Values in Protest News the 2020 Anti-SARS Uprising in Nigeria

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Abstract

Establishing patterns of newsworthiness in protest news contributes to the formation of social cognition responsible for the reproduction of protest as organised resistance or solidarity. This study explores how newsworthiness is constructed in the coverage of the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Based on a qualitative content analysis of 291 articles from two mainstream dailies, the Daily Trust *and the* Punch, *this study shows that the Press tends to favour elites in news reports about the protests. In order to be strategically effective, it is essential for a protest movement to analyse the circumstances under which it is operating and show an understanding of its democratic character to achieve its objectives. This study provides crucial insights into why news values are essential in explaining critical social phenomena, especially in non-western societies like Nigeria.*

Keywords: News values, journalists, #EndSARS, protests, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, a leading economy in Africa, was on the edge of anarchy in October, 2020, following the #EndSARS protests after protesters refused to call off their riots and law enforcement agents were nearly overwhelmed. The agitation to end the rampant Police brutality associated with the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), an elite unit of the Nigerian Police Force, went rogue, culminated in a huge social uprising in the October of 2020. Demonstrations were held across the country over issues of police brutality, human rights abuses, and poor governance. It was a mass protest which unnerved the established political order. Mainstream media and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp also played major roles in creating contents which contributed to political polarisation (Lawal, 2020) in the wake of the protests.

Since journalists are responsible for conveying discourse to the audience (Richardson, 2007), how newsworthy are the #EndSARS protests? This paper attempts to answer this question, drawing from Bednarek and Caple's Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) framework. Recently, studies on news values has appears to be gaining traction among scholars of journalism and other soft sciences. However, many of these research efforts seem to completely ignore or

underemphasize the significance of news values in explaining critical social phenomena, particularly in a non-western context. One objective of the present study is to bridge this gap by examining how news values were established in the Nigerian mainstream press coverage of the agitation to end the rampant Police brutality associated with the SARS in October, 2020. Claiming to act in the interest of the public, on the one hand, protesters needed publicity for their agitations. On the other hand, citizens often rely on journalistic testimony about the protests, supplementing this knowledge with their own personal or direct experiences of Police brutality. Professional journalists are, therefore, obligated to get news about protests right. A predominantly qualitative analysis of 291 news stories in the period surrounding the protests was conducted using two mainstream dailies, the *Daily Trust* and the *Punch.*

Literature review

The central role of journalism is to provide information to the public so that citizens can make informed decisions concerning their lives and communities (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Nonetheless, determining what appears in a newspaper is a subjective endeavour derivative of journalists' experiences, attitudes and expectations. This is because reports provided by journalists are not entirely fool proof. It can be affected by different motives and interests, which drive journalists to communicate different stories or privilege certain narratives over others in the coverage of the protests (Ette, 2018). Thus, protesters, political actors, and activists often tend to interpret grievances associated with the protests and try to generate and diffuse those interpretations among the general population (Benford & Snow, 2000).

News values and protests

While the media has been considered the 'last resort' in deciding what to present to the public (Ostgaard, 1965), the parameters that guide journalism professionals in their day-to-day tasks of judging what should be reported as news do not occur by chance (Philips, 2015). Research on news factors at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, has been widely acknowledged in the field of journalism as it laid the foundation for a scholastic line of inquiry on the analysis of news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). However, these scholars' concerns about news values stemmed from their investigation of conditions for peaceful coexistence among individuals and national actors across societies rather 'than a fascination with news for its own sake' (Harcup, 2020, p. 17).

Decades of research under the subhead of the protest paradigm have shown that news media coverage was likely to negatively portray deviant groups in society while simultaneously legitimising the status quo (McLeod, 2007; Hertog& McLeod, 1999). Focusing on the news coverage of politically radical groups during the late 1960s, Todd Gitlin, for instance, noted that such groups were unable to achieve their desired objectives because they were systematically represented in ways that demeaned their activities and ideas via the media, causing protesters to become frustrated in their political actions.

