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Reporting African Countries in the Nigerian Press: Perspectives in International News

by Umaru A. Pate*

Abstract

This paper examines the reporting of news about African countries with emphasis on quantity, quality and distribution in selected Nigerian newspapers. It also tries to find out the significance of the Commonwealth factor in the newspapers' reporting of foreign news. Major themes and directions of the news were also analysed. The findings indicate a clear reflection of Nigeria's foreign policy in the coverage of foreign news by the national newspapers. Africa is the most reported region compared to other regions of the world.

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Reportage sur les Pays Africains dans les Journaux Nigériens: Perspectives dans les Nouvelles Internationales

Résumé

Cet article traite du reportage sur les pays africains avec un accent sur la qualité, la quantité et la distribution, dans un échantillon de journaux nigériens. Il essaie également de trouver l'incidence du facteur "Commonwealth" dans le reportage des nouvelles étrangères. D'autres orientations et thèmes importants des nouvelles ont été également analysés.

Les conclusions de cet analyse indiquent une nette réflexion de la politique étrangère du Nigéria dans la couverture des nouvelles étrangères par les médias nationaux. D'après l'article, l'Afrique reste la région la plus rapportée en comparaison aux autres régions du monde.

Introduction

One of the functions of the media in every country is to inform the citizens about local and foreign affairs. Because of this role, people come to rely on the media as their major source of news, particularly news of events outside their immediate experience. Based on information obtained from their local media, they acquire knowledge, create images and form opinions about other nations and their institutions (Boulding, 1969). Foreign news does not end at informing the citizens, it also legitimizes the interest and involvement of the country's government in international affairs.

Many reasons have been advanced to explain why the media of a particular country would tend to report news of certain countries more than others. According to Mowlana (1985) the reasons are economic, political, sociol-cultural, infrastructural and extra-media. He argues that if the nation and its media are economically buoyant, the buoyancy will be reflected in the quantity, quality and distribution of foreign news in the media.

Secondly, Mowlana argues that the political interests of a country will undoubtedly betray the behaviour of the national media. For example, the foreign policy of a country is likely to influence the direction of the media coverage to reflect national political interests.

Thirdly, socio-cultural factors like language, culture, religion and traditional beliefs, their differences or similarities between nations will explain the interest of the press in their foreign news coverage.

Explaining specifically in the African context, da Costa (1980) reports that in several African countries, international news is covered as it affects the reporting country's psycho-political security, community of interests and imperatives of national politics. Even factors like the professional standard of journalists, their ethnic, religious and political background coupled with age, experience and general socialization level assist in the selection and reportage of foreign news.

Nordenstreng (1984) holds that regionalism is the dominant factor in the coverage of foreign news. He explains that the media have a tendency to focus on foreign affairs which occur in or relate to their own respective regions. Therefore, the practice is for the national media to pay less attention to regions outside their own.

The above argument is closely related to the conclusion of a UNESCO-sponsored study of foreign images in the national media which identified geographical identity, historical similarities, commonness of cultures and economic interrelationships as the guiding principles in reporting news from other countries.

In a widely reported study, Galtung and Ruge (1970) accept that geographically distant news items feature less in the media of the Third World countries except in special cases. First, if the story is from the superpowers, the peripheries will readily report it; and second, negative stories are given prominence depending on the distance of their origin. In other words, culturally distant news does not usually warrant being reported unless the nations involved are metropolitan nations, the elite, or if the story involves a low class actor in a far away country in a negative light.

Lent (1976) posits that foreign news reporting in a country's newspapers depends on its ties with the superpowers (thus reflecting ideological stance), colonial background, relationship with neighbouring countries, economic infrastructure, governmental stability and professional training of journalists. As a result of these factors, Western Europe and North America have become 'semi-permanent' in the media of the Third World. The former are newsmaker nations that are constantly being reported, as opposed to the developing countries that only provide occasional hot news.

Previous studies of Nigeria's coverage of foreign news have revealed that the country's foreign policy and socio-cultural links strongly influence foreign news reporting (Ansah, 1979; Nwuneli and Dare, 1979; da Costa, 1980). Nigeria's foreign policy which is Africa-centered is clearly reflected in the preponderance of news about African countries in the media. For instance, Nwuneli and Dare (1979) found that a change in Nigerian government's foreign policy toward Angola on the eve of its independence "did unduly influence the Nigerian press coverage of the Angolan civil war in 1975" to favour the MPLA, instead of the earlier position of calling for a government of national unity.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that several factors influence and determine the pattern and trend of international news reportage in the mass media of a particular country. These factors include geopolitical, socio-cultural, historical, economic and the disposition of the news gatekeepers.

