

# NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES

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## Abstract

This study is a content analysis of three national Dailies (Vanguard, Guardian and Daily Sun Newspapers) to determine the coverage of climate change issues for a period of four months. The objectives of this study are to determine the volume of coverage of climate change issues, to find out the forms in which climate change issues were presented in the media and to determine the event/fora that drives the coverage of climate change issues by the Nigerian newspapers. The units of analysis of the study are volume of coverage, story type/forms of presentation, and fora/forum forms that brought about the media coverage of climate change issue, while the content categories are straight news reports, feature stories, cartoons, advertorials, editorials and letters to the editor. Sample size for the study was 190. It was found that the volume of coverage of the issue is poor and that the dominant form of presentation was feature stories. It was also found that most of the stories on climate change reported in the Nigerian media were based on specific events on climate change. It was recommended among others that Nigerian press should give priority attention to the coverage of climate change issues as regular communication about it is the first step towards developing coping mechanisms in Nigeria.

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**Keywords:** Climate, climate change, media coverage, developing nations

## Introduction

The issue of climate change is one that seems to be ignored at the society's peril. Over the past 50 years, evidence that human activities affecting the climate has accumulated inexorably and with it has come ever

greater certainty across the scientific community about the reality of recent climate change and the potentials for much greater change in the future if unchecked. Scientists are confident now, more than ever that humans have interfered greatly with the climate and that the further human induced climate change is on the way (IPCC, 2007). Climate change refers to a significant and lasting change in the statistical distribution of weather patterns over periods ranging from decades to millions of years. According to Umeji (2010), the issue of climate change cannot be shrugged off because their implications are legion especially on the African continent. African citizens will be among the most affected by climate change but are least responsible for the cause such implications include: increased surface temperature, rise in sea levels, change in precipitation, longer and more severe droughts as well as others. Puchari (2007) observes that in Africa by 2020, between 75 and 250 million people are projected to become exposed to water stress due to climate change. By the same year in some countries of Africa yields from rain-fed Agriculture could be reduced by up to 30%. The impacts of climate change would be disproportionately severe on some of the poorest regions and communities of the world. According to Puchari (2007), per head emission of carbon dioxide for all Africans stood at one ton (1tCo<sub>2</sub>), in comparison to a average figure of 19.9 tCo<sub>2</sub>.

The media have the responsibility of setting agenda and shaping the way the public understand certain issues like those of climate change science, the politics of it, its impact and the need for action. According to Mustapha (2012), the centrality of the mass media to the knowledge of goings-on in the society is at the heart of their influence on public's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. To catch a glimpse of the happenings in the society or meet a psychic need, some read newspapers or magazine or both, while some others watch and listen to television and radio respectively. In setting the agenda on climate change, the media can play a crucial role in disseminating useful climatic information to effectively guide public debate and understanding about the weather and climate change. Regular and accurate communication about climate change is the first step towards developing coping mechanisms in Africa (Tagbo, 2010).

Hellebrandt and Hellebrandt (2010) write that the survey on public perception of science carried out by the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2006 showed that a sizeable portion of the Brazilian public is interested in scientific issues (41% of 2004 respondents), that the public considered journalists to be the most trustworthy sources of information (27%), well above scientists working at state universities (17%). These findings, according to Hellebrandt, and Hellebrandt, suggest that there is clearly potential public interest in a theme such as climate change in Brazil, and that coverage of the theme by the media seems to play an important role in how

people construct the meaning of related issues – for example, impacts of climate change on coastal areas.

According to IPCC (2007), studies on the vulnerability of various sectors of the Nigerian economy to climate change reveal that climate change in due time will have great effect on human settlements, health, water resources, agriculture, food security. According to Umeji (2010), the issue of climate change cannot be shrugged off because its implications are legion especially on the African continent.

