

## COVERAGE OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT BY SELECT MAINSTREAM NEWS TABLOIDS IN NIGERIA.

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### ABSTRACT

This study was an assessment of the coverage of natural environment management by select newspapers in Nigeria. The newspapers were *Punch* and *Vanguard*. A total of 80 issues of the newspapers published between January and April 2022 were studied. The findings showed that *Vanguard* was more consistent in the coverage and publication of natural environment management than *Punch*. *Vanguard* had the higher number of stories on natural environment management; was outstanding in kinds of stories; and deployed, liberally, the traditional formats, particularly: news, features, editorials, letters, opinions, and pictures in reporting natural and environment management issues for its readers. It is recommended that other Nigerian newspapers should follow the *Vanguard* example and take more seriously their coverage of natural environmental management in the society.

**Keywords:** Newspaper, Journalism, Natural Environment Management, Coverage, Reporting, Forestation, Flood, Health, Climate Change

### INTRODUCTION

The traditional functions of the press are to inform, to educate and to entertain. As the watchdog of the society, it must be objective and virile in executing its duties except if the security of the nation is at stake. As a service agent, it is the duty of the press to complement government's development efforts by informing and simultaneously guiding the citizenry on the happenings in the society.

According to Udoh (2021), human beings are very inquisitive. In their natural states, they always crave to know what is new and what is new, first within their immediate natural environment, before what is happening in environments beyond them. To him, people would hardly be interested in earthquakes rocking foreign countries, except such natural occurrences have to do with their immediate environments. With this premise, man is usually anxious to be informed either through interpersonal communication or the mass media about what is happening in the world. The information he receives knowingly or unknowingly, influences his overview of and response to environmental issues. Therefore, no individual, organisation or a nation can advance effectively without communication generally and newspapers specifically.

As would be expected, the media generally and newspapers particularly, are assigned certain functions, some of which are coverage of the happenings within the environment in order to entertain, influence, and educate the public. It must be pointed out that these roles may not always be isolated from one another. This means the roles often overlap and interact with each other in any mass communication event. It has also been noted that the popularity and pervasive of the mass media can only be maintained by serving these duties.

In the case of attention given by newspapers to natural environment management, it could be said that since information is powerful, it implies that the more the people are informed about what is happening within their environments, the more powerful they become in their critical evaluation of environmental issues such as climate change, weather behaviour and vegetation changes.

While some observations show that many Nigerian newspapers pay special attention to political issues and entertainment, especially as the country is gradually transiting to another democratic leadership; it has also been suspected that not many newspapers in the country may be interested in reporting and following up environmental unfolding in the country. Put simply, it is the view of some environmental observers that the media tend to pay little or no attention to environmental issues, but rather they prefer to carry political issue which is of interest to the high class people of the society and also issues concerning crime which have very little or no relevance to the society, not minding the fact that most of these environmental issues are caused by man and could be reduced if the public are informed. The truth or otherwise of this popular observation is what informed the choice of this subject matter, more so as forestry and environmental matters, occasioned by rapid climate changes around the world, are fast becoming a popular discourse even in the academic circle.

It is pertinent to say that while some researchers have written on the role of natural environment, particularly forest and forestation in the society; others have taken a look at some related concepts namely: forest, deforestation, journalism, climate change, science and technology reporting, and so on. In looking at one of the most prominent environmental locations, Ogar (2010) sees forest as a continuous stand of trees with interlocking crowns which have a height of 10 metres and above. On the contrary, he sees deforestation as the conversion of forest to another land use or the long term reduction of the tree canopy cover between the minimum of 10 percent threshold. However, while writing on a similar subject matter, Esiere and Archibong (2015), decry the rate of deforestation in Nigeria, particularly in Akwa Ibom State, saying that the trend has robbed the people of fruits, nuts, meat and leaves; as well as vegetables. Forests, according to them, provide small poles for building, staking, and construction work, as well as serve as a source of medicinal plant. Writing on the role of forests in the amelioration of environment, Attah (2001), laments that the unhealthy state of the societal environment is predicated on mismanagement of the forests, stressing that forests have a significant role to play in ameliorating the poor state of the environment. To him, "trees and by extension, forests purify the atmosphere and filter the air. They serve as windbreakers and prevent strong winds from sweeping away fishing settlements and farming villages" (Attah, 2001, p. 107). Udofia, Uluocha, Eric, Oghenevwoke and Williams, (2015), take a look at the influence of temperature fluctuations on forest productivity. To them, temperature has risen over the past century and may continue to rise because of continuing release of human induced greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and the impact on forest production. While lamenting the poor state of forestry development in Nigeria and by implication calling for proper action from government, corporate bodies and individuals, Okoneyo (2015) identifies public ignorance of forest resources conservation as a major challenge facing the development of forestry development in the country. While advocating aggressive media campaigns and sensitisation in this respect, especially in Akwa Ibom State, he identifies other challenges to include: inadequate forest resource base, poor funding of forestry operations, declining trend in forest plantation establishment, and deforestation/de-reservation. In stressing the need for the mass media to pay adequate attention to forestry and ancillary news, Udoh (2014), says that journalism (news coverage in particular) covers or ought to cover every important field of human engagement and that the wider journalism coast is, the more relevant the profession becomes. To him, forests and forestry are very important to human existence, hence, the need to newspapers, in particular, to cover them the

