

Print Media Coverage of Supreme Court's Proceedings in the 2015 Governorship Election Petitions: A Content Analysis of Select Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study analysed the coverage of the Supreme Court Proceedings on 2015 governorship election petitions by Nigerian newspapers. Three objectives which are: to find out the prominence, the space allotted and the frequency of coverage. The period of the coverage was from September 2015 to August 2016. A content analysis research method was adopted in this study. The population was 732 issues drawn from all newspaper issues published daily by select newspapers with 20 percent sample at 146 issues. Drawing from the Gate-keeping theory and the work of two coders, a comprehensive analysis was carried out to identify 74 items in six content categories. Findings showed that the Supreme Court proceedings were not given much prominence, adequate space and high frequency. The conclusion is that the two select newspapers in their social responsibility roles, failed in terms of giving adequate space to the coverage of items, but essentially adhered to basic rules of reporting legal institutions and strengthening support of the Gate-keeping theory in media institutions by publishing what seems fit to publish. The study recommends that newspapers should give emphasize on the promotion of the judiciary by placing judiciary stories on the front pages and ensure coverage of Supreme Court proceedings on election petitions with adequate depth of analysis to aid in interpretation of issues on justice and democracy.

Keywords: Election, Petitions, Print media, Proceedings, Supreme Court,

Introduction

Between 1999 and 2015, Nigeria has had five general elections. In the 2015 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced the new technology of the Smart Card Reader machines and the electronic Permanent Voter Card, PVC, to improve electioneering. The elections took place from March 28, 2015 to April 11, 2015 for political parties to contest for the Presidential and National Assembly, the governorships, and the State House of Assembly seats. In the exercise of their constitutional rights, some losers in state and national elections challenged the results at the Tribunals, up to the Appeal courts while governorship candidates challenged theirs up at the Supreme Court.

In some petitions, the Supreme Court from the proceedings and in its judgments reversed or upheld the judgments of the lower courts. The Supreme Court judgments affected the elections of governors in Abia, Akwa Ibom, Benue, Delta, Ebonyi, Gombe, Imo, Lagos, Nasarawa, Ogun, Oyo, Rivers, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara States. These judgments generated mixed reactions among politicians, public analysts and across different strata of the society. As issues of public concern, the proceedings and judgments of the Supreme Court with diverse reactions of the public became the focus of the newspapers in the country. Some acknowledging the courage, some highlighting weaknesses, condemning, critiquing and some defending the Supreme Court on allegations of manipulated proceedings and judgments claimed to be influenced by corruption in the entire judiciary. Media coverage's have standard principles of editorial independence, accuracy, objectivity, non acceptance of rewards and gratifications, non plagiarism and others (O'Sullivan, 2011).

The introduction of electoral system in Nigeria has taken through events that span over centuries, likewise the linkage of the media on the progress of democracy in the country. The insistence for inclusion in governance and decision making by the Africans (Nigerians) was first made in 1881 during the agitation for the separation of Lagos from the Gold Coast Colony, using the National Congress of British West Africa in Accra. This set the process of Nigeria to become a country by the political enterprise of the British colonial authorities. The plan came to actuality by the fusion of the Northern and the Southern protectorates in 1914. There is no reservation about the significance of the amalgamation in Nigeria's record.

Among the paramount requests made and granted was a new Constitution which embodied in it:

- the principle of elections; a new legislative council of forty six (46) members; four of the unofficial members were to be elected by an adult male suffrage having a residential qualification of one year and a gross income of £100 per annum (Eko-Davies, 2011; Igini, 2015).

Ikelegbe(1995) quoted in Eric(2016) states, that “the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates marked a turning point in the evolution of the political entity, Nigeria” (p.2).

The most significant innovation to reduce mind sets of exclusion in governance was the introduction of the Elective Principles of the 1922 Hugh Clifford Constitution which authorized the formation of political parties, particularly the Nigerian National Democratic Party, (NNDP) as platform to participate in contesting elective positions (Aghalino, 2006).

