, France, USA, UK, Iraq, Somalia, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Palestine and they have killed 6,141 in 2015 alone (Global Terrorism Index, 2016, p. 54.).

This level of killings and destructions is second to none. Boko-Haram or Jama’atu Ahliss-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal Jihad according to Global Terrorism Index (2016, p. 54) is the second deadliest terrorist organization in the world, killing 5,478 people in 2014. According to Leila, Amélie and Arnim (2020), Boko Haram terrorist group emerged in the North Eastern part of Nigeria and flourished under various names since 1990s before adopting the current name. Boko Haram has since transformed into an international terrorist organization rampaging the North Eastern part of Nigeria as well as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

2.6 War against terrorism in Nigeria and the arm forces

The problem of insecurity is of great concern in Nigeria. The war against terror came to the front burner of national discourse in Nigeria in the year 2009 when the Boko Haram insurgency first struck the country. Ever since then, the insurgency has claimed thousands of lives as the armed forces are trying to put an end to the problem. Nigerian arm forces have engaged in full-blown war in the North Eastern States where Boko Haram activities domicile. Numerous people have been killed and up to 2.5 million people were said to have been displaced around the Lake Chad basin.

Access to information about what is happening at the “theatre of war” where military activities are taking place is pretty difficult as the military impedes the free flow of information to the public. This is so because the military is one of the most under-reported organizations anywhere in the world because of the popular doctrine of national security. The situation is more pronounced during the war period.

This sort of situation makes the military a restricted news area with obvious implications for military-civilian relationships. Deliberating on the widening gap between the military and society, (Ricks, 2009) cited in Caldwell IV, Stroud and Menning, (2009, p. 10.) believe that the gap is born out of a genuine desire of the army to maintain operations security by controlling the flow of information. To this end, with the military, one can actually say that the more we look the less we see.

2.7 Other categories of newspapers contents

Quite a number of other categories of newspaper content were examined in the study. These include the following: International news, sport news, news on science and technology, art and culture, entertainment, education, judiciary, religion, health matters, human interest stories, and crime.

3. Statement of the problem

The mass media is undoubtedly an important institution in society. Its role is of great importance and significant interest. It is interesting also to examine the subjects of its focus so as to determine whether or not the press is adequately giving adequate coverage to issues considered to be germane to the development of the nation. Most especially during the period covered by this study. It is believed in many quarters that all is not well with Nigeria. Corruption is considered to be a serious problem (Transparent International, 2014), insecurity is another serious problem, the economy is in shamble, low-level infrastructural development, and democracy is still at the infant stage. There is a mirage of other problems. The level of attention given to all of these issues is of significant importance.

3.1 Research objectives

- i. To identify the most dominant as well as the least dominant issues/topics covered by Nigerian newspapers.
- ii. To determine the most important as well as least important genres.
- iii. To examine the level of objectivity of journalists.
- iv. To find out the tone of the materials published in the selected newspapers.

3.2 Research questions

- i. What are the most dominant and the least dominant issues covered by Nigerian newspapers?
- ii. What are the most important as well as the least important genres?
- iii. Could the news content be adjudged fairly objective or subjective?
- iv. What was the tone of the materials published in the selected newspapers?

4. Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory is selected for this study. Agenda Setting theory is all about the ability of the press to determine what the media users think about. The mass media are impactful in agenda setting as they possess the ability to select or emphasize certain topics thereby causing the public to perceive such topics as important (Umechukwu, 2001 & Folarin, 2002, as cited in Ekeayanwun, 2007, p. 71.). The treatment meted to issues by the mass media determines the level of importance society ascribes to such issues, McQuail (1993).

Lang and Lang cited in McCombs and Shaw, (1977, p. 177.) affirm that the mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures, they constantly present objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and have feelings about.

However, the media has no power to force people to think and act in a certain way or manner, its influence ends with its ability to attach importance to issues people get to read, hear and watch at any given time. The critics are of the opinion “that the mass media’s influence may be minimal and it is actually the public which somehow influences what the media cover” Wanta (1988, p. 107.)

5. Methodology

Content analysis is the research method selected for this study. Content analysis as a research design is the most effective method that can be adopted for studying the manifest content of any news and information record.

“Content analysis makes replicable and valid inferences on the basis of data derived from text or images” (Riffe et al., 1998 as cited in Jacobson, Langin, Calton & Kaid, 2011, p. 3.).

Two newspapers were randomly selected from the list of the following national daily newspapers: The Punch, The Vanguard, This Day, The Nation, and Guardian. These newspapers do have national spread. This is achieved by writing all the listed newspapers separately on pieces of paper which were thereafter squeezed and put in a bucket. The pieces of paper were then thoroughly shuffled and then someone was asked to pick two pieces of paper from the bucket.

