

**MEDIA FRAMES OF GROUP IDENTITIES IN THE 2014 NATIONAL
DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE DAILY SUN* AND
LEADERSHIP NEWSPAPERS**

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ABSTRACT

The amalgamation of southern Nigeria with the north in 1914 by the British government has over the years generated hot debates. The critics argue that the people were not consulted, and that the union was a marriage of strange bird fellows. Nigeria, made up of over 250 ethnic groups is also geographically divided along ethnic and religious lines, Islam dominating the north and Christianity, the south; and the mainstay of the economy (oil) concentrated in the southern shores of the Niger Delta. The country since political independence in 1960 has undergone many political turbulence including military coups and dictatorships, a 30-month civil war (1967-1970), and in the recent time, religious extremism and terrorism championed by a radical Islamic sect - Boko Haram who believes that western education is evil and seeks to Islamize Nigeria; a viewpoint very provocative to the Christian south. Several national dialogues conveyed in the past to foster national unity had never yielded desired goals. That of 2014 came at a time of heightened insecurity and other ethno-political tendencies leading to the 2015 general elections in which the main context was between the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Southern Christian and Mohammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north. This study analysed the framing of group identities in two Nigerian national dailies: *The Daily Sun* (owned by a Southern Christian of Igbo ethnic group) and *Leadership newspaper* (owned by a northern Muslim of Hausa ethnic group). 68 editions made up the study population. Agenda setting served as the theoretical base. Findings suggest low coverage of the Conference in the two newspapers. Many of the stories were straight news that lacked in-depth analysis. Majority of the editions carried stories with sectional undertones; and many of the reports showed unsupportive slants to opposing ethnic groups' viewpoints on the Conference; while dominant frames were issues of sectional interests such

as power rotation, creation of additional states for equity, religion, state police, security and secession. The study calls for greater media interest in issues of national significance, and intensified crusade for national cohesion; it urges the media to lead the campaign by example; and suggests a review of the Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists to stress nationalism as against sectionalism in media reportage.

Keywords: Newspaper Frames. Group Identities. National Dialogue. Nigeria. *The Daily Sun/Leadership Newspaper*

Introduction

Nigeria, the largest country in the West African sub-region and the most populous black nation on earth has had a long history of national dialogues that have influenced her constitutional and political development. Early Nigerian nationalists were the first to demand for national dialogue shortly after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates on January 1, 1914 that created the Nigerian nation. A number of issues had agitated the nationalists. First, they argued that the amalgamation was a British colonial initiative, and that the people were not consulted. Again, that in spite of the amalgamation, colonial administration recognised the two areas as autonomous parts and administered the territories separately, and excluded the educated elites from colonial administration (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

The long history of conferences aimed at nation-building in Nigeria has shown that such conferences can be broadly discussed under three categories: Constitutional conference, National conference (non-sovereign) and Sovereign national conference. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014). A constitutional conference is concerned with the sole aim of developing a constitutional framework or making proposals for constitutional changes within the existing constitutional framework of a nation. A National Conference on the other hand is a formal platform for dialogue by constituent units of the nation convened by the national government of a country to discuss issues or problems that inhibit national progress or challenge national cohesion. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

The 2014 national conference in Nigeria was quite remarkable in a number of ways. One, it was coming at a time of heightened insecurity in the nation. The radical Islamic sect, Boko Haram had relentlessly attacked the north, abducted many, including young school girls which attracted global outcry, and killed thousands and displaced many more. Again, ethno-political tendencies and suspicions were also high in the country at the time resulting from President Goodluck Jonathan's body language of intent to run for a second term in office. Jonathan, a southern Christian of a minority Ijaw nation had served a tenure believed to belong to the north in accordance to the ruling party's policy of rotation of power between the north and the south as his former boss Umaru Musa Yar'Adua died in office in 2010. His intention to remain in office for another four years did not go well with the northern majority.

Other contending issues in the country at the time bothered on Devolution of power from the central government to the federating units; calls from several quarters for Political restructuring and a redefinition of the federating units, Resource control and resource allocation; Party system and elections; Accountability and transparency in government; Poverty and wealth creation; Religion and the state; Corruption and development; Ethnic nationalities and minority question; Judiciary and law reform; Citizenship; Energy crisis; and Land holdings and Land tenure, among others (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014 and Adeyeri, 2014).

Meanwhile, media in Nigeria, and indeed other parts of the world are believed to be agenda setters. It is believed too, that the amount of report and direction given to an issue go a long way in determining public knowledge and perception of the issue. Such reportage also sets the agenda for public opinion and discussion. It is thus expected how the media framed the 2014 national conference in Nigeria would go a long way in shaping the way Nigerians and indeed, the world would perceive the event. It was in line with this viewpoint that this study analysed how two Nigerian national dailies (*the Daily Sun* and *Leadership*) framed stories that emanated from the conference in pursuance of groups' interests. The two newspapers were selected purposively to reflect the north-south dichotomy of the Nigerian state. The regions have newspapers that frame their ideological aspirations. It is very common to easily understand the ethnic undertones that characterise Nigerian newspapers content. That is to say that one can easily decipher the ethnic cleavages that Nigerian media lend their witting and unwitting support based on the framing patterns.

