

ANALYSIS OF THE NATION, DAILY SUN, THISDAY, AND DAILY TRUST NEWSPAPERS COVERAGE OF 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to determine the frequency and prominence of newspapers' coverage of 2023 presidential election; to ascertain whether such coverage was moderated by journalistic principles of fairness and balance using content analysis. Data were sourced from editorial contents of four Nigerian daily newspapers (The Nation, Daily Sun, ThisDay and Daily Trust) geographic location spanning Nigeria's North, West and East regions. The newspapers editions studied were published between August 2022 and September 2023. Data were analysed using mean and simple percentage, and the percentage determination of the respective groups were represented graphically while the statistical analysis were done using GraphPad Prism version 5.03 for windows; grouped bar chart to compare differences between selected newspapers on the same category of report. One-way ANOVA was used to test for variation in the newspapers' activities among selected groups with post hoc comparison of mean performed by Bonferroni's multiple comparison. Findings indicated a moderately high prominence with front, back and center pages attracting attention score of 426, despite a minimal 8.7% frequency. Furthermore, Daily Sun and The Nation newspapers allocation of 90 and 68 stories respectively to the issue while playing down on religion portends a remote ownership influence. The study therefore recommends that newspapers should devote more space, frequency and prominence to presidential election in subsequent elections and strive for professionalism.

Keywords: Coverage, Presidential Election, Frequency, Prominence, Newspaper

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers globally cover elections through a plethora of national, regional and international periscopes with the goal of providing audience members with relevant and holistic perspectives. For instance the United States presidential elections often attract intense global coverage from multiple newspapers across the globe such as *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *The Sun*, *Tribune*, among others. Such coverage usually analyse the impacts of incumbent administration's foreign policy on the global economy, international relations as

well as how the incoming administration will perform on vital areas including NATO relations, trade agreements as well as the Middle East crisis(Lawless, 2024).

Here in Africa, newspapers coverage of elections seems to be dictated by the Western dominance of technological advancement with a slight paradigm shift by the advent of the social media (Buschschlüter, 2022). Global outlets such as *New York Times*, *Aljazeera*, BBC Africa, among others often examine issues such as governance, democracy and economic stability. African media such as *Daily Nation* in Kenya, *The Mail* and *Guardian* in South Africa report on Local Elections with particular focus on corruption, economic development security and social issues. Such issues also characterised newspapers coverage of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.

Although there were more than eight parties and candidates who contested for the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, the major ones include Prince Malik, Ado-Ibrahim who represented the Young Progressive Party (YPP), Rabiw Kwankwaso who represented (NNPP), Omoyele Sowere who represented the African Action Congress (ACC). Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), Prince Adewole Adebayo of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Kola Abiola representing People Redemption Party (PRP), Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Nwaboli and Ajibulu, 2023).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Multiple issues characterised the build up to the 2023 polls which included Central Bank's Naira redesign and its attendant cashless policy, muslim/muslim ticket of the ruling All Progressive Congress, the major opposition Peoples Democratic Party's nomination of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar from the north as its standard bearer in contravention of the zoning principle - a decision that triggered the breakaway of Wike-led G5 governors and the emergence of Mr. Peter Obi of the Labour party who took over the social media space. Of course, the muslim/muslim ticket whipped up unprecedented religious and ethnic sentiments that threatened the unity of Nigeria.

It is not certain whether the journalistic values of truth, fairness, accuracy and balance guided the coverage of 2023 presidential election by *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers or whether they were moderated by ownership influence, party cleavages or ethnic sentiments. This study examines the extent to which the above mentioned factors manifest in the frequency, prominence and direction of news and reports of the newspapers studied. In other words, what is the nature of the coverage of 2023 presidential election by *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study set out with the following objectives:

1. To examine the coverage of 2023 presidential election by *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers.
2. To ascertain the frequency of news and editorial contents of 2023 presidential election by the studied newspapers.
3. To determine the prominence accorded stories on 2023 presidential election by the four newspapers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newspapers are corporate citizens and are not left out in social engineering and politicking. They function to inform, educate and entertain. "Often referred to as the fourth pillar of

democracy, newspapers are the mightiest of the mighty, acting as custodians of truth and human rights. They serve as the mouthpiece of the public and a crucial link between the people and government" ("The Role of Newspapers in Society ",2021, para.1).

