

When Bias Defeats our Sense of Neutrality: An Analysis of Nigerian Newspapers' Framing of Political Crises

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Abstract

Newspapers have among others, the particular responsibility to strengthen democracy, through political coverage and convergences. As such, this research paper looks at the concept of framing and the actual frames therein Nigeria's newspapers reports of the certain contemporary political crisis situations – Obasanjo's third term bid; Yar'Adua's illness and eventual absence in office, as well as Goodluck Jonathan's post election violence. The paper specifically finds out how some national dailies framed their reports on the political crises situations, determines the extent to which there are dissimilarities in the frames of the reports of the political crisis situations between the dailies, and, ascertains the extent to which there are dissimilarities in the frames of reports of the political crisis situations. The framing theory of the media provides the theoretical bases for this paper, while the content analysis research design via coding sheet was used towards content analysis of the political crisis situations purposively considered. This paper concludes that the newspapers' reports on the political crisis situations had more biased frames than neutral frames; extent of framing, and the unanimous nature therein, is significantly, a factor of the extent of controversy of the political crisis situation at hand; political crisis situations that are clearly against public interest are most likely to be framed unanimously by the press. This paper, therefore, recommends among others that conventional journalism practice in Nigeria, and perhaps elsewhere, should be encourage and practiced by those with the prerequisite training in media and mass communication towards understanding the appropriate application of media and communications' theoretical frameworks or perspectives, as well as models for the benefit of society.

Key words: *.Newspaper .Framing .Political Crisis .Content Analysis .Bias*

Introduction

In no area of human endeavour is media contribution needed like in politics. According to Morris (2000, p.1), there is a general believe that the news media like newspapers have the particular responsibility to strengthen democracy, through political coverage and convergences that should educate the public about major issues, inform citizens about the contenders for office, and mobilize people to turn out, or boycott. Such a situation implies that newspapers, like other media will engage in framing of issues and event towards providing background, depth, and meaning (James, 2012). Nevertheless, given that the newspapers, like several other media, operates under different ownership structures, management styles and models, one cannot help but wonder if the frames that will emerge in the coverage of event will be the same, even as the public interest is often expected to come first. This is because public interest is synonymous with universally accepted roles of the media –agenda setting, correlations, surveillance, gate-keeping- which all build into framing process and the eventual frames (McQuail, 2010).

Given the fact that Nigeria, like many countries of the world, according to Daramola (2013), has a partisan political history, there is the need to find out the framing roles of the media, particularly, newspapers. Giving the reputation of newspapers to provide background, investigative information, there exist very serious political crisis situations in Nigeria. This,

readily, provides the motivation to do such a study that would eventually serve as an example of how press performance may be a force for public interest and good or can be overwhelmed by the models guiding their very foundation and existence. Such a motivation and the fore stated background to the role of the press in society; the relationship of the press with the political class; and the inevitability of the involvement as well as the implications of the press in political conflicts therefore informs the very essence of this paper.

Statement of the Problem

Due to a seeming but already known fact of the power of the media, several studies have been done on politics and the role of the media. Some of such instances where the political crisis situations in Nigeria soon after return to democratic rule. But the question is whether the Nigerian media took a similar stand on the political crisis situations or not. This paper, therefore, looks at the concept of framing and the actual frame therein the Nigeria's newspapers reports of the Obasanjo's third term bid; Yar'Adua's illness and eventual absence in office, as well as Goodluck Jonathan's post election violence.

Research Questions

This study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How did the selected newspapers frame their reports in the political crisis situations?
2. To what extent are there dissimilarities in the frames of the reports of the political crisis situations between the selected newspapers?
3. To what extent are there dissimilarities in the frames of reports of the political crisis situations?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are tested:

Ho: There is no significant difference between positive frames and negative frames of the selected political crisis situations in Nigeria.

Ho: There are no significant differences in the framing of political crisis situations in Nigeria between the selected Nigerian newspapers.

Ho: The political crises situations in Nigeria are not significantly framed differently.

