

Reporting on electoral violence in Nigerian news media: “Saying it as it is”?

Leila Demarest and Arnim Langer

Abstract: While Nigeria has a vibrant press media landscape, freedom of the press is only rated as “partly free” by Freedom House, mostly due to political influences on reporting. Yet the extent to which these influences affect the quality of reporting remains insufficiently investigated. We address this gap by analyzing how three newspapers with different political affiliations report on conflict in the run-up to the 2015 elections. Our analyses indicate that biases in reporting are generally limited, and that while political pressures are real, they are most evident in editorial choices.

Résumé: Alors que le paysage médiatique au Nigéria est dynamique, la liberté de la presse n’est qualifiée que de « partiellement libre » par Freedom House, principalement en raison d’influences politiques sur les reportages. Cependant, l’impact de ces

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Leila Demarest  is Assistant Professor of African Politics at the Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Netherlands. Her research interests include social movements and political mobilization in Africa, political communication, and quantitative and qualitative social science research methodology. Her most recent publications (with Arnim Langer) are “The study of violence and social unrest in Africa: a comparative analysis of three conflict event datasets” in *African Affairs* (April 2018) and “Peace journalism on a shoestring? Conflict reporting in Nigeria’s national news media” in *Journalism* (first online, August 2018). E-mail: l.demarest@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Arnim Langer is Professor at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium, and Director of the Centre for Research on Peace and Development (CRPD). He is currently also Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at Heidelberg University, Germany. His research interests include violent inter-group mobilization, inequality, and policies towards social cohesion. Recent publications include “A General Class of Social Distance Measures” (with Graham Brown) in *Political Analysis* (2016) and “How fear drives us apart: Explaining the relationship between terrorism and social trust” (with Amélie Godefroidt) in *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018). E-mail: Arnim.Langer@kuleuven.be

influences sur la qualité des reportages reste insuffisamment étudié. Nous comblons cette lacune en analysant la manière dont trois journaux de différentes affiliations politiques font état des conflits en préparation des élections de 2015. Nos analyses indiquent que les préjugés dans les reportages sont généralement limités et que, si les pressions politiques sont réelles, elles sont plus évidentes dans les choix éditoriaux.

Resumo: Embora a imprensa nigeriana apresente uma atividade intensa, a Freedom House apenas atribuiu a classificação de “parcialmente livre” à liberdade de imprensa no país, sobretudo devido às influências políticas na atividade jornalística. Porém, continua a não existir uma investigação suficientemente profunda sobre o grau em que estas influências condicionam a qualidade jornalística. Procurando colmatar esta lacuna, debruçamo-nos aqui sobre o modo como três jornais de diferentes afiliações políticas abordaram o conflito na corrida às eleições de 2015. A nossa análise sugere que, de um modo geral, há pouco enviesamento político nas peças jornalísticas e que, apesar de serem reais, as pressões políticas se fazem sentir sobretudo nas escolhas editoriais.

Keywords: electoral violence; Nigeria; freedom of the press; news reporting; political bias

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Introduction

Nigeria is characterized by a vibrant national press media with a long history of democratic resistance to authoritarian rulers, both under military and civilian regimes. Since the installation of the Fourth Republic in 1999, Nigerian news media have continued to pressure the government for accountability and have frequently revealed cases of political corruption. Nevertheless, with regard to freedom of the press, Nigeria has only been rated as “partly free” since the start of the Freedom House index in 2002. The main reason for this score is that Nigerian media, and particularly news media, are still sensitive to political pressures due to, among others, media ownership structures, dependence on advertisement revenue, and low journalist wages (Ciboh 2017; Freedom House 2016; Olukoyun 2004; Ojo 2003). These are important factors that can undermine impartial and objective reporting. Yet the extent to which they actually bias reporting, or worse, turn news media into tools for political propaganda, remains insufficiently investigated. This study aims to address this gap by empirically assessing how Nigerian newspapers reported on electoral violence in the run-up to the 2015 general elections and determining whether there are clear differences between newspapers with different political affiliations.

Previous research in Western settings has already shown that conflict reporting can be influenced by the political affiliations of media outlets. As Christian Davenport (2010) demonstrated in his influential analysis of news reporting on Black Panther-government relations in the United States,

newspapers can represent reality differently by choosing to report certain incidents over others. He compared the way that conservative/establishment newspapers reported on conflict between the Black Panther movement and authorities versus reporting by dissident/black newspapers and found substantial differences in the representation of conflict dynamics. Yet, newspapers can also represent the same events in different ways and put the blame for violence on the adversary (Earl et al. 2004:72–73). Hence while news media are professionally obligated to report the truth, the realities as they are represented, particularly with regard to conflict, can be very different. Potential repercussions are that news media may aggravate political divisions or even support the use of violence, as was the case with the Rwandan “Milles Collines” radio station, for instance.

Electoral violence reporting is particularly sensitive to political biases in news media. Electoral violence itself can be defined as a sub-category of political violence in which the aim of the violence is to influence upcoming elections or to challenge the results of recently concluded elections (Goldsmith 2015:822; Höglund 2009; Laakso 2007:227–28). Forms of electoral violence may include the vandalization of campaign materials and offices, clashes between supporter groups, or even assassinations. By selectively reporting on electoral violence, for example by overreporting the adversary’s use of violence relative to the reporting entity’s own party, it is also possible to influence citizens’ choices on whether to vote, whom to vote for, and whether to accept the results of an election as legitimate. By focusing specifically on electoral violence—a continuous feature of Nigerian multiparty democracy since 1999 (Human Rights Watch 2011; Lewis & Kew 2015; Omotola 2010; Orji 2017)—this study endeavors to assess the degree of political bias in Nigerian news media.

Empirically, this study makes use of both quantitative and qualitative data. The analyses focus on the 2015 elections, which brought Muhammadu Buhari from the All Progressives Congress (APC) to power. Although these elections have been regarded as some of the best managed elections in the country (Lewis & Kew 2015), violence nonetheless marred the political competition. Furthermore, the elections were run in the midst of the Boko Haram crisis that took place in northeastern Nigeria and led to massive loss of life, infrastructure destruction, and internal displacement. Interestingly, the Boko Haram crisis has also been linked to electoral competition. We focus specifically on the pre-electoral period, as this is where we expect most differences between newspapers if their reporting is indeed aimed at influencing the elections. A second reason we focus on the pre-electoral period is that incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) quickly acknowledged his defeat and no serious incidents occurred in the post-election period.

We first conducted quantitative analyses of electoral violence reporting based on a unique dataset on conflict events in Nigeria between April 2014 and March 2015, the one-year period before the presidential elections. This dataset allowed for an investigation of the representation of electoral

violence in newspapers with affiliations to the PDP and the APC, the two major parties in the elections. The newspapers analyzed include *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *The Nation*. We analyzed whether newspapers differed in the events they reported, with a specific focus on events in which the PDP or the APC were depicted as victims of violence. Moreover, we investigated whether event reporting changed as the elections drew nearer.

Our quantitative analyses indicate that while slight biases do appear, the three newspapers generally paint a similar reality, with the PDP more likely to use violence against the opposition. These results indicate that despite political pressures, Nigerian news media can be considered fairly objective and neutral. This observation is also supported by interviews with journalists and editors, as well as by qualitative analyses of reports on electoral violence. While acknowledging that “he who pays the piper determines the tune,” media professionals also affirm that when it comes to electoral violence, they “say it as it is.” Indeed, while political ties might influence editorial choices (including front page choices, headlines etc.), our research shows that there is no deliberate misreporting of electoral violence. Event reports themselves also demonstrate this editorial political preference while affirming overall attention to objectivity. Nonetheless, dependence on political party sources for electoral violence reporting and a need to balance party statements may in some cases undermine the media’s ability to present the truth with regard to perpetrator and victim.