The Problem

Media scholars are unanimous that mass media set agenda for public thoughts and discussions. The assumption is that the manner in which the media frame her reports goes a long way in determining public knowledge and perception of issues.

Sadly, studies of mass media coverage of important national issues in Nigeria in the past suggest that many of the reports tactically take sides on issues of ethnic, political, regional or religious considerations (see Kuka, 1993; Ige, 1995; Adebani, 2002; Mohammed, 2003; Agbaje, 2005 and Galadima and Soola, 2011). Agreeing to this, Nnoli (1978) cited in Galadima and Soola, (2011) observes that newspapers of the First Republic in Nigeria mainly owned by political parties published negative reports on opposing leaders and their ethnic groups. The writer observes that for instance, *the Nigerian Tribune* owned by Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Yoruba ethnic group published negative stories on Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and other leaders of the Igbo ethnic group, while *the West African Pilot* owned by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe also published negative stories on Chief Obafemi Awolowo and other Yoruba leaders. Galadima and Soola, (2011) write that, it was because of their partisan promotion of regional group identity, that *the Nigerian Tribune* and *the West African Pilot* newspapers were banned from circulating in the Eastern and Western regions respectively by the governments of those regions in 1965. According to him, *the Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* newspaper owned by the northern regional government was also blatant in their anti-Yoruba and Igbo vituperations during the period (see Galadima and Soola, 2011).

Although, between that period and now, attitudes and ways of doing things might have changed, but whether Nigerian newspapers have also changed in their coverage of crucial national issues such as the National Dialogue particularly in their portrayal of group identities is not known.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the dominant frames of the 2014 national conference in the *Daily Sun* and *Leadership newspapers*.
2. Ascertain the frequency of stories with sectional undertone on the conference in the sampled newspapers.

3. Identify the placement of/prominence accorded to group interest stories on the conference in the two newspapers.
4. Measure the depth of stories with group interest undertone in the two newspapers;
5. Identify the dominant slant of the conference stories in the two newspapers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What were the dominant frames of the 2014 national conference in the *Daily Sun* and *Leadership newspapers*?
2. What was the frequency of stories with sectional undertone on the conference in the sampled newspapers?
3. What was the placement of/prominence accorded to group interest stories on the conference in the two newspapers?
4. What was the depth of stories with group undertone in the sampled newspapers?
5. What was the dominant slant of the conference stories in the two newspapers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eras of Agitation for Dialogue/national and constitutional conferences in Nigeria

Nigeria is not new to problems of national and international magnitude that call for dialogue. The search for equity and justice in economic independence, social cohesion, national integration and political stability has been expressed continuously in the convocation of periodic Constitutional and/or National Conferences from the Colonial period to the present day Nigeria. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014). This section discusses the eras of agitation for dialogue/national and constitutional conferences in Nigeria.

1. The 1914 amalgamation and agitation for dialogue on self determination

The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates was a British colonial initiative. The Nigeria people especially the educated elite were aggrieved that they were not consulted. They also complained that, in spite of the amalgamation, colonial administration recognised the two areas as autonomous parts and administered the territories separately. The nationalists advocated for a national dialogue to discuss the future political development of their nation. They also demanded for participation in the management of their own affairs.

2. Agitation for dialogue on constitutional reforms

Agitations for constitutional reforms grew further as the British administration of the amalgamated Nigeria began to take root. The calls were mainly on constitution reforms to guarantee self-rule. The agitations paved way for early constitutions and political reforms in the country. Among them were:

i. The Clifford Constitution of 1922

The Clifford Constitution of 1922 was the first in the response to calls for constitution reforms and for self-rule. The constitution provided for 46 members, 27 of them were officials, and 19 unofficial. Out of the unofficial members, 3 were to be elected by adult males in Lagos with a residential qualification of 12 months and a gross income of £100 per annum, and one elected member from Calabar. An Executive Council provided for by the Constitution composed solely of British officials and Legislative Council whose function was limited to the Colony and Southern Protectorate. For the Northern Protectorate, the legislative functions were vested in the Governor. The restricted elective system into the legislature led to resurgence of political agitations among educated Nigerians and to the emergence of political associations/parties such as Herbert Macaulay's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) of 1922, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) of 1938, and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) of 1944. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

ii. The Richards Constitution of 1946

The pressures emanating from the fall out of the Clifford Constitution pushed the then governor of Lagos, Sir Arthur Richards to make proposals for a new Constitution to promote national unity and secure greater participation of the citizens in the management of their own affairs. The legacies of the Richards Constitution were however short-lived as it became severely criticised by many nationalist who perceived it as a mere instrument to undermine the spirit of pan-Nigerianism and lay foundations for inter-regional rivalry in the country. It thus became increasingly vilified and unpopular and the people agitated for yet another constitution. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

iii. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951

Between 1949 and 1950 Nigerians were consulted on new constitutional arrangements. An inter-parliamentary Regional Conference was held in Ibadan. It was at the Ibadan Conference

that the draft of the terms of a new Constitution in 1950 was made. The document established an Executive Council and a Lieutenant-Governor appointed in each region. The existing Legislative Council was replaced by an enlarged Central Legislature known as the House of Representatives, which had power to legislate for the peace, order and good governance of the whole country, subject to the veto of the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Members of the House of Representatives were elected formally from among their own communities where people were entitled to be registered as voters. And for the first time, both the Central and the Regional Legislative Houses were composed of elected Nigerians who were also in the majority. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