Conceptual Review

Crisis is precipitated by unresolved conflicts and conflicts are caused by unresolved issues. In other words, issues when not properly addressed, lead to conflicts and conflicts not properly managed, snowball into crisis (Abimbola, 2008a). Political crisis is a product of an unresolved political conflict. Abimbola (2008b) defines political conflict as an expressed struggle or differences between politicians, political parties and government. Thus, political crisis can be said to be related to political violence (Honderish, 1989), cited in (Alanamu, 2005). During crisis situations, the press is supposed to act as a catalyst for conflict resolution and peace building. This is what some scholars refer to as advocacy and peace journalism. No society is immune to crisis, Nigeria inclusive. Nigerian press has come of age in its struggle for good governance. Since its inception in 1859, it has stood its grounds in criticising government policies and educating the citizens on their rights. According to Odozi (2005), Nigerian press, having existed for a century before the emergence of the country as an independent nation, is therefore, a very credible witness and also a participant in the evolution of Nigeria as a nation.

Today, the Nigerian press ownership structure can be divided into two broad categories: those that are owned and run by individuals or groups other than government and those that are owned and run by the government. The first category can be sub - divided into private, nationalist and religious ownership structures. Irrespective of the ownership structure, there exist several models of press performance. McQuail (2010, p.184) presents four models in relation to normative media theory; a liberal-pluralist or market model, a social responsibility or public interest model, a professional model, and an alternative media model. Watson (2003, p.91), on the other hand, hinged the purpose and role of the media on what he calls models of media function. According to him, "...how the media are constituted- as primitive or public enterprises- governs how they perform and what principles inspire practice." He listed the

three broad models of media function as; propagandist, commercial laissez-faire and public service. For the purpose of this paper, Watson's models are considered, thus:

Propagandist model: classifies the purpose of the press as that of propaganda or mass manipulation (Duyile, 2007).

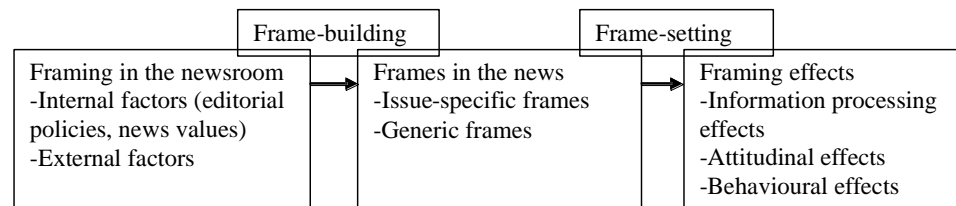
Commercial laissez-faire model: commercial laissez-faire model views media ownership and production as a financial enterprise with the sole aim of making profit (Watson 2003). This model is supported by McQuail's liberal-pluralist or market model of press theory which is based on the original free press (libertarian) theory. See (McQuail, 2010, p.184).

Public service model: The public service model centres essentially around concepts of responsibility, working according to codes of ethical and professional conduct, and in the public interest (Watson, 2003). This is similar to McQuail's social responsibility or public interest model (McQuail, 2005, p. 185).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is theoretically grounded on the framing theory. The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and can be constructed as having implication for multiple values or consideration. Framing, simply put, involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue (De Vreese, 2005). It is a process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or re-orient their thinking about an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007) and a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items or facts framing in the media involves selection, emphasis and exclusion (McQuail, 2010).

Figure 1: An integrated process model of framing



Source: De Vreese (2005).

Tankard (2001,p.101) suggests a list of eleven framing mechanisms or focal points. Framing theory is considered relevant to this study because it provides major yardsticks to measure press performance, especially towards understanding how the selected newspapers framed their reports of the crisis situations in terms of direction (frames) and balance (neutrality).

