

# Newspaper Coverage of the Herders-Farmers Crises: A Study of *the Punch* and *Vanguard* Newspapers



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## Abstract

The herders-farmers crisis has posed a problem to Nigeria's national security. The media are tasked with being socially responsible by reporting such issues to provide information and place great importance on those issues by performing the agenda-setting function. This study focuses on the reportage of the herders'-farmers' crises by two Nigerian dailies: *The Punch* and *Vanguard*. The objectives were to ascertain the level of coverage frequency by both newspapers, determine the prominence level of the crisis reports, identify the dominant nature of the crisis stories, and finally, detect if the newspapers' editorial policies affected the crisis reportage. Content analysis was used as the study's research design and a total number of 182 editions was reached as the study's sample size for a study period of 3 months (April – June 2021) with a coding scheme used as the study's data collection method. The study revealed that only 138 articles were published in both newspapers throughout the study period: 79 articles in *The Punch* and 59 in *Vanguard*. The study also revealed that the coverage frequency was low as the level of coverage of the crises stood at 0.51% compared to articles on activities of bandits, kidnappers, economic development, IPOB, and so on. In regards to the level of prominence, the study showed that the herders'-farmers' crises were not given high prominence by the selected newspapers as the majority of the published articles appeared on the inside pages. The dominant nature of published articles was straight news stories as revealed in the study. Finally, the reportage of the crises was objective by both newspapers despite their editorial policies. This shows that the newspaper coverage of the herders'-farmers' crises is low and needs to be worked on. The study recommends that the frequency of coverage should be heightened carefully, the press should engage in more investigative reportage, the press should also focus on developmental stories, and finally, prominence should be given to the crises.

**Keywords:** *Herders-Farmers, Crises, Newspaper coverage*

## Introduction

The herders-farmers crises in Nigeria can be traced as far back as 1996. Between then and 2006, clashes between herders and nomadic farmers in Bauchi and Gombe led to the loss of about 121 lives (Udeze, 2019). Over the years, these clashes moved from the Northern region (particularly the North-central) down to other regions of the country and this led to the loss of more lives and the destruction of properties such as farmlands and agricultural products. What began as a supposedly small issue concerning herders

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overstepping their boundaries and encroaching on the properties of others, particularly farmlands to allow their cattle to graze, eventually grew into a large-scale issue that presently poses a major threat to Nigeria's national security alongside other violent acts based on kidnapping and assassination of Nigerian citizens?

Since 2012, the Nigerian government has made efforts, such as the anti-grazing law of 2017, the Exercise Cat Race –a military operation launched to curb violence in selected states- and Operation Whirl Stroke which is still ongoing, to bring a truce to both sides and end the violence. However, because these projects were mostly supported by the Northern lawmakers and opposed by the Southerners, the endeavours of the government were majorly unsuccessful. In 2019, the national government headed by President Muhammadu Buhari introduced the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements which was aimed at creating reserved communities for herders to live and rear their cattle while undertaking other businesses without continuously moving from one place to another in search of grazing pasture for their livestock ("Rethinking the Ruga Policy", 2019). Unfortunately, this was met with fierce criticism and the policy has been suspended ever since while the herdsman continue to wreak havoc across the nation.

The media, on the other hand, plays major societal functions, one of which is the provision of information on various societal issues. Through the media, individuals, groups, and society at large can understand current happenings and then shape opinions (group and individual) based on the information obtained from the various media channels. Apart from the fact that the media provides so much information for our consumption, it also allows society to see what is important and what is not due to the amount of importance placed on certain issues and happenings. The media also plays the watchdog function wherein it monitors the activities of the government of society and society, in general, to check excesses and expose the ills that threaten security at local, state, and national levels.

The coverage of issues such as the herders'-farmers' crises in the nation falls under the watchdog responsibility of the media via its various channels as well as its social responsibility function as it is tasked with the duty of letting the citizens of Nigeria know what is going on, the consequences of these issues, and how it can thwart the nation's security. The media has to constantly play its part in the dissemination of such information and place emphasis on such issues so as to attach importance.

This research, therefore, seeks to determine if the Nigerian media gives coverage to the herders '-farmers' crises and the extent of coverage given to the crises by Nigerian newspapers with a focus on *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Nigeria today, clashes between herders and farmers have posed a major national security concern as it now affects the six geopolitical zones of the nation, bringing along with it social and economic consequences where lives are lost, properties destroyed, and people suffer displacements as a result of the crises. It has also created an impact on the nation's food security. Nigeria accumulates an estimated annual loss of 13.7 billion dollars in the country's potential revenue, courtesy of the herders-farmers clashes (Mercy Corp, 2015). Also, the herders' attacks, particularly the Fulani, have assumed the notoriety of terrorism according to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015).