Other scholars have also argued that people are genetically predisposed to pay close attention to negative news -deviant individuals, ideas, and events. Indeed, western journalists and international media were often criticised for their emphasis on bad news about the African continent. By exploring the impact of audience metrics on international news production by foreign correspondents in sub-Saharan Africa, Mel Bunce (2015) found that, based on audience metrics, most participants' editors often requested follow-up stories on issues that resonated with readers. In essence, journalists evaluate the perceived newsworthiness of events based on what they imagine their audiences find newsworthy and apply this evaluation to news production.

This said, like other citizens, news media professionals are members of the public and are affected in the content they produce for society (Scheufele, 2006; Abubakre, 2021). A German scholar, Christane Eliders, argued that news values could aid selective retention among audiences, whereby information is processed in a way that is initially peripheral to understanding. Then evaluation takes place to determine if the information deserves further processing (2006). Jorge (2005) attributed the potency of journalism inverted pyramid story structure to news values. He contended that emphasising the facts of an event in order of importance 'succeeds in giving a psychological, philosophical and organisational rationale to the order which journalists choose to give to the data supplied' (p. 57). While scholars have reviewed news values differently over the years (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O' Neill, 2001; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016; Cocking, 2017), the consensus remains that news values are a benchmark by which media practitioners decide that a story is worth disseminating. Conceptually, it is in establishing what is newsworthy that media practitioners choose what content to present to audiences. Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, who have expressed reservations about how the term 'news values' is applied by researchers, linked discourse analysis and news values to advance an approach called discursive news

values analysis (DVNA). Theirs is a blend of linguistic resources combined with semiotics: 'Newsworthiness is not inherent in events but established through language and image' (2012, p. 44). How an event is constructed as news by journalists forms the primary concern of the DVNA, which is somewhat a distillate approach from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A significance of the DVNA approach is that it underscores the formative influence of the language of the news media in enacting identity. This, in turn, shapes societal realities as well as directs our attention to the influence of text on social power and relations (van Dijk, 1988; Richardson, 2007). Operating within this context, Bednarek and Caple (2012) identified 'values that make the story newsworthy': negativity, timeliness, proximity, prominence, consonance, impact, novelty, superlativeness and personalisation (p. 42).

Methodology

This study employed qualitative content analysis (QCA) of two mainstream dailies, the *Daily Trust* and the *Punch*. The limitations of the QCA method were first recognized by Siegfried Kracauer (1952). He argued that an undue emphasis on quantification "tends to lessen the accuracy of analysis" (p. 631). Therefore, he suggested a complementary approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The researcher was operating on this pedestal while examining how news values played out in the reportage of the #EndSARS protests. Adopting a purposive sampling method, the *Punch* and the *Daily Trust* newspapers were chosen based on their influence, quality and geographical reach. A total of 291 news articles published in *The Punch* (n= 152) and the *Daily Trust* (n= 139) between October 4 and October 31, 2020, related to the #EndSARS protests were identified and selected for analysis. The dates stated here marked the period when the protests received some substantial media coverage.

These newspapers also cover a wide range of political perspectives. While it is also noteworthy that the *Punch* presumably holds some greater appeal among audiences in the southern part of Nigeria and the *Daily Trust* enjoys virtually the same in the North, the intent of this study was not to invest in the comparability between the two major dailies papers in terms of cultural ideology; rather, the focus is mainly on the cumulative patterns of newsworthiness of the #EndSARS protest, as reported by the two newspapers during the period under study.

The analysis was conducted via manual coding, looking at headlines, opening leads, and story structures of news articles and counting the news values per

occurrence. Each news value was examined one after the other to allow for a focused and systemic analysis. This implies that if a lexical item was repeated in the headline or in the lead or the story structure, it was counted twice or as many number of times it appears in the news text. Shareability, as a news value (see Harcup & O'Neill, 2016, p. 13), was excluded from the data analysis. It was felt that it would be unwieldy to keep track of all instances of shareability, which encompass news generated through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, because the #EndSARS protest was preceded by the Covid-19 lockdown, which impacted journalistic routines and content (Abubakre, 2021). This was marked by increased reliance on interactive digital media platforms. In the same way, newsmakers were increasingly providing information through their social media accounts.