5.1 Study Period

The study covers a period of one year five months i.e. January 2014 to May 2015. The interest in Former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan’s last one year and five months in office is not unconnected with the desire to understand the focus of the press at that period of time in a bid to examining the subjects that attracted press attention the most during the last one year five months of a regime that lost election as a result of perceived mis-governance and corruption. Nigerians were visibly fed up of Former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan’s regime.

The period covered by the study is quite significant because 2014 was pre-election year and the first quarter of 2015 was the election period. 2015 general elections happened to be very significant; the elections were considered historic because, in the history of Nigeria, the general elections happened to be the first civilian to civilian transition when political power shifted peacefully from the then ruling “People Democratic Party (PDP)” to the opposition “All Progressive Congress (APC)”. Political activities were on the top gear as the electioneering campaigns were on the front burner of political discourse in 2014.

5.2 Study Universe

A total of 144 randomly selected copies of two newspapers covering one year five months were thoroughly examined and 17027 various newspapers contents were identified in the two newspapers. Issues of the two newspapers were picked with random start, one issue each per one constructed week. Out of the 17027 identified topics, 4516 or 26.5 % were published on economy, 4010 or 23.6% were on politics. Newspaper materials on corruption enjoyed the lowest coverage with a meagre 151 or 0.9%.

5.3 Unit of Analysis

Story headline, entire story, cartoon, graphics and any other illustration constitute units of analysis of this study.

5.4 Definitions of Terms

Prominence: This is about the placement of news stories on the pages of newspaper. Stories on the front page and the back page are considered more prominent than the stories buried in the inside page.

Genre: This is the story type such as news story, feature story, opinion, editorial, interview etc.

Slant: This is the general assessment of news story as to whether or not it generates feeling of sadness or joy. The story slant could either be positive if it generates feeling of joy or negative if it generates feeling of sadness. It is neutral if the feeling can neither be adjudged positive nor negative.

Story themes/issues/topics: These are various identified issues and story titles covered by the journalists. These range from politics, economy or business, science and technology, sports etc.

Press: This is basically print-based media but it is inter-changeably used in this paper to denote mass media (i.e. main stream media).

Objectivity: This is all about the treatment given to the piece of information by journalists. Objectivity is the hallmark of good journalism. It is an important attribute of journalists and it is expected to reflect in the story they submit for publication. Journalists are expected to be unbiased arbiter of an event.

6. Data Presentation

Data on this study is presented in tables 1 to 5.

Table 1.
Newspaper

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Punch	8936	52.5
	Guardian	8091	47.5
	Total	17027	100.0

Data from the two selected newspapers shows that 17027 various items constituting newspapers content were gathered. The Punch had the highest share which is 52.5 percent while the Guardian share is 47.5 percent.

Table 2.
Issues/Topics

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Politics	4010	23.6
	Economy	4516	26.5
	Armed forces	355	2.1
	Government	984	5.8
	International news	1010	5.9
	Sport	1252	7.4
	Science and Technology	276	1.6
	Art/Culture/Entertainment	517	3.0
	Education	690	4.1
	Law/Judiciary	375	2.2
	Religion	330	1.9
	Health/Wellness	665	3.9
	Human Interest	751	4.4
	Crime	493	2.9
	Terrorism	240	1.4
	Corruption	151	.9
	Others	412	2.4
Total	17027	100.0	

Economy had the highest share with 26.5 percent, followed by topics on politics with 23.6 percent, while sport had 7.4 percent. Corruption had least attention of 0.9 percent. Corruption therefore had the least media coverage.

Table 3.
Genre

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	News Story	10251	60.2
	Editorial	151	.9
	Feature Story	2307	13.5
	Column/Commentary/Opinion	1152	6.8
	Advertisement	3008	17.7
	Others	158	.9
	Total	17027	100.0

News stories dominated the two newspapers selected for this study with 60.2 percent, followed by advertisements/advertorials with 17.7 percent. Feature stories constituted 13.5 percent of total newspapers content.

Table 4.

Tone		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Positive	7740	45.5
	Negative	3774	22.2
	Neutral	5513	32.4
	Total	17027	100.0

Overwhelming majorities of materials published in the two newspapers, that is 45.5 percent, were adjudged positive, 22.2 percent of all the materials were considered neutral while 32.4 percent were believed to be negative.

Table 5.

Objectivity		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Mostly Objective	11118	65.3
	Mostly Subjective	1198	7.0
	Can't say (appears balanced)	4711	27.7
	Total	17027	100.0

A good chunk of the newspapers' contents i.e. 65.3% was regarded to be mostly objective, it was difficult to determine whether or not 27.7 percent of the contents was neither objective nor subjective, while 7 percent was said to be mostly subjective.