The newspapers, just like other media institutions, are established to report events in the society. The absence of reportage or under-reportage of issues such as that of the herders-farmers clashes in locations around the country could be harmful to society as the amount of significance put on an issue by the public is benchmarked on the extent of coverage provided by the media. Based on this, the examination of the press coverage of the herders'-farmers' crises in Nigeria becomes extremely important.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To ascertain the level of coverage frequency of the herders-farmers conflict by *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers.
- ii. To determine the prominence level given to reports of the farmers-herders clashes within the study's duration.
- iii. To identify the dominant nature of press stories on the herders-farmers crises in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers.
- iv. To detect if editorial policies affect the reportage of the issue of the farmers-herders crises.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What is the level of coverage frequency by *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers on the farmers-herders clashes in Nigeria?
- ii. What is the prominence level given to reports on these clashes within the duration of the study?
- iii. What is the dominant nature of press stories on the herders '-farmers' crises in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers?
- iv. Do the editorial policies of these newspapers affect the reportage of the herders'-farmers' crises?

### **The Media and Conflict Coverage**

Although conflicts affect all parts of society, Olomjobi and Ajilore (2018) opine that the media can be selective when it comes to the reportage of conflict. They state that the media does not provide a balanced focus in conflict situations as certain conflicts are maximally reported while others are under-reported or not reported at all. A number of these conflicts become invincible as though they had never come to life when given little to no priority by the media. The implication, Sonwalkar (2004) as cited in Olomjobi and Ajilore (2018) states, is that a situation arises where the media restricts or thwarts the opportunities of such conflicts being featured in the public's agenda either at the national or global level.

In the reportage of conflict, the media can be a double-edged sword that plays both negative and positive roles to the extent that it (the media) can be an initiator or a heightener of a conflict (Olomjobi and Ajilore, 2018). On one end, the media's product has the power to initiate or intensify conflict and on the other end, the media can ease the reduction or complete resolution of a conflict.

### **Herders-Farmers Crises in Nigeria**

The Nigerian herders-farmers conflicts over the years mainly involved disputes over land resources between the herders and the farmers, especially in the Middle Belt (North-Central Nigeria) and in the North West. The major cause of the tension between pastoral herders and the farmers in its basic form is economic as land related issues are

traced as the root causes of the majority of conflicts between both sides (Abbass, 2012 in Olayoku 2014 as cited in Oyebuchi et. al, 2019).

This can be traced to the incessive struggle for fixed space in order to satisfy the demands of a population that is continuously growing (Olayoku, 2014). The socio-economic consequences, according to Oyebuchi et al. (2019), of these conflicts lead to misunderstandings between the herders and farmers, mistrust, tensions and eventually, open confrontations between the opposing groups. Eyekpimi (2016) states that other economic impacts of these clashes include hindering trade practices, the reduction of crop produce, the displacement of farmers, and the loss of lives and properties including products in storage, and public and private buildings.

In creating a timeline of the herdsmen and farmers clashes in Nigeria, Eyekpimi (2016) starts on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012 when a Fulani herdsman is accused of murdering one Benjamin Chegue on his farm. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Fulani assailants are believed to have been the ones who opened fire on community leaders and residents who had been in a meeting in Galadima village in Zamfara. This killed at least 79 (according to the Aljazeera web news article dated April 6, 2014) and injured an unknown number of individuals.

In February 2016, five persons were killed by Fulani herdsmen at Okokolo village in Benue state while nearly 500 persons lost their lives at the hands of the herdsmen on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016 after a siege on communities in the Agatu Local Government area of that same state. Between April 12<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of that same year, 88 people were reportedly killed as the herdsmen attacked several communities in Taraba, Delta, and Enugu States. June 2016 had at least 60 deaths reportedly recorded following attacks by the herders in Delta and Benue states.

In 2018, over 326 people were killed in these clashes in attacks in January, April, May, June, July, October, and December in various communities across the country while the total number of deaths recorded in 2019 as a result of the clashes was 187 according to the Human Rights Watch Report of 2019.

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

The Social Responsibility theory of the press assumes that the media must be socially responsible to the masses. The theory, which is an offshoot of the libertarian theory, sprung up in the mid-twentieth century. McQuail (1987) cited in Asemah *et al.* (2017) states that the theory's origin comes from the Commission on Freedom of the Press initiative. The theory emerged as a result of the press abusing the freedom they enjoyed under the libertarian theory.