Table 1: Examples of news values in #EndSARS Protests

News value	**Examples**
Eliteness/prominence Definition: Drawing readers in through the prestige of the news source, paying attention to the famous, usually indicating their *status, title or profession.*	Textual: Headline: 'I stand with you, Atiku tells protesters' 'Former Vice-President has declared support for Nigerian youths currently engaged in street protests across the country against SARS brutality.' *Punch October 11 2020* *Headline: They told Buhari I sponsored #EndSARS protests-Tinubu ,* *'A national leader of the All Progressives Congress, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, on Wednesday said he had been reported to the Presidency that he was a sponsor of the #EndSARS protests.' Daily Trust, October 22 2020*
Proximity Definition: This is adduced from references to place and how close or distant the protest is. Its core component is the 'where' of the event.	'Despite the Force's call for calm, the protest raged on in several parts of the country, including, Lagos, Osun, Oyo, Delta, Imo, with Nigerians abroad joining the demonstration'. *Punch,* October 10 2020

	Headline: *#ENDSARS protests spread to Kaduna* 'Youths in Kaduna on Saturday held a peaceful protest seeking for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to be disbanded.' *Daily Trust, October 11 2020*
Consonance Definition: Protest is presented in terms of what is familiar and stereotypical about the event.	'After days of public outcry and nationwide protests, the Inspector-general of Police Mohammed Adamu, on Sunday, bowed to pressure and disbanded the Federal Special Anti-robbery Squad. *Punch,* October 12 2020 Visual: Photos of Kano *Hisbah* officials enforcing Sharia-compliant haircut on a citizen in Kano, Front page, *Punch,* October 5 2020. Such images reinforce sentiments of human rights violation associated with Hisbah, a religious police force in Kano, Northern Nigeria. The picture, which is suggestive of equating the acts of Hisbah to the rogue SARS, is also an image open to multiple interpretations and sentiments, such as Nigeria being a secular and not an Islamic state; or conjuring an image of uncritical citizens, suggestive of an othering of Muslims and the North. Headline: 'Despite SARS ban, protests continue' *Daily Trust*, October 13 2020 Despite the pronouncement by the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, scrapping the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (FSARS), the EndSARS protests continued yesterday in parts of the country. 'The Northern States Governor's Forum on Thursday blamed the violence that erupted in some states of the country following the EndSARS protest by youths seeking to end police brutality as the action of 'diabolical influencers' who

	are bent on pushing for regime change outside the ballot'. *Daily Trust, October 23 2020*
Negativity/positivity Definition: The story prioritises the negative of the event in terms of evil and conflictual; alternatively discursively constructs positivity in terms of progress or action taken.	Headline: 'Outrage grows over SARS menace, Osinbajo, others condemn killings, arrests, extortion.' 'There was outrage across the country on Sunday over the harassment, extortion and extra-judicial killing of innocent Nigerians by operatives of the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad, one of the units of the Nigeria PoliceForce.' *Punch,* October 5 2020. Headline: 'Black Tuesday: 49 killed as protests turn bloody' *Punch,* October 21 2020 Headline: 'NMA urges doctors to provide emergency services to injured' *Daily Trust, October 23 2020, provides a useful exemplar of positivity.* 'The spontaneity of the *#EndSARS* protests happening across major cities in Nigeria and the violence, mostly targeted at the protesters by thugs, allegedly sponsored by state actors, appear like dark clouds during a hurricane'. *Daily Trust, October 16 2020* Visual: Three photos showing confrontations between protesters and hoodlums in Lagos and Abuja, with major roads blocked. Front page *Daily Trust, October 15 2020. The moment when one protester was using his cellphone to get a snapshot of another injured protester offers an opportunity to explain the relevant impact of digital media (social media) on the protests. Daily Trust, October 15 2020.*
Impact	Headline: 'Investors lose N113bn as

