Analysis of News Coverage of Islam in Selected Nigerian Online Newspapers

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Abstract
A huge amount of media coverage was devoted to Islam and Muslims after the 9/11 attacks. As a result, a media version of Islam became widely known. The topic of news coverage of Islam, particularly in western media, has been explored by many researchers. However, research into the news coverage of Islam in non-western media is either lacking or inadequate. Therefore, this study aims to identify the most common type of news used in covering Islam and determine the extent of Islam-related news coverage in selected Nigerian online newspapers. The Punch and Vanguard newspapers were chosen based on readership and online popularity. News articles related to Islam were gathered from the digital archives of the selected newspapers from November 2015 to September 2016 using "Islam" and "Muslims" as keywords. A total of 247 news articles were gathered and examined. The findings showed that the selected newspapers used more straight news stories in covering Islam-related events compared to feature stories. Additionally, the selected newspapers paid more attention to national Islam-related news than local or global news. These findings suggest that the selected newspapers tend to pay much attention to Islam-related events at the national level. Further analysis of the findings revealed that the selected newspapers covered Islam in the context of conflict. It was envisaged that this study would be useful, particularly to journalists, by providing information that could be used to improve news coverage of Islam. This study was limited to a sample of two online newspapers; hence, further research may employ a larger sample or consider other forms of media, such as radio and television.
***Keywords**: Feature story, news coverage, Islam, newspaper, Nigeria, straight news*

Introduction
The power of media in shaping people's opinions can never be underestimated (Happer & Philo, 2013; Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). The relationship between media and religion has become a contentious topic as researchers explore how media frame religion and how religious people use media (Allen, 2014; Mitchell, & Gower, 2012; Powell, 2018; Rupar, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Edward Said's *Orientalism* is regarded by many researchers as the landmark in the relationship

between Islam and the press (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Martin & Phelan, 2002; Saeed, 2007) which has informed many subsequent studies on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media. Newspapers media of mass communications constitute significant sources of news with various opportunities (Stempel, 1991; Street, 2002). As a result of the information revolution, newspaper publishers find it easy to reach the global audience promptly (Hassan & Azmi, 2018).

Improvements in the production, dissemination, and reception of media messages have led to an explosion in channels and media sources (Van der Wurff, 2008). After the 9/11 attacks, the huge amount of media coverage of Islam and Muslims resulted in a widespread awareness of the religion and its adherents. As a result, a media version of Islam became widely known (Rane, Ewart, & Martinkus, 2014). The amount of news coverage devoted to Islam has increased (Powell, 2018). However, meeting the quality of standards in news coverage is of great concern (Dart & Allen, 2000) because, at times, Islam was depicted in a bad light (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Jacobsen, Jensen, Vitus, & Weibel, 2012). This situation does not help to promote the readers' knowledge about religious co-existence but rather highlights the problem instead of solutions (Allen, 2014).

According to Dart and Allen (2000), many news producers maintain that they are open to good coverage of religion, but very few of them demonstrate a quality standard of news reporting. Objectivity in news coverage of regions matters greatly. For instance, the Danish Cartoon Controversy that occurred in 2005 was due to a blasphemous newspaper report (Asmal, 2008). Subsequently, the newspaper industry faced global challenges beyond what the journalists expected (Hoover, 2012). Previous studies found that news coverage of Islam and Muslims has increased significantly in the western media (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008; Powell, 2018; Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013). However, research into the news coverage of Islam in non-western media is either lacking or inadequate (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

Nigeria is a multi-religious society with Islam and Christianity as dominant religions (Ngbea, 2019; Nwaomah, 2011). As such, the Nigerian media landscape is characterized by Muslim-affiliated and Christian-affiliated media outlets (Demarest, Godefroidt, & Langer, 2020). Given this diversity, news coverage of

religion in Nigerian has been called to question by several researchers (e.g. Demarest, Godefroidt, & Langer, 2020; Hassan & Azmi, 2018). In pluralistic societies such as Nigerian, the media could play a critical role in promoting religious harmony. However, lack of objectivity in news coverage of religions may promote disharmony (Oloyede, Oni, & Oluwole, 2015). Additionally, Demarest et al. (2020) noted that Nigerian media outlets experienced numerous operational flaws that may hinder fair and balanced reporting.