However, Kumar (2014) opines that "they ought to be socially responsible and professional in the discharge of their of their functions "(p.36). But in practice, it is not possible to achieve one hundred percent objectivity, fairness and balance which are the hallmarks of professionalism in journalism. This, however, does not negate the perceived power and influence of the mass media on the behaviour and decisions of the mass audience. Behind this power are subtle, and sometimes obvious factors that characterize the operations of newspapers in Nigeria namely ownership influence, operational base, religion and political leanings, (Ashameri & Udoakah, 2021). Needless to emphasize that behind the profit making motive of the press is the unobtrusive motive of political control and it thus appears that those who seek political power are privy to the power of the mass media to sway and control public opinion on current and emerging issues. This clearly explains their obsession to control the media space.

It is also generally speculated that the press is powerful with a propensity towards tremendous influence on individuals, society and on institutions. This notion is deeply embedded in the consciousness of scholars and may have informed the cliché that "the pen is mightier than the sword"(@ axgilbert, 2025, May 8), an ancient aphorism which confirms the power of the press. This assertion is traced to the days of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte 1 who quoted to have said that three hostile newspapers are to be feared than a thousand bayonets (Waisbord, 2021).

Furthermore, McCombs (2004 ,p.4) encapsulates that "there is an inherent causal effect in agenda setting which reinforces the perceived power of the press; the increase the salience of a topic or issue by the mass media leads to the salience of that particular topic or issue among the public". So agenda setting is not restricted to the communication between the importance of a topic or issue for the media audiences but also incorporates the saliency of other related attributes of these topics, issues or persons. For instance, agenda setting on 2023 presidential election in Nigeria incorporates the saliency of the various presidential candidates, their political parties, manifestos and other related issues. Bassey *et al.* (2023) note that the "mass media are veritable tools of political communication used to promote participation of citizens in democratic governance through voters' education, discussion on the protection of human rights, promotion of tolerance among various socio-political groups and exposure of malfeasance,"(p.145).

Several factors mitigate the power of the press including; power of ownership and management, advertisers' might, freedom of access, judicial curtailment of journalists' right to disseminate information, legal and ethical restrictions, among others (Udejah,2004,pp.299-319). Salmon (2023) in "The Pitfalls surrounding press freedom in Nigerian politics" recounted an ugly development which can be seen as anathema to the freedom and power of the press in Nigeria. The incident involved the board of ThisDay newspaper and Arise television claiming they had received two different requests to fire two of their reporters, and the request was made by high ranking members of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC), which triggered debates on the neutrality and freedom of the press to conduct their legitimate functions. Hence, the findings of this study will lend more credence to 2023 presidential election.

NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE AND OBJECTIVITY

The primary focus of this study is coverage, a term which suggests the allocation of space and quality time to events, issues and people in the news. This implies the selective and deliberate attention of news merchants to certain events, people and issues in the news which is determined by the nature of journalism profession. For instance, Emeafor *et al.* (2017) discovered that the press coverage of environmental issues in Nigeria are grossly inadequate though positive, and this was confirmed by Painter and Ashe (2020) who posited that "newspapers devote inadequate time to stories..."(p.044005)

Writing about newspapers' coverage of the implementation of Buhari's treasury single account policy in Nigeria, Igboeli *et al.* (2015) gave to credence framing, reliance on straight news reports and the dominant theme of looting. A recurring outcome of the above coverage is the limited space and time devoted to events and issues, raising scholarly concern about objectivity. Thus, Ubah and Iwok (2021) in their study of ICT issues by local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State agreed with Akpan and Akpabio (2021) that coverage, as a process of giving account of news events through a medium to an audience should conform with a the requirements of responsible journalism.

But the question persists, is coverage only intended to bolster the credibility of the paper and its owner? According to Musa (2020), this question becomes expedient when the traditional roles of the press are considered, and it evokes a feeling of frustration at the rate of sycophancy in the Nigerian mass media that have become ready tools of manipulation by politicians. Thus, even the selection of editors and reporters is based on loyalty and ability to sing the praise of the proprietors these media or of the political parties which exercise control over the organ the media. "Partnership rather than objectivity now becomes the watchword among Nigerian journalists," (p.135).