Our findings suggest that while the degree of Nigeria’s press freedom is rated as “partly free,” the standards of the journalistic profession are still held high. This adds nuance to recent research by Wale Adebani (2016) on sectionalism in the Nigerian press. According to Adebani, Nigerian print media have historically represented political, and in particular ethno-regional, interests and have not been able to overcome sectional divides, even in the Fourth Republic. Indeed, in his opinion:

Despite the heroic efforts of the press in ensuring the restoration of democratic rule and its critical role in monitoring democratically elected officials and institutions, on a few critical occasions, the Nigerian press renders itself totally captive to ethno-regional and ethno-religious passions and calculations. (Adebani 2016:223)

We find that sectionalism appeared limited with regard to the reporting of electoral violence in the run-up of the 2015 elections, indicating that not all critical political events are subject to this dynamic. Adebani focuses more on editorial narratives, however, while we find that reporting as such appears relatively reliable.

The results of our research also suggest that Nigerian news media can be valuable and valid sources for studying political violence processes. As the study of electoral violence has picked up in recent years, several new data projects in the field have been developed to track incidents of electoral violence, particularly in Africa (Birch & Muchlinski 2017;

Hyde & Marinov 2015; Salehyan et al. 2012; Straus & Taylor 2012). While these new projects offer interesting cross-national comparisons, none of them makes use of local news sources. These can nonetheless provide more fine-grained information on violent events (e.g., Demarest & Langer 2018), while the risk of political biases in these types of sources appears limited.

The following section first briefly discusses how Nigeria's press media are linked to party politics, and electoral competition in particular. Next there is a description of the quantitative data collection process and methodology, followed by the analyses and discussion of the results. The penultimate section contextualizes these results with reference to interviews with Nigerian journalists and editors and examples of reports on electoral violence, while the final section concludes.

Politics and the media in Nigeria

Political influence on the media

Freedom House's Freedom of the Press rating relies on regional and country experts who assign scores to a country based on the legal environment, including the protection of journalists and how media laws are implemented; the political environment, focusing on political pressures on content through, among others, ownership structures and sourcing; and the economic environment, including production costs, advertisement dependence, and sensitivity to corruption. Most countries in Africa have a "partly free" or "not free" rating. For the year 2017, Nigeria had an overall score of 51/100, with higher scores indicating less freedom. In particular, the political environment received a high score, similar to scores in previous years.¹

Indeed, while Nigeria has one of the most vibrant press media landscapes in Africa today, its news media continue to experience political dependencies. On the one hand, the press performs a strong watchdog role in the Fourth Republic by revealing political corruption scandals and promoting accountability (Freedom House 2016; Olukoyun 2004; Ojo 2003). This role can be seen as a remnant of their opposition campaigns to previous military dictatorships. On the other hand, the media remain sensitive to political and ethno-regional pressures in their reporting. A much-cited example to support this claim (e.g., Jibo & Okoosi-Simbine 2003:183–84; Olukoyun 2004:83; Yusha'u 2015:144–45) is that southern newspapers were virulent in their critiques of the northern Speaker of the House when they found out that he had lied about his age, making him ineligible to be elected to the House, and about his University of Toronto degree. A southern Yoruba senator, Bola Tinubu, faced much less criticism, however, when it turned out he had lied about his University of Chicago degree.

Historically, independence leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo set up a number of newspapers not only to promote the independence cause, but also to increase their political influence

(e.g., Adebaniwi 2016:109–10; Coleman 1963; Jibo & Okeosi-Simbine 2003:182–83; Sklar 2004). Moshood Abiola, the winner of the aborted 1993 presidential elections, also saw the ownership of a newspaper as an important tool for a political leader (Ojo 2003:836). Yet private newspapers as well remain sensitive to political pressures, as they are generally dependent on advertisement from politicians and affiliated businesses. Low salaries for journalists, along with persistent delays in payments, also encourage “the brown envelope system” (Olukoyun 2004:78) by which politicians bribe journalists to write favorable reports about them (see also Freedom House 2016). Furthermore, journalists are primarily dependent on political sources for information, both government officials and political party representatives (Ciboh 2017). Finally, press media and journalists also face harassment and violence from disgruntled politicians and their supporters (Freedom House 2016). All these dynamics encourage self-censorship among the Nigerian press media. This is at times accompanied by actual censorship, for instance to prevent the circulation of reports that might be damaging to influential people or the government.

The media and elections

Since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has held multiple federal, state, and local legislative and executive elections. Presidential elections have been held five times: in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015. These elections have often engendered violence. The inaugurating elections of 1999, which brought former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo to power, still passed in relative calm, although they were characterized by widespread irregularities and fraud (Kew 1999). The 2003 elections were again won by Obasanjo and also saw manipulations such as voter card fraud and ballot theft as well as voter intimidation (Lewis 2003). Relatively few deaths occurred during the electoral process, yet severe and lethal violence in Rivers state could be linked to electoral politics (Human Rights Watch 2007).

The 2007 general elections in Nigeria were regarded as seriously flawed by international and domestic observers, and a step back in Nigeria’s democratization process (Egwu et al. 2009; Rawlence & Albin-Lackey 2007; Obi 2008). The legitimacy of the elections was curtailed not only by clear cases of fraud—in some areas almost no actual voting took place—but also by the level of political violence witnessed. The number of deaths due to electoral violence is estimated at between 55 and 300. As Obasanjo’s attempt at a third presidential term had failed (Suberu 2007), PDP candidate Umaru Yar’Adua gained the presidency.

Yar’Adua died of natural causes in 2010 and was succeeded by vice-president Jonathan. Jonathan himself was elected president in 2011. The 2011 electoral process was generally regarded as free and fair and an improvement after the 2007 elections (Akhaine 2011), but severe violence erupted after Buhari lost to Jonathan. While electoral violence in 2007

was most pronounced in the southwest, southeast and south-south, in particular in Ondo, Osun, and Ekiti states (Omotola 2010), severe electoral violence in 2011 took place in the north of Nigeria, specifically the states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. This violence is estimated to have claimed around 800 lives (Human Rights Watch 2011). Part of the reason the violence was so severe is that it took on an ethno-religious dimension, with patterns of violence overlapping with prior fault lines between Christian and Muslim groupings (Angerbrandt 2018).

The 2015 elections did not bring a repetition of the severe violence of 2011 (Lewis & Kew 2015; Orji 2017). Still, around fifty deaths were reported. Rivers state in particular remains a hotbed of electoral violence. Many results of the 2015 national legislative elections have been declared void because of malpractices in Rivers (Oluokun 2015). The 2015 presidential elections brought the APC candidate, former military ruler Buhari, to power. Jonathan quickly accepted defeat and no serious forms of post-electoral violence occurred.