### **The Problem**

For reasons which are subject to question, Nigeria has yet to take a strong posture towards influencing the climate change debate raging all over the world. The Nigeria media are assumed to be quiet, almost indifferent about climate change issues (Nwabueze, 2008). Tagbo (2010) observes that irrespective of the dangers of climate change, the Nigerian media appear to be lagging behind, leaving the awareness campaign to individual effort, thus exposing the country to the risk of getting badly bruised from the soon to come effects of climate change. According to Umeji (2010), the Northern States of Borno, Kebbi, Kano, Nassarawa and Kastina recorded drops in crop yield in the last five years, as a result of irregular rainfall pattern. The seasonal cycles are being disrupted; the weather is becoming fiercer, ocean levels are rising, riverine communities are being submerged, intensification of desertification and so on. But this study is not only focused on Nigeria but on developing countries.

The focus of the respective studies, however, has mostly been on what could be called national cultures of interpretation, i.e. specific frameworks of meaning established within nationally defined societies (Brand and Brunnengraber, 2012, p.8).

This study adds to existing discourse on various national or other geographically-bound media constructions on climate change. The study specifically shows coverage of climate change by newspapers in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of Study**

This study is aimed at achieving the following objectives

- 1) To determine the volume of coverage of climate change issues by newspapers in Nigeria.
- 2) To determine the story type or genre used in covering climate change issues by Newspapers in Nigeria.
- 3) To determine the sources, event/fora that drive the coverage of climate change issues by Newspapers in Nigeria.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is built around the agenda-setting theory of the media. The theory stresses the ability of the media to influence the significance of events in the public's mind. According to Mc Combs and Shaw (1972), cited in Ovoh (2008, p. 222) "members of the audience not only learn about public issues through the massmedia, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the media place upon it." According to Nwabueze (2006, p. 176), "Agenda-setting theory posits that by frequently covering and giving prominence to issues in the media, the audience attaches importance to those issues more than others. By so doing, the mass media set Agenda for public discussion."

Agenda setting theory is basically a theory of strong media effect which suggests that with the passage of time, the media agenda becomes the agenda. Griffin (2000) cited in Nwabueze (2008, p. 84) observes that "the media act as a mediator between the world outside and the picture in our head." The Agenda setting role of the media further posits that the news media tell the public which issues are important and which ones are not. This underscores the need to ascertain the degree of prominence given to issues of climate change, its volume of coverage which constitutes one of the research questions guiding this study. In this light, the media especially the print media should ensure that frequent and adequate prominence is given to climate change issues.

Another premise upon which this worked is based is the theoretical framework which understands risk as being socially constructed (Dake 1992, Beck 1992). The assumption here is that "the perception of risk among social actors will depend on their background, the context in which they live, the access to sources of information and ability to articulate responses to phenomena, among other elements which directly or indirectly contribute to the process of social construction of meaning (Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti, 2010, p.301)." There is interplay between natural and human causes of risk on one hand, and individual perceptions and social relations on the other hand. In relation to this study, it then follows that media representation of climate change is a function of the actors involved -media, scientists, politicians – and what are the relationships between them and their connection to the phenomena in question (Johnson, 1986; Beck, 1992; Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti, 2010). The major sources of climate change stories and the forums which generate such stories for journalists (which constitute an objective of this study) are significant factors to be considered in the coverage of climate change.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Climate Change: The History and Science**

According to Reuters (2010), the history of the science discovery of climate change began in the early 19th century when natural changes in climate were first suspected and natural green house effect first identified. In the late 19th century, Scientists first argued that human emission of green house gases could change the climate, but the details of the calculations were disputed. By 1950s and 1960s, the calculation of the warming effect of carbon dioxide emission became increasingly convincing, although some scientist also pointed out that human activities in form of atmospheric aerosols could have cooling effects (IPCC 2010). By 1970s and 1980s, scientific opinions increasingly favoured the warming view point. The consensus position formed that human activity was in the process of warming the climate, leading to the modern period of what we have today as global warming.

### **Nigerian Mass Media and Environment: The Case of Climate Change**

The Nigerian mass media play their basic role of information, education and entertainment in the society. This includes dissemination of information on green issues in the Nation and in the global scene. According to Nwabueze (2011, p. 108) “when incidents with great significance to the environment and to the health of people take place in the society, the media expose such incident and make the public aware of them.”

