

Coverage of Federal Government of Nigeria Amnesty Declaration to Niger Delta Militants by Select Nigerian Newspaper

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ABSTRACT

This work is a content analysis of the “Newspaper Coverage of Niger Delta Region agitations and Implementation of amnesty Programme: June 2009 – May 2010”. Three Nigerian newspapers were studied to find out how the newspapers gave prominence to the coverage of amnesty granted by the Federal Government of Nigeria, to identify the information sources of the newspaper on their coverage, to determine the direction of the news reported by the newspaper and the content type in which the amnesty reports appear the most. It was found out that the newspapers gave in – depth coverage of it through varying degrees. The newspapers attached high prominence to the amnesty declaration as the three newspapers collectively gave 53.42% prominence on front page stories, the direction of the coverage was favorable as the newspapers collectively had 93.97% favorable. It is recommended that the Nigerian newspapers should give priority attention to the coverage of issues such as safety, health, agriculture, environment as was given to the Federal Government Amnesty declaration to the Niger Delta militants.

KEYWORDS: Amnesty, coverage, militant, Niger Delta, Federal Government of Nigeria, content type, units of analysis, content categories

Introduction

The contributions of the Nigerian newspapers to the Amnesty Declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria have been a subject of national and international interest. Due to the complex nature of the Niger Delta conflicts and their effects on the socio-economic and political existence of the nation and the multinational corporations operating in the region. Conflicts in the Niger Delta have brought threats to national security. The situation also disturbed global interaction as the region became unsafe for foreign investors as well. The people of the Niger Delta, for their part, accused the government and the multinational corporations operating in the region of being responsible for the conflicts. With the rebirth of democracy in 1999, the problem rather escalated. There have been cases of youth restiveness, forceful takeover and shutdown of flow stations, kidnapping of expatriate staff of companies, oil bunkering, pipeline vandalism, and inter-ethnic crises among communities in the region.

President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, administration offered amnesty to the Niger Delta militants as a mark of his administration’s political will to end the incessant militancy in the

region. All illegal arms possessed by the militants were expected to be surrendered to the communities set up to effect the amnesty. According to Newsfeeds:

Yar'Adua, in his amnesty proclamation on Thursday, 25 June 2009, Said that: after due consultation with the national council of states and in exercise of the powers conferred upon me by the provisions of section 175 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I hereby grant Amnesty and unconditional pardon to all persons who have directly or indirectly participated in the commission of offences associated with militant activities in the Niger Delta (June 25, 2009).

Generally, the print media has contributed to the realization of development programmes in Nigeria. They educate citizens about development programmes and encourage them to participate in them. For instance, in Nigeria, the success of the 1991 population census was partly credited to the efforts of the mass media in mobilizing the people to present themselves for enumeration.

The move to change the Niger Delta militants' attitude through amnesty granted by the Federal Government may be successful if the newspapers in the country participate actively in it to create awareness of the benefits of the programme to the Niger Delta region and the world at large. For attitudes to change, there must be systematic information dissemination capable of sensitizing the people of the need to adopt new ideas and change. On the other hand, if the newspapers fail to make positive contributions, the amnesty programme could have a negative impact.

Statement of the Problem

On June 25, 2009, the late President Umaru Yar'adua declared an amnesty for all militants in the Niger delta (Niger Delta Standard, July 31, 2009). The militants have taken up arms after a series of agitations to ensure that the Federal Government and the oil companies operating in the region perform their social responsibility in developing the region and making life more meaningful for the people of the region (The Nation, May 3, 2010).

Contrary to amnesty, in the past, the response of the Nigerian government to the rising militancy in the Niger Delta was, on many occasions, the use of police and armed forces to maintain social order in the region. The failure of the efforts of these security agents to quell the militant groups in the region led to the declaration of the amnesty by the Federal Government of Nigeria after a series of consultations with the various stakeholders in and outside the region.

The study of the newspaper coverage of Niger Delta region agitations and implementation of Amnesty programme by select Nigerian newspapers became necessary since newspaper contributions can douse/extinguish or incite militancy just as they can help to make the amnesty work or help or mar the amnesty.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of prominence given to the amnesty declaration?
2. Who were the sources used by the select Nigerian newspapers in their coverage?
3. What unit of coverage did amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants appear most regularly?
4. What is the direction of coverage by the select newspapers on the amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants?

Theoretical Framework

The theory upon which this study is based is the Agenda setting theory

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting theory postulates that the news media have a large influence on their audience or the public due to the choice of stories they consider newsworthy and how much importance and space they give the stories. It believes that the amount of coverage an event receives in the media influences people's perception of how important the story is.