Definition: This relates to the consequences of the protest. How does the protest affect other members of the public?	#EndSARS crisis deepens' 'The Nigerian bourse on Wednesday closed lower to reverse the previous day's gain as bears regained their grip following fear of insecurity arising from *#EndSARS* protest that degenerated into mayhem across the country.' *Punch,* October 22 2020' Visual: The pictures of a burnt shopping mall and an event centre presented easily convey the aftermath effect of the protests. Front page *Punch,* October 28 2020. Headline: 'Nigeria loses N770bn as protests ground Lagos, others' 'As the *#EndSARS* protests bite harder, businesses and government in Lagos have lost over N770 billion, relevant authorities said on Tuesday.' *Daily Trust, October 21 2020* Visual: Photos of a police station in flames, images of burnt media organisations linked to a notable politician, photo of victims of protests receiving treatment at a hospital; also contribute to the discursive interpretation of impact in the protest coverage. Front page. *Daily Trust, October 22 2020*
Personalisation Definition: The concern here involves communicating the feelings or humanising the protest.	Headline: 'My daughter almost lost her life to SARS men, says Ooni' 'Meanwhile, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi, has supported the scrapping of SARS. Ogunwusi said on Twitter that his 25-year-old daughter once had a nasty experience with SARS operatives that almost cost her life.' *Punch,* October 13 2020' Headline: 'I took my son to police only for

	him to be killed there- Kano parents speak' 'As a law-abiding citizen, Malam Nasiru Abdulkadir took his 26-year-old son to a police station in their community for interrogation over a neighbourhood gang fight he was alleged to have been involved in. Little did he know that his dear son would pay heavily for his action as the police allegedly tortured him till he died'. *Daily Trust, October 24 2020* *Visual: An image of a damaged vehicle belonging to the Osun State Governor is used on the front page. Daily Trust, October 18 2020, see also, Punch,* October 18 2020'
Superlativeness Definition: It refers to the level of intensity associated with the protest.	Headline: 'Investigate Lekki killings, 30 rights groups tell African commission' Over 30 human rights groups in Africa under the aegis of Coalition of Human Rights Organisations in Africa have asked the African Commission on human and people's rights to investigate the alleged murder of protesters at Lekki Toll Plaza.' *Punch,* October 24 2020 Headline: 'Endsars: Death toll rises to 12, many injured' 'Twelve people have been killed since protests against police brutality started in Nigeria about 10 days ago.' *Weekly Trust,* October 17 2020 'Hundreds of young men and women took to the streets in Surulere Local Government Area, Lagos State, to express their dissatisfaction over what they termed harassment and brutalisation of young Nigerians by men of SARS.' *Daily Trust,* October 13 2020 Headline: 'Endsars: Too much anger, hunger in the land- Govs' *Daily Trust,* October 19 2020

Timeliness Definition: When an event takes place is linked to this aspect of the protest.	Headline: 'Police begin training of 1850 SWAT personnel today' 'The police authorities have partnered the International Committee of the Red Cross and other development partners on the training of the new Special Weapons and Tactics Team which commences on Monday (today).*Punch,* October 19 2020 Headline: 'Buhari to #Endsars: Stop Protests Now' President Muhammadu Buhari last night told the #EndSARS protesters to stop and warned those he said have hijacked and misdirected the youths from their initial and genuine agitation for reform.' *Daily Trust,* October 23 2020
Novelty Definition: Refers to the unusual aspect of the protest.	Headline: 'Army arrests soldier supporting #EndSARS protesters on twitter' 'The Nigerian Army has arrested Lance Corporal Harrison Friday, who has been supporting citizens calling for an end to police brutality' *Punch,* October 22 2020. Headline: 'Why these states survived palliatives looting frenzy' 'In the wake of the #EndSARS protests across the country, hoodlums broke into several warehouses across many states and looted palliatives. However, few states survived the plundering of palliatives. *Daily Trust* reports on why looting of palliatives did not take place in these states'. *Daily Trust, October 31 2020*

Table 2
An example of quantitative analysis

News Value	***The Punch***	***Daily Trust***	**Total references across sample**
Elite/Prominence	147	119	266
Proximity	83	89	172
Consonance	59	70	129
Negativity/Positivity	55	32	87
Impact	23	29	52
Personalisation	10	8	18
Superlativeness	11	8	19
Timeliness	4	5	9
Novelty	2	1	3

