

## Measuring Press Freedom in a Democratic Society: A Content Analysis of Nigerian Newspapers

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**Abstract:** The present plurality of ideas in the cornucopia of communicative space throughout Nigeria does not make Nigeria a free and open society. As such, the country's journalism practice is characterized by intimidation by the state actors. However, anchored on development media theory, this study therefore, investigated the extent of press freedom from the relationship between Nigerian press and President Muhammadu Buhari's first democratic dispensation. Using quantitative content analysis, individual news story of 2016 fuel scarcity and Naira Devaluation and Dollar appreciation reported in the Nigerian newspapers was used as unit of analysis while systematic sampling was used in selecting the sample. Findings revealed however, away from the partisan relations between Nigerian press and the government, the relationship between the press and the present democratic government is critical with a very little attention to journalists' repression. Further findings revealed that the press is noticeably free since it repeatedly covered 57.6% and 74.1% of stories considered critical to the government by giving such stories prominence on the front pages of the country's popular newspapers. The implication of this is that professionalism and objectivity can hypothetically be guaranteed in the coverage of issues that borders on public affairs in any liberal African democracy.

**Keywords:** Press Freedom; Democratic Government; Content Analysis; Private Press

### 1. Introduction

Press operations all over the world, and in Nigeria in particular, is essential to democratic constructiveness, good governance, unalloyed citizens' rights, active

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citizens participation in the political process, overall effective functioning of the governing system and the entire nation building. Nwakaego (2012) recognized press freedom as the internationally acclaimed indicators for measuring the degree of democratic or national development of a policy in the face of a nation building. Writing on the viability of the press, Hacket and Carroll (2006) said the press is constitutionally enshrined as the fourth estate of the realm to serve as watchdog of the society against abuse of power, righter of wrong, a humbler of hubris and arrogance, an agent of positive social change that comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted. Indeed, the press can be vibrant and restive institution which provides platforms for power negotiations in the public space. It sets the stage for public discourse on popular issues and enjoy wide readership. The wide gap between the government and the governed is possibly removed due to the participation of an informed citizenry in the diversity and plurality of ideas in the communicative space and government political will. This suggests that an informed citizenry identifies policies that affect them and proffer alternative views capable of catering for their needs and aspirations. In this regard, a good public policy needs information and critical public discussion (Sen, 1999). This, in the opinion of Sen, prevents unhandled transactions, commercial frivolity and corruption. The enormous impact derived from policies for famine prevention is, according to Sen (1999), a product of information from an independent media and true democracy. Thus, freedom of the press is a cornerstone to evaluate the development of a nation's democracy. Respect for freedom of expression and the right of public to access and receive information can be attributed to transparency and accountability in governance. In the words of (Bruns, 2008 & Oyeleye, 2004), they maintained that critical independence, democratic constructiveness and commercial viability are vital to an ideal press environment. Apparently, "the state's fear of the power of press organizations and their immense contributions to the defense of fundamental human rights often serves as justification for censorship" (Akinwale, 2010, p.48).

Therefore, the position of this paper is that, prior to the current administrative era however; government and the press are always at loggerheads that curbing press freedom is the panacea to the development of a nation and economic steadiness forgetting that government accountability to the ruled is crucial in nation building and development. A more reason that upsurge this study was to see the extent to which press freedom is guaranteed owing to the specific needs which, in 2015, the Nigeria present dispensation claimed in his presidential speech which reads "I am for everybody and I am for nobody". This presidential speech contains a strong

decision to tackle corruption among official leaders which is what has been observed as critical to political-economy and infrastructural development in Nigeria.

Thus, our concern here is that the Nigerian press cannot be left out in terms of tackling corruption in achieving true democracy and national development especially at a critical time of fuel scarcity in early January and at a time of Dollar appreciation and Naira depreciation respectively in 2016. This paper used two privately owned newspapers in Nigeria to see whether this present dispensation since its inception in May 29, 2015 allows the press to uphold their professional integrity through objective and unbiased reporting of issues of negativities concerning the presidency, and his cabinet in the front pages of private newspapers.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The present plurality of ideas visible in the cornucopia of communicative space throughout the country does not make Nigeria a free and open society. According to Bamidele (2013, p.51) countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and a few others are homes where the practice of Journalism is characterized by intimidation, harassment, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, and other forms of repression by both state and the non-state actors especially with regards to the coverage of inherent corrupt practices among cabinet members of any ongoing political dispensation. As such, press freedom in the present dispensation in Nigeria is the major focus of this study. Journalists in a democratic society with little or no press autonomy are at risk of falling victims of maltreatment. In many countries however, police is brutally meted on members of the press, especially editors and journalists who observed professionalism and not succumb to government influence on public opinion (Bamidele, 2013). Moreso, the power of the press to act as the fourth estate has been curtailed from extensive definitions of “national security”, with critical implications on socio-economic development in Nigeria.

