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# *Performance of Nigerian Newspapers in Accurate Reportage of Selected Supreme Court Decisions*

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**Abstract:** *Previous studies have focused on the Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) from a wide range of perspectives. But literature search reveals a dearth of studies on media reportage of SCN's decisions and the extent to which the media accurately communicate the judgments to the public. This study evaluates the magnitude and accuracy of media reports on six selected decisions of the apex court. Social responsibility theory provided the theoretical framework. Primary data was collected from the reports of the selected newspapers while certified Supreme Court judgments of the selected cases formed the secondary data. The decisions evaluated included the Ibori's ex-convict status controversy; the legality of ex-Governor Ladoja's impeachment; the validity of 2007 electoral victory of Governor Wamakko and President Umaru Yar'Adua; the ownership tussle between Akwa Ibom and Cross River over 76 oil wells and the tenure elongation suit. The Guardian, The Punch, Daily Trust and Daily Sun newspapers were selected for the study based on ownership and national circulation. Twenty-four editions of the newspapers were selected for content analysis. A 14-item coding sheet was the instrument of data collection. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The selected newspapers were fairly accurate (57.5%) in communicating the decisions of the SCN. The Guardian newspaper had the most accurate reports (76%), while the Daily Sun had the least accurate reports (44.7%). The study found that the magnitude and degree of accuracy of the newspaper reports depended on the nature of the case facts, the political weight of the parties involved in the dispute, nature of the judgments handed down by the SCN in the cases, and the individual newspapers owing to ownership interest, location and their editorial policies.*
**Keywords:** *Accuracy of Report; Supreme Court of Nigeria; Holding.*
**Résumé :** *S'il est vrai qu'il existe de nombreuses études sur la Cour Suprême du Nigeria, une analyse de celles-ci révèle toutefois un manque d'études portant sur la façon dont les médias rapportent les décisions de la Cour mais aussi la fiabilité avec laquelle ces décisions sont rapportées. La présente étude se propose donc de faire le point sur la quantité et la fiabilité des rapports des médias sur six décisions choisies de la Cour. L'étude a pour cadre théorique la théorie de responsabilité sociale. Les données primaires sont*

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*constituées par les rapports d'un certain nombre de journaux nigérians alors que les données secondaires sont les décisions certifiées conformes de la Cour. Parmi les jugements analysés, il y a : l'affaire du statut de l'ex-gouverneur de l'état de Delta James Ibori, qui a été emprisonné en Angleterre ; la légalité de la démise de ses charges de l'ancien gouverneur de l'état d'Oyo, Ladoja ; la validité de la victoire électorale de 2007 du gouverneur Wamakko et du président Yar'Adua ; la bataille juridique de propriété de 76 puits de pétrole qui a opposé l'état d'Akwa Ibom à l'état de Cross River ; ainsi que l'affaire d'extension de mandat. L'étude a retenu les journaux suivants pour ses analyses : The Guardian, The Punch, le Daily Trust et le Daily Sun. Ce choix a été guidé par deux considérations : la propriété des publications et la circulation nationale de celles-ci. Un total de 24 éditions des journaux ont été retenues pour l'analyse de contenu. Un instrument de recueil des données comprenant 14 rubriques a été utilisé. Les résultats de l'analyse montrent que les rapports des journaux étaient pour l'essentiel fiable (57,5%) dans la communication des décisions de la Cour. Le Guardian Newspaper s'est révélé le plus fiable dans ses rapports avec un taux de fiabilité de 76% alors que le Daily Sun s'est révélé le moins faible avec un taux de 44,7%. L'étude a pu conclure que le taux de couverture et la fiabilité de celle-ci étaient toujours fonction des faits sous-jacents aux affaires considérées, la notoriété des partis concernés, la nature des jugements de la Cour, la propriété des journaux proposant les rapports, la région du siège social et la politique éditoriale de la publication.*

**Mots clés** *: fiabilité des rapports ; Cour Suprême du Nigeria ; Pétition électorale ; Affaire James Ibori ; Président Umaru Yar'Adua.*

## 1. Introduction

Public understanding of the apex court, and in fact, the entire judiciary, depends almost exclusively on the press. It is so because it is the press that mirrors what happens in the court including the justices' opinions that are difficult for the ordinary citizens to obtain and understand. In fact, the Supreme Court, which epitomizes the judiciary, regularly, makes decisions with profound policy implications but it leaves it largely to the media to transmit and shape public opinion regarding those policies (Greenhouse, 1996; Clawson, Strine IV and Waltenburg, 2003). In other words, the press, not only, determines the quantity and quality of information available to the public on the judiciary institution, it, also, gives an image and legitimacy to it through reportage of its operations (Greenhouse, 1996; Watson, 2007). This implies, therefore, that the press is an important intermediary between the legal system and the people it serves. Mathewson, cited by Musdapher (2012:6), puts it succinctly thus:

> When the court speaks, who listens? Who transmits each new rule of law to the citizenry? Even in the internet era, when the court posts its opinion promptly on its website, both the justices and the citizens still depend on journalists to get the word out to the broad public. It is still reporters who immediately read the often challenging legal language and make sense of it for lay understanding.

While getting the story right is the first duty of professional journalists, the law, however, is a complex field for reporters to operate as it requires expert knowledge and years of experience to understand its subtleties. Notwithstanding its complexity, the news media, however, are under a duty to mirror the court's proceedings and decisions accurately to the public. The report must also be balanced and fair to all subjects of news

and free from pressure or direction by the people who own and run the newspapers (Davis, 1996).

