

Press Coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal: A Content Analysis of Three Selected Newspapers (The Punch, Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers)

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Abstract

The conduct of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria has no doubt generated furor through issues that characterized the poll as captured by the media, forming the basis of a perception of many observers at home and abroad. After the poll, the wave of media frenzy that trailed the conduct of the general election shifted to the electoral tribunal. To identify how the media fared in the post-election period, particularly when attention shifted to the election tribunal, requires empirical interrogation, forming the thrust of this study. Situated within the assumptions of framing theory, the study adopted content analysis as a method; it sampled 279 copies of the three selected newspapers (The Punch, Daily Trust, and Vanguard) between August 6 and November 6, 2023. Findings showed that the Punch newspaper gave the election petition tribunal the highest prominence, with 33 stories appearing on its front page. News was the highest editorial material deployed for the coverage of the tribunal by all the selected newspapers. Three major dominant themes in the coverage were legal argument, alleged certificate forgery, and alleged attempt to compromise the justices of the tribunal. The study recommended, among others, that newspapers should continue to maintain political neutrality in Nigeria for better credibility and improved social justice.

Keywords: newspaper, coverage, presidential, election petition tribunal

Introduction

Newspaper is the most active and effective of all the media of mass communication; members of the public can get their basic news from radio, television, and social media, but not in the verified, substantive, and interpretative way that good newspaper writers can present it (Rabiu, 2023). Newspapers have consistently remained useful resources in the society since their emergence in the 17th century. As the medium

of mass communication, this important institution has functioned as a tool for shaping thoughts and means of controlling economic and political power. Newspapers have equally provided discussion and debate forums, thereby providing guidance for society (Copeland, 2003, cited in Bello, 2014).

Traditionally, the press has certain cardinal functions of informing, educating, entertaining, and mobilizing, but Bello (2014) averred that in fulfilling these essential functions in society, newspapers, like other channels of mass communication, have always devoted attention to the coverage of various aspects of human endeavors. These include, but are not limited to, politics, education, sports, business and economy, religion, arts and culture, entertainment, and health. Indeed, newspapers are veritable channels of authentic and reliable information.

Mažylė (2023) affirmed that elections represent a major step in the life in democratic countries, being a mechanism that implements the citizens' right to participate in the state governance and to elect their representatives that adopt vital decisions, media, therefore, is an intermediary between the citizens and political elite. At the dawn of democracy in Nigeria in the 1999, Adedayo (2023) said the Nigerian press was at the vanguard of the fight against any form of abuse, it monitored the various arms of government, and it did not call the emerging rotten fruit of banana/plantain a ripening beauty. The press called it by its real name.

Media coverage of elections has been a topic of extensive research globally. Scholars have explored how media can either facilitate or hinder the democratic process. Within the Nigerian context, previous studies have investigated the media's role in covering elections, emphasizing the importance of fair, balanced, and informative reporting. The role of press in shaping opinions and thoughts during and after election is not in doubt, this is evident in the key role played during the general elections across the 36 states in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 respectively. Its role in setting the agenda on political, social and economic fronts stimulate discourse which significantly influence the people to learn more about the political process and the society (Ugo et al., 2023).

As members of the fourth estate of the realm, newspapers often regarded as press, have the constitutional mandate of holding government and its institutions accountable to the members of the public as enshrined in Chapter 2, under the Fundamental Objective and Directive Principles of State Policy of Nigerian

Constitution, section 22 of the 1999 Constitution as amended (Okoye, 2007). However, Oboh (2021) warned the present-day press in Nigeria to eschew political partisanship in order not to suffer the same misfortune as the early press in the country. This is about how the early newspaper proprietors and political leaders, including Chief Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, were divided along ethno-political lines after the nation's independence on October 1, 1960, thus leading to the collapse of the First Republic six years later.

