

African Renaissance

ISSN: 1744-2532 (Print) ISSN: 2516-5305 (Online)

- Indexed at: EBSCO, ProQuest, J-Gate and Sabinet
- Accredited by IBSS and SCOPUS

Vol. 15, (No. 4), December 2018

pp 75 – 98

Partisanship and Selective Reporting in Nigerian Newspapers' Coverage of Elections

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-5305/2018/v15n4a4>

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Abstract

This study examined the level of objectivity demonstrated by Nigerian newspapers in their coverage of elections with specific reference to the Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. Textual analysis was used to examine news stories about electioneering activities of the two leading political parties—the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC)—as reported by *The Nation*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers, which were selected purposively based on their national reach and ownership. The newspapers foregrounded some news stories about the political parties and their presidential candidates while they buried others in manners that reflected biases influenced by ownership and political alignments of the newspapers. This trend has implications for Nigeria's democracy as the frames adopted by the news media to report electioneering activities may determine the voting decisions of the electorate and the final outcome of elections. Therefore, Nigerian news media should be fair and objective while reporting sensitive issues such as elections.

Keywords: *Media Bias, Media Framing, Nigerian Newspapers, Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election, Objectivity in News Reporting.*

Background and Rationale

The principle of popular participation, irrespective of religion, ethnicity or gender (Okoosi-Simbine, 2012), on which the golden value of democracy is anchored (Soola, 2009) becomes heightened at election periods, especially in the periods of electioneering (Parikh & Pahad 2011; Momoc, 2012). The citizens turn to the news media to get “accurate” and “unbiased” news about the candidates of their choice, and the political manifestoes of the various political parties. The extent to which the mass media are objective, truthful, accurate and factual in reporting electioneering and other political activities plays a significant role in a peaceful outcome of elections. Information provided by the news media help the electorate to make informed decisions and choice during elections (Oboh, 2016). When the media fail to perform this sacred function fairly and objectively, it is seen as a dysfunction with negative consequences. Making reference to the negative consequence of an ineffective press especially at election times, Ademolekun and Taiwo (2013, p.438) argue that during campaign periods in Nigeria “most

platforms for debates and other political communication become platforms for verbal threats, insults, intimidation, coercion, blackmail, and hate speech”.

During the period leading to the March 28, 2015 presidential election, the Nigerian public grew weary of the Nigerian news media. They accused different media organisations in the country of bias, ideological alignments and overt expression of sentiment for different political groups especially the two leading political parties—the People’s Democratic Parties (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). The veracity of these claims required investigation. Therefore, focusing on four national newspapers (i.e. *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, and *Nigerian Tribune Newspapers*) this study examined how the Nigerian newspapers covered events leading to the March 28, 2015 Nigeria’s presidential election, in order to establish if biases and subjectivity alleged by the citizens actually reflected in the newspapers’ reports.. Findings of this study would have implications for Nigeria’s democracy as the study would provide basis for assessing the nation’s media during subsequent elections in the country.

Scholars have worked on the issues relating to objectivity and bias in media coverage or framing of elections in Nigeria and other countries of the world (e.g. Ayodele 1988; Ojebuyi & Ekennia, 2013; Olukoyun 2004; Entman 2007; Levasseur, 2008; Carkoglu, Baruh & Yildirim, 2014; Fink & Schudson, 2014; Orji, 2014; Isika, 2016; Oboh, 2016; Ojebuyi & Chukwunwike, 2018), and Nigerian politics generally (e.g. Jinadu, 2011, Aiyede, 2012; Ogbeidi, 2012; Abdulsalami, 2013; Brown, 2013; Oluwole, 2014), but this current study adds a fresh perspective to the role of the media in election coverage because of its focus on press performance at a critical period of general elections in Nigeria—a nation with history of rancour, violence, ethnicity, and political complexity (Anikwe & Kushie, 2011). As asserted by Oboh (2016, p. 2), how the Nigerian media performed in the 2007 general elections was similar to the contributions they made “toward the 1964-1965 postelection crises that later culminated in the collapse of the Nigerian First Republic in 1966.” This shows that the media constitute a significant factor in the democratic prospect of any modern nation. Therefore, a study of media performance during elections, especially in a culturally and socio-politically complex nation like Nigeria, is imperative. The study would contribute to the existing body of knowledge that concerns the cardinal roles of the press in reporting elections in terms of balance, objectivity and fairness.

