

Newspaper Coverage of Child Protection Issues in Nigeria

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to determine how much coverage child protection issues have received in select Nigerian newspapers. The study was anchored on the agenda setting theory. Data collection for the study was done using the content analysis method. *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers constituted the sample for this study for a two-year period. Findings showed that only 42 reports were found on child protection issues, indicating insufficient coverage. Findings also showed that 54.8 percent of the total coverage was devoted to straight news. Furthermore, there were more reports on violations of child protection issues than on educating people on what constitutes child labour. Based on the findings, it was concluded that the select newspapers did not adequately cover child protection issues and did not perform the interpretative function by thoroughly delving into the issues. Thus, it was recommended that child protection issues receive more attention in the media in order to persuade the government to implement and strictly enforce policies.

Keywords: Child Labour, Child Protection Issues, Child Rights, Social Responsibility, Press Coverage

Introduction

When in 1959 the United Nations (UN) made the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, it was based on the premise that 'mankind owes to the child the best it has to give' (Cobley, 1995, p. 116). In the same vein, the United Nations apparently aware of the dangers that child labour constitutes in 1989 also adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as CRC/UNCRC) which spells out different rights of children. Some of such rights are children's rights to freedom of expression (Article 13) and calls on the media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child (Article 17). There is also the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of African Children by the African Union. As explained by Kudjonu (2016), the Charter stated that the situation of most African children remains critical. The extent to which the media is meeting this responsibility is a source of concern.

The social responsibility of the press posits that the media are to be responsible to society by providing information and opening up discussion on important social issues. By doing this, they will be advocates in public welfare and protecting the rights of the people. The mass media as an important institution of the society has the responsibility of surveying the environment and bringing to the fore issues of importance and this can be

likened to the watchman role where the media are to keep society aware of happenings around them. Given their ability to promote public awareness on issues, the media should constantly prioritise issues of child rights violation. As a result, journalists are saddled with the responsibility of recognising and elevating children's basic rights. By prioritising issues of child rights violation, more people will be aware of the issues and this could aid in the reduction of child-related exploitation situations in the Nigerian society.

Uzochukwu, Morah & Okafor (2015) in monitoring six Nigerian broadcast stations for three months discovered that there were only three reports related to child rights and protection implying that children issues are not top priority in the media. Many examples of child exploitation are rarely reported and most people who submit such information to the media prefer to remain anonymous (Uzochukwu *et al* 2015). Jempson (1997) also stated that "children are not considered 'hot topics' for the media, not unless children figure in a scandalous or heart-rending story or in some shocking data or statistics." Oyero (2011) posits that children seem to be invisible in newspaper content. In a 2010 study, he opined that because of the commercial interests of privately-owned newspapers, more attention is paid to reports of economic interest at the expense of development issues like child rights reporting. Uzochukwu *et al* (2015) opined that since the media effectively sensitises and informs the public, then child protection issues should gain enough attention for the public to observe them and make informed decisions. Valenzuela & McCombs (2009) stated that the mass media help us to learn about the world beyond our reach. The media serve as the chief information source for most people; what most individuals know today is as a result of the pictures created for them by the mass media. The media can raise awareness on the need for parents to stop giving out their children for cheap labour and also sending them out to hawk or beg; they can also sensitise children on some of their rights as stipulated in the Child's Rights Act and the UNCRC. It is against this backdrop that the researchers examined the coverage of child protection issues by select Nigerian newspapers.

Research Questions

The following questions were posed to guide this research:

1. What is the genre of coverage of child protection issues by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers?
2. What is the level of prominence given to child protection issues by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers?
3. What is the most dominant child protection issue reported by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers?
4. What is the nature of coverage given to child protection issues in *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers?

Literature Review

In their study, Goddard & Saunders (2001) discussed the media's role in child abuse and child protection. They argued that the media have been crucial in raising awareness of the issue of child abuse and putting it on political agendas. According to Goddard & Saunders (2001), journalists must exert significant influence on social and political responses to all

children in addition to their role in drawing attention to particular childhood concerns. As a result, they are in a unique position to advocate for children in society. To determine the frequency and in-depthness of media coverage, Kunkel, Smith, Suding, & Biely (2002) examined the coverage of five child-related topics: child abuse and neglect, child care, child health insurance, teen child bearing and youth crime and violence. They discovered that the majority of news coverage was on youth crime, violence and child abuse and neglect.

