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Newspaper Framing of Environmental Pollution in Rivers State, Nigeria from January 2022 to December 2023

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Abstract

Environmental pollution is a serious problem which some scholars described as life-threatening issue, especially in a development country like Nigeria. This prompted the study which centred on newspaper framing of environmental pollution in Rivers State from January 2022 to December 2023. This is due to the fact that studies have established the role of newspapers' framing of an issue in eliciting actions and policy direction toward solving problems. The study was guided by research objectives which include examine the frequency of framing of environmental pollution in Rivers State by Punch, Vanguard, Daily Trust and the Tide newspapers within the period under study and ascertain the prominence accorded environmental pollution in Rivers State by the newspapers under study in their reportage, among others. It is also guided by framing and agenda setting theories. It adopted content analysis as the research design. The study found that frequency of framing of oil spillage and gas flaring by the four newspapers was abysmal; that prominence was not given to reportage of oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by Punch, Vanguard, Daily Trust and the Tide newspapers. It also found that solution frame is the dominant frame used by the newspapers, among others. In view of these findings, the researchers recommend among others that oil spillage and gas flaring should be framed frequently by Nigerian newspapers and other media of mass information because oil spillage and gas flaring are serious issues which affect many aspects of life and that prominence should be given to oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by the newspapers because of their consequences on human and aquatic health, social and environmental consequence, among others.

Keywords: Environment, Framing, Newspaper, Pollution, Rivers State



Introduction

From the beginning, the environment was created for human's comfort. Human beings are therefore, required to take care of their comfort for their continued comfort. Corroborating this view, Godam (2022) asserts that from the creation of Adam, God the creator of the universe charged human beings with the responsibility of taking care of the environment and everything within it. Similarly, Okwueze (2024) maintains that God gave human beings authority over all other things that were created by him. From the pre-historic times, human beings have continually and consistently interacted symbiotically with their environment. Studies by (Ochonogor and Cookey 2016; Okwueze (2024)) have established that from the earliest times, human's relationship with the environment was observed as that of a superior and a subordinate, with the human beings seeing nature as the superordinate reality and themselves as the subordinate. Nevertheless, amid rapid advancements in science and technology, particularly with man's quest to triumph over the environment for comfort came a matching drastic change in human's attitude towards the environment (Ochonogor & Cookey, 2016).

The drastic change in people's attitude toward the environment is consequential, as reactions from the environment are evident in the society today. Okon (2017) contends that due to the domineering attitude of human beings, they often times engage in socio-economic activities that affect the environment negatively rather than preserve it. As a result of the above situations, the world over, environmental pollution poses great challenge to humanity, this calling for environmental activism. As observed by Okoro and Nnaji (2012) on the African continent, the first conference by African leaders on the environment took place in Cairo in 1985. At the conference, it was resolved that there should be collaboration among countries in Africa to address the challenge. Currently, more voices have been added to the clamour for healthy and sustainable environment. Environmental activism has been in existence for a long period at global level. The first recorded incident of environmental activism took place nearly 40 years ago in Rajasthan, India when a number of people of Rajasthan laid down their lives to resist the cutting of trees in their region. This incident provided the springboard for the evolution of more organised environmental activism which the world is experiencing today (Nwabueze, 2015).

However, as noted by Reuben (2020) human beings whose responsibility it is to protect the environment from depletion, are not living up to that expectation. As a result, human actions have not ceased to cause unlimited destruction to the environment. Obeten (2023) is particularly concerned about the situation in developing countries such as Nigeria, asserting that there are avalanche of environmental degradations among which is land dilapidation which constitutes grave environmental problem because if land is sullied, it ceases to have the ability to sustain life.

Oil exploration and exploitation in the South-South region of Nigeria has increased environmental pollution in Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta axis of the country. One of the chief glitches that are confronting the Niger Delta region is of environmental contamination which causes prodigious harms to the earth. Pollution of the environment occurs when the environment lacks the capacity to process and neutralise harmful by-products occasioned by human activities in on time (Okoro & Nnaji, 2012).