Methodology

The content analysis research design via coding sheet was used towards content analysis of the political crisis situations considered in this study. See Wimmer and Dominick (2000) and Borden and Abbott (2008, p. 238). The political crisis situations covered are: President Obasanjo's Third Term Agenda- November 1, 2005 to May 31, 2006; constitutional crisis over power vacuum created by President Yar'Adua's absence from office- November 23, 2009 to May 23, 2010; violent protests in the North, which followed INEC's declaration of President Goodluck Jonathan as winner of 2011 Presidential election -April 17, to May 30, 2011. The population for this study was made of editions of *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* between November 1, 2005 and May 30, 2011. The newspapers were randomly selected among 10 national dailies in Nigeria. The systematic sampling technique was employed to pick the sample of newspaper editions. Table 1 shows the sample size of the five newspapers during the periods of study.

Table 1: Breakdown of sample size of newspaper editions

S/N	Political Crises	Periods of Study	Total Editions	Sampling Interval	Sample Size
1.	President Obasanjo's Third Term Agenda	November 1, 2005 to May 31, 2006	212 x 5 (1,060)	5.0	42 x 5 (210)
2.	Power vacuum created by President Yar'Adua's absence from office	November 23, 2009 to May 23, 2010	182 x 5 (910)	5.0	36 x 5 (180)
3.	Violent protests in the North over the declaration of Goodluck Jonathan as the winner of 2011 Presidential Poll	April 17, to May 30, 2011	44 x 5 (220)	2.0	22 x 5 (110)
	TOTAL		447 x 5 (2,235)		100 x 5 (500)

Source: Content Analysis, 2013.

The units of analysis included news stories, feature articles, opinions, editorials comments, interviews, pictures, cartoons, letter/text messages to the editors as well as advertorials (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2005; Wimmer and Dominick, 2000). The frames of reports were the only category into which the units of analysis were classified. The result of correlation coefficient *r*, as calculated in the test of reliability and validity of the coders and the coding sheet was **0.6**. According to Biddix (2012) **0.6** is a high and appreciable correlation coefficient score.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Table 2: Direction of newspaper reports on Obasanjo's third term agenda

Slant	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	The Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Neutral	42	16	54	39	33	184	51.4
Positive	24	9	7	1	0	41	11.4
Negative	13	25	49	9	37	133	37.2
Total	79	50	110	49	70	358	100

Source: Content Analysis, 2013.

Table 2 shows that *The Sun* had 110 items -the highest number of items on President Obasanjo's third term agenda. This is followed by 79 items from the *Daily Trust* newspaper; 70 from *Tribune*; 50 items from *The Punch*, and 49 items from *The Guardian*. Furthermore, 184 (51.4%) items were neutral; 41 (11.4%) of the newspaper items were positive -favouring/supporting President Obasanjo's third term bid; while 133 (37.2%) were negative -against President Obasanjo's third term bid. Majority of the press items on the President Obasanjo's third term bid were biased in nature.

Table 3: Direction of newspaper reports on Yar'Adua's illness

Slant	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	The Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Neutral	26	20	16	10	27	99	23.6
Positive	77	10	30	3	10	130	31
Negative	35	20	33	55	48	191	45.4
Total	138	50	79	68	85	420	100

Source: Content Analysis, 2013

Table 3 show that out of 420 items, the *Daily Trust* accounted for the highest number of newspaper items on late President Yar' Adua's illness. In a descending order, the *Tribune* accounted for 85 items, *The Sun* had 79 items, *The Guardian* had 68, while *The Punch* had 50. On the whole, 23.6% of coded items on Yar'Adua's illness were neutral, 31% were positive, while 45.4% were negative. Majority of the press reports were against the then vacuum in Nigeria's presidency due to Yar'Adua's illness.

Table 4: Direction of newspaper reports on post-election protests

Slant	Daily Trust	Punch	Sun	The Guardian	Tribune	Frequency	(%)
Neutral	59	19	41	4	1	124	34.7
Positive	27	2	21	0	0	50	14
Negative	93	6	51	24	9	183	51.3
Total	179	27	113	28	10	357	100

Source: Content Analysis, 2013

Table 4 reveals that *Daily Trust* had 179 items -the highest number of items on the post-election protests. This is followed by 113 items from *The Sun* newspaper; 28 items from *The Guardian*; 27 from *The Punch*, while *Tribune* had just 10 items. Furthermore, Table 4.16 shows that 124 (34.7%) were neutral; 50 (14%) of the newspaper items were positive -favouring/supporting the protests; while 183 (51.3) were negative -against the post-election protests. Majority of the items on the post-election protests were against the protests.