Literature Review

Nigerian Press, Ownership Factor and the 2015 Presidential Election

Among other factors, the political developments in Nigeria have also shaped the structure of media ownership, especially the nation's print media. Describing the relationship between media ownership and political affiliation in Nigeria, Oso (2012) says that political alignment by Nigerian newspapers has been a perennial pattern in the media system. He traces the origin to the later stage of the pre-independence era when Nigeria was preparing for her first general elections in 1959. Supporting the views held by Omu (1978) that Nigerian newspapers were instruments in the hands of Nigerian politicians, Oso further explains that:

The most important factor that stimulated the growth and changes in the newspaper industry was the advent of electoral politics....All the leading newspaper owners and journalists were also leaders of the main political parties. The newspapers aligned themselves to each of these parties during the campaign... The newspaper became a major instrument not only of political party publicity but of recruitment and a vehicle for attaining political power. To a good number of the pre-independent political parties, having a newspaper as an ally was an organisational imperative (pp. 20-21).

The foregoing phenomenon described by Oso continued after Nigeria's independence in 1960 through the truncated Second Republic and to the current Fourth Republic after perpetuated military incursions into the nation's politics. "Since 1999 when the current dispensation began, the main newspapers are those established by politicians" (Oso, 2012, p. 29). The only difference in the current structure is that no newspaper is directly owned by any of the political parties. Yet, as Oso argues, the political supports of the main national newspapers in Nigeria are quite evident. Through their proprietors, who are card-carrying politicians, friends or supporters of the political aspirants, the newspapers still maintain evident link to the political parties.

Expectedly, profiles of the four newspapers (i.e. *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, and *Nigerian Tribune Newspapers*) selected for this current study reflect the ownership structures and ideological alignments in Nigeria as

explained in the foregoing paragraphs. *The Punch* is a national, Lagos-based newspaper founded in 1973 by Olu Aboderin. The newspaper is one of the most circulated quality newspapers in Nigeria and it is reputed for its acclaimed ideological neutrality (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2013). However, Agbaje, cited by Adesoji and Hahn (2011), argues that although *The Punch* started as an apolitical newspaper, it later became politically inclined. *The Nation* newspaper is linked to Bola Ahmed Tinubu, former Governor of Lagos State. Tinubu is one of the strong politicians that formed the APC. Therefore, *The Nation* was alleged to be sympathetic towards the causes of its founder and the ideology of the APC (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2013; Olukoyun, 2004). *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper, the oldest surviving Nigerian newspaper founded by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, is based in Ibadan—the political cradle of the South-West politics. As Oso (2012, p. 31) asserts, “*The Nigerian Tribune* supports the mainstream mantra of the Yoruba faction of the PDP.” It could, therefore, be assumed that *The Nation* and *Nigerian Tribune* would naturally not hold the same ideological stand because of the rivalry that had existed between the Tinubu and the Awolowo dynasties. *Vanguard* newspaper is based in Lagos. Its publisher, Mr Sam Amuka, is from Niger-Delta—the region where Goodluck Jonathan, former President of Nigeria, hails from. Therefore, the newspaper would be expected to be favourable to stories about Dr Goodluck Jonathan, who was the presidential candidate of the then ruling party (PDP). Founded in 1984, *Vanguard* newspaper’s cardinal philosophy is to provide the platform for critical discussion of national issues (Adesoji & Hahn, 2011), but it has also been accused of demonstrating sentiments for the PDP. Like other media outlets in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections, the four newspapers, based on their ownership and perceived political orientations, were expected to exhibit sympathies and biases for the political camps that aligned with the corporate philosophies and interest of their proprietors. This study aimed to confirm this conjecture.

Objectivity and Bias in News Reporting

Objectivity is an ethical concept (Nassanga, 2008). It requires the journalist to free himself from authorial influence, interpretation, or personal opinion (Adaja, 2013; Day, 2006; Forman, 2010; Oso, 2012) which may influence the audience to interpret the news story differently from the constructed social reality. Objectivity requires that the journalist

should not editorialise or give comments; he should not hide under the prerogative of his power as the gatekeeper (see McKain, 2005; Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley, 2001; Shoemaker, 2006) to arbitrarily deploy the news selection criteria (Shepard, 1999; McGregor, 2010). The journalists must always adopt a standpoint of detachment and neutrality towards the news object, refrain from partisanship, and maintain strict attachment to accuracy and truth (Ayodele, 1988; Schudson, 1995; McQuail, 2005; Tucher, 2009; Oso, 2012; Dimitrova, Sheheta, Stromback & Nord, 2014).