Unfortunately, Snipke (2013) says media reportage on both the executive and the legislature is vast and extensive in virtually all jurisdictions but a review of the literature shows that journalists may cover the third arm—the judiciary—too little and that when they do, may do so inaccurately. Musdapher (2012) who corroborates Snipke's observation, however, localized the allegation when he says that the Nigerian media, more often than not, misrepresent not only the proceedings and decisions of courts in cases they report but also issues about the judiciary owing to poor knowledge of the law and desire to pander to selfish interest of media owners.

Elaborating on his claims, he adds:

> I am aware today that most media houses have an editorial policy and clear leaning towards sectional and often myopic perspectives. Tribal and nepotistic leanings are present in most issues debated or reported in our media. The government-owned media showcase the activities of government with little or no critique in contrast to the harsh realities faced by the millions of subscribers of these news mediums. Newspapers and mediums owned and operated by politicians are mostly reflective of the interest of their principals as opposed to the need to permanently reside with the truth and justice.

He argues that, though, newspapers should be neutral in the treatment of news, the case is not so with the Nigerian press. He maintains that the editorial views and political beliefs of the owners and editors of newspapers are infiltrating the news page which he believes is an anathema. Popoola (2011) who agrees with Musdapher says a meticulous review of scholarly works and research findings with respect to the accuracy of reporting by the Nigerian mass media shows that it may be fallacious, sometimes, to say that the media always handle reporting with fairness, accuracy and justice, at least, as expected of a socially responsible media.

Inaccurate reportage itself is a 'sin' in journalism. However, when it recurs as long as courts have published decisions as observed, it calls for examination. The preceding allegations against the media on the reportage of the proceedings, decisions and issues around the judiciary compel this study not only because misleading reportage of court proceedings and decisions has the potential to confuse the public and distort their views about the nation's justice system, the authority of the judiciary itself to adjudicate depends solely on the public perception of its propriety which inaccurate reportage definitely undermines.

In addition, while the SCN, as an institution, has attracted substantial literature in Nigeria, not much attention has been paid in media studies to evaluation of newspaper reportage of the decisions of the summit court in public interest cases handled by it to establish not only the extent of reportage but also how accurately such judgments are communicated to the public. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the important gap in the literature. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how four selected newspapers: *The*

*Guardian, The Punch, Daily Trust* and the *Daily Sun* reported decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in six public interest cases decided between 2006 and 2012 legal years of the Fourth Republic to ascertain the extent to which the selected newspapers accurately communicated the decisions of the SCN in the cases to the public.

## 2. Objectives

The key objectives of the study are to:

- To examine the extent to which the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria to the public in the selected public interest cases.
- To find out how accurately the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria to the public in the selected public interest cases.

## 3. Research Questions

Consequently, the following research questions have been designed to guide this study in an attempt to find answers to the problems enunciated above:

- To what extent did the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria to the public in the selected public interest cases?
- How accurately did the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria to the public in the selected public interest cases?

## 4. Theoretical framework

One principal ingredient which inspires the formulation of theoretical framework for the study is explanation. The study is anchored on social responsibility theory. The theory provides the platform to explain the benchmark against which media reportage of the selected Supreme Court cases in this study is measured.

Social responsibility theory of the press is a normative theory that explains how media should ideally operate in a given system of social value and states the standard against which the public should judge the performance of the media. According to Folarin (2002), the chief duty of the media operating by this theory is to raise conflict to the plane of discussion.

McQuail cited in Baran (2010) identifies the main principles of the social responsibility theory in driving media practice to include that the media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society and meet these obligations by setting high standards of professionalism, truth, accuracy and objectivity. In other words, the media are expected to hold high the canon of accuracy in performing its constitutional role of reporting news and holding the government accountable to the public. According to Ganiyu (2004), accuracy is fundamental, like truthfulness, to the trust the public reposes in the media, adding that the first duty of a journalist is to the truth and not the source of the story or even his organisation. He is of the view that accuracy means more than being exact with facts but also involves quoting a source or figures, correctly, anytime such is done. He said it also extends to ensuring that all headlines are fully in accord with the body of the stories or reports.

Okoye (2007) sees accuracy as a conscious effort to guard against inaccuracies, carelessness, bias and distortion through deliberate technological manipulation, omission and emphasis. Okoye who says accuracy implies accuracy with all details like titles, names of persons and places says adherence to the principle is a mark of good journalism. He explains that the media that have made accuracy a tradition are the most patronized by the public regardless of the owner, the place it is sited and the caliber of people working there. He used this yardstick to explain why most Nigerians would rather tune to BBC, even for local news, about Nigeria.

Other principles of social responsibility theory highlighted by McQuail are that the media should be self-regulating within the framework of the law and avoid disseminating material that might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or that might offend minority groups. Besides, he also says the media, as a whole, should be pluralistic, reflecting the diversity of the culture in which they operate and give access to various points of view and rights of reply even as he adds that the public have the right to expect high standards of performance while official intervention can be justified to ensure the public good. He concludes that the media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to their employers and the market. In a nutshell, social responsibility theory, according to Baran (2010), asserts that the media must remain free of government control but in exchange, they must serve the public. This theory is therefore relevant to this study because it mandates accurate communication of information by the media to the public. In fact, the accuracy of information is not only the obligation of the media, it also forms one of the indexes of assessing how responsible a media organization is. The implication is that any report that lacks accuracy is not only irresponsible but also constitutes a mark of bad journalism.