7. Results

i. *What are the most dominant as well as the least dominant issues covered by Nigerian newspapers?*

The economy happened to be the most dominant issue that the Nigerian press talked about during the period of this study. 26.5% of all the materials published in the selected newspapers were on the economy. This simply shows the premium the Nigerian press place on the economy. Next to the economy is politics with 23.6%. Corruption, terrorism, and science and technology constituted 0.9%, 1.4% and 1.7% respectively. Also, the least topics of the press coverage were in this order. This implies that the media agenda focuses more on the economy and politics.

ii. *What are the most important as well as the least important genres?*

News stories dominated the pages of the selected newspapers with 60.2% of the newspapers' contents, followed by advertisements with 17.6%, while feature stories constituted 13.3%. However, editorials, for obvious reason (that is, there is a limit to the number of editorials that can appear in an issue) constituted the least genre of the newspapers' content. This was followed by column, commentary, and opinion.

iii. *Could the news content be adjudged fairly objective or subjective?*

According to the data provided in table 4, 45.5% of the content was considered to have a positive connotation, 32.4% was neutral while as much as 22.2% of the content was seen as negative.

iv. What was the tone of the materials published in the selected newspapers?

Table 5 provides answer to this question can be found in table 5. The overwhelming majority of the news content, that is, 65.3% was adjudged objective. It is however difficult to determine whether or not 27.7% of the news contents were neither objective nor subjective while 7% of the contents were adjudged mostly subjective.

8. Discussion

Nigeria is faced with numerous challenges of lack of basic infrastructural facilities. Added to these challenges are the problems of corruption and insecurity. These are some of the issues that are adversely affecting the well-being of the people of Nigeria.

Insecurity is an existential threat to Nigeria as a nation. However, one expects to see these issues adorning the pages of national dailies. Unfortunately, that seems not to be the case. Economic news constitutes 26.5% while the share of political news is 23.6% of the newspaper content. Newspapers' content on education which was supposed to play a pivotal role in the development of the country was just 4.1%, and content on science and technology was 1.6%. Newspapers' content on corruption are a meager 0.9%. Corruption is considered the bane of the Nigerian developmental agenda. Corruption is the reason why nothing seems to work in Nigeria (Ogbeidi, 2012; Adeyemi, 2013; Transparency International, 2014; Amundsen, 2017)).

Though the maxim - he who pays the piper calls the tune (O'Connell, 2021) is quite true. Media owners in the capitalist country such as Nigeria are more concerned about profit than any other thing. Media content that appeals to the advertisers mostly catch their attention, while materials on fight against corruption, science and technology, education, and health/wellness are off the mark for the selected newspapers. In terms of genre, the story types account for 91.1% of all the content published in the selected newspapers.

They are news stories with 60.2%, this is followed by advertisements and feature stories with 17.6% and 13.3% respectively. It has been argued that advertisers substantially influence media content. Scholars believe that advertisers, to a large extent, shape media content (Morissan, 2016). This is because advertising plays a major role in the survival of the media industry as it is the source of substantial mass media revenue. Media owners will more likely create room for advertisements than any other newspaper's content. Advertisers, therefore, have a tremendous influence on the contents of newspapers.

9. Conclusion

Out of more than 17 topics that constitute newspapers' content as identified in this study, only four topics, (that is, economy, politics, sport and international news) have a 63.4% share of the media content. All other topics attracted less media attention. Agenda set by the press is such that politics, economy, sport, and international news were the four items given serious attention by the press (Ekeayanwun, 2007). Going by the level of coverage given to other topics, one can only conclude that the Nigerian press is less concerned about opening wide its editorial gates to more content on education (Edho, 2009), the development of the health sector (Osibogun, 2004), as well as security (Folarin, & Oviasogie, 2014), corruption (Onwuka, Okoh, & Eme, 2009) and other issues of national importance.

Take corruption as a good example, the past Nigerian leaders are known to have stolen a huge amount of money that ought to have been spent on the development of infrastructure. For instance, monies stolen by the late Head of State General Sani Abacha who ruled Nigeria between 1993 and 1998 are still been repatriated back to the country up till now. \$311.7 million of such monies was repatriated to Nigeria from the United State of America in 2020. <http://saharareporters.com/2020/05/04/just-nigerian-government-receives-311m-abacha-loot->

united-states. More of such illicit monies belonging to the people of Nigeria are cooling off in various bank accounts overseas.

Unfortunately, more than ever before, the country is at a crossroads today as insecurity and corruption threaten the existence of the nation. The economy cannot grow because no serious investors would put their monies into the Nigerian economy in the face of a threatening security situation and politics cannot be adjudged stable in the face of incessant terrorist attacks.

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