



# Newspaper Framing of Incumbent President and Challenger in Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election

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**Abstract:** As elections draw near, citizens look up to the media for information about contestants. This study examines the coverage, by four dominant newspapers, of an incumbent President and his challenger in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, to determine how the news was constructed and the framing patterns in their reports. Using the continuous week formula, 28 editions spread over four months were studied. Results show that there were 110 articles on the 2015 election that captured a total of 245 frames. The *history* frame was dominant, followed by *national security* and *corruption*. The findings also show that the 2015 presidential elections were adequately reported by the media but contents focused more on the candidates than on issues. This study recommends that the issues raised by contestants in their manifestos could be appropriated by the media to expand their discussion on matters affecting the citizens rather than the personality of the contestants.

**Keywords:** Media, Framing, presidential election, incumbent president, challenger.

## Introduction

Elections are conducted every four years in Nigeria and 2015 was an election year. Though there were 14 candidates vying to become president in that year, only two - incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (of the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP) and former Head of State Muhammadu Buhari (of the All Progressive Congress, APC) - appeared popular.

The 2015 presidential election was one of the fiercest owing to the socio-political situation which had ebbed dangerously. Security situation in the country had been complicated by the Boko Haram insurgency. Youth unemployment, rivalry of the country's north and the south over power-sharing, menace of Fulani herdsmen, fragile party alliances, shortage of electricity were just a few of the tension-causing factors. Nigerians needed change desperately and the 2015 presidential elections provided the opportunity to bring in a new regime that could turn things around.

Ezea (2015, para. 5) asserts that "since 1999, Nigerians have not witnessed a presidential poll [whose] prelude has generated much controversy, hate campaigns, tense atmosphere, intrigues, scheming, blackmail, mudslinging, allegations, divisiveness, bad blood, threats, inflammatory and unguarded utterances, propaganda like the forth

coming poll which many see as a tight race between the two top contenders namely President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) of the All Progressive Congress (APC)." The two candidates, according to Samuel (2016) were commonly depicted in a variety of stereotypical terms, with Buhari being seen as northerner, militarist, ostensibly ascetic, jihadist; while Jonathan was presented as a southerner, civilian, indolent, and religiously moderate.

Buhari was a four-time opposition candidate who contested in 2003 and 2007 under the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP). In 2011, he contested under the platform of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) against Jonathan, who won and in 2015, he became the presidential candidate for the All Progressive Congress (APC) and emerged the winner. Jonathan became the acting President in 2010 following the demise of the President, Umaru Musa Yar'adua. He then contested in 2011 and won.

These two candidates were popular and given much coverage by the media. The mass media influence the public opinion by canalizing attention toward the topics and themes that they consider important. The approaches mass media use regarding these themes can induce

specific effects in their evaluation by the public (Carstea, 2012, p. 97). The media and political parties share a symbiotic relationship. The former generate income from electioneering advertisements while the latter need publicity to get their message across. This arrangement is a critical component of the discourse on media commercialism (Omojola & Morah, 2014).

Sambe (2015, p.119) asserts that “Governments around the world, knowing the power of the media ... tend to hold onto it or fear the level of freedom allowed because of the power of the media toward public opinion and mass mobilization.” Media and politics are inseparable in any democratic culture and environment” (Ekeanyanwu, 2015, p. 198). In media contents, frames exist or are created which affect election fortunes and influence political destinies. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to investigate the frames used in reporting PDP and APC Presidential candidates during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As elections draw near, citizens are faced with many choices to make regarding candidates. Since it is quite impossible for them to interact personally with these aspirants, they look up to the media for information about them.

The media can influence the public opinion and perception of a candidate with the way they frame and construct news reports. Framing is a central process by which political actors and government officials exercise political influence over each other and over the public (Oksanen, 2011, p. 481). Ideally, framing research examines the construction of news stories, how these stories articulate frames, and how audience members interpret these frames (Carragee & Roefa, 2004, p. 215).