However, Paul and Elder (2006) have argued that attainment of absolute objectivity in news reporting is unlikely because millions of events are competing for access, through the narrow media gates (see Donohew, 2001; McKain, 2005; Shoemaker, 2006), to the limited space that the mass media can provide. Besides, reporters and their editors always use a number of news values (Schwarz, 2009) to select the newsworthy items. This phenomenon of conflicting values puts the media professionals in a dilemma. Consequently, in most cases, journalists use this dilemma as a pretext to sacrifice the principles of objectivity.

Bias, in news reporting, is the opposite of objectivity. If a journalist is not objective in the manner he presents his reports, then he is biased or subjective. If a news report lacks objectivity, therefore, such a news story contains bias. Media bias occurs when journalists show an unjustifiable favouritism, attachment or partisanship in their approaches to news presentation. It is a situation where the news media reports half-truth or presents a partial, subjective, an inaccurate and unfair picture of social reality (Mathews, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

We combined the Framing Theory and D'Alesso and Allen's (2000) theoretical description of media bias as the theoretical framework for this study. Both the Framing Theory and media bias model are connected. As journalists frame news stories, they also project certain ideological stance. In doing this, the issue of bias sets in as it is naturally impossible for media actors to maintain absolute neutrality and objectivity (Paul & Elder, 2006).

The Framing Theory has its roots in Erving Goffman's phenomenology—a philosophical system which provides that world

views, experiences and knowledge are the factors that determine how individuals perceive the social reality. Phenomenology, as Littlejohn and Foss (2009) explain, constitutes some interpretive designs, which are the “frames that we use in our day-to-day experience to make sense of the world” (p.408), interpret and construct social reality.

In reference to the mass media, McCombs (2004, p. 87) defines framing as “the selection of—and emphasis upon—particular attributes for the news media agenda” in a way that filters and shapes a news story as the sender wants. Chong and Druckman (2007) submit that a frame in news reporting refers to the words, phrases, visual elements, and the presentation styles that a message source employs to relay information about an issue. The nature of these framing elements would always influence how the audience perceive and interpret the communicated message. Schmitz, Fililpone, and Edelman (2003, p. 385) describe framing as “a process through which a communication source defines and constructs a public issue or controversy and can have significant consequences for how people view and understand an issue”. According to Entman (2007), to frame is to select some fragments of social reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in a manner that could promote or suggest causal interpretation, definition, moral evaluation or treatment of a perceived reality. Based on the foregoing definitions, we consider media framing theory as the appropriate theoretical framework for this study, which focused on press coverage of events in the build-up to Nigeria’s presidential election of 2015.

In the context of this study, we adopt D’Alesso and Allen’s (2000) model of media bias. The authors present three basic theoretical constructs to explain media bias. These constructs are (1) *Statement Bias*, (2) *Coverage Bias*, and (3) *Gatekeeping Bias*. It may be difficult to treat each of the biases in isolation because in most cases, two or all of the three categories of biases can manifest simultaneously in a news story. The three constructs, as explained in the following section, provide the categorisation matrix we used for analysis in this study.

Statement Bias: This occurs when journalists infuse personal opinions or sentiments into their reports. Statement bias is a common feature of political news, and it is what Lévassieur (2008) calls *partisan bias*. A media report that is tilted in favour of a particular political party or projects one political party at the expense of a rival party manifests a statement bias. D’Alesso and Allen, (2000) argues that this form of media bias has

attracted the most public reaction or interest. The degree of favourability or otherwise of the coverage is the parameter used to measure statement bias.

Coverage Bias: This type of bias has to do with media attention. Here, media bias is measured by the physical amount of coverage either side of a news story receives from the media. In print media, photographs, headlines and space allotted to each party in a story are used to gauge coverage bias, whereas in electronic media, the visual elements (in television reporting) and the amount of airtime given to each side of a story are the parameters used.

Gatekeeping Bias: Gatekeeping bias is also described as *structural bias* (Levasseur, 2008). This bias is located in the domain of gatekeeping analysis. It happens when reporters exert a certain slant or attention in their stories to adhere to some forces (Shoemaker et al., 2001; McManus, 2005). It explains that journalists usually select few items from a pool of potential stories, and by extension, deselect those stories that will never get to the mass audience. Gatekeeping bias occurs when the journalists or the editors report some aspect of a story and suppress other aspects either to the advantage or disadvantage of any of the news subjects. Gatekeeping bias favours negative news and conflicts that naturally attract human attention (Anaeto, Solo-Anaeto & Tejumaiye, 2009).