In this light, this paper examines the extent that Nigerian press covers the cabinet of the federal government of Nigeria abuse of public offices for private gains and the government reaction to the newspapers’ coverage of his cabinet’s corrupt practices. The study used two private newspapers and focused on front page lead stories to enable the researcher assess whether the news reports of *Daily Trust* and *The Guardian* front-pages seem favorable or critical to the government.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

1. To what extent does Nigerian press practice freely in contributing towards the development of democracy in the country?
2. What is the news story that frequently criticizes the government from early January to March 2016?
3. What is the distribution of government unfavourable news according to prominence?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Constitutional Exploration**

Our interrogation to literatures on the meaning of press freedom brought about the recognition of freedom of expression without which press freedom may not be entirely guaranteed. Thus, freedom of expression as contained in the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as cited in Bamidele (2013) states: “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers” (p.19-20).

Similarly, section 22 of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that “the press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in the chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”. Chapter 4 of section 39 of the same constitution also provides that “every person including the press shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and imparts ideas and information without interference”. In the words of Olukotun (2018), the section 22 above enjoins the media to monitor the government, inform the people about their responsibility and accountability and subsequently punish offenders.

In spite of all constitutional provisions, there is no clear indication of strong and special forms of protection for the press to carry out its constitutional obligations without interference. In fact, the Nigerian section 39 of the 1999 constitution (as amended), which give the press the statutory role of watchdog, is curtailed by section 45 of the constitution that unequivocally states that the role of the press as provided in section 22 can be abrogated by any law reasonably justifiable in a democracy.

This kind of curtailment is abundantly manifested in the Nigerian media environment with draconian legislation and decrees like Sedition Act, Defamation Law, Decree 4 of 1984, Decree 2, Nigerian Press Council Law (Okunna & Popoola, 2015, p.6-7). No other industry has been confronted with such a degree of antagonism. Perhaps it has been acclaimed that modern mass media is said to be 'too poor' to buy the 'too expensive' absolute freedom. That is why press freedom is regarded as "legality in antiquity" (Nwakaego, 2012). This means it was only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Libertarian theory existed that absolute freedom was envisaged. This study's main argument is that a free press is important in the development of the political process of Nigerian society through its ability to expose any misdemeanor within the ruling bourgeois class.

## **2.2. Perspectives on Press Freedom**

In order to provide a framework to understand the study, the concept, "free press," or rather press freedom is conceived as the absence of restraints on the media and also the presence of those conditions necessary for the dissemination of a multiplicity of ideas and opinions to a relatively large audience such as enforced right of access to newspapers and radio stations. The need for this is because even though virtually every constitution in the world has guaranteed freedom of the press, however, the traditions and needs of each country has made it to be interpreted differently (Ogbondah, undated).

More succinctly, the role of the press and concept of press freedom have mixed and varied perceptions by scholars from Africa, Asia and South America. For instance, Diego and Ruth (2016), contend that press freedom is a stronghold of democratic systems. Freedom House (2015) posits that freedom of information is "a pillar of democracy", and "threats to media freedom . . . present a stark challenge to democratic values" (p.21). Meanwhile, Bamidele (2013) contend that freedom of the press, in its true sense, is the instrument that protects journalists and all other media professionals from all forms of impunity. Their opposing viewpoints are typical of the diversity of opinion on what press freedom actually is. Thus, a high degree of press freedom is essential for building inclusive knowledge societies and democracies and fostering dialogue, peace and good governance. Strong freedom of the press is essential to ensure the safety of journalists and to eradicate impunity and violation of human rights. Without freedom of the press and adequate safety for journalists, it is impossible to have an informed, active and engaged citizenry

(Okunna & Popoola, 2015). Commenting further on the need for freedom of the press, Wolfenson, (1999) cited in Ciboh (2014) remarked:

“A free press is not a luxury. A free press is at the absolute core of equitable development, because if you cannot enfranchise poor people, if they do not have a right to expression, if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus needed to bring about change” (p.1).