Amid this situation, Nwachukwu (2016) contends that a clean and healthy environment is a necessity for citizen's progress and social wellbeing. Therefore, awareness about the consequences of unhealthy behaviour on the environment has been identified as part of the measures that should be adopted in eliminating or reducing the risk. At the centre of the awareness initiative are the mass media. Yousaf (2013), in John and Jonjua (2018), report that communication scholars and environmentalists have acknowledged the indispensable role of the media in environmental sustainability. The public depends on the media for accurate information for what is happening around them for prompt decision. The mass



media are powerful because they appeal to and are actually able to reach so many people from all ends of the social, economic and political spectrum.

Alabi (2017) is equally of the view that dissemination of news is one of the most important functions of mass media. He maintains that societal people actively seek news and information to keep themselves abreast of developments; keep them relevant and plan their lives. Hence, the media have become integral part of our lives. The mass media adopt different strategies in carrying out their social and constitutional responsibilities. One of the strategies is through framing of events or issues. Ndinojuo et al. (2018) while explaining media framing, aver that the media lay emphasis on particular aspects of happenings and then make efforts to give them meaning in order for the audience to interpret them. They maintain that frames are constructs that aid in structuring meaning of message, especially with the information they are framed to convey.

There are other environmental pollutions in Rivers State but this study explored how the *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* and the *Tide* newspapers framed oil spillage and gas flaring in the state, from January 2022 to December 2023. This is due to the multifarious effect of these environmental pollutions on human beings and the environment. The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the frequency of framing of environmental pollution in Rivers State by *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* and the *Tide* newspapers within the period under study;
2. Ascertain the prominence accorded environmental pollution in Rivers State by the newspapers under study in their reportage; and
3. Investigate the dominant frames used by the newspapers under study in the reportage of environmental pollution in Rivers State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by framing and agenda setting theories. Lamidi and Olisa (2016) hint that Erving Goffman in 1974 propounded framing theory, following his work entitled *framing analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. Ogbodo, Ugbo, Duru and Jibrin (2021) corroborate the above view by asserting that the idea of framing theory originated from the work of Gregory Bateson and was advanced by a sociologist-Erving Goffman in 1974. The theory explains the mental outline through which individual's experiences are organised. However, in the context of journalism and communication studies, this theory refers to the approaches that journalists adopt in reporting news.

Oluwadamilare and Ekwueme (2020) assert that framing theory recognises issue, discusses it, acts about it, take a position and recommends solutions. The theory further explains that the news media frequently adopt the use of some particular language, make allusion to some background sources, select certain pictorial representations and refer to a particular issue in passing on its messages to its audience, thereby, influencing the mind-set of the audience towards a defined thought. In the views of Ndinojuo, Ihejirika and Okon (2018), framing theory is seen by some academics as the second aspect of the agenda setting theory. It makes others to accept one meaning over another because of how the issue is presented by the mass media. Through framing, the mass media place emphasis on certain features of situations and then make efforts to give them meaning in order for the audience to decode them.

On the other hand, agenda setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. It is widely believed among communication and media scholars that the tenets of the theory originated from the work of Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion* of 1922. Davis and Baran (2010) note that the idea of agenda-setting has been with many scholars for a very long time, beginning from days of the penny press. In explaining the theory, Davies and Baran hint that Walter Lippmann, in his work *Public Opinion*, published in (1922), argued that the masses do not deal directly with their environments as much as they respond to *pictures* in their heads. This is because the actual environment is completely too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. Although Walter Lippmann did not explicitly use the term *agenda setting*, Cohen (1963) is generally credited with turning Lippmann's ideas into the theory of



agenda-setting as we have it today, stressing that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion.

Wogu (2008) notes that the masses consider as important the issues reported in the media and that major issues discussed in society are introduced by the mass media. This is the idea behind the agenda-setting theory of mass communication. Ochonogor (2016) quoted Okpoko (2001) to have explained the philosophy behind agenda setting by asserting that media experts are of the view that by considering a particular topic worthy of giving prominent treatment in the mass media over a period of time, they would have succeeded in influencing the audience to believe that the issue is indeed, prominent.

According to Nyekwere and Ajaero (2019), this implies that the media use words to create viewpoints and direct understanding in a context. So, how the audience perceive an issue when exposed to only a particular aspect of the information on a particular issue may not be the same when exposed to all pertinent features of the event. Therefore, the media choice of words and the way such words are used determine audience perception of such issue. It goes to suggest that the tenets of agenda-setting theory recognises the fact that issues considered by the mass media as important will be projected (the issues, therefore, become media agenda), and will be consistently projected, analysed and discussed. Public awareness of the issues will increase; the public will think about the issues and opinions formed based on how the media projected the issues. So, societal agenda on issues are set first, in the media, and later by the public (which include the government and decision-makers).