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of the study was to examine the reporting of news about African countries in selected Nigerian newspapers. The study also attempted to determine the extent to which the 'Commonwealth factor' influences the newspapers' reporting of foreign news. The study had the following four working hypothesis:

- H₁ Nigerian newspapers would give greater emphasis to news relating to African countries than news of other countries in other regions of the world.
- H₂ Nigerian newspapers would give greater emphasis to news relating to Commonwealth countries than to news of non-Commonwealth countries.
- H₃ Nigerian newspapers would accord more priority to news relating to political affairs of African countries than to news of social, economic and cultural activities.
- H₄ Nigerian newspapers would give greater emphasis to positive news about Africa than to negative news about the continent.

Methodology

Three national newspapers, *Daily Times* (Circ. 400,000), *New Nigerian* (Circ. 200,000) and the *National Concord* (Circ. 400,000) were purposively chosen, based on

circulation, ownership and accessibility. The three are tabloid English language dailies. The selection of only English language papers is because they have wider readership in Nigeria than vernacular papers which are limited to particular geo-ethnic areas. While *the Daily Times* is 60% owned by the Federal Government, the *New Nigerian* is fully government owned and the *National Concord* fully private.

The newspapers were also selected on the assumption that, even though their outreach may be less than that of the electronic media, they provide more foreign news and the readership encompasses the elites who not only influence government decisions but are themselves decision-makers.

The study randomly picked a month each in 1987 (January), 1988 (April) and 1989 (July). The constructed or rotating week approach was used to select sample days. Starting from January 2, 1987 which was a Friday, we counted seven days, that is up to Saturday, January 10. In the third week, we selected Monday, January 12, followed by Tuesday, 20th and Wednesday, January 28. This procedure was repeated in selecting the days in April (1988) and July (1989). Sundays were excluded from the sampling because Sunday editions of the various newspapers do not follow the daily pattern of news presentation. Thus, 13 sample days were selected which gave us 39 newspaper editions to analyse.

All foreign news that appeared on the front, "foreign", or sports pages were coded. Foreign news was defined as "events or situations outside Nigeria, or part of which are presented as having substantive relevance to foreign affairs." Materials relating to foreign affairs on other pages like feature stories, editorials, letters to editor and cartoons were excluded. Each story depending on its dateline was coded for location, topic and direction. Location was categorised into regions, North America, South America, Africa, Middle East, Asia, Western Europe, Oceania, Eastern Europe and Others. Similarly, column length of each news story was measured in centimetres to find total space allotted to each region during the period.

All news items originating from Africa were coded for sub-regions depending on the country it came from. The sub-regions are North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa and Others (comprising continental organisations).

News stories were categorised and coded according to themes: Political, Economic, Social, Cultural and Miscellaneous. Political news refers to news relating to the activities of governments and their agents, the visits of state or government ministers, activities of political parties, news of liberation movements, border disputes, diplomacy, elections, security matters, etc.

The other news categories were defined as follows:

Economic News: News relating to international loans, economic aid, economic negotiations, banking institutions and operations, agricultural developments, trade links, structural adjustment programmes, monetary matters, shipping, environmental affairs, smuggling, and others.

- Social News:** Include news about urban development, health, transportation, crime, education, prison matters, labour/ industrial relations, religious affairs, drought, floods, population matters, mass media, telecommunications, relief operations, drugs, aids and related issues.
- Cultural News:** News about local and international sports, cultural festivals, language development and related matters.
- Miscellaneous Category:** For stories that did not fall under any of the above categories.

The news stories were also coded in terms of direction: positive, neutral and negative with the following definitions:

- Positive News:** Stories that report harmony within and between nations and nationals, cooperation, development, economic growth, and easing of tensions.
- Negative News:** Stories depicting or suggesting conflict, misunderstanding, crisis, border disputes, human or natural disasters, poverty, disease, dumping of toxic waste, smuggling, frauds and scandals.
- Neutral:** Stories that did not fall into any of the two categories.