Tagbo (2010), after a study, found that apart from being a disposable beat, climate change is a relatively new subject in many African media. Less than 30 per cent of climate change journalists interviewed during the course of her study have reported the subject for more than three years of these, 60 percent identified a lack of training and time pressure as major reason why topic has rarely generated coverage commensurate to its significance for the comments future prosperity. Empirical data from Tagbo also shows that the Nigerian mass media have not been doing well in the coverage of environmental issues, with specific reference to climate change, gas flaring and environmental pollution in the oil rich Niger Delta region. The environmental crisis in the Niger Delta region denotes the environmental Agenda in the country neglecting other environmental issues. After studying media images of environmental issues and problems in Nigeria, Nwosu and Uffoh (2005) discovered that the media give poor quality coverage to environmental issues.

Experts have emphasized the need to communicate effectively to policy makers about the future climate change so as to influence appropriate agricultural policies and adaptation strategies. The media, according to Tagbo (2010) can play a crucial role in disseminating useful climate

information to effectively guide public debate and understanding about the weather and climate change. Tagbo (2010) also writes that regular and accurate communication about climate change is the first step towards developing coping mechanisms in Africa.

### **Coverage of Climate Change Issues in Africa and Latin America**

Aniegbunam (2010), cited in Tagbo (2010), observes that climate change has become a strong development issue but has been over-shadowed by other pressing issues which are more visible to the public. There is a vital consensus on the coverage of climate change issues from the South Africa and Nigeria editors interviewed by Tagbo in her research work. According to Aniegbunam, climate change by nature is not a front page subject except when there is a strong local, political and economic dimension to it, which is rarely the case.

Lack of understanding of the issue in climate change makes it difficult for most African journalists to do a good job of reporting it. By extension only few journalists are literate enough on the issue, unlike what you have in the developed world (Tagbo, 2010; Nwabueze, 2007). For most local journalists, climate change is a complex science story that cannot be properly accommodated in their daily routine because of the deadline culture of the newsroom (Tagbo 2010). According to Owusu in Tagbo (2010), “climate change is like a cancer, slow poison; it takes the eyes of experts and the informed to see it”.

The turbulent political history of many African countries strongly influences the type of priority given to environmental issues such as climate change (Tagbo 2010). As pointed out by BBC World Service Trusts Policy Briefing (cited in Tagbo 2010), the beginning of the last two decades was when concerns about the changing climate started filling into most western media in a major way and began to attract wide public debate. But paramount in the agenda of South Africa media then was political freedom and the fight for fair treatment.

Nigeria on the other hand has diverse languages. According to World Bank, Nigeria has within the last five decades earned over \$500 billion from oil revenue but as a result of misappropriation, more than 70% of Nigerian citizens still live on less than one dollar a day (Tagbo 2010). This power struggle, lack of accountability and weak institutional structure are more visible and pressing issues in most African countries and these issues dominate news stories. The issue of climate change cannot be ignored because its implications are legion especially on the African continent. Studies on the vulnerability of various sectors of the Nigerian economy to climate change by inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) revealed that climate change in due time will have great effects on human

settlement, health, water resources, agriculture, food security (Tagbo 2010; Nwabueze,2007). The media can play a crucial role in setting agenda and disseminating useful climate change information to effectively guide public debate and understanding of the issue. This is because regular and accurate communication about climate is the first step towards developing coping mechanisms in Nigeria and Africa.

Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti (2010) observe that there is potential public interest in a theme such as climate change in Brazil, and that coverage of the theme by the media seems to play an important role on people's construction and understanding of the meaning of impacts of climate change on coastal areas. Findings by Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti in their study also show that the public in Brazil see journalists as the most trustworthy sources of information on climate change, well above scientists working at state universities.

Takahashi (2011), in a study of mass media coverage of climate change in Peru during the Fifth Latin America, Caribbean and European Union Summit in May 2008 found that the media relied mostly on government sources, giving limited access to dissenting voices such as environmentalists. The study further revealed a prominence of "solutions" and "effects" frames while "policy" and "science" frames were limited. Just like in Nigeria and Brazil, newspapers in Peru reported more of the effects of climate change rather than policy issues on the matter.