In general, the media have played an important role in election monitoring and violence deterrence (e.g., EU election observer mission 2015:22–25; Lewis 2003:142; NDI 2011:42–43; Rawlence & Albin-Lackey 2007:499). Nonetheless, political influences have also arisen during election times. This has already been shown for media coverage of parties and candidates. While the Electoral Act requires equal media coverage for all political parties, there is generally an incumbent advantage in coverage. In the run-up to the 2011 elections, for instance, about forty broadcasting stations were fined for violating the Electoral Act (NDI 2011:42–43). Government-owned media clearly represented the incumbent party in a favorable light, but even private media gave greatest coverage to the ruling party. The same patterns were observable in the run-up to the 2015 elections (EU election observer mission 2015:22–25). In some cases, the PDP received up to 80 percent of electoral coverage. While disproportionate media attention for the incumbent President and his party may be a sign of political pressure on media houses, it may also be a direct result of the widespread interest most people have in the President's actions. Similar incumbent dominance was found for political advertisements in news media, however, indicating an economic advantage as well (Alawode & Adesanya 2016).

The literature suggests that Nigerian news media are sensitive to political pressures during election times. While previous research has highlighted differences in media attention and advertisement between incumbent and opposition, this study focuses in particular on electoral violence. This focus allows an analysis of the content of newspaper reporting more in depth, focusing on how reporters actually engage with politically sensitive forms of violence. The following section explains the methodological framework for the newspaper content analyses, beginning with the newspaper selection and then addressing the coding process.

Methodological framework

Newspaper selection

As mentioned previously, Nigeria has a vibrant media landscape. Print media, our primary data source in this article, are widely available, and the market is competitive. A large number of newspapers is distributed on a (relatively) national scale. Furthermore, Nigerian newspapers often publish issues on a daily basis, with newspapers commonly counting more than sixty pages. As papers are sold at low prices (200 to 250 Naira), most income stems from advertisements. This also leads to the high page counts. Newspapers are primarily targeted at an upper middle class and elite audience. Publishing houses are predominantly located in the south of the country. The most important northern newspaper is *The Daily Trust*.

Our selection of newspapers was guided by two principles. Firstly, we aimed to select newspapers which were affiliated with either the PDP or the APC as the main parties contesting the elections. The second criterion was that newspapers be relatively national in scope and have a wide readership. This excluded local, small-scale newspapers and party outlets. The major challenge was determining affiliations or “sympathy” toward a political party. For one of the newspapers selected, *The Nation*, this was more obvious. *The Nation* is a widely-read newspaper in Nigeria and is hence also collected in national and university library archives. Furthermore, its ownership is linked to Tinubu, who is the major APC strongman in the south-west region (see also the section “Political influence on the media”). The newspaper can hence be considered an APC (and previously Action Congress Nigeria) outlet (Ademilokun & Taiwo 2013:452). The northern newspaper, *The Daily Trust* is privately owned, but could also have been considered as sympathetic towards the APC, based on its status as voice of the north, which is Buhari’s regional origin. At the time of our data collection, however, we did not have access to the *Daily Trust* archives in Abuja due to travel restrictions.

The selection of newspapers which are favorable to the PDP was less obvious, but after consultations with Nigerian communication scholars at the University of Lagos (UNILAG), we decided to select two newspapers, *The Guardian* and *This Day*. Both are privately owned, but as mentioned in the previous section, this does not preclude political sympathies. *The Guardian* is sometimes considered to be representing the regional interests of the south-south zone (Ette 2018:177; Yusha’u 2015), the region former President Jonathan hails from. Furthermore, Sunday O. Alawode and Olufunke O. Adesanya (2016) find that with regard to electoral advertisement there was more inclusion of PDP-sponsored messages than APC sponsored messages in *The Guardian* in the run-up to the elections, in contrast to the *Daily Trust*. Our own observations also indicated that PDP advertisement was substantially more prominent in *The Guardian* and

This Day than APC advertisement, while PDP advertisement in *The Nation* was extremely rare. Nonetheless, the EU election observer mission report (2015:25) states that election coverage in *The Guardian* was relatively balanced. Overall, whether *The Guardian* is an independent outlet or leans more towards the PDP can be debated. Nevertheless, *Guardian* editorship also states that many people consider them pro-PDP (Interview AS, Lagos, December 18, 2017).

According to the EU election observation report (2015:25), coverage in *This Day* was also balanced. Yet *This Day* owner Nduka Obaigbena has also been implicated in a major arms deal scandal under the Jonathan administration (*Premium Times* 2017). Moreover, *This Day* salary payments to journalists are extremely irregular and low, indicating a potential for brown envelope journalism (Udo 2015). The extent to which reporting on party violence is biased remains, of course, the empirical question of this study.

Coding process

For the purposes of this study we established a dataset on conflict events in Nigeria based on events recorded in *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *The Nation*. The dataset covers a wide range of events, including peaceful demonstrations, riots, violent clashes, battles between the national army and Boko Haram, violence against civilians, and terrorist attacks. As several other datasets also focus on these (sub-)types of events in Nigeria, it is worth highlighting some of the differences between our dataset and other data projects such as ACLED (Raleigh et al. 2010) and the Nigeria Watch project.²

The ACLED dataset has recorded events of political violence in most sub-Saharan African countries since 1997, with monthly updates. Besides international news wires and NGO reports, ACLED relies on online information from a range of Nigerian newspapers. Nigeria Watch, maintained at the University of Ibadan, has recorded violent events since June 2006 and draws from ten national daily newspapers. These datasets do not allow us to study the effects of political orientation on the selection of events into the news (“selection bias”) or on how events are described (“description bias”) (Earl et al. 2004), however. Firstly, datasets record the news source on which an event was based, but they do not provide information on whether events were only included in that source or also reported by other newspapers (selection bias). Secondly, the event data do not take into account differences in how an event is reported between news reports and newspapers (description bias). Thirdly, the coding scheme does not allow for possible contestation over the responsibility for the use of violence in events. The coding scheme developed for our dataset does allow these distinctions. Finally, while ACLED captures different forms of violence, including forms of vandalism, Nigeria Watch only includes lethal events, including accidents.

To sample the events, we consulted the hard-copy versions of the newspapers at the University of Lagos (UNILAG) library as well as additional data archives based in the city.³ Relevant news reports were scanned and saved to a hard drive. To select reports, coders were instructed to check for relevant content by reading through the newspapers. A list of key words aided coders in the scanning process, although the presence of a key word was no condition for selection if the event was clearly relevant for inclusion. Opinion pieces, interviews, and editorials were explicitly excluded, as the focus lay on news reporting practices. The period of study was April 2014 to March 2015. The 2015 presidential elections took place on March 28-29, 2015. Hence, the data cover the one-year period before the general elections. Events which fall outside this date range but were reported in the newspapers within this period of study were also excluded.

Events were coded by the principal investigators and research assistants following the codebook developed by the authors. The coding process followed the research strategy proposed by Weidmann and Rød (2015), which consists of coding each report separately in order to investigate differences between them, rather than coding only one report of an event and leaving other reports aside. Each time coders came across a report of an event, they coded the necessary information based on that report. If the same event was spotted again, this report was also coded. Different event reports were then aggregated in a final event dataset. The dataset covers 2191 events and 7288 corresponding event reports. All newspapers were scanned a second time for missed events. Two independent coders have a congruence of around 85 percent for the selection of events after double-checking (tested on a sub-sample). Inter-coder reliability scores (Krippendorff alphas) for the variables used in the analyses are higher than 0.77 (Krippendorff 2013).