The Social Responsibility theory is benchmarked on the press acting responsibly. The press enjoys a privileged position under the government of society and, it is obliged to be responsible for the communication of contemporary society (Asemah *et al.*, 2017). McQuail (1987) in Baran (2009) as cited in Onyebuchi *et al.* (2019) notes that the media has to be socially responsible to the people it is linked with by ensuring a high standard of professionalism, truth, accuracy, and objectivity. The media must also be self-regulating within the provision of the society's law and pluralistic in the sense that it reflects the diversity of the cultures available in the society it operates in to give way for various points of view and opinions.

In the context of this research, the social responsibility theory is relevant as the basic tenets of the theory necessitate that the media owes it to the citizens (Nigerians) to cover

issues of importance to the entire nation such as the herders'-farmers' clashes with farmers. In doing so, the media puts the safety and unity of the nation as its top priority as anything short of this could prove to be disadvantageous.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

The Agenda-Setting Theory opines that the media determines issues that are to be held or seen as important by society. The theory's proposal was spearheaded by McCombs and Shaw in 1971 (Asemah, 2011 cited in Gever and Essien, 2017).

The theory lays out the news media's ability to influence the importance of topics for the public. The more an event or happening is covered, the higher the level of importance attached to that event by the audience. This is done, according to Folarin (1998) in Gever (2013) cited in Gever and Essien (2017), in ways such as the increased frequency of reporting, prominence level given to the reports through headline displays, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics, or timing on radio and television, and also the degree of conflict generated in the reports and cumulative media-specific effects over time.

This theory is relevant to this study as the Nigerian media is tasked with the duty of frequently covering issues surrounding the herder's and farmers' crises to make the audience regard these issues with great importance as they pose a threat to Nigeria's national security.

### **Research Methodology**

The research design adopted in this study as the primary approach to data generation is content analysis. According to Bryman *et al.* (2011), content analysis is the study of documents and communication artifacts, which might be texts of various formats, pictures, audio, or video. He further states that social scientists use content analysis to examine patterns in communication in a replicable and systematic manner. Ward (2012) says that content analysis is a systematic research technique that provides a method for the qualitative and quantitative analysis of a corpus of information, generally text.

In this study, content analysis is used to examine two selected newspapers; *The Punch* and the *Vanguard* to determine the extent and depth of the coverage of the herders-farmers crises in the country.

The population of the study covers two Nigerian dailies: *The Punch* and *Vanguard*. These papers were chosen because of their wide circulation, positive patronage, and availability of these papers to the researcher. *The Punch* newspaper has a daily circulation rate of about 80,000 copies according to the Nigerian Finder while the *Vanguard* newspaper, according to the newspaper's official site, has a daily circulation rate of 120,000-130,000 copies.

The study duration is 3 months: April to June 2021 and the two newspapers are to be analysed each day. In a month, an average number of 62 newspaper editions are produced; 31 editions of *The Punch* newspaper and 31 editions of the *Vanguard* newspaper. For the entire period of study, the population would be  $62 \times 3 = 186$  editions.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select weekday editions and weekend editions of the selected newspapers. According to McCombes (2019), the purposive sampling method, also known as judgement sampling, involves the researcher using their expertise to select a sample that is most useful to the purposes of the research; It is often used in qualitative research where the researcher wants to gain detailed

knowledge about a specific phenomenon rather than making statistical inferences, or where the population is very small and specific.

In determining the sample size of the study, the complete enumeration technique was adopted which is of the assumption that if the sampling unit could be repeatedly counted, the same count would be made for each replicate and thus, there would be no variance associated with the count (Raghunath, 2017). In this study, this technique is employed for all the weekday and weekend editions of the two selected newspapers for a period of three months, resulting in a sample size of 182 editions which is a sum of the 130 weekday editions for both newspapers and the 52 weekend editions of the two selected newspapers published during the study's time frame.

The data collection method adopted in this study is the coding scheme. This is the process of creating and assigning codes to categorize data extracts; it generally refers to the process of labelling and grouping similar types of data to make generating themes and analysis more manageable (Crosley & Jansen, 2020).

The units of analysis include the level of coverage frequency, the dominant nature of stories, and the prominence level given to the crises by the two newspapers. The findings of the study are quantitatively presented in tables using figures and percentages which take into account the frequencies or numerical values with which the various items of the analysis of content occurred.

## Findings

### Coverage

**Table 1: Analysis of article publication**

	THE PUNCH	VANGUARD
APRIL	20	18
MAY	26	21
JUNE	33	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>59</b>

Source: Field Study, 2021

Table 1 displays the number of articles published during the study period (April to June, 2021). A total number of 182 newspaper editions were studied which was a sum of the 130 weekday editions and 52 weekend editions of both newspapers (*The Punch* and *Vanguard*). Out of the studied editions, a total number of 138 articles on the crises were published throughout the study period: 79 articles in *The Punch* and 59 articles in *Vanguard*.