iv. The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954

Oliver Lyttleton's Constitution was introduced in 1954. By this Constitution, Nigeria was divided into five units: Northern, Western and Eastern Regions, the Southern Cameroons and the Federal Capital Territory of Lagos. All Legislative and Executive powers were transferred to the Regions with some reserved exclusively and others in part for the Centre. The Eastern and Western Regions were to achieve internal self-government in 1957 and the Northern Region in 1959. Nigerians virtually took over the Legislative Houses, though the system of franchise varied from Region to Region. The direct system of election replaced the indirect system. In 1957-1958 there were further Constitutional Conferences in London to discuss the Independence Constitution. Two important developments followed the 1957 Conference: the Eastern and Western Regions achieved self-government on August 8, 1957; and Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa became Nigeria's first Prime Minister on September 2, 1957. ((See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

v. The 1957 – 58 Constitutional Conferences

In 1957 and 1958, several conferences were held at the Lancaster House in London in preparation of a new Federal Constitution for an Independent Nigeria. Nigerian delegates were selected to represent each Region and reflect various shades of opinions. The delegation was led by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the NPC and party leaders; Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Action Group, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC, and Sir Ahmadu Bello of the NPC, who were also Premiers of the Western, Eastern and Northern Regions respectively. The 1958 Constitutional Conference discussed and agreed that the Northern Region should

attain self-government on March 15, 1959 and Nigeria should attain its Independence on October 1, 1960. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

vi. The 1960 Independence Constitution

A Constitutional Conference was convened in 1960 in order to deliberate on the Draft of the Independence Constitution. The Conference ratified the decision of the House of Assembly of the Southern Cameroons to cease to be part of Nigeria at Independence, and also approved the Independence of Nigeria with full responsible status within the Commonwealth effective from October 1, 1960. Both the Federal and the Regional Governments operated a bi-cameral Westminster Model of parliamentary system of government. (See: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/national-conference/wp-content/uploads/National-Conference-2014-Report-August-2014-Table-of-Contents-Chapters-1-7.pdf>).

vii. The 1963 Republican Constitution

The 1963 Constitution provided for a ceremonial President while the Head of Government was a Prime Minister. In the regions, there were ceremonial Governors, while the Executive was headed by premiers. The National Parliament consisted of elected Representatives and a Senate whose members were nominated from the Houses of Chiefs. Before the promulgation of the 1963 Constitution, there were numerous disturbing signs of discord, tension and disagreements, leading a series of crises: the Action Group crisis of 1962; the Revenue Allocation disputes; the Treasonable Felony Trial of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and 20 leading members of his party; the Census Controversy of 1962-1964; and the crisis in the Western Region elections of 1965. All these negative developments watered the seed of discord that eventually led to the fall of the First Republic through the violent military intervention of January 15, 1966, and the emergence of General Johnson Thomas Ummakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi as the first military Head of State in Nigeria. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

3. Constitutional Conferences under the Military

Following the violent military seizure of power in 1966, three Study Groups were set up by the new administration to examine Constitutional, Administrative and Institutional problems in the Federation. They were to, among others, review all aspects of the 1963 Constitution. Before the Constitutional Study Group made any progress, it was scuttled by the

promulgation of the Constitution (Suspension and Modification) (No. 5) Decree No. 34 of 1966. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

i. The Unification Decree No. 34 of 1966

Under Decree No. 34 of 1966 of General Ironsi regime, Nigeria ceased to be a Federation and instead came to be known as “Republic of Nigeria”; the Regions were equally abolished and each came to be known as “Group of Provinces” under a Military Governor appointed by the Head of the National Military Government. Lt. Colonel (Later General) Yakubu Gowon overthrew the Ironsi Military Government in another bloody coup d’état and set up an Advisory Group of Civilians to advise his Government on appropriate Constitutional changes that could be easily accommodated. An Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference of the Advisory Group of Civilians was convened on September 2, 1966 in Lagos. The Conference failed because the protracted deliberations on the acceptable formula for maintaining the Federation were prematurely ended with the news of fresh outbreak of violence in the North, which was also echoed in the South. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014). The increasing resentment led to the rapid deterioration of relations between the Eastern Regional Government and the Federal Government. A peace meeting was convened at Aburi, Ghana on January 4-5, 1967, what is popularly called the ‘Aburi Accord’. Regional considerations and conflicting interpretations made the implementation of the Aburi-Accord impossible. In response to the stalemate, the Federal Military Government promulgated series of Decrees, and further divided the Regions into a 12-State structure. It was in opposition to these constitutional developments that the then Military Governor of the Eastern Region, Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the Region independent. Consequently, a Civil War ensued which lasted 30 months. After the war, the failure of the Gowon regime to successfully return the country to democratic rule and loss of confidence of the people that culminated in another coup d’état which brought Brigadier (Later General) Murtala Ramat Mohammed to power on July 29, 1975. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

ii. Murtala Constitutional Initiatives

General Murtala Mohammed on assumption announced a 5-stage programme of transition to democratic civilian administration including the setting up of a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) in September 1975 to produce and submit to the Supreme Military Council a Draft Constitution. During the debates at the Assembly, the most controversial