These two theories are considered appropriate for the study due to their relevance and similarities. As observed by Salaudeen *et al.* (2018) framing has some nexus with agenda setting theory, which focuses on how the mass media direct attention to some issues through coverage and therefore, alter the perceived importance of such issues in reality. Nevertheless, while agenda setting relates with importance of issues, framing on other hand, deals with the presentation of such issues. Despite the differences, the theories play complementary roles, hence their consideration for this study. This study, therefore, explores these complementary roles in finding solution to the identified environmental problems in Rivers State.

Method

Content analysis research method was adopted for this study. According to Adelekan (2014) there are over 100 newspapers that are published regularly in Nigeria of which about 17 have a national circulation. Out of the 17 national newspapers, three, which are: *The Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers were selected while the Rivers State Government-owned newspaper-Tide is also selected, for the study. The choice of the three national dailies is due to their wide circulation and huge readership, while the Tide newspaper is selected to give local perspective to the study.

The time frame for the study is equal to twenty-four months, and there are approximately 730 days in twenty-four months and each of the four selected newspapers would publish equal number of issues within twenty-four months. For the twenty-four months, each newspaper would publish 730 issues. Therefore, the four dailies would have $730 \times 4 = 2,920$ issues. The study adopted composite week sampling technique. A composite week was drawn in each of the months under study. Based on Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) advice that a study might use a sample of one Monday (drawn at random from the four or five possible Mondays in the month), one Tuesday (drawn from the available Tuesdays), and so on, until all weekdays have been included; we considered that there are 104 weeks covering the month of January 2022 to December 2023. Meanwhile, there are 7 days in each week, which means that 7 days were studied in a month. The dates selected applied to all the four newspapers. Therefore, 7×24 (two years) will be 168 editions for each newspaper. This number multiplied by 4 (number of newspapers studied) gave a total of 672 sample size.

Data were collected with the help of two research assistants who helped in coding the items. The content categories (frequency of framing and prominence given to environmental pollution by the newspapers under study, while units of analysis are straight news stories, features, editorial, opinion



articles and cartoon) which were used to classify the newspaper contents. Data for this study were analysed using quantitative method. The data obtained from coding of newspaper contents were arranged in tabular format. The study used coding sheets to generate the data. To achieve this, the stories in the sampled newspapers were coded based on unit of analysis and content categories. The empirical calculation of result showed the correlation of (r) of 0.99. This showed a high correlation, thus, the instrument had strong reliability.

Findings

Four newspapers, comprising three national dailies and one Rivers State-based newspaper were studied. These newspapers were studied from January 2022-December 2023. Seven editions were selected for each month, for each of the newspapers. This entails that for every newspaper, 168 editions were studied. This brings the total editions of the papers studied to 672. The research had access to the six hundred and seventy-two editions of the four newspapers, coded them and content analysed.

Table 1 shows the frequency of framing of oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by the selected newspapers

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
Punch	19	26
Vanguard	13	17.8
Daily Trust	14	19.1
The Tide	27	36.9
Total	73	100

Table 1 above indicates that the frequency of framing of oil spillage and gas flaring by the four newspapers was abysmal. The *Tide newspaper* framed the environmental pollutions only 27 times of the 168 editions of the newspaper. This is followed by Punch newspaper which framed the situation only 19 times; *Daily Trust newspaper* 14 times, and Vanguard newspaper barely 13 times. The total percentage of framing of oil spillage and gas flaring by the newspapers is 11% which is less than an average. However, the *Tide newspaper* has the highest framing on oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State. The implication is that most of the views regarding environmental pollution in Rivers State were obtained from the Tide newspaper which is state-based newspaper. More so, agenda set on oil spillage and gas flaring would only attract the attention of local and/or regional stakeholders and the masses. On the part of the media, the implication of this finding is that the lesser framing the news media have on environmental issues of this nature, the lower the level of public awareness. This has negative consequence on the level of awareness of the citizens concerning environmental pollution in Rivers State.