These major steps brought the foundations of democracy through parliamentary election in 1919, 1954 and a general election in Nigeria in 1959 (Edigin, 2010). This was the situation until independence in 1960, when Nigeria started operating a cabinet system of government with three regions and later the presidential system of government from the Second Republic. Military incursion into governance from 1966 to 1979 suspended the country’s Constitution and all organs of democracy. Preparatory to a handover to a democratic elected administration in 1979 the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was constituted by the General Obasanjo-led military government. The electoral body organized the 1979 and 1983 general elections before another took over by the Buhari - led military administration. Then, came in 1987 – 1989, the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria, (NECON), headed by Professor Eme Awa, a political scientist from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). He only conducted the marred 1987 local government elections. However, due to the short stay of the commission, it is hard to give an objective appraisal of his stewardship. The National Electoral Commission (NEC), was established in 1989. It conducted the June 12, 1993 annulled election.

Attendant upon each of the elections are media reports of violence, irregularities, agitations, protests, complaints and petitions that often lead to election Tribunals, the Appeal Courts and the Supreme Court. Some observers have argued that even at the adjudication by the judiciary, comprising the Election Tribunals, the Appeal Courts and the Supreme Court, many decisions on elections conducted by INEC and the judgments by the judiciary are not usually convincing to petitioners.

The bottom line is that the alleged aspersions, negativities and accusations claimed to have been cast on the judiciary by the newspapers, against expectations of positive viewpoints are perhaps not without tendencies to build mixed impressions and generate misconceptions about the Supreme Court (Smith, 2017). In an environment with claims of tribal, regional, political, ethnic and profit-making bias of media proprietors and journalists above professionalism, it is either there was huge claims of aspersions in some newspapers than positive stance to misinform and destroy the integrity of the judiciary or vice versa.

Media coverage of election petitions and the judgments are mostly undetached from allegations of rigging, ballot snatching, ballot stuffing, bribery and corruption. Election rigging and related malpractices are not new in Nigerian politics. It has been

present in Nigeria before political independence. Starting from the 1959 elections to the elections after political independence in 1960, the level of election rigging has increased overtime. Edoh (2003) observes: “Even, under the supervisory eyes of the British, during the 1959 elections, incidents of violence, stuffing of ballot boxes as well as obstructions and intimidations of opponents were reported here and there” (p.70). It has been rightly observed that rigging is almost synonymous with Nigerian elections (Kurfi, 2005). The chronologies of electoral hoax in Nigeria have often been associated with political tension and indeed violence and crises, thus, undermining the basic conditions for the survival of democracy (Adekanye,1990; Awopeju,2011).

On the other side, many Nigerians viewed that the Supreme Court proceedings and judgment on election petitions hardly convey justice, against expectations that an independent judiciary to achieve justice is, a sine qua non for democracy.

According to Chapter 11, Section 22 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), “The press, radio, Television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives... and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”.

This cardinal responsibility of the media also involves beaming light on the activities of the courts and associated institutions classified as the judiciary arm of the government. The reporting of events in the courts forms an important task for the news media to fulfil the correlation functions.

Despite the importance of courthouse coverage, judges and lawyers and members of the public often complain that news organizations carry out duties about the courts with very diminutive understanding by the reporters on the complications of the justice system. Members of the public also complain about sensational reporting, misinformation about the courts and misinterpretation of the rules of the entire judiciary. While the media rely on national and international conventions of Freedom of Information dissemination, the judiciary sees the media as not vested with the integrity to question the transparency of its judgments. Election petitions are issues that the media will want to find out the level of integrity and probity of the judiciary. The national newspapers selected for this research are *Vanguard*, and *Daily Sun*.

Statement of the problem

It is general understanding that journalism practice carries with it great responsibilities in giving information about individuals and institutions. This is because journalism enhances the direction of information in the society. Individuals, organizations and the government depend on journalism practice to receive information. In trying to play the basic roles of delivering news to the public, journalist face myriad of problems ranging from ownership control, laws and regulations set up by proprietors. In this situation, journalists and the media institutions are faced with the dilemma of abiding by professional ethics to protect stability of the society. This responsibility stretches to cover the deliberations of judges even at the Supreme Courts in the

consideration of all cases as well as petitions challenging the results of elections in the country

Therefore, the statement of the problem of the study is to expose the different perspectives the media in Nigeria presented stories to either build or mar the platform of public debates and discussions on issues surrounding the Supreme Court proceedings and final verdict on 2015 governorship election petitions. The direction entails the analysing of the categories, the types of stories, the prominence, angle, depth and the frequency of stories published by select newspapers while taking into account media social responsibilities in a society alleged subsumed in political, tribal, ethnic interest and bias of journalists and media proprietors?