To aggregate events, we combined information on the actors involved, types of violence mentioned, and the dynamics of violence or who started/committed the violence. The aggregation of events relied on time, location, and actor information but was done conservatively: if there was a good probability that two reports concerned the same event, they were ultimately coded as one event in the aggregated dataset. The aggregation of the violence dynamics variable is particularly important in the purview of this study. The variable on who started the violence includes five answer categories: Actor A, Actor B, Actors accuse each other (disputed statements on who was responsible for the start of the violence), unknown (e.g., a PDP-APC "clash" occurred), or Not applicable (in case of a peaceful protest). When there is one report stating Actor A started the violence, or multiple reports which do not deny this finding, the aggregate event will state Actor A committed the violence. If, however, multiple reports in the same newspaper disagree (e.g. due to new party statements dismissing allegations), the coding will be "accuse each other." As such, our analyses focus on the aggregate message newspapers disseminate on electoral violence events.

Empirical analyses

Firstly, we focus our analysis on selection bias or the question of whether the three newspapers select different types of events into the news. Secondly, we analyze whether event inclusion is related to the electoral calendar. Thirdly, we analyze the spatial distribution of political conflict events, and whether events are related to electoral competitiveness at the state level. Fourthly, we focus on the issue of description bias, or whether the same events are reported in different ways by the newspapers.

Selection bias in *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *The Nation*

The occurrence of a range of events can be related to the proximity to elections. In the quantitative literature, “electoral violence” or “violence related to elections” has been conceptualized in different ways. Staffan I. Lindberg (2006), for instance, focuses on events that are explicitly linked to the electoral process, while Scott Straus and Charlie Taylor (2012) as well as Arthur A. Goldsmith (2015) associate different forms of political violence witnessed in a country with the electoral process if the violence takes place within a specific time frame. Furthermore, the occurrence of elections has also been used as a key independent variable in studies focusing on more general forms of violence. Ole M. Theisen (2012), for example, finds that land scarcity and population pressure do not systematically affect the occurrence of armed conflict events in Kenya, but that election years systematically see more violence. Lars-Erik Cederman et al. (2013) in turn, find that competitive elections increase the chance of ethnic civil war onset.

As a range of events is potentially affected by proximity to the electoral calendar, we first inspect how many events the three newspapers have included by making use of different conceptualizations of conflict. We first focus on the general event type categories included in the dataset: protests (demonstrations, sit-ins), riots (violent protests or mob justice), kidnappings (kidnapping for non-criminal purposes), armed attacks (assassination attempts, battles between government troops and rebels, violence against civilian populations etc.), and terrorist attacks (IED, suicide bomber, car bomb etc.). These categories are mutually exclusive. Secondly, we use the Actor variable to distinguish between different types of events which have a political nature. A first type, “political party event,” includes all general event types, including protests, in which a political party is mentioned as an actor. This also includes parties other than the PDP and APC. The second and third sub-type only concern violent events in which either the APC or the PDP were victims of violence (e.g., secretariat bombing, assassination). As the conflict and actor coding is done separately for the three newspapers, the categorizations are newspaper-specific.

We also focus on the reporting of the Boko Haram conflict, as the handling of that crisis has been a major source of criticism of the Jonathan administration. Moreover, agitation against the government to “Bring Back

Our Girls” has also been seen as APC-directed, most famously by Patience Jonathan, the president’s wife. Including events of Boko Haram killings and excluding events related to Nigerian army successes might undermine the PDP’s position for the 2015 elections. Again, we use the Actor variable to categorize events that include Boko Haram. However, we also make two sub-distinctions: events in which Boko Haram attacks civilians and events in which the Army is engaged in fighting the insurgents. The former could be more prone to overreporting by *The Nation* (APC), for instance, than the latter. The event types are not mutually exclusive, however, as some Boko Haram events involve civilians as well as troops at the same time.

Table 1 gives an overview of the event frequencies per newspaper. This Table shows that in terms of conflict reporting, *The Nation* includes the most events, while *This Day* includes the least. All newspapers are more or less similar in the number of pages they count, however. Interestingly, *The Nation* includes more conflict events involving political parties, and clearly more events that depict the APC as a victim of violence. In contrast to what could have been expected, however, *The Guardian* and *This Day* also report more events in which the APC is a victim than events in which the PDP is the victim, even though the discrepancies are less wide. *This Day* devotes most attention to events involving Boko Haram, yet other than this observation there does not appear to be an immediate bias in the reporting of Boko Haram-army or -civilian events.

Table 1. Event type per newspaper

	<i>The Guardian</i> (PDP)	<i>This Day</i> (PDP)	<i>The Nation</i> (APC)
General event types			
All	1058 (100%)	923 (100%)	1393 (100%)
Protest	291 (27.50%)	202 (21.89%)	448 (32.16%)
Riot	83 (7.84%)	67 (7.26%)	119 (8.54%)
Kidnapping	8 (0.75%)	11 (1.19%)	22 (1.58%)
Armed attack	609 (57.56%)	574 (62.19%)	728 (52.26%)
Terrorist attack	67 (6.33%)	69 (7.48%)	76 (5.46%)
Political party events			
All ^a	217 (100%)	155 (100%)	292 (100%)
APC victim	56 (25.81%)	50 (32.26%)	117 (40.07%)
PDP victim	46 (21.20%)	36 (23.26%)	49 (16.7%)
Boko Haram events			
All ^b	295 (100%)	379 (100%)	309 (100%)
Boko Haram & civilians	178 (60.34%)	228 (60.16%)	170 (55.02%)
Boko Haram & army	113 (38.31%)	160 (42.22%)	152 (49.19%)

^aThe ‘All’ category also contains events which involved other parties than the PDP and APC, as well as events which mention a “political party” without specifying the party. The category also includes a limited number of protests.

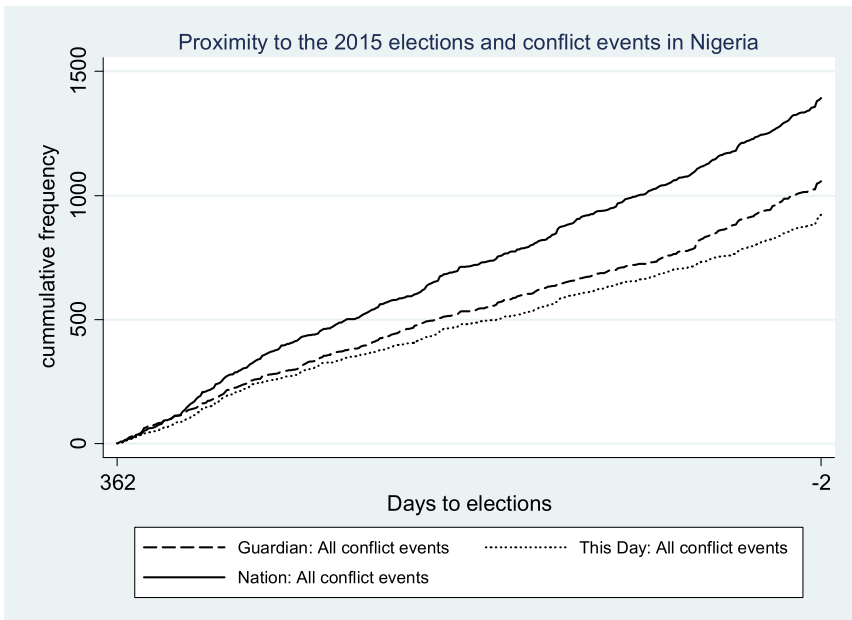
^bBoko Haram events can involve the army and civilians at the same time, hence the categories are not to be seen as mutually exclusive, or adding up to 100 percent. Furthermore, for a limited number of events, Boko Haram is linked to actors other than the army and civilians.