## 5. Some empirical studies in newspaper coverage of the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court of Nigeria, as an institution, has attracted substantial literature in Nigeria. For instance, scholars from the fields of law, political science and communication studies had done some studies on the Supreme Court of Nigeria including Alabi (2002), Akeredolu (2006) and Adesanoye (1974) to examine the role of the SCN in the nation's political system covering 1963 and 1997; highlight the profiles of all the justices that were appointed to the SCN's bench between 1963 and 2006; and review selected proceedings and judgments of four categories of court—Magistrate Court, High Court, Court of Appeal, and the Federal Supreme Court of Nigeria for stylistic error analysis to establish whether proceedings of the court are communicated in good English Language respectively. But not much attention has been paid in media studies to evaluation of newspaper reportage of the decisions of the nation's summit court in public interest cases to establish not just the quantity of the reportage but also how accurately such judgments are communicated to the public.

Curiously, however, there is abundant literature in all of these areas in the advanced democracies like the United States of America. For instance, Yanus (2009) did a content analysis of the newspaper coverage of the decisions of 20 state Supreme Courts in the United States handed down in 1998 to establish the relationship between news coverage of the courts and the following: case facts, characteristics of the media and characteristics

of the judiciary. The study found that there was a significant relationship between news coverage of the state Supreme Courts and case facts, judiciary characteristics and media characteristics. The study revealed that media were more likely to cover courts' decisions that had the greatest likelihood of altering the status quo, and were least likely to be overturned or both. Clawson, Strine IV and Waltenburg (2003) also did a content analysis of the coverage of the US Supreme Court decisions in the case of Adarand's Constructors. Inc. v. Federico Pena, Secretary of Transportation, et al. by the Black press and the mainstream press in the United States.

The study clearly found that the mainstream press and the Black Press covered the decision in significantly different ways. As an advocate for Black interests, the Black press focused on the implications of the rulings for minorities, actively criticized Justice Thomas and emphasized pro-affirmative action sources. Also, by relying on a Dramatic Setback frame, the Black Press stressed the detrimental effects of the ruling on Black citizens. The Black Press also devoted significant attention to interpreting the court ruling as a decision consistent with the basic principles of affirmative action. On the other hand, the mainstream press coverage of the ruling of the Supreme Court in the decision focused more on the Supreme Court ruling more than its implications. The mainstream newspapers also anchored their framing of the decision more on No Preferential Treatment Frame than Dramatic Setback Frame embraced by the Black press.

Also, Solomine (1980), Tarpley (1981), and Bowles, Dorothy and Bromley (1992) examined, in three separate studies, how news magazines covered the Supreme Court of the United States to establish how well they accurately communicated the decisions of the apex court to the public at varying time periods. Solomine, in his own study, investigated the 1975-1977 terms of the Court. Tarpley, on the other hand, examined the 1978-1981 terms of the Court while Bowles and Bromley looked at the 1981-1989 terms of the Court. In the Solomine's study, it was found that out of five cases that the Supreme Court heard, news magazines reported only one.

For the cases reported by the newsmagazines, Solomine adopted six variables of measurement which Ericson (1977) used to assess newspaper coverage of the Supreme Court of the United States during its 1974 term. The variables included the followings: (1) background facts and litigation history (2) probable or expected impact of the decision (3) Explanation of the decision process (4) balance (respective to coverage of the dissent or reactions critical of the result (5) contextualization with relevant law and (6) reportage of outside reactions to the decisions. The variables examined in the newsmagazine reports of the court cases represented the significant ingredients of a standard published decision and as such useful in determining the accuracy of newspaper reports of the Court's decision. Unlike Ericson's (1977), in another but similar study, which found that newspapers covered almost none of these variables in their reports, Solomine (1980) discovered much greater depth in the coverage of the variables.

Tarpley (1981), in his study, though had similar focus with Solomine, he nonetheless distinguished his work by looking at the degree to which newsmagazines were inclined to report media-related court decisions than non-media decisions in terms of frequency. He also used the six variables adopted by Solomine to assess the quality and accuracy of the

reportage. But Bowles and Bromley (1992) not only expanded the scope of studies in Solomine and Tarpley, but they also added three variables to the 6-factor list adapted from Ericson's work. The variables are the followings: (1) whether the story denotes the case name or provides identifying information (2) whether the story provides background facts of the case or litigation history (3) whether the story provides the specific votes of the court (4) whether the story mentions the reasoning of the Court or in some way discusses the Court's reasoning (5) whether the story mentions the dissent or outlines the dissenting argument in some way (6) whether the story discusses applicable statutes or precedent with respect to the case at hand (7) whether the case discusses expected effect of the decision or impact in general (8) whether the story describes any reaction to court's decision and (9) whether the story properly attributes the source of the reaction as coming from legal experts, parties, people in the street.

The study, however, found that news magazines treated their readers to less than 10% of the cases decided by the Supreme Court. Besides, the study also found a significant improvement in quality of reportage notwithstanding the fact that the variables were upped by three. The four studies—Ericson (1977), Solomine (1980), Tarpley (1981) and Bowles, Dorothy and Bromley (1992) are significant to the instant study as one of its principal objectives is to determine the extent to which the four newspapers selected for this study reflected the standard outlined parameters in their reports. Overall, all other previous studies reviewed in this work will form the basis for comparison between what obtains in Nigeria and the US. The present study will, also, contribute to the body of literature on the subject, research being a global work.