Therefore, this study focuses on a content analysis of news coverage of Islam-related news in Nigerian online newspapers from November 2015 until September 2016. *Punch* and *Vanguard* were selected for analysis based on their readership and online popularity. Specifically, this study aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. To identify the most common type of news used by the selected online newspapers in covering Islam.
2. To determine the extent to which the selected newspapers cover Islam-related news?

Media News Coverage and Islam

A number of studies were conducted to explore news coverage of Islam (Abbas, 2015; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Bleich & van der Veen, 2021; Cottle, 2006; Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, & Keel, 2011; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Lindemann & Stolz, 2014; Moore et al., Nanabawa, 2013; Poole, 2011; Terman, 2017; Thompson, 2013; Younes, Hassan, & Azmi, 2020). Most of these studies indicated a massive increase in the dimensions of media coverage of Islam and Muslims, especially after the 9/11 attacks (Jacobsen et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2008; Thompson, 2013; Yusof et al., 2013). For example, Thompson (2013) found that media coverage of Islam and Muslims rose dramatically during the 9/11 attacks. The 9/11 incident resulted in a massive increase in media coverage of Islam. According to Thompson, news discourse during the period was mainly negative and centered on violence or fanaticism. Similarly, Poole (2011) found that the major change in news coverage of Muslims after 9/11 was the association of Islam with terrorism. This change happened immediately following the 9/11 attacks when the media focused dramatically on three main issues: terrorism, counter-terrorism measures, and discrimination against Muslims.

Additionally, Moore et al. (2008) conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles about Muslims in the British press from 2000 to 2008. The study found that

after 9/11, news coverage of Muslims increased significantly, peaking in 2006 and remaining at a high level in 2007 and 2008. A study shows that media coverage of Islam increased despite the killing of Osama Bin Laden (Yusof et al., 2013). The bulk of coverage of Muslims focuses on Muslims as a threat. Rane et al. (2014) argued that substantial media coverage of Islam can be influential in shaping the audience's attitudes and opinions about Islam and Muslims. The more reliant audiences are on the media, the more potentially vulnerable they are to media influence. This argument concurs with Said's (1979) assertion that when attention was given to the religious revolution in Iran, Islam was characterized limitlessly through a handful of i generally organized media stereotypes. Also, research shows that increased news coverage of Islam is often associated with misinformation that can trigger human emotions (Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013).

Moreover, controversies about Islam dominate the press coverage of religion, mostly containing accusations about extremism or intolerance (Thompson, 2013; Younes et al., 2020). For instance, among the prominent stories of 2011 in the US was the so-called threat of homegrown "Islamic terrorism" (Mitchell & Gower, 2012). A study conducted by Poole (2011) found news coverage of fundamentalism mostly focused on Muslims. The media tend to use "fundamentalism" to describe Muslim extremists alone. According to Baker et al. (2013), Muslims are constructed as extremists and fundamentalists. It should be noted that stereotyped media depiction of Islam is not a new phenomenon. As pointed out by Thompson (2013), Islam has been subjected to certain trends of depictions that are as old as the news media themselves.

Also, Jacobsen et al. (2012) posited that negative portrayal dominates the media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Lindemann and Stolz (2014) conducted a media content analysis of how Muslim foreigners are constructed in media discourse compared to other immigrants in Switzerland. The study showed that religion was a new instrument in the newspaper's description of foreign otherness and that topics about religion were infrequent in the 1970s. Unfortunately, Swiss media focused on Islam in the discourse of immigrants, which indicates their construction of "Muslim foreigners". Similarly, Rupar (2012) observed that by using Muslims and immigrants interchangeably, the media tend to reproduce prejudice and bigotry.

According to Kumar (2011), Muslims are under-represented in media coverage. This representation is likely to construct a distorted image of Islam. Abbas (2001) also noted that British Muslims feel that their media representation is distorted and stereotypical. A recent study conducted by Bleich & van der Veen (2021) showed that American newspapers portray Islam more negatively than other religions. Similarly, Rezaei, Kobari, and Salami (2019) aver that "media purposefully tend to collectivize Muslims to depict that terrorism and Islam are two inseparable notions" (p. 70).

