

The Structure of Corruption Stories in Nigerian Newspapers: A Counter Framing Re-imagination

Fred A. Amadi, PhD

Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Nkpolu, Port Harcourt,
NIGERIA.

amadi.fredi@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Three objectives were set including the exploration of how reporters handled counter framing cues in the studied newspaper texts. Eleven texts were sampled, categorized and analyzed under three exemplars, namely: Structural Amnesia, Connivance by the International Community and Imposition of Assumptions. Unstructured chance interviews were conducted with the reporters who wrote the texts that were analyzed. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used as a tool of analysis. Among other findings was that by being too alert to the tacit codes that govern journalism practice, reporters unwittingly help the powerful to avoid getting roughened up with aggressive reporting.

Keywords: Corruption stories, counter framing, journalists, paymaster, media production

INTRODUCTION

Remarks that diminish the reputation of journalists are not in short supply. While Gustav Freytags describes journalists as “rotten bounders and political careerists without value,” Gunter Wallraff sees a professional journalist as a “cynic, a low-life with a social standing that is as low as the alcoholic content of his blood is high” (Kunczik, 1995, p. 40). In a 1988 book – *Generation of Swine* – Hunter S. Thompson claims that journalism is a “...low trade and a habit worse than heroin... full of misfits, drunkards and failures...” Beck, Bennett & Wall, 2004, p. 320.

Many journalists may dismiss as unfair the strong language in these remarks, but such dismissal cannot erase concerns about the inability of journalists to keep the interest of their paymasters from interfering with media contents. Webster (2011) has analyzed how ownership pattern determines Western media production and concludes that Western market forces scupper the hope that private media organizations might provide the arena where “debates and discussions would take place amongst citizens engaged in conversations about what would be the most preferable directions of government” (p. 31). Webster’s conclusion is reinforced by the fact that government-owned public media institutions have not, as yet, been able to keep the interest of the powerful away from media products. It needs to be recalled that despite its much-touted editorial independence, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has not exonerated itself from an accusation that it aired a sham request from an Argentine mother in order to appease the government of Margret Thatcher during the Falkland War (Joweth & O’Donnell, 1999, p. 296). An analysis which shows that media production in Nigeria is influenced by a six-prism filtering process controlled by paymasters

confirms that the menace of overshadowing media contents with the interest of the powerful is more alarming in Nigeria (Utomi, 1999).

Notwithstanding the myth that the internet guarantees information empowerment to everybody, Cass Sunstein contends otherwise arguing instead that the internet has become a domain of “information chaos where audience fragmentation breeds groups that pay heed only to that which suits their prejudices and predisposition” (Sunstein, 2006 as cited in Webster, 2011, p. 30). Amadi (2012) reports that social media in Nigeria are awash with paid agents who are mandated to make sure that contents that question the interest of the powerful, no matter how logical, are either expunged or crowded out with inanities.

RATIONALE FOR THE PAPER

As discussed in preceding paragraphs, the interests of their paymasters prevent journalists, the world over, from meeting the information yearning of audiences. This unfortunate fact is not much of the problem in this paper as journalists’ defense of conventions that are disguise to legitimize the overbearing influence of paymasters. For example, Amadi (2011) reports that instead of blaming the fear of the paymaster as the reason for not ascribing appropriate meaning to deceitful comments, Nigerian journalists prefer to invoke reportorial conventions that frowns against writing a story with reporters’ imputations. This misrecognition plagues journalism to an extent that warrants a study designed to explore how journalists might be encouraged to recognize the traps that are embedded in the conventions that journalists defend. In the light of the above, objectives are set to:

- (i) Examine how reporters react to insights that can improve how they write corruption stories.
- (ii) Ascertain how reporters handled counter framing cues in the texts sampled from corruption stories.
- (iii) Explore how reporters managed unconfirmed assumptions in the texts sampled from corruption stories.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Working as a journalist in Nigeria is a dangerous endeavor. Instances where Nigerian journalists have been killed in the course of doing their work are many (Amadi, 2014). The resolve to carry on despite the ghastly death of many colleagues shows journalists’ readiness to embrace ideas like the ones convey in articulation theory. When a journalist combines the debates and counter arguments that articulation theory promotes with the tenets of civic journalism (Friend, Challenger & McAdams, 2000, pp. 228 – 231, Rosen, 1999; Anderson & Ross, 2002, p. 222; Slack, 2004, pp. 114 – 115), such combination could help the journalist to seek out trends and patterns in a story instead of merely reacting to events. When a story is planned to seek out trends, “interpretation of interpretations” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 67; Steiner, 1991, p. 331) becomes a useful tool to infuse a reporter with the awareness of the multiple contestable meanings that lurk in a news source’s utterance. Counter framing (Watson, 2003, 351; Reese, 2010, p.20) is a good resource when a reporter seeks to make a news source to understand that “polysemy” (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2007, p.126) is a constant attribute of utterances. In writing a corruption story, counter framing could reduce

the ideological baggage that skews the intention of both the reporter and the news source at the moment of interface between the two.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

I situate myself in Port Harcourt Nigeria not only as a researcher who subscribes to the notion that contemporary social research recognizes that “science, data, evidence, method, analysis and truth are no longer defined from within a narrow policy-oriented framework” (Denzin, 2013, P. 536) but that social research practices uphold “multiplicity of approaches” by recognizing that “knowledge is situated in nature” and can therefore not be gained in an “uniform way” (Torrance, 2013, p.366; Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p.146; Denzin, 2013, p. 536).

METHODOLOGY

As outlined, the objectives of this paper aim at exploring how reporters attached meaning to utterances, texts, actions, inactions and episodes in the corruption stories they wrote. I consider the qualitative methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDS) Wodak & Meyers (2006) as suitable in a study that is focused on how reporters constructed meaning in corruption stories. Words, episodes and interaction contexts are not studied in terms of their “quantity, intensity or frequency” (Okeke & Ume, 2004, p.326) in critical discourse analysis but are rather studied for the meanings of the “texts and subtexts” (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001, pp.5 & 7) that “speakers, reporters and news makers unconsciously take for granted” (Gripsrud, 2002, p.142) during news-production interactions. When used as a methodology, critical discourse analysis finds justification in the notion that what is said in a text always rests upon unsaid assumptions thereby raising a challenge for textually-based researchers to “identify what is assumed” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). Moreover, Toynbee (2006) observes that the imperfections in the world are reflected in the texts produced in it and that “textually-based researchers should target the elimination of such imperfections” (p.160).

Procedure

I targeted and used data that “occurred naturally” (Parakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2013, pp. 277-308) in order to free the data from contaminations such as “subject reactivity” and “dissimulation” (Lang & Lang, 1991, pp. 195 & 202; McQuail, 2010, p. 360). Aware that I will access the volume of data that will guarantee “empirical adequacy” (Hesmondhalgh, 2006 p. 121) from the pages of Nigerian newspapers, I “theoretically sampled” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p.167) 11 texts and categorized them into three exemplars namely: Structural Amnesia, Connivance by the International Community and Imposition of Assumptions. Five texts are categorized and analyzed under exemplar one while three texts each are analyzed under exemplars two and three. Sampling and categorizing of the 11 texts out of thousands of column inches of corruption stories that spew forth from Nigerian newspapers were done with the help of 10 students that I had trained on how to identify, codify and categorize texts for both semiotics and critical discourse analyses (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001; Fairclough, 2001; Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2006; Richardson, Krzyzanowski, Machin & Wodak, 2014).

Method of Textual Analysis

“Researcher construction” and “subjective valuing” (Keyton, 2001, p.70) which emphasize the use of subjective introspection in writing up what a researcher gleans from data were

adopted in data analysis. Apart from making it possible for me to attribute a class of phenomenon to segments of texts” (Fielding & Lee, 1998, p.41), subjective valuing agrees with the notion that “subjectivity is advantageous and can be seen as virtuous and as the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (Peshkin as cited in Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013, p. 1). Peshkin’s view resonates with that of Roulston (2010) who notes that research is an explanation of subjectivities – those of the researcher and researched. The research report, according to her, is a “synthesis of the experiences of the researcher and the researched” (p. 120). To check interpretative bias, the opinion of the journalists who wrote the analyzed texts were sought and included as steps in “data triangulation” (Keyton, 2001, p. 77; Roulston 2010, P. 84) as well as “why-interviewing” (Roulston 2010, p. 122).

