

# Comparative Evaluation of Nigerian Newspapers' Coverage of Political Violence, 2003-2011

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## Abstract

The role of the media in informing the people can never be overstretched. This study, therefore, compares the reportage of political violence through the prisms of four Nigerian newspapers, *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *ThisDay* and *New Nigerian*. Using content analysis method and predicated on the Social Responsibility theory, the study found that the newspapers buried most of the stories on political violence on the inside pages of the newspapers as well as presenting most of the newspaper contents through the traditional straight-news format at the expense of editorials, features, articles and other forms of opinionated contents. The study also found that the newspapers depended more on their in-house staff as sources for their stories on political violence. It was recommended amongst other things that the newspapers should use the other genres of reporting to inform the public as well as giving political violence the prominence it deserves through story placement. The usage of a multi-source approach to news stories should also be adopted instead of the dependence on in-house staff as sources of news stories.

**Keywords:** .Coverage .Political violence .Reporting .Newspapers

## Introduction

Humanity and crisis are not strange bedfellows. They interact in one way or the other and at different levels on a daily basis. Most societies, the world over, have had to go through one form of crisis or the other in their evolutionary process. As Anifowose (1982) states, "violence or the threat of violence is a universal phenomenon" (p.1). The causes of these violent situations could be social, ethnic, economic, religious or politically engineered". Violence does not just crop up in any society. It starts with crisis and metamorphoses into a conflict. Coser (1968, p.6) aptly sees conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals." Citing Burton (1993), Bakut (n.d. p. 236) sees conflict "as a term used usually for the range of arguments, tensions and violent conflicts that occur both within and between states". The physical violence engineered by political underpinnings or conflict is of utmost importance to this study.

The issue of political crisis degenerating into political conflict and, consequently, political violence is not a recent innovation on the world's political scene. In other words, violence, as a weapon in the hands of people in the pursuit of goals or desires, is not restricted to only one class of people in society. The haves as well as the have-nots do use violence to achieve their heart desires.

Sorkaa (2007, p.28) succinctly captures the foundation of political violence as "political mistrust which is the display of lack of confidence among political actions and parties ...absolute lack of trust but suspicion on the activities of other political actors." He further states that "political violence erupts when politicians fail to reconcile their differences arising from mistrust and directly or indirectly through their supporters, [who] engage in covert and overt actions and reactions that negatively affect the peace of the society."

In the midst of this politically motivated violence, there is the mass media. Nwosu (1996, p. 11) sees the mass media as “technical communication concepts” that describe those devices deployed by anyone engaged in mass-mediated communication situations to send or move messages across time or distance.

These roles have been made more pronounced now with developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such that the world is now a global village, where “time has ceased and space has vanished. We live now in a simultaneous happening” (Marshall McLuhan, quoted in Gross, 1995, p. 4).

The interface between the mass media and political violence in Nigeria is central to this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

On a general level, especially in Third World countries, elections are sometimes marked by conflicts and subsequent violence. Anifosowo (1982) avers that conflicts of political origin are synonymous with most political systems of the world, especially those of the developing countries, including Nigeria, where these political conflicts, crises and even violence, have become “essential characteristics of the political process,” (p.31). As such, there are usually cases of political violence before, during and after elections in Nigeria, which is also a Third World country. This study sought to find out how Nigerian newspapers performed the function of informing the public with reference to occurrences of political violence.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised:

1. What level of prominence did Nigerian newspapers give to political violence as against other issues on their front pages in their reports?
2. What news formats did Nigerian newspapers use to present stories of political violence?
3. What are the sources of Nigerian newspapers’ stories on political violence?

### **Literature Review**

Examining the coverage of issues by the mass media, to evaluate their performance, is a worldwide phenomenon. This affords researchers and communication specialists the opportunity to assess the performance of the mass media in covering topics or issues deemed important by such researchers or communication specialists. Such examinations include Nwosu (1996), Sambe (1996), Tobechukwu (2007), Kombol (2008), Stremlau and Price (2009), Meadows (2009), Ciboh (2010) and Martins *et al* (2013). All these aggregate to an evaluative study of the mass media, with reference to their performance, which could be on the dark or light side. Issues of such magnitude covered by the media include political crises that, more often than not, result to political violence.