Methodology

Method and Materials

The primary objective of this study was to establish the veracity of the claims that Nigerian newspapers expressed biases in their coverage of issues relating to Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. We, therefore, employed qualitative content analysis as the research method. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) describe qualitative analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". Data for the study were retrieved from four Nigerian newspapers (i.e. *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, and *Nigerian Tribune*). We used judgemental (purposive) sampling to select the newspapers and the news stories that were eventually analysed. The

newspapers were selected because they extensively reported stories about the 2015 presidential election, and they are national newspapers.

Only political stories about the two major political parties—the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) during Nigeria’s 2015 presidential elections were selected for analysis. We chose the two parties because they were the two dominant political parties in the presidential race. The PDP was the ruling party while the APC—a mega amalgamation of some opposition parties—was the major opposition party. Only the electioneering issues published between February and March 28, 2015 were selected. This period was the peak of election campaigns. We did not select stories beyond the election date (March 28) because we believed that the outcome of the elections could influence editorial postures of the newspapers in their coverage of the two political parties.

Research Question

How objective were Nigerian newspapers in their presentation of news stories about the two leading political parties (the People’s Democratic Party and the All Progressives Congress) during the period leading to Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election?

Data Analysis

We subjected the data to deductive qualitative content analysis. To carry out the analysis of the data for this study, we followed a three-step procedure (i.e. preparation, organisation and reporting) as suggested by Elo and Kyngas (2008). Headlines and stories were the units of analysis. Guided by the tenet of Media Framing Theory, we considered two *macroconstructs* (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) of news framing (**placement** and **amount of space** given to each of the selected stories) to carry out the analysis. In each of the stories, we looked for the *statement bias*, *coverage bias*, and *gatekeeping bias*. This was guided by the theoretical approaches to the explanation of bias as identified by D’Alesso and Allen (2000). We considered only the aspects of the data that fitted the three types of biases. Relevant extracts from the newspapers, as identified during the analysis, were used to explicate the bias evident in the analysed data. As presented in the following sections, we describe and discuss the findings.

Findings

The selected newspapers (*The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, and *Nigerian Tribune*) demonstrated biases in the manner they reported electioneering activities of the PDP and the APC during the period leading to Nigeria's presidential election of March 28, 2015. They selected, de-selected, emphasised and suppressed political stories in manners that reflected their respective editorial and ideological postures. On many occasions, patterns of constructing the news stories analysed reflect *statement*, *coverage* and *gatekeeping* biases simultaneously. This confirmed the fact that as journalists attempt to construct social reality by framing subjects, they always highlight, suppress or ignore some facts simultaneously (Paul and Elder, 2006). Therefore, in order to avoid repetition, we treated the three categories of biases together as they manifested in the analysed samples from the selected news reports. The following findings show instances of these biases.

Case A: Framing of General Theophilus Danjuma's Visit to President Goodluck Jonathan

Sample 1:

Headline: *Danjuma visits Jonathan, says I don't canvass votes for candidates*

Source: *Vanguard*: March 11, 2015. Story by Ben Agande, Abuja.

Former Chief of Army staff and Minister for Defence, General Theophilus Danjuma Tuesday met with President Goodluck Jonathan behind closed doors at the official residence of the President in the presidential Villa. General Danjuma told state House correspondents that he came to discuss with the president on the situation in the country.... Asked if he was going to canvass support for the president for the elections, the former Army chief said "I don't canvass. I am not in any of the political parties. The president is the president of the country".

Sample 2:

Headline: *2015: I won't canvass for Jonathan, says Danjuma*

Source: *The Nation*: March 11, 2015

Former Minister of Defence, Lt. Gen. Theophilus Danjuma (Rtd.) on Wednesday declared that he cannot canvass support for the re-election

of President Goodluck Jonathan.” On whether he would canvass support for the president for the elections, he said: “I don’t canvass. I am not in any of the political parties. The president is Nigeria’s president.”