Corroborating the above, Bamidele (2013) noted that “freedom of the press is a cornerstone for human rights, a keystone that guarantee other freedoms, a promoter of transparency and good governance that ascertain statute of justice” (p.19). In relation to the above submission, Lowenstein (1966) cited in Ogbondah (undated) maintained that:

A completely free press is one in which newspapers; periodicals, news agencies, books, radio and television have absolute independence and critical ability, except for minimal libel and obscenity laws. A completely free press has no concentrated ownership, marginal economic units or organized self-regulation. A completely controlled press is one with no independence or critical ability. Under it, newspapers, periodicals, books, news agencies, radio and television are completely controlled directly or indirectly by government, self-regulatory bodies or concentrated ownership” (p.10-11).

It is vital here to assert that the professional calling of the press is that of societal watchdog (Udomisor & Kenneth, 2013). its ability to function as watchdog over the government, i.e. monitoring and investigating the actions of those in power and informing citizens against abuse of power specifically through reporting of their misdemeanor so as to create opportunity to punish, sanction and deter the perpetrators, has since, been recognized as catalyst for press freedom and development. No wonder that Okoro and Chinweobo-Onuoha (2013) reflects the press as a veritable tool for information dissemination, social mobilization and control, a means of public education and development and as such a very important institution affecting the lives of the people. They noted that this could be achieved through the instrumentality of the press.

### **2.3. The Press and Government Tussle: The Nigerian Experience**

Prior to the government-press relations in Nigeria, America has recorded a meaningful relationship with the press. In the history of America press, and journalism practice throughout the world, one statement will never be forgotten. Thomas Jefferson, the 3<sup>rd</sup> American President once said; “Were it left to me to decide whether we shall have a government without the press or the press without government, I shall not hesitate a moment to choose the latter.” Commenting on this, Nwakaego, (2012) observed that Jefferson and other statesmen such as Adams, Franklin, Benjamin Harris, John Campbell among others used the press as a political weapon until America became a free nation in 1776. Because of the significance of the press to the emancipation of American Nation, the press became the first beneficiary of the amendments carried out on the nation’s constitution in 1791. The first amendment states, “Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...” (Okunna & Popoola, 2015, p.5).

Consequently, this constitutional provision holds the key to progress, development and stability of democratic institutions upon which life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of the nation rest. This provision also allowed for a formal relationship between the government and the press in the United States, and then becomes a reference point to other nations around the globe.

The Nigerian press, just like their American counterparts, also fought during the colonial era for the attainment of independence of the Nigerian state. Nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Ernest Ikoli used the press to assiduously fight the obnoxious regimes. Between 1903 and 1960, the colonial government enacted various laws to checkmate and control the activities of the press; the only viable weapon in the hands of the nationalists to expose and sensitize the Nigerian public to the evils of colonialism was the press. Thus, a more pragmatic rationale that explains the state’s clampdown on the press was to “incapacitate it from investigating and unearthing the bombastic level of corruption, fraud, embezzlement and greed among members of Nigeria’s ruling bourgeoisies” (Ogbondah, undated cited in Oso & Pate 2011, p.40). It is however, significant to know that freedom of expression and of the press have severe limitations like murder, kidnapping, pressure, intimidation, unjust imprisonment of journalists, and the destruction of facilities (Bamidele, 2013).

Thus, Oyeleye (2004) explored the turbulent relationship between the press, the political process and political actors in the context of the complex structure of

Nigerian society and found it to be very antagonistic. It started from mild restrictions of press freedom during the colonial era and grew into full-blown repression in the post-colonial era. In other words, the “effort by the media to fulfill the constitutional obligation of holding the government accountable is the key source of tension in state-media relations in Nigeria” (Ogbondah, 2016, p.23). This means that media freedom, as noted by Mapuva (2016) is subject to certain conditions.

In the military era in Nigeria, nonconforming Journalists were sacked, newspapers burnt, media houses closed, Journalists detained and some murdered documented by (Bamidele, 2013; Harry, 2015; Udeze, 2012; Ogbondah, 2011; Olukotun 2004a; 2004b; Oso & Pate, 2011). Typical examples of this was the case of Dele Giwa Parcel bomb, editor of news watch in October 19, 1986; Paxton Idowu, editor of Republic newspaper met his death on the writing of corrupt practices and fraudulent business deals of the then vice president on June 16, 1989 and the death of Minere Amakiri of Nigerian Observer in Rivers State (Ajibade, 2003).

