Newspapers' Reportage of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria: Implication Towards De-Escalation of Electoral Violence

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Abstract

The mass media play a crucial role in electoral processes. Most scholarly attention has primarily been focused on media coverage of election conflicts, with little attention on the de-escalation of electoral violence in the media reportage. This study, therefore, aimed at assessing the prominence given to de-escalating electoral violence in the coverage of the 2015 general elections in Nigerian newspapers. Employing exploratory design, the research utilised media content analysis and in-depth interviews as methods. Four newspapers Daily Trust, Nigerian Tribune, Daily Independent, and The Sun were purposively sampled. A total of 520 editions of the newspapers were coded and analysed using a coding sheet. Additionally, twelve interviews were conducted with editors, correspondents, and INEC officials. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed through the narrative technique. Findings revealed that newspapers gave high prominence to the de-escalation of electoral violence in their coverage and reportage of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The study underscores the importance of media operators being more conflict-sensitive in their presentation of sensitive issues like elections and adherence to professional journalistic ethics.

Keywords: Mass media, electoral conflict, violence de-escalation, media framing, 2015 general elections

1.   Introduction

The pivotal role of mass media within democratic societies cannot be overstated, as they serve as catalysts for public awareness by setting agenda on crucial issues and facilitating meaningful engagement between political entities and the electorate. This essential function underscores the intricate interplay between media outlets, political actors, and the citizenry, delineating the democratic process itself. Scholars such as Daramola (2015), Coolschool (2021), and Isola & Owoyemi (2023) have underscored the indispensable nature of mass media in fostering societal cohesion, knowledge dissemination, global interconnectedness, and information diffusion. Ladd & Rosking, as cited in Aririguzoh (2011) emphasise the pivotal role of the press in political affairs, particularly in the context of party politics and electoral campaigns, where media platforms wield substantial influence in shaping public opinion. Indeed, the press emerges as a linchpin in the democratic fabric, pivotal in cultivating an informed and engaged electorate crucial for the integrity of free, fair, and transparent elections. In essence, mass communication stands as a formidable tool in swaying the sentiments of voters, who hold the reins of power in democratic systems, thus accentuating its pivotal role in the democratic process.

In any political system, the media play a crucial role in fostering political growth and development, as elucidated by Ekeli (2007). Communication serves as the conduit through which political and governance processes are conveyed, a function facilitated predominantly by mass media in contemporary societies. NIM (2009) argues that communication facilitates the discussion of issues, the proposal of solutions, and the deliberation of decisions aimed at resolving them. Throughout the governance spectrum, political communication stands as a linchpin, with mass media serving as its primary vehicle. This underscores the indispensable relevance of media in the political arena, particularly within democratic governance frameworks. Bojuwade, as cited in Onwubiko (2016:1), aptly characterises the Nigerian media as a "potent force for social engineering, a vigilant guardian of public discourse, the fourth estate of the realm, and a beacon of hope in political conflicts. Aina (2000:20) delves into the intricate relationship between the press and politics, noting its "enduring controversy and fascination since the 18th century when the term 'the fourth estate' was coined to explore what was seen as a usurping and improper power of the press challenging the English House of Common".

The role of the press in modern society would be better appreciated if one takes into consideration the dynamic and diverse nature of the people in the society. It is in recognition of this that many scholars have written about the role or responsibility of the press in society at large and in politics in particular. Thomas Jefferson, one of the United States of America's most respected democrats, a philosopher and the third US President appreciated the inevitability of the media when he said:

> "Since the basis of democracy was the opinion of the people, the very first objective was to keep that right. If it were left for me to decide whether we should have a government without the mass media or mass media without the government, I should not hesitate a movement to choose the latter" (Jefferson, 2021:1).

Sydney (1975) underscores the profound impact of mass media on the political landscape, by highlighting their significant potential in shaping political dynamics. He emphasises the pivotal role of the press in moulding political beliefs, asserting that "access to the media spells political strength of the executive". Drawing upon the case study of the United States of America, Sydney (1975:319) further reinforces the influential power of the press by citing the Watergate Coverage of the Washington Post, heralded as one of the most consequential journalistic endeavours in American history. He notes that both the press and a substantial portion of the public attribute this coverage to the eventual resignation of the president, underscoring the instrumental role media can play in holding political figures accountable. Consequently, Sydney advocates for fostering amicable relationships between the government, political entities, and the press, recognizing the symbiotic nature of their interaction in maintaining transparency and accountability within the political sphere.