The contention by those in power is that the media wields enormous influence capable of swaying public opinion and that if they are not brought into control, the opposition can capitalize on the lacuna and dislodge them from power. This shows that even the ones that give them favourable coverage are still under suspicion of not giving enough, and the media outside that control will not give sufficient coverage.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Ashameri, I. and Udoakah, N. (2021).A Study of Propaganda and Newspaper Ownership Influence on Political Advertising in Select Nigerian Newspapers. AKSU Journal of Communication Research, 8(1), 97-109.

The research was carried out to examine the influence of media ownership on publication of political advertising with propaganda elements using three Nigerian national dailies namely: *The Punch*, *The Nation* and *Nigerian Pilot*. The specific objectives of the study were to determine the frequency of the use of propaganda elements in political advertisements, types of propaganda elements commonly used in presidential campaigns and the relationship between ownership influence and propaganda elements as they relate to political parties. The discourse relied on the propaganda model while the research method is analytical approach otherwise referred to as content analysis. With a population of 453, the systemic sampling procedure was adopted in dividing the population by the sample size of 181.

The findings show that *The Punch* newspaper published 40(67.8%) advertisements containing propaganda elements in favour of PDP,19(32.2%) in favour of APC while *The Nation* newspaper published 39(92%) propaganda elements in favour of APC, a clear indication that ownership influence played a great deal in the imbalance. The findings

further revealed that 2015 presidential election witnessed a plethora of negative political advertisements directed mostly at perceived opposition candidates. This study is related to this work due to the similarity in research methodology.

Onyenekwe, O and Okpara, C. (2023).A Content Analysis on Discourses about Influence of Religion on 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,8(1),74-84.

The study was carried out to examine how religion influenced the discourse preceding 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The researchers adopted the content analysis method of investigation to analyze the contents of three prominent and widely read online edition of Nigerian newspapers including: *Punch* online, *ThisDay* online and *Guardian* online newspapers. Data was collected by using coding sheets to study the news headlines for a period of ten (10) months (January, 2021 to October, 2021) with content categories on news and features to determine if a headline features religious discourse or not.

Findings of the study revealed that out of the 120 editions of the first quarter in the study, story headlines with religious discourse featured once (0-88%) in *ThisDay* online newspaper but not in *Punch* or *Guardian* online newspapers. In the second quarter, out of 123 editions which were randomly selected, story headlines on religious discourse featured twice (1.63%) in *ThisDay* online edition and once in *Punch* online edition but none in *Guardian* online edition. This negligible coverage portends that the editors did not consider granting much attention to religious discourse due to their editorial policy.

Although the sampling procedure is at variance but the focus on 2023 presidential election and the adoption of content analysis which is also the method used for this work creates a relationship between the two studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two theories of social responsibility and framing. The social responsibility theory which is the lead theory for this study provides a useful tool to examine how the 2023 presidential election was covered by *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers.

The social responsibility theory was propounded by Robert Hutchin when a group of scholars came together under the Hutchin's Commission in 1947. In essence, the Committee was set up to consider the roles of the press in modern societies and thus the theory emerged as a challenge to the limitations of the libertarian theory which premised that both the truth and falsehood should view together in the open market of information and that mass wisdom will prevail in sifting the truth from falsehood. In other words, the libertarian theory was embedded with the propensity to mislead the media to harm public interest without oversight (Bates, 2020).

The social responsibility theory therefore posits that the media should serve the public good, balance freedom with responsibility, and provide accurate, fair and unbiased information. It emphasizes the media's role in promoting democratic principles, fostering public dialogue, and addressing societal needs (McQuail, 2010). Bassey (2016, p.222) asserts that "the social responsibility theory calls for responsible mediate that operate ethically with the focus on serving the people and providing information on issues at stake." Furthermore, as the theory underscores the media's role as a watchdog, educator and facilitator of public debate in democratic societies, analyzing the coverage of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election by *The Nation*, *Daily Trust*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Sun* through the lens of Social Responsibility theory involves examining how these papers fulfilled their

ethical obligations to inform and educate the people during the electoral process. Thus assessing these papers adherence to the theory here will involve analyzing whether they gave equitable attention to all regions, parties and candidates including smaller ones, immaterial of political, ethnic or ideological divide. When applied effectively, the social responsibility theory ensures that the electorate has access to trustworthy and comprehensive information, fostering a healthy democratic process.