However, in the civilian era, repressive actions, censorship among others are used as instruments to muzzle the press. Extralegal and legal constraints are another set of hindrance to the press men. The legal aspects are the press laws which prevent the press sometimes to freely source for information in a democratic regime. Typical examples of this could be trace to extra judicial killing of Paul Abayomi Ogundeji in 2008 and Bayo Ohu extra Judicial killing in 2009 (Bamidele, 2013).

Sadly enough, in Benue state, Morris Tsav a journalist, brutally manhandled by security agents for covering reports on the scandals making news of the state governor’s excuse of carrying a huge sum of money to purchase pigs in China. Likewise, in Eboyi state, two journalists, Imo Eze and Olowole Elenyinmi publisher and general editor of Eboyi voice, a local newspaper were arrested and accused of sedition in a story they publisher titled, “Is Ebonyi a Failed State” (Ogbondah, 2018, p30). Journalists all over the world, and particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, continue to work under risks of intimidation, harassment, violence, arbitrary arrest, kidnapping and even extra judicial killings (Okunna & Popoola, 2015). Thus, the threat of attacks distorts reality of news by creating a climate of fear in news coverage among members of the Nigerian journalists.

Similar to this repression, Bamidele (2013) submits that 2006 was the bloodiest year on record of 150 media killings, where hundreds of media workers were arrested, threatened and attacked. This might not be unconnected to the politicization of democratic and institutions by the ruling governments to entrench themselves in



power, using continuous vague and unnecessary definitions of “state security” as priority to attaining national status quo.

Moreso, this situation has ultimately caused Bamidele (2013) to conclude that relations between Journalist in Africa and the government security agents still remain far from normal. It is a relationship characterized by mutual suspicion. Their difference however lies in their professions. While journalists want to report the news as it is, bond by the cardinal principles of objectivity, accuracy and timeliness on all news items, including issues dealing with police investigations, the courts and other state matters, the police on the other hand had always want to reach logical conclusions in their investigations first before they see them published by the press (Bamidele, 2013). As such, the role of the press to disseminate information as a way of mediating between the state and all facets of civil society remains critical.

#### **2.4. The Press and Democracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic**

The role of press as fourth estate, a forum for public discussion in the democratization process has been adequately appreciated (McConnell & Becker, 2002; Street, 2010; McQuail, 2010; Norris, 2006; Voltmer, 2013; Waisbord, 2000). Media role in this regard are a function of increased development of a democratic values and active citizen participation in the political process. The press is perceived as an indicator of democratic reform (McConnell & Becker, 2002), by improving the quality of the electoral system and access to multiplicity of ideas in the communicative space, and safeguarding their democratic performance of the state (Street, 2010 & McQuail, 2010). Investigative reporting which has led to the expulsion of some Nigerian ministers and the drop of dishonest administrations has made the media an effective and credible watchdog in their role to buttressing and deepening democracy further.

Media ensures that objective news and information programs are supported so that people make informed decisions. They are the product of popular participation in the democratization process by multiplying the impact of transition activities through the dissemination of plurality of information. They ensures that citizens make informed decisions in ensuring that elected representatives capable of representing them well are put in government offices by upholding their oaths of allegiances.

The press builds a culture of openness and disclosure that has made democratically elected governments more accountable. The press shape public opinion, promote

democracy by ensuring that governments are transparent and accountable. For instance, the press, have exposed malfeasance in governance resulting in the resignation of top official leaders (i.e. Former Finance Minister, Kemi Adeosun; Former House of Assembly Speaker, Honourable Patricia Etteh and Former Aviation Minister, Stella Oduah) among others. In addition, the media have contributed to public education and enlightenment and social reforms that enhances the contribution to a more democratic nation.

Thus, a well-functioning media system would move from one that is directed or even overtly controlled by government or private interests to one that is more open and has a degree of editorial independence, financial viability, diverse and plurality of ideas that serves the public interest. Editorial independence of the media ensures plurality of ideas, and plurality of ideas in turns enable citizens to have access to information that they need to make informed decisions and to participate in society. The press has equally been found responsible by serving as ‘fourth estate’ and acting as ‘watchdog’, exposing the misdemeanors of the public officials and other power holders within the democratic system and by holding the government and political elites accountable (Waisbord, 2000), this is possible in a state of critical democratic journalism.