Sample 3:

Headline: *Danjuma visits Jonathan, avoids endorsement*

Source: *Punch*: March 11, 2015

A former Minister of Defence, Gen. Theophilus Danjuma, on Wednesday met behind closed-doors with President Goodluck Jonathan at the Presidential Villa, Abuja. Danjuma warned the reporters not to speculate about the purpose of the visit. “Don’t speculate. I came to visit the President and find out how things are going...,” he said. When asked whether he was ready to support Jonathan’s re-election, Danjuma said he could not canvass votes for any candidate “I don’t canvass (for votes). I am not in any of the political parties. The President is Nigeria’s President,” he simply said.

Commentary: Samples 1, 2 and 3 presented in above reflect statement bias. As reported in the samples, General Theophilus Danjuma’s visit to President Goodluck Jonathan attracted public interest because of two possible factors: the visitor’s personality, and the timing which was proximate to the presidential election. However, the visitor claimed that the visit was not about the election. The newspapers approached the story from different angles that reflect statement bias, which may further suggest the editorial disposition of each of the newspapers to the subject of the story. As reflected in the headlines, the stories convey different messages: While the headline by *Vanguard* suggests that General Danjuma maintained a neutral stance towards all candidates in the presidential elections by claiming that he did not “canvas votes for candidates”, the headlines by *The Nation* and *The Punch* suggest that General Danjuma specifically refused to “canvas votes for Jonathan” or “endorse Jonathan”.

The lead of the story by *The Nation* further highlights this “anti-Jonathan” stance (e.g. “Lt. Gen. Theophilus Danjuma (Rtd.) ...declared that he cannot canvass support for the re-election of President Goodluck Jonathan.”). Ironically, none of the statements directly attributed to General Danjuma in the stories shows that he specifically mentioned

President Goodluck Jonathan as suggested in the headlines by *The Nation* and *The Punch*. General Theophilus Danjuma, a retired senior military officer, a Statesman, and a former Minister of Defence, is regarded as a strong opinion moulder and influencer in the dynamics of Nigerian politics. Therefore, any direct, public endorsement or rejection of a presidential candidate was believed to have a far-reaching consequence for the candidate at the polls. The frame adopted by *The Nation* and *The Punch* suggesting that Danjuma “did not endorse President Jonathan” could project the latter (President Jonathan) unfavourably in the public assessment, and produce negative consequences for him at the polls.

While *Vanguard*, *The Punch* and *The Nation* reported the story, *Nigerian Tribune* did not report the story at all. This is also an instance of gatekeeping bias in the form of blackout or deliberate exclusion.

Case B: Framing of Anti-Jega Protest in Lagos on Monday March 16, 2015

Sample 4:

Headline: *Protesters hold anti-Jega rally in Lagos*

Source: *Nigerian Tribune*, 17.March, 2015)

Lagos and parts of Ogun State were early Monday, grounded, as thousands of people protested against the chairman of the independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Attahiru Jega, demanding his removal. Different groups, under the aegis of Coalition of Concerned Nigerians, consisting of the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), nollywood artistes and human right groups, organised the protest. They claimed that the protest was to “analyse the state of the nation and the forthcoming general election.” In a carnival-like manner, a road show involving top fuji musicians, Saheed Osupa and Abass Akande, popularly known as Obesere and Nollywood artistes, were also part of the protest.

Sample 5:

Headline: *Pro-Jonathan OPC on the rampage through Lagos*

Source: *The Nation*: Tuesday, March 17, 2015

Lagos was yesterday groaning under a crippling protest by the militia group, Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC). Security agents looked the other way as the group’s members troubled the city, calling for the removal of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman,

Prof. Attahiru Jega. The protesters were members of a faction of the OPC, led by Chief Gani Adams, one of those who have just won the controversial N9billion pipelines protection contracts. Some Niger-Delta militants reportedly joined the protest. The protesters got traffic stuck for hours, smashed cars, harassed motorists and disrupted business in many parts of the city. They destroyed banners and campaign billboards of All Progressives Congress (APC) candidates.

Sample 6:

Headline: *Armed pro-Jonathan groups protest against Jega in Lagos*

Source: *Punch*: Tuesday, March 17, 2015

Thousands of Odua Peoples Congress and the Coalition of Concerned Nigerians members loyal to the Peoples Democratic Party took to three major roads in Lagos on Monday demanding the sack of the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Prof. Attahiru Jega. The protesters, who wore T-shirts with PDP inscriptions and pictures of President Goodluck Jonathan, started gathering in front of the Federal Road Safety Commission near the old Lagos Toll Gate on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway as early as 7am. The demonstrators, who wielded broken bottles and knives, also displayed banners and posters calling for Jega's removal. They destroyed outdoor adverts of All Progressives Congress candidates on the street lights along the highways.

