

Analysis of News Presentation Patterns in Three Selected Catholic Newspapers in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The Catholic Church has communication in its Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA). Communication is its life, as it directs how to propagate belief and make sense of the world around it. Hence, the Church also communicates like every human society that desires growth and life.

Objective: The study's thrust is to examine the pattern of coverage (issues, frequency, and tone) by *Catholic Herald*, *The Leader*, and *Catholic Weekly Independent* from 1961 to 2018.

Methodology: The study adopted quantitative content analysis as a method strategy. Three Catholic newspapers were purposively selected, with 1120 editions covering 1961 and 2018. Moreover, coding guides and sheets were adopted as research instruments, while issues reported, issues of prominence, and tone and focus formed the content category. The units of analysis were homily from the Pope, education, politics, racial conflict, and others, and inter-coder reliability was ensured among the coders.

Results: Findings showed that the newspapers covered many issues outside of religion despite being religious-oriented. Specifically, the *Catholic Independent* newspaper had more comprehensive coverage and content than *The Leader* and *Catholic Herald* newspapers.

Unique Contribution: This study could help catholic newspapers in Nigeria redirect their focus and become more competitive in the sales and advertising market by increasing the profile of consumers and advertisers who patronise them.

Conclusion: Catholic newspapers have undoubtedly accommodated more stories outside religion in their news content.

Recommendation: Catholic newspapers need more editorial independence to sustain the current trends of the newspaper business. Also, religious news and content should be tailored to how it affects the socio-economic life of Nigerians in the form of liberation journalism.

Keywords: frequency, news presentation, public relations, catholic newspapers, prominence.

Introduction

The Catholic Church has communication in its Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA). This is because communication is basic to growth and health, the same way DNA is basic to human growth and health. In short, communication is its life. Communication codes guide how to propagate belief and make sense of the world around it. Hence, the Church communicates like every human society that desires growth and life (Offor et al., 2015). According to Anameje (2023), the Church has experienced communication right from its infancy to its present technological explosion. It nursed communication and practically saw it grow. It once used orality to communicate its teachings and then adapted to advancements as they came. It has always been believed that no matter the form of communication takes time, its goal should always be a universal brotherhood of men, peace, and human solidarity.

Moreover, people everywhere should learn to use communication tools to promote these core human and societal values. The Church has, therefore, warned about embedded dangers as communication changes form over time. Hence it adapts to these forms to lead the way and baptise the change in form. It therefore communicates using newspapers, magazines, radio, television, new media/internet, books, hymn books, bulleting, newsletters, breviaries, dictionaries, bible etc.

The print-based publications are called the press by structure (Offor et al., 2015). However, the press plays a key role in midwifing communication in society. They do this by disseminating information and ensuring education, entertainment, and mobilisation (Jatula, 2017). As enunciated by Jatula (2017), the press as a structured industry is now seen as the ‘fourth estate’ to recognise its stately duty of being the link between the governed and their government and for its watchdog function in society.

Thus, this study focuses on Church newspapers for obvious reasons, one of which is the fact that it is the oldest in the press. Newspaper enjoyed a beginning that is traceable to the 17th century, as it is even older than Nigeria’s independence from the grips of colonialists. According to Apuke and Tunca (2020), newspaper publishing in Nigeria could be traced back to the pre-independence days, precisely in 1859 when Henry Townsend, the Anglican missionary and entrepreneur, established *Iwe Irohin*, which became the country’s premier newspaper. However, it was not until Sixty-five (65) years after (June 21, 1924) that Archbishop Leo Taylor established the premier Catholic Newspaper in Nigeria and named it ‘*The Catholic Herald*’. Since then, the newspaper industry in Nigeria has witnessed phenomena growth, becoming a tool individuals and entities use to state and defend their ideologies, religious and political alike (Aliagan, 2015).