Event reporting and the electoral calendar

We now investigate to what extent the different event types included in Table 1 are affected by the electoral calendar. We aim to determine, on the one hand, whether events occurred more frequently as the elections of March 28–29, 2015, drew closer, and, on the other hand, whether there are differences between the newspapers analyzed. Firstly, we look at the overall relationship between time and conflict in Nigeria. Figure 1 shows the cumulative conflict count line as the March 2015 elections approached.⁴ As the dataset starts at April 1, 2014, and ends at March 30, 2015, the x-axis runs from 362 to -2. The number of conflict counts at -2 represent the total count per newspaper in the dataset (see Table 1). As Figure 1 demonstrates, there is no clear relationship between the elections and conflict events in general in the country, nor are there differences between newspapers. The cumulative lines steadily progress without clear jumps, which would indicate an acceleration of conflict. A slight jump occurs on the election days themselves and is shown by all three newspapers. A broad conceptualization of conflict hence does not reveal a relationship with the electoral calendar (Goldsmith 2015; Theisen 2012). We find similar results for the Protest, Armed Attack, and Boko Haram events.⁵

Turning more in depth to the Boko Haram crisis, one can see a relationship with the electoral calendar. At the beginning of the crisis, the

Figure 1. Proximity to the 2015 elections and conflict in Nigeria



slow response of the federal government led to much criticism from civil society as well as from opposition parties. Eventually, more troops were deployed to the northeast, especially right before the elections, which were delayed for six weeks to allow for the operation. As a result, while attacks against civilians were more prominent between April and October/November 2014, they declined somewhat thereafter. Interestingly, this decline is only visible in *The Guardian* (PDP) and *The Nation* (APC) newspapers. Clashes between Boko Haram and the army in their turn become more prominent after September 2014, in particular for *The Nation* and *This Day* (PDP) papers. It appears that reporting on Boko Haram events is hence also not affected by the individual newspapers' political affiliations.

As could already be derived from Table 1, more differences are expected for events involving political parties. Figures 4 to 6 show how each newspaper constructs electoral violence occurrence in the run-up to the 2015 general elections. For the broad category of conflict events which involve political parties, there is a clear connection with proximity to elections, as these events accelerate rapidly as the elections draw nearer. Another interesting feature is that in all three newspapers, reporting of violence victimhood becomes more prevalent over time. Indeed, it is not the case that *The Guardian* and *This Day* will start overreporting violence toward the PDP, as compared to *The Nation*, in the campaign period. The cumulative lines for PDP and APC victimhood do not cross or only slightly so (*This Day*). *The Nation* devotes more attention to APC victimhood in the campaign period,

Figure 2. The 2015 elections and Boko Haram attacks against civilians

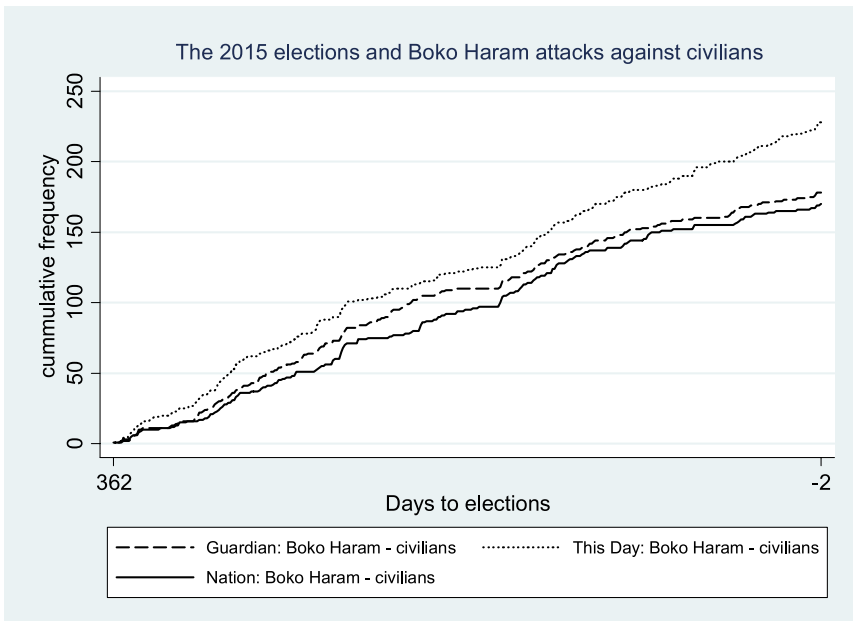


Figure 3. The 2015 elections and Boko Haram battles with the army

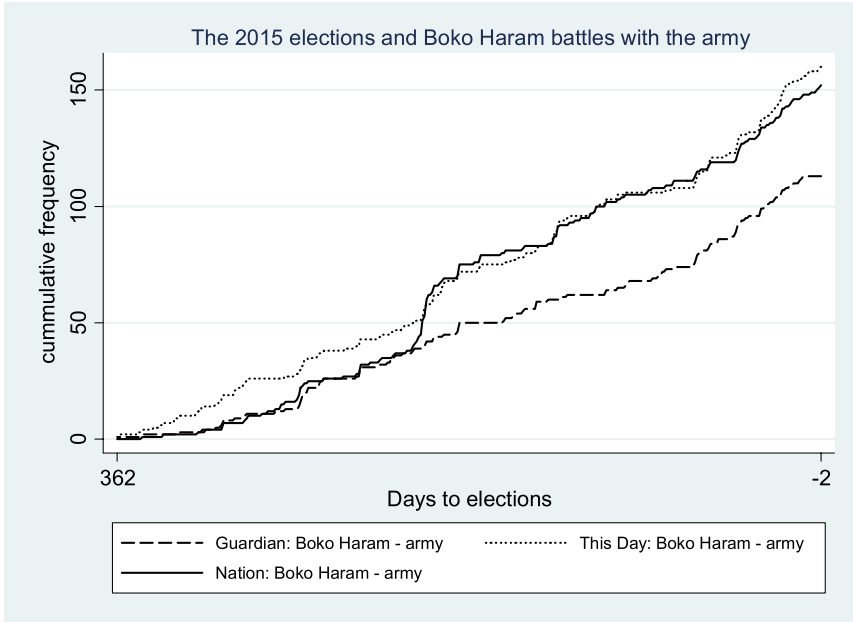


Figure 4. Political violence and proximity to elections (*The Guardian*)

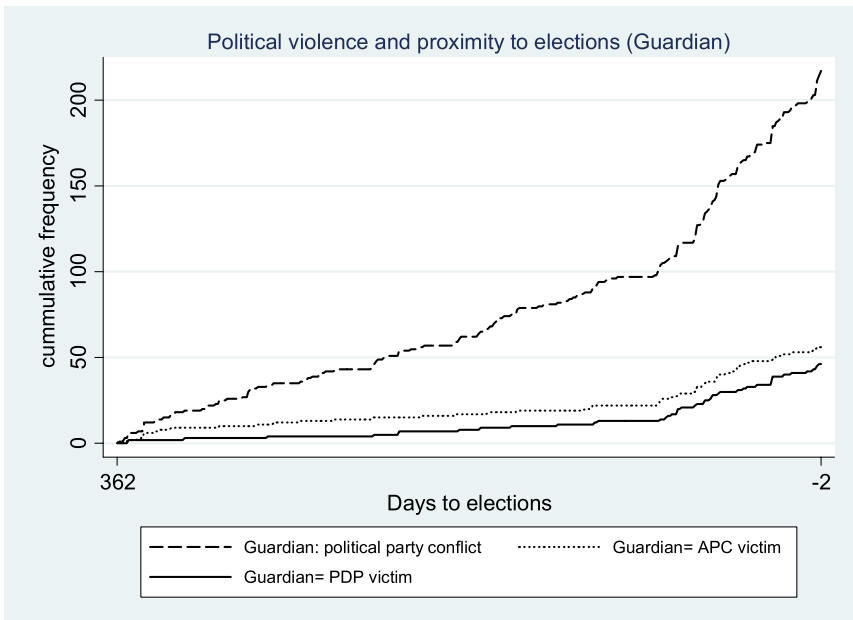


Figure 5. Political violence and proximity to elections (*This Day*)