The press has been identified as a viable means through which peace and harmony can be attained in a world saddled with conflicting (political) interests. Ndekwu (2015) buttresses this point by saying that the media and communication processes possess unique and unquestionable roles in conflict resolution. In this connection, Akinfeleye (1995) contends that the media can serve an agenda for the promotion of democracy by providing useful information about certain conflicts or fuelling human conflicts in the democratic process. He, thus, advised that the media should not be used as destroyers of democracy but as builders of democratic structures. Orhewere (2007) identifies the significant relationship between exposure to information and content and the development of political values and argues that newspapers, TV and radio are chiefly perceived as being useful to the development of civil attitudes towards the political system. Sydney (1975) also agrees that "television contributes to learning about politics and government" through which "political behaviour may be formed" because the media have the power to control their audience indirectly (Isola 2010).

Scholars such as Sydney (1975), Ekeli (2007), Galadima (2007), Orhewere (2007), Nwagbara (2010), Daramola (2015), Nwammuo et al., (2015), DoubleGist (2021), Egbuta (2021) and Nnamani (2021) see the mass media, particularly television, radio and newspapers, as an agent of political mobilisation responsible for highlighting attitudes about individuals and institutions. Olukotun (2003) lends his words to this sentiment as he echoes that during elections, the mass media are the principal vehicles through which the voters receive information concerning the political parties, the voting process, the electoral commission and other issues germane to the exercise of their rights. Thus, Sydney (1975:320) argues that "mass communication is an agency responsible for instilling attitudes about political institution".

When acting as unbiased umpires, the media perform formidable roles in the resolution of political conflicts. Thus, Paluck (2009) appreciates the mass media's role "in shaping beliefs and behaviours, especially prejudiced beliefs and behaviours", which Nwagbara (2010) says is central to conflict management and peaceful resolution of political conflicts. It has also been demonstrated that lasting peace, security, democracy, sustainable development and good governance are connected with virile media. One very important thing is that effective governance in any society is built on a solid communication network whether in a democracy or meritocracy (Akinfeleye 1995:10). Akinfeleye says that effective mass media is always the central control mechanism for meaningful peaceful and sustainable democracy. Diedong (2013) thus argues that in an emerging democracy, the wielding of journalists' power can be described as a double-edged sword and the influence of the press can have greater implications on political features and strengthening of democratic processes. Isola (2010:102) holds a similar view when he states that the "press needs to cultivate the practice of protecting the interest of the society and undertaking to reconcile political actors by practising conflict-sensitive reporting". This can help the public to have a clear understanding of the hallowed functions of the media, especially during political campaigns, when politicians and political parties are usually in hot pursuit of prime time on air (in the case of radio and television) and pages (in case of newspaper and magazine). On the whole, media practitioners should be wary of the temptations that can lead to their involvement in partisan political struggles (Enemakum, 2005).

2.   Post Independent Press and Political Conflicts in Nigeria

Post-independence political activities in Nigeria took off on ethnic prejudice, a legacy that persists to this day. According to Ayatse & Irohen (2013), several factors contributed to the turbulence during this period, including the unstable tripartite federal structure characterised by regionalism, disparities in the sizes and populations of the three regions, the dominance of three regionally based and tribally sustained political parties, and a weak political class driven by regional and ethnic ideologies. This ethnic-regional politics deeply influenced the foundation of party politics in Nigeria since independence in 1960, as noted by Ayatse & Iorhen (2013). The press, just like in the pre-independence era, became deeply entwined in partisan politics during this period, reflecting the traits that characterized its earlier history.

Scholars such as Ige (1994), Adedayo & Agbaje (2010), Isola (2010), Oluwajuyitan (2015), Aghamelu (2016), and Oyovbaire (2021) have explained the role played by the press in Nigeria's political history, particularly during the first republic, and have identified various factors contributing to its performance during that period. The pattern of media ownership and usage remained largely unchanged in the immediate aftermath of independence, as noted by Oluwajuyitan (2015), but rather transitioned into partisan advocacy shortly before and after independence, according to Adedayo & Agbaje (2010). There is debate among scholars regarding the primary influences on the press during this time. While some argue that ownership influence played a significant role, others point to political party affiliation or ethnic-regional interests as key factors. For example, Ige (1995) and Jibo (2003) contend that the press primarily promoted and defended the interests of their respective regions, whereas Adedayo & Agbaje (2010) and Isola (2010) believe that the press was more influenced by factors such as regional interests and the preferences of media proprietors. Notably, media owners often

held leadership positions within political parties and championed the causes of their respective regions - the North, West, and East - further complicating the relationship between the press and political interests during this period.