Framing Theory

Erving Goffman is credited with popularizing the concept of framing theory in his 1974 book "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience." The framing theory suggests how information is presented, or framed, can significantly influence the way people perceive it. In other words, the way a message is structured and presented can shape an individual's understanding and interpretation of the information. This theory implies that media outlets and communicators have the power to influence public opinion by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others. This agenda-setting process is closely linked to the concept of framing, which refers to the media's ability to construct a field of meaning around the issues, events, and objects they cover. By framing these elements in particular ways, the media provides the public with interpretive schemas and cognitive shortcuts to understand and respond to them (Al-Battat, 2024). Bassey and Iwok (2019) explain that framing theory deals with media contents and effects, how media messages are presented (media frames) and influence of the presentation on the interpretation and perception by the audience (audience frames).

According to O'Malley *et al.* (2012) the proportion of space, ratio of soft and hard news and frequency determine the nature of framing. The Framing Theory suggests that the way newspapers choose to present and contextualize the 2023 Nigerian presidential election can significantly influence how the public perceives and understands the political process. This is relevant in examining how different newspapers frame the key issues (such as religion, zoning principle, competence, among others), candidates, and events surrounding the election, such as the emphasis placed on certain topics, the language used, and the narratives constructed. In other words, this theory is relevant to this study as it will help to explain how *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers through their news stories, features, editorials, advertisement and other editorial contents selected and emphasized attributes related to the broad issues of 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. It is noteworthy to observe that certain specific issues were emphasized and framed by the media in relation to the last presidential election and such issues include, the Muslim/Muslim ticket of APC, zoning principle, party affiliations, economic policies and the general manifestoes of the various political parties, insecurity, among others.

METHODOLOGY

The research technique used for this study is content analysis. According to Luo (2023) content analysis is a research method used to identify patterns in recorded information. To conduct content analysis, the researcher systematically collects data from a set of texts which can be written, oral or visual. Thus, four newspapers including *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* were selected for the study. Although the major focus of the research is 2023 presidential election, sports, the economy, national interest, education, health were initially examined to determine the proportion of 2023 presidential election compared to the overall coverage by the selected newspapers from September 2022 to

August 2023. The 2023 presidential election contents were further analyzed to determine their frequency and prominence.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The population of the study covered all the editions of the studied newspapers published from September 2022 to August 2023, i.e. 12 calendar months including weekend editions. In other words, a total of $365 \times 4 = 1,460$ editions of the studied newspapers made up the population of the study. The newspapers studied were: *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust*. The newspapers also have their online editions and thus a wide circulation, in addition to ownership mix which spans Nigeria's north, west and east regions, balancing political affiliations (APC, centrist and populist tendencies). *The Nation* is dominant in the southwest, *Daily Sun* in the southeast, *ThisDay* has a national and diaspora appeal while *Daily Trust* dominates the north.

THE SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The sample size for this study was determined at 25% of the total editions of the four newspapers under study, considering that analyzing the entire population would not have only been cumbersome but also unnecessary. Each newspaper contributed 91.5 editions of the total size amounting to 365 (91.5×4). According to Central Limit Theorem, when the sample size increases, the sampling distribution of the sample mean will approach a normal distribution, regardless of the distribution of the population. This allows researchers to use standard normal distribution tables to calculate the appropriate sample size needed to achieve a desired margin of error and confidence level (Lee & Kim, 2020).

In the area of sampling technique, the researcher adopted the systematic sampling procedure using the defined skip interval which involves dividing the population by the sample size thus:

Period of analysis: September 2022 to August 2023 (365 days)

Sampling size estimated at 25% of the population gives: $\frac{25}{100} \times \frac{1460}{1} = 365$

$$\text{Sample skip} = \frac{\text{Population}}{\text{Sample size}} = \frac{1460}{365} = 4$$

Thus, the editions of the newspapers were selected at an interval of 4.