This study investigates the frames used in the coverage of Mohammadu Buhari and Goodluck Jonathan by four dominant Nigerian newspapers. It specifically identifies the frames, especially the preponderant ones that formed the basis for discussion in the build-up to the election.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To determine the frequency of coverage of the APC and PDP candidates in the selected newspapers.
2. To ascertain the frames employed by the press in their reportage of the two candidates.
3. To identify the dominant frames in the coverage that dominated public discourse in the build-up to the 2015 presidential election.

### **Significance of the Study**

Many reports have been written about the 2015 presidential election

in Nigeria but only very few are visible in the area of framing patterns. This is a contribution to help increase the knowledge of students, reporters and readers about media framing and its usage.

### **Literature Review**

Rather than reporting the facts of a story, the media have been accused of inserting their personal biases or opinions in news content (O'gara, 2009, p. 1). The lack of objectivity in news presentation has made visible the existence of alternative media which are usually online-based. This is not just a Nigerian phenomenon. Sani's (2014, p.71) study of Malaysia's 13<sup>th</sup> general elections concluded that "...there was an element of contradiction between the mainstream print media and alternative online media. The biased coverage of mainstream print media has pushed readers to look for alternative news in online news portals." This is in line with Ekeanyanwu's (2015, p. 17) assertion that "the media are not the sole source of information for voters but in a world dominated by mass communications, the media determine the political agenda."

The history of political crises in Africa appears to be incomplete without references to the media as a promoter of the problem (Onyebadi and Oyedeji, 2011). In their study of the newspaper coverage of the post political election violence in Africa,

specifically Kenya, the authors concluded that "the media and ethnicity are readily blamed in conflicts" (p. 216). Olayode (2015) supports the assertion and stresses that from the presidential through gubernatorial, national and state assemblies elections, aspirants are largely chosen on the basis of ethno-regional identities. He adds that "political parties and candidates are easily perceived as representatives of a particular ethnic or religious group and voting pattern in Nigeria largely mirrors the various cleavages in the country" (p.3).

Several studies have been conducted by researchers on the framing on the coverage of elections, debates and campaigns in different countries (Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, 2014; Groshek and Al-Rawi, 2013; Kasmani, 2013; Schuck, Vligenthart, Boomgaarden, Elenbaas, Azrout, Spanje and DeVresse, 2013; Buller, 2012; Oksanen, 2011; Dimitrova and Stromback, 2011; Zurbrigger and Sherman, 2010; Squires and Jackson, 2010). Carstea (2009) studied the opinion articles on the 2009 presidential elections in Romania and found that the mass media provided mainly negative interpretation (attack/conflict type) to the electoral campaign and focused mainly on secondary themes that were rather related to the candidates' moral conducts and

characters than their manifestoes. On the 2015 presidential election campaign in Nigeria, Samuel (2015, para. 1) opined that “what is in contention in the election may not be the superiority of one ideology over the other, as understood in the Western democracies. Rather, what is becoming evident is that the election is about two quarrelsome camps, each seeking a popular mandate to determine the fortunes (or the lack thereof) of nearly 170 million Nigerians”

Issues like insecurity, corruption, religion, ethnicity and the economy were popular in the public discourse. The 2015 general elections were seen by northerners as their golden opportunity to wrestle back power, which they felt had been unjustly denied them after the untimely death of kinsman President Musa Yar’adua that saw Jonathan taking over as the acting President (Olayode, 2015, p. 17).

Studies have been conducted on the 2015 elections in Nigeria. While some researchers looked at political participation, voting behavior and the role of the media in Nigeria (Olowojolu, 2016; George-Genye, 2015), others analyzed the 2015 elections political advertisements (Alawole and Adesanya, 2016; Ojekwe, 2015; Batta, Batta and Mboho, 2015). The study by Alawole et.al (2016) on political advertisements in selected

newspapers on the 2015 elections found that PDP and APC dominated the political landscape with low presence of adversarial contents.