According to Ndimele and Innocent (2006), "Mass media can make an issue a matter of everyday discourse by members of the audience when they give aggressive attention to the issue or when they focus extraordinary attention on the matter." (p.235). McQuial (2005) also describes agenda sitting theory as a process of media influence by which the importance of issues, events, and news in the minds of the public is affected by the order of presentation in news reports.

By constantly reporting, airing or writing on amnesty, newspapers in the country make it an everyday discourse among the people. Such constant reporting also places an importance on amnesty. It helps structure people's awareness of amnesty programme both locally and internationally.

Critique of Agenda setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw, who proposed the agenda-setting hypothesis, saw it as a sharp break from the limited effects model that had been held away in media research since the work of the "founding fathers" in the 1940s. Although not recovering from the old hypodermic needle model or magic bullet conception of media influence, McCombs and Shaw ascribed to broadcast and print journalism the significant power to set the public's political priorities. As years of careful research has shown, however, it doesn't always work. Perhaps, the best that can be said is that the media agenda affects the salience of some issues for some people. As recently as 1994, McCombs suggested that "agenda setting is a theory of limited media effects" that would be quite a comedown from its original purpose.

The new dimation of framing, reopens the possibility of a powerful media effects mode. As Ohio State University Journalism Professor Gerald Kosicki states:

Media “gatekeepers’ do not merely watch over information, shuffling it here and there instead, they engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue and not others” (pgs 269 -370).

Crises in the Niger Delta

Ikelegbe (2008) observes that the nature of the relationship between the Nigerian state and oil and the multinational oil companies is the cause of the problems in the region: its marginalization, oppression, underdevelopment, unjust treatment, poverty, and inequitable treatment. Oji (2009) notes that the unmet needs in the region are the cause of the conflict. According to him, the basic needs of man, such as food, shelter, water, electricity, roads, etc., are not easily provided for the people of the region. He also observes the existence of inter-community conflict in the Niger Delta region. This type of conflict occurs between members of the community, especially between the leaders and the rest of the community. The disagreement is usually over the sharing formula when compensation from oil companies or money from the government or politicians is to be shared.

Akpororo (2008) argues that since the inception of oil exploration decades ago, the region has become the main source of foreign exchange earnings for the Nigerian nation through petroleum production. Accordingly, since 1975, the Niger Delta’s oil resources account for about 90% of the nation’s export earnings, yet the region does not benefit in any significant way. He adds that the region is the least developed in the country in both physical and socio-economic terms. The deplorable situation led to the crisis and subsequent agitation for the emancipation of the region by the youths of the region.

Amnesty declaration

On June 25, 2009, the late President Umaru Yar’Adua declared amnesty for all militants in the Niger Delta (*Niger Delta Standard, July 31, 2009*). The amnesty was meant for the Niger Delta militants who renounced militancy. Prior to this time, the militants has been agitating that the Federal Government and the oil companies operating in the region should perform their social responsibility in developing the region and making life more meaningful for the people in the region. James Jephthah, the Chairman of bayelsa State Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee commended President Yar’Adua for showing sincere commitment to the development of the Niger Delta. The militants were advised to embrace the change and give peace a chance. Several militant groups surrendered their weapons and embraced the amnesty. Groups such as *Niger Delta Movement* led by Ateke Tom, *the Douglas Camp* led by Douglas, Otokolo of Akassa, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, a group in Bayelsa State led by Ayebatari Odio, alias Great Kali of the River Num, among others surrendered their arms.

Although, the *Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta* (MEND) led by Henry Okah initially refused to have anything to do with the Federal Government of Nigeria’s

amnesty programme on the ground that it failed to deal with its political demands, its strongman, Chief Government Ekpemupolo, (Tompson) embraced the amnesty after he sought conditions for his acceptance of the amnesty offer in a letter dated August 24, 2009 to President Umaru Yar'Adua (Niger Delta Standard, September 16, 2009)

Relevance of this study

Despite the amnesty granted by the late Musa Yar'Adua's administration to the militants in the region, several new militant groups has emerged which might be an indicator that the people of the region are not yet satisfied. Omojunikanbi N. (2019) posits that, only the amnesty programme which has somehow pacified the militant and boosted exploration activities is given attention while the major issues of development of the region that are contained in the report are abandoned in the files of the government (pp 36 - 37). They decry or belittle the payment of ₦65,000.00 to "rependant militants" whereas graduates from the region who refused to carry gun are left to suffer without the prospect of even getting employments.