Findings

A sample of 649 straight foreign news items were recorded in the three newspapers during the selected days over the three months period. Individually, the three newspapers did not differ much in their reporting of foreign news. Each of them devoted not more than 10% of the total coverage to foreign news. In other words, not more than one page was usually reserved to foreign news in each edition. Foreign news hardly appear on front or back pages, except, perhaps, if Nigeria is involved or if it is of global importance.

Table 1 presents the findings on the amount of foreign news reported by the three newspapers during the period analysed.

News of African Countries

Previous studies of Nigeria's media coverage of international news have found that Africa is the most frequently reported region in the media (Pinch, 1978; Nwuneli and Dare, 1979). The Nigerian media portray continental consciousness in their foreign

Table 1: Amount of Foreign News Reported by the three Newspapers

Source	New Nigerian		Daily Times		National Concord		Total	
	Item No.	Space in Col. Cm	Item No.	Space in Col. Cm	Item No	Space in Col. Cm	Frequency	Space
North America	11	246	15	286	20	411	46	943
South America	12	168	4	62	11	194	27	424
Africa	62	1,233	92	1,632	79	1,501	233	4,366
Middle East	25	452	15	224	21	353	61	1,029
Asia	52	882	34	708	30	674	116	2,264
Western Europe	46	914	33	516	22	343	101	1,773
Eastern Europe	7	139	11	199	12	249	30	587
Oceania	1	19	5	137	3	44	9	200
Other	7	184	8	188	11	264	26	636
Total	223 (34.4%)	4,237 (34.7%)	217 (32.3%)	3,952 (32.2%)	209 (32.2)	4,033 (33.0%)	649 (100%)	12,222 (100%)

news coverage. In a transcontinental study which included the Nigerian press, Pinch (1978) reported that: 'African newspapers (and presumably readers) want news about African countries but appear to be much less interested in news from Third World countries in the Americas or elsewhere.'

In the present study, 649 foreign news stories were sampled over a space of 12,222 column centimeters. Of this total, Africa accounted for 35.9% (233 news stories). This is in line with the country's foreign policy which makes Africa its centrepiece. Africa is the continent in which Nigeria belongs, justifying the fact that geographical proximity plays an important role in news reportage. Additionally, by making Africa its centrepiece, the country has politically committed itself more to African affairs than to those outside the continent.

This trend may have further influenced the newspapers to constantly devote more attention to African affairs. Some of the papers could have seen such issues as "supra-domestic" affairs that Nigeria must not ignore. Our findings lend credence to the first hypothesis.

Table 2 presents the findings on the countries most frequently reported in the newspapers.

Table 2: *Top Fifteen Countries in Frequency of Mention*

Rank	Country	Frequency	Commonwealth
1.	USA	54 (6.9)	X
2.	UK	37 (5.7)	
3.	USSR	28 (3.4)	X
4.	India	23 (3.5)	
5.	South Africa	22 (3.3)	X
6.	China	21 (3.2)	X
7.	France	15 (2.3)	X
8.	Philippines	14 (2.3)	X
9.	Zimbabwe	14 (2.3)	
10.	Egypt	14 (2.1)	
11.	Uganda	14 (2.1)	
12.	Ghana	14 (2.1)	
13.	Israel	14 (2.1)	X
14.	Tanzania	14 (2.1)	
15.	West Germany	13 (2.0)	X

Note: Percentage is in bracket; (n=649) X= Non Commonwealth country

The USA was found to be the most reported nation during the sampled period. The UK, which is the leader of the Commonwealth group, came second with 5.7% of the sampled news. Of the 15 top countries in the sample, nine are not Commonwealth countries. From the table, we can conclude that the Nigerian newspapers do not reflect the Commonwealth spirit in their coverage of foreign news. Our findings tally with an earlier report by Ansa (1976). According to him, the Commonwealth does not "seem to be an important factor in news coverage in the African papers." We have noticed that fewer Commonwealth countries have obtained higher news coverage with absolute or near neglect of important countries of the group like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and many others.