The First Republic therefore witnessed a consolidation of the existing political pattern and continued the use of the mass media, especially newspaper press for regional, ethnic and partisan political gain by the Nigerian elite. Among the newspapers established during this period were the *Nigerian Outlook*, the *Express*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Post*, the *Daily Sketch* and the *New Nigerian*. As the press became increasingly regionalized, Dr Michael Okpara, the NCNC premier of the Eastern Region who had taken over from Dr Azikiwe following the latter's decision to become the Governor-General of Nigeria, refurbished and strengthened the Eastern Government's *Eastern Outlook*. Subsequently, on independent day (October 1, 1960), the *Eastern Outlook* was renamed *Nigerian Outlook*. The newspaper was not just an NCNC paper, it was more importantly a paper controlled by the Eastern regional government and, for that reason, owed its allegiance more to that government and its leader. It was not surprising, therefore, that within the context of intra-NCNC politics and given the need for Dr Okpara to build upon his support within the party and the region, the *Nigerian Outlook* often had clashes with papers owned by even Dr Azikiwe, including the *West African Pilot* during the First Republic (Ige, 1994).

The *Daily Express* and the *Sunday Express* were founded following an agreement between the Action Group-controlled Amalgamated Press and the Thomson Corporation of Canada. Initially, these newspapers were pro-Action Group (AG), however, following the crisis within the AG in 1962 and pressure from the NPC-dominated federal government, the papers began to adopt a more independent editorial policy, eventually folding up in 1965 (Oluwajuyitan, 2015). The *Daily Mail* was established in Kano by the NPC, possibly in response to the party's previous absence from the newspaper scene. However, during the First Republic, the paper's national influence was limited because it tended to focus on Northern politics or the NPC in its coverage of events (Oluwajuyitan, 2015).

The *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* newspapers were established by the coalition federal government of NPC/NCNC, with the NPC being the dominant partner. According to Oluwajuyitan, these papers were founded in 1961, reflecting the federal government's belief that it could no longer rely on regional papers for influence in the ongoing press war. However, they faced resistance in sales, especially from constituencies sympathetic to the AG, which viewed them as a 'government megaphone'. Internal wrangling within the management, primarily composed of party-sponsored candidates, further limited the effectiveness of these papers during the republic (Oluwajuyitan, 2015). The *Daily Sketch* was established in Ibadan in 1964 by the West regional government of Chief S.I. Akintola, who had led a revolt against the AG leadership of Chief Awolowo. Akintola had unseated the party from the government and founded his party – first the United Peoples Party and later the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). The newspaper was established to support Akintola's regional administration, which faced widespread public opposition (Ige, 1994). As expected, the *Sketch* took an anti-AG stance and aligned itself with parties like the NPC, which Akintola leaned towards for political support, and with which the NNDP forged an alliance to contest the 1964/65 federal/parliamentary elections.

The *New Nigerian* emerged on January 1, 1966, just two weeks before the coup that marked the end of the First Republic. The transformation of the Nigerian Citizen into the New Nigerian reflected the perceived failure of the former to adequately champion Northern (NPC) interests. The paper was conceived to more effectively advocate for these interests. This aligns with the views expressed by scholars such as Subaru (1989), Yakubu (2003), and Mohamed (2003), who highlighted the role of the media in ethno-regional politics during the First Republic. Ige (1994) and Galadinma (2010) further describe the strategies employed by politicians of that era, including appeals to ethnic sentiments, publication of inflammatory statements, support for the formation of factions within ethnic unions, and the banning of newspapers from circulation in certain regions, among others.

Having examined a sample of newspapers, Oluwajuyitan (2015) argues that the 1964/65 parliamentary elections were held amid heightened inter-ethnic rivalry fueled by newspapers' interpretations of realities. He contends that newspapers undoubtedly exacerbated inter-ethnic bitterness and rivalry through their reporting on the struggle for political power, contributing to disorders. Isola (2010) documents inciting statements published by partisan newspapers that escalated political crises and violence during the 1965 parliamentary elections. By the end of the elections, the Western region was engulfed in unprecedented violence, with widespread protests and discontent among senior army officers over perceived manipulation of the democratic process. These protests tragically escalated into violence, resulting in an estimated 2,000 casualties in the Western Region (Adeeko, 2021). This grim toll underscores the tumultuous electoral climate of the period, ultimately leading to a section of the military overthrowing the government in a bloody coup on January 15, 1966, thereby ending the first republic. As a result, the Nigerian media, similar to media outlets in other parts of the world, have faced criticism and blame for various political challenges in the nation. This criticism, at times, has been justified, while in other instances, it may have been unwarranted.