Findings

As mentioned in the literature review, the objective was to examine how newsworthy were the #EndSARS protests in the Nigerian Press. The findings of this study indicate that elite/prominence is the most frequently constructed news value in the coverage of the protests. As seen in Table 2, other significant values that made the protests newsworthy were proximity, consonance, and negativity/positivity. This finding supports the assertions by Bednarek and Caple (2012) that the high status of the individuals, organisations or nations involved in an event makes a story newsworthy. This presupposes that journalists' decisions concerning the character and discourse of protest news are based on a solid relationship between their sources and themselves. Now, much has been made about the dynamics between journalists-source relationships (Ciboh, 2017), essentially because journalism enjoys a 'privileged cultural status' (McNair, 2005, p. 26) whereby social actors, who, by their social status, have access to the media and may want to convey misleading political facts through it. Beyond this, it is equally essential to interrogate the fidelity of the complexities of misinformation and disinformation surrounding media coverage of the protests concerning power relations in society. This, however, is beyond the scope of the present research.

Nonetheless, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) hitherto emphasised the significance of the power elite as a leading criterion that news stories must satisfy to make it into the news of the day. Concerning the protests, the voices of prominent individuals, elite politicians, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and elite countries were

privileged in news reports, providing a somewhat unified agenda about the protests. At the same time, the protest provided a basis for critics to condemn or make claims criticising the government's handling of the protests and engage in what Stuart Hall (1982) has described as 'politics of signification' (p. 65).' In this role, political actors tend to engage in the dissemination of frames to diagnose problems and attribute responsibility while proposing ways to solve social problems (Benford & Snow, 2000). As seen in the elite/prominence news value category column in Table 1, the statement of support by Nigeria's former Vice-President, Atiku Abubakar, demonstrates solidarity with the protesters. At the same time, it could be interpreted as a positive self-presentation to promote his political and public relations value. Relatedly, news reports of protest coverage also favour voices affiliated with recognised authorities and organisations, such as the Inspector General of Police and the Amnesty International organisation, etc. Eliteness as an essential consideration in protest news accords 'prestige, increases news production efficiency and adheres to the rituals of objectivity' (McLeod, 2007, p. 187).

Proximity is a second significant value for discursively constructing protest news. Proximity was determined with references to states and towns mentioned in the dataset, among which were: Lagos, Abuja, Ebonyi, Osun, Oyo, Kano, Benin, etc. Commenting on proximity, Bednarek and Caple (2012) note that it encompasses 'both geographical and cultural nearness' (p. 43). Journalists often convey a sense of presence at events to capture readers' attention. At the same time, they gain legitimacy in the public eyes as a result of their proximity to the protest. van Dijk (1988) also underscores the importance of proximity in news selection because such news is considered more relevant and 'yield better topics for storytelling in everyday conversation' (p. 124). Martin Conboy recognised the place of such value in news content, writing that it must be organised according to what the 'national readership is willing to recognise as belonging to its own narratives and traditions of the nation' (Conboy, 2006, p. 47). Analysis of data from the *Punch* and the *Daily Trust* reveals that both papers prioritised this value in the coverage of the protests as seen in the number of references in Table 2.

Consonance is another news value which underscores the extent to which existing stereotypes fit in with preconceived societal beliefs relating to the protests. Consonance may also act as a causal agency or harbinger of the news value of negativity, reflective of confrontation, failure or disaster. The headline 'EndSARS trends again after viral shooting video,' published in the *Punch*, October 4 2020,

serves as a helpful illustration of how consonance is discursively constructed in the news discourse of the protest. One can infer that the protests did not just happen in October 2020, given that the advocacy to end Police brutality using social media platforms actually began around 2017. The news value of Negativity/positivity serves as a baseline explanation for journalists' selection and presentation of the protest. As Galtung and Ruge (1965), contends:

> There is a basic asymmetry in life between the positive, which is difficult and takes time, and the negative, which is much easier and takes less time.Compare the amount of time needed to bring up and socialise an adult person and the amount of time needed to kill him in an accident: the amount of time needed to build a house and to destroy it in a fire, to make an airplane and to crash it, and so on. The positive cannot be too easy, for then it would have low scarcity value. Thus, a negative event can more easily unfold itself completely between two issues of a newspaper and two newscast transmissions- for a positive event that is more difficult and specific (p. 69).