Takahashi and Meisner (2013) in a study of climate change in Peruvian newspapers: The role of foreign voices in a context of vulnerability, also found a prevalence of an effects frame, followed by a politics frame. Their study revealed that generally, the coverage prioritizes mitigation strategies and policies while providing limited attention to adaptation. This, according to Takahashi and Meisner, can be insufficient for a highly vulnerable country.

## **Method**

The content analysis method was adopted for the study. The manifest content of the selected newspapers concerning the media coverage of climate change issues in Nigeria from February to May 2012 were analyzed. Three National Newspapers were selected for this study – *Vanguard, Guardian and Daily Sun Newspapers*. These are among the leading national dailies in Nigeria with wide circulation and readership across all the zones of the country. The population is 363. This is arrived through

February – 29

March - 31

April - 30

May - 31

121

$$\therefore 121 \times 3 = 363$$

Systematic sampling was used in selecting the days to be studied. Rather than studying all the days of the week, 4 days were studied as one week. The days are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. These days were selected to ensure that a number of editions were selected in search of manifest contents on climate change. To determine the sample size, the formular Taro Yamani was used, thus

$$S = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where S = Sample size

N = Population

E = Error margin

I = Constant

$$\therefore \frac{363}{1 + 363 \times 0.0025}$$

$$\frac{363}{1 + 0.9075}$$

$$\frac{363}{1.9075} = 190$$

The following units of analysis were employed in the study to help guide coding of the selected newspaper samples.

1. Volume of coverage: This is the total number of climate change issues reported by the selected newspaper.

2. Story type/forms of presentation: This refers to the forms in which issues on climate change were presented in the newspapers like straightnews, cartoons, editorial etc.

3. Fora/forum: These are the forms that brought about the media coverage of climate charge issue. They include international fora, government settings, seminars, individual personalities, and media fora. The content categories of this study are straight news reports, featurestories, cartoons, advertorials, editorials and letters to the editor. For the inter-coder reliability, a coefficient of .72 was arrived indicating internal consistency of the instrument.

The coding yielded inter-coder reliability coefficients of .78 for volume of coverage, .81 for story type/forms, and .88 for Fora/forum. The overall inter-coder agreement was .76. These coefficients are beyond the benchmark of .70 that is generally acceptable when using the Pi or alpha (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000; Keyton, 2001).



## **Findings**

### **Volume of coverage of climate change issues in Nigerian Newspapers**

The data show that, out of all the editions of the 3 newspapers, only 15 reports on climate change issues were carried by the newspapers. Further observation shows that *The Guardian* had the highest number of stories publishing seven (47%) out of the 15 reports, *Vanguard* followed with a total of seven (40%) stories out of the 15 reports while *Daily Sun* had the least number of stories publishing two (13%) out of the 15 reports.

### **Story type/Genre is used in covering climate change issue in Nigerian Newspapers**

Data show that the most prominent form climate change issues were presented in the media during the period of study is feature stories six (40%), followed by straight news four (26%), opinion article three (20%), advertorial, one (7%) and editorial one (7%). However, on individual basis, *Vanguard* has the following, two (33%), (17%) advertorial, two (33%) opinion article; *The Guardian* straight news reports, one (17%) feature stories, one (14%) straight news stories, four (58%) features, one (14%) editorial, one (14%) opinion article while *Daily Sun* has one (50%) straight news, one (50%) feature stories.

### **Event/fora drive the coverage of climate change issues in Nigerian Newspapers**

Findings show that the prominent forum that brought about the coverage of climate change issues by the Nigerian Newspaper was international fora nine (56%), followed by individual personalities five (31%), government settings two (13%). However, on individual basis, *vanguard* had the following: four (57%) international fora, two (29%), individual personalities, one (14%) on government settings; *guardian* had three (43%) international settings while *sun* had two (100%) on international fora only.

