



## Newspaper coverage of economic crimes in Nigeria: Content analysis of daily sun, Vanguard, the nation and the guardian

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### Abstract

Nigeria's socio-political and economic landscape has been blighted by the endemic evil of economic crimes since independence. Economic crimes are the bane of Nigerian development efforts. All these crimes harm Nigerian economy in no small measure. This paper focused on the newspaper coverage of economic crimes in Nigeria. The newspapers content analysed were *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard*, and *The Guardian* newspapers. The period under study were two years 2021 and 2022. The research method used was content analysis while the study was situated under the agenda setting theory and social responsibility theory. The findings of the research shows that the volume of the coverage is low. The study reveals that low significance was given to the coverage of the economic crimes as most of the stories by the newspapers appeared on the inside pages coupled with the fact that most of stories were not illustrated. Economic crimes were mostly covered using the news format. The direction of coverage was negative and there were no depth attached to the story. The study recommended that it is necessary to place the reportage of economic crimes articles on the front burner of Nigerian newspapers agenda giving the pervasiveness of the problem in the country.

**Keywords:** Newspaper, coverage, crime, economic crime

### Introduction

Without a doubt, underdevelopment and poverty among the populace are Nigeria's biggest challenges right now. These issues have put human and national security at danger. Lack of good governance and/or transparent leadership in both the public and private sectors of the economy may be to blame for the issue, which could affect Nigerians' vested interests in amenities for a good life or the improvement of the human condition through the provision of good, decent, and affordable housing, education, water, electricity, a good road network and transportation system, and so on. In a nutshell, it may be claimed that the Nigerian state has abjectly failed to carry out its fundamental duty of providing security and welfare services (see clause 14(2) (b) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 Constitution) <sup>[14]</sup>.

The core of this issue is the widespread economic crime that has recently been observed, so to speak, in proportions that have never been envisioned or experienced since the establishment of the Nigerian state in 1960. Scams of all kinds seem to be prevalent in the current Nigerian environment. Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) seem to be competing with one another to deceive the Nigerian people in an unholy alliance (Agu, 2009) <sup>[2]</sup>. The moral code of conduct for participation in politics and business has been abandoned by politicians and captains of industry, and graft has taken control. Life in Nigeria is almost becoming nasty, brutish, and short; there is a palpable state of anomie; and national security is in jeopardy because of the aforementioned economic crimes as well as others that aren't mentioned. Corruption/bribery, fraud, smuggling, human trafficking, stealing, money laundering, kidnapping, and you name it are here with us.

Authorities have debated the press's function over the years, debating whether it acts as a spark for crime or as a tool for mitigating it. The media have been recognised as a crucial tool in the fight against the global plague of economic crimes, and they are also seen as the most powerful

influencers of public opinion (AFRICAW - Africa and the World, 2012; WSCIJ, 2013) <sup>[1, 50]</sup>. A free and independent media is one of the main platforms for educating the public about corrupt activities, according to Transparency International, the World Anti-corruption Watchdog (AFRICAW, 2012) <sup>[1]</sup>. According to the AFRICAW group, Transparency International noted that by looking into and reporting on economic crimes, the media offers a crucial check on the use of entrusted authority for personal gain, bringing to light the wrongdoings of both public officials and corporate executives. The media can use its potential to influence government policy and action as well as its whistleblowing function to help bring about the much-needed development and good governance (WSCIJ, 2013) <sup>[50]</sup>.

It is significant to highlight that in modern times, the media now dominates the conversation on economic crimes rather than pulpits and philosophers. According to Anderson (2002) <sup>[6]</sup>, media coverage of economic crimes in certain areas of a country's economy is a good indicator of how widespread the disease is there and can help stop the spread. For instance, the extensive media coverage of scandals involving high-ranking politicians and economic crimes in Italy and Germany (Lashmar 2001) <sup>[26]</sup> led to the discrediting of political parties and the political system as a whole, and the conviction of several high-ranking politicians on bribery charges.