UNITS OF ANALYSIS

The units of analysis refer to the portion of the content that will be the basis for decisions made during the development of codes. It could be a word or symbol, a theme (a single assertion about one subject) a headline or an entire story, (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Wimmer & Dominick, 2020). The units of analysis in this study included editorial items such as news stories, editorials, features, photographs and, cartoons contained in all the newspapers studied.

CODING PARAMETERS

The researcher created several parameters to analyze the data from the four newspapers studied. These include the use and determination of: frequency and prominence.

Content categories

The researcher created the following content categories for the study as they related to the coverage of 2023 presidential election in Nigeria: ethnic prejudice, zoning, religion and competence. Berelson, as documented by Wimmer and Dominick (2020) pointed out that particular studies have been productive to the extent that the categories were clearly formulated and well adapted to the problem and the contents.

DATA AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data were reported as mean and simple percentage of the group total and the percentage determination of the respective groups were represented graphically. Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism version 5.03 for windows. Grouped bar chart was used to compare differences between selected newspapers on the same category of report. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for variation in newspaper activity among the selected groups while post hoc comparison of means was performed by Bonferroni's multiple comparison.

DATA PRESENTATION

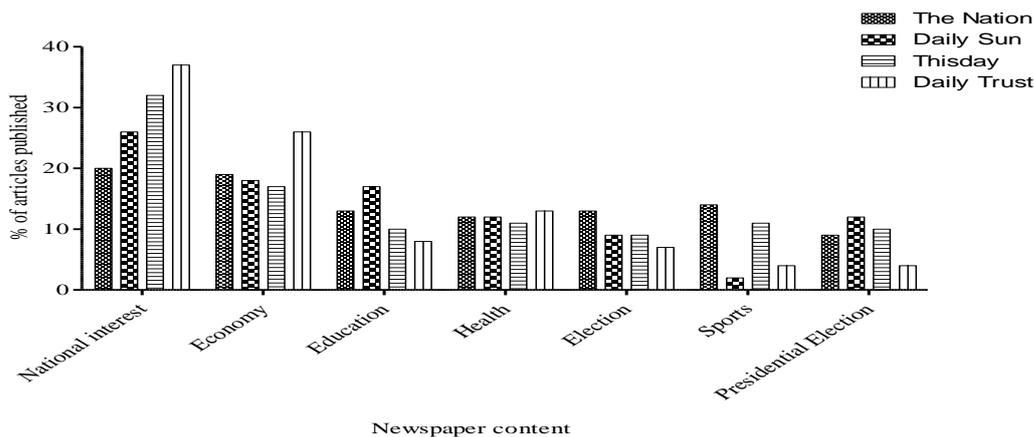


Figure 1: Presidential Election as a Fraction of Newspaper Contents

Figure 1 presents graph showing distribution of stories/editorial matter of the sampled editions of the four newspapers studied. The main intention was to show the number and percentage of the articles on 2023 presidential election published against other items. Findings show that *The Nation* allotted 9% of its editorial contents to the 2023 presidential election during the period studied. *Daily Sun* devoted 12% to 2023 presidential election. *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers devoted 10% and 4% respectively to the same issue. Altogether, 2023 presidential election attracted the least mean percent of 8.7 for all the papers studied.

Based on the analysis, it can be inferred that the four newspapers considered 2023 presidential election significant but not above other national issues. Despite the limited coverage of 2023 presidential election, it may have sparked off interest among readers locally and nationally. In other words, the coverage of 2023 presidential election in the four newspapers studied may have set agenda for topical discussion which is one of the functions of the media which in turn may have influenced voting decision as well as the perception of the public about the key actors in 2023 presidential election.