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same way they cover other sectors such as energy, politics, medicine, business, economy, astronomy, nuclear physics, technology, arts, and law.

In explaining the principles and realities of science and technology reporting, Udoh (2014) advises science and technology reporters (including forestry reporters) to see themselves as a bridge between the world of science and their communities of coverage. To him, reporters may not need to know as much as the scientists, but simply need to be able to put the relevant parts of their knowledge into words which their audience can understand. They do not have to understand the whole of any field of science and must not write anything they do not understand. Udoh (2019) further advises that a science and technology writer to make effort to establish at least one contact from each major scientific field (such as medicine, environmental science, agriculture and fishing, geology, engineering or any other fields which are especially important in your society) and keeps these contacts in mind with a view to quoting them in his stories if they are experts in the particular field.

It is the opinion of some writers that editorial contents of a newspaper must reflect the tastes of the society, the dos and don'ts. According to Nwosu (2003) societal taboos must be respected; otherwise the newspaper will fold up. He explains that newspaper must then exist for society. The mass media which are meant to operate with the understanding that they are serving the public, sometimes as citizen invoke fundamental rights in their reporting which could cause strong disagreement in certain quarters. It therefore behooves the publisher to keep an eye on the community's population and the literacy rate, as planning for a newspaper with small population and low literary rate may not be profitable for a daily newspaper. Newspapers as a culture of the people tend to represent and interpret what happens in the society, thereby drawing attention to such issues. This is shown in news, features, cartoons, sports etc.

However, while Bitner (2003) in her argument says: certainly dangers can emerge such as when the ownership of the chain decides to use the newspaper as a unified editorial voice; Nwosu (2003) observes that a newspaper's continues existence in the society has something to do with the choice of ownership of the publishing house. The latter, however lists

some principles towards newspaper ownership. These include financial standing, which, according to him, is the greatest mainstay of any business. To him, the financial standing of a potential newspaper house must be assured so as to meet the objectives of that business.

According to Ozoh (2005) several investigations into factors affecting media coverage or response to an issue or event have revealed a number of them, among them which include, professional orientation, subjective values and ownership. To him, every reporter or correspondent has passed through certain professional training which tends to shape his world view to a particular angle. However, unlike what is obtainable in some western countries where ownership of the mass media is private, that of Nigeria and most African countries is neatly divided into government and privately owned. Research has shown that ownership structure tends to affect the degree of support as well as the pattern of coverage among Nigerian newspapers, particularly with development-oriented issue, (Ozoh 2005).

Ozoh (2005) says that government-owned newspapers tend to be more supportive, cover more favorable issues and programmes run by the government. Sobowole (1991) agrees that, media ownership influences the type and quality of information that the mass media make available to their consumers. He concludes that in spite of journalist commitment to "professionalism", "objectivity" and "fairness"

they will always protect the interest of their proprietors and protect their means of livelihood.

In terms of studies on how certain newspapers cover certain sectors of the economy and the society generally, there are some literatures related to this study. Jumoh (2008) had as one of its specific objectives to know the differences between indigenous and English newspaper's coverage of health matters. The study covered a four-year period: June, 1999 to May, 2003. The study found out that the newspaper, published in indigenous and English languages, gave inadequate coverage to health matters.

From the theoretical perspective, the Development Media theory is apt for this study as this theory reflects the aspirations of the third world countries. The mass media under this theory are deployed for social, economic and political purposes. The media are used as "partners in progress" and once expected to sing the tunes of national integration, unity and progress. The Development Media Theory tend to portray the development plans of the Third World countries which the mass media (newspaper) must work hand-in-hand with the government. As such, newspaper often try to focus on issues that are government related, leaving the demands of the citizens in the dark. This theory brings to bear the Nigerian situation in which reporters adopt western media philosophy by being one-sided in reportage.