The mass media in their everyday duty of informing, educating and entertaining the society, create frames that can serve as a prism through which the audience understand issues and events as they happen in the society. Mchakulu (2011, p. 30) opines that frames are deliberately created by political organizations or their agents to be used publicly, disseminated widely, and repeated often by speakers that are affiliated with one political party or another.

Sambe (2015, p. 115-6) asserts that contemporary writings on political communication must be a serious – theoretical and empirical- evaluation of the importance of the mass media in relation to public opinion. Although researchers have conducted studies on the influence of the media on voting behavior and also analyzed the 2015 elections political advertisements, there exists a dearth of study on newspaper framing of the two presidential candidates of the two most influential party-PDP and APC during the 2015 elections. How these two candidates were depicted in the media with regard to the themes used informed this study.

## Framing Theory

It has been said that the way a particular issue or event is presented affects the way it is perceived and understood (Ajaero, 2014). Ideally, framing research examines the construction of new stories, how these stories articulate frames, and how audience members interpret these frames (Carragee and Roefa, 2004, p. 215). The framing approaches in media studies relate to the psychological and sociological proposition that individuals need certain interpretative frames to be able to establish an opinion or an evaluation about a matter (Carstea, 2012, p. 98).

Framing is a central process by which political actors, such as government officials, exercise influence over each other and the public (Oksanen, 2011, p. 481). When Nisbet and Newman (2015) state that “there is no such thing as unframed information”, they point out how framing is such a large part of communication and society. (p.325). Ritzer and Goodman (2003) conclude that “without frames, our world will be little more than a number of chaotic individual and unrelated events and facts” (p.363). Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by the audience (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

This means that through the use of frames by the media, several events can be understood by people in the society.

Baran and Swan (2007, p. 13) see media framing as “shaping the news we’re exposed to and the issues we think about. It can move people to vote against their best interests, buy products that are not good for them, and help dissolve boundaries separating facts, marketing, dogma and ideology.” Framing must be perceived as a process in which *frame-building* happens first, followed by *frame-setting* in a process that leads to positive or negative outcomes (DeVresse, 2005). This work investigated the type of frames employed by newspapers in their reportage of the 2015 presidential election candidates.

## Method

This study adopted the content analysis method and the population of this study includes all the national dailies published in Nigeria. Using the purposive sampling technique, four titles - *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard* - were selected. The dominance (Odiboh et al, 2017) of the newspapers in Nigeria informed their selection. The issues studied spanned December, 2014 - March, 2015. This period covers the time when the primaries were conducted up to the presidential elections that was

held on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Using the continuous week formula,

28 editions (four weeks) of the newspapers were studied.

**Data Analysis**

Table 1: Issues studied from the four selected newspapers

	<i>Week</i>	<i>Editions</i>
<i>Daily Sun</i>	3	15,16,17,18,19,20,21
<i>The Guardian</i>	2	12,13,14,15,16,17,18
<i>Vanguard</i>	1	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,
<i>The Nation</i>	3	16,17,18,19,20,21,22
<i>Total</i>	4	28

The instrument used in collating data for this work is the code sheet. The units of analysis for this study are straight news stories, features, opinion articles, editorials and letters-to-the-editor on the 2015 Presidential elections.

It is important to note that the hard editions of these newspapers were investigated without prejudice to their online versions. They were selected for the study because they still attracted significant readership according to composite opinion of the newspapers editors. One of the editors maintained that the hard copy issues would not have been

published had they been deemed inconsequential.

**What is the frequency of coverage given to the PDP and APC candidates in the selected dailies?**

Table 2 below shows that a total of 110 issues on the 2015 Presidential election were retrieved from the 28 editions of the newspapers studied. This shows that the media gave adequate coverage to the issue, although the highest report on the 2015 Presidential election was seen in February. This could be attributed to the fact that INEC shifted the elections from February to March.