Data Presentation

Exemplar One: Structural Amnesia

1. They demanded some answers from the Federal Government over the alleged mismanagement of \$3.5 billion annually in the power sector in the past ten years, amounting to \$35 billion (*Sunday Independent*, 30 March, 2014, p. 34).
2. Other queries include what mechanisms exist within government to ensure transparency, accountability and regular monitoring over the use of tariff revenue (*Sunday Independent*, 30 March, 2014, p. 34)?
3. What mechanisms are available to address allegations of corruption, or other complaints (*Sunday Independent*, 30 March, 2014, p. 34)?
4. What mechanism is in place to monitor and regulate service provision by private actors as required under the State’s duty to protect (*Sunday Independent*, 30 March, 2014, p. 34)?
5. I am not the National Assembly; but, I think there are a lot of questions. Why is the loan necessary, given Nigeria’s anticipated revenue? What steps are being put in place to prevent corruption (*Punch*, 3 August, 2014, pp. 14 – 15)?

Analytic Interpretation

Sentences 1-5 are categorized under the sub-title of structural amnesia because there are other critical meaning frames that the reporter missed in those sentences. To be sure, structural amnesia is a reportorial flaw that deprives the audience details of an issue when a reporter fails to ask necessary questions of newsmakers while a frame, on the other hand, is the “perspective from which a text producer wants readers/listeners to understand and evaluate information” (Kunczik, 1995, p. 161; Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001, pp. 144 & 177). Sentences 1-4 were uttered when Magdalena Sepulveda Carmona a United Nations rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights and Raquel Rolnik a Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing were reacting to a petition that a coalition of Nigerian Human Rights Activists sent to the rapporteurs accusing the federal government of Nigeria of mismanaging \$35 billion in the power sector in the last ten years. The reporter’s mere repetition of the rapporteurs’ questions as the only content of the story betrayed a lack of alertness to the fact that the media-attention the questions afforded the rapporteurs could be the ultimate goal of the rapporteurs who might not want to take more action like going to government officials to

press for answers for the questions they had raised. Moreover, knowledge of counter framing (Watson, 2003, p.351; Reese, 2010, p. 20) would have, in this scenario, encouraged a reporter to press the rapporteurs to explain what they would do to ensure that Nigerian officials address the rapporteurs' questions and what the rapporteurs would do if the officials spurn the questions. My view that the rapporteurs merely raised the questions only to grab media attention but not to follow up for necessary answers and my demand that the reporter should tell me the answer that the government gave to the rapporteurs drew the following response from the reporter:

Nigeria is sovereign country. The United Nations recognizes this fact and cannot force government officials to answer questions. This fact might have prevented them from doing anything beyond what I wrote in my story. As to your second demand, I have not been able to ascertain whether they actually went to the government and what answers the government might have given. Also, as I am not a member of the group, I would not know what options are available to the rapporteurs to press home their demand.

My view that many readers might interpret the above comment as conveying cold aloofness on a matter that requires decisive investigative commitment failed to bother the reporter.

The suspicion that the media in Nigeria avoid probing questions in corruption stories is heightened in the context of sentence five (5). When John Campbell, the former United States ambassador to Nigeria uttered the "I am not the National Assembly" segment of sentence five (5) in response to a question as to whether he supports Nigerian government's bid to take out a loan, he was actually wondering why the *Punch* had not gone to the National Assembly to ask the law makers to explain why a country that earns the huge revenue that accrues to Nigeria will ever contemplate taking out a loan. When I asked the interviewer whether he understood what the interviewee meant when he retorted "I am not the National Assembly" and whether the response compelled the interviewer to go the National Assembly with the question, his remark:

He was asking me to go to the National Assembly for the answer. I couldn't go to the National Assembly because of work pressure; secondly, it's not always easy for a reporter to get answers from such quarters.