Perhaps, this could be the reason some new militant groups has emerged. On March 2016, *The Niger Delta Avengers* (NDA) publicly announced its existence. Their aim is to create a sovereign State, and had threatened to disrupt Nigeria's economy to achieve their goals. Another group called *Egbesu Mightier Fraternity* emerged same month and threatened to blow off all offshore facilities in the region if government did not meet its demand - release of Kanu (The Biafran man). Another group calling itself, *Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force* emerged in early June 2016 and vowed to launch six missile in the Niger Delta and warned that it will bring down any helicopter deployed in the area. Also, a group named *Asawanda Deadly Force of Niger Delta* emerged in late June 2016 and demanded independence for the region within a few days while threatening to shut down oil production in the region if it failed to achieve its goal.

On 8 July, a new group called *Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders* (NDRC) bombed the Brass Creek Manifold in Bayelsa State on July 13, 2016, the group then declared a two-week cease fire. Another group calling itself *The Niger Delta Red Squad* declared its existence in late June 2016. The group claimed that it had blown up two pipelines belonging to Shell in the Asa/Awara axis and also threatened to attack major oil pipelines in Oguta Council area, as well as shut down all oil wells in Imo State. A few days later, another group calling itself *Adaka Boro Avengers* emerged threatening to destroy oil producing facilities and warned all oil companies to leave the Niger Delta within a week. On August 9th 2016, *Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate* declared its existence and threatened to destroy refineries in Port Harcourt and warri within 48 hours as well as a gas plant in Jeremi within a few days. The next day the group reportedly blew up a major oil pipeline operated by the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC). In Isoko on 12th August, the group warned it would blow up more oil installation in the future. On August 19, the group was reported to have blown up two pipelines belonging to NPDC in Delta State on 28th September. *Niger Delta Justice Defence Group* (NDJDG) blew up an oil pipeline in Gokana. 14 oil workers and their driver on their way to Port Harcourt were kidnapped by unknown gunmen on 2nd September after a vehicle transporting them was hijacked on Omoku-Elele Road.

All this are indications that crises in the Niger Delta has not yet been resolved even with the introduction of amnesty which was supposedly to be a developmental programme from the Federal Government of Nigeria to help resolve the crises and bring about peace in the region

Research Method

The study used the content analysis technique. This method is useful to this study because going through the manifest content such as advertisement, news stories, editorials, letters-to-the-editor, cartoons, photographs, feature articles, press releases done on the selected newspapers, the researcher would discover the frequency, magnitude, prominence and direction of the coverage given to amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to the Niger Delta militants.

The population of study was 1095 being the total issues of the three newspapers published for the year. The random sampling method was used because it involves giving all members of the population an equal chance of being selected for the study. This method eliminates bias and helps to increase the representativeness of sample chosen (Ohaja, 2003, P.76).

From the publications of *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *The Niger Delta Standard Newspaper*, one hundred and forty four (144) issues were randomly selected and analyzed. Forty eight issues each were randomly selected from each newspaper. In each of the issues selected, amnesty stories in any form were studied.

However, four dates were selected per month per newspaper for the 12 month under study. That is for each newspaper 48 issues were studied for 12 months under study. Therefore, for the three newspapers, 144 issues were studied (48 multiplied by 3).

The time frame for this study was June 2009 through May 2010. Between 1st June 2009 and 31st May 2010, each of the selected papers was to publish a total of 365 issues. The three newspapers collectively published a total of 1095 issues for the one-year time frame. This period was so chosen because it served as a turning point in the history of militancy in the Niger Delta as amnesty was not only declared but the ex-militants were engaged in training to shape their behavioural pattern and afford them the opportunity to be economically productive. The coding sheet was designed to respond to the research questions raised in the study. As a result, both the content categories and the units of analysis were carefully chosen to achieve this purpose.

Contents of newspapers were collected based on units of analysis and content categories. The units of analysis for the study included cartoons, editorials, letters-to-the-editor, straight news stories, feature articles, photographs and press releases. The content categories included content length, prominence, page leadership, direction, source.

Inter-coder reliability

The researchers used two independent coders to test the reliability of the coding sheet used in the study using formula

$$\frac{2m}{N1+N2}$$

Where m = total decision agreed by the two coders

N1 = number of coded decision to coder 1

N2 = number of coded decision to coder 2

The inter-coder reliability was calculated thus:

$$\frac{2m}{N1+N2} = \frac{2(23)}{28+28} = \frac{46}{56} = 0.82$$

The inter-coder reliability of 0.82 then showed that the prepared coding sheet was reliable enough to guide the researcher in content analyzing the newspapers.