Table 2 Types of Newspaper Content through which oil spillage and gas flaring are framed by the selected newspapers.

		Story Type				
Total Story Published During the Period Under Study (Jan. 2022-Dec. 2023)		Straight news stories	Feature Story	Editorial	Opinion Article	Cartoon
Punch Newspaper	19 (26. %)	16	2	0	1	0
Vanguard Newspaper	13 (17.8%)	12	1	0	0	0
Daily Trust Newspaper	14 (19.1%)	12	4	0	0	0
The Tide Newspaper	27 (36.9 %)	22	4	1	0	0
Total	73	62	11	1	1	0

As shown in the table above, framing of oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by the various newspapers, was mostly done through straight news (deadpan reporting). Of the nineteen times *Punch newspaper* framed the environmental problem under study; the issues appeared 16 times under straight news while *Vanguard newspaper* carried the situation 12 times under straight news of the 13 times it framed the situation. *Daily Trust newspaper* also framed the situation 12 times through deadpan reporting, out of the 14 times it framed the problem, while the Tide newspaper framed it 22 times through deadpan reporting, of the 27 times the problem appeared in the editions under study. This shows that all the newspapers adopted same approach in the framing of the environmental problem in Rivers State. The implication of this is that framing of oil spillage and gas flaring by the newspapers was not detailed. The newspapers only informed the masses and stakeholders about the problem but did not educate them. Feature stories and editorial treatment would have deepened people's understanding of the problem and set the agenda on the issue. This is because soft news adds more flesh to the hard news and gives it more meaning while editorial conveys stance of newspaper organisation about an issues. Such position is usually taken seriously because of the role of the mass media in nation building process.

Table 3 shows prominence accorded oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by the studied newspapers

Newspaper	Prominence		
	Front Page	Inside Page	Back Page
Punch	2	17	0
Vanguard	0	13	0
Daily Trust	0	14	0
The Tide	10	17	0
Total	12	61	0

Table 3 above indicates that *Punch newspaper* framed oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State only twice on its front page, of the 19 times it reported the situation. Deductively, only 10.52% of the stories framed by the newspaper appeared on the front page while 17, which is 89.47%, was framed inside the newspaper, as the situation did not receive back page treatment. Vanguard newspaper did not frame the situation on its front page. Framing of oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State by Vanguard newspaper, appeared only in its inside pages. Daily Trust newspaper took same approach. Meanwhile, the *Tide newspaper* framed the situation 10 times on its front page. This shows that 37.03% of the situation was framed by the Tide newspaper on its front page while 62.96% of the framed situation appeared in its



inside page. None of the newspapers, however, frame the situation at the back page. By implication, none of the newspapers ascribe prominence to oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State.

Table 4 shows the dominant frames used by the newspapers under study in the reportage of environmental pollution in Rivers State

Newspaper	Dominant Frame
Punch	Solution Frame
Vanguard	Attribution of Responsibility Frame
Daily Trust	Economic Consequence Frame
The Tide	Solution Frame

Table 4 points to the fact that the dominant frame used by the newspapers is solution frame. This shows that the newspapers in framing the environmental pollution in Rivers State, also understand the importance of advocacy which some referred to as solution journalism. It indicates that in framing the situation, the newspapers played down on blame, responsibility, consequences and conflict, rather focused on how the problem could be solved. This approach may have been adopted to avoid misinterpretation of the story or in order not to ignite crisis due to the sensitive nature of the situation and the nature of the studied area which had witnessed several agitations by environmentalists and other concerned individuals.

Discussion

Research question 1 has been answered based on data contained in table one above. As could be seen in that table, framing of oil and gas spillage in Rivers State by the newspapers under study, appeared only 73 times out of the 672 editions which is 43.3% of the issues. Thus, the rate of framing of oil spillage and gas flaring by the four newspapers was awful. This finding corroborates earlier study by Innocent (2016) which notes that in terms of incidence, environmental stories had an average frequency rate of 0.5 stories per issue of the newspapers examined.