Commentary: As presented in samples 4, 5 and 6, the newspapers' patterns of covering the protest also reflect statement, gatekeeping and coverage biases as do the patterns in samples 1 to 3. The newspapers used different frames to construct the story in way that shows bias. They highlighted and suppressed or deselected certain aspects of the story to serve some purposes. On the one hand, for instance, *Nigerian Tribune* constructed the story using a frame that exonerates both the protesters and Dr Goodluck Jonathan, and by extension, the PDP. On the other hand, *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers used indicting frames that presented the protesters as groups working for the PDP. The headline by *Nigerian Tribune* makes no reference to the OPC, while its lead and entire story (see sample 8) do not report the wearing of "T-shirts with PDP inscriptions and pictures of President Goodluck Jonathan", the "destruction" or "danger" caused by the protesters as reported by *The Nation* and *The Punch* in the headlines, the leads and the bodies of their respective versions of the story as shown in samples 5 and 6.

The Nation's version of the report that “the security agents looked the other way as the group’s members troubled the city” suggests a collaboration between the security agents and the protesters who were accused of working for the ruling PDP. *The Punch* also indicted the protesters and suggest that they worked for the ruling party (PDP) by reporting that “the demonstrators...wielded broken bottles and knives...destroyed outdoor adverts of the All Progressives Congress candidates”. However, *Nigerian Tribune* seems to give some legitimacy to the protest by reporting that the rally was organised by different groups to “analyse the state of the nation and the forthcoming general elections.” The foregoing patterns, in terms of statement bias, suggest that both *The Nation* and *The Punch* used favourable frames to construct the story, whereas *Nigerian Tribune* used less favourable frames.

Furthermore, in terms of coverage bias, the amount of space each of the newspapers dedicated to the story suggests their respective political alignments.. For example, analyses of the full stories by the selected newspapers show that *The Punch* and *The Nation* gave more attention to the story with 1,451 and 1,007 words respectively, compared to the amount of space given to the story by *Nigerian Tribune* (458 words). This means that whereas both *The Punch* and *The Nation* gave relative prominence to the story, *Nigerian Tribune* deliberately underreported the story.

Case C: Framing of President Jonathan’s Promise to End Oil Sector Corruption

Sample 7:

Headline: *Oil sector corruption to end in four years –Jonathan*

Source: *Punch*: March 24, 2015

President Goodluck Jonathan has promised to eradicate corruption in the nation’s oil sector in the next four years if re-elected during Saturday’s Presidential election. Jonathan made the promise in Lagos Sunday evening at a youth event. The event was meant to showcase his administration’s achievements in the sports sector.

Sample 8:

Headline: *Jonathan vows to eradicate corruption in oil sector, if re-elected*

Source: *Vanguard*: March 24, 2015

President Goodluck Jonathan has promised to entrench greater transparency and eradicate corruption in the nation's oil sector if re-elected. He gave the commitment on Sunday evening in Lagos at a youth event designed to highlight his administration's achievements in the sports sector.

Commentary: Versions of reports by *Vanguard* and *The Punch*, as presented in samples 7 and 8, were selected because they provided two different frames that presented the statements made by President Goodluck Jonathan. These frames provide more examples of coverage and statement biases through selective reporting. As shown in the headlines and leads of the stories, *The Punch* newspaper, on the one hand, foregrounded the angle of *four years* as the time-frame the President would need to eradicate oil sector corruption if he was re-elected. On the other hand, without any reference to a period of *four years* as reported by *The Punch* newspaper, *Vanguard* emphasised the President's promise to fight corruption in oil sector.

Tables 1 and 2 further establish the patterns of selective reporting by the four newspapers we selected. While *The Nation* demonstrated bias for the APC, *Nigerian Tribune* exhibited sentiments for the PDP. Relatively, *Vanguard* and *The Punch* appeared to exercise some neutrality, however, not without demonstrating some bias for the two political parties: *The Punch* tilted in favour of the APC, while *Vanguard* showed bias for the PDP.