A few studies focused on the coverage of religion in the Nigerian media (Ashimi, 2013; Hassan & Azmi, 2018; Hassan, Azmi, & Abubakar, 2017; Oloyede, et al., 2015). Mostly, these studies established that the Nigerian media tend to cover religion, particularly Islam, in a bad light. For example, Ashimi (2013) found that the Nigerian media often smear the image of Islam, especially regarding the introduction of Sharia. According to Hassan et al. (2017), the negative portrayal might due to the media's association of Islam with violence. Unfortunately, this situation appears to be overlooked in public debates.

The foregoing review suggests that news coverage of Islam and Muslims increased after 9/11. This increased coverage is often distorted and likely to construct Muslims negatively. However, previous studies focused on news coverage of Islam in western media. According to Ahmed and Matthes (2017), there is a lack of research into news coverage of Islam in non-western media. Therefore, the present study could provide valuable information that can be used to improve news coverage of Islam, particularly in Muslim-majority nations. The study focuses on how Nigerian newspapers cover Islam-related news. Nigeria is a Muslim-majority nation and, to some extent, English speaking country (Saidu, 2014). The findings of this study will equip the public with information on newspaper coverage of Islam-related news and could help journalists to improve news coverage of Islam.

Theoretical Approach

This study adopts agenda-setting theory to guide the research. The development of agenda-setting theory is attributed to McCombs and Shaw (1972) who provided the first experimental support of agenda-setting effects in their study of a presidential campaign. Their analysis revealed that when the media report certain issues more saliently than others, those salient issues became the focus of the campaign (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2009; Potter, 2012). Agenda-setting

theory presumes that news media create a particular image of reality whether, consciously or unconsciously, and then confront the audience daily with issues that are important according to the media agenda. As a result of an omission of certain issues and emphasis on others, the media create a particular way for the audience to think about reality (Fourie, 2001). McCombs and Shaw (1972) showed a significant relationship between media and public agenda, but the study failed to determine which influences the other.

Agenda-setting consists of two levels. The first-level refers to the salience transfer of issues while the second-level is the process of various attributes competing for attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; McCombs, & Reynolds, 2002). These levels set the public agenda and influence the public perceptions of issues. To identify salience in media agenda-setting, studies have focused on the attention level of agenda-setting (Lim, 2010). According to (Kiousis, 2004), there are two characteristics of media agenda salience: visibility and valence. Visibility consists of the attention or prominence accorded to particular issues. Attention is measured in terms of the number of news stories about an issue while prominence is measured in terms of length and placement of stories in print media, or the length and time allocated to stories in broadcast media. The second level of agenda-setting is very similar to framing. According to Weaver (2007), there is no consensus among researchers on whether the second-level agenda-setting is equivalent to framing. However, whether framing is more or less similar to second-level agenda setting depends to a great extent on how framing is defined.

Agenda-setting theory suggests that the extent of reporting is one of the significant elements associated with agenda-setting (Folarin, 1998). Based on this assumption, we argue that the extent of media coverage of Islam determines the salience of media-generated Muslims' image. Agenda-setting theory presumes that what the media consider important will ultimately be reflected by what society will come to think is important. Newspapers offer cues about the salience of issues. By repeating these cues day after day, the newspapers effectively communicate the importance of such issues (Okwuchukwu, 2014). The media set the agenda of public discourse and determine the people's perception of particular issues.

Methodology

Design

This study employed content analysis to analyze news coverage of Islam-related in selected Nigerian newspapers. A content analysis emphasizes an integrated view of speech/texts and their specific contexts (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). As a research technique, content analysis enables communication researchers to make inferences about the influences of news on the audience. The advantages of using content analysis are numerous; it looks at communication via text and allows for qualitative analyses. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), "content analysis takes texts and analyses, reduces and interrogates them into a summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes" (p. 476). This study focuses on newspapers because readers can have a reasonable control level over their news consumption since they can attend to news stories at any time (Kuypers, 2002).

