



Fuel Subsidy Removal Strike in Nigeria: A study of Selected National Newspaper Reports

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Abstract: The Nigerian Government reviews the prices of petroleum products upwards from time to time. Early in 2012, it removed the fuel subsidy, resulting in fierce protests by many citizens. The objection to the resultant pump price hike by many Nigerians led to a somewhat downward review of the prices. The unfolding events featured prominently in the media. This study presents the coverage of the fuel subsidy removal saga by some selected national newspapers. Findings from the contents analyzed show that all the newspapers investigated gave significant coverage to the fuel subsidy removal demonstrations across the country. However, certain newspapers were found to be subjective in their reportage, thus raising ethical questions. The study recommends, amongst others, that some editors should consider public interest as paramount in crisis reporting.

Keywords: Newspaper coverage, fuel subsidy, Nigeria, *Daily Sun*, *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, Strike action.

Introduction

The announcement in January, 2012, of the removal of fuel subsidy by the government of President Goodluck Jonathan, was met with protests by many Nigerians who described the resultant pump price hike as an unsolicited gift. With the home

grown realities of unemployment, lack of confidence in government and security challenges amongst others, the pervasive expectation was that the government would hardly consider price increment in such a charged atmosphere of dissatisfaction and instability. The

heat generated by the government's action attracted the media, including newspapers which remain commanders of a large army of readers across the country. Cobb and Elder (1981) stress that "the news media provide ideological definitions and interpretations of policy issues by constructing them in ways that mobilize public support..." (in Torwel, 2011, p.5). Besides this, the media also legitimized protests as a national issue. Anuforo and Akpan (2011) quoted the Minister of Information in the build up to the protests:

If Nigeria wants to develop, we can't continue to do things the way we have been doing them. You can't dedicate one third of your budget to subsidize one item when industries and other critical sectors of the economy also require attention... if we continue like this, the economy will collapse on our head (p.5)

Alio (2006, p.7), taking a cursory look at the performance of the petroleum sector in Nigeria, explained that revenue from agriculture constituted the mainstay of the national economy prior to independence in 1960. According to him, during that period, there was no internal upheaval as economic and social life had flourished under the colonial administration." Though this is disputable, there is hardly any doubt that the standard of living was not as low as recorded during the

subsidy removal crisis. Even if the standard was low, there was no record of fuel crisis, let alone that of subsidy predicament.

The fuel subsidy removal started essentially as a political pronouncement, which had a direct bearing on the economy of Nigeria. In the estimation of McQuail (2010): The public character of the media derives mainly from its political function in a democracy as from the fact that information, culture and ideas are considered the collective property of all (p.218). Wogu (2008) adds on the relevance of newspapers opining that:

Media content is far less tangible than other consumer products. The meaning of individuals (sic) messages can vary tremendously from one person to the next. Just what is being traded when news stories or television dramas are "bought" and "sold"? When we buy a newspaper, we don't buy individual stories, we buy packages of them bundled with features like comic and horoscopes. We can choose to ignore anything in the package that we find offensive (p.67).

Ezekwesili (2011), while expatiating on the need for the media to focus more on developmental issues, advocates adequate publication of policy matters and reforms critical for fostering development by the media.

Early 2011, the Arab Spring began with Tunisia protests which spread to

other Arab nations. The conditions that led to the uprising were similar to those of Nigeria. Protests began in Lagos with music and dance at the famed Gani Fawehinmi Park under the tag "Occupy Nigeria." Akaaer (2011) reiterates dance and music as factors that help attain communal goal in the Africa's cultural milieu. The goal of the protest was for the reversal of fuel price to the original ₦65 per liter from ₦120. Government was compelled to reverse the hike, albeit to ₦97. The Governor of Lagos State, Raji Fashola condemned the deployment of soldiers to crush the protests, saying "majority of us who hold public office danced and sang before these same people when we were seeking their votes. Why should we feel irritated when they sing and dance in protest against what we have done" (Olufowobi & Makinde, 2012, p.6).