issues were those relating to the creation of new States; establishment of Federal Shari'a Court of Appeal; the ban on corrupt public officers from contesting for or holding public offices. The issues relating to the amendments were popularly referred to, as the "No-Go-Areas"! It however laid foundations upon which General Obasanjo promulgated the amended Draft Constitution presented to his regime in the 1979 Constitution. A General election was held which, ushered in a civilian administration at Federal level and the 19 States of the Federation with Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the elected President and a National Assembly comprising a Senate and House of Representatives at the centre. Similarly 19 State Governors were elected each with an elected State House of Assembly. The second Republic lasted four (4) years. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

iii. General Babangida's Constituent Assembly

On December 31, 1983 exactly three months into President Shehu Shagari's Second Term in office, General Muhammadu Buhari forcefully seized power. His regime introduced sweeping and stern economic and social measures aimed at ridding the country's political landscape of corruption. His economic policies caused severe hardship across the country and a faction of the military took advantage of the situation to stage a counter-coup which brought General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida to power on August 27, 1985. In September 1987, a Constitution Review Committee (CRC) was set up to examine the 1979 Constitution and make relevant amendments. The 1979 Constitution was not fully adopted, but was the brainchild for the Transitional Committee that consummated in the Presidential Election of June 12, 1993 which was eventually annulled.

iv. The Abacha's National Constitutional Conference of 1994/95

The annulment of the results of the June 12 Presidential Election by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida created very serious political and inter-regional tensions. General Babangida himself was not left out of the fallout. He handed over power to Chief Ernest Shonekan on August 27, 1993 to head an Interim National Government (ING). Chief Shonekan's interim administration lasted only three months, and was overthrown by General Sani Abacha on November 17, 1993. With the termination of the ING, the agitations for a return to Constitutional Government heightened. Amidst incessant calls from several quarters, General Abacha convened a National Constitutional Conference in 1994. The Conference concluded its assignment in 1995. The products of its deliberations and policy recommendations were never promulgated.

The only aspect that was accepted and has now been entrenched in Nigeria's political landscape is the six (6) geo-political zones structure. The sudden death of General Abacha in 1998 after a controversial attempt at self-succession, led to the emergence of General Abubakar Abdusalami as Head of State. Abubakar established a Constitution Review Committee which examined previous constitutional arrangements and made recommendations for a new Constitution. An election was held in 1999 which ushered in a new civilian democratic dispensation under President Olusegun Obasanjo. (See: Final Draft of National Conference 2014).

4. The Return of Democracy and the Resurgence of Agitation for Sovereign National Conference

The return to civil rule on May 29, 1999 following the re-establishment of democratic governance did not lay to rest the agitation for a Sovereign National Conference. The weaknesses of the 1999 Constitution had become more evident with various peoples of Nigeria expressing concerns about its operation. From May 1999 when the Constitution came into effect, many had challenged as a lie, the preamble to the Constitution which states that:

'We the people' of the Federal Republic of Nigeria' having firmly and solemnly resolved, to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God, dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding; and to provide for a Constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people; do hereby make, enact and give to ourselves the following Constitution.(See: National Conference Reports, 2014, p. 20).

The proponents of a Sovereign National Conference continued to insist that this 'lie' about "we the people..." must be resolved through a national conference in order to have a People's Constitution. Against the backdrop of widespread pressures and agitation, President Olusegun Obasanjo during his first tenure in 1999 began to concede to the calls.

i. The Oputa Panel of 1999

President Obasanjo in 1999 established the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC), headed by late Justice Chukwudifu Oputa. The commission was nicknamed Oputa Panel. The panel served as a forum for public hearing where issues of human rights violation were presented. This was not purely a national dialogue, but it served

similar purpose because it brought some hopes and recommendations from a broader national perspective. In May 2002, the Oputa Panel submitted a 98-page report drawing conclusions and recommendations. The non-practicability of the recommendations resulted in continuous demand for a better national platform to mend the broken fences.

ii. The Obasanjo's National Political Reform Conference of 2005

Chief Obasanjo convened a National Political Reform Conference from February-July 2005. Among the issues of political reforms were: the federal structure, fiscal federalism (especially in relation to resource control), form of government, citizenship, accountability and ethics in government, the Independent National Electoral Commission, political parties, reform of the electoral system, the economy, foreign policy and the environment (see: National Conference Reports, 2014, p.20). On completion of the Conference, the National Assembly rejected the entire package of legislative and constitutional matters arising from the resolutions because of the determination of the members to knock out the idea of third term which Obasanjo had tactfully inculcated. The agitations for a National Conference persisted.