Data Collection

The *Punch* and *Vanguard* were selected for analysis based on their readership and online popularity. In 2018, the selected newspapers had 3.00m and 2.43m site visitors respectively (Top 500 Sites, 2018). All the selected newspapers are published in English. *Punch* newspaper is published by Punch Nigeria Limited while *Vanguard* is published by Vanguard Media Limited. Both publications are privately owned. It should be noted that most Nigerian newspapers are owned by private individuals or organizations (Africa Media Initiative, 2006).

Regarding the news articles**, a** sample was collected from November 2015 until September 2016. This period represents a scenario of various related events around the globe. The two-year period (2015-2016) has experienced its share of significant world events (Global Terrorism Index, 2017). Also, this time frame was chosen to make the data into a manageable size for analysis. An internet-based search was conducted to gather relevant data from the websites of the selected newspapers "Islam" and "Muslim" as keywords. Any article that focuses upon a report about Islam or Muslims fulfills the inclusion criteria. All news articles identified using this method were read for relevance. Articles that do not primarily focus on Islam were not included in the study. Additionally, only straight news and feature stories were chosen for analysis. While Straight news is meant to report breaking news and is usually written or delivered in a short and straightforward form, feature article takes an in-depth look at a subject (Murray, 1991; Oyero, 2006).

2.1.1 Data Analysis

The data were coded using the content analysis procedure proposed by Cohen et al. (2007): Breaking down texts into units of analysis; undertaking statistical analysis of the units; and presenting the analysis in as economical form as possible. At the preliminary stage of coding, all the selected articles were summarized. The unit of analysis is any individual relevant news article that appeared in the selected newspapers within the period of data collection. The news coverage refers to the extent to which a news story is reported in the newspaper. The coverage of Islam-related news was categorized into: i) local news, which refers to the coverage of Islam-related events in a local context that would not be of interest to another locality; ii) national news, which refers to the coverage of events in a national context; and iii) global news, which refers to news coverage in a global context.

The above categories are determined based on the issues covered and the audience for whom the news is reported. For instance, on 30th November 2015, the *Punch* newspaper reported, "Northern Muslim elite laid foundation for B'Haram- Kukah". This news article focuses on a national issue that might be of particular interest to Nigerians. The newspaper even classified this report as "National News", perhaps to specify that the topic is of national interest. Nevertheless, on 8th December 2015, the same newspaper reported, "Trump calls for halt on Muslims entering US". This report covers a global topic that might attract a global audience. Additionally, each article was read to determine whether the content is written as straight news or feature story.

Subsequently, categorical variables were formed to generate quantifiable data. To ensure reliability in this study, inter-coder reliability was employed. The reliability was measured using Cohen's kappa. The researchers and the coder reached 100% agreement on the types of news and categorization of news coverage. According to Neuendorf (2002), inter-coder reliability is paramount as content analysis measures are meaningless without an acceptable level of reliability. The quantification of data was performed using the SPSS software package (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA, 20.0).

Findings

The selected newspapers produced different amounts of Islam-related articles within the period of data collection. *Punch* produced 103 Islam-related news articles while *Vanguard* produced 144 articles. The overall 247 Islam-related news articles were analyzed. The first objective of this study aims to identify the most common type of news used by the selected online newspapers in covering Islam. This information is depicted in Table 1 as follows.

Table 1: Types of news and coverage

Variable	Categories	RF	PC	CP
Type of news	Straight News	0.98	243(98.4)	98.4
	Feature Stories	0.02	4(1.6)	100
	Total	1.00	247(100)	
Coverage	Local news	0.33	81(32.8)	32.8
	National news	0.35	87(35.2)	68.0
	Global news	0.32	79(32.0)	100
	Total	**1.00**	**247(100)**	

The first question aims to identify the most common type of news used by the selected newspapers in reporting Islam. As depicted in Table 1, a large majority (98.4%) of the Islam-related articles published in the selected newspapers contained straight news stories while only 1.6% contained feature stories. These findings indicate that the selected newspapers have not performed an in-depth coverage of Islam-related news.

The second objective aims to determine the extent of Islam-related news coverage in the selected newspapers. Table 2 shows that more than one-third (35.2%) of the Islam-related news articles covered national news. Additionally, almost one-third of the articles covered local (32.8%) and global news (32.0%) respectively. These findings imply that, in news coverage of Islam, the selected newspapers focused more on national news compared to local or global news.