## **2.5. Theoretical Framework**

The Development Media Theory readily provides anchorage for the study. The theory seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the press in countries that are classified as “developing countries” or “third world countries”. McQuail (1987, p.121) cited in Folarin, (2002) posits the major tenets of the theory thus:

Freedom of media should be open to economic priority and development needs of the societies, media should give priority in news and information to link up with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally or politically with journalists and other media information gathering and dissemination task.

In a developing country like Nigeria, to actualize press freedom, the press must accept and carryout positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy. The government, media and public must also work amicably to actualize press freedom; the public should not be restricted to any information. McQuail (1987) cited in Folarin, (2002) also summed up that in the interest of development,

the state has the right to intervene in or restrict media operations and devices censorship, aid and direct control can be justified.

Applying this theory, the press relays unfolding developmental issues to the generality of the society. The press integrates the culture, economic and political issues in the society to facilitate national development. In addition to national development, the press carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy and this is achievable through access to and dissemination of unrestricted information deem significant to the development of the nation's polity. While the press gives priority in their content to the national culture and language and in news and information to link with other developing countries, the government defines and determines the actualization of press functions in a given broad-based society like Nigeria.

### **3. Methodology**

The research method used in this study is quantitative content analysis. The Nigerian dailies published in two private papers; Daily Trust and the Guardian newspapers from January 1st to March 30th, 2016 (3 months) in this study, constitute the population of this content analysis. The justification for choosing this period was noted for its intense fuel scarcity and the period of Naira and Dollar devaluation and appreciation respectively. The concern of these researchers was to see whether this period of critical issues concerning the government is widely reported, especially in the front pages of the two privately owned newspapers. The population of the study comprised all Nigerian newspapers while the sample is chosen to be Daily Trust of the north and the Guardian of the south respectively. What informed the choice of these newspapers was that the Guardian is one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Nigeria, published in the southern part; whereas Daily Trust has the largest readership from north and among the top ten (10) newspapers in Nigeria (Uko, 2014). The selection was equally based on the recommendations of scholars like Adaja (2016), Adisa (2016), Aliagan (2016), Nwabueze, Ugochukwu and Egbra, (2014) who proved that the newspapers are capable of representing the North and South in terms of readership, circulation strength, their availability, and their wide range of coverage of issues that borders on public affairs. The selection of the editions of the newspapers was based on systematic random sampling. The systematic sampling used generated 81 news stories in the total of 30 editions of the two newspapers. A random procedure was drawn to obtain the samples for the study

in each month, the researcher picked 7th number through random selection as the study interval, and with regards to the principle of nth subject, the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th editions of each newspaper formed the sample of the study for each of the three months study period (see Keyton, 2015, p.112; Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 97). In the study however, the front page news stories were categorized into three; positive, negative and neutral. Positive refers to a category of news stories that depict good image on the government. Negative is classified as news coverage that is against government and cannot be published in government owned newspapers. Neutral is the last category that belongs to neither positive nor negative.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the data collected through content analysis with regards to whether the relationship between the Nigerian Press affect their coverage of issues critical to the government during the sudden devaluation of Naira and Dollar appreciation or not, were collected and analyzed quantitatively using tables, chats and percentages.

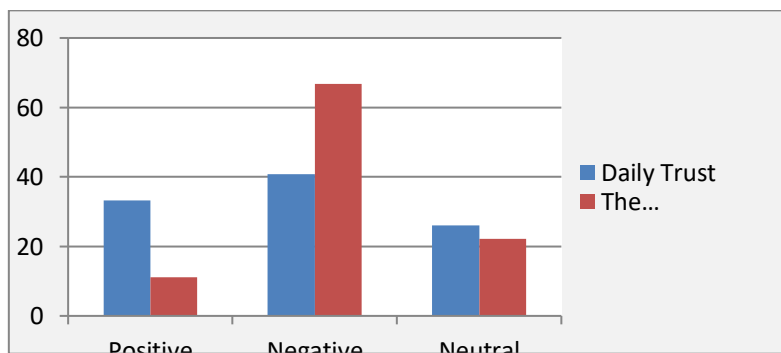
**Table 1. Extent which Nigerian Press Practice Freely in Contributing towards the Development of Democracy in Nigeria**