iii. The Convocation of the National Conference of 2014

In the midst of heightened security challenges and increased political, ethnic and religious intolerance preceding the 2011 post election violence, calls for National Dialogue continued to brew. The Jonathan Administration responded by constituting a high-powered Committee to Review Outstanding Issues from the 2012 Constitutional Conference under Justice S. M. Belgore. The Belgore Committee was mandated to examine the relevance and currency of the recommendations of previous Conferences which were not implemented, draft bills for consideration (where necessary) and propose policy guidelines for the implementation of those recommendations. On October 1, 2013, President Jonathan in his Independence Day broadcast, declared the intention of his Government to organise a National Dialogue as a way of resolving the intractable security and political crises in the country. The President set up a 13-member Presidential Advisory Committee on National Dialogue with Senator Femi Okurounmu as Chairman and Dr. Akilu Indabawa as Secretary. The Committee, which was charged with designing the framework for the National Dialogue toured 13 cities, 2 in each geo-political zone and the FCT Abuja and interacted with more than 7,000 Nigerians. The Committee submitted its report to the President in December 2013. President Jonathan inaugurated the National Conference Committee on March 17, 2014 and mandated members

to deliberate on all matters that militate against Nigerian's national unity and progress. Government accepted that the Conference should discuss any matter (s) that will help in strengthening the unity of Nigeria. The only issue that was not allowed for deliberation at the Conference was the existence of Nigeria as an indissoluble nation. The National Conference was made up of 492 Delegates and a 6-Member. The Principal officers were Hon. Justice Idris LegboKutigi as Chairman, Professor A. Bolaji Akinyemi as Deputy Chairman and Dr. (Mrs.) Valerie-Janette Azinge as Secretary. (See: National Conference Reports, 2014).

During the conference, issues that were constantly raised by the Delegates in the course of the General Debate were: 1. National Security and Defence; 2. Devolution of power from the central government to the federating units; 3. Political restructuring and a redefinition of the federating units; 4. Agriculture and Food Security; 5. Resource control and resource allocation; 6. Forms of government; 7. Deepening of democracy; 8. Party system and elections; 9. Accountability and transparency in government; 10. Poverty and wealth creation; 11. Economic development; 12. Religion and the state; 13. Public service; 14. Foreign Policy and Diaspora Matters; 15. Corruption and development; 16. Ethnic nationalities and minority question; 17. Civil society and the media; 18. Judiciary and law reform; 19. Transport, public works and Infrastructure – roads, aviation, waterways, etc; 21. Social sector and social welfare; 22. Education and culture; 23. Citizenship; 24. Immigration Matters and Cross-Border crimes; 25. Energy crisis; and 26. Land holdings and Land tenure. (See: National Conference Reports, 2014, p.20)

After the General Debates were exhausted, the Conference went into the Committee stage where the bulk of the Conference work was done. Delegates were distributed into 20 Committees. The Committees were as follows:

1. Agriculture and Water Resources; 2. Citizenship, Immigration and Related Matters; 3. Civil Society, Labour and Sports; 4. Devolution of Power; 5. Economy, Trade and Investment; 6. Energy; 7. Environment; 8. Foreign Affairs and Diaspora Matters; 9. Judiciary, Law, Human Rights and Legal Reform 10. Land Tenure; 11. National Security; 12. Political Restructuring and Forms of Government; 13. Political Parties and Electoral Matters; 14. Politics and Governance; 15. Public Finance and Revenue; 16. Public Service; 17. Social Sector 18. Religion; 19. Science, Technology and Development; and 20. Transportation. (See: National Conference Reports, 2014, p.20)

Main recommendations of the 2014 National Conference

Upon completion, the main recommendations of the Conference were:

1. Scrapping the current system of 774 local authorities - this is intended to save money and reduce corruption. States would be able to set up their own local systems
2. Creation of 18 new states - equally spread around the country.
3. States wishing to merge can do so if certain conditions are met.
4. Revenue allocation - proposes reducing share of national income going to the federal government and increasing share for the states
5. Modified presidential system of government that combines the presidential and parliamentary systems of government; and that the President should pick the vice-president from the legislature
6. Power should be shared and rotated at all levels of government. Presidency should rotate between north and south and among the six geo-political zones of the country. Likewise, the governorship post should rotate among the three senatorial zones of each state (*source, BBC Analysis, 2014*).

The Conferences and the Mass Media Roles

The mass media in Nigeria have not only been very active in issues of Nigeria national development but indeed instrumental to the successes of the various national conferences and have a long-built reputation of contributing to national development in several areas. To mention but a few, the press in the country was instrumental for the bloodless nationalistic struggles that wrestled power out of the colonial masters and placed Nigerian on the path of irrevocable political independence on 1st October, 1960. They endured and weathered the storm of the military junta that followed suit. The press also made significant contribution to the return of civilian rule in 1999.

Writing on the vital roles of mass media in shaping Nigeria national issues, Leke, D. (2000) observes that the media play a role of the mirror in the society, the conciliator, the shaper of issues and events in the nation; the press is an important institution in every society and whichever of these or other roles it finds itself performing at any time matters a great deal in the life of people.

James (2014) agrees to the above assertion but specifically notes that the Nigerian media played special role in contributing to the success of the 2014 conference. He cited one of the delegates and veteran journalist Ray Ekpu as requesting journalists to “show extreme sensitivity about the tough issues that this Conference will have to deal with” because “how they cover controversial issues such as ethnicity, religion, structure of government, resource control, fiscal federation, rotational presidency, devolution of powers, etc., will determine whether we want a united country or not.”. Ray Ekpu, a veteran journalist goes on to admonish the press on how best to handle the event coverage, urging them to demonstrate “a little more sensitivity to the wrangling, the flashes of temper, the disputations and the partisan oratory that you may experience in the coverage of the conference.” Doing all these as Ekpu contends would translate as “contributing your own quota to the efforts that the conference will be making to solidify the unity, cohesion and integration of the country.” (see: *News Express* of April 12, 2014).

