

NEWSPAPER FRAMING OF GOVERNOR HOPE UZODIMA ADMINISTRATION AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF SUPREME COURT JUDGMENT

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Abstract

This study set out to ascertain the patterns of news framing of Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration in Imo state between January and June 2020. Two theories were reviewed for this study: the agenda setting theory as well as the framing theory of the media. The researcher used the content analysis research method for this research. The universe of this study was all the editions of Community Watchdog – an Imo state based local tabloid from January to June, 2020. This comprised of 72 editions of the newspaper. Winner and Dominick composite week sampling technique was used to derive 24 editions as sample size. The inter-coder reliability is accepted as the correlation coefficient is up to .72. The following findings were made: Governor Hope Uzodinma were captured in headlines (35 stories with 23.5%) and made reference to (16 stories with 10.7%) jointly (51 stories with 34.2%); the level of prominence given to the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration was high; there was 58.8% favourable direction of news and feature stories that discussed the court case, mandate tussle and administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma. Majority of the news and feature stories about the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma has been supportive from January 2020 to June 2020. The following recommendations were made: local tabloids in Imo state should keep up with the level of prominence of coverage of incumbent government activities in the state; however, they should not merely give straight news report on the activities of government, there should also permit some level of constructive criticism where and when necessary.

Keywords: Media, government, Governor Hope Uzodinma, Supreme Court, Imo state

Introduction

All round the world, mass media are regarded as political instrument, since they are actually an essential part of the politics of any country (Owen, 2017, Coxall, Robins & Leach, 2003). Through the media, the public get the information which they need to make political judgment as well as regulate their political attitudes (Müller, 2014). Ideally, it will be very difficult to have a government making it through to the people without the mass media (Ercebe, 2015, Umechukwu, 2001). However, from the very beginning, in the late 15th century when printing press started in England (NOUN, 2007), media have also been on the trial of government (McFaul, 2005).

The rapport between the media and government has been a “bite and kiss”, “punch and huge” kind of cordiality. At one point, these two are at war with each other. At the other, they are at peace and working together to better the society (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017). These slants depend on media's perception of the people in government - the relationship might be directionally favourable when the media present the government in good light; or, media can also cover government in bad light (Olaopa & Odeyemi, 2021); by allowing more unfavourable news and features as well as comments and opinion about the government (Chen & Zhang, 2016).

Recently in Imo state, the relationship between the people, the media and the government seems to further buttress the aforementioned point. From observations, Imolites are assumed to use the media as a tool to attack the government of the day in the state (Peterside, 2021). In Imo, media is believed to be taking side with members of society to antagonise government by receiving and publishing anti-government stories and reports. This has been on-going in the state for a while now. It is believed to have started with the Rochas led administration, with its numerous policies that aggrieved the people.

Fast wayward to today, there are aggravations that the present governor of the state was installed by the Supreme Court of Nigeria and not duly election or given the mandate by the people. Of a truth, in January 14, 2020, the Supreme Court of Nigeria declared Senator Hope Uzodinma as the governor of the state. The court nullified the declaration made by INEC that Emeka Ihedioha (Channels TV, 2020). From that point, there

were clamours in the state (Oyero, 2020). A large number of residents of Imo state claim that the declaration made by the Court was biased and only represented and/or excited those that were affiliated to the ideology of the ruling party – All People Congress (APC).

According to the exponents of this scholar of thought, this declaration was made without considering the opposition party – People Democratic Party (PDP). Consequentially, it was a wide speculation early last year, the speculation still lingers on; that Senator Hope Uzodinma did not rightfully gain the mandate of the people of Imo state; but, was given the position by the ruling party – where he belongs via the instrumentality of the Supreme Court. The people of Imo state, a large number of them, acclaim that Senator Hope Uzodinma is a “Supreme Court Governor” rather than the governor duly elected by the people.

Statement of the Problem

Every democratic dispensation comes with series of agitations at local, state and national levels. Over the years, researchers have developed an interest in political issues in Nigeria. Much of the literature dwells on prominence and frequency of coverage of national political issues. The implication is the obvious lack of studies on the coverage and framing of state administrations. It is nothing to argue that the verdict of the Supreme Court that declared Senator Hope Uzodinma as the governor of Imo state, nullifying the declaration of Emeka Ihedioha earlier declared by INEC; was welcomed by varying reactions. Whilst the supporters of Hope Uzodinma congratulated and commended the newly elected governor; contrary to this, members and supporters of the opposition party – PDP, condemned and spoke against the judgment made by the Court. The most opinionated dissatisfaction was expressed when the newly elected governor was being labelled “the supreme court governor” in lieu of duly elected governor.