Objectives of the study

1. find out the prominence given to the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers;
2. find out the space given to the coverage on the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers;
3. find out the frequency of coverage on the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers.

Research questions of study

1. What is the prominence given to the coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?
2. What is the space given in the coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?
3. What is the frequency of coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?

Scope of the study

The scope of the study is September 2015 to August 2016, based on the fact that the Supreme Court started hearing petitions on 2015 general election on Governorship positions from Lagos State, in September, the beginning of the 2015 annual legal year, while August 2016 marked end of the legal year.

Literature Review

Newspapers, the Judiciary and Electoral Development: The Prominence of Coverage

Judging by the historical account of the development of the Nigerian Judiciary, it is safe to aver that the judiciary played no significant role in electoral processes during

and after colonial era. Two scholars, Obiyan and Amuwo (2013), state that the Nigerian judiciary did not emerge until 1963, and did not perform any significant role in the electoral process immediately after independence. They add that this was due to the diffusion of powers between the three arms of government under the parliamentary system. Although the 1963 Republican Constitution provided for separation of powers between the three organs of government, these provisions were grossly inadequate.

However, the beginning of the judiciary's intervention in the nation's electoral process became noticeable in the Second Republic, when the courts were called upon to hear and determine petitions that had arisen from the 1979 general elections. The court also became involved in electoral dispute resolution in the 1983 governorship election in the petition of Unongo v. Aku (1983) 2 S.C.N.L.R. 332. Nonetheless, it is hardly in dispute that the real test and, of course, the climax of the involvement of the judiciary in resolving electoral disputes was during the case of Awolowo v. Shagari (2005) 1 NEPAC 392.

Bawa(2014) posits that the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) was enacted to regulate the conduct of Federal, State and Area Council elections in Nigeria with provisions for registration of voters and the National Register of voters. Bawa stresses that the electoral process regulates activities of political parties, offences, sanctions and roles of the judiciary in the determination of disputes arising from the conduct of an election. By Section 137 of the Electoral Act, an election petition can only be presented by a candidate in the election or a political party which participated in the election on the grounds stated in Section 138 of the Act.

The judiciary, Nigerian election petitions and media space attention

The Supreme Court is the Apex Court in Nigeria. It is a key button in the dispensation of justice by the judiciary. In the explanations of Ayorinde and Bankong – Obi (2012) the Supreme Court is the last of the chains in the “Judicial” defined as the system of courts for justice in a country; the section of government charged with the administration of justice to protect the liberties of the people. The system of courts are under the control of legal professionals, also described as the judiciary.

Uwaifo (2005) adds that the role of the judiciary in any democracy is to interpret and apply the law based on the constitution. Ijure (2003) notes that “the judiciary is also responsible for providing impartial mediation of disputes and petitions between the state and individuals, between individuals, and between different levels of government within the state”(p.5).

Newspapers coverage of Courts of law: Issues of Coverage Frequency

In covering the courts, it is an important task for the news media for several reasons. First, the judiciary is one of the three branches of government. Therefore, coverage of the courts fulfils part of the surveillance function of the media. Second, there is a great deal of public interest in what the courts do, particularly in election cases.

According to Alexander (2010), the coverage of election petitions and judgments serve an invigorating purpose for the public in signifying that justice is served and frivolities of candidates and political parties are not permitted to penetrate governance. Alexander adds that the coverage of the courts can also expose unfairness in the judiciary system, either against petitioners or defendants. Media coverage of the courts also helps in preventing injustices by beaming a limelight on the actions of judges, lawyers and other participants in the judiciary system. Fargo(2011) argues that despite the importance of courthouse coverage, some judges and lawyers often complain that news organizations harbour journalists that do stories with little training about the complexities of the justice system. On the other side, members of the public complain about sensational, inaccurate and short of context reporting about the courts.

Ritchie and Ansell (2006) state that it is an age long view that in the dispensation of duties by the courts on election matters, justice must be done and must be seen to be done. 'Seen to be done' means, among other things, allowing the media to report on court proceedings, the trial and subsequent judgments. Interestingly, the media play foremost roles in the way information about the courts is disclosed to enhance the trust in the judiciary. Based on how court proceedings are reported by the press, it is clearly important that the channels of communication between the judiciary and the media be transparent.