Meanwhile Chapman, (1998) has argued and rightly so, that news coverage does not always present issues independently and objectively, but to a large extent, “it does provide important insights into how events are represented publicly”. This study seeks to determine media frames of the conference stories from the perspectives of the two newspapers under review.

Theoretical Foundation

The study examined the issues involved within the framework of agenda setting. The agenda setting theory is associated with the works of Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw of 1972. The theory according to Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008), postulates that what people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media present to them, and the significance they ascribe to issues tends to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to the issue in the media. Studies by Rogers and Shoemaker (1996) aptly explain that "what the public know about the state of affairs at every given time is largely a product of media gate keeping." Media experts believe that by giving a particular topic a prominent treatment in their agenda over a period of time, the mass media would have succeeded in making the audience believe that the issue is indeed important. (See: Nwafor, Odoemelam Ekerikevwe 2013)

Applied to this study, the theory provides an explanation as to how the frequency, prominence, depth, slant, and tone of the newspaper reports of the 2014 Nigeria national conference aided public's knowledge and understanding of the incident and the importance to the nation.

Methodology

The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research designs, using content analysis of newspaper frames of two Nigerian national dailies – *The Daily Sun* and *Leadership*. Issues of these two newspapers from March 1 to August 31, 2014 were examined. That formed the population of the study. This procedure yielded a census of *Daily Sun* ($n=38$), *Leadership* ($n=30$) as the study size.

Code sheets and code guides were used to generate the data for the analysis, and this was done in relation to the objectives and research questions. In selecting the newspapers whose contents were analysed, three different sampling techniques were employed. First, the simple random sampling technique gave the needed samples equal chance of being selected. The purposive sampling technique ensured that it was only samples with the needed attributes were chosen. Then, the selection of copies of the editions of the newspapers was systematic.

The content categories were: News, Features, opinion articles, and editorial comments; while the unit of analysis included: Frequency of coverage (daily, weekly, monthly), *placement or prominence* in the paper (front page, inside page, and back page), as well as positioning on the page prominence (above or below the fold) and visual dominance. *Ethnic affiliation* of the reporter, was discernible from the by-line; *Depth or magnitude of coverage* (full page, $\frac{1}{2}$ page, $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ page, $\frac{1}{5}$ - $\frac{1}{8}$ page and below); *Slant or direction of story* (supportive/constructive, neutral, unsupportive/destructive); *Dominant frame* (Ethnicity/religion, resource control/revenue allocation, secession, 2015 elections/politics/additional states, security/boko haram/state police, others); *Average number of stories per edition* (one, two, three or more); *Story type* (news, feature, interview, pictures/cartons, others).

Data Presentation

Generated data are hereunder presented using simple tables of numbers and percentages.

Figure 1: Story Type

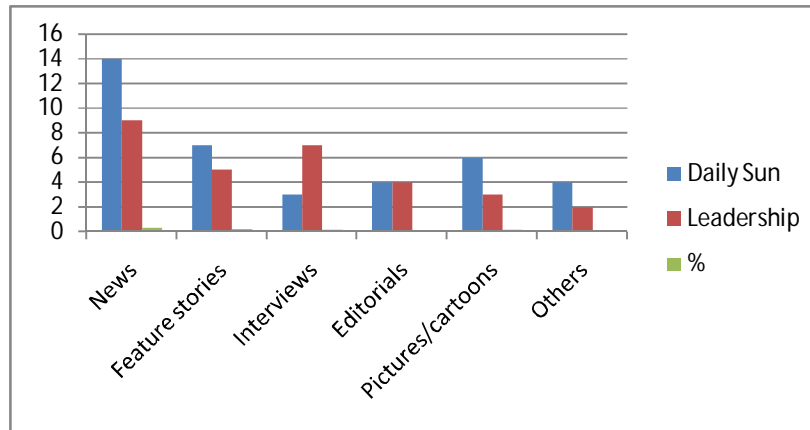


Fig 1: Chart showing types of stories on the Conference featured in the newspapers studied

Figure 1 above shows that, of all the 68 editions reviewed, 23 (33.8%) were news items; 12 (17.6%) were features stories; 10 (14.7%) were interviews; 08 (11.8%) were either editorials or advertorials; 09 (13.2%) were either pictures or cartoons; while other story items not captured above constitute 06(8.8%).

Table 2: Placement of Stories

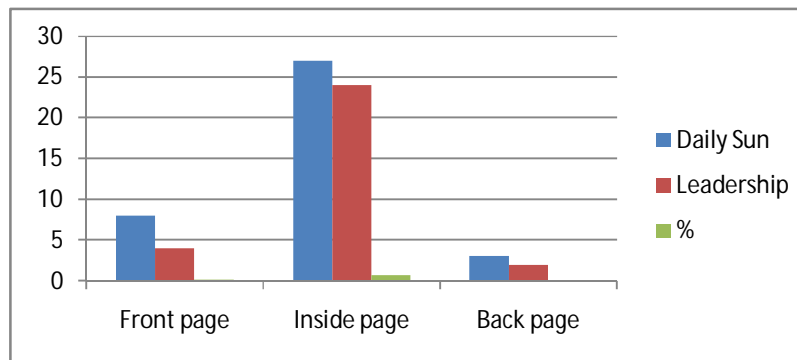


Fig 2: Chart showing story placement of the Conference stories on the two newspapers studied

Figure 2 shows that out of the 68 editions reviewed, only 12 (17.6%) were accorded the front page position; 05 (7.4%) were placed at the back page; while 51 (75.0%) were buried inside the newspapers. Data presented in the table also suggest that *the Daily Sun* gave more prominence to the coverage of the conference than *the Leadership*.