The failure to go to the National Assembly with the question is adjudged a failure by a reporter to take advantage of a reportorial context to reconstruct factors that contribute to the transgression the reporter is writing about.

Exemplar Two: Connivance by the International Community

1. The Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) yesterday alleged that an oil marketer, who is on bail in an alleged N979.6 million subsidy fraud trial, has fled the country to Canada (*Guardian*, 11 April, 2014, p.3).
2. The World Bank had written about this in a 2007/2008 Handbook on Stolen Assets Recovery where the case was cited as a best practice example of how to deploy proceeds of looted assets (*Guardian*, 6 July, 2014, p. 53).
3. Why he was proclaimed spotless is a question that perhaps only the French authorities can answer (*The Nation*, 3 April, 2014, p.71).

Analytic Interpretation

Those who expect “aggressive and comprehensive” style in corruption stories (Topic, 2002, pp. 235, 274, 290; Rosen, 1999, pp. 33, 42) will be disappointed with the structure of the story from which sentence one was sampled. When a suspect in a corruption case involving such amount of money escapes, a reporter should not just walk away upon being told by an official – in this case an official of the agency responsible for prosecuting financial crimes – that the accused cannot be brought to justice because he had escaped to Canada. A reporter who believes she or he wants to make a point ought to have, upon being told of the escape, refocused the story by demanding explanation regarding how the accused escaped. Among the omitted strands that impoverished the story are comments from the Canadian Embassy in Nigeria or from any other competent Canadian source. It could even have drawn applause if the reporter had seized the opportunity to ascertain why the so-called international community have not started arresting corrupt Nigerian officials in the manner the Spanish authorities did in the 1990s (Kasaam, 2014) to bringing to justice villains who escaped abroad after taking advantage of the weaknesses of the criminal justice system in their home countries. When I asked the newspaper to explain why the story did not proceed according to these lines of thought, the response was:

You know, nobody knows it all; it never occurred to me to follow such angle in the story but now that you have pointed it out, I will be alert to such a possibility next time.

Nigerians are often skeptical when claims are made about what the government has done with billions of repatriated looted funds. But the reference to the World Bank in the story from which text 2 of Exemplar 2 was sampled would have provided an opportunity to allay such doubts if the reporter had been imaginative. Getting the World Bank to confirm specific locations in Nigeria where projects have been executed with repatriated funds and citing the pages of the 2007/2008 World Bank Year Book where the claim could be found would have been more convincing. The exclusion of these details robbed the story of the status of becoming the first to authenticate claims of executing projects in Nigeria with repatriated funds. When I asked the newspaper whether it agrees with my view that the exclusion of these details worsened the suspicion that the media are indifferent to international community’s tolerance of corruption in Nigeria, the response was:

...you see! We tried to establish that, but... you know, this is a diplomatic matter. If you insist on getting the right answers, how do you file the story before it gets stale? You may not know but time is everything in our business ...the earlier the better... yes; we cannot afford the delay that detailed investigation will require.

In a similar vein, a French government-statement that it had cleared a former Nigerian minister of all corruption charges after an earlier conviction warrants more investigative style of writing than the hasty conclusion displayed as text 3 of Exemplar Two. Up to the time France made the U-turn, the conviction of the minister and James Ibori’s were the closest attempt by the international community to help Nigeria fight corruption. When I put it to some editorial staff of the newspaper that the French government’s action is part of the international communities’ connivance at corruption in Nigeria, the response was:

We don’t have to speculate...more so, it is a diplomatic matter ... that is out of the purview of our paper.

Exemplar Three: Imposition of Assumption

- (1) ...his trial and sentencing of politicians and even journalist was *knocked* for lacking in basic standards of human rights; it *appeared* the tribunals went to work with a pre-determined outcome of jailing all politicians of that dispensation (*Guardian*, 30 March, 2014 pp. 17 – 21).
- (2) Yusuf pleaded guilty to breach of trust and fraudulently converting N2 billion of Police Pension Funds to his private use; upon conviction the trial Judge sentenced him to two years imprisonment with an option of fine in the sum of N750, 000.00 for three offences he pleaded guilty to even though each of the three offences attracted a maximum of two year jail term (*Guardian*, 30 March, 2014 pp. 17 – 21).
- (3) As I said earlier, Nigeria is a place where you have our criminal justice administration system being turn upside down; you see many judges ordering EFCC not to even investigate a governor not to talk of freezing his accounts (*Guardian*, 30 March, 2014 pp. 17 – 21).