Results

Table 1: Aggregate units of coverage of Amnesty Declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants by *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, and *The Niger Delta Standard Newspapers* from June 2009 to May 2010.

Units	<i>The Guardian</i>	%	<i>The Punch</i>	%	<i>The Niger Delta Standard</i>	%	Total	%
Editorial	3	2.17	2	3.77	3	2.07	7	2.08
News stories	68	49.28	30	56.6	80	55.17	178	52.38
Feature articles	11	7.97	4	7.55	22	15.17	37	11.01
Press releases ¹	17	12.32	1	1.89	10	6.9	28	8.33
Letter-to-the-editor	16	6.52	3	5.66	7	4.83	26	5.65
Photographs	15	10.87	11	20.75	19	13.1	45	13.39
Cartoon	9	11.59	2	3.77	4	2.76	15	6.55
Total	138	100%	53	100	145	100	336	100

The implication of this table is that more attention was given to straight news stories as it carries more information on the amnesty programme while less attention was given to it at the editorial as straight news had a percentage of 52.38% and the editorial was the least with 2.08%.

Table 2: Summary of information sources on amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants: *The Guardian*, *The Punch* and *The Niger Delta Standard*.

Source	<i>The Guardian</i>	%	<i>The Punch</i>	%	<i>The Niger Delta Standard</i>	%	Total	%
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Outside contributors/ columnist	43	33.08	17	29.31	58	40.28	118	35.54
Government information department	54	41.54	22	37.93	52	36.11	128	38.55
Niger Delta indigenes	28	21.54	16	27.59	26	18.06	70	21.08
Militants	5	3.85	3	5.17	8	5.56	16	4.82
Total	130	100	58	100	144	100	332	100

According to the report of this table, the information sources of the three newspapers has the government information department as their major source. The implication of this is that the three newspapers major source of information might be doubted by the people as information that comes from the Federal Government are most times suspected by the people of the region and as a result might not make much desired impact.

Table 3: Summary of prominence given to amnesty declaration by the three newspapers

Prominence	<i>The Guardian</i>	%	<i>The Punch</i>	%	<i>The Niger Delta Standard</i>	%	Total	%
Front page	73	48.03	42	70	80	52.29	195	53.42
Back page	33	21.71	5	8.33	15	9.8	53	14.52
Inside page	46	30.26	13	21.67	58	37.91	117	32.05
Total	152	100	60	100	153	100	365	100

This tables shows that the three newspapers attached so much importance to the amnesty declared by the Federal Government of Nigeria to all Niger Delta militants who are willing to surrender their guns and embrace the amnesty. This also shows that the three newspapers understood the importance as it relates to managing or resolving the crises in the region as both newspapers gave high prominence by reporting and placing the stories on front page which collectively gave 53.42% as against 14.52% for Back page and 32.05% for inside page. Placing the stories on front page also creates more awareness as well as setting the agenda for discussion which is the theory used for this work.

Table 3: Summary of prominence given to amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria by the select Nigerian newspapers

Prominence	The Guardian	%	The Punch	%	The Niger Delta Standard	%	Total	%
Front page	73	48.03	42	70	80	52.29	195	53.42
Back page	33	21.71	5	8.33	15	9.8	53	14.52
Inside page	46	30.26	13	21.67	58	37.91	117	32.05
Total	152	100	60	100	153	100	365	100

The level of prominence and awareness on amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria created by the newspapers were high. This is seen in the prominence given to it as most of its report on the issue appeared on the front page of the newspapers. This also shows that both newspapers attach importance on the issue as the front page stories has the highest percentage of 53.42% as against inside page with 32.05% while the least is the back page with 14.52% as indicated in the table.

Table 4: Summary direction on Coverage of Amnesty Declaration by the select newspapers

Newspapers	Favourable	Unfavourable	Total
<i>The Guardian</i>	144 (41.98%)	8 (36.36%)	152 (41.64%)
<i>The Punch</i>	58 (16.91%)	2 (9.09%)	60 (16.44%)
<i>The Niger Delta Standard</i>	141 (41.11%)	12 (54.55%)	153 (41.92)
Total	343 (93.97%)	22 (6.03%)	365 (100%)

Looking at the direction of the news report from the above table, it is obvious that the issue received a favourable response from the three newspapers as each gave a good response on the issue which shows that the select newspapers understood the importance of the amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria and its effect in sustenance of peace not just in the region but globally. Also, from this report, it shows that the direction of this news report will affect the peoples’ perception of the story as important.