The Problem and Objectives of the Study

Newspapers, in line with other media of communication, have a primary responsibility of informing, educating and entertaining. In addition, they interpret, concretize and even mobilize the people to take meaningful actions. Adabga, Ugwu and Eme (2007) had observed the trend of strikes arising from fuel pump price increase but the role newspapers played needs to be clarified to enable equitable appraisal of the medium as an agenda setter

whilst effecting social responsibility. This study, therefore, investigated how some daily newspapers in Nigeria covered the fuel subsidy removal protests. This is a departure from Torwel (2011) who limited his study to magazines and three aspects: news reports, editorials and letters to the editor. Here, the main objective is to find out if the press lived up to its responsibility of reporting this important national development. Other objectives are:

- To investigate the level of coverage given to the nationwide protests by key national newspapers.
- To ascertain the informative significance of the coverage of the fuel subsidy removal, that led to nationwide protests.
- To establish the direction of the newspapers in their different presentations.

Research Questions

The foregoing objectives are transposed into the under-listed questions:

- What is the level of coverage given by the newspapers to fuel subsidy removal?
- What is the informative significance of the coverage of the fuel subsidy removal and the national strike on the people?
- How did the papers direct their stories on the subsidy removal and the consequent national strike?

Fuel Price Hike in Nigeria: History and Reactions

According to Ukonu (2006), private media owners are very visible and active in Nigeria. At a glance, it is rare to find any functional government newspaper or magazine. The most prominent 25 national newspapers are privately owned. This, by implication, means that the newspapers should be free to report without undue government interference. Generally, these national papers should be the channels for conveying the people's feelings or views to government and in turn reporting or explaining governments' actions, policies and programs to the public.

On January 1st, 2012, the federal government announced the total removal of subsidy on fuel leading to a hike in pump price from ₦65 to ₦141 per liter. This action was rejected by many Nigerians because of its obvious negative effects on the economy and their lives. The Deputy Minority Leader of the House of Representatives Suleiman Abdulrahman Kawu said the action of the government amounted to violation of the law since the federal budget for that financial year had accommodated fuel subsidy. However, the Governors' Forum, a meeting of the heads of the Nigeria's 36 political subdivisions, supported the subsidy removal as substantiated by the Niger State governor, Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu.

The hike to ₦141 was not the first in the country. During General Yakubu Gowon's administration, fuel price rose from 6 Kobo to 9.5 Kobo per litre (Adagba et al, 2012,p.74) through ₦65 per litre by Musa Yar'Adua administration to ₦141 per litre by the Jonathan's administration (Fanimu, Aduba, Okere, Adepetun and Salau, 2011,p.10) which started a campaign to enlist the understanding of the populace.

President Jonathan explained why the subsidy must be removed, saying "the truth is that we are all faced with basic choices... either we deregulate and survive economically, or we continue with subsidy regime that will continue to undermine our economy and potential for growth and face serious consequences" (as cited in Shehu, 2012, p.11). The media, as the fourth estate of the realm, set out to inform and educate the citizens on the crisis. Nigerian newspapers were particularly active and very visible as they turned out to be the first choice for news for many Nigerians right from the pronouncement of the subsidy removal on January 1st, 2012 to the commencement of the strike from January 9th to 16, 2012, leading to the reduction to ₦97 in the pump price and then to the call for an overhaul of the petroleum industry.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on the social responsibility and agenda-setting theories of communication. The social responsibility theory is a normative that originated from the Hutchins Commission on freedom of the press set up in the United States of America in 1947 to re-evaluate the licentiousness (the overbearing influence) of advertisers, media professionals and the *nouveau riche* who had the means to set up media empires and run them without due regard to public interest.

In the view of Folarin (2002, p.31) the thrust of the theory is socially acceptable press behavior anchored on self-regulation, but if the press would not voluntarily regulate itself then there must be certain social structures to ensure that it does behave in compliance with recognized social standards. This led to the formation of regulatory authorities such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) the continued participation of pressure groups and code and ethics conducts.

The social responsibility theory is designed to achieve an appreciable level of self-control, not government intervention. It explains media ownership as a form of public trust cum stewardship. It is not an unlimited private franchise but that with a guiding objective of a healthy democracy (McQuail, 2010, pp.170-

172) though Folarin (2002) states: "Quite naturally, the interpretation and implementation of the theory's tenets will vary in line with any given social milieu" (p.33).

The agenda-setting theory emerged after the normative theories. Media in this sense is seen to work with other variables to bring about change in the society and not ascribed the "almighty" status that is applicable in the normative theories. Folarin (2002) notes:

Agenda-setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda-setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about (p.75).