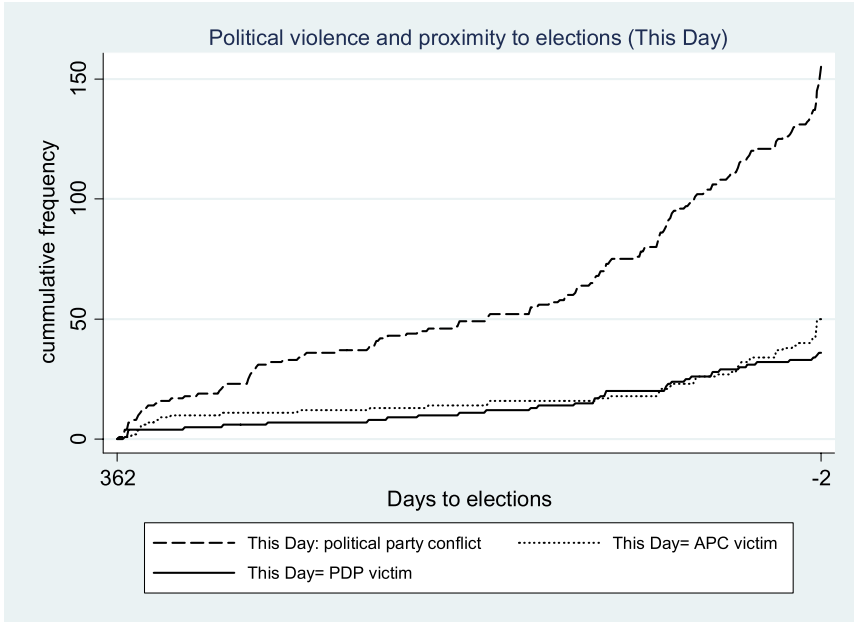
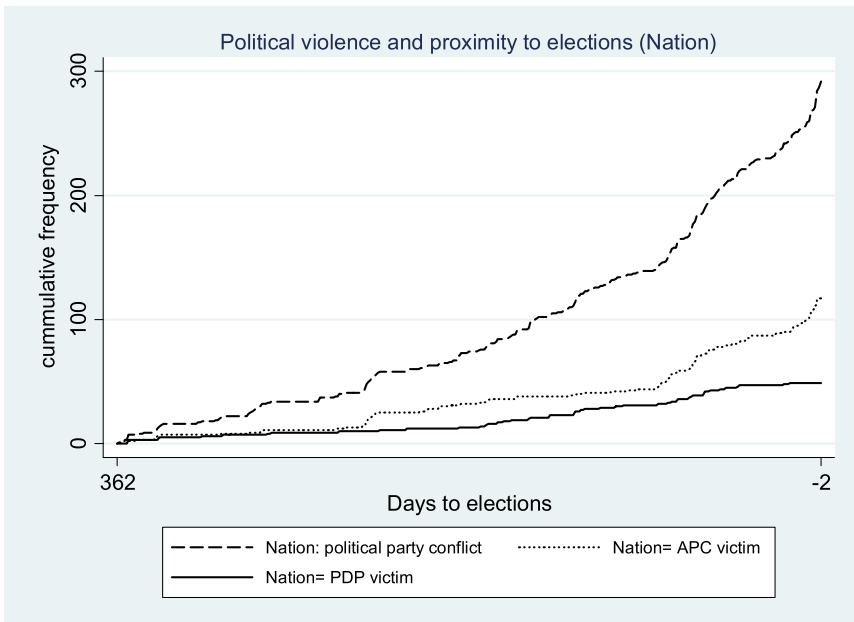


Figure 6. Political violence and proximity to elections (*The Nation*)



however, with the cumulative line accelerating stronger. PDP victimhood is largely overlooked.

It is worth emphasizing again that all three newspapers show that the APC was more likely to be the victim of violence than the PDP in the pre-electoral period, regardless of the paper's political affiliation. Most of this violence was perpetrated by PDP actors. This result supports earlier findings by Scott Straus and Charlie Taylor (2012), who argue that the opposition is most likely to be the victim of electoral violence in the pre-electoral period, in contrast to the view of Paul Collier and Pedro C. Vicente (2014), who argue the opposite.

The spatial distribution of political party conflict and electoral competitiveness

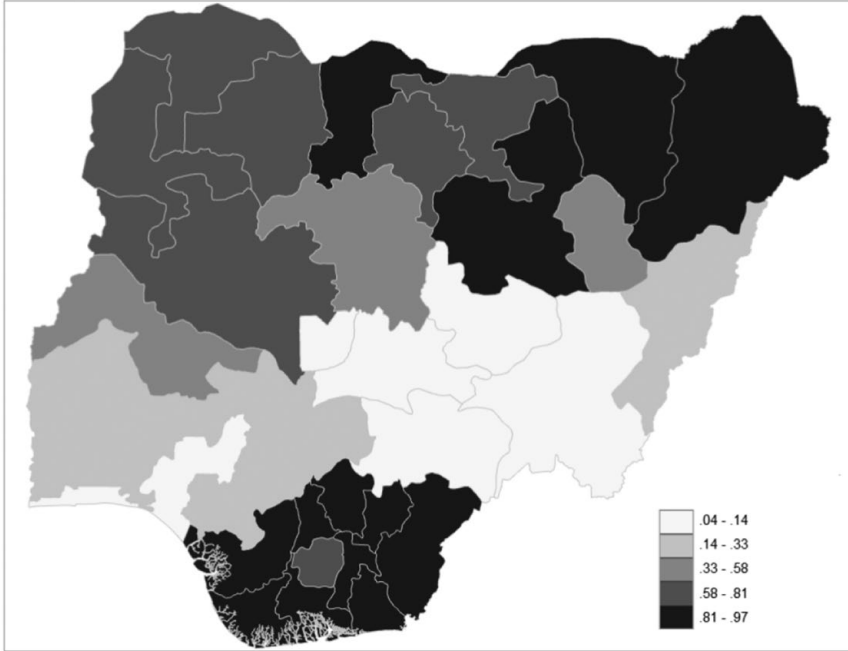
Previous analyses have focused on general trends on the national level. Here, we investigate how conflict relates to electoral competitiveness on the sub-national level. We only consider conflict events which involved political actors. Table 2 gives the top five states per newspaper for political party conflict. There is clear agreement that Rivers state and Ekiti states were most prone to conflict in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections, while more disagreement arises over other states' relative position in the ranking. This could perhaps be due to differences in regional foci or sales numbers for each newspaper.