Concomitantly, this study is designed to address the concerns of stakeholders of the Catholic press who believe that Catholic newspapers only publish Church news. These stakeholders highlighted so many challenges and problems of Catholic newspapers and adduced them to the overbearing prominence of Church news. Although addressing church news in any Christian religious newspaper is fundamental, Catholic newspapers cannot be an exception. To what extent does Church news dominate the contents of Catholic newspapers? Are there certain issues these newspapers address along with Church news? If other issues got the attention of these newspapers, what are they? What is the level of prominence given to issues outside religion? What is the tone of such stories? These are the various questions this study seeks to proffer answers to. Therefore, this study aims to highlight trending issues found in three selected Catholic newspapers published between 1961 and 2018.

Objectives of Study

The aims and objectives of this research include the following:

1. To highlight the issues under focus by the *Catholic Herald*, *The Leader*, and *Catholic Weekly Independent* from 1961 to 2018
2. To determine the level of prominence given to issues by these newspapers
3. To identify the tone of such stories

Significance/Contribution of Study

This study can help Catholic newspapers in Nigeria to refocus their philosophy, especially in the area of sales and advertising, in order to carve a niche for themselves in the industry. It also can guide proprietors and publishers to ensure they follow the right direction regarding the mode of appointing editors and leadership of the newspapers. Bishops usually prefer editors, most times priests, who accept the public relations model as such editors would devote attention to Church news. The ownership/publisher influence on the content, therefore, becomes overbearingly

palpable. Hence, this study gives further insights to these proprietors on appointing core professionals at the helms of affairs.

Conceptual Clarifications

Catholic Herald Newspaper

As mentioned in the introduction, the *Catholic Herald newspaper* is the number one tabloid in the Catholic Church in Nigeria. It commenced operation on June 21, 1924. Archbishop Leo Taylor established the newspaper to the delight of the people of Lagos. As Akodu (2023, p. 30) recalls, “It started a year before Herbert Macaulay’s newspaper, *Lagos Daily News*, debuted. (Taylor) established a printing press in Obalende area of Lagos to produce the newspaper and other print requirements of the Archdiocese.” Fr. Dennis Slattery was the pioneer editor of the paper. Slattery enjoyed great visibility with the state in his time. As editor, he constantly partnered with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). Around 1945, his ‘nationalist’ fervour became fired up. He played a role in the 1945 general and Enugu coal miners’ strikes.

The British government attempted thrice to expel him from the country without success. He was a founding member of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). He was also a founding member of the Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE). He was an avid footballer. He operated from the inside left position while playing for the Lagos United Football team. In 1956, he founded St. Finbarr’s College, Akoka, Lagos. As we know, education, sports, social advocacy, and politics are important issues journalists cover routinely. As a result, they are dear to news gathering and coverage. These issues must have gotten prominence in the *Catholic Herald* at the time. Regarding the paper’s outlook or external presentation, Sir Richard Odeyemi (Odeyemi, 2017, p. 12) avers, “It is a long tabloid.” Here, it is the personality of the editor that was likely to drive and enhance news coverage.

The Leader Newspaper

Bishop Brendan Joseph Whelan founded *The Leader Newspaper* in Owerri on August 15, 1956. He also established Assumpta Press to publish the diocese’s newspaper and other print requirements such as hymn books, bible, newspaper, books, pastoral items, educational items, pamphlets, etc. In 1977, the *leader newspaper* broke into three businesses: Newspaper, Bookshop and Press (Nwalo, 2016, p. 26). Today, however, the press director also manages the newspaper as Editor-in-Chief. Fr. William Maher CSSP was its pioneer editor (1957-1968). The newspaper covered the whole Owerri diocese, including today’s Rivers and Bayelsa States. As a result of the wide coverage, the business attempted to provide resources to manage operations very well.