## 6. Methodology

### *6.1. Research design*

This study adopted quantitative research design in collecting relevant data for this study. Specifically, content analysis was the research method used to study the contents of the relevant editions of the selected newspapers that fell within the time frame of this study. Content analysis is an organized procedure designed to identify and evaluate the content of a text or recorded information (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000 and Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps, 1991). The research method is useful for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorf, 1980). The conclusion to use this research method for this purpose is reinforced by Borden and Abbot (2008: 238) who advised researchers to go for the method "when you want to analyse a written or spoken records for the occurrence of specific categories or events…"

The study covered 2006 to 2012 legal years of the SCN in the Fourth Republic. All the decisions selected for this study were delivered by the SCN during the 2006-2012 legal years of the court. They are as follows :

- The decision of the SCN in the Governor Ibori's ex-convict trial—May 19, 2006.
- The decision of the SCN in Governor Rashidi Adewolu Ladoja---December 7, 2006.
- The decision of the SCN on late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's election---December 12, 2008.

- The decision of the SCN on the sack of five sitting governors--January 27, 2012.
- The decision of the SCN on the disputed 76 oil wells between Cross River state and Akwa Ibom state—July 10, 2012.
- The decision of the SCN on validity of Governor Aliyu Wamakko's election---November 26, 2010.

The following constituted the data sources: editions of the Nigerian newspapers published between 2006 and 2012 legal years of the SCN as well as certified copies of the SC judgments on the selected cases.

Purposive sampling technique was used to pick the sample for the study. Four Nigerian newspapers were therefore purposively selected from the study population for this study. The newspapers were: *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *Daily Trust* and *Daily Sun*. The four newspapers were chosen because they were national in spread while the ownership of the newspapers also cut across the geo-political zones of the country. Six cases as listed above were also purposively picked for this study for five reasons: First, all the cases were decided between 2006 and 2012 legal years of the SCN in the Fourth Republic, and therefore, fell within the time-frame of this study. Second, all the cases threw up novel constitutional issues for determination which decisions could alter the status quo in the polity. Third, the issues decided by the SCN in some of the cases were so controversial that the justices of the SCN, which most times, enter unanimous decisions, were divided in their opinions to enter split decisions. In the other cases in which the SCN entered unanimous decisions, Nigerians were themselves, polarized by the judgments. Fourth, the cases represented good instances of appropriate cases in which the SCN could exercise its original and appellate jurisdictions as enshrined in sections 232 (1) and 233 (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria respectively. Fifth, all the six cases were public interest litigations.

Twenty-four editions of the four selected newspapers were also purposively picked for content analysis. That is, for each newspaper, six editions containing reports and pictorials on the six selected decisions of the SCN were purposively picked. The editions selected for each newspaper were those published a day after the judgments were delivered on each of the cases while all other editions of the newspapers published before and after those specific dates were excluded notwithstanding whether they contained reports and pictorials on proceedings and decisions of the SCN in the cases. The editions of the four selected daily newspapers were purposively picked because they contained news reports on the selected decisions; news reports on the immediate reactions of stakeholders to the decisions, news analyses on the decisions and pictorials taken immediately after the selected decisions of the SCN were handed down. The editions were dated May 20, 2006 (Ibori); December 8, 2006 (Ladoja); December 13, 2008 (Yar'Adua); November 27, 2010 (Wamakko); January 28, 2012 (Tenure elongation) and July 11, 2012 (76 oil wells).

The study employed Coding Sheet as a tool to collect data for the study. A 14-item coding sheet was designed to generate data from the editions of the selected newspapers for this study. This researcher was guided by the research questions for the study in designing the coding sheet. The coding sheet, therefore, contained relevant units of

analysis and the categories of analysis to extract data from the content of the relevant reports in the selected newspapers to answer relevant research questions. Six research assistants, all university graduates, were trained on how to use the coding sheet. They all assisted in the coding process. As earlier stated, two broad categories—unit of analysis and category of analysis, were constructed.

### *6.2. Units of Analysis*

The unit of analysis is the basic unit of text to be classified during content analysis (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000). Simply put, it is the unit of text that is counted wherever it is encountered in any edition of the selected newspapers. For this study, the units of analysis represented news story, news analysis, feature article, opinion, editorial, photograph, and cartoon. For this study, straight news stories on the selected decisions of the SCN are classified into two: main news stories and support news stories. The units of analysis for this study are therefore explained as follows:

- Main News: These are news stories specifically published by the newspapers as straight stories to capture the reasoning of the SCN on the selected cases. They are supposed to be factual and different from opinions, features, analyses or editorials.
- Support News: These are news stories specifically published by the selected newspapers as straight stories to capture the reactions of stakeholders to the reasoning (decisions) of the SCN in the selected cases. They are also different from opinion or analyses
- News Analyses: These are discourses written by the editorial staff of the selected newspapers critical of the reasoning of the SCN on the selected decisions of the summit court for this study. The analyses are different from opinion, feature, and editorial, in format.
- Features: These are comprehensive and discursive reports on the selected decisions of the SCN written by an editorial staff of the newspaper.
- Opinions: These are opinionated essays written by staff or persons who do not necessarily work in the newspaper organization (regular and guest writers as well as columnists), expressing personal views about the reasoning of the SCN in the selected cases.
- Editorial: This is an important article in a newspaper expressing the official opinion of the newspaper about the reasoning of the SCN in the selected cases.
- Photographs: These are images published by the selected newspapers to complement or illustrate news stories on the decisions of the SCN.
- Cartoons: These are amusing drawings in a newspaper about the reasoning of the SCN in the selected cases or the parties involved in the cases.