2.1 Media Contribution to the Electoral Violence in Second Republic

The dynamics of media coverage during the Second Republic echoed those of the First Republic, particularly concerning electoral issues. The patterns observed in the reportage of the 1979 and 1983 elections mirrored those of the 1964/1965 elections. Once again, appeals to ethnic loyalties and regional sentiments were prevalent, with newspapers often aligning themselves with particular political factions to safeguard the interests of their owners and sponsors (Oluwajuyitan, 2015; Owoyemi, 2024). Only a handful of newspapers (*Nigerian Tribune, New Nigerian, Daily Times,* and *Daily Sketch*) survived the prolonged military rule, from the First Republic into the Second Republic. However, between 1979 and 1983, other newspapers emerged. These included *Punch, National Concord,* and *The Guardian*, some of which eventually got enmeshed in the partisan politics of the era. The *Nigerian Tribune*, affiliated with Obafemi Awolowo's UPN, and the *Daily Sketch*, jointly controlled by the governments of Ondo, Ogun, and Oyo States, prominently served the interests of the UPN. Conversely, *New Nigerian* and *Daily Times* aligned with the NPN, the ruling party at the federal level. While *the Daily Times* initially maintained neutrality during the 1979 elections, by 1983, it had transformed into a mouthpiece for the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). Among the newspapers during this period, *The Punch* and *The Guardian* appeared relatively neutral, steering clear of overt partisan affiliations. Additionally, several local newspapers with partisan inclinations circulated in various states, further shaping the media landscape of the Second Republic.

The Second Republic marked a significant era characterized by the proliferation of both government-owned and privately-owned newspapers, as well as state-owned television and radio stations (DoubleGist, 2021). The surge in media outlets can be attributed to the federal government's control over the National Television Authority (NTA), which enjoyed nationwide coverage but was often criticized for its overt support of the federal government and the ruling party. In response, governors of states lacking television or radio stations quickly established their own media platforms upon assuming office. During this time, newscasters were noted for their overt sycophancy, as highlighted by Abati in DoubleGist (2021). Consequently, the propaganda battles surrounding the 1983 elections were fought both in print media and electronic media channels, reflecting the intense political climate of the period (Popoola, 2014).

Babarinsa (2003) vividly captures the tumultuous atmosphere of the Second Republic's final days, describing it as a "taste of the Second Republic's death race" in Ondo State. He reports on a "war of words" unfolding in Akure, the capital of Ondo State, between media outlets controlled by the federal government and those controlled by the state government. This conflict, prominently featured on the front page of the National Concord on June 25, 1983, reflects the heightened political tensions and power struggles of the era. At the peak of the intense battle between the federal government-owned Radio Nigeria and the Ondo State-owned radio (OSRC), OSRC issued a fervent call to action, urging

the citizens of the state to stand up and hold accountable anyone who attempted to steal their votes: "He who betrays his fatherland would be destroyed by the fatherland…The result announced by FEDECO is totally unacceptable. We have been insulted by the criminals in our own fatherland. That verdict will not stand" (Babarinsa, 2003:2-3).

Among the local newspapers circulating in the state at the time were *Premier* and *Peoples News*, both of which were deeply entrenched in the partisan politics of the era. These publications staunchly aligned themselves with candidates from opposition parties, deploying inflammatory language in their contents, thereby contributing to the escalation of political tensions in the state in the run-up to the 1983 elections. In one of its particularly venomous stories, published on the front page on August 30, 1983, *Peoples News* claimed that "Omoboriowo fainted." The paper went on to assert that Chief Akin Omoboriwo's fervent ambition to become the governor of Ondo State had descended into a ludicrous spectacle, with reports suggesting he had fainted twice in the last five days due to sleep deprivation. Over the past few days, the self-proclaimed governor-elect of Ondo State, Chief Omoboriowo, visibly lost weight, and it was reported that he was increasingly consumed by feelings of emptiness and hopelessness about his future. His heart was described as being in turmoil, plagued by violent anguish and distress. (People's News, August 30, 1983, front page).

Premier swiftly responded to Peoples News:

> Let them swallow this bitter pill. Whether they like him or not, whether they want him or not, Chief Akin Omoboriowo will be sworn in on October 1, 1983, as the next Ondo State Executive Governor for four years. There is nothing anybody can do about that. They can go on rioting for the next four years… (Premier, September 1, 1983, front page).