Table 3: Depth of stories with group interest undertone

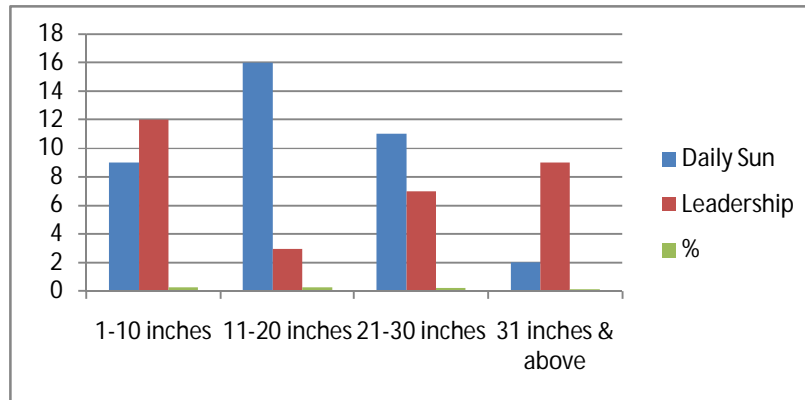


Fig 3: Chart showing the depth of stories on the 2014 National Conference in the newspapers

Data in figure 3 shows that out of the 68 editions of the two newspapers, 21 (30.9%) measured up to full page; 19 (27.9%) only occupied $\frac{1}{2}$ page; 19 (26.5%) occupied between $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ pages; while 12 (17.6%) were located between $\frac{1}{5}$ - $\frac{1}{8}$ page and below. The table further shows that *Leadership* newspaper was more detailed in the depth of coverage of issues than *the Daily Sun*.

Table 4: Frequency of stories with sectional undertone

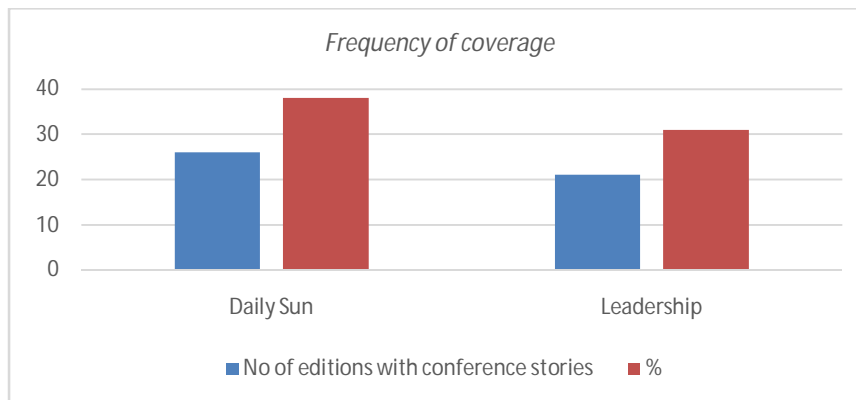


Fig 4: Chart showing frequency of stories

The data above show that an average of two-third editions of the sampled newspapers carried stories with sectional undertone, while only one out of three editions did not.

Table 5: Slant/Tone/Direction

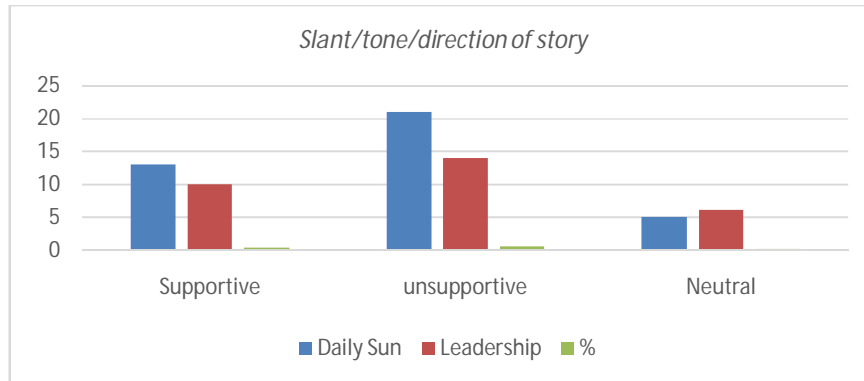


Fig 5: Chart showing the slants/tones/directions of stories in the papers

Figure 5 above indicates that out of 68 items reviewed, 23 (33.8%) were supportive or showed a degree of optimism in the conference; 35 (51.5%) were unsupportive or slanted their stories towards pessimism; while only 11 (16.2%) items were neutral or showed no form of bias or slanting of the national conference.