Gana (2002) remarks that the lack of professionalism has bedeviled journalism practice in Nigeria and damaged personalities and institutions through defamation, allegations of corruption without evidence, publication of false stories , sensational headlines, as well as the invasion of privacy. Ibezimako (2006) observes that the fear of the media to twist views has caused some lawyers, litigants, petitioners, respondents and witnesses to rebuff serving as sources of news, giving analysis and commentaries on court activities, making it difficult for the voice of the judge and the positions of the courts on cases and petitions to reach the public.

McLaughlin (2004) notes that many judges simply choose to avoid talking to the press even with the knowledge that an open judiciary improves by allowing effective news coverage of its proceedings for the ultimate benefit of the public. This goes to say that the rule of flatly refusing to talk to the press by the courts has not been discarded by the present generation of judges.

What this simply means is that the desire of Nigerians to have information about the activities of the courts on matters of credible elections seems hampered. The different arms of government cannot successfully do their job by being detached from the media. The media have to be allowed at the centre of reporting matters surrounding the judgments of courts on election petitions. In playing its role of reporting, the petitioners and the respondents, the media have to keenly be involved in beaming the searchlight on statements of claims and defences of political parties, candidates, the electoral umpire, the proceedings, orders and verdicts. This would ensure that the petitions are handled according to the rules. In doing all these, Hocking (2009)

maintains that the media must maintain critical balance, impartiality, and non-partisanship in evaluating the electoral process while avoiding incendiary views and reports that may lead to flare of violence and loss of lives.

While the media and courts should not be adversaries, the different duties are also not expected to be done to the point of aiding and abetting any form of cloudiness in the delivery of justice to election petitioners and respondents. Ajibade (2001) assesses that the media gallantly performed roles from the stage of filling petitions, through arguments and counter arguments to appraise the course of justice. The feats of the media in reporting elections appears just as in the struggle for the attainment of independence, and the return to democratic rule in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping theory was propounded by Kurt Zadek Lewin in 1943, a social psychologist who used the term to describe individuals who control the gates or channels which information or news passes from the source to the final consumer. This explains that before readers or listeners get the consuming version of news, it has pass through stages of processing, where certain areas are either accepted, amended or rejected.

The point is simplified by Ekeanyanwu (2005) that no media house, no matter the size and level of operation can transmit all messages that get to it each day. There are personnel who decide which to transmit, which to modify, suspend or reject entirely. By opening and closing gates to news items, the media are engaged in shaping stories and causing the readers to accept the media version of happenings around their environment.

Method

The study is a content analysis which is the most appropriate method for studying processes or events occurring over a long period of time especially and suited when a research universe is in text form or documentary. The select newspapers are: *Vanguard and Daily Sun*. These newspapers have news of current events, informative articles, diverse features, editorials, and advertisements. They are usually printed on newsprint papers. These daily and general interest newspapers typically publish stories on local and national political events and personalities, crime, business, entertainment, society and sports. They are easily seen at newsstands across states of the country.

Universe of the study: Since the timeframe of the study is one year, each newspaper had 366 issues multiplied by two thus: $366 \times 2 = 732$ issues forming the universe of the study.

Sampling Procedure: Borg and Gall (1989) cited in Obasi (2013) notes that “the breaking down of the population in content analysis in percentages of: 1 - 1000 and above by 20 percent, 5000 by 10 percent, and 10,000 and above by 5 percent”(p.99). This means that

20 percent of the population of 732 is 146 sample size issues making 73 from each newspaper. The sampling interval, was calculated by dividing the population size by the sample size to arrive at 5 as the starting point. This means that from the 5th day of September 2015, with the application of a skip interval of 4 days, every 5th day of publication by the two newspapers was picked monthly from September 2015 to August 2016. The table below shows the constructed month based on skip interval of four days.