Table 2: The frequency of coverage of the selected newspapers on the 2015 Presidential elections

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Daily Sun	7	6.4
The Guardian	19	17.3
Vanguard	46	41.8
The Nation	38	34.5
Total	110	100

Table 3: Story genres employed by the newspapers in their reportage of the 2015 Presidential elections

Story Genres	Daily Sun	The Guardian	Vanguard	The Nation	Total	Percentage (%)
Straight News	3	6	28	30	67	60.9
Features	0	8	11	2	21	19.1
Editorial	0	1	0	0	1	0.9
Opinion article	4	4	7	6	21	19.1
Letters-to-the-Editor	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3 shows that most stories on the 2015 Presidential candidates were written using the straight news format (60.9%) with features and opinion articles having equal percentage (19.1%). Only one editorial from *The Guardian* newspaper was recorded. This shows that the media were basically reporting what happened on the campaign trail, the states these candidates visited and what people were saying about them. This set the

tone for the opinion article and feature stories.

**What kinds of frames were adopted by the four selected newspapers in their coverage of the two candidates?**

A total of 245 frames were identified from the 110 articles assessed. The type of frames used are 14 namely: corruption (12.7%), age (4.5%), history (17.9%), religion (3.7%), economy (11%), National security (13.1%), ethnicity (7.8%), good governance (3.3%), bad



governance (3.3%), rule of law (1.6%), education (4.1%), power (2%), electoral violence (2.9%) and

miscellaneous (12.2%). Table 4 below presents the numbers visibly.

Table 4: The type of frames used by the selected newspapers in their reportage of the 2015 Presidential elections

Frames	Daily Sun	The Guardian	Vanguard	The Nation	Total	Percentage (%)
Corruption	3	6	10	12	31	12.7
Age	2	3	2	4	11	4.5
History	3	9	18	14	44	17.9
Religion	1	0	3	5	9	3.7
Economy	3	6	10	8	27	11.0
National Security	3	9	15	5	32	13.1
Ethnicity	1	2	9	7	19	7.8
Good Governance	2	0	3	3	8	3.3
Bad Governance	0	1	4	3	8	3.3
Rule of Law	0	2	2	0	4	1.6
Education	1	2	5	2	10	4.1
Power	0	2	1	2	5	2.0
Electoral violence	1	1	2	3	7	2.9
Miscellaneous	4	6	10	10	30	12.2

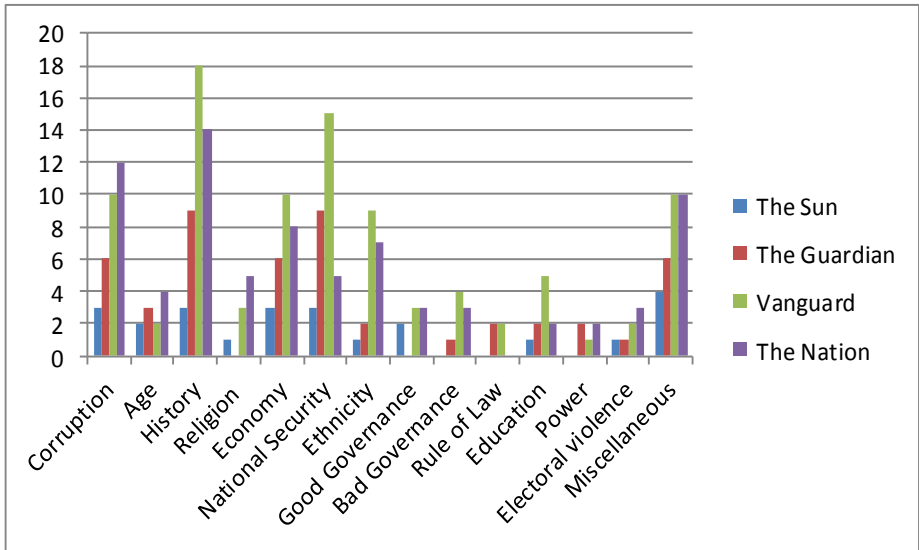
**What is the dominant frame used by the selected dailies?**

The chart below shows that the *history* frame was dominant, followed closely by *national security* and then *corruption*. This can be attributed to the fact that since President Muhammadu Buhari was a former military Head of State

and a former Chairman of a government body, his experience must be cited when reporting issues about him in the media. The *national security* frame came second because of the insecurity issues plaguing the country – the Boko Haram insurgency; abduction of the 219 Chibok school girls in Borno;

the spate of kidnapping and so on. Figure 1 illustrates the frames.