Newspapers, like other forms of media, are generally used to disseminate information, whether it be in the form of editorials, feature stories, or official opinions. This material is being spread for the purposes of informing, educating, entertaining, or enlightening people about the activities of mankind in his personal, social, political, economic, criminal, sporting, or leisure activities. The purpose of this essay is to investigate how Nigerian newspapers have covered economic crime.

### Statement of Problem

All human life has crime as a fundamental component of social phenomena. Nigeria has thus been referred to as one of the most criminally inclined countries in the world due to her poor degree of social security and her involvement in criminally inclined social activities. Reporting on public affairs by the media has always been a hot topic for academic discussion among communication specialists and scholars. Numerous economic criminal activities are reported in a single television report or radio report.

The general public has benefited from broadcast media's efforts to educate them on the risks of economic crime and potential solutions to eradicate it from society. Examples of sponsored programming used by the broadcast media to educate the public and combat economic crimes include Eagle on Radio, which airs on FRCN, and the EFCC Half Hour, which airs on NTA. However, how has print media supplemented this broadcast media effort? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to ascertain how Nigerian newspapers genuinely report economic crimes.

### Objectives of the Study

1. Determine the volume of coverage on economic crimes by the selected newspapers;
2. Ascertain the level of prominence attached to the reportage of economic crimes by the selected newspapers;
3. Identify the story type that received more attention by the selected newspapers in their coverage of economic crimes;
4. Ascertain the direction of economic crimes stories in the selected newspapers; and
5. Discover the treatment of stories on economic crimes in terms of depth in the selected newspapers

### Literature review Crime: an overview

The word 'crime' is of origin *viz*; 'Crimean' which means 'charge' or 'offence'. Crime is thus the intentional commission of an act deemed socially harmful; or dangerous and the reason for making any given act a crime is the public injury that would result from its frequent participation. The society therefore takes steps for its prevention by prescribing specific punishments for each crime. A crime may be defined as an act or omission, sinful or non-sinful, which a society or a study has of thought fit to punish or otherwise deal with under its laws for the time being in force.

Discourse about crime, a phenomenon present in all human societies is as old as civilization itself. What crime is and what crime is not have engaged the attention of scholars over time and in different climes. What becomes obvious from the discourse is that crime, apart from being relative and changing with time, also has both legal and social dimensions.

Marshall (1996) in Amzat *et al* (2012) <sup>[5]</sup>, underscoring the legal perspective conceives crime as an offence which goes beyond the personal and into the public sphere, breaking prohibited rules and laws to which legitimate punishments or sanctions are attached, and which requires the intervention of a public authority (the state or a local body). Okunola's (2002) <sup>[32]</sup> views are no different as he defines crime simply as an act or omission punishable by the state. However, both authors, like most sociologists are quick to add that a legal definition of crime is not sufficient as it only

takes cognisance of infractions against certain proscribed laws which is known as crime only when it gets to official attention and is processed by an enforcement agency.

The extent of crime for Okunola (2002) <sup>[32]</sup> goes beyond the detected and recorded crimes to include two other categories that are the undetected or unknown, and the detected or known, but unrecorded crime. The notion of social infraction signifies that not all social deviance constitute crime. There are some deviant behaviours prohibited in the society as manifest of degraded moral values but cannot be tried in the law court. It is in this vein that crime differs from deviance.

Socially, crime is seen as violation of the socio-cultural mores and norms of a group which is frowned upon and which attracts sanctions from other members of the group. As a social phenomenon, crime is increasing in both developed as well as developing countries, and as such is becoming one of the top concerns of the public and policy makers. The concern of crime to the public authorities in most countries is seen in crime control measures like increased funding to the police and recruitment of more police officers. Other measures by the government to control crime in some parts of world include the introduction of a community policing scheme, aimed at involving the public in issues of their own security and safety plus other sundry measures to control the crime situation in the country and inauguration of specialized agencies as in control of corruption and financial crime, anti-drug agency and so on.

### Pattern of crime news reportage

Crime news exhibit remarkably similar patterns in studies conducted at different times and places. From the earliest studies onwards, analysis of news reports have found that crimes of violence are featured disproportionately to their incidence in official crime statistics or victim surveys.