Table 1 Constructed Monthly Calendar

<i>Months</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>No of Days picked</i>	<i>No of issues per newspaper</i>	<i>No of issues by two newspapers</i>
<i>September</i>	5,10,15,20,25,30	6	2	12
<i>October</i>	5,10,15,20,25,30	6	2	12
<i>November</i>	4,9,14,19,24,29	6	2	12
<i>December</i>	4,9,14,19,24,29	6	2	12
<i>Jan. 2016</i>	3,8,13,18,23,28	6	2	12
<i>February</i>	2,7,12,17,22,27,	6	2	12
<i>March</i>	3,8,13,18,23, 28	6	2	12
<i>April</i>	2,7,12,17,22,27	6	2	12
<i>May</i>	2,7,12,17, 22,27	6	2	12
<i>June</i>	1,6,11,16,21,26	6	2	12
<i>July</i>	1,6,11,16,21,26,31	7	2	14
<i>August</i>	5,10,15,20, 25, 30	6	2	12
<i>Total</i>		73	2	146

A total of 73 days per newspaper multiplied by the two select newspapers achieved 146 copies sampled size of the 732 copies.

Validity of the Instrument: A pre-test of the instruments of the research was carried using constructed content coding sheets targeted on stories from the two select newspapers on the proceedings of the Supreme Court on the 2015 governorship elections within the time frame of the study.

Unit of Analysis: The units of analysis was straight news, features, editorial, letters to the editor, cartoons and photographs having references to the 2015 election petition at the Supreme Court by the two select newspapers.

Content Categories: notice/motions (the filing of petitions and the replies by respondents); hearing,(the beginning of presentations and arguments by parties in the petitions); submissions, (the positions of the Supreme court either accepting or rejecting evidences of the parties in the petition); verdicts, (the declaration of conclusions to uphold or turn the prayers of the parties and announcing the winning parties on the point of law by the Supreme court political party,(the contesting political organizations majorly the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP and the All Progressive Congress, APC in the cases of Akwa Ibom state and Lagos , Rivers states) candidates for elections (the

governorship candidates in the 2015 general elections standing as petitioners or respondents).

Coding Placement Process: The units of analysis was assigned coding placement parameters on a coding sheet constructed to determine:

- Frequency of stories, as in the number which a type of story appear,
- the prominence based on (Front page, Inside page, Center Page, Back Page) the page of newspapers;
- the depth of the coverage from the space either in (full page, ½, ¼, 1/3) allotted stories by the two selected newspapers.

Inter-Coding Reliability The test of coding reliability by using Holsti (1969, cited in Andrade 2013, Neuendorf, 2002) was applied.

Hoslti formula is: CR

$$\frac{2M}{N1+N2}$$

Where 2 represents the number of coders; M represents the number of agreements or decisions made on each content category by the coders; N1 stands for the number of items analyzed by the first coder, N2 stands for the number of items analyzed by the second coder.

It helped the coders to independently identify the specified characteristics of stories and record the contents of the select newspapers to meet the objectives of the study. It also help in the calculation of the inter rater reliability probability agreements by the two coders reliance on reexamined 69 items out of the initial 73 items. This means that $69 \times 2 = 138 \div 73 = 1.89$. That is to say that 138 ÷ by 146 provided 0.94.5 percent reliability position

Data Analysis

Data collected through units of analysis was analyzed using simple percentages from frequency tables presented to reflect variables of the research questions.

Table: 2: Prominence of coverage given by the select newspapers on election petitions

<u>Prominence</u>	<u>Daily Sun</u>	<u>Vanguard</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>%</u>
Front Page	2(1%)	7(3%)	9	12
Inside Page	32(15%)	25(12%)	57	77
Centre Page	0(0%)	6(3%)	6	8
Back Page	2(1%)	0(0%)	2	3
Total	36(17%)	38(18%)	74	100

In Table 2 front page coverage recorded 9 items or 12% items while the back pages had the least of 2 items or 3%. The Table also shows that *The Vanguard* had the highest

number of reports of 7 items or 3% on the front page and the *Daily Sun* with 2 items or (1%). It shows that inside page coverage were dominating at 57 items or 77% .