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2000), the category of analysis implies a category system used to classify media content. They are like pigeon holes into which units could be sorted. The intensity of reports and accuracy of reports formed the categories into which the units of analysis were classified (See Appendix 5A).

### *6.3. Categories of Analysis*

#### *6.3.1. The Intensity of report (Quantity and Emphasis)*

The intensity of reports, in this study, refers to the quantity of various genres of (units of analysis) newspaper reports on each of the selected newspaper decisions on the one hand and the emphasis placed on such reports in the newspapers on the other hand. To determine the quantity of reports in this study, the number of times or the frequency of various genres of reports on each of the selected decisions of the SCN formed the index. The genres of reports, otherwise, known as the unit of analysis, refers to the various types of newspaper reports on an issue—news stories, news analyses, features, opinions among others.

The emphasis of reports, however, refers to the prominence given to the newspaper reports on the selected decisions of the SCN. The prominence of reports, for this study, was measured by two indexes: The position of reports and the size of reports.

Position of reports: This researcher stratified the position occupied by newspaper reports on the selected decisions of the SCN into two for significance ascription purposes. They were: Front page and inside page. The classification was done on the basis that highly significant reports were placed on front pages while less significant reports were placed on the inside pages. In other words, reports that were placed on the front pages of the selected newspapers were considered more significant than those placed on the inside pages by the editorial managers of the newspaper organizations.

The size of a report: For this study, the size of a report refers to the space allocated to newspaper reports on the selected decisions of the SCN. Specifically, the space allocated to reports was, first, determined by columns and inches before it was categorized into three broad groups. It is standard that a full-page size newspaper report is an equivalent of 6 columns by 14 inches; half-page takes 3 columns by 14 inches or 6 columns by 7 inches while a quarter-page is 3 columns by 7 inches. The three broad groups, therefore, are :

**a.** Less quarter-page---Small report
**b.** Quarter-page but less half page---Medium report
**c.** Half-page or more---Large report

The classification was done for measurement purpose. For this study, therefore, the reports that occupied less than quarter-page was categorized as small; those that were up to quarter-page but not up to half-page were categorized as medium while those that were allocated up to half-page or more were categorized as large.

#### *6.3.2. Accuracy of report (Quality)*

The accuracy of a report, in this study, refers to the quality of newspaper reports on the selected decisions of the SCN and this is measured by only the straight news stories. To determine the accuracy (quality) of reportage, the Bowles' and Bromley's method that was developed over several similar but previous interactions provided a guide. Specifically, Bowles and Bromley's standard of measurement took into account nine

parameters in the examination of the quality of newspaper reportage of Supreme Court decisions. The Bowles' and Bowles' measurement standard, as earlier stated, was a revision of the methods used by Ericson (1977), Solomine (1980) and Tarpley (1981) in past studies. While Ericson took into account six parameters which Solomine adopted, wholesale, in his 1980 study of newspaper coverage of the 1975-1977 terms of the Supreme Court of the United States, Bowles and Bromley, in a study conducted in the US in 1992, took into account nine parameters. But all the methods used by all these scholars were deficient in one way or the other. The latest by Bowles and Bromley was though an improvement on the earlier ones, one vital parameter—headline analysis, was conspicuously missing from the parameter list.

For this study, a compact eight-parameter standard was designed. It is an improvement on the earlier standards for two reasons: One, it captured all the key parameters in previous standards. Two, it added a new parameter that was missing in previous iterations: headline analysis. The headline analysis involves a comparison of the headline of the newspaper report with the body of the report on the SCN's decision to determine whether or not the headline is misleading or appropriately communicates with the main body of the stories. The headline analysis is considered important because of the fact that headline is not only an important part of a news story but also can complement or mar the accuracy (quality) of report. Besides, not every newspaper reader has the time to go through the body of news stories.

For this study, therefore, the accuracy of the report was measured by comparing the content of the newspaper's main news stories with the content of the SCN's judgment on the following counts:

- Whether the story denotes accurate names of parties in dispute and the panel of justices of the SCN that decided the case
- Whether the story provides the background facts and litigation history of the case
- Whether the story provides the specific vote of the court against the names of SCN justices on the panel
- Whether the story mentions the issues formulated by the SCN for determination
- Whether the story captures the holdings or reasoning of the court on each of the issues formulated for determination and the dissent's argument in some way where the decision is split
- Whether the story discusses the relevant statutes and precedents upon which the decisions were anchored
- Whether the story discusses the expected effects (implications) of the judgment
- Whether the story carries an appropriate headline that communicates with the body of the story.

The combination of the outlined parameters represented the organic constituents of a standard published decision. The accuracy of a report, in this study, was, therefore, measured, through a multi-stage process. The first stage involves comparing and contrasting the newspaper reports with the original judgments of the SCN in the selected cases to determine the presence or absence of the outlined variables listed above in the

newspaper reports. This method accords with the model employed by Bowles and Bromley which involves counting the number of outlined variables captured in every coded report along with some considerations of means and medians in order to explicate the accuracy (quality) of the reportage.

Afterward, the presence or absence of the outlined variables in the coded newspaper reports is further measured by determining the extent to which each of the outlined parameters (variables) is captured in the newspaper reports. For instance, if the original judgment of the Supreme Court formulated three issues for determination in a particular case, and the newspaper report captured all the three issues, it was rated Fully Captured and scored 1. But if the newspaper did not mention any of the three issues in its report on the decision, it was rated Not Captured and scored 0. However, if the newspaper report captured, at least, one but less than the three issues formulated for determination by the SCN, it was rated Partially Captured and scored 0.5.