It started a Limited Liability Company called ‘Mater Farm’, which members of the Church in the diocese bought into by buying shares. In the late 1970s, The Leader’s management started to give complementary copies of the paper to institutions such as government ministries, information offices, libraries, etc. (Nwalo, 2016, p. 19). This exposed the paper to market corridors outside the Catholic Church. The newspaper eventually got government patronage as the press became a government press (Nwaka, 2013; Nwalo, 2016). These initiatives helped it to overcome the challenges of the civil war, which brought untold difficulties to newspaper operations. Here, the editors’ business sense or creative energy was likely to drive and enhance news coverage.

Catholic Weekly Independent Newspaper

Bishop Richard Finn founded the *Catholic Weekly Independent Newspaper* in Ibadan on August 14, 1960. According to Akodu (2023, p. 34), “He also established Claverianum Press to produce the paper and other print requirements of the diocese. ... The civilian authorities at the time warmly received it. They showered its debut with messages of congratulation and well-wishing.” For instance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then leader of the Federal House of Representatives opposition, said, “The aim of a good newspaper is correctly to inform, entertain, and enlighten its readers. The Catholic Mission has a reputation for running newspapers, which closely approach the ideal (Oso et al., 2011, p. 23).”

In his own warm welcome, D. Osadebay, leader of the opposition of the Western House of Assembly, said, “It is my opinion that there is too much party politics and bitterness in Nigeria, and I, therefore, welcome newspapers, which are likely to see things in a more objective perspective and act as reins to the Nigerian party political horse. (Omu, 1978, pp. 34-45)” In his view, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, then Prime Minister of Nigeria, said, “The role which the missionaries have played already in every field of development in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised, and it is my earnest hope that the *Catholic Weekly Independent* will aim at making yet further contributions towards the spiritual education not only of the Catholic community but of all its readers in Nigeria” (Akodu, 2023, p. 97). Though the newspaper enjoyed such a loud beginning, ownership contraptions chained the newspaper to the ground for years by changing hands.

According to Akodu (2023), ownership resided with the Diocese of Ibadan from 1960 to 1972, when Finn returned home. In 1974, however, ownership crossed over to the Ecclesiastical Province of Lagos; it reverted to the Diocese of Ibadan in 1983. The newspaper sells for N100. One of the banes of news coverage was ownership, and this impacted the *Catholic Weekly Independent* at that time. It negatively affected the operation of the paper and rubbished its official approval by the State. Nonetheless, the paper offered some of its articles and news items for reproduction by some English and French news agencies for worldwide circulation. The pioneer editor was Fr. Patrick O’Neill. Here, unstable ownership was likely to slow down news coverage.

Theoretical Framework: Agenda-Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory relevant to this study was originally attributed to Walter Lippmann (1922) and Benard Cohen (1963). However, it was made popular by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory assumes that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The public has a lot to consider before arriving at an opinion that is their own. One such factor is sociological factors, which affect what they make of what they hear from interpersonal conversations. What do they make of what they hear from opinion leaders? Then how do they make sense of what the journalist tells them? Such opinion leaders are also agenda-setters.

According to Asemah et al. (2017), agenda setting implies that mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. It does not ascribe to the media power to determine what people think, but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what people are thinking about. According to Asemah et al. (2017), the characteristics involved in agenda setting include:

1. The quality or frequency of reporting
2. Prominence is given to reports-headlines display, layout, timing on radio and TV set
3. The degree of conflict generated in the reports
4. Cumulative media-specific effects over time

Even though the broadcast media is always constrained by time and newspapers by space, their respective gatekeepers will find time or space as it applies if they consider any issue as important for public attention. This is one area in both print and broadcast media that demonstrates their agenda-setting power. Another area is if there is great consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This, too, confirms the power of agenda-setting. Moreover, Naser (2020) opines that this consistency and repetition signal to people the importance of the issue or event. Globally, any event given major emphasis in the mass media ultimately becomes a major event. Thus, the tenets of the theory entail that appropriate procedures for examining agenda-setting involve comparisons between media content over a certain period and subjects that most people in society are discussing at the time. The extent to which there is a similarity between the two will confirm the agenda-setting hypothesis. The greater the consonance, the more the agenda-setting hypothesis is confirmed.