Kunczick (1995) clarifies that the "... appropriate procedures for examining agenda-setting involve a comparison between media content over a certain period and the subjects that most people in the society are discussing" (as cited in Folarin, 2002, p.76).(McQuail 2010, p.512-513) observes that in order to show a causal relationship between the various issues termed agendas, content analysis, reflecting media attention to various issues in the relevant period, should be applied within a strict methodological culture.

Agenda – setting theory negates the filtering of information by interpersonal and mass communication audiences in the context of selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception and selective retention. McLuhan (in Folarin, 2002, p.76) faults the agenda-setting theory, stressing that “the press can color events by using them in a particular way, or refusing to use them at all.” While fulfilling its statutory roles as information provider, watchdog, electioneering monitor, whistle blower and agitator for electoral reforms (Omoera 2010, p.33-38), the press should also serve as an impartial mediator especially on such a sensitive topic as fuel subsidy removal. McQuail (2010) elucidates this point:

One main feature is the adoption of a position of detachment and neutrality towards the object of reporting. Secondly, there is an effort to avoid partisanship: not taking sides in matters of dispute or showing bias. Thirdly, objectivity requires strict attachment to accuracy and other truth criteria (such as relevance and completeness). It also presumes a lack of ulterior motive or service to third party. The process of observing and reporting should thus not be contaminated by subjectivity, nor should it interfere with the reality being reported on (p.200).

Absolute objectivity is believed not achievable by some observers as Dommick and Rothenbuhler (1984) have put it: “There always appears to be some ‘niche’ in which a particular medium has an advantage”. The foregoing statement notwithstanding, the roles of the media in ensuring that political leaders are accountable and events are fairly reported are not negotiable in order justify its appellation “fourth estate of the realm.”

Significance of the Study

This study would add to the existing body of knowledge on crisis reporting. Nigeria may not have seen the end of fuel crisis and its reportage. Recently, the Nigeria’s National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) stated that the current price of N145 per liter was not realistic and that the company would have to review it upward. Public reactions are unfolding and the press would be called to duty in which case lessons from the past would be useful. Media establishments outlets apart from those investigated could learn from the findings of the study and the knowledge gained could of help in subsequent reporting of similar crises. Moreover, the study provides some data *prima facie* to assist researchers in development communication. Such uncomplicated data (in percentages) stand a chance of being used by the government for planning purposes. The study could assist the government in policy

decisions especially on national issues as significant as oil subsidy removal.

Methodology

Three Nigerian national newspapers – *The Punch*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust* were selected for analysis based on ownership structure and regional interest of business. While *The Punch* and *Daily Sun* are based in Lagos, the owners of *Daily Sun* are mainly from South East geopolitical zone while those of *The Punch* are from the South West. In contrast, *Daily Trust* is based in the central region with reportorial focus on the northern part of Nigeria. The private ownership of these newspapers assures minimal government interference whilst their regional interests make certain a balanced national spread.

Content analysis as applied in this work facilitated data study and uniform presentation of facts and relevant materials. Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p.161) aver that “two dimensions are usually used to determine the appropriate universe for a content analysis-the topic area and the time period”. In this instance, all editions of the three selected newspapers (*The Punch*, *Sun* and *Daily Trust*) that reported subsidy removal from August, 2011 to January, 2012 formed the study population.

Owing to the fact that a sample allows for generalization via

extrapolation beyond the observed range, time is saved and ample opportunity avails for working with a manageable quantity, within a time-framed sample construction. Ohaja (2003, p.78) notes that, “in order to arrive at the issues to study, we can decide to have one continuous week and one constructed week for each newspaper per year.” Notably, the fuel price strike occurred within six work days i.e. Monday 9th-Friday January 13th, 2012 and Monday January 16th, 2012. Consideration was given from Sunday January 8th to Saturday January 14th, 2012 as the continuous week (which is seven days). The constructed week comprised, additional two days - Thursday January 5th, and Friday January 6th, 2012 and the balance 5 days effective Monday January 16th (which is still part of the strike, though called off later in the afternoon) to Friday January 20th, 2012 - totaling 14 days.

Stratified sampling was adopted in selecting the newspapers to study in recognition of the country’s geopolitical peculiarities; quite in sync with the argument by Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p.104) that sample characteristic is more important in selection than size. This goes to confirm the reason that news coverage is hinged on newspaper ownership, among other factors (Rodman 2010, p.100), which in this case manifests in the geopolitical

zone that each of the investigated newspaper represents.

Manually constructed code sheet was used for data collection, the content categories of which include: photographs, illustrations/cartoons, news, features, opinion, editorials, interviews, adverts/advertorial, letters to the editor, and columns.