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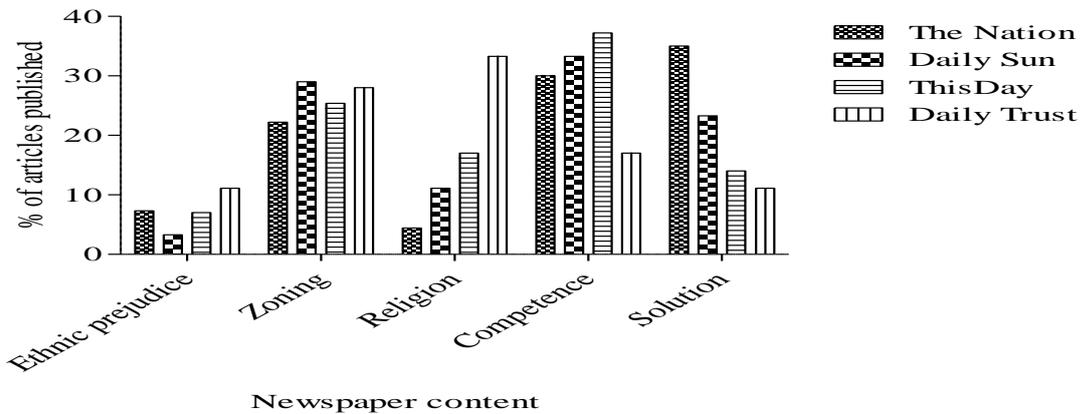


Figure 2: Distribution of 2023 presidential election stories According to Content Categories

Figure 2 displays the frequency of 2023 presidential election under the content categories of the newspapers analyzed. Of all the 2023 presidential stories published, 8% were ethnic prejudice, competence took the lion share of 29.3% followed by zoning with 26.1% while solution and religion accounted for 20.8% and 17% respectively. In fact a total of 235 stories were recorded in relation to 2023 presidential election.

The analysis further shows that *Daily Sun* published more stories on 2023 presidential election (90) followed by *The Nation* newspaper (68), *ThisDay* (59) and *Daily Trust* newspaper (18). All the newspapers devoted more space to stories with Theme of competence and also considered ethnic prejudice worthy of editorial comment. *ThisDay* newspaper in particular came tops with 37.2 (22) although *Daily Sun* publish 30 stories (33.3%) on competence.

The graph in Figure 2 also shows that the solution theme was predominantly used by *The Nation* newspaper (35%) and *Daily Sun* newspaper (23.3%) both of them with a strong support for All Progressive Congress (APC) and Ahmed Bola Tinubu. *ThisDay* newspaper allocated 14% to the same solution theme while the *Daily Trust* newspaper devoted 2 stories (11%) which suggests a moderate level of objectivity by *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers in respect to the coverage of 2023 presidential election.

Findings from Figure 2 further revealed that *Daily Trust* newspaper devoted 33.3% (6 stories) to religious themes against 10 stories each by *ThisDay* and *Daily Sun* newspapers with *The Nation* newspaper coming last with an insignificant 3 stories on the same theme.

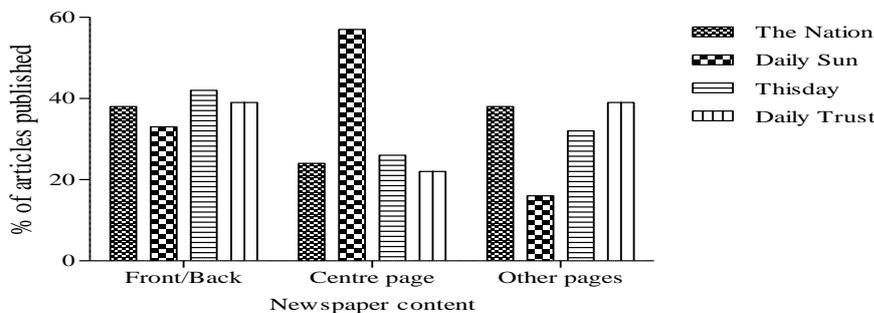


Figure 3: Prominence Accorded 2023 Presidential Election stories in the newspapers studied

Figure 3 shows prominence accorded 2023 presidential election by the four newspapers selected for the study. Available data indicates that the front/back pages carried 37% of the stories on 2023 presidential election. The centre spread followed 32% while other pages accounted for 31% of the stories on 2023 presidential election. In terms of attention score, front/back pages attracted 264 out of which *The Nation* newspaper contributed 78, *Daily Sun* newspaper 90, *ThisDay* newspaper 75 and *Daily Trust* newspaper 21.