## **Discussion of Findings**

From the volume of coverage of climate change issues by Nigerian newspapers, it can be said that the newspapers did not give adequate coverage to climate change issues. This is in view of the fact that out of 190 editions of the newspapers studied, only 15 stories on climate change were recorded. This finding supports the assertion by Tagbo (2010) that the coverage of climate change issues in Nigerian media is disproportionate to the level of threat it poses to the country and continent as a whole. Tagbo further writes that the media in the Western world give adequate prominence to climate change issues. This, according to is premised on the fact that the

bulk of publications on the subject of climate change in African newspapers and magazines are culled from the adequate, systematic coverage of the issue by the Western media and foreign institutions. In Brazil, there is also a paucity of articles dealing with climate change in coastal settings, a development which is remarkable when one considers the significance of climate-related risks in these areas (Nichols 2007; Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti, 2010).

The major event (fora) that brought about the coverage of the issue was international fora which had the most dominant result of nine (56%). This means that climate change articles in the selected newspapers dealt more with international dimensions/scenario and gave very little or no Nigerian context. According to Umeji (2010), the more Nigeria media give climate change issue a Nigerian setting, the more initiated and concerned the people would be on the issue. It was also found that most of the stories were premised on specific events, especially international events on climate change and global warming. This finding was supported by the trend observed in other studies, where newspaper coverage of climate change is guided by specific events (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007). However, the trend of general increase in coverage is largely associated with either specific events (such as the release of Al Gore's film *The Inconvenient Truth*, as well as his shared Nobel prize with the IPCC) or large scale disasters, such as the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the US (Boykoff & Roberts 2007, Boykoff & Roberts 2008; Hellebrandti, and Hellebrandti, 2010).

Hellebrandti & Hellebrandti, (2010) after a study of Representations in the Brazilian media of the impacts of climate change in the coastal zone found a predominance of issues set by an international scientific and political agenda in the Brazilian media and relative absence of references to the coastal setting on the national coverage. They argue that this finding points to the need for an urgent review of priorities in the mass communication of scientific and environmental themes in Brazil.

The over-reliance on foreign sources and events for stories on climate change is not without implications. In Brazil for instance, the paucity of articles dealing with climate change in coastal settings put into perspective the relative absence of consideration for coastal processes in the national policies aimed at tackling climate change (Rosa 2009). Furthermore, the tendency in question also suggests that the mismatch between existing public policies and the needs of vulnerable coastal populations in Brazil and Latin America (Romero *et al.* 2009, Sant'Anna Neto & Roseghini 2009, Murgida & Natenzon 2009) is unlikely to be challenged by a mass media which responds to issues set by an agenda removed from local concerns.

## Conclusion

The following conclusion could be drawn from the findings of the study; the volume of coverage of climate change issues by the media in Nigeria nations is poor. The findings further reveal that the volume of coverage of climate change issues by the Nigerian Newspapers is not enough set Agenda for public debate on the issue, create awareness of the issue and as such achieve the desired objective. Nigerian newspapers relied more on international fora and media in reporting on climate change issues; climate change issues lacked 'Nigerian setting'. This also a similar observation among newspapers in Brazil where there is a paucity of articles dealing with climate change in coastal settings, a development which is remarkable when one considers the significance of climate-related risks in these areas (Nichols *et al*, 2007; Hellebrandti and Hellebrandti, 2010).

The media in developed countries tend towards 'balanced' coverage of scientific opinions for and against the theory of human-induced climate change (Lahsen, 2009; Brand and Brunnengraber, 2012). For instance, after a study of mainstream and alternative media in the US, Brand and Brunnengraber, (2012, p.16) reveal thus:

*Within American media the issues of climate skepticism versus the scientific consensus and debates on the scientific integrity of climate science have been far more prevalent than depictions of any problem-solution-chains. In this sense, the coverage of scientific knowledge production in this area has to some degree overshadowed the coverage of climate change phenomena themselves in the US mainstream media.*

This is a departure from the pattern of coverage in developing countries which focuses more on effects of climate change rather than the politics and scientific arguments behind it. Socio-economic and political structures of developing countries could be responsible for this pattern of coverage, since developed countries are scientifically and technologically more advanced to understand, discuss and emphasize the scientific aspects of climate change while developing countries seem to be way behind, concentrating on the likely effects of climate change.

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