Table 3 Space allotted in the coverage by the four select newspapers

<u>Space</u>	<u>Vanguard</u>	<u>Daily Sun</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Full page</i>	14 (6%)	0(0%)	14	19
<i>3/4 Page</i>	6(3%)	0(0%)	6	8
<i>1/2 Page</i>	8(4%)	15(7%)	23	31
<u><i>1/4 Page</i></u>	<u>10(5%)</u>	<u>21(10%)</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>42</u>
<i>Total</i>	38(18%)	36(17%)	74	100

The Table 3 on the space given to the coverage shows that the newspapers dedicated 14 items or 19% of coverage on full page. The Vanguard published 14 items or 6% of their coverage on full page while the *Daily Sun* had none on a full page and $\frac{3}{4}$ quarter page. The two newspapers published 31 items or 42% of their coverage on 1/4 page

Table 4 Frequency of coverage given to the Supreme Court proceedings by the two select newspapers.

<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Average of Coverage per day</i>
<i>Vanguard</i>	38	51	0.11
<i>Daily Sun</i>	36	49	0.09
<i>Total</i>	74	100	0.20

In Table 4 *The Vanguard* recorded 37 items or 51%, as the highest, *Daily Sun* published 36 items or 49%, The sum of frequencies of coverage by *The Vanguard* from the South South section of Nigeria, at 51% or 0.11 as the highest frequency of coverage per day and that of the *Daily Sun* from the Eastern section with the least 36 or 0.09 daily coverage per day. This means that all the newspapers considered the coverage of the Supreme Court as not topical while dividing the total items of 74 items by 366 days duration of the study to arrive at 0.20% per daily coverage with differences less than 1% in the frequency.

Discussion of Findings

RQ 1: What is the prominence given to the coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?

This research question is answered using Table 2 about the prominence given in the coverage of Supreme Court proceedings by the four select newspapers. What comes out of this is that the newspapers put more of the items in the inside pages rather than on the front or back pages. This was interpreted as low prominence given to the coverage of the election petitions. This is a confirmation of the position of Brown (2015) that the press in Nigeria has not given adequate coverage to political issues and that this has affected the political process in several ways. Due to lack of sufficient coverage of political issues by the press, people are not stimulated to regard political participation as a matter of concern to the citizens. This, therefore, means that the political consciousness among the ordinary citizens is very low which ultimately translates into a weak democratic foundation in the country.

It is also a confirmation of observations by Okorie and Oyedepo (2011) that most of the news reported in newspapers are usually seen inside rather than the front or back pages. The items on the front pages and the inside pages were straight news sourced from the staff reporters, correspondents and news agencies. The items on center pages and back pages were more of opinions written by external contributors. The *Vanguard* usually dedicates its back pages to sports rather than politics or election petition items. This also accounted for the low number of items counted from the back pages of the newspapers.

The position on low prominence could have been an indication that the dailies did not want to overheat the polity by according prominence to election petition reports given the tense atmosphere in the country. The implication is that the reading public were withdrawn from being attracted to election petition coverage, hence a reduction in contributing to discussion on the issue.

The front and the back pages are with limited spaces with captivating events competing for the selection of the editor. In that situation, it is quite a relative number of issues that pass the test of coming on the front page of newspapers. Since the two newspapers depend on newsstand sales and advertisements, this could have been the reason the editors concentrated on exclusive items on the front and back pages to give readers the reasons to buy the copies. The front page sells the newspapers. It is hard news mostly on the front pages, especially where editors know the news can arrest readership attention. In spite of limited spaces the editors still accommodated few of the election petition items on the front and back pages. The outcome of this work on prominence of coverage is in line with arguments by Wolfe (2009) that issues of elections, war, and international diplomacy, are regularly featured on the front page, whereas overseas trade, human interest, arts and leisure, and everyday business news are considerably more profoundly covered in the inside pages.

RQ 2. What is the space given in the coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?

The space allotted to the coverage in the two newspapers under study was identified as full page, $\frac{3}{4}$ page, $\frac{1}{2}$ page, $\frac{1}{4}$ page. The categorizing of the coverage indicated that the *Daily Sun* did not publish any of the items on full page. The 14 items identified on full page came from vanguard only. Fawole and Olajide (2012) explain that the total amount of space allotted to an issue is one way of evaluating the depth editors grant an issue. That the select newspapers published only 19% of the items using the full pages, agrees with Batta and Mbang (2017) argument “if full page reports are fewer, newspapers have failed to give sufficient depth to issues in performing social responsibilities” (p.380). It is the space allotted to items published that determine the extent of analysis and interpretations.