Methodology

Study Design: This study used content analysis to determine the content and treatment of issues in selected Catholic newspapers, namely, *Catholic Weekly Independent*, *Catholic Herald*, and *The Leader*. According to Dare (1991, p. 6), cited by Ekeanyanwu (2005), content analysis is a research technique for objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. With the objective of this study in mind, researchers identified content categories/themes. These include Politics, Education, Economy, Sports, Religion, Crimes/Killings/Kidnapping, Racial Conflict, Science, Health, Independence/independence struggles, Family Homily from the Pope and others. Researchers analysed content categories to determine general issues newspapers focused on, issues under the focus of individual newspapers, prominence accorded to issues and tone of language.

Population of Study: The population of this study includes all Catholic newspapers published and circulated in Nigeria. However, the “secondary population of this study” includes all editions of *Catholic Weekly Independent*, *Catholic Herald*, and *The Leader* published between 1961 and 2018. The historical gap prevented the research from getting an equal representation of editions across the period of study. Therefore, only *Catholic Weekly Independent* had copies found in 1961, 1975, and 2018. *The Leader* had copies found in 1975 only, while the *Catholic Herald* had copies found in 2018 only.

Sample Size: The sample size for this study is 1,120 issues (editions) gotten from a total of 1,680 issues of the three selected papers for 1961, 1975 and 2018 for *Catholic Weekly Independent*, 1975 for *The Leader*, and 2018 for *Catholic Herald*. To arrive at this sample size, researchers selected seven issues per week and then multiplied by four weeks to arrive at 28 monthly issues. Twenty-eight issues per month were multiplied by eight months selected for each year, thus arriving at 224 issues per newspaper. The researchers then multiplied 224 issues by the three newspapers to determine a sample size of 1,120. Below is the sample of issues studied for the three newspapers:

Catholic Weekly Independent Newspaper

Sample for a month- $7 \times 4 = 28$

Sample for 1961- $28 \times 8 = 224$

Sample for 1975- $28 \times 8 = 224$

Sample for 2018- $28 \times 8 = 224$

The Leader Newspaper

Sample for 1975- $28 \times 8 = 224$

Catholic Herald Newspaper

Sample for 2018- $28 \times 8 = 224$

Sampling Technique: The sampling technique used in selecting the three newspapers is purposive sampling. This technique entails the researcher deliberately selecting what constitutes his sample based on some predetermined purposes or aims that his study hopes to achieve. The purposive sampling method is used in selecting these newspapers due the following reasons:

1. Wide readership
2. Regional acceptance
3. Historical antecedence
4. Availability of copies of newspaper for analysis.

A purposive sampling technique was also used to select the seven issues studied per week. However, a simple random sampling technique was used to select the months for the study because the technique gives all the population units an equal chance of selection into the sample. Based on the months and years selected, all the months in a year from January to December for which newspapers publish were assigned on identical cards. The identical cards were put into an enclosure with a lid, and the researcher shuffled and reshuffled cards to get selection. As the container was opened after being shuffled, January, March, May, June, July, September, November, and December were picked at different times. This process ensured no bias or preference in the days, months, and years studied.

Units of Analysis/Measurement: The units of analysis or measurement refer to those benchmarks used in analysing and evaluating data collected. This study developed some content categories to determine and analyse issues the three papers focused on. These content categories/themes include Politics, Education, Economy, Sports, Religion, Crimes/Killings/Kidnapping, Racial Conflict, Science, Health, Independence/post-independence struggle, Family, Homily from the Pope and others.

Coding

Coding is highly efficient when conducting quantitative content analysis. Thus, the contents of the three selected newspapers were coded as outlined in the coding guide. Contents categorised and coded include news prominence, tone, and frequency.

Inter-coder Reliability and Validity

Inter-coder reliability assesses the level of agreement between coders' decisions when two coders code the same units of sample. To ensure inter-coder reliability for this study, the researchers conducted Holsti's (1969, pp. 142-147) reliability test. A reliability coefficient of .80 was arrived at, which falls within the requirement for reliability indices.