In the studies by Nwosu (1996) and Tobechukwu (2007), their findings included stories being presented in the straight news format, just as Ciboh (2010) also found out as well as the stories being buried inside the newspapers. In terms of news sources, while Nwosu (1996) found “all the newspapers generally got most of their stories from their foreign correspondents” (p.87) as opposed to other “new sources”, Ciboh (2010) found sources being monolithic in the form of government/official elite sources.

The study is anchored on the social responsibility theory. The theory is viewed as a brainchild of the report by the Robert Hutchins’ Commission on Freedom of the Press in the United States of America in 1947. In summary, the Commission opined that the freedom of the US press was endangered because the few people who were controlling the media had jettisoned their full responsibility to the people, thereby controlling the spectrum of ideas. This was in direct contrast to John Milton’s 1644 argument that an open marketplace of ideas advances and heightens the interests of society and mankind

(Trager, *et al*, p.2007). As Okunna (2002, p.10) states 'the libertarian era afforded the press so much unrestrained freedom that it became careless and irresponsible, thereby taking its freedom for granted,' leading to an increasingly irresponsible press.

Based on the Hutchins' Commission's report, McQuail (2007, pp.117-118) distilled the tenets of the theory to include the media serving the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible; serving the economic system, for instance, by bringing together buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising; regulating itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities; preserving financial autonomy in order not to become dependent on special interests and influences; reflecting society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and granting all the right to reply and that accountability of media professionals should be to the society, employers and the market.

The media are, therefore, bound by this theory to serve the society in all spheres of life. They should provide a level field for all conflicting ideas and every stratum of the society. This service is provided through true, fair, objective and accurate reporting of events, involving all the segments of the society. In Nigerian, the press is constitutionally empowered to be a watchdog over the Nigerian society.

Predicated on the above and the tenets of the Social Responsibility theory, holding the government responsible to the people does not only mean talking about corrupt practices in government circles only. It also implies reporting on all issues affecting the people, political violence inclusive. It suggests that the media should keep the people informed on all issues affecting them. The way they reported political violence is thus examined here.

### **Methodology**

The content analysis procedure was used for this study as textual materials from Nigerian newspapers were studied to examine the interface between the Nigerian mass media and political violence reportage in Nigeria between 2003 and 2011 with a constructed calendar of 9 months drawn from the election months of the period.

### **Population of the Study**

The population for this work was 13,148 editions of newspapers. The researcher purposively selected 4 titles based on geographical spread, circulation strength, ownership pattern, their coverage of a wide range of national and international issues and availability of the newspapers in his place of domicile. The titles were *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *New Nigerian* and *ThisDay*.

The population of study was determined by multiplying the number of study years or days by the four selected newspapers. The total population of the study, therefore, stood at 3,287 days x 4 newspapers, which yielded a study population of 13,148 newspapers. The research depended on the sampling months and days to determine the sample size.

### **Sample Size**

The sample that was content analysed, however, was drawn from a 9 month calendar: one month before the election, one month for the voting period and a month after the election for 2003, 2007 and 2011. This is with reference to the elections that were held within these three years, specifically, ranging from State Houses of Assembly to the presidential election. These were March, April and May for the three years. These then were used to construct a composite calendar and the sampling days drawn from it. Using Wimmer and Dominick's (1987, p.173) *n*th principle of simple random sampling of calendar dates, the three months for 2003 produced 23 days that the newspapers were sampled on. The same applied to 2007 and 2011. Total number of days on which the four newspapers were sampled, therefore, stood at 69 days.

In order to give the four newspapers under review equal opportunity of representation, the researcher sampled all the four newspapers on each of the 69 days. The total sample size, therefore, was 4 newspapers multiplied by 69 days, which yielded 276 issues of newspapers.

The research instrument used was the coding sheet. Coders, who were trained in sync with the variables of the study, did the coding in accordance with the units of analysis of news stories, editorials, opinions, feature stories, interpretative articles, photographs and cartoons/comic strips. The content categories were placement, Themes, volumn, sources and story types, which werre treated under the various variables. Inter-coder reliability tests yielded coefficients of .75 and above, using the *pi* index, in accordance with Wimmer and Dominick’s assertion (1987, p.187) that “as a rule of the thumb, most published content analyses typically report a minimum reliability coefficient of about 90% or above when using Holsti’s formula, and about .75 or above when using *pi* or *alpha*”. The inter-coder reliability between the two coders used was got using Scott’s (1955) *pi* index.

**Data Presentation and Discussion**

**Thematic concerns**

Thematic concerns sought to measure the incidents of political reports in terms of their placement on the front pages of the newspapers under study. This measurement was, however, restricted to only front pages that carried news on political violence on the sample days of the study.