Many people were waiting to do that should Omoboriowo's victory be upheld, as observed by Babarinsa (2003). Amidst the violence that accompanied the 1983 general elections, Popoola (2014) researched the contributions of the media to the election's violence. He argues that the newspapers in circulation at the turbulent time in Southwestern Nigeria published perilous headlines, conflict-fueling, and politically inciting stories, functioning as megaphones and amplifiers of the voices of their political owners. The crises climaxed in yet another coup on December 21, 1983, which signalled the death of the second republic.

These events underscore the role played by the mass media in the collapse of both the first and second republics. While previous studies had primarily focused on the contribution of the media to the escalation of electoral conflicts, this study empirically investigated the prominence given to the de-escalation of electoral violence by the newspapers in their report of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

3.   Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

Framing is the process through which communication sources, particularly journalists, define and shape information communicated in a context of latent meaning. McQuails (2010:555) describes it as the way "in which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by journalists within reference, and according to some latent structure of meaning". Aina (2004), citing Nelson et al., (1997) elaborates on framing as the method by which news organisations construct political issues or public controversies. Aina (2004) further explains that framing involves the selection of coding words to describe an issue, emphasising its potential impact, especially when coupled with commentary from prominent individuals. This theory extends beyond agenda-setting by delving into the essence of issues rather than their mere prominence. While agenda-setting concerns itself with salient issues, framing focuses on how these issues are presented. Entman (2004) defines framing as the act of selecting certain aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in communication texts, thereby promoting specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, or treatment recommendations. Semiu

(2015) expands on this by stating that framing primarily concerns how issues and other entities are depicted in mass media rather than their prominence in reporting. Consequently, the presentation of electoral violence issues in newspapers can significantly influence public perception.

## 4.	Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory design, using media content analysis and in-depth interviews as methods. The research instruments included a coding sheet for content analysis and an in-depth interview guide. The study population consisted of national newspapers with consistent daily publication between December 2014 and May 2015. Four national newspapers, namely, *Daily Trust, Daily Independent, Nigerian Tribune,* and *The Sun*, were sampled using purposive and convenient sampling methods. The target population included editors, correspondents, and INEC staff who participated in the 2015 general elections. Both newspaper samples and human samples were utilized, with 520 editions of the selected newspapers comprising the newspaper sample, 4 editors, 4 correspondents, and 4 INEC officials forming the human sample, totalling 12 interviewees. Relevant stories for analysis were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentages and frequency counts, while interview results were analyzed using narrative techniques.

## 5.	Findings

5.1. What was the Prominence given to the Issues of the 2015 General Elections in the Selected Newspapers?

The prominence of issues in newspapers can be gauged by their content placement and the amount of space allocated to them. This factor influences the thoroughness of issue presentation and has the potential to shape readers' opinions by providing them with a comprehensive array of information for decision-making. This study examined the prominence of issues related to the 2015 general election in newspapers based on their spatial allocation to the issues of the 2015 general election in the newspapers. The following figure illustrates the prominence accorded to these issues in the selected newspapers.
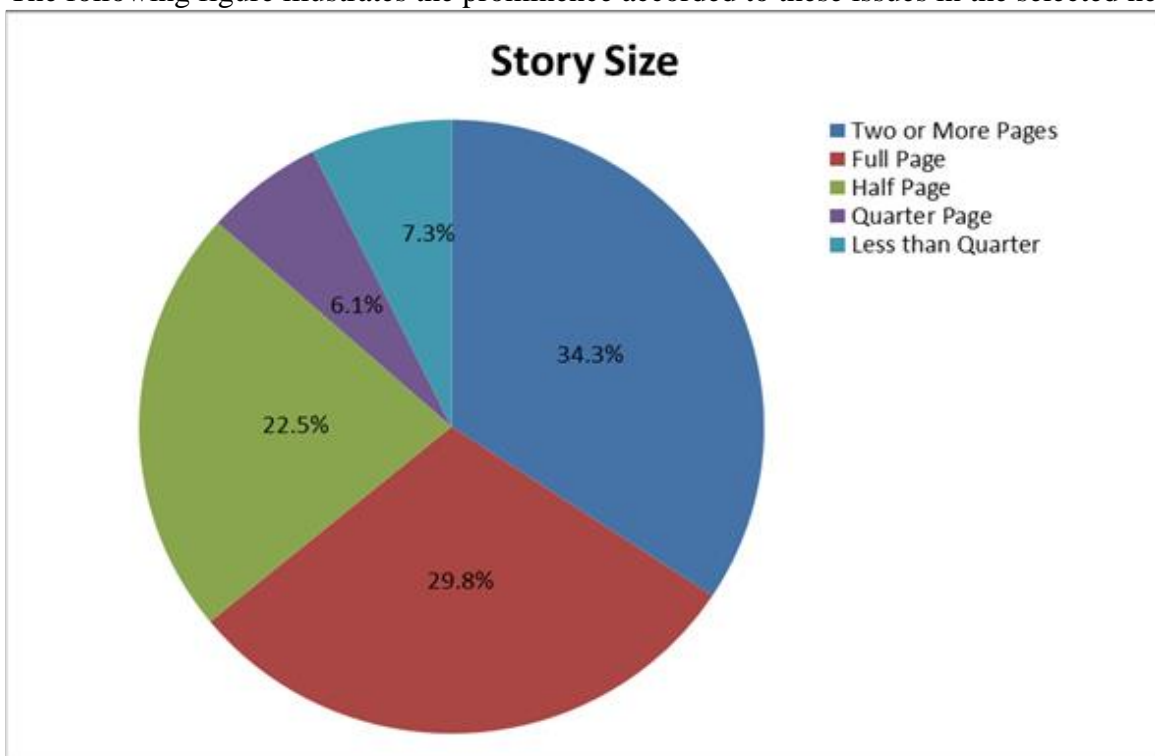