Methods of Data Presentation and Analysis: The study's findings were presented in statistical tables containing percentages. To ensure the accuracy of the results and analysis, these tables and their percentages were generated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program software. Subsequently, the analysis's results formed the basis of discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

Data Analysis/Presentation

Research Objective 1: Issues under focus by *Catholic Herald*, *The Leader*, and *Catholic Weekly Independent* from 1961 to 2018

Table 1: Issues under focus

Issues Under Focus	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Religion	728	57.0
Education	82	6.4
Politics	95	7.4
Sports	66	5.2
Crimes/killings/kidnapping	18	1.4
Racial conflict	2	0.2
Science	2	0.2
Health	48	3.8
Independence/post-independence struggle	21	1.6
Foreign aids/African development issue	1	0.1
Family	48	3.8
Public information	50	3.9
Gospel from The Pope	17	1.3
Book review	10	0.8
Law/legal issue	7	0.5
Catholic event	7	0.5
International event	11	0.9
Socio-economy issue	21	1.6
Infrastructure	1	0.1
Nigerian local event	12	0.9
Conflict/violence	8	0.6
Fashion and entertainment	16	1.3
Other	6	0.5
Total	1277	100%

Table 1 shows issues the papers focused on within the period under review. Despite being religious publications, it is quite glaring that the papers covered various issues outside of religion. However, religious issues constitute most of the content (57.0%). Other issues prominently covered are politics (7.4%), education (6.4%), sports (5.2%), health (3.8%), general information (3.9%) and family affairs (3.8%). Socio-economic issues (1.6%), independence/post-independence issues (1.6%) and yearly homily from the Pope (1.3%) were also covered.

Table 2: Issues under Focus of Individual Newspapers

Issues Under Focus	Catholic Independent newspaper	The Leader newspaper	The Catholic Herald newspaper
Religion	548 (61.6%)	81 (77.1%)	99 (35.1%)
Education	73 (8.2%)	3 (2.9%)	6 (2.1%)
Politics	26 (2.9%)	0	69 (24.5%)
Sports	48 (5.4%)	0	18 (6.4%)
Crimes/killings/kidnapping	12 (1.3%)	0	6 (2.1%)
Racial conflict	2 (0.2%)	0	0
Science	2 (.2%)	0	0
Health	42 (4.7%)	0	6 (2.1%)
Independence/post-independence struggle	21 (2.4%)	0	0
Foreign aid/African development issue	1 (0.1%)	0	0
Family	42 (4.7%)	0	6 (2.1%)
Public information	14 (1.6%)	0	36 (12.8%)
Gospel from The Pope	2 (0.2%)	3 (2.9%)	12 (4.3%)
Book review	10 (1.1%)	0	0
Law/legal issue	7 (0.8%)	0	0
Catholic event	1 (0.1%)	0	6 (2.1%)
International event	2 (0.2%)	0	9 (1.1%)
Socio-economy issue	9 (1.0%)	9 (8.6%)	3 (1.1%)
Infrastructure	1 (.3%)	0	0
Nigerian local church event	3 (0.3%)	9 (8.6%)	0
Conflict/violence	8 (0.9%)	0	0
Fashion and entertainment	16 (1.8%)	0	0
Other	0	0	2.1%)
Total	890 (100%)	105 (100%)	282 (100%)

Table 2 shows the specific issues that newspapers focused on between 1961 and 2018. *The Leader* only focused on five issues: religion, education, homily from the Pope, socio-economic issues, and

Nigeria’s local church events. *The Catholic Independent* is more comprehensive and covers more issues than *The Leader* and *Catholic Herald*. *The Catholic Independent* newspaper mostly focused on Religion, Education, Politics, Sports, Family and Health issues. There are other issues, but the listed issues are the major focus of the paper. For *The Catholic Herald*, major issues are Religion, Education, Politics, Sports, and Crime/killings/kidnapping. Apart from these issues, public information content and Pope’s homily were also focused on.