Nevertheless, the press plays a pivotal role in gathering and shaping public opinion and influencing the democratic process by providing information and perspectives on significant political events; this may come during or after the election (Ugo et al., 2023). Santas and Ogoshi (2017) hold that given the fact that the election period is characterized by intense political communication via the mass media. The mass media must report thoroughly and accurately what the contestants stand for. Therefore, the media is like a mirror which shows us the bare truth and harsh realities of life (Sood, 2020).

In the context of the 2023 Presidential Election Petitions Tribunal in Nigeria, which commenced from the Federal Court of Appeal and ended at the Supreme Court as enshrined in section 130 subsection 2(a) of the 2022 Electoral Act, the role of the press in disseminating information, framing issues, and contributing to public understanding of the tribunal's proceedings is of paramount importance. This is so because strict professional etiquette/standards are expected of such highly sensitive political events as espoused by social responsibility media theory (Anaeto et al., 2008). However, the problem lies in the potential for biases, framing effects, and disparities in the quality and quantity of coverage across different newspapers, which most often than not, resort to media trial and infringement on the right of court otherwise known as prejudicial, given the fact that every medium promotes different philosophy, which may impact the electorate's perception of the tribunal and, consequently, the overall credibility of the electoral process. This study, therefore, addressed these concerns through content analysis of the press coverage given by three prominent Nigerian newspapers—The Punch, Daily Trust, and Vanguard newspapers.

The specific objectives of this study are to: find out the prominence given to coverage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal. To investigate the tone and framing techniques used by the newspapers in their coverage of the tribunal. To identify

and analyze the key themes and issues that emerge in the press coverage of the Presidential Election Petitions Tribunal and to compare the extent of coverage and space each of the Punch, Daily Trust, and Vanguard newspapers devoted to the coverage of the tribunal.

The study is hinged on framing theory. Framing focuses on how media draws the public's eye to specific topics – setting an agenda. Then it takes a step further to create a frame through which the audience will comprehend such information (Arowolo, 2017). Arowolo said framing describes thinking about news items and story content within a familiar context. McQuail, (2005), cited in Asemah et al. (2017), contended that the theory is a philosophical postulation that sheds light on how media men shape news content.

According to Mass Communication Theory (n.d), framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition. However, it expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses on certain events and places them within a field of meaning. Mass Communication Theory (n.d), also added that framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information.

Asemah et al. (2017) further held that the basis of the theory suggests that media focus attention on certain events and the place or situate them within a field of meaning. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure meaning in a message. The most common use of frames is in terms of the frame the news or media places on the information they convey. They are thoughts to influence the perception of the news by the audience; in this way it could be construed as a form of second-level agenda-setting – journalists in this regard will not only tell the audience what to think about (agenda-setting theory) but also how to think about that issue (second level agenda setting, framing theory) (Mass Communication Theory, n.d). The nexus between this theory and the press coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal lies in how newspaper organisations frame their various reportage of the tribunal proceeding and even the various pronouncements and verdicts coming out of the tribunal. To that extent, coloration given to such an important electoral process ultimately shaped the opinion and perception of Nigerians.

Method

The study was quantitatively designed, with content analysis adopted as a method, using the University of Abuja Library as the secondary data source from the three selected newspapers. Each of the papers was selected to represent three zones of Nigeria. The Punch Newspaper was chosen to represent Western Nigeria, Vanguard was selected to represent Eastern Nigeria, and Daily Trust was selected to represent the North. A key consideration behind this decision lies in the fact that each of the leading three candidates who were parties in the election and the tribunal came from each of these three regions. President Bola Tinubu of APC is from the west, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP is from the North, while Peter Obi of the LP is from the East. The population for the study covers all editions for three months, from 6th August to 6th November, 2023.

The rationale behind this decision was that 6th of August, 2023 was a month before the date when the first judgment of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PEPT) came, and huge media attention was devoted to the tribunal by the Nigerian media from this particular period. The final judgment on the Presidential tribunal came up on October, 26th, from the Supreme Court of Nigeria, the researchers decided to extend the period of coverage till 6th November, 2023 to meet up three months target, the time lag between October 26th and November 6th, served as period of postmortem of the press coverage that followed the supreme court decision. All editions of the three selected newspapers in the period under review totaling 279 copies, 93 per each were sampled.