A further breakdown of the data displayed in Figure 3 reveals that *The Nation* newspaper accorded the centre page attention score of 32, *Daily Sun* newspaper 92, *ThisDay* newspaper 30 and *Daily Trust* newspaper 8. In respect to other pages, *The Nation* newspaper recorded attention score of 26, *Daily Sun* newspaper 14, *ThisDay* newspaper 19 and *Daily Trust* newspaper 7. According to available data, both front/back and centre page which are considered as pages of prominence contributed 69% which implies that the four studied newspapers' editorial policies placed a high premium on 2023 presidential election thereby allocating the scholarly accepted pages of prominence for the majority of the stories on 2023 presidential election.

It follows logically that such prominence may have sparked of interest among readers and consequently set agenda for public discussion in addition to shaping voters' perspectives about choices of presidential candidates and parties and, this is one of the cardinal functions of the media.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study on coverage of 2023 presidential election by *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers was to examine whether journalistic principles of truth, accuracy, fairness and balance moderated the coverage or not. The first objective of this study examined the coverage of 2023 presidential election. In figure 1, the main intention was to show the number and percentage of articles published on 2023 presidential election in order to comparatively examine how the four studied newspapers reported the issue. The frequency of reports on 2023 presidential election was 8.7%, national interest 30%, the economy 20%, education 12%, health 12%, general election and sports 9.5% and 8% respectively. It is worthy to mention that despite the low frequency of stories on 2023 presidential election, they provided the necessary information which gave the basis for interpretation and analysis.

A further breakdown of the analysis in Figure 1 reveals *The Nation* newspaper published 68 stories, i.e. (9%) of its total editorial contents, *Daily Sun* 90 stories (12%), *ThisDay* 59 stories (10%) and *Daily Trust* 18 stories (4%). The high volume of stories on 2023 presidential election by *The Nation* and *Daily Sun* newspapers makes it glaring that the papers were fulfilling their social responsibility (McQuail, 2010) but also suggests a remote ownership influence and party affiliation given their ownership by Bola Tinubu and Orji Kalu, members of ruling APC. Conversely, the low coverage of 2023 presidential election by *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* newspapers agrees with earlier findings by Emeafor *et.al.* (2017) that the Nigerian press is characterised by limited coverage of issues, and also Onyenekwe and Okpara (2023) that low coverage portends a negative influence on editorial policy.

The second research objective examined the frequency and editorial contents of the studied newspapers. Data evidence in Figures 2 reveals a total of 253 stories published by the four studied newspapers on 2023 presidential election. Interestingly, *The Nation* and *Daily Sun* newspapers played down religion (4.4% and 11.1%) and ethnic prejudice (7.3

and 3.3%) while publishing more stories on zoning (22.2% and 29%), competence (30% and 33.3%) and solution (35% and 23.3%).

This editorial decision suggests an external influence to justify the muslim/muslim ticket while framing other themes to reinforce stereotypes, and this submission is supported by O'Malley *et al.* (2012) that the proportion of space, ratio of soft and hard news and frequency determine the nature of framing.

Lastly, the third objective determined the prominence accorded stories on 2023 presidential election. Data evidence in figure 3 reveal front/ back pages 37%, center spread 32% and other pages 31% while a total attention score of 426 was recorded, indicating a moderately high prominence and strategic framing (Arowolo, 2017). The high visibility of the contents relates to the agenda setting hypothesis which has its root in the power of the press to confer status on issues deemed to be of societal and national significance, and also assumes that a direct, positive relationship exists between the media coverage and the salience of the topic in the public mind (Folarin, 1998; Akakwandu, 2020). This is not far-fetched since the 2023 presidential election was the determining factor of the direction of political, economic and resource allocation and control in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

From the study, it is evident that the coverage of 2023 presidential election during the period of the study was significant due to the prominence attached to the issue. It was capable to set agenda for public discussion and eventually shape perspectives despite the minimal 8.7% frequency which it attracted. *Daily Sun* and *The Nation* newspapers' allocation of 90 and 68 stories respectively to the issue, while playing down on religion portends a remote ownership influence on editorial policy. Comparatively, *ThisDay* (59 stories) and *Daily Trust* (18 stories) newspapers coverage of 2023 presidential election evenly spread their narratives suggesting a moderate fairness and balance.

The study therefore recommends that newspapers should devote more space, frequency and editorial contents to presidential election in subsequent elections, strive for editorial independence and professionalism, while shifting focus from ethnic prejudice and religion to competence, capacity and solution to Nigeria's economic and security challenges.

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