Table 5: Summary of Page Leadership: *The Guardian, The Punch and The Niger Delta Standard*

Page Leadership	The Guardian	%	The Punch	%	Niger Delta Standard	%	Total	%
Lead	73	48.03	21	35	78	50.98	172	47.12
2 nd Lead	31	20.39	13	21.67	35	22.88	79	21.64
3 rd Lead	30	19.74	17	30	21	13.72	69	18.90
Filler	18	11.84	8	13.33	19	12.42	45	12.33
Total	152	100	60	100	153	100	365	100

The lead of newspaper is usually ‘eye catchy’ as it attracts attention and most times attention of readers are always drawn to the lead stories. The select newspapers stories on amnesty declaration were placed as lead stories which also is an indication the three newspapers consider the amnesty declaration as newsworthy which make them focus extra-ordinary attention on the matter which in turn makes it news in the minds of the public.

Table 6: Summary of story length on amnesty declaration by *The Guardian, The Punch and the Niger Delta Standard*

Page Length	The Guardian	%	The Punch	%	Niger Delta Standard	%	Total	%
Above 1 page	16	10.53	6	10	21	13.73	43	11.78
1 page	40	26.32	14	23.33	61	39.88	115	31.51
$\frac{3}{4}$ page	6	3.95	4	6.67	13	8.49	23	6.30
$\frac{1}{2}$ page	47	30.92	13	21.67	38	24.84	98	26.85
$\frac{1}{4}$ page	33	21.71	18	30	17	11.11	68	18.63
Below $\frac{1}{4}$ page	10	6.58	5	8.33	3	1.96	18	4.93
Total	152	100	60	100	153	100	365	100

Most of the stories as shown on the table are full page i.e. 1 page. This also reveals the importance of the story to the newspapers by the order of their presentation as majority of the stories are 1 page with 31.51%.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study were discussed in response to the research question.

Research question 1: What is the level of prominence given to amnesty declaration?

The placement of the stories in the newspaper formed the basis of which the prominence given to amnesty declaration is determined. The three newspapers jointly gave 53.42% prominence on front page stories as seen in table 3, 14.52% on Back page. The front page is seen as the most important part of the newspaper and which is easily seen by readers. Based on this, it could be said that the three newspapers to a large extent gave prominence to the coverage of amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants.

Research question 2: what unit of coverage did the amnesty declaration appear most regularly?

This is discussed using table 1. The three newspapers collectively had 52.38% on news stories, photographs had 13.39%, feature articles 11.01, cartoons had 6.55%, letter-to-the-editors 5.65% and editorial 2.08%. The findings shows that news stories were the most reflected with 52.38%. the implication is that not much in-depth writing was carried out in the reporting of amnesty declaration by Nigerian government as the editorials and feature articles had less percentage of coverage of the story.

Research question 3: who were the sources used by the selected newspapers?

Various information sources were sampled for this study such as Government Information Department, outside contributors / columnist, Niger Delta indigenes, militant. Report shows that within the time frame of the study, the major sources of information were the

Government Information Department and outside contributors / columnist. This shows that the newspaper made use of government sources in their coverage of The Federal Government Declaration of amnesty to the Niger Delta militants.

Research question 4: what is the direction of coverage by the selected newspapers?

The result of this investigation shows to a great extent that the newspapers coverage of the amnesty declaration were in support of the amnesty. This implies that the selected Nigerian newspapers viewed the amnesty as a great move to the development and peace of the Niger Delta in particular and the Nigeria society in general.

Summary

The analysis of the Federal Government Amnesty to Niger Delta militants by select Nigerian newspaper shows that the newspapers were in tune with the amnesty programme and gave in-depth coverage of it at varying degrees.

The study also shows that the newspaper attached high level prominence in the amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants as 53.42% of the coverage was found on the front page. On the whole, the direction of the coverage was favourable. This means that the coverage by the newspaper supported the amnesty declaration.

Conclusion

This study concluded that Nigerian newspapers have not done badly in their coverage of amnesty declaration by Federal Government of Nigeria. This is seen in the level of prominence given to the story as 93.97% of the coverage is in favour of the amnesty declaration as against 6.03% that is not in favour. It is therefore concluded that the Nigerian newspaper helped Nigerian to have more understanding of the amnesty declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria to Niger Delta militants.

This however agrees with what Galadima (1991) notes: The press have not only arrived, but can be relied upon to give reliable and comprehensive information provided they are taken into full confidence (p.7).

Recommendation

The Nigerian newspaper in its coverage of Federal Government amnesty to Niger Delta militants should undertake an evaluation in order to discover its strengths and weaknesses.

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