Consequently, studies that centre on prominence and frequency which ignore framing fail to help in revealing the role of the media in the selection, interpretation, and communication of perceived reality. Premised on this insufficiency, this study set out to ascertain the patterns of news framing of Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration in Imo state between January and June 2020. Did the media take any side in the narratives of the people of Imo state about Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration? How did Imo state based newspaper frame the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state?

Research Objectives

The following objective guided the execution of this study:

- i. examine the frequency of coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo state against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state;
- ii. determine the level of prominence of coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo state against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state;
- iii. find out the direction of coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo state against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state;
- iv. establish the tone of coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo state against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state;
- v. explain the framing used in the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo state against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him the governor of the state

Conceptual Clarification

Media and Government Relationship in Nigeria

Olaopa and Odeyemi (2021) opined that the media has been used to make an impact on politics and political activities, especially in terms of provision of adequate and appropriate instructive political information; guiding and influencing citizens' voting decision by shaping opinions and setting the political agenda for the electorates; educating the electorates about election procedures; and creating awareness about candidates and their campaign manifestoes; as well as enlightenment on other political issues, election matters and processes.

Asemah (2011) opines that the relationship between the media and government in Nigeria is not too cordial. In the opinion of Sambe (2008) cited in Asemah (2011), the relationship between the government and

the media is an inherent inter-dependent relationship that can plunge the society into chaos and disorder of one sub-culture is found dysfunction. Dysfunction is found when a journalist does not tell the public the truth or takes side while reporting government and political activities. Although the relationship between the government and the media ought to be cordial, it has been that way even when these two arms of society need each other dearly.

Understanding Frames and Framing (Positive and Negative)

The way newspapers transfer information to their recipients is by framing stories to meet the goals of the providing source. According to Cissel (2012, p.67), “in communication, framing defines how news media coverage can shape mass opinion by using these specific frameworks to help guide their reader to understanding”. That is to say, the formation of words used in a news article creates a vehicle for persuasion that has the opportunity to influence the minds of its readers. To further provide evidence on how newspapers framing works, Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) carried out a study on print media framing, though not on politics, but on Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.

Azlan (2012) has analysed how public attitudes are shaped as a result of media framing of a subject. He noted further that there are two factors that facilitate the adoption of frames; “the accessibility of an issue, and the correlation between a subject and the audience's pre-existing opinions.” In other words, framing effects are not independent (Azlan, 2012, p 320). That is to say, there is a connection between what people know or think about an issue and what the media present the way they present it. In a study by Shuck and de Vreese (2006), findings show that attitudes and knowledge that exist before media exposure play an important role in determining the framing effects.

Empirical Reviews

The research area of media coverage and government activities in Nigeria is vague. It is believed that these areas have been submerge by media coverage of insecurity, political activities in so much that the coverage of Government activities has been particularly neglected. As such, the lack of more empirical finding in the special area of media coverage of government activities; this is the gap this study seeks to fill.

However, in a study, Rasaan, Mahamood, Arikewuyo, Abdullah, Patrick, Ahmad, Ibrahim, Bajuri and Rezuwan examined and compared the prevalence of public officials' corruption frames in the online version among three popular Nigerian newspapers. According to the finding of the study, the Nigerian government was framed as having highest responsibility for corruption eradication with the total percentage of 79.6%. Therefore, the responsible government was recommended for treatment of corruption in Nigeria with the total percentage of 82.2%.

Also, Udende, Adisa, Mahamood, Abubakar, Adegoke, Abdullah, Ahmad, Bajuri and Hussin carried out a study on selected newspapers coverage of political defections in Nigeria in 2014. Findings show writers' use of different frames in their stories and this vary and the pattern of frames show elements of bias based on political affiliation. The study concluded that there is apparent bias in most of the defection stories reported in The Nation while those carried in Daily Trust are neutral.

Agenda Setting and Media Framing Theory

In the bid to find theoretical support and backing for our investigation, two theories were reviewed that shared similar basic beliefs with the assumption that forms the crux of this study: the agenda setting theory as well as the framing theory of the media. The Agenda Setting Theory describes the power of the media content to influence the importance placed on a topic of public concerns. The agenda setting theory assumes that the news item covered frequently and prominently, attracts the audience attention as to what issues are important. The theory was propounded by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study of American Presidential election in 1968. Davis (2006) cited in Orji-Egwu (2012, p.188), observed that “in choosing and displaying news, editors and newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping of political reality”.