Finally, the extent to which each of the newspapers, overall, accurately covered each of the decisions of the selected SCN with respect to the outlined parameters (variables) was, afterward, determined by class interval scale. Specifically, if a report, for instance, cumulatively scored, at least, 6 (75%) of the maximum 8 (100%) in the reflection of the outlined variables, it was classified as **Accurate** while a report that cumulatively scored, at least 4 (50%) and at most 5.9 (74%) in its reflection of the outlined variables was rated **Fairly Accurate**. Moreover, any report that cumulatively scored, at least, 2 (25%) and, at most, 3.9 (49%) in its reflection of the outlined eight parameters was rated **Inaccurate** while any report that, cumulatively, scored less than 2 (24%)) in its reflection of the outlined factors was classified as **Very Inaccurate.** This is further represented thus:

**Table 1: Class Interval (scale of measurement) for accuracy of reportage**

| **Ranking** | **Proportion of Variables** | **%** |
|---|---|---|
| Absolutely Accurate | 8 | 100 |
| Accurate | 6-7.9 | 75-99 |
| Fairly Accurate | 4-5.9 | 50-74 |
| Inaccurate | 2-3.9 | 25-49 |
| Very Inaccurate | 0-1.9 | 0-24 |

After the instrument was validated and found reliable, research assistants were hired and trained by the researcher to use the research instruments to collect relevant data from the sample. The researcher employed and trained six research assistants who not only sourced some of the newspapers from the library shelves but also used the coding sheet to collect relevant data from the newspaper editions for content analysis. The researcher effectively monitored the coding exercise.

### *6.3.3. Method of data analysis*

The researcher used the discursive and explanation building techniques to analyse data for this study. Specifically, the researcher, on the one hand, presented data gathered

through the quantitative research design in tables of frequency count and simple percentage while a discursive technique was used to discuss and interpret the data in each table in relation to the relevant research questions. The explanation building was subsequently used to develop a general explanation that applied to the research questions under study. Specifically, tables of frequency counts and simple percentage were used to analyse the data generated by coding sheet while discussion and interpretation of the data followed each table to answer relevant research question simply because descriptive statistics, according to Wimmer and Dominic (2000) are intended to reduce the data sets to allow for easier interpretation. They also make generalizations possible (Osuala, 2000).

## 7. Findings

*To what extent did the selected newspapers report the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the selected public interest cases?*

To answer this research question, the extent category of analysis was used. This was subdivided into the frequency/volume of reports by the newspapers as well as the prominence they accorded the reports. Prominence was further measured by the placement/position and size of the reports.

### *7.1. Volume of Coverage*

**Table 2. Cumulative quantity of newspaper reports on the selected SCN decisions**

| **Genres** | ***The Guardian*** | ***The Punch*** | ***Daily Trust*** | ***Daily Sun*** | **Frequency** | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main news | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 23 | 19.6 |
| Support news | 12 | 18 | 15 | 19 | 64 | 54.7 |
| Analyses | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 2.5 |
| Pictorials | 8 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 27 | 23.0 |
| **Total** | **26** | **33** | **26** | **32** | **117** | **100** |

**Source. Content Analysis, 2014**

A total of 117 reports were obtained from the four newspapers under study. Of the figure, *The Punch* newspaper had a cumulative 33 items which represented the highest number of coded items on the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the six selected public interest cases. This is followed by 32 items from the *Daily Sun* and 26 items each from *The Guardian* and the *Daily Trust*. Of the 33 items coded from *The Punch*, only 6 items (main news stories) were devoted to the details of the judgments of the SCN in the six selected case, implying one story, each, to the details of each of the decisions; 18 items were reactions (support news stories) to the 6 judgments, 8 were pictorials while the remaining one (1) item was analysis.

For *The Guardian* which had a total of 26 coded items on the six selected cases, six (6) items were devoted to the details of the judgments of the SCN in the six selected cases, 12 items were reactions (support news stories) to the judgments of the court in the six cases while the remaining 8 items were pictorials. *The Guardian* did not publish any analysis on any of the six decisions of the SCN. Of the 32 items coded from the *Daily Sun*,

five (5) items were devoted to the details of the judgments of the SCN in five of the six selected cases, 19 items were reactions (support news stories) to the judgments, six (6) were pictorials while two (2) were analyses. For the *Daily Trust* which had a total of 26 coded items on the six selected cases, six (6) items were devoted to the details of the judgments of the SCN (main news stories) in the six selected cases, 15 were reactions (support news story) to the judgment while the remaining 5 were pictorials.

On the genres of reports, support news stories which presented the reactions of the stakeholders to the reasoning of the SCN in the six public interest cases accounted for 64 (54.7%) of the entire coded items. Specifically, pictorials accounted for 27 (23.07%) of the coded items; main news story 23 (19.65%) while analyses were 3 items (2.56%) of the coded items.

### *7.2. Prominence of Coverage*

This is measured by placement and size of reports.

**Table 3. Placement of newspaper reports on the six selected decisions of SCN**

| **Placement** | ***The Guardian*** | ***The Punch*** | ***Daily Trust*** | ***Daily Sun*** | **Frequency** | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Front Page | 11 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 44 | 37.6 |
| Inside Page | 15 | 22 | 16 | 20 | 73 | 62.3 |
| **Total** | **26** | **33** | **26** | **32** | **117** | **100** |

**Source. Content Analysis, 2014**

Of the 117 coded items on the six selected decisions of the Supreme Court, a significant 41 items representing 37.6% were on the front pages of the selected newspapers while a preponderant 73 items representing 62.3% of the coded items were placed on the inside pages of the selected newspapers.