This approach guarantees orderly, classificatory and qualitative output that is valid (Obikeze 1990, p.26; Okpoko & Eze, 2011, p.14)). Validity in the words of Uzoagulu (2011, p.88) “is simply the appropriateness of an instrument in measuring what is intended to measure.”

For the content categories, content validity was considered, which Nkpa (1997), referred to as “the extent to

which the items of an instrument are representative of the content and behavior specified by the theoretical concept being measured” (cited in Uzoagulu, 2011, p.89).

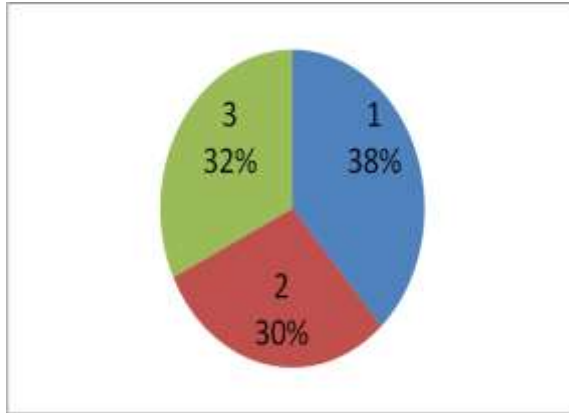
Furthermore, two coders in addition to the researchers were trained for two hours daily for two days to code selected editions. The composite inter coder reliability tests carried out using the Krippendorff Alpha formula (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 174) yielded .89 percentage point. Analysis of variance and pictorial representations were carried out to show the results of the investigation.

Results and Discussion of Findings
Research Question 1: What is the level of coverage given by the newspapers on fuel subsidy removal?

Table 1: Level of coverage by the three national newspapers

| Newspapers | f | % |
|--------------------|-----|--------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 849 | 38.26 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 657 | 29.61 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 713 | 32.13 |
| n =2219 | | 100.00 |

Table 1 showed that 38.26 percent of the newspapers coverage was effected by *Daily Sun* while *The Punch* covered a total of 29.61 percent and *Daily Trust* had 32.13 percent. This is represented in this pie chart.



Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Research Question 2: What is the informative significance of the coverage of the fuel subsidy removal and the nationwide protests on the people?

Table 2: Informative significance of the coverage on the respondents

| Source | Sum of squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig |
|------------------------------|----------------|----|-------------|------|------|
| Corrected model | 236350.489 | 89 | 2655.625 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Intercept | 54957.511 | 1 | 54957.511 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Sections | 15,4532.711 | 9 | 17170.301 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Newspapers | 641.622 | 2 | 320.811 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Reaction | 19824.622 | 2 | 9912.011 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Section/Newspapers | 4555.489 | 18 | 253.083 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Reaction/section | 46725.089 | 18 | 259.838 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Newspapers/Reaction | 1188.044 | 4 | 297.011 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Section/Newspapers/Reactions | 883.511 | 36 | 246.764 | 0.00 | .000 |
| Error | 0.00 | 0 | | | |
| Total | 291308.000 | 90 | | | |
| Corrected Total | 236350.489 | 89 | | | |

Table 2 shows the important sections of the content of the newspapers: advertisements, columns, features, editorials, photographs, cartoons, opinion, letters to the editor, interview and news.

The newspapers treated are categorized as: neutral, support and against. The table shows that the sections had 0.05 level of significance, with 0.00 (p value); the newspapers showed 0.05 level of significance where the p -value was 0.00. The reactions also indicated 0.05 level of significance with 0.00

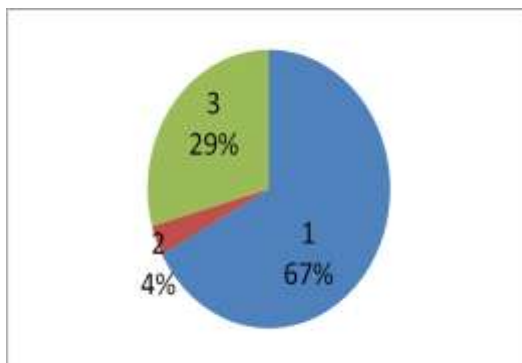
p -value. Therefore, the impact of the newspapers coverage on the people was significant.

Research Question 3: How did the newspapers direct their stories on subsidy removal and nationwide protests?