In Nigeria, newspapers are one of the major mainstream media organisations that monitor with a view to informing, educating and of course entertaining the people about the various unfolding in the various environments in which they find themselves. These duties are in line with the traditional expectations of the media. However, the ways and manners in which different newspapers report natural environment management in the society may differ. In other words, because of editorial policies, it may not be possible for all newspapers to give uniform coverage pattern to all natural environmental happenings and their management in a particular society. For instance, while some newspapers may decide to give prominence to some natural environmental management issues by placing such stories on their front pages, their counterparts may decide to bury such happenings in their inside pages. The same may happen when it comes to frequency of reportage and the depth given to the stories. The above, therefore, explains the problem or worry of this study which, interrogatively put, is: to what extent do the select mainstream newspapers in Nigeria cover natural environment management in the society?

This study sought to: identify the kind of natural environmental management covered by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers in the first four months of 2022; find out the frequency of coverage given to environmental management within the period under review; and identify the different formats used by the newspapers in the presentation of environmental management stories covered by the newspapers.

This study adopted the content analysis research method in ascertaining the attitude of *Punch* and *Vanguard* news tabloids to coverage of natural environment management. Accordingly, *Punch* and *Vanguard* published between the 1<sup>st</sup> of January and 31<sup>st</sup> of June 2021 constituted the population for this study. A total of 80 issues of the newspapers published within the period were considered. All the stories on natural environmental management were categorized in terms of the kinds of natural environment management stories covered by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspaper between January and April 2022 – a period of year with high incidence of environmental and climate challenges and changes occasioned by arrival and departure of the dry season. Also of interest were the frequency of coverage given to

those issues within the period under review; and the format of presentation of environmental stories covered in the newspaper.

Any words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs or news stories excluding advertisement, which addressed the subject matter, were examined in line with the study objectives. The units of analysis, which in the context of this study, were classified as formats, were: news, features, pictures, editorials, letters and opinions. Similarly, the kinds of stories (content categories) as used in the study objectives, were in the areas of health, climate change, flood and forestation; while frequency had to do with the number of times that stories on the subject matter were carried by the newspapers.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1: Kinds of natural environment management stories**

Subjects	Content Categories					
	Punch	%	Vanguard	%	Total	%
Health	34	40.5	50	39.4	84	39.8
Climate	14	16.7	32	25.2	46	21.8
Flood	16	19.0	25	19.7	41	19.4
Forestation	20	23.8	20	15.7	40	19.0
Total	84	100	127	100	211	100

The data shows how the select newspapers performed in their coverage of the four different kinds of coverage areas, namely, health, climate change, flood and forestation. Details show that *Vanguard* had the majority of the stories from most of the categories.

**Table 2: Monthly environmental matters covered (January and April 2022)**

Month	Punch	%	Vanguard	%	Total	%
January	15	17.9	38	29.9	53	25.1
February	23	27.4	27	21.3	50	23.7
March	17	20.2	33	26.0	50	23.7
April	29	34.5	29	22.8	58	27.5
Total	84	100	127	100	211	100

Table 2 shows the monthly frequency of coverage and reportage by *Punch* and *Vanguard* from January to April, 2022. *Vanguard* had majority of the coverage.

**Table 3: Format of coverage/presentation**

Newspaper	News	Editorials	Features	Letters	Opinions	Pictures	Total
Punch	25	7	14	13	8	17	84
	29.8%	8.3%	16.7%	16.7%	9.5%	20.2%	100%
Vanguard	35	12	21	17	9	23	127
	27.6%	9.4%	16.5%	13.4%	15.0%	18.1%	100%

Table 3 above indicates that the total number of natural environment management issues published by *Punch* as News, Editorials, Features, Letters, Opinions and Pictures amounted to 84 issues; while the total number of environmental issues published by *Vanguard* as News, Editorials, Features, Letters, Opinions, and Pictures was 127. Again, *Vanguard* had the largest amount of coverage.

**Table 4: Summary**

Newspapers	Environmental issues	%
Punch	84	39.8
Vanguard	127	60.2
Total	211	100

Table 4 shows that *Vanguard* was overwhelming in the frequency of coverage of natural environmental management issues. *Vanguard* issues amounted to 127 reports which represent 60.2%.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of findings was based on the specific objectives of the study, which were centred on: the kinds of natural environment management stories covered by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers between January and April 2022; the frequency of coverage given to those issues within the period under review; and the major formats of presentation of the stories.