The analysis unit comprised all news content and advertorial related to the tribunal and its activities covered by the selected newspapers within the period under review. Eight (8) coding categories were designed in the coding guide, which strictly references the research objectives and issues that came out of the tribunal, which form the basis of what the parties argued before the court. The researchers previewed the content of the selected newspapers so that all issues or themes generated are covered. This was followed by coding of these content into coding sheets. To achieve coding reliability, the two researchers ensured inter-coder reliability, which determined the degree of agreement between the first researcher and his co-researcher in the coding process. The data collected were analyzed after that.

Findings

Table 1. Story Source

Newspaper	Stories
The Punch	74 (32%)
Daily Trust	68 (29%)
Vanguard	91 (39%)
Total	233 (N=100%)

Source- Authors fieldwork

The table above shows the number of stories written on the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal within the three months selected by each of the newspapers. Vanguard has the highest number of stories, 91, which is 39% of the total number of stories. This was followed by The Punch newspaper, with 32%, and Daily Trust, with 29%.

Table 2. Story Placement

Variables	The Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
FP	33 (45%)	19 (28%)	36 (40%)
IFP	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
BP	8 (11%)	6 (9%)	1 (1%)
BIP	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
IP	30 (40%)	43 (63%)	49 (54%)
CS	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (4%)
Total	74 (n=100%)	68(n=100%)	91 (n=100%)

Source- Authors fieldwork

The table above reveals that the Punch newspaper gave the coverage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PETP) the highest prominence among the selected newspapers, with 33 stories representing 45% of the total stories the paper published on the tribunal appearing on its front page. The Vanguard newspaper, however, came second with 36 stories representing 40% percent of the total stories published on the PEPT, followed by Daily Trust with 19 stories representing 28%. Invariably, the value of stories appearing on the front pages was factored alongside the total number of stories published by each newspaper to arrive at the prominence of the front page. This addresses the first objective of the study.

Table 3: Editorial Genre/Type

Variables	The Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
News	39(53%)	36(53%)	49(54%)
Opinion	11(15%)	12(18%)	27(30%)
Editorial	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)

Feature	8(11%)	3(4%)	7(8%)
Cartoon	2(3%)	5(7%)	4(4%)
Letters to the Editor	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(1%)
Interview	9(12%)	1(1.5%)	1(1%)
Advertorial	4(5%)	10(15%)	2(2%)
Pictures	1(1%)	1(1.5%)	0(0%)
Total	74(n=100%)	68(n=100%)	91(n=100%)

Source- Authors fieldwork

Table 3 above presents the outlook of various editorial genres the selected newspapers used in covering the PEPT to the readers, with news taking the lead across the three newspapers. Vanguard newspaper has 49 news stories, representing 54% of all the editorial materials used; the duo of The Punch and Daily Trust have 39 news stories and 36, respectively, with 53% each. Opinion page came second in the list of editorial genres used to cover the tribunal by the selected newspaper with Vanguard newspaper coming top with 27 opinions, representing 30% of all items published by the newspaper. Daily Trust came second with 12 opinions, at 18% of all items published about the PEPT, while the Punch newspaper followed with 11 opinions. Daily Trust newspaper, however, recorded the highest number of advertorials about the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal, with 10 adverts, representing 15% of all issues published.

Table 4: Tone of the Coverage

Tone Variables	Newspapers		
	The Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
Positive	15(20%)	20(29%)	20(22%)
Negative	11(15%)	12(18%)	37(41%)
Neutral	48(65%)	36(53%)	34(37%)
Total	74(n=100%)	68(n=100%)	91(n=100%)

Source- Authors fieldwork

Findings from the table above showed that Vanguard newspaper recorded the highest number of negative stories against the Presidential Election Petitions Tribunal with 37 stories, which stand at 41%. It was equally observed that with the highest number of opinion pages published among the selected newspapers, as reflected in Table three (3) above, the stage for the highest number of negative stories was set with opinion pages, allowing the writers the opportunity to inject their personal views and biases in such write-ups. The Punch newspaper came top with the highest number of

neutral news stories, with 48 stories representing 65% of the total number of published items about the Presidential Tribunal. However, the duo of Daily Trust and Vanguard published twenty positive stories (20) each about the tribunal. This table addressed the second objective of the study.