Sheley and Ashkin's (1981) <sup>[38]</sup> comparison of crime trends reported by the police and the press did not correspond. A review of 36 content analysis of crime news in the United States between 1960 and 1988, and 20 studies in 14 other countries between 1960 and 1987 indicated more interpersonal crime in the papers than to official statistics. The ratio of violent-to-property crimes appearing in surveyed newspapers was 82 to 2 while official statistics on the other hand reflected a property-to-violent crime ratio of more than 9 to 1 (Marsh, 1991) <sup>[27]</sup>.

Over-reporting violent and interpersonal crime (rape particularly) compared to official statistics and under reporting property offences was highlighted by Soothill and Walby (1991) as they found out that between 1951 and 1985, the number of rape trials in Britain increased nearly four times, from 119 to 450. In the same period, the number of rape cases reported in the press increased more than five times from 28 to 154. Studies conducted in the 1990s show the same pattern of over-reporting violent and interpersonal crimes and under-reporting non-violent crimes Chiricos *et al* (1997) <sup>[12]</sup>. Coverage of environmental crime in Hillsborough country, found that of the 878 chemical spills reported to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) only nine were reported in the *Tampa Tribune*.

Reiner *et al*'s (2000) historical study of two British newspapers since the Second World War further reinforced

the press over reporting tendency of violent crimes as the study found that homicide was reported most, accounting for about one-third of all crime-news stories throughout the period. It was further observed that property crime in which no violence occurred declined. Reiner further revealed that property crimes feature frequently in news stories during the 1940s and 1950s but after the mid-1960s, they were hardly ever reported unless some violence ensued from them. On the other hand, some offences began to feature prominently in news stories only after the mid-1960s, notably drug offences, which by the 1990s accounted for about 10 per cent of all crime stories (Reiner *et al*, 2000; Reiner, 2001) [34, 35].

Findings of Dubois (2002) [17] study on press reporting of organized crime in Australia similarly buttressed the fact that the press glorifies violent stories compared to non-violent stories, and that precedence is given to extreme forms of crime of those that involve vulnerable victims. Another consistent finding from the literature is the predominance of stories about criminal incidents, rather than analysis of crime patterns or the possible causes of crime. Criminal incidents are described in short and terse news items in some few paragraphs rather than writing extensive and analytical feature stories (Amari, 1999) [4].

Sherizon (1978) however criticizes the practice of writing only news items on the grounds that it only provides citizens with a public awareness of crime based upon an information rich and knowledge-poor foundation and that those interested in learning about crime from the media are only treated to examples and incidents. Beckett and Sasson (2000) [9] also hold Sherizon's ideas as they argue that crime stories in newspapers consist primarily of brief accounts of discrete events, with few details and little background materials.

Furthermore, the proportion of news devoted to crime of different types and the prominence with which it is presented varies according to newspapers' consideration of readers' interests. Williams and Dickson (1993) [48] for instance revealed that the percentage of stories dealing with crimes involving personal violence, and the salience they were given, measured by where they appeared in the layout and the extent of pictures accompanying them increased considerably depending on the popularity of the newspaper.

An indirect consequence of the pattern of offences reported by the newspapers is an exaggeration of police success in clearing-up crime (resulting largely from press reliance on police sources for stories). Marsh (1991) [27] argued after a review of 56 content analysis in 15 different countries between 1960 and 1988 that the over reporting of violent crimes is advantageous to the police because the police succeed more in solving violent crimes than property crimes. The position however is not reflective of the situation in weak state as most crimes (violent and non-violent), may not be resolved by the police. Thus, there is no exaggeration of police success in clearing-up crime in most weak states. Hence, situation in most third world usually reflect the inefficiency of the law enforcement agents.