<i>Daily Trust Newspaper</i>		
<b>Direction of stories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Positive	27	33.3%
Negative	33	40.7%
Neutral	21	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100%</b>
<i>The Guardian Newspaper</i>		
<b>Direction of Stories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Positive	9	11.1%
Negative	54	66.7%
Neutral	18	22.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100%</b>

The question of press freedom in a democratic society is represented in table 1. 33.3% of the stories reported in the Daily Trust newspaper showed positive coverage

on the government concerning the critical issues of Fuel scarcity in January and the subsequent Dollar appreciation and Naira devaluation through March 2016. 40.7% of the stories showed negative coverage while 26% of the stories covered remain indifferent to neither positive nor negative to the government. However, with regards to the Guardian newspaper, 11.1% of the stories showed positive coverage to the government. 66.7% showed negative coverage and 22.2% remains indifferent to either positive or negative issues relating to the government.

According to the newspapers content analysis, the interpretation revealed that however, in the two privately owned newspapers, the Guardian newspaper is more objective with the report of 66.7% of stories concerning public affairs issues relating to criticisms of the government over the fuel scarcity and Naira devaluation in the face of Dollar appreciation as against the Daily Trust report of 40.7% of stories considered critical to the government within the period of study. This, by implication, revealed that press in Nigerian society is considerably free considering the submissions of the two newspapers with regards to the criticisms (unfavourable reports) leveled against the government with the highest percentage of 40.7% in trust newspaper and 66.7% in the Guardian newspaper over the report of critical issues as at the time of fuel scarcity and the subsequent Naira devaluation and Dollar appreciation respectively. Thus, figure 1 showed the graphical explanation of press freedom in the two newspapers.



**Figure 1. Graphical Explanation of Press Freedom in Daily Trust and The Guardian Newspapers**

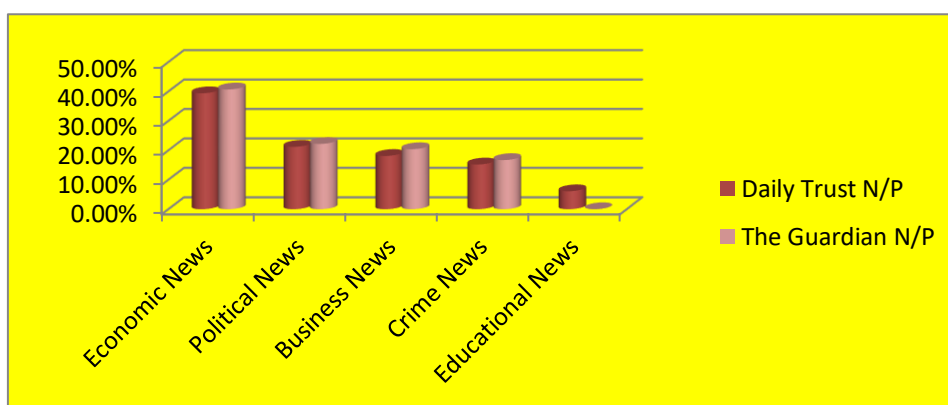
**Table 2. Story that Frequently Criticized the Government from early January to March 2016**

News Stories	Daily Trust N/P		The Guardian N/P	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Economic News	13	39.4%	22	40.7%
Political News	7	21.2%	12	22.2%
Business News	6	18.1%	11	20.4%
Crime News	5	15.2%	9	16.7%
Education News	2	6.1%	-	-
Total	33	100	54	100

The question on the most frequent stories that criticize the government more often in relation to Fuel scarcity and Naira devaluation and Dollar appreciation in the months of January through March 2016 is represented in table 2. 39.4% of economic news was reported in Daily Trust as the stories that often criticized the government during the study period. 21.2% of political news was used to criticized the government in its frequency, Business news was coded as 18.1%, crime news was coded as 15.2% while Educational news was coded as 6.1% whereas in the Guardian newspaper, 40.7% of economic news was used to criticize the government within the period of study leaving 22.2% of political news stories, 20.4% of business news and 16.7% of crime news as stories critical to the government while no education news was recorded on the Guardian's front-page newspaper within the period of study.

As to the question of frequently used story that criticized the government during the period of the study, Daily Trust newspaper was coded to have used economic news story with 39.4% to criticize the government while the Guardian newspaper was coded to have used same economic news with 40.7%. The implication of this is that however, because of the geographical location of the Daily Trust in north and Guardian in the south there is tendency that the location of the formal has a significant impact on the coverage pattern given to government criticisms when compared to the latter and reasons to this however, may not be unconnected to the ethnic differences of the two newspapers.