Table 3: How the newspapers directed their stories using Advertorials

| Newspapers | f | % |
|--------------------|-----|------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 39 | 67.2 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 2 | 3.5 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 17 | 29.3 |
| n=58 | | 100 |

Table 3 shows that 67.2 percent of the advertorial was covered by *Daily Sun*, 3.5 percent was covered by *The Punch* while 29.3 percent of the advertorial was covered by *Daily Trust*. This is represented pictorially for easy understanding of the level of coverage given to advertorial.

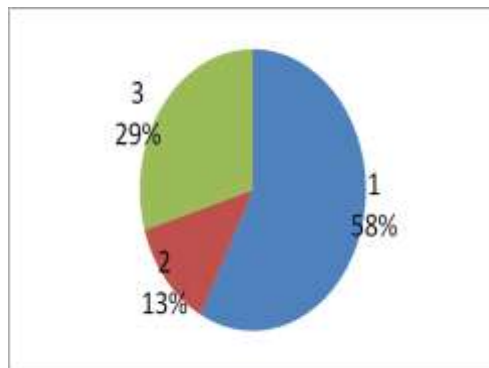


Legend: 1=*Daily Sun*, 2=*The Punch*, 3=*Daily Trust*. Percentages are approximated.

Table 4: How the newspapers directed their stories using Columns

| Newspapers | f | % |
|--------------------|----|--------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 41 | 57.7 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 9 | 12.7 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 21 | 29.6 |
| n=71 | | 100.00 |

Table 4 reveals 57.7 percent of the column was covered by *Daily Sun*, 12.7 percent was covered by *The Punch* while 29.6 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. For pictorial representation of the level of coverage given to column find thus:

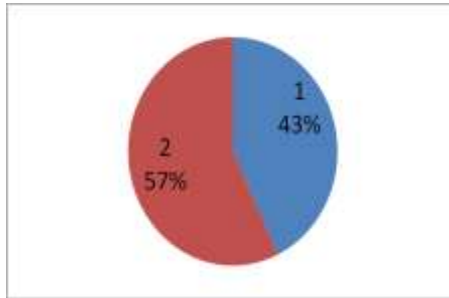


Legend: 1=*Daily Sun*, 2=*The Punch*, 3=*Daily Trust*. Percentages are approximated.

Table 5: How the newspapers directed their stories using Features

| Newspapers | f | % |
|--------------------|---|------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | - | - |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 4 | 42.9 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 3 | 57.1 |
| n=7 | | 100 |

Table 5 shows that *Daily Sun*, did not cover features, 42.9 percent was effected by *The Punch* while 57.1 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. For pictorial representation of the coverage given to features, see below.

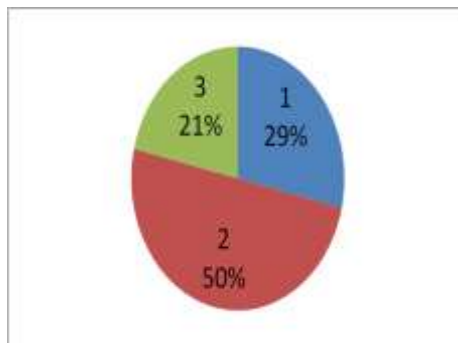


Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 6: How the newspapers directed their stories using Editorials

| Newspapers | <i>f</i> | % |
|-------------|----------|------|
| Daily Sun | 4 | 28.6 |
| The Punch | 7 | 50 |
| Daily Trust | 3 | 21.4 |
| n=14 | | 100 |

Table 6 shows that 28.6 percent of the editorial was covered by *Daily Sun*, 50 percent was covered by *The Punch* while 21.4 percent was reported by *Daily Trust*. The pictorial representation is presented below:

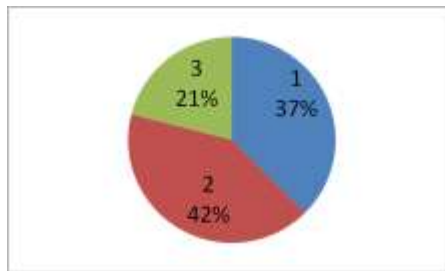


Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 7: How the newspapers directed their stories using Photographs

| Newspapers | <i>f</i> | % |
|--------------------|----------|-------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 240 | 37.6 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 26.5 | 41.5 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 134 | 21.00 |
| n=639 | | 100 |