Oyero (2010) looked at how media ownership affects how child rights are covered in another study. Two national newspapers- *Daily Times* (government-owned) and *The Guardian* (privately-owned), were examined between 1999 and 2003 using the content analysis method. A total of 193 stories in total were written about the issues. *The Daily Times* covered the subject more thoroughly than *The Guardian*. High levels of reporting were seen in the years 2002 and 2003 and the National Assembly passed the Child Rights Act in that year. This demonstrates the relationship between the agendas of the media, the public and the policy makers because the issue was brought up in the media to the point where it caught their attention. According to the research, newspapers should support coverage of child rights issues and pay more attention to development-related issues. Two Nigerian and two Ghanaian newspapers from the years 1999 to 2003 were further examined by Oyero (2011). A total of 448 stories about children's issues were published. Ghanaian newspapers received more attention with 56.9%, while Nigerian newspapers received only 43.1%. Both newspapers owned by the government covered 60% of the stories, compared to 40% by newspapers owned privately.

Four newspapers—*the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the San Jose Mercury News* and the *Houston Chronicle*—were the subject of Arthur's (2012) content analysis. Additionally, it was found that while the majority of longer feature stories and opinions/editorials were thematically framed, the majority of news articles were episodically framed. The researcher claimed that this was expected because features, opinions and editorials are less focused solely on news and allow for more context and specificity regarding larger systemic issues. In his conclusion, Arthur (2012) reaffirmed the value of using thematic frames in the news because they help readers understand the problem from a larger societal context and inspire community-level action to prevent abuse and lessen its effects when it does occur. In a study on the extent of child-related issues in Kenyan media, Ortum (2013) explained that in order to get policymakers' attention on child-related issues, there must be sufficient publicity. *The Standard* and *The Daily Nation* newspapers were the subjects of the study from January 2013 to June 2013. Out of the 240 articles analysed, 121 treated children's issues. The researcher suggested that newspaper organisations cover children's issues more extensively by dedicating specific pages to them so that readers can access these pages when looking for information on children.

Nwaolikpe (2018) examined how the media contributed to national growth and the necessity of media advocacy in Nigeria to stop the growth of "baby factory" activities. The results showed that mass media play a significant part in the growth of any nation as they provide information, education, entertainment, integration and social interaction in a country by offering an understanding of societal events and promoting the development of

the country. Uzochukwu *et al* (2015) in monitoring six Nigerian broadcast stations for three months discovered that there were only three reports related to child rights and protection implying that children issues are not top priority in the media. Nair (2019) concluded that the effective use of the media for reporting, representation and advocacy can help the society understand child labour as a social problem and also raise awareness that most perpetrators of abuse are people known to the child.

On some issues that could hinder the proper coverage of children issues, Internews Europe (2014) explained that the lack of children voices in the sense that children should also be part of the debate on child rights. There is lack of children voices in media reports and this is evident in the studies of Oyero (2010); Nwodu & Ezeoke (2013). This situation is, however, unfortunate and is not in accordance with the social responsibility theory that posits that the media should be used for public good and become a voice of all the people, not just elite groups or groups that had dominated national, regional or local culture (Baran & Davis, 2003 p.109). Other reasons for poor reporting of children issues according to Ajaegbu *et al* (2020) are funding, weightier issues, editorial policy of the newspaper, journalists not doing enough investigative journalism and cultural factors.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on agenda setting theory. Ekeanyanwu (2007, p. 89), citing McCombs & Shaw (1974) posited that “the media emphasis on an issue influences the audience to also view the issue as important.” Greenberg & Salwen (2009) agreed as they posit that when topics are less emphasised in the media, then they are of less importance to the public because the media confer status on issues. Freyenberger (2013) further explained that the news media can increase the importance of a news story by the amount of time spent reporting the issue. The mass media determine most of the issues that members of the public worry about; they do this by raising salient issues in our society (Yarosan & Asemah, 2008; Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). Dominick (2002) explained that the media have an impact on agenda-setting when “they have the ability to choose and emphasise certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important (p.492).” Griffin (2006) said that with the salience of issues in the media, people pay greater attention to them and regard them as important. This goes to show that the more media reports in the form of news, features, editorials and other editorial content on child labour issues and the more prominence they receive, the more the audience will learn about the issue and thus take a stand. In addition, by bringing attention to child protection issues through the agenda-setting function, the media set an agenda for the public and for policy makers. Violation of the rights of children may not be eradicated completely, but it can be controlled with the media being active in the advocacy for policies to guide children and to a great extent stem the problem of child labour in Nigeria.