### *7.3. Size of coverage*

**Table 4: Space/size of newspaper reports on the six selected SCN decisions**

| **Space/Size** | ***The Guardian*** | ***The Punch*** | ***Daily Trust*** | ***The Sun*** | **Frequency** | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Short | 18 | 21 | 19 | 26 | 84 | 71.7 |
| Medium | 6 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 24 | 20.5 |
| Large | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 9 | 7.6 |
| **Total** | **26** | **33** | **26** | **32** | **117** | **100** |

**Source. Content Analysis, 2014**

Of the 117 coded items on the six selected decisions of the Supreme Court, 84 representing 71.7% were short in size, 24 (20.5%) items were of the medium size while the remaining nine (9) items representing 7.6% were large in size. These data also show that majority of the newspaper items coded on the SCN decision in the selected public interest cases were small in terms of the space occupied in the newspapers.

### *7.3.1. Discussion*

Holistically, the selected newspapers reported the decisions of the SCN in the six public interest cases to an average extent but in varied proportions, depending on the nature of the decisions entered by the SCN in the cases regarding whether the judgments were split or unanimous and whether they altered the status quo or not; the nature of the case facts regarding whether the cases were purely political or not; the weight of the parties involved in the dispute, ownership and the editorial policies of the selected newspapers.

Specifically, the selected newspapers reported the decisions, in terms of quantity and emphasis, to an average extent with the verdict which affirmed the electoral victory of late President Yar'Adua in the 2007 presidential poll and the reactions from stakeholders to the decision, having the highest 38 (32.4 %) coded reports of the newspaper items, followed by 33 (28.2%) items from tenure elongation decision; 29 (24.7%) items from the verdict on Ladoja's case; 8 (6.8%) items on the disputed 76 oil wells case; 5 (4.2%) items on Ibori's ex-convict case and a lean 4 (3.4%) items on the validity of Governor Wamakko's election. Yar'Adua's case got the highest reportage because the decision was about struggle for the highest political office in Nigeria while the SCN itself which sparingly enters split judgments, did so in the two major appeals challenging late President Yar'Adua's electoral victory. Besides, data also showed that out of all the newspaper reports on the selected judgments of the SCN in the chosen cases, reactions to the decisions accounted for 54.7% of the reportage, followed by pictorials which accounted for 23%, the main decision accounted for 19.8% while analyses accounted for 2.5%.

Furthermore, out of the total 117 coded items on the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the six public interest cases, *The Punch* had 33 items which represented the highest coded newspaper items, followed by *The Sun* with 32 items and 26 items each from *The Guardian* and the *Daily Trust*. The frequency of the reports, nonetheless, a preponderant 84 (71.7%) of the 117 items coded were short in sizes, 24 (20.5%) items were of the medium size while the remaining 9 (7.6%) were large in sizes, thus indicating that majority of the newspaper items coded on the SCN decisions in the selected public interest cases were small in terms of the space occupied in the newspapers. Moreover, of the total 117 coded items on the six selected decisions of the SCN, a significant 44 items representing 37.6% were on the front pages of the selected newspapers while a preponderant 73 (62.3%) items of the coded reports were placed on the inside pages of the selected newspapers, thus showing that the newspapers attached very great importance to the decisions which accounted for the reason such high percentage of the items was given front page attention. The statistics also showed that more of the coded newspaper items were placed in the inside pages.

Consequently, one can safely conclude that the selected newspapers, holistically, reported the decisions of the SCN in the public interest cases to a medium extent because the reportage was far below average in three of the cases involving Ibori, Wamakko and the 76 oil wells while it is far above average in the cases involving late President

Yar'Adua, Ladoja and the five PDP governors who were sacked from office on the same day.

*How accurately did the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the selected public interest cases to the public?*

To answer this question, only the main news stories of the newspapers were used. Of the six selected Supreme Court decisions evaluated for this study, 23 main news reports were coded from the four selected newspapers: The Guardian=6; The Punch =6; Daily Trust=6; and Daily Sun=5. All the newspapers reported the decisions of the Supreme Court in all the selected public interest cases except the Daily Sun which reported only five. The newspaper was silent on the decision of the Supreme Court on the validity of Governor Aliyu Wammako's electoral victory in 2016. Besides, *The Punch* newspaper though reported the decisions of the Supreme Court on the six selected cases, however, the newspaper published a headline of its report on the Governor James Onanefe Ibori's ex-convict case but a totally different report was published under the headline.

### *7.4. Accuracy of Newspaper Reports on the Selected Decisions*

Of the 6 main news reports coded for this study from the four selected newspapers on Ibori's case, *The Guardian* reflected in its report 7.5 of the 8 parameters (94%) used to assess report accuracy in Ibori's ex-convict's case; *The Punch* reflected only 1 parameter (13%); *Daily Trust* had 2.5 (31%) while *Daily Sun* had 6 of the parameters in its report representing 75% accuracy. In the Yar'Adua's case, *The Guardian* reflected in its report 5.5 of the 8 parameters (69%); *The Punch* reflected 5 parameters (63%); *Daily Trust* had 5.5 (69%) while *Daily Sun* had 3.5 of the parameters in its report representing 44% accuracy. In the suit by five sitting state governors seeking elongation of their tenure of office, *The Guardian* reflected in its report 6.5 of the 8 parameters (81%); *The Punch* reflected 7.5 parameters (94%); *Daily Trust* had 5.0 (63%) while *Daily Sun* had 4 of the parameters in its report representing 50% accuracy.