The framing theory of the media was also considered for this study because it provided support for us to investigate how Newspaper portrays Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration in news and feature stories. First put forth by Goffman in 1974 in his "Frame Analysis", the theory explains how people interpret what is going on around their world. In this case, a frame refers to how newspaper organizes and presents the ideas, events, and topics they cover about Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment. Framing is the way and manner a communication source such as journalists, feature writers and editorial writers defines and constructs any piece of communicated information in order to give hidden clues on how information should be perceived and interpreted (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, Ezegwu, Udoyo & Chime-Nganya, 2017).

Methodology

The researchers used the content analysis research method for this research. The population or universe of this study was all the editions of *Community Watchdog* – an Imo state based local tabloid from January to June, 2020. This comprised of 72 editions of the newspaper. The sampling technique used to derive the sample for this study was the Winner and Dominick composite week sampling technique. The researchers picked one edition of the selected newspaper to represent one (1) week through the period of the months being studies. Using this method, there were 24 editions. The researchers collected data for this study using the coding guide and sheet with the help of a trained coder. To ensure that the instrument is reliable, the researcher adopted the Holsti's inter-coder reliability formula. The inter-coder reliability is accepted as the correlation coefficient is up to 0.72. Data was presented in tables and analysed using percentage.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Frequency of Coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration captured in headline	35	23.5
Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration referenced to in story	16	10.7
Other political issues within Imo state	52	34.9
Other political issues with Nigeria	34	22.8
Foreign stories on politics and economy	12	8.1
Total	149	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 1 compares the frequency of coverage received by issues about Governor Hope Uzodinma after the Supreme Court judgment that installed him as the duly elected governor of the state. The table show that in as much as stories about Governor Hope Uzodinma were captured in headlines (35 stories with 23.5%) and made reference to (16 stories with 10.7%) jointly (51 stories with 34.2%), was not as frequently covered as the general coverage of political issues in within the state received more coverage (52 stories with 34.9%), to a very little extent, more than the stories about the incoming governor and his administration. When compared with other stories such as other political issues around the country (22.8%), foreign issues on politics and economy (8.1%) covered in the selected newspaper, the coverage of the governor and his administration was more frequent.

Table 2: Prominence of Coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Front (cover) page	33	64.7
Back page	0	0
Centre spread	0	0
Inside page	18	35.3
Total	51	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

This table revealed that the level of prominence given to the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration was high. This assertion is as a result of the high rate of stories regarding the governor that appeared on the cover/front pages (33 stories with 64.7%) of the selected newspaper. It is nothing strange that media has always being on the trail of government and its activities from the time being. This explains the prominence of media attention accorded to the activities of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration by the

selected newspaper in the state.

Table 3: Direction of Coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Favourable	30	58.8
Neutral	7	13.7
Unfavourable	14	27.5
Total	51	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3 showed a 58.8% favourable direction of news and feature stories that discussed the court case, mandate tussle and administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma. This is directly contrary to the assumption of this study, that the people of Imo state were not happy about the installation of Hope Uzodinma as governor of Imo state, which was drawn using observations of public opinion. Although there were serious side talks and general gossip expressing displeasure over the installation of Hope as governor, it is clear from the table above that this gossip did not translate to predominant negative or unfavourable coverage of the administration being studied. The reason for this contrast, however, has not been established from this table.

Table 4: Tone of Coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Supportive	29	56.9
Neutral	12	23.5
Antagonistic	10	19.6
Total	51	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 4 established that a majority of the news and feature stories about the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma has been supportive from January 2020 to June 2020. Although there is a drop from the percentage of supportive tone (56.9%) from the percentage of the percentage of favourable direction (58.8%), nonetheless, this table buttresses that the positive direction taken by the coverage conditioned the tone.

Table 5: Framing of Coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State

Options	Frequency	Percentage	
Favourable frames	Governor of Imo state	24	44.4
	resounding victory	6	11.1
	commendable	2	3.7
	authentic candidate	4	7.4
Unfavourable frames	Opponent	12	22.2
	rape on justice	2	3.7
	unelected governor	4	7.5
	Supreme court governor	0	0
Total	54	100	

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 5 establishes the perspective and frame through which media narratives of Governor Hope Uzodinma was covered was favourable.

Discussion of Findings

In response to research question one; the study compared the frequency of coverage received by issues about Governor Hope Uzodinma after the Supreme Court judgment that installed him as the duly elected governor of the state without other topical political issues covered within the timeframe of the study in order to establish the level of frequency. The study found that stories about Governor Hope Uzodinma captured in

headlines combined with stories that made reference to the governor was one of the frequently covered issues across the selected newspapers within the timeframe being studied. Stories about Governor Hope Uzodinma were the second most frequently covered stories. Stories related to the governor followed the general coverage of political issues in the state. This received the most frequent coverage. This goes a long way to confirm the construct of the agenda setting theory. This finding further buttress the agenda setting theory which has the construct that media can influence the importance placed on a topic of public concerns when it given it frequency. That is, news item covered frequently, as proposed by this theory, attracts the audience attention as issues that are important.