Generally, findings revealed that economic news was used by Nigerian press to criticize the government on the dawdling development of the nation with regards to fuel scarcity and Naira depreciation and Dollar appreciation respectively within the period of study. These criticisms raised by Nigerian press to the government due to the pitiable development of the nation without any restraint in the coverage can be attributed to improvement in the level of freedom enjoyed by the press. This is better illustrated in the chat below.



**Figure 2. Showing the Percentage of Story that Frequently Criticized the Government from early January to March 2016**

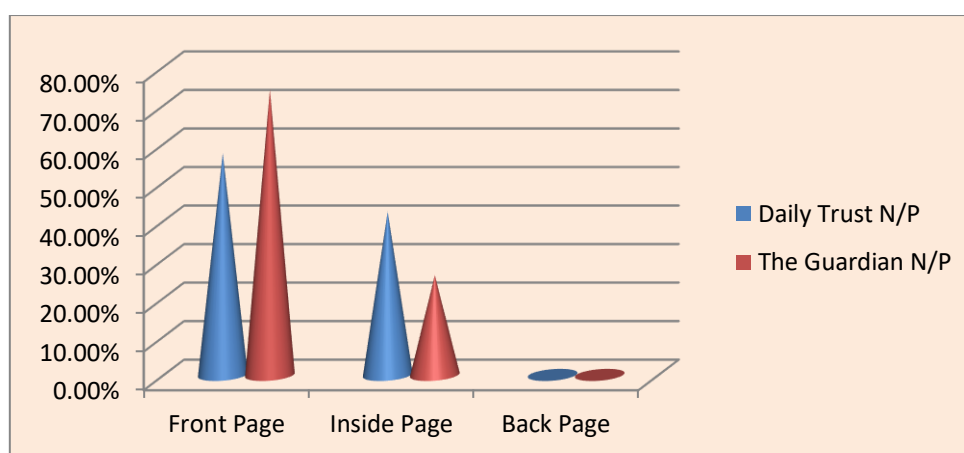
**Table 3. Distribution Of Government Unfavourable News According to Prominence**

Prominence	Daily Trust N/P		The Guardian N/P	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Front page	19	57.6%	40	74.1%
Inside	14	42.4%	14	25.9%
Back page	–	–	–	–
Total	33	100	54	100

Question on the prominence of the stories that is considered critical to the government as regard the headlines placement in the two newspapers is represented in table 3. 57.6% of government unfavourable stories were placed on the front pages, and 42.4% of the unfavourable stories were placed on the inside pages both in Daily Trust. While in the Guardian newspaper 74.1% of the unfavourable stories were placed on the front pages of the newspapers. Equally, 25.9% of the said stories were

placed on the inside pages throughout the critical times of fuel scarcity and Naira devaluation and Dollar appreciation of January through March of 2016 while no government unfavourable stories were reported at the back pages of both newspapers.

Result of this finding from the above interpretation revealed that Daily Trust to some extent is subjective. This is because as at the critical time of fuel scarcity and Dollar appreciation and Naira devaluation respectively, the Daily Trust only concentrated little attempt in criticizing the government with coverage of critical of 57.6% at the front pages contrary to what is obtainable in the Guardian newspaper where much attempt of criticisms was focused on the government regarding the crisis of fuel scarcity and Naira depreciation respectively with the coverage of 74.1% on the front pages of the newspaper. This by implication suggests that paper from the north tends to have soft spot in covering critical issues that borders on the northern government. This equally explains why ethnicity and political affiliations of the Nigerian newspapers affect objective coverage of news in the communication industries. The chart below provides the graphic distribution according to prominence.



**Figure 3. Distribution of Government Unfavourable News According to Prominence**

## 5. Discussion of findings

A total of 81 news stories were recorded on the two selected newspapers over the period of study. It was submitted that southern press has been objective in the reportage of negative happenings concerning the presidency and his cabinet with the percentage of 74.1% of stories considered critical to the government, while northern