Patterns of crime reporting also indicate the values of the press. The press indicates high risk areas in the society through risk-laden reports. This kind of report as Sherizon (1978) observed provide public awareness. This in most time assists the general public in implementation of precautionary efforts. It does not only inform the public about the areas but also the kind of people involved in such

criminalities. This is usually portrayed in mask-unveiling reports. This directs the anger and cautionary efforts of the public. Another value-laden report may take the form of blame-laden report. There are reports that take the form of 'where-were-the-police'. In cases where crimes are committed with impunity and without the trace of the law-enforcement agents, the press reports tend to blame the inefficiency of the agents in curtailing crimes in the society. This (in most cases) account for the 'reprisal' call on the press when a big round-up is made by the law-enforcement agents.

Pattern may also take the form of coverage-proven. When it is such, the aim of the media is to vindicate and eulogize their coverage. Such reports normally are international news; other news apart from crimes news could also serve similar purpose. Most importantly, the undertone of such reports is 'we-are-concerned' and 'we-were-there'. Meanwhile, like some other news that is magnified, sooth-captioned, some crime news is also returns-laden. The essential of this is to attract the general public for patronage. Such reports will attract more printing and plough a lot of returns. Soola, (2003) [40] posits that profit-making motive is central to most crime reports as the public would be interested in how and where such events happen; so they buy papers.

## Theoretical framework

### 1. Social responsibility theory

The social responsibility theory basically emphasizes the responsibility of the press to report every aspect of the society. Umechukwu (2004) [46], commenting on the theory asserted that "the press in any given society should be responsible in the performance of its functions" (p. 10). McQuail (2005) [28] emphasized that "the social responsibility of the press to provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning, serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and be a common carrier of the public expression and give a representative picture of constituent groups in society and also present and clarify the goals and values of society" (p. 172).

The chief duty of the media operating within the context of this theory is to raise conflict to the plane of discussion. With specific reference to reporting crime, Coleman (1999) [13] has reasoned that, by providing information in a public context, the media help to alter the basic conditions that predispose a society to, and sustain, crime. Similarly, by reporting on underlying causes and societal factors, the media serve to facilitate discussion of crime and violence and its solutions, while encouraging the inclusion of views outside the dominant ideology, which perceive crime and violence as being individually-located, and its solution in terms of punishment rather than prevention.

### Agenda-Setting theory

Accordingly, agenda-setting implies that the media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given point in time in a given society. Although the theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what people actually think, it does ascribe the power to determine what the public are thinking about.

This view is evident and buttressed by Agbese (1987) in Amzat, *et al* (2012) [5] that the media's role in shaping and

moulding public opinion. The press role and functions in the society aid in identifying and setting the tone of public debate on issues. By its agenda-setting activities, the press may consequently influence public perception on crime, create new categories of crime and impact the criminal justice system by the way it reports crime.

### Research methodology

The research design used for this study is content analysis. Content analysis is done on recorded materials and newspapers. The population was limited to all issues published by the three selected national dailies: *Daily Sun*, *the Guardian*, and *Vanguard* newspapers from January 1st, 2021, to December 31st 2022, which amounted to 2190. A total of 360 editions of the three selected newspapers formed the sample size of this study.

This research made use of the multi-stage sampling technique whereby varying techniques were involved at different stages in the selection process, like both probability and non-probability sampling techniques

(Sedgwick, 2015). Using the purposive sampling technique, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *Daily Sun* newspapers were selected for this study. The study is a two-year study.

This made the population 2190. The daily editions of the publications were used (weekly editions: Monday-Friday). Weekend publications were eliminated as they were special publications with a separate editorial staff. In determining the appropriate sample size for the study, one week was randomly selected in each month under study.

This amounted to 60 editions in each of the selected newspapers: *The Daily Sun*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*. The 60 editions were multiplied by two, which is the number of years under study. This amounted to 120 editions. Thus, to get the actual sample size, 120 was multiplied by three, which is the number of selected newspapers, making a total of 360 editions.

The code sheet was used as an instrument of data collection.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1:** Volume of Coverage

Newspaper	Volume	Percentage
<i>Daily Sun</i>	45	32%
<i>The Guardian</i>	62	44%
<i>Vanguard</i>	34	24%
Total	141	100%

**Research Question Two:** What is the level of prominence attached to the reportage of economic crimes by the selected newspapers?