Table 7 shows that 37.6 percent of the photographs was covered by *Daily Sun*, 41.5 percent was covered by *The Punch* while 21 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. Pictorial representation for is thus:

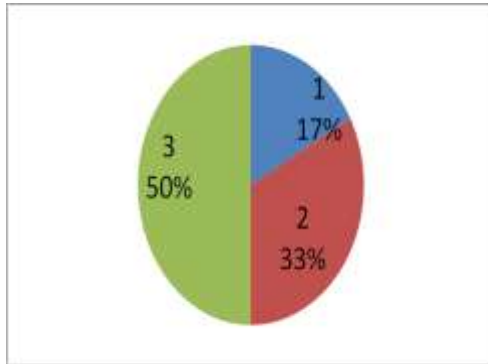


Legend: 1=*Daily Sun*, 2=*The Punch*, 3=*Daily Trust*. Percentages are approximated.

Table 8: How the newspapers directed their stories using Illustrations/Cartoons

| Newspapers | <i>f</i> | % |
|--------------------|----------|------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 12 | 17.1 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 23 | 32.9 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 35 | 50 |
| n=70 | | 100 |

Table 8 shows that 17.1 percent of the cartoons/illustrations was achieved by *Daily Sun*, 32.9 percent by *The Punch*, while 50 percent was realized by *Daily Trust*. Coincidentally, *Daily Trust* figure rhymes with the combination of *The Punch* and *Daily Sun*. This is pictorially represented by the pie chart below:

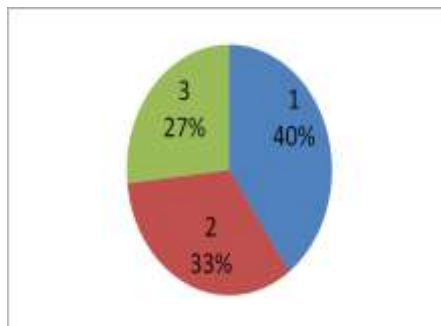


Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 9: How the newspapers directed their stories using readers' opinions

| Newspapers | f | % |
|-------------|----|------|
| Daily Sun | 30 | 40 |
| The Punch | 25 | 33.3 |
| Daily Trust | 20 | 26.7 |
| n=75 | | 100 |

Table 9 shows that 40 percent of the opinion content was reported by *Daily Sun*, 33.3 percent by *The Punch*, while 26.7 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. The pie chart follows:

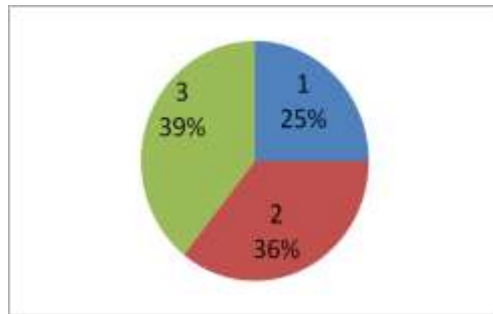


Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 10: How the newspapers directed their stories using Letters to the Editor

| Newspapers | <i>f</i> | % |
|--------------------|----------|------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 7 | 25.0 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 10 | 35.7 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 11 | 39.3 |
| Total | 28 | 100 |

Letters to the editor is an important component of the investigation; an important variable. According to Table 10 some 25 percent of the letters to the editor was covered by *Daily Sun*, 35.7 percent was covered by *The Punch*, while 39.3 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. This is pictorially represented by the following pie chart.

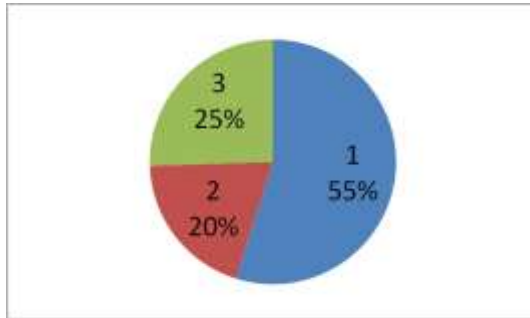


Legend: 1=*Daily Sun*, 2=*The Punch*, 3=*Daily Trust*. Percentages are approximated.