Table 1: Pattern of Anti-PDP/Pro-APC News Selection by the Select Newspapers

S/N	ABRIDGED HEADLINE	DATE	REPORTED BY THE NEWSPAPER			
			<i>Punch</i>	<i>Tribune</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>
1.	<i>Jonathan's men haul cash to UK for anti-Bubari rally</i>	26/2/15	NO	NO	NO	YES
2.	<i>APC Senators raise alarm over plot to sack Jega</i>	26/2/15	YES	NO	YES	YES
3.	<i>Patience Jonathan, a crude woman, says APC</i>	04/3/15	YES	NO	YES	YES
4.	<i>Outrage over pipeline contracts to Tompolo, Gani Adams, others</i>	14/3/15	NO	NO	NO	YES
5.	<i>How military plans to intimidate Tinubu, others</i>	24/3/15	NO	NO	NO	YES
6.	<i>APC alleges PDP plans to re-enact 'Ekiti rigging strategy</i>	24/3/15	NO	NO	NO	YES

7.	<i>Vote out Jonathan, Buhari tells Imo people.</i>	24/3/15	YES	NO	NO	YES
8.	<i>Jonathan does not deserve re-election – Group</i>	25/3/15	YES	NO	NO	YES
9.	<i>How PDP plans to rig, by APC</i>	27/3/15	NO	NO	NO	YES
10	<i>Buhari: I'm not in the race for money and power</i>	27/3/15	YES	NO	NO	YES

As shown in Table 1, all the 10 anti-PDP news stories selected were reported by *The Nation* whereas *Nigerian Tribune* did not report any of the stories. While *The Punch* reported five out the 10 anti-PDP stories, *Vanguard* reported only two. This trend suggests that though both *The Punch* and *Vanguard* do not appear to be as strongly politically aligned as *The Nation* and *Nigeria Tribune*, *The Punch* appeared to have sympathy for the APC while *Vanguard* appeared to be more pro-PDP.

Table 2: Pattern of Anti-APC/Pro-PDP News Selection by the Select Newspapers

S/N	ABRIDGED HEADLINE	DATE	REPORTED BY THE NEWSPAPER			
			<i>Punch</i>	<i>Tribune</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>
1.	<i>Buhari absent at APC rally in London...</i>	26/2/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
2.	<i>Chatham House: APC Chasing Shadows – PDP</i>	26/2/15	NO	YES	YES	NO
3.	<i>Morocco: Stop damaging Nigeria, Fani-Kayode tells APC</i>	13/3/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
4.	<i>120 Atiku supporter group set to defect to PDP</i>	16/3/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
5.	<i>Atiku's group in South-West endorses Jonathan's re-election</i>	17/3/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
6.	<i>APC leaders share power, give OBJ three ministerial slots</i>	22/3/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
7.	<i>APC plotting military take over after March 28 Presidential election, PDP alleges</i>	24/3/15	NO	YES	YES	NO
8.	<i>APC set to unleash inciting video against Jonathan— Fani Kayode</i>	24/3/15	NO	YES	YES	NO
9.	<i>Independent surveys give Jonathan edge over Buhari</i>	25/3/15	NO	YES	NO	NO
10	<i>Why Yorubas will vote Jonathan —Okupe</i>	26/3/15	YES	YES	YES	NO

Conversely, as presented in Table, while *Nigerian Tribune* reported all the 10 anti-APC news stories selected for analysis, *The Nation* neglected all the stories. Maintaining the same pattern of subtle neutrality, *The Punch*

reported only one of the anti-APC stories, but *Vanguard* reported four of such anti-APC stories.

Discussion

Our findings in this study show that all the newspapers we selected for this study favoured one political group at the expense of the other. This is reflected in how the newspapers selected and constructed their news stories about the two political parties—PDP and APC. The newspapers gave more emphasis to stories about one political party they seemed to favour while they either underreported, ignored or buried stories about the other political party that they did not favour. In general assessment, the newspapers were subjective in their coverage of events leading to the presidential election. The patterns of report, as established in the textually analysed stories and further shown in Tables 1 and 2, confirm that both *The Nation* and *The Punch* demonstrated bias for the opposition party (APC) and its presidential flag bearer, Gen Muhammadu Buhari, whereas *Nigerian Tribune* and *Vanguard* showed sentiments for the PDP and its presidential candidate, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. However, *The Nation* and *Nigerian Tribune* demonstrated more bias for the APC and the PDP respectively compared to *The Punch* and *Vanguard*, which relatively demonstrated some level of neutrality.