Two election moments took place in Ekiti: the governorship election in June 2014 and the presidential and legislative elections in March 2015. The 2015 vote margins—the differences in vote share between the winner and runner-up—for the listed states are (Figure 7): 91 percent for Rivers (PDP victory), 17 percent for Ekiti (PDP victory), 21 percent for Osun (APC victory), 11 percent for Lagos (APC victory), 16 percent for Edo (PDP victory), 3.5 percent for FCT (PDP victory), 88 percent for Akwa Ibom (PDP victory), 39 percent for Kwara (PDP victory), 26 percent for Oyo (APC victory), 10 percent for Benue (APC victory), 86 percent for Cross River (PDP victory), and 84 percent for Ebonyi (PDP victory).

Interestingly, there is no immediate relationship between party conflict and competitiveness. Nonetheless, in Rivers, many results were cancelled, and bye-elections were eventually won by the APC, indicating more competition than first assumed. There is also no relationship

Table 2. Top 5 states most prone to political conflict per newspaper (number of events in brackets)

<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>This Day</i>	<i>The Nation</i>
Rivers (34)	Rivers (30)	Rivers (46)
Ekiti/Lagos (20)	Ekiti/Federal Capital Territory (15)	Ekiti (34)
Osun (15)	Edo (11)	Lagos (32)
Edo (13)	Akwa Ibom/Kwara/Lagos (10)	Oyo (17)
Benue (10)	Cross River (7)	Kwara/ Ebonyi/Osun (15)

Figure 7. Vote margin by state, 2015 presidential elections

Source: INEC (2015). Map made with Indiemapper (<http://indiemapper.io/app/>)

between events reported and the eventual winner of the elections at the state level.

Differences in reporting on the same events

While each newspaper reports over 150 conflict events involving political parties (see Table 1), only 70 of these events are shared by all newspapers.⁶ Lethal events have a higher probability of being shared events. For about two-thirds of these events, there are no notable discrepancies between newspapers in how they report violence dynamics, including who is the victim and who is the perpetrator.

Some of the differences that do occur in reporting are in line with the expectation that political ties influence the reporting of violence. For instance, *The Nation* reports that a March rally in Lagos by the O’dua People’s Congress (OPC) is associated with the PDP, and that violence occurred against civilians and APC campaign materials. This description is not corroborated by *The Guardian*, however. *This Day* reports that APC could have also started the violence. A widows’ protest in Imo in February 2015 degenerates into violence. According to *The Guardian*, the violence was caused by APC thugs, while *The Nation* accuses the PDP of being behind the violence. *This Day* reflects both views, resulting in an “accuse each

other” code. An attack on Borno governor Shettima from the APC is described as committed by the PDP in *The Nation*, while *This Day* speaks of “irate youth” and *The Guardian* of “attackers.” A burning of a PDP campaign office is attributed to the APC by *The Guardian* and *This Day*, while *The Nation* speaks of “angry youth.”

Yet there are also examples which are not in line with the expectations. For example, while *This Day* and *The Nation* state that unknown gunmen attacked a PDP senator in Akwa Ibom, *The Guardian* includes allegations that PDP thugs themselves committed the attack. Similarly, an attack on the brother of Rivers governor Amaechi, who by that time had switched to the APC, is specified as perpetrated by the PDP in *The Guardian*. An attack by the APC on another political party is reported in *The Nation*, while *The Guardian* and *This Day* do not include statements on who started the violence. The comparison of event descriptions generally supports our above findings that political conflict reporting cannot be directly associated with political preferences of newspapers.

In the following section, we contextualize these findings further through interviews with Nigerian journalists and editors. The interviews targeted various media channels, not restricted to the three newspapers investigated in the quantitative analyses. The interviews specifically aimed to elucidate more clearly how and to what extent reporters allow political affiliations to influence their reporting practices, in particular with regard to inter-party conflict.

Newspaper politics: biased reporting or editorial preferences?

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that media representatives themselves rarely deny the presence of political pressures on reporting:

You know the interests of your proprietor, your management. You self-impose restrictions, maybe the management would not even stop you. I haven't been told to report something, but I know the management's interest, you should know what they stand for. (Interview YO, Abuja, November 30, 2017)

You can only follow the master's interests. Ownership of media houses has always been a problem. Some things cannot be reported. (Interview CA, Abuja, December 4, 2017)

We have training and experience, but proprietors' interests are important, what can you do. Press freedom is undermined. Editors may be competent but when proprietors are close to political people... (Interview MO, Lagos, December 18, 2017)

The well-known Nigerian adage with regard to media reporting, “He who pays the piper determines his tune” (Interview PO, Lagos, December 19, 2017), is clearly supported.⁷

Nonetheless, this does not mean that Nigerian newspapers blindly let themselves be turned into tools for political propaganda. While political ties can influence the tone and style of reporting, the occurrence of electoral violence is not necessarily actively misrepresented:

Political parties have built synergies with media houses. They have their publicity departments, they try to gather, process, and disseminate information themselves and try to carry journalists along by sending press reports, photos etc.... There are also situations where political actors try to use media to make unsubstantiated claims. We want balance and hence cross-check: is there evidence? If not, there is probably an ulterior motive and we can choose not to report at all.... Political ties yes, but this does not mean that if they perpetrate violence that we do not report this. It molds your opinion to report them more favorably but you are not blindly promoting them. For example, if they would do an action to promote peace you would put them on the front page and not tuck them away if they patronize you. Or if they have an accident on the campaign trail, you would put '10 PDP members die in accident' on the front page, while other newspapers would perhaps do page five. (Interview MU, Abuja, December 1, 2017)

Interviewees also point out other editorial strategies:

Politicians try to woo journalists and influence them and paint opponents in a bad lights. ... You see political affiliation in the newspapers. If it is against the APC, you will not see it in *The Nation* or tucked inside, watered down or the narrative changed. If there was an incident, they don't report the incident but interview someone on the incident, condemning it. (Interview AO, Abuja, December 4, 2017)

Interestingly, the issue of leaving out some events is also pointed out by the interviewee. Yet as our quantitative analyses indicate, this might occur at a smaller scale but not so that it causes severe biases.

News media also seem to be particularly conscious of upholding professional standards in the face of political influences:

Yes we have the same interests as PDP, so we would mellow PDP violence down. But there is also the national interest: we are not reporting deaths without confirmation. (Interview IO, Abuja, December 4, 2017)

They can try to pull strings but the Nigerian media are stronger. Maybe in editorial policies but not actual news. (Interview AS, Abuja, December 7, 2017)

We try to be professional. We reflect opinions of parties in a balanced way. It can be difficult to escape the proprietor's interest, you always make sure you look out for this. This person is paying your salary, so you protect their interest, but there are still the ethics of the profession. (Interview LM, Abuja, December 12, 2017)

Indeed, most claim that when it comes to reporting on electoral violence, “we tell it as it is” (Interview PO, Lagos, December 19, 2017). A representative of *The Guardian* puts it as follows:

We report political violence as it is. We always confirm our reports, balance them, report the angle from the other side. No-one can accuse us of bias. People are always saying we are pro-PDP. Most newspapers are privately owned but the publisher has its own interests, political affiliations. That’s why people see biases and complain, but we try to balance as much as possible. (Interview AS, Lagos, December 18, 2017)

The interviews indicate that electoral violence reporting is mostly sensitive to editorial changes rather than deliberate misreporting or under/overreporting. Nigerian media appear to be highly conscious of upholding professional ethics and verify information as much as possible. There is a potential risk, however, with the perceived need to be as balanced as possible: “They’ll sue the editor and reporter, but not the publisher. So we try to avoid things, misrepresentations” (Interview IO, Abuja, December 4, 2017). If reporters allow for balance or the representation of both sides in an event of electoral violence, this gives both parties the opportunity to make allegations and/or deny involvement. Ultimately, this creates uncertainty over violence dynamics and results in a story in which no one is perpetrator or victim. This can be problematic if media want to play a true watchdog role by reporting cases of political violence. This also runs together with structural problems in terms of information access. Reporters remain very much dependent on political statements and sources for reporting without in-depth investigation by journalists (Ciboh 2017). Below, we highlight some of these issues by drawing on some examples of electoral violence reports of *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *The Nation*. While our quantitative coding does not necessarily reveal differences for these events, we can trace the influence of editorial policies qualitatively.