Table 11: How the newspapers directed their stories using Interviews

| Newspapers | <i>f</i> | % |
|--------------------|----------|------|
| <i>Daily Sun</i> | 28 | 54.9 |
| <i>The Punch</i> | 10 | 19.6 |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 13 | 25.5 |
| Total | 51 | 100 |

Table 11 shows that 54.9 percent of the interview was covered by *Daily Sun*, 19.6 percent was covered by *The Punch* while 25.5 percent was covered by *Daily Trust*. This is represented pictorially for the level of coverage given to interviews thus:

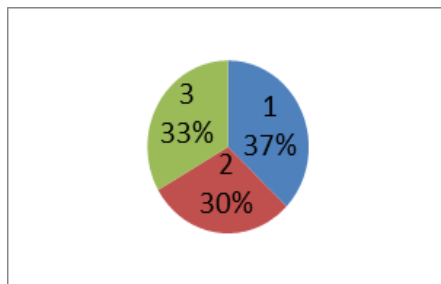


Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 12: How the newspapers directed their stories using News reports

| Newspapers | f | % |
|-------------|------|------|
| Daily Sun | 448 | 37.1 |
| The Punch | 357 | 29.6 |
| Daily Trust | 401 | 33.3 |
| Total | 1206 | 100 |

Table 12 shows that 37.1 percent of the news was covered by *Daily Sun*, 29.6 percent by *The Punch* while 33.3 percent was reported by *Daily Trust*. This is represented pictorially represented by the following pie chart. Table 13 below sums up all the foregoing, listed data.



Legend: 1=Daily Sun, 2=The Punch, 3=Daily Trust. Percentages are approximated.

Table 13: Summary of findings

| S/ N | Content Categories | <i>The Punch</i> | | | | <i>Daily Sun</i> | | | | <i>Daily Trust</i> | | | | Cate gory Total |
|---------|----------------------------|------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|
| | | Y | X | N | T | Y | X | N | T | Y | X | N | T | |
| 1 | Adverts | 1 | | 1 | 2 | 37 | 2 | | 39 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 17 | 58 |
| 2 | Columns | | 8 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 28 | 9 | 41 | 1 | 17 | 3 | 21 | 71 |
| 3 | Features | 1 | 3 | | 4 | | | | 0 | | 2 | 1 | 3 | 7 |
| 4 | Editorials | | 6 | 1 | 7 | | 3 | 1 | 4 | | | 3 | 3 | 14 |
| 5 | Photos | 20 | 236 | 9 | 265 | 21 | 177 | 42 | 240 | 19 | 105 | 10 | 134 | 639 |
| 6 | Illustrations /Cartoons | 1 | 22 | | 23 | | 12 | | 12 | | 35 | | 35 | 70 |
| 7 | Opinion | 2 | 22 | 1 | 25 | 8 | 21 | 1 | 30 | 1 | 16 | 3 | 20 | 75 |
| 8 | Letters to the Editor | | 10 | 1 | 11 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 9 | | 10 | 28 |
| 9 | Interviews | 4 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 6 | 21 | 1 | 28 | 2 | 9 | 2 | 13 | 51 |
| 10 | News | 51 | 200 | 106 | 357 | 138 | 185 | 125 | 448 | 101 | 202 | 98 | 401 | 1,206 |
| | TOTAL | 80 | 512 | 121 | 713 | 215 | 453 | 181 | 849 | 131 | 401 | 125 | 657 | 2,219 |

Fuel protest reportage legend:

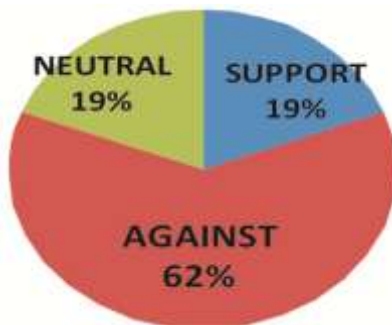
Y- In support of the fuel subsidy removal

X-Against

N-Neutral - Neither for nor against

T-Total

| | |
|----------------|-------------|
| SUPPORT | 426 |
| AGAINST | 1366 |
| NEUTRAL | 427 |



The matrix above offers the evidence that 2,219 reports emanated from the three tabloids on the fuel price

increase imbroglio and *The Sun* led the pack with 849 mentions. *The Punch* and *Daily Trust* had 713 and

657 allusions to the subject matter to claim second and third positions respectively. Notably, *The Sun's* established reportorial allegiance to the Eastern region where matters of the black gold touches the heart of the people seems to be corroborated by this finding. It may be logical to infer from this salient point that the farther a newspaper is to the dormitory of an issue, the lesser its reportage on same. Geographical contiguity mirrors reportorial connectivity in spite of the fact that fuel price hike affects all Nigerians in all facets of daily living. Regional bias is confirmed to have played a dominant role in the reportorial interest of the three dailies concerning the fuel price enmeshment.