### **The kind or subject matter of environmental issues covered by the select newspapers**

As explained earlier, *Punch* and *Vanguard* natural environment management reports were further divided into four broad subject matters or categories namely: health, climate change, flood and forestation. how much of these categories covered by the newspapers was of interest to the study. All issues concerning the wellbeing of the individuals, environmental nutrition, hygiene and their accessibility to health facilities and medications constituted health news. Similarly, everything on droughts, heat waves and fire outbreak constituted climate news. Matters concerning overflow of water in different regions constituted flood news and everything concerning forest preservation and bush burning constituted forestation.

Table 1 shows that *Punch* published a total of 84 issues under health, climate, flood and forestation as its coverage of natural environment management; while *Vanguard* covered and published a total of 127 issues under health, climate, flood and forestation. The data, in summary, showed that the two national dailies paid more attention to health issues than the other issues listed.

In relation to the theoretical underpinning of the study, the finding upholds the development media theory and portrays the newspapers as relatively development oriented. The theory explains that news media in developing countries (should) prioritise development issues in their reportage. Health, climate, flood and forestation are good examples of development issues in developing countries of the world. The finding is equally in line with position of Essien and Archibong (2015) which does not only decry the rate of deforestation in Nigeria, but calls on government to enact relevant laws to check the dangerous and ugly trend.

### **The frequency of coverage of natural environmental management**

Naturally, newspapers have the right to give prominence to any kind or category of story. This is because each media house is different in terms of perception and handling of news events and stories. Of course, this is in line with both the perceptual and the individual differences theories of communication.

The data on Table 2 tackle this question. The table shows that the total number of natural environment management issues published were 211. A further breakdown of the above shows that *Punch* published 15(17.9%) issues in January, 23(27.4%) in February, 17(20.2%) in March and 29(34.5%) in April. *Vanguard* on the other hand, published 38(29.9.0%) in January, 27(21.3%) in February, 33 26.0%) in March and 29(22.8%) in April.

Based on the above, it can be clearly seen from Table 2 that the month of April recorded the highest number of environmental issues, which is to say that environmental issues were frequently covered more in the month of April. At least, 27.5% of its coverage was environmental issues. Apart from Table 2, Table 4 also shows in summary that *Vanguard* covered and published more stories on environmental management and related issues. Statistically, it carried 127(60.2%) of the entire stories within the period under review. This is against 84(38.9%) carried by its counterpart, *Punch* within the same period.

### The format of presentation of environmental management stories

By tradition, a newspaper, like any other mass medium of communication, has three basic contents, known as media forms. These, in their order of importance, are: news, features and advertisements. What this means is that every other content of a newspaper falls under any of these broad forms. But for the purpose of this study, such forms have been enlarged to cover other related contents. Therefore, in Table 3, the environment stories were divided into news stories, editorials, features, letters, opinions and pictures. This, as earlier pointed out formed the units of analysis. Therefore, *Punch* and *Vanguard* published a total of 211 natural environment management issues under the formats deployed in the present study. The cumulative story published by *Punch* under news stories, editorials, features, letters, opinions and pictures is a total of 84 while the cumulative story published by *Vanguard* under news stories, editorials, features, letters, opinions and pictures is a total of 127.

From the table, *Vanguard* stories were more than those of *Punch*. However, since the difference was not much, it could be said that they both gave considerable attention to the issue within the period of study. Again, the finding can be linked with the assumption of the Development Media theory earlier explained, which holds that the media focus or should focus on issues that are geared towards societal development. By covering environmental news to the extent that they have done within the period under review, the two newspapers, in the evaluation of this study, have done their part in contributing to the development of the society which they serve. Also, the study therefore shows that *Punch* and *Vanguard* make effective use of the popular story formats, namely, news, editorials, features, letters, opinions and pictures to report natural and extra environmental management issues.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For precision, this study sought to: identify the categories of natural environment management majorly covered by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers in the first quarter of 2022; find out the frequency of coverage given to those stories within the period under review; and identify the format of presentation of environmental stories covered by the newspapers. From the findings, which show a relative contrast between the coverage given by the two mainstream newspapers to environmental management, it is hereby concluded that not all newspapers in Nigeria see the coverage of natural environment management in the same light. Taken holistically and from the major findings, *Vanguard*, in all departments, paid greater attention to environmental management than *Punch* between January and April 2022.

From the above, the study recommends that:

1. *Punch* should improve its coverage and subsequent reportage of environmental management.
2. By extension, other national dailies should accord more prominence to natural environmental issues in the area of education as this will help reduce some of the natural environmental problems caused by man.

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