An interesting series of events concerns the “Edo crisis” of October 2014. The crisis consisted of an attack on a PDP representative of the State House of Assembly, followed by an attack on APC delegates at Benin airport, and a much more publicized attack on the APC legislative quarters in the city. *The Nation* devotes its front and following pages to the event, together with pictures of the vandalized vehicles of APC lawmakers. The balance standard is still held high, however, as the PDP is quoted as denying the party’s culpability, while blaming the perpetrators of the previous attack on the PDP member as being behind the incident. *This Day* devotes a full page to the event, but interestingly only includes APC statements (October 14, 2014:11). *The Guardian* reports the attack on APC members, but also emphasizes PDP fears of a reprisal attack (October 13, 2014:86). *The Guardian* also reports on the airport attack, but the same report first details Jonathan’s arrival at the airport and his message to Edo (October 11, 2014:3). *The Nation* starts with the attack

and reports on the President's message in the second part of the report (October 11, 2014:3).

Other major events follow similar editorial policies, including the Ekiti high court attack by PDP thugs in September 2014, the assassination of a PDP member following this event, and the eventual counter-attack on APC offices; the teargassing of the House of Representatives Speaker Aminu Tambuwal (APC) at the National Assembly in Abuja in November 2014; and the Okrika (Rivers state) bombing and shooting at an APC rally in February 2015. *The Nation* generally devotes more attention to APC victimhood in terms of number of reports, visuals and language, but still lends voice to the PDP to comment on allegations. *This Day* and *The Guardian* appear generally more neutral and toned down. A slight bias can be discerned for *The Guardian*, which pays no attention to the "impeachment plot" associated with the attack on Speaker Tambuwal, and does not devote the front page to the Okrika attack, but rather only a headline on the first page.

The confusion that can be raised by overemphasizing balance is perhaps best illustrated by an incident involving APC governor Kayode Fayemi of Ekiti state in June 2014, in the run-up to the governorship elections. A rally for PDP candidate Ayo Fayose was followed by an APC counter-rally led by governor and candidate Fayemi of the APC. Police were initially said to have killed an APC member while dispersing the protest, which led to strong condemnations by the APC and concerns that the police would interfere in favor of the PDP during the elections. However, the accusation was countered by the PDP, which declared that the person killed was actually a PDP member, while the perpetrators were APC members. To cover up the crime, the APC perpetrators supposedly took off the PDP member's Fayose shirt and replaced it with an APC shirt. While *The Nation* devotes most attention to the APC statements, all sides and narratives are represented in news reports of the three papers. In the end, by focusing on balance and the repetition of party statements rather than in-depth journalism, the question of guilt becomes unsolvable.

While Nigerian news media hold professional standards such as impartiality and balance high in the reporting of inter-party violence, these standards, as well as their dependence on political representatives for information, also appear to undermine their watchdog role. Indeed, care for balance—and fears for litigations—lead to reports on "alleged attacks" by "suspected members of party X," which give voice to a range of conspiracy theories often marring Nigerian political debate. While political biases do not appear to majorly affect reporting and are usually limited to editorial placement, this issue still undermines the reporting of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the extent to which editorial policies affect quantitative event coding is dependent on the coding policies. For our dataset, we scanned through the entire newspaper issues, for instance. Coding schemes which rely on issue front pages might result in

Table 3. Electoral violence in *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *The Nation*, front page only

	<i>The Guardian</i> (PDP)	<i>This Day</i> (PDP)	<i>The Nation</i> (APC)
APC victim	12	11	31
PDP victim	7	5	1

more severe biases. As Table 3 indicates, the difference between APC and PDP victimhood remains similar when only looking at events included in first page articles and headlines, yet the difference becomes (even) more exaggerated for *The Nation*.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed to what extent electoral violence reporting in Nigeria is influenced by newspapers' political affiliation, using quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Overall, we found that political biases in the reporting of electoral violence remain limited, but that they are more pronounced for newspapers owned by politicians (*The Nation*) than privately owned papers (*The Guardian*, *This Day*). Biases also appear more predominant at the level of editorial policies (e.g. page and size of the report, inclusion of visuals).

These results, first of all, have implications for the perception of the quality of Nigerian news media. While political pressures are acknowledged, we find that Nigerian news media can still be considered professional outlets with a credible role in challenging lingering authoritarianism, political corruption, and, indeed, violent conflict. The latter is subjected to a caveat, however, in particular due to the stress Nigerian media representatives put on balance, and their reliance on political sources for information.

A second important implication of our study concerns the actual patterns of electoral violence in Nigeria. Regardless of political preference, all newspapers investigated included more events in which the APC was the victim of violence than the PDP. This supports the view that it is indeed the incumbent who is responsible for most pre-electoral violence. Furthermore, electoral violence in Nigeria mostly took place in the south-south and southwest regions, hence differing from the 2011 post-electoral violence, and returning to the pattern of the 2007 elections. These sub-national patterns highlight important differences between regions in the occurrence of pre- and post-electoral violence. Finally, although electoral violence is commonly related to electoral competitiveness (Höglund 2009:421–22), we did not find a relationship between conflict and the vote margin in the presidential elections at the state level (although official vote margins are of course not a perfect indicator for competitiveness).

The third implication concerns the validity of local African news media as empirical sources of information. In many African countries, including

Nigeria, the degree of freedom of the press is considered “partly free” by the Freedom House index. This rating does not necessarily imply that local newspapers are overly biased, however. Indeed, while press freedom indicators can be useful to assess and compare media climates, our research demonstrates that they do not necessarily hold implications for the reliability of media reporting. Exactly how constraints on press freedom affect journalistic practice is hence still open for further research and debate.

Although more research is needed to assess whether Nigeria is exceptional or not, our findings suggest that even with a “partly free” rating, local newspapers can be consulted to scientifically investigate political (violence) processes. Such studies can be of a qualitative or quantitative nature. It remains the case, however, that it is important to be well informed on the possible preferences of the news source analyzed, also in terms of editorial policies (e.g., when conducting front page analyses only). Informed selection of African news sources in the study of political violence can indeed open up valuable new areas of research.

Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.150>

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Notes

1. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/nigeria>
2. <http://nigeriawatch.org/>
3. Only four newspaper issues could not be consulted. For *This Day*: January 1, 2015, July 2, 2014, and June 26, 2014; for *The Nation*: June 7, 2014.
4. All figures are made with Stata version 12.0.
5. The Kidnapping, Riot, and Terrorist attack categories have insufficient numbers of events for this analysis.
6. A shared political party event is an event which is included in all papers and in which at least one paper identifies a political actor. Not all newspapers hence identify political actors in these events. Only forty-four events exist which are shared by all papers and in which all papers identify a political actor. This distinction does not substantially alter our findings.
7. Quotes are based on field notes, which were preferred over recordings to safeguard anonymity and to support openness about a potentially sensitive subject.