These biases demonstrated by the newspapers also highlighted the ownership and ideological differences that have characterised the Nigerian media system (Oso, 2012; Ojebode, 2013). As earlier indicated, *Vanguard* newspaper, which was founded by Mr Sam Amuka from the same Niger-Delta region of Nigeria as Dr Goodluck Jonathan, would be expected to express sympathy for the PDP—the ruling party that fielded Goodluck Jonathan as its presidential flag bearer. Also, we predicted that *Nigerian Tribune* and *The Nation* would naturally not share the same ideological perspective because of the rivalry that had existed between the Tinubu and the Awolowo dynasties who founded the two newspapers respectively. These two predictions have been established by this study.

Our findings in this study have further confirmed similar empirical evidences by previous studies (e.g. Esser, 2009; Obijiofor, 2009; D'Angelo, Pollock, Kiernicki, and Shaw, 2013; Musa and Ferguson, 2013) that journalists always allow their sentiments to reflect in the frames they use to present social reality and that media framing is always influenced by

various forces such as sources, ownership factors, ideological inclination and news values generally (Enman, 2007; Littejohn and Foss, 2009). For instance, in their study, Musa and Ferguson (2013) reported that Nigerian newspapers constructed sectarian conflicts using the ‘enemy images and stereotypes to demonise the “other”, reshape their readers’ impression of the “other”, reinforce intolerance and, possibly, spread hate and amplify conflicts’ (2013: 7). A study by Esser (2009) shows that while covering the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003, journalists used four frames (i.e. conduct, strategy, personalization and accountability) to construct the role of news media and military news management. The study further shows that journalists allowed their sentiments to reflect in their stories while the press coverage of the two Gulf Wars assisted citizens to make an informed judgement on the relationship of war and media.

In our current study, the selected newspapers, in their coverage of events leading to the 2015 presidential election, reflected subjectivity in the form of political alignments. These patterns of coverage could be linked to ownership and political affiliations, which have been empirically proved to be strong forces that determine the level of ethical freedom and professional elbowroom that Nigerian journalists enjoy. For instance, Ojebode (2013) conducted a study among journalists in politician-businessperson-owned (PBO) newspapers in Nigeria to investigate how loyalty to the owners’ multiple interests had undermined the professional elbowroom of the journalists. The study established that there was narrow elbowroom for the Nigerian journalist to exercise professional and ethical freedoms. Most of the journalists interviewed strongly expressed their commitment to professionalism, but they identified political and commercial interests of the owners of their newspapers as “the ‘wall of obstacles’ that they face in their attempt to stick to professional standards” (2013: 301). The four newspapers we selected for analysis in this study represent ideological and ownership configurations of Nigerian media, and the patterns of their coverage of political stories in the period shortly before the election reflected influence of ownership and political alignments.

Paul and Elder explain that the issue of media bias is intensified in circumstances where there are ideological conflicts or differences with the mass media resorting to the use of self-serving terms or techniques primarily to satisfy segments of the audience that share the same ideology that the media project: the mass media, in pursuing this self-serving agenda, therefore, highlight one side of the stories while ‘suppressing,

denying, or minimizing' the other side (Paul and Elder , 2006: 26). The consequence of this phenomenon, as established in the manifest content of the newspapers analysed in this study, is either blackout or selective reporting where facts are emphasised, tilted, underreported, buried or completely ignored by the news media in manners that reflect proprietorial influence and political alignments.

Conclusion

The core objective of this study was to establish the veracity of the claims that Nigerian press coverage of events leading to the March 28, 2015 Nigeria's presidential election contained biases and subjectivity. This study has confirmed that Nigerian newspapers failed to observe the sacred principles of fairness and objectivity in their coverage of issues relating to the Nigeria's presidential election of March 28, 2015. The selected newspapers demonstrated biases that placed them as allies or enemies of certain political groups or interests. Their patterns of reporting the election stories have further proved that ownership and ideological orientations still significantly influence media performance in Nigeria.

The intricacies and responsibility of applying the numerous forces while taking editorial decisions may make it practically impossible for journalists to be absolutely objective in their professional performance. However, it is imperative that Nigerian journalists try as much as possible to be ethically responsible by adhering to the minimum standard of fairness especially when they are reporting sensitive issues such as elections and general political matters. The frames used by the news media to construct social reality have significant influence on the public perception and interpretation of such a social reality. Besides, how the Nigerian media report election issues has great implications for the nation's democracy and her subsequent elections as the electorate may lose confidence in a media system that could not uphold the sacred principle of fair and objective reporting.

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