Fig. 1: Size of Stories about the 2015 General Elections in the Selected Newspapers

The findings depicted in Figure 1 indicated that stories spanning two pages, accounting for 34.3% of the total, were the most prevalent size in the coverage of the 2015 general elections by the newspapers. As shown in Table, the newspapers allocated ample space to election-related issues, with over 60% of all analyzed content occupying a full page or more.

5.2. What was the Prominence given to the De-escalation of Electoral Violence during the 2015 General Elections in the Selected Newspapers?

The framing of stories in the media plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's understanding of those stories and can influence their emotions and actions. Therefore, the framing pattern of election stories in newspapers has the potential to impact readers' perceptions and subsequently influence their actions regarding the elections and the electoral process. The table below illustrates the framing pattern of the issues surrounding the 2015 general elections in the newspapers.

Table 1: Framing Pattern of Messages and Themes of the Stories about the 2015 General Elections

Message/Theme	Frequency	Percent
Conflict-oriented	346	24.1
Peace-oriented	522	36.4
Inciting	115	8.0
Cautioning	205	14.3
Education-focused	247	17.2
Total	1435	100.0

As depicted in Table 1, the framing patterns observed in the messages and themes of the stories concerning the 2015 general elections in the chosen newspapers predominantly centred on the de-escalation of electoral violence. The majority of the stories exhibited a peace-oriented approach, emphasizing cautionary measures and educational content.

6. Discussion

Newspapers gave considerable prominence to reportage of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria by devoting ample space to the elections-related issues, with the majority of stories spanning more than one page across all newspapers. For instance, over 60% of the analyzed content occupied a full page or more, indicating robust and comprehensive coverage. This extensive coverage is often reflected in increased newspaper sales during election periods in Nigeria as a result of the trust reposed on them by the electorate. This underscores the significant role played by newspapers in shaping public opinion during elections in Nigeria. The trust placed in newspapers by the general population, particularly during election periods, is evident. Public figures, especially politicians, utilize newspapers as a platform for communication and mobilization, leveraging the established credibility and reach of these publications. This trust is built on the historical role of newspapers in disseminating important information to the public, especially on matters of public concern such as elections. The influential role of newspapers in shaping public opinion during elections cannot be overstated. They serve not only as sources of information but also as tools for political communication and mobilization. This highlights the pivotal role of newspapers in the political process and emphasizes their significance as a medium for political communication and mobilization. It can be said, therefore, that the findings of this study underscore the influential role played by newspapers in shaping public opinion and facilitating political communication and mobilisation during election periods. The trust and credibility earned by newspapers over time highlight their importance as a medium for political engagement and underscore their enduring relevance in the digital age. On this note, a veteran journalist and public analyst, John Okeire stated:

> That is why you have to balance your story because… if you do not balance your story, you will shape opinion in negative form but if you balance your story, it will shape opinion in a positive form where the reader or the audience have to make judgement, not you making the judgement for them. You don't have to influence your reader's judgement, you should allow your reader to read both sides of the story in order to make his own valid judgement.