Similarly, in the decision of the Supreme Court on the validity of the impeachment of Governor Adewolu Ladoja by the Oyo State House of Assembly, *The Guardian* reflected in its report all the 8 parameters (100%); *The Punch* reflected 5 parameters (63%); *Daily Trust* had 4.5 (56%) while *Daily Sun* had 4.5 of the parameters in its report representing 56% accuracy. In the 2006 decision of the apex court on the validity of Governor Wammako's electoral victory, *The Guardian* reflected in its report 4 of the 8 parameters (50%); *The Punch* reflected only 3 parameters (38%); *Daily Trust* had 4 (50%) while *Daily Sun* did not report the decision at all while in the Supreme Court decision on the disputed 76 oil wells between Cross River State and Akwa Ibom State, *The Guardian* reflected 5 of the 8 parameters in its report (63%); *The Punch* reflected 5 parameters (63%); *Daily Trust* had 4 (50%) while *Daily Sun* had 3.5 of the parameters in its report representing 44% accuracy.

#### *7.4.1. Discussion*

A holistic analysis of the data collected from the selected newspapers for this study indicated that the newspapers were not absolutely accurate but fairly accurate in the

reportage of the decisions of the SCN in the chosen public interest cases for this study. However, the degree of accuracy by the Nigerian press in communicating the decisions to the public varied according to individual newspapers, nature of the case facts and nature of the decisions.

**Table 5. Cumulative data on frequency of indices of accuracy in six selected cases**

| Dailies | Parties and panel | Facts & History | Votes | Issues | Holding & Dissent | Statute | Impact | H/Line Analysis | Pro | % | Degree of Accuracy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Guardian | 5 | 4.5 | 5 | 2.5 | 6 | 2 | 5.5 | 6 | 36.5 | 76 | Accurate |
| The Punch | 3.5 | 3 | 3.5 | 1 | 4.5 | 0.5 | 4.5 | 6 | 26.5 | 55.2 | Fairly Accurate |
| Daily Trust | 3.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 4.5 | 2.5 | 4.5 | 6 | 26 | 54.1 | Fairly Accurate |
| Daily Sun | 3 | 1.5 | 2.5 | 1 | 4.5 | 0.5 | 3.5 | 5 | 21.5 | 44.7 | Inaccurate |
| **Total** | **15** | **11.5** | **13.5** | **4.5** | **19.5** | **5.5** | **18** | **23** | **110.5** | **57.5** | **Fairly Accurate** |

**Source. Content Analysis, 2014**

Key:
Fully Captured 1
Partially Captured 0.5
Not Captured 0

For the newspapers, statistics have revealed that *The Guardian* newspaper was cumulatively accurate in its news reportage of the selected decisions of the SCN with 76% accuracy even though the degree of accuracy was not absolute. *The Punch* followed *The Guardian*, though not closely, with 55.2% accuracy while the *Daily Trust* closely followed *The Punch* with 54.1%. The *Daily Sun* came last with 44.7% accuracy.

For the decisions, the statistics reveal that the newspapers were fairly accurate in their reportage on tenure elongation with 72% accuracy followed by the reportage of the court's decision on Ladoja with 69% accuracy and 61% accuracy in Yar'Adua case. The newspapers were, however, found to have performed below average in the reportage of the Ibori's case as they were 50% accurate. The nature of the SCN's judgments in the cases which did not alter the status quo definitely was responsible for the trend. Again, these findings, in a way, corroborate outcomes of a number of studies in advanced democracies including Ericson's (1977), Bowles and Bromles (1992) and Snipke (2013) to the effect that newspapers misstate, omit or muddle up the organic constituents of the decisions of the Supreme Court in their reportage, particularly issues for determination, holdings of the court and the statutes or the judicial precedents on which the judgments

were anchored. The implication of this is that the selected newspapers provided their subscribers (newspaper readers) with insufficient, and, at times, warped information on the selected decisions of the SCN to enable them do an accurate appraisal of the reasoning of the summit court.

## 8. Conclusion

The study concludes that the selected newspapers, on the whole, were not fantastic in the reportage of the selected cases in terms of quality of reportage. But it is safe to conclude that the selected newspapers were, on the whole, average, notwithstanding the deluge of factors constraining their performances. However, of all the four newspapers selected for this study, *The Guardian* newspaper was found to be constantly faithful to the principle of accuracy in its reportage of the selected decisions and it is therefore safe to recommend the newspaper, of the quartet, to any reader who wants to enjoy accurate reportage of the substance of the SCN decisions.

Furthermore, the study concludes that the extent of reportage of the selected cases by the newspapers was dependent on the nature of the decision entered by the SCN regarding whether the judgments were split or unanimous and whether or not the judgment altered the status quo in the polity; the nature of the case facts regarding whether the issue in contention was about struggle for political power or not; the weight of the parties involved in the dispute with regards to the weight of the political offices occupied by them and the editorial policy cum ownership interest of the newspapers.

## 9. Recommendations

- It is recommended that newspaper reporters and their editors should religiously adopt the 8-parameter guideline on accurate reportage of SCN's decision designed by this researcher to improve the reportage of court proceedings and decisions in Nigeria and enhance objective public perception of the summit court through newspaper reports.
- Journalists, especially judiciary reporters and their editors, should be trained regularly and be encouraged to be familiar with the parameters of accurate reportage of Supreme Court decisions to guide them in writing fairly informative and accurate news report on court proceedings and decisions.

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