Test of Hypotheses

Test of hypothesis one (Ho₁)

Ho₁: There is no significant difference between positive frames and negative frames of the selected political crisis situations in Nigeria.

Table 5: Step 1 of 3; Cumulative table showing only percentages of frames and neutrality

Newspaper	Political situation	Frames		Neutral	%
		Positive	Negative		
Daily Trust	OBJ Third Term Agenda	30.4	16.4	53.2	100
	Yar'Adua's illness	55.8	25.4	18.8	100
	Post-Election Protests	15.0	52.0	33.0	100
Punch	OBJ Third Term Agenda	18.0	50.0	32.0	100
	Yar'Adua's illness	20.0	40.0	40.0	100
	Post-Election Protests	7.4	45.1	70.4	100
Sun	OBJ Third Term Agenda	6.4	44.5	49.1	100
	Yar'Adua's illness	38.0	41.8	20.2	100
	Post-Election Protests	18.6	45.1	36.3	100
Guardian	OBJ Third Term Agenda	2.0	18.4	79.6	100
	Yar'Adua's illness	4.4	80.9	14.7	100
	Post-Election Protests	0	85.7	14.3	100
Tribune	OBJ Third Term Agenda	0	52.9	47.1	100
	Yar'Adua's illness	11.8	56.4	31.8	100
	Post-Election Protests	0	90.0	10.0	100

Source: Content Analysis, 2013.

Table 5 is cumulative and shows only the respective percentages of frames and neutrality, as determined from the respective frequencies. This is the step 2 of the 3 step process of the test of Hypothesis one (Ho₁). While the total for coded contents that are neutral are avoided, the total for each frame -positive and negative- of all the newspapers studied is obtained and divided by 3 -the total number of political crisis situations studied. The answer to the above stated process and calculation for the respective newspapers is therefore used as the variable towards the test of Hypothesis one (Ho₁).

Table 6: Step 2 of 3 -Frames of political crisis situations among selected Nigerian newspapers

	Positive frames	Negative frames	Total
Daily Trust	33.7	31.3	65.0
Punch	15.1	45.0	60.1
Sun	21.0	43.8	64.8
Guardian	2.1	61.7	63.8
Tribune	3.9	66.4	70.3
Total	75.8	248.2	324.0

Source: Content Analysis, 2013

Table 7: Step 3 of 3 –Test of Ho₁

Observed	Expected	(O - E)	(O - E) ²	(O - E) ² /E
33.7	20	13.7	187.69	9.3845
31.3	60	-28.7	823.69	13.72817
15.1	20	-4.9	24.01	1.2005
45.0	60	-15.0	225.0	3.75
21.0	20	1	1	0.05
43.8	60	-16.2	262.44	4.374
2.1	20	-17.9	320.41	16.0205
61.7	60	1.7	2.89	0.04817
3.9	20	-16.1	259.21	12.9605
66.4	60	6.4	40.96	0.6827

Source: Content Analysis, 2013.

Based on data in Table 7 above, Degree of Freedom = (c-1) (r-1) = (1) (4) = 4.
 $\chi^2 = 62.199 = P < 0.05 = \text{Sig. Difference}$. Ho₁ is therefore rejected.

Test of hypothesis two (Ho₂):

There is no significant difference in the framing of political crisis situations in Nigeria between the selected Nigerian newspapers.

Table 9: -Cumulative result of test of Hypothesis Two

Test series	Newspapers	Result	Interpretation
1	Daily Trust/Punch	8.98 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
2	The Punch/Sun	0.804 =P>0.05	No Significant Difference
3	Sun/The Guardian	18.49 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
4	The Guardian/Tribune	0.398 =P>0.05	No Significant Difference
5	Tribune/Daily Trust	36.075 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
6	Sun/Daily Trust	5.028 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
7	The Guardian/ \the Punch	12.3 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
8	Tribune/The Punch	9.976 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
9	Sun/Tribune	16.18 =P<0.05	Significant Difference
10	The Guardian/Daily Trust	37.82 =P<0.05	Significant Difference

Source: Content Analysis, 2013.