**Table 2:** Placement of Stories

Placement	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
Front page	4	6	3	13	9%
Back page	-	-	-	-	-
Centre page	-	2	4	6	4%
Inside page	41	54	27	122	87%
Total	45	62	34	141	100%

**Table 3:** Illustration of Stories

Illustration	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
Photographs	4	5	6	15	11%
Cartoons	4	3	2	9	6%
Charts	-	-	-	-	-
Graphs	-	-	-	-	-
Not illustrated	37	54	26	117	83%
Total	45	62	34	141	100%

**Research Question Three:** What is the story type that received more attention by the selected newspapers in the coverage of economic crimes?

**Table 4:** Story Genre

Story type	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
News	29	50	22	101	72%
Editorials	3	2	-	5	4%
Features	8	5	6	19	13%
Letters to the editor	-	-	-	-	-
Opinion articles	5	5	6	16	11%
Total	45	62	34	141	100%

**Research Question Four:** What is the direction of economic crimes stories in the selected newspapers?

**Table 5:** Direction of Coverage

Direction	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage
Positive	12	14	9	35	25%
Negative	25	42	19	86	61%
Neutral	8	6	6	20	14%
Total	45	62	34	141	100%

**Research question five:** What is the treatment of stories on economic crimes in terms of depth in the selected newspapers?

**Table 6:** Length of economic crimes Stories

Story Length	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
1–5 Inches	29	50	22	101	72%
6–10 Inches	11	12	4	27	19%
11–5 Inches	5	-	8	13	9%
16 Inches and above	-	-	-	-	-
Total	45	62	34	141	100%

### Discussion of Findings

A total of 141 reports were found and analysed for the period of this study. Discoveries were made from the analysis which calls for a detailed discussion along the line of the research questions and proving or disproving the efficacy of the theories employed for the study.

Research question one sought to unravel the volume of coverage given to economic crimes by the newspapers. Thus, within the period of the study, the newspapers had 141 stories on economic crimes. Thus, *Daily sun* had 45 stories on economic crimes, *The Guardian* had 62 stories while *Vanguard* had 34 stories. Bring the total stories on economic crimes to 141 within the period under study. This indicates that the volume of coverage is low

This does not follow the findings of early studies on crime. Williams and Dickinson (1993) <sup>[48]</sup> discovered a rise in the percentage of crimes stories when they compared coverage of crime in 10 national daily newspapers for four weeks. Okoro (2001) <sup>[30]</sup> revealed that the percentage of crime stories in two Nigerian newspapers, which editions were randomly selected from 1993 to 1998 was 5.98 percent, coming behind issues such as government activities, politics etc. Reiner *et al* (2000) <sup>[35]</sup> and Reiner (2001) <sup>[34]</sup> also found a generally upward, (albeit fluctuating trend) in the proportion of stories focussed on crime in *The Times* and *The Mirror* for each year between 1945 and 1991 with the sharpest increase occurring during the late 1960s, when the average annual proportion of crime stories almost doubled from around 10% to around 20% in both papers. The obvious reasons for this kind of situation is the difficulty in tracking the crime and the reluctance of victims to report the issues to the appropriate authority.

Research question two sought to find out the level of prominence attached to the reportage of economic crimes by the selected newspapers. The answer to this question is found in Tables 2 and 3 under the codes Placement and Illustration respectively. The page placement of stories on economic crimes by the newspapers showed that much of the stories appeared on the inside pages. Thus, 121 stories representing 87% were seen on the inside pages while only 13 stories representing 9% were seen on the front pages. This indicates that the economic crimes were not given prominence by the newspapers.

In the illustration of the stories as seen in table 3, it was seen that much of the stories were not illustrated. Thus, 15 economic crime stories representing 11% were illustrated with photographs, 9 stories representing 6% were illustrated with a cartoon while 117 stories representing 83% were not illustrated. This implies that economic crimes stories were not given illustration which would naturally draw readers to it due to the photographs attached to the stories. It is worthy to add that *The Guardian* had more stories that were not illustrated.