The above findings show that the selected newspapers tend to create the image of Islam nationally by producing Islam-related news for national consumption. However, substantial coverage was devoted to global news. Some of the global news stories covered by the newspapers include the Paris attacks in 2015, the Bangladesh café attacks in 2016, and the San Bernardino California attacks in 2015.

These incidents are some of the violent events that occurred within the period of data collection. Therefore, the findings of this study also indicate that the selected newspapers covered Islam in the context of conflict.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Nigerian newspapers used more straight news than feature stories in news coverage of Islam. It can be argued that readers are not likely to develop an in-depth understanding of Islam through straight news. This is because feature stories are intended to involve and educate the reader by providing information with real events, innovations, and trends, while straight news stories give factual accounts of events in a simple and straight manner (Murray, 1991). Oyero (2006) explained that the main function of feature stories is to educate and entertain. In news coverage of religion, journalists must endeavor to maintain journalistic ethics and professionalism. This is because reporting religion in the context of conflict is likely to generate tension instead of promoting peace and harmony (Powell, 2018).

Additionally, the extent of news coverage is one of the significant elements associated with agenda-setting (Folarin, 1998; Coleman, et al., 2009). In this regard, it can be argued that the extent of coverage of Islam-related news determines the perceived importance of Islam-related issues in the audience's mindsets. The findings reported in this study show that Nigerian newspapers tend to pay much attention to Islam-related events at the national level. However, a huge coverage was also devoted to local and global Islam-related events. People's attitudes toward Islam and Muslims can be shaped through world events. As claimed by Agenda-setting theory, the seriousness of coverage and frequency of news presentation are likely to shape people's perceptions. The findings of this study are supportive of Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) who found that most of the articles in Australian newspapers were about local issues. In contrast, Dahinden et al. (2011) found that media coverage of Islam in Switzerland focused more on Muslims abroad than local. Cottle (2006) also found that approximately 86% of the global news coverage focused on Islam.

Moreover, based on the assumption of agenda-setting theory, when an issue receives global coverage, such an issue is considered important. In this regard,

many studies (Dahinden, et al., 2011; Rupar, 2012; Cottle, 2006) found that the focus of contemporary media is more on Islam in the global context and that Islam is mostly a topic in the foreign news section of many media outlets. This study indicates that the selected newspapers covered Islam in the context of conflicts, such as the Paris attacks, the Bangladesh café attacks, and the San Bernardino California attacks. In line with the findings of this study, Dahinden et al. (2011) found that coverage of Islam mostly consists of conflicts, terrorism, war, and other forms of violence. The everyday life of Muslims, such as cultural or historical aspects of their faith is hardly part of the coverage. Some studies (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Moore et al., 2008) found that there is a constant relationship between international events and domestic issues in terms of how Islam and Muslims are represented in the media. Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) found that there is intertextuality between local and international discourses on Islam and Muslims. Advances in technology have created opportunities for newspapers to access, gather, and disseminate information globally.

Conclusion

This study explored the coverage of Islam-related news in selected Nigerian online newspapers. According to the findings, a large majority of the Islam-related articles contained straight news stories. Also, the selected newspapers covered more national Islam-related news than local or global news. However, a huge amount of coverage was also devoted to global Islam-related news. Based on the assumption of agenda-setting theory, the extent of news coverage determines the perceived importance of Islam-related issues in people's mindsets. As newspapers have an online presence, they tend to accomplish cross-boundary dissemination of Islam-related news through globalized means of communication. These media messages can influence both local and international communities. Additionally, most of the Islam-related news stories were reported in the context of conflict. This kind of coverage does not help to promote harmony.

This study advances our understanding of how non-western newspapers cover Islam-related news. It was envisaged that this study would be beneficial, especially to journalists, by providing information that could be used to improve news coverage of Islam. This improvement can be achieved through objective, balanced and fair reporting as well as sticking to the ethics of journalism. Also, the findings of this study can be useful in news gathering, production, and dissemination. However, the sample of this study was limited to two online newspapers. Therefore,

further research may use a larger sample to produce more representative outcomes. Also, news coverage of Islam in other forms of media, such as radio and television, can be a potential area for further studies.

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