Methodology

The researchers adopted content analysis method. The multistage sampling technique was used till the actual editions were selected. For the first stage, two newspapers were randomly selected from the pool of five newspapers at the Laz Otti Memorial Library at

Babcock University. The Library subscribes to five newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *The Nigerian Tribune*, *The Vanguard* and *The Nation*. All five newspapers were written on different slips of paper and folded. Using the simple random sampling technique, two newspapers—*The Punch* and *The Vanguard*—were selected. The study period from January 2020 to December 2021 was purposively chosen. The year 2020 recorded one of the highest cases of violations of human rights, with violations of children's rights topping the list due to the restriction of movement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adenekan, 2021). The population comprised all the editions of the two newspapers published in the two years. Year 2020 had 366 editions, while year 2021 had 365 editions.

2020- *The Punch* 366 *The Vanguard* 366 = 732

2021- *The Punch* 365 *The Vanguard* 365 = 730

Thus, the population is of the study is 1,462 editions of *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers.

For the next stage, the select years (2020 and 2021) were divided into four quarters; using the simple random sampling technique, one month was selected from each quarter, resulting in 4 months of study for each year. The constructed week sampling method was used to select the days that were sampled. The select months were March, April, September and November. Thus, to get the editions that were sampled for this study, seven days of the week were chosen from each of the selected months. This means that in each month, there were seven days and for each year, there were 28 editions (days). Thus, the sample of this study was 112 editions of the newspapers, 56 editions for *The Punch* newspaper and 56 editions for *The Vanguard* newspaper. The Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyse the data. The analysis was descriptive in nature. The descriptive statistics made use of simple frequency counts and percentages. A coding sheet was used to gather information from the newspapers; the content categories for this study were: prominence, genre of report, nature of coverage and child protection issues.

i. **Genre of Report:** This has to do with the editorial contents of the newspapers; that is, whether the stories were carried as straight news, features, editorials, opinions, columns and pictures.

ii. **Prominence:** This was measured by the location or position of the story. The position of the reports was measured front page (FP), inside pages (IPs), and back page (BP). Where a story is placed, determines to an extent, its level of significance or importance.

iii. **Nature of Coverage:** This construct (nature of news) was adapted from Ali, Rehman & Hassan (2016). The nature of coverage is like the direction of the reports whether it was to raise awareness on the issue, or to educate the public on what child protection issues are and what constitutes violation.

Coding was done by one of the researchers by reading through the newspaper contents and searching for reports on child protection issues.

Result and Discussion of Findings

A total of 42 reports were found on child protection issues in *The Punch* and *The Vanguard*. Further analysis was done based on the research questions raised in the study.

Table 1: Genre of Coverage of Child protection Issues by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* Newspapers

Genre	<i>The Punch</i>		<i>Vanguard</i>		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Straight news	13	54.2	10	55.6	23	54.8
Editorial	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Feature	11	45.8	7	38.9	18	42.9
Column	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Picture	0	0.0	1	5.6	1	2.4
Total	24	100.0	18	100.0	42	100.0

The major genre of report given to child protection issues was straight news story (54.8%). Feature articles accounted for (42.9%); this means that the newspapers reported the issues as they unfolded and probably did not do extensive research on the problem. The reporters performed more of the informational role and gave only the superficial aspect of the occurrence because news only gives details and hardly gives in-depth analysis. The implication of this is that the reports did not allow for much interpretation by the reporters. Findings from some other studies (Oyero (2010); Arthur (2012); Nwodu & Ezeoke (2013); Internews Europe (2014) are also in agreement with the findings of this study.

Having reports in more news format also means that the tenets of the framing theory were not applied by the press as messages were not framed to activate the readers' thoughts to make inferences based on the issue, define the problem and thus proffer solutions as the reports were just informational. News only contains information of what happened and the way it happened without any interpretations. Oyero (2010) said the trend of having more reports in straight news format could be attributed to the commercial interests of the newspapers so they pay more attention to reports that have economic interest.