This was a major ingredient for the success of the elections, because, it played a pivotal role in the de-escalation of violence during the elections. With the understanding of this and the inherent danger enshrined in subjective reportage, Iruonagbe et al., (2015) argue that media operators should guard against political officeholders hijacking the media space to disseminate propaganda, as it compromises the ideals and work ethics of the media, ultimately undermining press freedom. Corroborating this, John Okeire added that the papers gave adequate spaces for the coverage of the elections:

> You know why? It is only in the newspaper that you can have a full page where politician will be talking to the electorate on what s/he is able to do. But it's not feasible in radio or television. They don't have such space. That kind of space? You won't have it. In the print medium, some people can have two full pages telling people what they intend to do when they are elected. But the electronic medium won't give you that kind of space because it is guided by time: 24 hours… So, newspaper gives the politicians the ample opportunity to tell the people what they want to do

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It is evident, therefore, that each of the newspapers devoted adequate space to the coverage of the issues of the identified conflicts during the elections. More importantly, those issues which dominated the campaigns of the political parties and most debates and discussions about the elections were also centred on these issues. All these were well-reported in each of the papers. The discussions and debates were very robust in the papers as a result of the adequate space given to the issues and the parties involved were satisfied with the kind of representations in the papers. This rested more on the balanced representations of the candidates and their political parties. It can be deduced that Nigerian politicians, much like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, utilised newspapers' coverage and reporting of their political activities to enhance their public image and thereby garner the support and sympathy of the electorate.

Also, the findings revealed a predominant focus on the de-escalation of electoral violence in the framing of stories related to the 2015 general elections, with 67.9% of stories adopting this approach. However, a notable 32.1% of stories were framed in a manner that could potentially escalate electoral violence. This highlights the significant influence of newspapers in shaping public perception and behaviour during periods of heightened political tension. The emphasis on peace-oriented framing is crucial in mitigating tensions during election periods when media influence on human interaction is particularly pronounced. The intersection of media power and consumer response can lead to unpredictable outcomes, as highlighted by Jenkins (2006). The framing of information in newspapers directly influences how it is perceived by the public, underscoring the media's responsibility in shaping public understanding of complex issues. This finding aligns with Reuben's (2019) assertion that framing often guides audience response, as evidenced by the tragic events of the 1994 Rwandan conflict, where media framing played a significant role in influencing extreme actions. Therefore, the emphasis on de-escalating electoral violence in the framing of stories by the selected newspapers during the 2015 general elections indicates a shared approach aimed at promoting peace and stability. This framing strategy likely contributed positively to the peaceful outcome of the elections by shaping public perceptions and encouraging peaceful engagement in the electoral process.

Some examples of the stories that were considered to be peace-oriented and capable of de-escalating electoral violence are as follows:

i.   Controversial Advert – PDP Disowns Fayose (*The Sun,* January 21, 2015, front-page).
ii.   Jonathan, Buhari Review Peace Accord (*The Sun,* 27 March, 2015, front-page).
iii.   I have no Plan to Remove Jega, Jonathan (*Daily Independent,* March 2, 2015, front-p).
iv.   I 'm not under Pressure to Resign – Jega (*Daily Independent,* March 16, 2015, p.3).
v.   Jonathan will Concede Defeat if he Loses – Presidency (*Daily Trust,* January 19, 2022, p.4).
vi.   APC Condemns Attack on Jonathan's Convoy in Katsina (*Daily Trust,* January 22, 2022, p. 3).
vii.   These Men have Committed to PEACE. Let us Follow their Example! (*Daily Trust,* March 25, 2015, advert on front-page).
viii.   Northern Elders Laud Jonathan, Charge Buhari (*Daily Trust,* April 2, 2015, p.7).
ix.   As Deadline Expires: no Case against Buhari's Election (*Daily Trust,* April 22, 2015, front-page).

The following are some examples of the stories that threw caution in the air and could thus contribute to de-escalation of electoral violence:

i.   "Further Polls' Shift Unconstitutional", Jega (*Daily Independent,* January 25, 2015, front-page).
ii.   Buhari Urges Supporters to Shun Violence (*The Sun,* 27 March, 2015, p.5).
iii.   Obama, Buhari, Moon, other World Leaders, Nigerians Celebrate Jonathan, Buhari (*Nigerian Tribune,* April 1, 2015, pp 4 & 5).
iv.   2015: "I will Prevent Election Violence" – Jonathan (*Daily Trust,* December 25, 2014, p.6).
v.   Civil Society Groups Urge Compliance with Abuja Peace Accord (*The Sun,* January 12, 2022, p.7)
vi.   "Nothing must Go Wrong with Card Readers" – Sambo (*Daily Independent,* March 13, 2015, p.4).
vii.   Obasanjo Warns against Handover to Military (*Daily Trust,* March 25, 2015, front-page).
viii.   Don't Undermine Election Results– US, UK (*Nigerian Tribune,* March 31 2015, front-page).