Therefore, the second hypothesis is not validated. Commonwealth countries do not receive higher coverage in the Nigerian press. Even though a few Commonwealth countries in Africa seem to get more attention, there are other explanations. Countries of Southern and Eastern Africa like Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Uganda may have received higher mention because of their internal political tensions, activities of liberation movements, coupled with the interest of Nigeria in these issues. For example, Ghana may have received higher coverage in the West African Zone because of her cultural, social, economic links and more essentially, the political similarities between her and Nigeria. The study also noted the neglect of Francophone countries in the newspapers. For example, distant Anglophone African nations attracted more coverage than Nigeria's Francophone neighbours. This observation supports Galtung's hypothesis that 'there is relatively little or no flow of news among 'periphery' nations, especially across colonial based borders'. Ansa has also stated that West African papers show little interest in the affairs of countries that do not share 'similar colonial experience with them.' He reported the neglect of immediate neighbouring countries in the Nigerian and Ghanaian press.

In our study, Nigeria's neighbours, Chad, Benin, Niger and Cameroon were marginally covered compared to Anglophone Ghana, Uganda or Tanzania.

News of Political Affairs

Table 3: *News of African Regions According to Main Topics*

	Total No. of Items	Space in Col. cms	Pol.	Econ.	Soc.	Cult.	Misc.	%
West Africa	61	1224	32	13	13	3	-	26.2
East Africa	55	930	24	15	12	1	3	23.6
Southern Africa	67	1196	40	10	13	1	3	28.7
Central Africa	9	160	4	2	2	1	-	3.9
North Africa	25	487	15	1	6	3	-	10.7
Others	16	369	9	2	5	0	-	6.9
Total	233	4366	124	43	51	9	6	100
			(53.2%)	(18.5%)	(21.8%)	(3.9%)	(2.6%)	(100%)

Table 3 shows that political affairs dominated the foreign news coverage, confirming the third hypothesis. In the context of Africa, 53.2% of the news related to political matters like internal conflicts and crises, armed conflicts, diplomacy, liberation movements and domestic political activities. Little attention was devoted to social, cultural and economic news. The dominance of political news is a universal phenomenon. Political issues tend to have wider repercussions on the lives of the people. Even at the domestic level, the media tend to report more political affairs than other issues. Therefore, the preponderance of politics in African news dovetails with the norm.

Direction of News

Table 4: *Direction of African News According to Regions*

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
West Africa	40	3	18	61
East Africa	25	3	27	55
Southern African	25	5	37	67
Central Africa	7	-	2	9
North Africa	8	5	12	25
Others	13	2	1	16
Total	118 (50.7%)	18 (7.7%)	97 (41.6%)	233 (100%)

A large proportion of news about African nations is positive. Except for Southern Africa and to a lesser extent, East Africa which had recorded more negative news, the remaining regions had more positive news items. Overall, the 50.7% recorded for positive news as against 7.7% for neutral, and 41.6% for negative, is enough evidence to validate the fourth hypothesis.

As indicated in Table 4, Southern Africa has got the highest coverage in Africa with most of the news tending to be negative. This is because of the civil disorders and the state of emergency in the black townships at that time. Similarly, Nigerian newspapers might have focussed their attention on that nation to highlight its apartheid activities. This is clearly in line with the Nigerian government's stand on the exposure and fight against apartheid in South Africa.

Countries like Mozambique and Angola have got rebel activities that keep them in the news. And considering Nigeria's assistance to the Frontline states, the newspapers have to reinforce the position by keeping both government and citizens abreast with happenings in that area.

In East Africa, Uganda and Ethiopia have been responsible for the higher negative coverage. Uganda at the time of the study was engulfed in rebel activities while trying

to build itself after the bloody civil war. Similarly, in Ethiopia rebel groups were busy fighting the government. Added to that were the consequences of the wars and natural phenomena like drought which was rampant in the country. All stories but one about Sudan were negative. The country was also involved in political crises and a bloody civil war.

The other regions of Africa, as noted earlier, recorded overall a positive image in the papers. Perhaps, these are deliberate efforts by the papers to present the image of the continent in a positive light in countering the unfavourable coverage of Africa by the Western media.

Conclusion

From our findings on the coverage of international news with special reference to Africa, we can generally conclude that Nigerian newspapers:

- Give relatively inadequate coverage to foreign news;
- Give more coverage to Africa which is in line with the country's foreign policy and due to geographical proximity;
- Give more attention to African countries that share similar historical and political experiences with Nigeria;
- Give little attention to ethnographically related but politically and historically divergent neighbouring countries of Benin, Cameroun, Chad and Niger;
- Give more coverage to developed countries that have historical, political, economic and social links with Nigeria;
- Focus more attention on politics than on other themes; and
- Make a deliberate attempt to emphasize positive news about Africa.

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