Table 6: Frames of Groups Interests

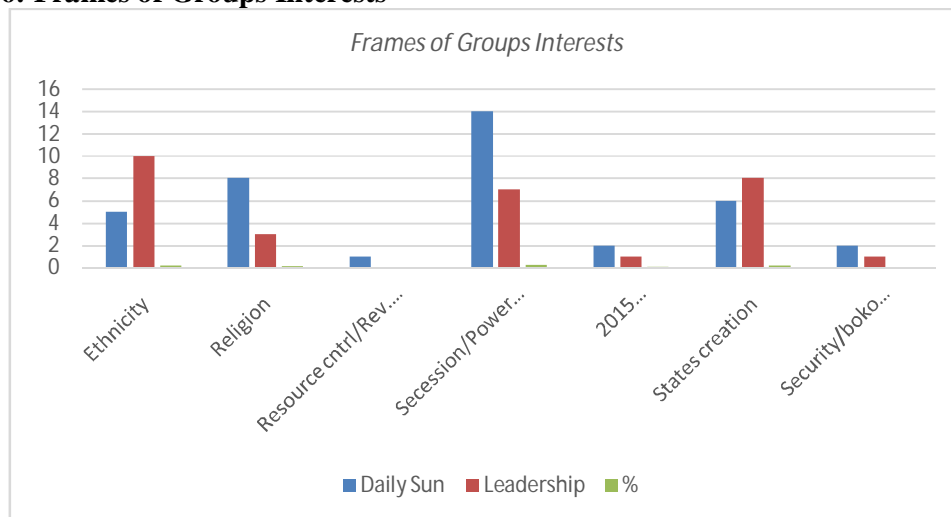


Figure 6 shows that out of the 68 items analysed, the dominant frame employed in the discourse were issues on the 2015 elections/power rotation/politics/additional states creation with 21 (30.9%). The second dominant frame was issues that cantered on ethnicity/religion and unity which constitutes 15 (22.5%); security/ boko haram/state police took the third slot in the order of dominance. The least dominant was the issues of secession with only 1 (1.5%).

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

This study analysed the framing of group identities during the 2014 National Conference in two Nigerian national dailies: *The Daily Sun* and *Leadership newspaper*. 68 editions made up the study population. Five objectives were formulated from which the research questions were derived.

RQ1: What were the dominant frames of the 2014 national conference in the *Daily Sun* and *Leadership newspapers*?

Generated data show that news frames dominated the conference reports in the two newspapers analysed. The implication is that readers may be well informed of the conference, but the limited number of features and editorial imply that follow-up details and interpretations were minimal.

RQ2: What was the frequency of stories with sectional undertone on the conference in the sampled newspapers?

Findings of research question two suggest that an average of two-third editions of the sampled newspapers carried stories with sectional undertone, while only one out of three editions did not. This is indeed an unhealthy development not only for the media in Nigeria but the nation at large.

RQ3: What was the placement of/prominence accorded to group interest stories on the conference in the two newspapers?

The prominence accorded to items was measured in terms of placement. Generally, stories placed on the front pages are usually the most important items, followed by the back pages; and those buried in the inside pages are in most cases the less prominent. Generated data from research question two show that not too many of the front and back page stories wear group interest undertone in the sampled papers. Many of such stories were placed in the inside pages. This suggests that such stories were not given prominence in the editions studied.

RQ4: What was the depth of the stories with group interest undertone?

Generated data show that majority of such stories (31%) measured up to full page; 28% occupied ½ page; 26% measured between $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ pages; while 18% were located between $\frac{1}{5}$ - $\frac{1}{8}$ page and below. The result further shows that *Leadership newspaper* was more detailed in the depth of coverage of such stories than *the Daily Sun*.

RQ5: What was the dominant slant of the conference stories in the two newspapers?

To measure this, stories were evaluated in three directions: ‘supportive’, ‘unsupportive’, and ‘neutral’. Results indicate that majority of the reports (52%) were unsupportive of opposing ethnic groups’ viewpoints on the Conference; 34%) were supportive of other groups’ views; while only 16% were neutral or showed no form of bias or slanting of issues of the national conference. This is also an unhealthy development as the media is expected be objective and unbiased in their reports, but this was not the case in reporting the 2014 National Conference in Nigeria as evident in the findings of this study.

Findings also indicate that issues on the conference that dominated the pages of the newspapers centered on: (1) The 2015 Elections/Power Rotation/Politics/Additional States Creation (40%) (2) Ethnicity/Religion and Unity (23%) (3) Security/Boko Haram/State Police (3%) and (4) Secession (1.5%).

Conclusion

From the findings, we conclude that:

1. There was low coverage of the National Conference in the two newspapers.
2. News frames dominated the conference reports in the two newspapers; this could mean that the newspapers fed readers with information on the subject-matter, but follow-up details and interpretations were minimal;
3. Majority of the editions of the newspapers carried stories with sectional undertones;
4. Many of the reports show unsupportive slants to opposing ethnic groups’ viewpoints on the Conference;
1. Group interest stories such as elections, power rotation, creation of additional states, citizenship, ethnicity, religion, security and secession dominated the newspapers’ reports on the Conference.

Recommendations

From the conclusion, the study recommends that:

The media as agenda setters and watchdog of the society should spearhead the crusade for national unity. The Nigerian Press Organization comprising the Nigerian

Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) and the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) should be at the vanguard of this campaign. At the moment, the body has Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists. The Code talks about the right attitude of practitioners to the practice, but no sections stress nationalism against sectionalism in the process. This should be revisited.

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