Table 5. Key Themes/Issues

Variable/themes	The Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
Manipulation of Justices	9(12%)	11(16%)	22(24%)
Legal Argument	29(39%)	31(46%)	38(42%)
IRV	1(1%)	1(1.5%)	2(2%)
INEC complicity	2(3%)	0(0%)	3(3%)
25% of the FCT	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(1%)
Rigging of Election	5(7%)	0(0%)	5(6%)
Certificate Forgery	24(32%)	22(32%)	14(15%)
Non-qualification of Candidates	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Ethical/Religious bias	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(1%)
Others	4(6%)	3(4.5%)	5(6%)
Total	74(n=100%)	68(n=100%)	91(n=100%)

Source- Authors fieldwork

As indicated in the table above, the three major issues or themes that dominated the reportage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal by the three selected newspapers are legal arguments advanced by parties in the tribunal, certificate forgery against the candidate of the All Progressives Congress, who is the President of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu. Also recognized in that order as one of the prominent themes is the alleged manipulation of the Justices of the tribunal and that of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. This table takes care of the third objective of the study.

Table 6: Story Length

Length of Story	The Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
Full page	25(34%)	13(19%)	11(12%)
Two pages and more	4(5%)	1(1%)	14(15%)
3/quarter page	6(8%)	13(19%)	4(4.2%)
Half page	22(30%)	10(15%)	25(28%)
Quarter page	1(1%)	16(24%)	16(18%)
One eighth	16(22%)	15(22%)	21(23%)
Total	74(n=100%)	68(n=100%)	91(n=100%)

Source- Authors' fieldwork

The table above shows the amount of space dedicated to stories on the Presidential election petition tribunal by the three selected newspapers. Of the three newspapers, Punch has 25 full-page stories, followed by Daily Trust, while Vanguard came third. However, Vanguard has the highest number of stories that ran into two pages or more, with 14 stories.

While Vanguard recorded 25 stories on half-pages, Punch newspaper had 22 stories. Based on these data, Punch newspaper devoted more space to coverage than the two newspapers.

Table 7: Political party of focus.

Party of focus	Punch	Daily Trust	Vanguard
APC	28(38%)	40(59%)	33(36%)
PDP	10(13.5%)	7(10.2%)	7(8%)
LP	3(4%)	3(4.4%)	3(3%)
ALL	33(44.5%)	18(26.4%)	48(53%)
Total	74(N=100%)	68(N=100%)	91(N=100%)

Source- Authors' fieldwork

Table 7 above shows that APC was the dominant party of focus for most stories written and published by the three selected newspapers. Daily Trust has the highest number of stories dedicated to APC and its candidate, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, with 40 stories followed by Vanguard with 33 stories and the Punch newspaper with 28 stories. In this order of focus, PDP and its Presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, followed, while the Labour Party came third in terms of the political party of focus. The table also showed that Vanguard newspaper has the highest number of stories that focus on all political parties that participated in the tribunal, with 48 stories; next to it is Punch newspaper, with 33 stories dedicated to all parties.

Discussion of Findings

This study has shown that Vanguard has the highest number of stories written and published on the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal among the three selected newspapers. The study also established that the Punch newspaper gave coverage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PETP) with the highest prominence among the selected newspapers, with the highest number of stories published on the tribunal appearing on its front page. The Vanguard newspaper followed it. Invariably, the value

of stories appearing on the front pages was factored alongside the total number of stories published by each newspaper to arrive at the prominence of the front page. This outcome relates to findings from a study conducted by Boukes et al. (2020) investigating newsworthiness and story prominence: how the presence of news factors relates to the upfront position and length of news stories. The study demonstrates that a more significant number of news factors in a story positively predict an item's length and likelihood of front-page publication or a newscast's opening item. It further emphasized that two news factors, 'conflict' and 'eliteness,' have the most substantial impact. Impliedly, the 2023 Presidential election petition tribunal was an elitist story; the outcome of such a proceeding is a potential springboard for conflict.