Consequently, following the afore-stated, it is quite clear that there was no much prominence attached to the coverage of economic crimes in the period under study. This supports

the finding of Fadairo, Fadairo & Aminu (2014) <sup>[20]</sup> who found out that 87.4% stories on corruption news were given low significance, that is, they were placed on inside pages.

Research question three sought to ascertain the type of report that received more attention by newspapers in the coverage of economic crimes in Nigeria. The answer to this question is seen in Table 4 under the code “story genre”. Thus, it was seen that most of the stories covered under the economic crimes were straight news stories. There were 101 news stories representing 72% with *The Guardian* contributing 50 news stories. For example, in January 4, 2021 edition of *The Guardian*, page 4, a headline that depicted straight news story was seen-*SERAP Seeks Probe of Alleged Missing N3.8b in Health Ministry*. However, features had only 19 stories representing 13 percent.

This greatly supersedes other story types like features, editorials, letters to the editor and opinion articles which received minimal attention in the newspapers within the period under review as evident in Table four. This finding was criticised by Sherizon (1978) who asserts that the practice of writing only news items on crimes is on the grounds that it only provides citizens with a public awareness of crime based upon an information rich and knowledge-poor foundation and that those interested in learning about crime from the media are only treated to examples and incidents. He argues that crime stories in newspapers consist primarily of brief accounts of discrete events, with few details and little background materials. Amari (1999) <sup>[4]</sup> criticising this pattern of reporting said that criminal incidents are described in short and terse news items in some few paragraphs rather than writing extensive and analytical feature stories.

Research question four sought to discover the direction of economic crimes stories in the selected newspapers. Data from the field shows that majority of the stories 86(61%) direction is negative. This finding follows the assertion of Fogarty (2005, p.153) who said that “The news media have a penchant for emphasising the negative when the economy is performing poorly”. This finding corroborates the results of the present research. One reason for this negativity is the fact that newspaper organizations are business outfits, and to sell their papers, stories that capture the interest of the public. Fogarty (2005, p.165) puts it clear that “one possible reason is that reporters and editors may emphasize the negative to pique the public’s interest, thus attempting to maximize revenues from readership and viewership.” The consequence of this is that citizens were exposed more to the side effects of the menace and this made them to believe that the government was doing little or nothing to contain the situation as it ought to.

Research question five sought to understand the treatment of stories on economic crimes in terms of depth in the selected newspapers. Out of 141 stories examined, 259(81%) was within the range of 1-5 inches. This was followed by 27 (19%) stories within 6-10 inches and 13 (9%) stories within 11-15 inches. This shows that most stories did not have

depth. This is not surprising, as most of the stories were reported as news stories. News reports are always straight to the point without opinions, interpretations, analyses, or explanations. It is evidenced, therefore, that story types such as features, editorials, analysis, columns among others which are platforms through which newspapers can do in-depth coverage recorded low figures.

Thus, it could be inferred that the press, as it relates to economic crimes issues gave the audience news stories mostly based on the occurrence of events around the issue as can be seen in the result of research question three. It is worthy to mention that straight news stories, unlike opinion articles and editorial, is brief and not in-depth. Since the amount of space or column inches given to a story shows how important such a story or issue is to either the press or government, it then follows that the press does not give enough depth to stories or issues emanating from economic crimes.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined the newspaper coverage of economic crimes with the analysis of three newspapers: *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*. Economic crimes stories were given low coverage. The prominence to these stories was very low as most of the stories appeared inside pages. Majority of the stories was reported as a straight news as could be seen from the analysis. The direction of coverage is negative and the stories does not have depth.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations will be productive if given due consideration.

1. The media should be encouraged and should diligently cover stories on economic crimes and this will serve as their quota in eradicating the menace.
2. It is necessary to place the reportage of economic crimes articles on the front burner of Nigeria newspapers agenda giving the pervasiveness of the problem in the country.
3. Also, efforts should be intensified by journalists in the area writing of features, editorials and other opinion piece on economic crimes. This is required to raise a virile social movement against economic crimes in the country.
4. More reports prompted by the initiatives of the journalists should be reported on issues like this as they elaborate more and not basing reportage on events occurrences alone through straight news.

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