press tries to give exact picture but with little attention to the positive side of the government, it reported 57.6% of the critical issues during the critical time in Nigeria which is less comparable to Guardian attention to the critical issues that borders on the people's lives. Individually, there was significant difference between the newspapers' coverage of critical issues of economy hardship in terms of widespread criticisms on the government. Perhaps, this could be explained by the geographical location, religion and ethnicity which divide the Nigerian press. Along this line, southern press severely criticized Nigerian government based on the poor economy policies and control under the heightened time of 2016 sudden economy hardship experience by Nigerians and which is yet to be addressed. These severe criticisms however, as observed by scholars of communication such as (Adaja, 2016; Aliagan, 2016 & Adisa 2016), may be seemingly inherent in sectional, economic and ethnical interests with which the papers are established. This explains the differences in the percentages of criticisms leveled against President Muhammadu Buhari by the Guardian and Trust. While the Guardian was so critical to the present administration with its level of percentage of news stories considered critical to the government however, it is not surprising that the trust newspapers showed some level of sympathy with its incomparable turnout of coverage of issues considered critical to the government owing to the fact that the president (himself) hailed from the north with the paper. With this, it could be summarized that both southern and northern press report negatively on the government on power that comes from their section, religion and or ethnicity, but rather, government enjoyed some level of sympathy in relation to the widespread report of criticisms on government through newspapers that share same geographical location with the government.

## 6. Conclusion

The relationship between the press and the government under present study is considered critical to the government. This is because the press unequivocally recorded reports that are considered not favorable to the government within the period of fuel scarcity at the early January and the period of Dollar appreciation and Naira devaluation at the mid February through March 2016 respectively. Result of this finding reveals that *Daily Trust* newspaper to some extent is however, subjective. This is because at a period of critical time of fuel scarcity and Dollar appreciation and Naira devaluation respectively, the paper only concentrated little attention in criticizing the government with 57.6% of the stories. Contrary to what is

obtainable in *the Guardian* newspaper where much attention of criticisms was focused on the government regarding the crisis of fuel scarcity and Naira devaluation respectively. *The Guardian* submitted 74.1% of the stories considered critical to the government. This infers the position from the analysis of the data coded from within the period of the study that the press is, to some extent, free in a democratic environment. The result of the question as to the status of press freedom in the present dispensation in Nigeria arguably corroborates the conclusion of (Akinwale, 2010 & Sanni, 2014), that there is present of freedom for the press in the Nigeria democratic society but not absolute one. With the above submission, it could be concluded with the widespread criticisms reign to the government through the Nigerian newspapers outlets with regards to poor economy policies that expose most Nigerians vulnerable to economy hardship and without any journalists held hostage, rebuke or tormented and or without any restrain to such coverage during and after the heightened time of fuel scarcity, Naira devaluation and Dollar appreciation especially, could hypothetically mean an improvement in the level of freedom given to the press. Stated differently, the fact that large percentage (57.6% in *Trust and* 74.1% in *the Guardian*) of reports were given to the coverage of government incompetence with regards to unyielded economic policies in Nigeria without any obstruction to such coverage calls attention to considerable level of press freedom enjoyed by the Nigerian press. In a more popular parlance, the conclusion inferred is that the press is free to some extent but in an account of issues affecting the government the press tender some level of sympathy and this could be attributed to the geographical location of some newspapers. With the submission of *Daily Trust* newspaper, it is evident that the paper is from the north, publish precisely in Abuja, there is no doubt that there is geographical and ethnic influence on its content with the level of sympathy the paper devoted to the present administration which race from the same ethnic line especially at the time described critical to government. No wonder that (Adisa, Ahmad, Ahmed, Shuhairimi, Udende, Nor'izah, Abubakar, Maskor & Ahmad, 2018), found that newspapers in Nigeria are established along economy, political and ethnic inclinations.

## **7. Recommendations**

There is the need for the Nigerian press and the Nigerian government to work towards the realization of socio-political democratization in Nigeria. This can be achieved through absence of complete interference of government on what the press

content should be. Although the press is considerably free under present study but the principle of forth estate of the realm as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution that provides press autonomy has also been constitutionally denied with some extended definitions of “state security” as contained in the constitution.

A more important need is to enact anti-censorship statute that outlaws censorships and total governmental interference in the media. The law should guarantee the media and the journalists the right of editorial independence, and it should criminalize arbitrary detention and other forms of extra-legal actions against the press and journalists. The enactment of this law is to further strengthen the constitutional protection of the press under any democratic dispensation.

Although, the relationship between the press and the present Nigerian government is seen critical to government which gives the press some sense of editorial independence but more still need to be done.

This paper recommends among others, the need for the press to be opened to free ethnic and geographical influence on what communication scholars see as obstacles to ethical and socially responsible journalism.

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