Table I below shows the story placement on political violence on the front pages of the newspapers and other stories. Out of 105 stories from the four newspapers, 35 stories (33.33%) were on political violence. While politics had 32 stories (30.48%), military issues were seven (6.67%). Power/energy and economy/business had six stories each (5.71% apiece), leaving the judiciary/courts with five stories (4.76%). While communications and police/crime had four stories each (3.81% each), corruption had three (2.86%). Stories on religion, labour and aviation had only one story each (0.95% apiece).

**Table I: Percentage Distribution of Thematic Concerns of front-page stories on sampled days**

	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total	%
Political Violence	09	08	14	04	35	33.33
Communications	01	01	02	00	04	3.81
Corruption	00	01	02	00	03	2.86
Police/Crime	00	01	03	00	04	3.81
Judiciary/Courts	02	01	02	00	05	4.76
Politics	09	12	11	00	32	30.48
Power/Energy	00	02	04	00	06	5.71
Economy/Business	00	01	05	00	06	5.71
Religion	00	01	00	00	01	0.95
Labour	00	00	01	00	01	0.95
Military	01	05	01	00	07	6.67
Aviation	00	01	00	00	01	0.95
Total	22	34	45	04	105	100

Of the 35 stories on political violence on the front pages, the *New Nigerian* led with 14 stories (40.00%) while *Daily Sun* came second with nine stories (25.71%). *The Guardian*

come third with eight stories (22.86%) and *ThisDay* came last with four stories (11.43%). From the above, the *New Nigerian* placed political violence on higher premium than the other three newspapers. Overall, front-page display of stories on political violence on the sample days was one-third of all front-page stories. The mean frequency distribution of front-page stories on political violence by the four newspapers stood at 8.75 or approximately nine stories to one newspaper.

### Story Placement

Story placement determines the importance of a story or issue on the agenda of newspapers as well as that of the public as seen in the tenets of the agenda-setting theory. Table II below shows story placement on political violence during the period.

**Table II: Percentage of prominence given political violence news stories**

	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total	%
Front Page Lead Story	03	02	07	02	14	4.33
Front Page Story	06	06	07	02	21	6.50
Back Page Lead Story	02	00	00	01	03	0.93
Back Page Story	00	01	00	00	01	0.31
Inside Page Story	93	45	94	52	284	87.93
Total	104	54	108	57	323	100
Jump Page Story	05	06	12	06	29	

The results above show that out of a total of 323 stories pooled together by the four newspapers, 284 stories (87.94%) were buried on inside pages followed by 21 stories (6.50%) placed as front-page stories. Front-page lead stories had 14 stories (4.33%) while back page lead stories had three stories (0.93%). Back page story was the least with one story (0.31%). Again, from the total number of stories, only 35 stories (10.83%) were displayed as front-page news stories. In other words, the burying of stories on political violence on inside pages was nine times higher than those placed on the front pages. From the news stories that were found important and up to the agenda of front-page lead placement, the *New Nigerian* contributed seven stories (50.00%), the *Daily Sun* had three stories (21.42%) while *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* tied with two stories (14.29%) each.

From the 35 stories placed on the front-page, the *New Nigerian* had 14 (40.00%) stories, showing the high premium placed on the coverage of political violence by the newspaper. The *Daily Sun* had a greater news value of political violence of nine (25.71%) stories than *The Guardian* with eight (22.86%) stories. *ThisDay* placed only four (11.43%) stories on the front-page and only two were accorded the lead placement. With this number, one is left with one suggestion that *ThisDay* placed lesser premium on political violence than the other three newspapers.

### Story or News Type

Table III below presents the story format in which news that dealt with political violence were couched. The traditional straight news approach accounted for 271 stories (75.70%), representing over two-thirds of newspaper content that was political violence based. Pictures depicting scenes of political violence or aftermath of political violence had 26 (7.26%). Features on political violence were 22 (6.14%). While articles were 11 (3.04%), columns and opinions were nine (2.51%) followed by cartoons and comic strips with six (1.68%). Interviews were five (1.40%), letters to the editor accounted for four stories (1.12%) while editorials were three (0.84%) with one rejoinder (0.28%).