### Prominence

**Table 2: Summary table of prominence attached to Herders-Famers crises articles**

	THE PUNCH	VANGUARD	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE (%)
Front Page	16	19	35	25.36%
Inside Page	55	38	93	67.39%
Centre Spread	8	2	10	7.25%
Back Page	0	0	0	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Study, 2021

Table 2 reveals that the two selected newspapers had a total publication number of 35 front-page articles which equates to 25.36% of all articles published during the study period. A total of 93 articles were published on the inside pages of the selected newspapers, amounting to 67.39% of the total articles published. 10 articles were published on the centre spread which takes up 7.25% of the total number of articles published during the study period and lastly, there were no articles published on the back pages of the selected newspapers. The results show that the articles published on the inside pages (67.39%) are greater than other variables combined.

**Nature of Stories**

**Table 3: Dominant Nature of Published Stories**

	THE PUNCH	VANGUARD	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE (%)
News Articles	76	56	132	95.65%
Editorials	1	3	4	2.90%
Features	2	0	2	1.45%
Editorial Cartoons	0	0	0	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Study, 2021

Table 3 shows that during the study period, 132 news articles were published by both newspapers and this makes up 95.65% of the overall total. 4 editorial articles were published; making up 2.90% and 2 features were published, accounting for 1.45% of the overall total. There were no editorial cartoons published in both newspapers throughout the study period.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question 1: What is the level of coverage frequency by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers on the farmers-herders clashes in Nigeria?**

According to Meyer (2016), a newspaper publishes roughly 150 articles per day, and going by this calculation, an average number of 4,500 articles are published per month for one newspaper. During the period of study, one newspaper published a rough total of 13,500 articles and together, both newspapers published a rough total of 27,000 news articles. This is, however, prone to errors as there are days when a newspaper edition contains fewer or more articles than that of another day.

Out of this rough number, a total of 138 articles were centered on the herders-farmers crises, which is roughly 0.51% out of 100%. This means that 99.49% of the total number of articles focused on other issues in the country such as the IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) activities, activities of bandits and kidnappers, economic matters, and at the later part of the study; the Twitter ban by the federal government. The implication of this is that activities of bandits, kidnappers, IPOB, and economic matters had higher coverage in the newspapers in comparison to the crises of the herders and farmers.

Therefore, it is deduced that the frequency of the herders-farmers crises in the dailies is low, especially when compared to other societal issues. This contradicts the results by

Onyebuchi, Obayi, and Nwagu (2019) where reports on the herders' crises stood at 49.8% while news on Boko Haram activities and the 2019 general elections stood at 15% and 35.2% respectively. This result, however, is consistent with that of Gever and Essien (2017) where the reports on Fulani herders' clashes with farmers proved to be episodic and underreported.

**Research Question 2: What is the level of prominence given to reports on these clashes within the duration of the study?**

The analysis of the coded data revealed that the selected newspapers did not attach high prominence levels to issues revolving around the crises. As seen in Table 2, the total number of articles on the front pages is 35 (25.36%) and this is considered low, especially when compared to the inside pages which had most of the articles with a total of 93 (67.39%). The center spread which usually contains in-depth articles had a total of 10 (7.25%) and there were no back page stories.

This result is in line with Gever and Essien (2017) on Newspaper coverage of the herdsman-farmers conflict in central Tiv Land, Benue State, Nigeria where the inside pages of the selected newspapers had the highest amount of stories.

**Research Question 3: What is the dominant nature of news stories on the Herders-Farmers crises in the Punch and Vanguard newspapers?**

Table 3 shows that out of the coded data, straight news articles were the most published in both newspapers. A total number of 132 news articles were published throughout the study period, accounting for 95.65% of the total publication of crisis articles. 4 editorial articles were published throughout the entire period (2.90%) and 2 features were published (1.45%) while there were no editorial cartoons.

This is consistent with the results of Gever and Essien (2017) and that of Onyebuchi *et al.* (2019) where there were more straight news stories than editorials, features and editorial cartoons. Just as Gever and Essien (2017) state, this is not adequate because in order to be socially responsible, newspapers should give satisfactory coverage of the issues with solutions to solving them and this would only come about with the increase in number of editorials and feature stories in the pages of newspapers.

**Research Question 4: Do the editorial policies of these newspapers affect the reportage of the herders-farmers crises?**

According to the Division of Students Affairs at Appalachian State University, editorial policies are sets of guidelines by which a news organization operates. It includes the news organization's attitudes toward its community and aids editors in making editorial decisions.