Table 2: Level of Prominence given to Child Protection Issues by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* Newspapers (Placement of the story)

Prominence	<i>The Punch</i>		<i>The Vanguard</i>		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Front page lead	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Front page minors	4	16.7	2	11.1	6	14.3
Back page	1	4.2	0	0.0	1	2.4
Centre spread	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Inside pages	19	79.2	16	88.9	35	83.3
Total	24	100.0	18	100.0	42	100.0

Prominence here was measured by position or placement of story. Findings showed that issues on child protection were placed in less prominent positions, particularly, the stories appeared more frequently on the Inside pages of the newspapers and rarely on the front page or back page of the newspaper. 83.3% of the stories were on the Inside pages. There

was no front page lead and this means the newspapers seemed not to attach enough importance to child protection issues. Stories that appeared on the front page and next on the back page are often considered important and should attract the audiences’ attention even without going through all the pages of the papers. Having child protection issues more inside the newspaper could be attributed to the fact that children were not considered very important topics as compared to political and economic issues. Jempson (1997) also stated that “children are not considered ‘hot topics’ for the media, not unless children figure in a scandalous or heart-rending story or in some shocking data or statistics.” Two studies (Nwodu & Ezeoke, 2013; Oyero, 2011) also corroborated this finding as they report that most stories on children and women alike are buried inside the pages of the newspaper probably showing they lack newsworthiness.

Table 3: Dominant Child Protection Issues by *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* Newspapers

Child protection issue	<i>The Punch</i>		<i>The Vanguard</i>		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Child labour	3	12.5	1	5.6	4	9.5
Child abuse	9	37.5	8	44.4	17	40.5
Child street hawking	5	20.8	4	22.2	9	21.4
Child trafficking	4	16.7	3	16.7	7	16.7
Child street begging	3	12.5	2	11.1	5	11.9
Others	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	24	100.0	18	100.0	42	100.0

The most dominant child protection issue covered by the newspapers was child abuse (*The Punch*=37.5%, *The Vanguard*= 44.4%). Child street hawking and child trafficking were equally significant. Child abuse is an issue that some people still find hard to understand in the sense that some people do not know that between discipline and child abuse is a thin line. This could be why child abuse issues gained more coverage because while some parents/guardians were trying to enforce discipline, they ended up inflicting pain on the child/children and some led to death of the child. Kunkel, Smith, Suding & Biely (2002) did a study on coverage of five child related topics- child abuse and neglect, child care, child health insurance, teen child bearing and youth crime and violence. It was discovered that child abuse and neglect accounted for majority of the coverage after youth crime and violence.

Table 4: Nature of Coverage given to Child Protection Issues in *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers

Nature of Coverage	<i>The Punch</i>		<i>The Vanguard</i>		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Awareness	8	33.3	5	27.8	13	31.0
Education	4	16.7	2	11.1	6	14.3
Violation	12	50.0	11	61.1	23	54.8
Total	24	100.0	18	100.0	36	100.0

The nature of coverage given to child protection issues as indicated in table 4 shows that both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers' had a total coverage of 23 (54.8%) on violation, 13 (31%) on awareness and 6 (14.3%) on education. This shows that the majority of the news reported on child protection issues were based on violation of children, while awareness and education accounted for less. Ali *et al* (2016) discovered that *Daily Dawn* and *Daily Jang* had covered more news about the violation and awareness of child labour, while the education news about issue was somehow unnoticed. Newspapers and the media in general are to raise awareness on what child protection issues are and also to educate them on the ills of child labour and generally what child labour constitutes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that the newspapers did not give sufficient coverage to child labour issues. The most emphasised child labour issue was child abuse; this means that there was a high occurrence of child abuse cases that gained media attention during the period of the study. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended the following:

1. The media through incisive editorials and feature articles can be advocates of the people by lobbying the government for good policies and proper implementation of such policies/programmes as regards the welfare of children.
2. Newspapers should devote more attention to child protection issues and the reports should be placed in more prominent positions.
3. Though most child protection issues are seen as crime stories, newspapers reports can be more educative about the ills affecting children.
4. Reporters are to liaise with NGOs/CSOs as major social actors in the course of the welfare of children to understand how best to report children issues. They should not only be sources of information but partners in progress.
5. Realising that children need somebody to speak for them as their voices cannot be heard because of fear of whoever they are working for; it is pertinent that the media should be involved in investigative reporting and assure the children of confidentiality and not to endanger them through the reports.

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