Fig. 1: The frames used by the selected dailies



### Discussion of Findings

The aim of this study was to investigate the themes/frames that dominated the media landscape during the 2015 presidential elections. As earlier stated, there were 14 candidates who contested the election but only two – Jonathan and Buhari - were popular. The frequency of coverage given to these candidates can attest to this fact. A total of 110 articles were harvested from the 28 editions of four newspapers studied. This leads to the conclusion that the issue was frequently discussed in the media. The peak of the reportage was seen in February as the election was shifted from February to March. The

shift sparked off a lot of comments and criticisms from citizens as it was alleged that the ruling party (PDP) was trying to buy more time as it faced an impending loss. The opinion article published in *The Nation* on March 17 was proof of the criticisms.

The dominant story genre was the straight news story. This is because the media were keeping people abreast of the activities of these political parties. The issues often raised in these straight news reports were then fully explained in feature reports. Young (2011) asserts that because of the reporter’s need to have a new story each day on the campaign trail to compete for the

attention of viewers, campaign coverage often becomes less issue-focused and more focused on ‘who’s ahead and who is behind’ as a campaign progresses. A typical example of such coverage can be found in a feature article published in *The Nation* on March 17:

After a review of an opinion poll on the chances of the two leading presidential candidates-incumbent Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Gen. Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC)-Eurasia Group-the world’s largest political risk consultancy firm-has rated the challenger above the incumbent, giving Gen. Buhari 60 per cent and Dr. Jonathan below 40 per cent ... (De Pontet, 2015, p. 2-3)

A total of 14 frame types were identified with the *history* frame having the highest number of occurrence, contrary to some belief that corruption was the most important issue (Ekeanyanwu, 2015) at the time. Mchakulu (2011) contends that frames are deliberately created by political organizations or their agents to be used publicly, disseminated widely, and reported often by speakers that are clearly affiliated with one political party or the other. A report published in *The Sun* newspaper of December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and written by the media aide to the President, Mr. Femi Adesina,

states that “...at 72 (his birthday was just two days ago, congratulations to the peoples General), Buhari still bears Nigeria and her weighty issues in his heart, and on his slender frame” (p. 57). Also the APC chairman in Rivers State in the southern part of the country, Mr. Ikanya in a statement, said that “the wicked acts against Rivers State and its people, for reasons to be explained by Jonathan and his managers explain why we will do everything humanly possible to ensure that this man that has run aground our economy will never continue in office beyond May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015” (*The Nation*, March 18, 2015, p. 12). Another writer asserts that “Buhari has a perception problem. May be it has to do with his eyesight or something else. But the point has to be made that if Buhari sees corruption, he won’t even know. Buhari’s understanding of corruption is antiquated” (*The Guardian*, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, p. 60).

One point to note here is that media ownership and political inclination were among the determinants of the kind of themes that dominated reports on these candidates. *The Nation* is an outfit owned by a chieftain of the APC and thus its reports would have to be favorable to his party’s cause. This is in line with Mchakulu (2011) explanation on frames.

The issue of ethnicity and religion were evident in news reports as opinions about Buhari and his history as a Fulani and then a Muslim were x-rayed. Ethnicity was the fifth most used frame in this study while religion came seventh. This underscores the importance of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria, given its diverse ethnic and religious nature. Even the choice of General Buhari and his running mate (a Christian) were strategically crafted to appeal to the northern and southern parts of the country. The following report is an evidence of the accusation about ethnicity:

Gen. Buhari was an active participant in the revenge coup of July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1966. Rochas Okorocho, Ogbonnaya Onu, Sam Nkire and other historically blind politicians of Igbo extraction should investigate his role in the unexplained disappearance of dozens of Igbo officers and men of the Nigerian army in Abeokuta immediately after the murder of Gen. J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi (Anele, *Vanguard*, February 8, 2015, p. 11)

Northerners vote for Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, a southerner from a minority ethnic group was also an issue pointed out by Ajeluorou (2015, p. 60) when he opined that: “I do not know of any north-easterner who would reward Dr. Jonathan for his abysmal and vexatious handling of the Boko Haram menace. Nor do

I know any parent except one with empathy, who would ignore the more than nine months-old Chibok abductions” (*The Guardian*, January 18<sup>th</sup>).