**Table III: Percentage Distribution of Story or News Type of political violence stories**

	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total	%
Straight News Story	86	46	91	48	271	75.70
Editorials	02	01	00	00	03	0.84
Columns/Opinions	04	00	01	04	09	2.51
Features	08	07	05	02	22	6.14
Articles	00	01	07	03	11	3.07
Letters to the Editor	01	00	02	01	04	1.12
Pictures	21	01	02	02	26	7.26
Interviews	02	00	02	01	05	1.40
Rejoinders	01	00	00	00	01	0.28
Cartoons/Comic Strips	00	06	00	00	06	1.68
Total	125	62	110	61	358	100

Source: Content Analysis, 2013

From the total of straight news stories published on political violence by the newspapers under review, the *New Nigerian* contributed the highest number of 91 (33.58%) followed by the *Daily Sun* with 86 (31.73%). While *ThisDay* had 48 stories (17.71%), *The Guardian* had 46 stories (16.98%). Similarly, the *New Nigerian* also published straight news stories approximately two times more than either *ThisDay* or *The Guardian*. Another comparative perspective shows the newspapers studied had more than 90 times the number of straight news stories than editorials on political violence. From the three editorials published, the *Daily Sun* had two editorials (66.67%) while *The Guardian* had one (33.33%). The other two newspapers had none. Under features, the *Daily Sun* had eight (36.36%) with *The Guardian* having seven (31.82%) and the *New Nigerian* contributing five (22.73%) while *ThisDay* was two (9.09%). All the newspapers studied published stories on political violence in straight news format 12 times more than feature stories.

Opinions, articles, interviews, rejoinders and letters to the editor accounted for about one-twelfth of the total stories generated through the various genres of news reporting. All these other genres had the *New Nigerian* with 40 percent. *ThisDay* followed with 30 percent while the *Daily Sun* had 26.67 percent and *The Guardian* 3.33 percent. Thus, while the *Daily Sun* and *ThisDay* had four columns/opinions each, the *New Nigerian* had just one while *The Guardian* had none. On letters to the editor, the *New Nigerian* led with two while the *Daily Sun* and *ThisDay* tied with one each and *The Guardian* had none.

On cartoons, only *The Guardian* had six (100%) with the three remaining newspapers having no cartoon. Five of the cartoons by *The Guardian* were placed on the editorial page alongside letters to the editor. From the photographs that ranked second to the straight news genre, the *Daily Sun* contributed 80.77%. While the *New Nigerian* and *ThisDay* had 7.69% each, *The Guardian* was 3.85%.

#### Sources of News Story Items

Table IV below shows the sources of the news stories that the newspapers relied upon for their stories. The newspapers used non-journalistic sources more than journalistic sources. While non-journalistic was about two-thirds (63.17%) of the sources, journalistic sources constituted about one-third (36.84%).

On individual source basis, the newspapers mostly sourced for news stories on political violence from in-house staff, which accounted for 32.20% of all the sources. Other sources, not specified, stood at 22.10% with party officials having 17.03% and the police being 10.22% followed by government sources with 8.98%. While news agencies and eyewitness accounts had 2.78% each, other media accounted for 1.86%. Victims as news sources stood at 1.24%.

**Table IV: Percentage Distribution of Sources of News Stories on political violence**

	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total	%
<b>Journalistic Sources</b>						
In-House Staff	41	12	28	23	104	32.20
News Agencies	00	04	05	00	09	2.78
Other Media	00	00	06	00	06	1.86
<b>Non-Journalistic Sources</b>						
Government Sources	08	07	11	03	29	8.98
Eye-witnesses	04	02	02	01	09	2.78
Victims	03	01	00	00	04	1.24
Party Officials	18	13	17	07	55	17.03
Police	09	05	14	05	33	10.22
Others	21	10	25	18	74	22.10
Total	104	54	108	57	323	100

Of the 104 stories sourced from in-house staff, the *Daily Sun* had 39.42% followed by the *New Nigerian* with 26.92%. While *ThisDay* had 22.12%, *The Guardian* brought in 11.54%.

**Story volume by length**

The volume, in terms of length, accorded a story in a newspaper is seen as being directly proportional to the importance attached to such a story by the newspaper. This present work, therefore, measured story volume on political violence in terms of the length of the story. To do this successfully, a pre-determined categorization of stories was done. Stories were classified into three groups of short, medium and long stories. In spite of the number of standard tabloid columns occupied by any story, the length of such a story determined its classification. In this way, stories measuring 0 – 24cm were grouped as short stories while those between 25 and 50cm were categorized as medium and those from 51cm and above were classified as long stories. It is to be noted that editorials, columns/opinions, features, articles, letters to the editor, interviews and rejoinders were measured and converted to standard tabloid size and categorized accordingly.