*The Punch's* editorial policies have everything to do with the promotion and defense of the values of democracy while contributing to the economic development of the country (as stated on their official website). However, in 2019, the newspaper introduced a new editorial policy that stated that the country's president, Muhammadu Buhari would be referred to by the media establishment as Major General, referring to his government as a regime than an administration. This elicited reactions ranging from support to rage and since then, the newspaper has been seen as anti-Buhari or anti-APC newspaper.

For a newspaper with such an editorial policy where it could easily blame the government for everything happening, *The Punch* newspaper was objective in its news

reporting of the herders-farmers' crises, reporting events as they happened and not siding with one party over the other. The editorial written on the crises showed a clear opinion of the journalist and provided plausible solutions that could bring an end to the crises if adopted and implemented. The feature stories published by the newspaper provided more details on the current activities of the crises, giving more than what the news stories offered.

The *Vanguard* newspaper, on the other hand, shares similar editorial policies with *The Punch* (apart from the latter's new editorial policy concerning President Muhammadu Buhari), and just like the latter, the newspaper objectively gave reports on the crises although the total number of articles was lower than that of *The Punch*. The editorials expressed the opinions of the editors without necessarily placing the blame on any party. There were no features published in the *Vanguard* newspaper throughout the period of the study.

Therefore, it can be deduced that the editorial policies of the newspapers have no effect on the reportage of the herders-farmers crises and this justifies the Social Responsibility Theory of the media.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This research work aimed at studying the newspaper coverage of the herders-farmers crises in Nigeria with emphasis on *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers. The study sought to ascertain the level of coverage frequency of the herders-farmers crises, find out the level of prominence given to the reports, find out the dominant nature of the published articles, and finally, find out if editorial policies of the newspapers affect the reportage of the crises. Content analysis was used to gather and code data for a period of three months: April to June 2021.

The study revealed that 138 articles were published out of roughly 27,000 articles, accounting for 0.51% out of a hundred percent which was low as compared to other societal happenings that are reported in dailies which accounts for about 99.49%.

The study also revealed that the crises were not given high prominence as only 35 articles (25.36%) articles appeared on the front pages, 10 articles (7.25%) on the center spread pages, 0 articles on the back pages, and the bulk number of articles appearing on the inside pages; 93 articles (67.39%).

Furthermore, the study showed that the majority of the published articles are straight news articles which stood at a total number of 132 (95.65%). Editorials are 4 in number while features are 2, accounting for 2.90% and 1.45% respectively. There were no published editorial cartoons and this proved that straight news articles were the dominant nature of published articles in the newspapers.

Finally, the study discovered that the editorial policies of the newspapers do not affect the reportage of the crises of the herders and farmers as both newspapers objectively reported the various activities and happenings without any form of bias where one party sided with the other.

All of the above suggests that the issue of the herders-farmers crises in Nigeria is covered by the newspapers but not as much as one would think, especially with the current state of the nation where the herders, kidnapers, and bandits are the ones who now call the shots.

The discussion and analysis of the obtained data set the ground for the conclusion that the newspaper coverage of the herders-farmers crises in Nigeria can be worked on

as it is underreported as compared to other issues such as the kidnapping of students, activities of IPOB and happenings in the economic sector. Apart from the fact that the number of articles concerning the crises isn't encouraging, there is no high prominence placed on the crises as the majority of the articles appear on the inside pages; placed where readers can easily miss while skimming through that edition.

Also, there is a clear lack of editorials, features, and editorial cartoons as against the number of news articles, which is a cause for concern as there would be inadequate opinions of various individuals on the crises and also not enough information on what is happening.

More reportage on the crises would raise more awareness, make it an important issue (the agenda-setting function of the press), provide opinions of various Nigerians, and also provide solutions that can bring an end to the whole issue if properly adopted and implemented.

The study, therefore, recommends:

1. The frequency of coverage of the crises by the press should be heightened but this should be done with care because if given too much publicity, the herders may be encouraged to commit more atrocities.
2. The press should engage in more investigative news reportage to provide more information than the usual news stories to give the readers a good back story and opinion articles (editorials) should also be encouraged.
3. When reporting, the press should also focus on developmental news instead of paying all its attention to violence as it places fear in the minds of the readers and also creates apathy. By choosing to also focus on developmental news, the media provides an avenue for the de-escalation of the crises.
4. More prominence should be given to the crises as it poses a threat to national security but the press should do its best to avoid giving too much prominence so that it doesn't overshadow other activities and eventually paint the herders in an overly negative light.

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