The most dominant frame in this study points to the fact that the media were more focused on candidates’ character rather than their manifestoes. This can be found in several articles published in the sampled dailies as the person of Buhari and Jonathan was more espoused than their programs. While Buhari talked about ‘change’, without specific reference to what this change would entail, Jonathan’s team preached ‘continuity and transformation’ without clearly stating the policy issues that would drive this. This finding is in line with Carstea’s (2009) study that the media focused on secondary themes that are rather related to the candidates’ moral conducts and characters than their political programs. O’gara echoed same in his study when he found that the media continue to place greater importance on candidate’s image and viability than on policy issues.

Every Nigerian knows that this is a disciplined man, every Nigerian knows that this is a man that is not corrupt, this is the only Head of State in the history of Nigeria who has refused to receive even his own so called legitimate income because of the conviction that

that income has been so corruptibly and so undesirably that it is nothing but mere looting of the National treasury (Olarinoye, 2015. *Vanguard*, February 8, p. 52)

Here, the writer is trying to sell the person of Buhari as an incorruptible man. There was no mention of his policies but what Nigerians stand to gain by voting his person in as the president.

The frames used in reporting the 2015 Presidential elections were thematic as the feature and opinion articles explored the issues raised by the media in the coverage of the candidates. The nature of the candidates involved in the election is responsible for the dominance of *history* frame as reporters tried to compare Buhari's military rule in 1983 with his current disposition in a democratic society. Writers gave their opinion of the candidates and even went as far as analyzing the gains and woes of choosing one candidate over the other.

The media gave adequate coverage of the 2015 presidential elections but the frames used were more about candidates than issues. The frames focused mainly on the presidential candidates, their abilities, achievements and personal idiosyncrasies without recourse to their policies.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study was carried out to assess the frequency of coverage and the

frames employed by the selected dailies in their reportage of the 2015 Presidential election of PDP and APC. The candidate of the PDP, Jonathan and the APC candidate, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari were popular and given more attention than the other 12 contestants. Using the continuous week formula, a week was studied for each of the months under study (December, 2014-March, 2015). The simple random sampling technique adopted resulted in the selection of a total of 28 editions for investigation. The result of the inter-coder reliability test was high at .78.

The issue of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria cannot be pushed to the background in Nigeria owing to the more than 250 competing ethnic groups in the country with all kinds of faith. Since the two presidential candidates were from different regions and different religions, reports found in the newspapers appealed to peoples' religious and ethnic leanings.

Nevertheless, the media did a good job in reporting events surrounding the candidates in the 2015 Presidential election but these reports were focused more on individual capabilities and character than policies. The reports projected the candidates' more than their manifestos. To this end, the following recommendations should be noted:

- The media are the purveyors of information and the people look up to them for their information need as noted earlier. The public rely on the media to help them make their electoral decisions. As such, the media should pay more attention to the manifestos of these candidates to generate discourse on issues rather on the personality of the candidates. Professional reporters should understand that they need to do this to differentiate themselves from citizens or ‘emergency’ journalists (Omojola, 2014, p.172) who lack an ethical standard that guides their practice.
- There were other candidates who contested the elections but these candidates were not known due to the fact that they did not belong to the two major political parties. The media should be able to give adequate coverage to all contenders especially in a presidential election.
- This work only assessed frames used in the reportage of the PDP’s and APC’s presidential candidates in the 2015 election. Further studies can be done to ascertain the influence these frames had on the people and if they informed their choice of candidates during the 2015 elections.

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