Further, the matrix above shows that News (the tenth reportorial category on the table), contributed more than the other nine categories combined, in publishing stories about the price hike protests. For instance, while News reports led the rest with 1,206 contributions out of 2219, photo stories took a distant second position with 639. In real terms, none of the remaining eight reportorial categories contributed adequately for a resounding third position having recorded lowly double and single digit scores. However, the contribution of the category of news should not be surprising since the newspapers are *prima facie* news carriers. The ontological property of

any newspaper is news but the contribution of photo stories should be noted to confirm the aphorism that a picture is worth more than a thousand stories. Again, regional affiliation also played out with news reportage of the dailies examined. Once more, *The Sun* led with 448 news correspondences while *Daily Trust* and *The Punch*, this time, swapped positions with 401 and 357 to claim second and third positions respectively.

Three dispositions of “support,” “against” and “neutral” are central to this study as indicators of the stand of the newspapers on the issues of fuel price hike. Content analysis data in the matrix above shows that all the newspapers are against fuel price hike. *The Punch* seems the most vehement with 512 counts on all categories except advertorials; *The Sun* scores 453 points also on all categories but “features.” *Daily Trust* registers 401 tallies on all categories excluding “editorials.” Clearly, opposing the decision of the government to hike fuel price and supporting public restless reaction constitute the tabloids’ expression of responsibility to the society.

Consistent with its anti-government and pro-people position, *The Punch* records a very low score on the “support” barometer with only 80 points, albeit, in eight reportorial categories. In contradistinction, *The Sun* and *Daily Trust* seem to vacillate

with 215 and 131 reportorial contents respectively, which fairly indicate their support for the fuel price hike. Further equivocation by *The Sun* and *Daily Trust* is noticeable in the area of neutrality towards the subject matter. With 181 and 125 tallies respectively, both newspapers insinuate that they are neutral. Though their bars of neutrality are not as high as the tabloids' level of opposition, where support outweighs impartiality, the social responsibility status of a newspaper becomes questionable. Summarily, 426 mentions favor subsidy removal by the government, 1366 reportorial oppose whilst 427 reportorial represent the neutral voice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The combination of the 19.20 percent a piece for subsidy removal and neutrality amount to 38.44 percent, which when deducted from 61.56 percent against is 23.12 percent. This is clearly significant in authenticating the overwhelming voice of distress demonstrated during the rallies. The resultant effect is the standing down on the fuel subsidy removal and shifting to a downward review from the stipulated ₦141 as announced on January 1st, 2012 to ₦97 per liter for fuel as announced on January 16, 2012. Therefore, the overall newspaper reports were justified.

Having successfully championed the fuel subsidy removal reportage,

newspapers should apply same media hype to other pressing developmental issues such as corruption, social injustice, etc.

In keeping faith with the discoveries in this study, it is pertinent to proffer the following:

- It is necessary for the government to consciously seek constructive conclusion to any discourse initiated with the citizenry especially such sensitive matters pertaining to daily living. Social upheavals would be banished where popular decisions are embraced.
- Exhaustive engagement of channels of communication is key to infallible decision-making. Government should reach rural dwellers through traditional communication channels (story telling, theatre, song and dances) as noted by Yahaya (2003, p.43) for dispersal of information. Here, entertainment laced with education would help to solve problems of human endeavor” (as cited in Ugande, 2011, p.40).
- Newspapers need to be more decisive in taking positions on all issues affecting the people. Editorial commentary which is the exclusive preserve of tabloids contributed little to the vexed issue of fuel subsidy removal as shown by the findings wherein editorials emerged 9th of 10 content categories. More that reporting public opinion, newspapers should

contribute their opinion as stakeholders in the affairs of the nation.

- Advertorials in support of the government and also placed by same were not properly distributed as *Daily Sun* received 39 of 58; this could be inferred to have influenced its reportage and inconsistency noted earlier. Government should guard against this undemocratic and subjective flow of information especially on

national matters such as this. Advertorials should spread evenly in future.

- Research is recommended to assist government in decision making to avoid treading on the wrong side of public opinion and general expectation Olukotun (2012, p.64). The protests and losses could have been avoided if research findings were applied in the decision to raise fuel price.

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