In answering research question two, the researcher established that the level of prominence given to the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration was high. Most of the news and features stories about the governor appeared on the cover or front pages of the selected newspaper. The assertion that media has always being on the trail of government and its activities from the time being explains the prominence of media attention accorded to the activities of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration by the selected newspaper in the state. Also, this finding supports the argument of agenda setting theory. The agenda setting theory presumed that prominent news item covered frequently attracted the audience attention as to what issues are important. It describes the effect of the media content to influence the importance placed on a topic of public concerns. To support this, Fowler & Ridout (2009) found that coverage of political advertising is quite extensive in frequency.

Research question 3 was on the direction of the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma Administration in Imo State. The study showed that the direction of coverage of news and feature stories that discussed the court case, mandate tussle and administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma was favourable. This is directly contrary to the assumption of this study, that the people of Imo state were not happy about the installation of Hope Uzodinma as governor of Imo state, which was drawn using observations of public opinion. Although there were serious side talks and general gossip expressing displeasure over the installation of Hope as governor, it is clear from the table above that this gossip did not translate to predominant negative or unfavourable coverage of the administration being studied. The reason for this contrast, however, has not been established from this table. From their findings, Fowler and Ridout (2009) states that most of it is low quality, and its volume depends on the size of the market.

On the question of tone of coverage poses research question 4, this study established that a majority of the news and feature stories about the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma has been supportive from January 2020 to June 2020. When compared to the level of favourable direction, the study found that there is a drop from the percentage of supportive tone (56.9%). Regardless of the slight, this study buttresses that the positive direction of the coverage of the governor and his administration conditioned the tone of the coverage in one way or the other. Most of the stories were expressions of support, commendation and congratulations. Of great concern is the fact that, one of the selected newspapers dedicated, by commission or omission, its January, 16th edition to advertorials on congratulatory message for the supporting acclaimed “supreme court government”. The support given to this administration still calls for concern as it is contrary to the prevalent issues on ground during this period. In terms of tone, Fowler and Ridout (2009) found that the tone of the spots aired was more engaging and lively more than that of political coverage.

Research question 5 which was, what framing did the coverage of Governor Hope Uzodinma administration in Imo State take? The researcher established that the perspective and frame through which media narratives of Governor Hope Uzodinma was covered portrayed the government in positive light. Eight frames were used to describe the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma as gathered from cursory observation. Findings of the study showed that Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration received favourable framing in terms of newspaper coverage. The framing theory explains the use of framing. Framing is used to explain how Imo state based newspapers organized and presented ideas, events, and topics about Governor Hope Uzodinma and his administration against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment.

This adds highlights a positive frame which is contrary by complementary to the findings of Chen & Zhang (2016) that showed partial differences in frames between netizens, government, and news media; and that of Udende et al. (2017) which established that writers' use of different frames in their stories and this vary and the pattern of frames show elements of bias based on political affiliation. They noticed apparent bias in most of the defection stories reported in *The Nation* while those carried in *Daily Trust* are neutral.

Conclusion

The study was carried out to evaluate how selected newspapers cover as well as frame the administration of Governor Hope Uzodinma in Imo state from January 2020 to June 2020 against the backdrop of the Supreme Court judgment that declared him governor. Based on findings, the study provides evidence into the frequency, prominence, direction, tone and the various patterns of frames and the differences in newspapers

reporting of the of Governor Hope Uzodinma in Imo state. On the basis of findings and literature reviewed, the study makes some recommendations for improvement in newspaper coverage and framing of political issues as well measures to encourage democracy. A significant contribution of this study, not found in previous efforts, is coverage of government administration in Nigeria at the state level and the analysis of the two directions of frames – favourable and unfavourable frames – which contribute to the understanding of the role newspapers play in the understanding of state government administration not only in Nigeria but globally.

Recommendations

From the finding of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Local tabloids in Imo state and Nigeria at large should allocate a section of their paper for the monitoring of government activities. It should not be “*randomalised*”.
- ii. Local tabloids in Imo state should keep up with the level of prominence of coverage of incumbent government activities in the state.
- iii. Local tabloids in Imo state should not merely give straight news report on the activities of government, there should also some level of constructive criticism where and when necessary.
- iv. Local tabloid should keep with the moderation of the tone of coverage of government activities; however, room should be made for more news features and interpretation.
- v. Local tabloids should be objective and accurate in their use of frames and framing directions in the government activities in the state.

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