For this reason, when the #Endsars uprising became marked by infiltration by hoodlums who broke into public buildings and warehouses where the Covid-19 pandemic palliatives were stored; broke into prisons, freed up prisoners and seized arms and killed Police officers, it received substantial media coverage that emphasises the main element of negativity. The underlying aim of the protest, which was meant to advocate an end to Police brutality, became derailed. Negativity was established using evaluative constructions such as: shooting, attack, outrage, killings, arrests, harassment, violent, protest, tension, vandalised, injured, killed, evil, raged on, etc.

Impact as a news value often builds on the derivative consequence of negativity in protest reportage, becoming newsworthy. Reported events of the protests construct impact as they cover difficulties, shutdowns, financial losses or loss of lives occasioned by the protests (see, for example, 'Airlines cancel Lagos flights over curfew', *Daily Trust,* October 21, 2020). Superlativeness is linked to impact, which focuses on defining the degree of intensification associated with the protest. In Bednarek's and Caple's (2012) view, superlativeness satisfies the character trait of a force of behaviour, which construes that 'the bigger, the faster, the more destructive, the more violent, the more famous…, the more newsworthy something is' (p. 44). Relevant illustrations for superlativeness are seen in Table 1.

Personalisation brings an emotional angle to presenting protest coverage. Under personalisation, ordinary individuals get into the news because of their varying experiences of Police brutality. The illustration of personalisation in the *Daily Trust* exemplar in Table 1 also captures how newsworthiness are simultaneously construed in terms of values of novelty(**Little did he know**), superlativeness (**pay heavily**), negativity (**tortured)**. When elites share like-minded experiences, it fits in and consolidates a theme of building solidarity with the protesters rather than demonising them. Regarding timeliness, it is a central value normalised in updating readers about the event's currency. Not only is it integral to journalistic authority imbuing a sense of responsibility for news reports, but it is also an important consideration that may impact the principle of selective attention to the news. Timeliness in protest coverage may refer to the day of the week or month, such as: Sunday, yesterday or next month.

Novelty pertains to the unusualness of the protest, which contributes to the effectiveness of news because of the presumption that such events are beyond readers' knowledge. While it has proven difficult to identify news values in images even though it seems fairly straightforward at first glance, in part due to socio-cultural differences in media audiences (Bednarek & Caple, 2012), the use of images in interpreting information about the protest remains significant. Indeed, a key component of fact-checking claims about the #EndSARSprotests was images, according to Dubawa, the first indigenous fact-checking platform in Nigeria. Relatedly, one of the most symbolic pictures of the protest which trended during the period was that of an activist, Aisha Yesufu, described as 'the hijab wearing revolutionary' (Nwabufo, 2020) with a bag flung across her chest, her fist thrown up in the air with an aura of defiance and unmatchable resolve (see, front page, *Daily Trust* October 12 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In reporting protest news, news values are easy to dismiss due to their amorphous nature, but it is not unlikely that they serve as an unwritten guide for journalists. Therefore, there is a need to analytically establish with sharper precision the specifics of how news values shape protest news, and this is what this article has attempted to do. The coverage of the#EndSARS protests in Nigeria by the *Daily Trust* and the *Punch* newspapers illustrates the importance of values in protest news. In establishing what is newsworthy about the protests, media practitioners tend to privilege elitism in the coverage of the #EndSARS protests. Because journalists set out *ab initio* to focus on protest events in the news, they employ

values in the news to make decisions. Each of the news values identified in the analysed data is related to the maintenance of democracy in consideration of the importance of debate and the robustness of ideas that compete with each other for the health of democracy. It is arguable that the newsworthiness of the #EndSARS protests in October, 2020 had undoubtedly helped kick-start a corrective action mechanism against Police brutality in Nigeria from the public and private concerned bodies. In order to be strategically effective, a protest movement needs to analyse the circumstances under which it is operating and show an understanding of its democratic character to achieve its objectives and maximize public exposure through the media.

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