Table 3 above answered research question 2. Out of the 73 times that the four newspapers framed oil spillage and gas flaring during the period of study, the problem appeared only 12 times on the front pages of only two newspapers. This entails that only 16.43% of the stories appeared on the front page. This is grossly inadequate, and shows that the newspapers did not accord prominence to environmental pollution in Rivers State. It means that the environmental pollution in Rivers State would not receive the desired attention from government and other stakeholders because as noted by Ogu (2020) one of the ways of giving priority attention to the environment is by giving environmental issues prominence in frequent reportage of events by the mass media. This approach is aimed at attracting the attention of people and the government to develop genuine environmental management plans that can address the problems which hinder sustainable development.

This result agrees with the findings by Okoro and Nnaji (2012) in a study on press coverage of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta: content analysis of the *Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Thisday* Newspapers, which ascertained that in spite of the growing rate of global concern for the environment, the newspapers did not strategically place stories on environmental pollution in the Niger Delta on the front or back pages. There is no much difference between this finding and the outcome of a study by Okon (2017) which observed that the mass media studied all spread contents across similar categories of straight news, features, editorial while advertorial did not hit an average score. Meanwhile, of the content categories, space was given to the subject matter on the features category only. The above cited scholar believed that since gas flaring is an environmental concern, the newspapers would have paid serious attention to it in order to curtail the problem.

Data in table 4 above answered research question 3. Solution frame is the dominant frame used by the newspapers. This shows that the newspapers in framing the environmental pollution in Rivers State, also understand the importance of advocacy which some referred to as solution journalism. It points to the fact that in framing the situation, the newspapers played down on blame, responsibility, consequences and crisis, rather focused on how the problem could be solved. This approach may have been adopted to avoid misinterpretation of the story or in order not to ignite crisis due to the sensitive nature of the situation and the condition of the people which had witnessed several agitations by environmentalists in the state and other concerned individuals in the Niger Delta region at large. As noted by Janssen (2010) journalists apply frames to their messages and texts to deliberately guide the reader's interpretation of that text. This is a very subtle and powerful way to influence an audience, as frames suggest a certain way of interpretation.

This finding, however, differs from that of Holt and Major's (2010) study which found that both national and local newspapers used the attribution of responsibility frame most frequently. Altogether, the findings have again proven the relevance of framing and agenda setting theories. Frames are interpretative storylines that talk about why a situation or an issue is a problem, who or what is responsible for it and what should be done in addressing it. Meanwhile, agenda setting talks about the fact that whatever the mass media consider important and project it to the masses, that is what the masses will also consider as important issue. So, as the mass media repeatedly beam light on the issue and place it strategically in the media space, such issue becomes dominant matter that public discourse will focus on.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that prominence was not given to oil spillage and gas flaring in the studied newspaper. This is despite the seriousness of the situation. It, therefore, goes to show that the geo-political depiction of Nigerian newspaper does not influence their framing of environmental pollution, rather their editorial policy and perhaps prominence as news value. This conclusion is drawn because of the four newspapers, two (*Vanguard* and the *Tide* newspapers) are from the South-South region of Nigeria. The *Tide* newspaper, for example, is owned by the Rivers State Government, yet framing of oil spillage and gas flaring in these newspapers was poor. Based on the findings we recommend that oil spillage and gas flaring should be framed adequately by Nigerian newspapers and other media of mass information because they are serious issues which affect many aspects of life; prominence should be given to oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State because of their consequences on human and aquatic health, social and environmental consequence and that more newspapers should adopt solution frame in reporting oil spillage and gas flaring to the masses, as this will help to douse tension associated with the problem.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Oil spillage and gas flaring should be framed frequently by Nigerian newspapers and other media of mass information. Oil spillage and gas flaring are serious issues which affect many aspects of life. For example, gas flaring contributes to climate change. Therefore, Nigerian newspapers should not focus attention on climate change and neglect framing of gas flaring. As argued by Emenyeonu and Mohamad (2017) while the huge menace posed by climate change cannot be denied, it is also of paramount importance that other pressing environmental woes should not be ignored or left behind while addressing climate change. This is more apt in countries like Nigeria where media coverage of environmental issues emphasizes climate change other than major environmental issues.
2. Prominence should be given to oil spillage and gas flaring in Rivers State because of their consequences on human and aquatic health, social and environmental consequence, etc.



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3. Nigerian newspapers should adopt both solution and responsibility frames more in presenting oil spillage and gas flaring to the masses. This will help in prompting actions from policy makers.

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