Analytic Interpretation

The menace of corruption has stalked Nigeria right from independence. Muhamadu Buhari's military administration in the 1980s is usually cited by Nigerians as one administration that took decisive action in its fight against corruption. The 'his' at the beginning of sentence one above refers to Buhari in a manner that leaves a cursory reader with the impression that the dramatic measures taken by his administration to fight corruption were improper. What gives that impression is the omission in the story of those who *knocked* Buhari's action as 'lacking in human rights' and those to whom it *appeared* that the tribunals had a "pre-determined" intention to send corrupt politicians to jail. These instances of obfuscation of the agents that 'knocked' and those that it 'appeared to' in sentence construction as seen in the text under consideration have been identified as one of the paths the media take to manufacture and impose assumption (Fairclough, 2001). In the text under consideration, the assumption that is created and imposed by means of such obfuscation is that any administration that takes decisive step like setting up a tribunal to try and sentence corrupt public officials to prison will receive 'knocks' from the Nigerian public. But the concerns conveyed in sentences two (2) and three (3) of Exemplar Three are proves that any Nigerian leader who sincerely wants to stamp out corruption should take sterner measures than Buhari's. The frustration conveyed in sentences two (2) and three (3) shows that fighting corruption in Nigeria in an atmosphere that is not as stern will only evoke the memory of David and Goliath in reverse – meaning that corruption will become Goliath and will continue to win.

Despite the fact that sentences two (2) and three (3) have exposed the ineffectiveness of the artifice called a fight against corruption under Nigeria's democratic experimentation, there is a way the structure of those sentences accords unmerited credit to Nigeria's anti-corruption agency – the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The EFCC framed its role in those sentences as that of an independent hardworking commission that is doing all it takes to quell corruption in Nigeria. By merely reporting it as "framed" (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001, pp. 144 & 177), the reporter wittingly/unwittingly exonerated the EFCC from a culpability which a counter framing style of reporting (Watson, 2003, p. 351; Reese, 2010, p. 20) would have held the EFCC accountable for.

When the EFCC official uttered sentences two (2) and three (3) as displayed, the reporter ought to have remembered that EFCC is an independent agency with full powers to detect, indict and prosecute persons, institutions, government agencies seen as perpetrating corruption in Nigeria and such awareness ought to have spurred the reporter into pressing the EFCC official to explain why the commission has not arrested the judges who use verdicts like the one conveyed in sentence two (2) to pervert Nigeria's criminal justice system. But instead of accepting that his failure to counter-frame the interviewee has valorized EFCC's frame making it sound as if the EFCC is doing a terrific job of fighting corruption in Nigeria, the reporter rather rationalized thus when I showed him my analytic interpretation:

...you see! It's all part of the conundrum. Even if we secure an arrest, it is still a Judge who will preside over the case. Will a trial Judge in Nigeria be very willing to convict his or her colleague? I can't tell you the answer to that. Such are the challenges.

CONCLUSION

Corruption is rooted in powerful circles in Nigeria. Vibrations from these circles undermine both media operations and the hope that the media might be relied upon to fight corruption. As discussed in this paper, reporters are hardly concerned about silences in story-angles where their smart questioning would have roughened the feathers of the powerful. Also discussed is reporters' obsession with re-echoing only what news makers said without pushing for other meanings that might arise from what a news maker said. Furthermore, reporters' invocation of the convention of timeliness as a reason for not adopting a dialogic style of reporting betrays reporters' ignorance that over-reliance on such conventions nurtures the transgressions they report. Overall, the studied sentence-structures portray how careerist obsession blinds journalists from taking advantage of the "oracular powers" (Matheson, 2005, p. 2) of the media when they write corruption stories.

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