In addition, findings showed that the none allocation of enough space for analysis of items on the Supreme Court proceedings by the select newspapers due to one reason or another can weaken the social responsibility of the press to give full detail of an event. This finding is in line with Uzuegbunam (2013) that non- adherence of press performances on the principles of social responsibility theory can result in low media performance to fit standards, public taste and restrictions to constitutional obligations of making information accessible while also hindering the media from acting the watchdog over the government.

RQ 3: What is the frequency of coverage of the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions by select Nigerian newspapers?

Data from the two newspapers showed that 74 items were identified in the 146 sampled issues of the newspapers within the 366 days. Findings showed that during the twelve months, there was inconsistency in the frequency of coverage by the two newspapers. The highest frequency of 38 items or 51% and 0.11 item per day coverage was in *The Vanguard* while the lowest of 36 items or 49% or 0.09 item per day was in the *Daily Sun*. In the overall, within the duration of one year, 74 items divided by the 366 days gives 0.20 items per day in the two select newspapers. The frequency of coverage shows the low newsworthiness of the Supreme Court proceedings to the select newspapers. In other words, the two newspapers could not jointly present an average of one item per day on the Supreme Court proceedings in the 2015 governorship election petitions.

Findings indicated that the role of the select newspapers was not without tendencies of weakening the shape of public views about the integrity of the Supreme Court in deciding the petitions in 2015 governorship elections. The low coverage given to the Supreme Court proceedings was contrary to Umechukwu’s (2001) assertions that the fundamental role of the mass media (newspapers) in a democracy is the formation and shaping of public opinion through agenda setting to sustain the society. Umechwukwu had stressed that the media have the duty to create participatory democracy by guiding

citizens to either accept or reject policies initiated by government institutions, making the mass media the fulcrum of all forms of democracy.

The short fall in the number of time reports were published about the Supreme Court in the select newspapers on 2015 governorship elections agree with Okpoko (2015) remarks that political enlightenment and awareness about the essence of democracy in political developments is deficient in Nigerian political psyche. The findings may also imply that Nigerian journalists are not adequately knowledgeable about principles of reporting the Courts or it may be that the newspaper gatekeepers had preempted the judgment of the Supreme Court on the petition, hence the reduction on the number of times that the gates were opened for the stories to gain space. It is an indication that the press is weak on judiciary surveillance function. This supports the position of Abdullahi (2012) that Nigerian newspapers hardly devote pages for the reporting of matters concerning the Courts. Rather than reporting the Supreme Court and bore readers with regimented reports, the newspaper prefer taking on viable economic sector reports affecting the public since the period was that which Nigerians were battling with the global recession due to fall in oil price.

The findings on the frequency of coverage is not a fair appraisal of the select newspapers as one would have expected the press to give comprehensive reports on the Supreme Court election petitions as often as the proceedings lasted and even on post reports of the court decisions.

Conclusion

From analysis and discussion of findings, the research has come with the conclusion that the Nigerian newspapers did not place prominence on the items as many of the items were placed in the inside pages of the newspapers. The position on low prominence could have been an indication that the dailies did not want to overheat the polity by according high prominence to election petition reports given the tense atmosphere in the country. The implication is that the reading public were withdrawn from being attracted to election petition coverage, hence a reduction in contributing to discussion on the issue.

The two select newspapers in their social responsibility roles, failed in terms of giving adequate space to the coverage of items. This means that the newspapers did not give wide investigations, analysis or interpretations. The newspapers did not provide the space for the taking up of news behind the news in the coverage of proceedings of the Supreme Court in the election petitions. The absence of adequate space for analysis of reports is inimical to investigative journalism.

The low frequency of reported items about the Supreme Court proceedings on the 2015 governorship election petitions negated newspapers' place as an open forum for organized groups to participate in public affairs through regular sensitization to awaken democratic consciousness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made :

Nigerian newspapers should strive at cultivating the characteristic of placing standard coverage items about Courts on the front pages or back pages to help in arousing the curiosity and the attention of readers.

Nigerian newspapers should develop the practice of giving sufficient pages to activities of the Supreme Court to help in offering full detail of an event with further investigation in media social responsibilities.

More-so, newspaper reporters must strive to providing the market place of ideas on specialized legal sectors by the frequent coverage of court proceedings, especially concerning election petitions.

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