**Table V: Percentage Distribution of political violence stories by length**

	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New Nigerian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total	%
0-24cm (Short)	66	33	80	43	222	68.73
25-50 cm (Medium )	23	14	19	10	66	20.43
51 cm & above (Long)	15	07	09	04	35	10.84
Total	104	54	108	57	323	100

Table V above shows that of 323 stories, more than two-thirds (68.73%) of the stories were short ones numbering 222. Medium length stories accounted for 20.43% with 66 stories while long stories were 35 (10.84%). Of the 222 short stories, the *New Nigerian* contributed 80 (36.04%) followed by the *Daily Sun* with 66 (29.73%). While *ThisDay* had 43 (19.37%), *The Guardian* had 33 (14.86%). Out of the 66 medium length stories, the *Daily Sun* had 34.85% with 23 stories while the *New Nigerian* contributed 19 (28.79%). With *TheGuardian* having 14 (21.21%), *ThisDay* had 10 (15.15%). With 35 stories in the long stories category, the *Daily Sun* contributed 15 (42.86%) while the *New Nigerian* had nine stories (25.71%). While *The Guardian* had seven (20.00%), *ThisDay* accounted for four (11.43%). Overall, the *New Nigerian* contributed 33.43% of the stories followed by the *Daily Sun* with 32.20%. While *ThisDay* contributed 17.65%, *The Guardian* was 16.72%. The *New Nigerian* alone, therefore, contributed about one-third of the stories content-analysed.

Since the media exist to inform, educate and entertain the masses, it was not surprising that the newspapers carried the same news stories of political violence in a particular part of the country with the same date line, as seen in the bombing of the PDP rally in Suleja, Niger State on March 3, 2011. However, the incongruence in figures given by the papers was another disturbing finding: *Daily Sun* (2011, March 4) had 'PDP Rally Bombed: 10 killed, 18 on Danger List', *New Nigerian* (2011, March 4) was 'PDP Rally: 6 Killed in Bomb Blast... 15 Injured in Suleja' and *ThisDay* (2011, March 4) was '10 Killed, 21 Injured as Bomb Rock PDP Rally'.

### **Conclusion**

From the results got, the researcher arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Though it might appear that prominence was given to stories on political violence, this was not so. Most of the news stories on political violence were buried on the inside pages of the newspapers studied.
2. Most of the newspaper content on political violence was presented using the traditional straight-news format as was the case in the reviewed literature in Nwosu (1996), Tobechukwu (2007) and Ciboh (2010).
3. Since the news stories were devoid of editorials, features, articles and other forms of opinionated write-ups on political violence, the newspapers failed to maximize the functions of these genres of reporting.
4. Nigerian newspapers depended more on their in-house staff, as sources for their stories on political violence, than other sources, like Nwosu (1996) also found in his study but unlike Ciboh (2010) who had government/official sources dominating.
5. Most of the stories were very short stories whereby one is tempted to say that the full story was not told, though a story was published. This agrees with Ciboh (2010) and Tobechukwu (2007).
6. On the whole, one could be right to draw the conclusion that the way Nigerian newspapers report issues of national importance has not changed or improved from the old style of straight news format utilization. If other genres of news reporting are deployed by Nigerian newspapers, there is the likelihood that the readers would be better informed and placed in an advantageous position to better appreciate the issues being reported.

### **Recommendations**

Nigerian journalists should wake up and write more on political violence. This can be through in-depth reports, interpreting, analysing, interpreting and explaining through the journalistic genres that allow for such like features, opinion columns and editorials.

Though the use of in-house staff as major sources of stories on political violence is a healthy development for the media industry, it is still not adequate. Having plurality of news sources for news stories on a topical issue like political violence undoubtedly would add to the credibility of the news organization.

There are print and electronic media in the country. A research can be conducted with the aim of comparing the coverage given to political violence by two or more of such media. For instance, there could be a comparative analysis between radio and television or a group of radio stations against another group of radio stations. It could be public versus private stations. Again there could still be a comparative analysis between newspapers and news magazines.

The present study did not delve into the causes of political violence in the country as well as the public's perception of coverage of political violence by Nigerian newspapers. This could be done to further understand the role being played by the Nigerian media in reporting topical issues in the country.

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