This suggests that the newspapers played a role in framing the elections' stories with a focus on peace. This implies that the newspapers intentionally or inadvertently presented information in a way that would promote a peaceful atmosphere during the elections. This seems to be good because of the increasing influence of the media in various aspects of human interaction, which suggests the power dynamic between the media and its readers. It could be said therefore, that the presentation of the newspapers was capable of influencing the people towards peace during the period of the elections because the way a story is framed in the media has a direct impact on how readers interpret and respond to it. This highlights the significance of responsible journalism in shaping public perceptions. The finding of this study, therefore, underscores the critical role of media framing in shaping public opinion and behaviour, especially in sensitive contexts like elections.

        Most previous studies emphasised how mass media, due to factors like bias, deliberate distortion, partisan reporting, and unprofessional conduct influenced by ethnicity, ownership, and other interests, sometimes exacerbate violence (Tobechukwu, 2021; Ibraheem et al., 2015; Iruonagbe et al., 2015; Nwamuo, Edegoh & Iwok, 2015 & Isola, 2010). The point to be taken home here is that newspaper framing of stories can play a key role in public perception and behaviour, especially in the context of sensitive events like elections. It also draws attention to the importance of responsible and unbiased journalism in contributing to a peaceful democratic process. Buttressing this, a high-ranking media professional and editor, Debo Abdulahi explained a deliberate move of the papers towards peace:

> If we did not consider peace we would have taken that advert from Ayodele Fayose, for instance. All adverts that came in that time were properly screened. There were some that were rejected, that we said "no, no". I cannot remember all. Some were sent back, that remove this sentence, this paragraph.
>
> I killed many stories. You know an editor is a killer. I killed many stories because they did not conform with the company's policy at that time, some were unprintable. The reason was that we did not want to set the country in flame. And of course, it is not all stories that can go. I have over 100 correspondents reporting to me every day from the 36 states of the federation. I killed stories yesterday, I will kill stories today. If I killed stories in 2015, so it was in 1949 (when *Nigerian Tribune* was established).

It can be said, therefore, that the position of the framing theory, that "news content is typically shaped and contextualised by journalists within reference, and according to some latent structure of meaning" (McQuails, 2005:555), is germane. As noted by Nelson et al., (1997) and amplified by Uzuegbunam (2021), Reuben (2021) and Aina (2004), framing is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organisation defines and constructs political issues or public matters. This completely tallies with the findings of this study, especially as posited by Aina (2004: 6), that "framing theory suggests that the way mass media frame an issue and code words to describe the issue can have an impact and the role of well-known individuals commenting on it can be an important one". This also resonates deeply with the insights offered by scholars like Oboh (2021), who issues a compelling admonition. Oboh underscores the paramount importance of media outlets, both public and private, aligning themselves with courses of action that serve the greater public interest. In this discourse, the media's role in the context of elections and campaigns assumes pivotal significance. Therefore, the media's responsibility is not only to furnish information regarding registered political parties, their respective agenda, electoral process and candidates but also to present this information in a manner that encourages citizens to make informed decisions about the electoral process, political parties and candidates without fanning the flames of conflict.

7. Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it becomes evident that newspapers possess the capacity to significantly influence conflict situations through their coverage and reportage. This was particularly notable during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, where newspapers played a crucial role in the de-escalation of electoral violence by framing their reportage in a manner that emphasised peace. The framing pattern of the newspapers was primarily peace-oriented, emphasising cautionary and educational content. Additionally, the extensive coverage given to the elections, with significant space devoted to election-related issues, facilitated a robust presentation of electoral matters. In essence, this study underscores the potential for media operators to contribute to peaceful outcomes, provided they adhere to the professional ethics of journalism. Furthermore, it reaffirms the notion that media framing can wield considerable influence over the actions and perceptions of the populace.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:
1. Media operators should be conflict-sensitive in their presentation and framing of sensitive issues such as elections;
2. Adherence to the tenets of professional ethics of journalism is strongly recommended;
3. Journalists are encouraged to resist anything that can stand between them and doctrine of objectivity and fairness in their reportage.

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