Table 9 is the cumulative result of test of Ho₂. The hypothesis is largely rejected. Variables used for the test are obtained from tables 5, 6 and 7.

Test of hypothesis three (Ho₃)

Ho₃: The political crises situations in Nigeria are not significantly framed differently.

Results obtained after the test showed that there is no significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the third term agenda and Yar'Adua's illness/absence in office - $X^2 = 1.7$, $P > 0.05$; there is no significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the third term agenda and post election violence - $X^2 = 3.2$, $P > 0.05$. However, there is significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the post election violence and Yar'Adua's illness/absence in office - $X^2 = 11.1$, $P < 0.05$. Therefore, Ho₃ is modestly rejected.

Conclusion

1. The newspapers reports on the political crisis situations had more biased frames than neutral frames. This means that the newspaper were generally more reactive to the political crisis than being neutral.
2. The level at which the press may frame any particular political crisis situation in a unanimous manner is largely a product of how controversial the political crisis situation is or not. This is because the study showed that the press could not largely frame (positive or negative) reactions the Obasanjo's third term agenda as compared to the other two political crisis situations. The Obasanjo's third term agenda can be considered largely as a constitution issue which would have pulled through had the constitutional review committee approved the third term bid, hence, the press appeared, - at least as shown by the study, to have been largely neutral in the issue and live it to those saddled with responsibility of constitutional adjustments.
3. The press can only react explicitly (framing positively or negatively) to issues that are obviously against public interest. This is because the study shows that in the case of the Yar'Adua's illness and eventual absence in office, as well as the post election political crisis situations, the press was largely unanimous in their frames. Both political crisis situations were largely framed negatively -showing press disapproval of the situations. Indeed, *The Guardian* and *Tribune* did not even have any positive (favourable) content on the post election violence.
4. The location of a newspaper's publishing house and the proximate location of the demographic and psychographic aspects of any political crisis situations are significance to the framing of newspapers' reports. This is assertion is due to the fact that *DailyTrust*, which is based in the northern part of Nigeria was the only national newspaper that largely framed the political crisis situation about the Late President Yar'Adua's illness and absence in office in a positive manner. Perhaps relevant to this assertion is the fact that Late President Yar'Adua was from Kastina state -northern Nigeria.
5. The press, irrespective of how unanimous they may be can hardly equally frame any political crisis situation. Also no two political crisis situation are exact the same in scope and perspective. Results obtained after the test show that there is no significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the third term agenda and Yar'Adua's illness/absence in office - $X^2 = 1.7$, $P > 0.05$; there is no significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the third term agenda and post election violence - $X^2 = 3.2$, $P > 0.05$. However, there is significant difference between the way Nigerian newspapers -all together- studied framed the post election violence and Yar'Adua's illness/absence in office - $X^2 = 11.1$, $P < 0.05$.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Conventional journalism practice in Nigeria, and perhaps elsewhere, should be encourage and practiced by those with the prerequisite training in media and mass communication towards understanding the appropriate application of media and communications' theoretical frameworks or perspectives, as well as models for the benefit of society. This may help more in the way and manner the press is expected to play its role in not just politics, but also in other sensitive endeavours of the Nigerian society, and beyond.

2. Political reporters and editors should be regularly re-oriented towards effective and efficient framing practices of the media. This is expected to be helpful in the sensitive role of the press towards the management of political crisis situations.
3. There needs to be a correlation studies into the locations of newspaper publishing bases and the manner in which such newspapers may report and frames sensitive issue like political crisis.
4. Professional bodies like the Nigeria Guide of Editors, Nigerian Press Council, as well as other relevant international government and non-governmental organisations and entities dealing with government and governance, politics, as well as political crisis resolutions and how the press can play any role thereof should be encouraged to adopt strategic approaches towards more press performances in society.

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