Furthermore, the outlook of various editorial genres the selected newspapers deployed in the coverage of PEPT indicated that news took the lead across the three newspapers. The importance of news as editorial material for news media is well established. This revelation falls in line with the core assumption of developmental media theory that says media are to be used to serve the general good of a nation, especially issues that are relevant to their development (Asemah et al., 2017)

The study also showed that Vanguard newspaper recorded the highest negative stories against the Presidential Election Petitions Tribunal. The highest number of opinion pages published among the selected newspapers came from Vanguard newspaper; the freedom to inject opinion and biases in opinion pages arguably set the stage for this slant. The outcome here synchronized well with a study conducted by Nwofe (2016), who investigated the dimensions of negativity in the coverage of Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The study identified different methods through which news outlets frame negativity in the coverage of political issues. Such methods, as documented by the study, are similar to what is obtainable in the study at hand; they include a selection of like-minded sources, making salience of ideologically based opinion articles, and re-publication of news items from other news channels that aptly support specific agenda frames.

The study brought to the fore that three major issues or themes dominated the reportage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal are legal arguments, certificate forgery against the candidate of the All Progressives Congress, who is the President of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, and the alleged manipulation of the Justices of the tribunal. The outcome here empirically validated the sectional biases rented the air while the tribunal

lasted; for instance, the issue of alleged certificate forgery against the APC candidate Bola Tinubu was so fixated by one of the parties in the tribunal to the extent that its verification was dragged up to Chicago, in the USA. Also rife in public discourse at the material time was the imaginary attempt to manipulate the justices of the tribunal, no thanks to the controversial billboard with the inscription all eyes on the justices of Appeal Court, erected a few days before the verdict of the tribunal in Abuja, the Nigeria seat of power. This outcome fits the core assumption of framing theory, suggesting that the media focuses on specific events and then places them within a field of meaning. To this end, experts contended that journalists would tell the audience what and how to think about that issue -second-level agenda-setting-framing theory (Asemah et al., 2017, Mass Communication Theory, n.d).

Equally of note is that the outcome of the study shows the Punch newspaper gave the highest amount of space to the coverage of the tribunal. It has 25 total pages of stories, followed by Daily Trust. However, Vanguard has the highest number of stories, which ran into two pages and above, with 14 stories. The study's outcome indicates that APC was the dominant party of focus for most stories written and published by the three selected newspapers. Daily Trust has the highest number of stories dedicated to APC and its candidate, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, followed by Vanguard and then the Punch newspaper. This finding is an empirical validation that prominence is still a news determinant because APC and its candidate are key respondents in all the matters presented and argued before the presidential election petition tribunal.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined press coverage of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election petition tribunal, using three selected national newspapers as guides. The three selected newspapers' cumulative number of stories written and published on the subject matter is 233. The study affirmed that the Punch newspaper gave the tribunal the highest prominence, with the highest number of stories on its front page. The study also affirmed that most stories came as news and were published on the newspaper's inside pages.

Three major themes or issues are framed to dominate the discussion. At the same time, the tribunal lasted, and there were alleged certificate forgery, alleged

attempts by the ruling class to compromise the justices of the tribunal, and legal arguments. The study also established that Vanguard newspaper, owned by a Nigerian from the Eastern part of the country from which the candidate of the Labour Party, Peter Obi, hails, recorded the highest opinion pages and equally highest negative stories against the tribunal.

The study recommends, among other things, that newspapers in Nigeria hold all branches of government accountable but be wary of setting negative agendas that will continue to affect the image of the country and its leaders in the community of nations.

Nigerian newspapers should be authoritative in their reportage through discrete investigation rather than remain fixated on the handouts provided to them by the political class, as demonstrated in most of the agenda set during the tribunal.

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