Research Objective 2: Level of prominence given to issues by newspapers

Table 3: Prominence

Prominence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Front page lead	40	3.1
Front page minor	63	4.9
Inside page	1082	94.7
Back page lead	19	1.5
Back page minor	73	5.7
Total	1277	100%

In line with regular journalism practice, most of the news articles published appeared on inside pages (94.7%), but less than 10% of issues made it to the front page, which determines the prominence accorded to issues. A few of the stories made it to the back page, either as minor or as a lead, in Table 3.

Table 4: Issues given Prominence Mostly

Issues Under Focus	Frontpage lead	Frontpage minor	Inside page	Back page lead	Back page minor
Religion	3.4%	5.8%	83.2%	0.4%	7.1%
Education	0	2.4%	84.1%	9.8%	3.7%
Politics	13.7%	6.3%	71.6%	0	8.4%
Sports	0	0	86.4%	4.5%	9.1%
Crimes/killings/kidnapping	0	0	100%	0	0
Racial conflict	50%	50%	0	0	0
Science	0	0	100%	0	0
Health	0	0	97.9%	2.1%	0
Independence/post-independence struggle	0	0	100%	0	0
Foreign aid/African development issue	0	0	100%	0	0
Family	0	2.1%	97.9%	0	0
Public information	0	0	98.0%	2.0%	0

Gospel from The Pope	0	17.6%	82.4%	0	0
Book review	0	0	90.0%	0	10%
Law/legal issue	0	0	85.7%	0	14.3%
Catholic event	14.3%	0	85.7%	0	0
International event	0	0	100%	0	0
Socio-economy issue	0	0	85.7%	14.3%	0
Infrastructure	0	0	100%	0	0
Nigerian local church event	0	0	83.3%	8.3%	8.3%
Conflict/Violence	0	100%	0	0	0
Fashion and entertainment	0	0	100%	0	0
Other	0	0	100%	0	0

Table 4 presents issues that were given prominence mostly by the papers. These issues appeared on the front page either as minor or as lead. Therefore, Politics enjoyed more prominence than other issues (20%). Racial conflict and violence, Catholic events, family-related issues, and the homily from the Pope were the issues given prominence by the papers.

Research Objective 3: Tone of stories

Table 5: Tone of Language

Tone of language	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive	314	24.6
Neutral	841	65.9
Negative	122	9.6
Total	1277	100%

Table 5 shows the tone of language used by the three newspapers. The majority of them are in a neutral tone (65.9%), followed by issues written in positive language (24.6%). Some of these published articles were written in negative language (9.6%).

Discussion of Findings

It is good to embrace something that has become a limitation of this research: the archival problem. The civil war affected the documentation of The Leader newspaper. Therefore, only the 1975 edition was available for use. Lack of proper documentation also stifled our hands, and we could only recover the 2018 edition of the *Catholic Herald newspaper* for use. History would have been easy to have recourse to in order to advance the future if proper archiving and documenting had happened. This is a major reason researchers avoided this research field in the past. Of the three papers, *Catholic Weekly Independent* is the only one with a well-organised historical archive. The first research objective investigated issues under focus by the *Catholic Herald*, *The Leader* and *Catholic Weekly Independent* from 1961 to 2018. Tables 1 and 2 answered this question. Though these newspapers are religious papers, they cover a wide range of issues outside of religion.

Accordingly, religious issues (57%) constituted the majority of the contents in keeping with the nature of the papers. Other issues, too, got various degrees of coverage. Such issues include politics (7.4%), education (6.4%), sports (5.2%), health (3.8%), general information (3.9%), and family affairs (3.8%). Others include socio-economic issues (1.6%), independence/post-independence issues (1.6%), and periodic homily from the Pope (1.3%). Also, each newspaper differed in the issues they focused on and the type of issues reported. However, as shown in Table 2, the Catholic Independent newspaper had wider and more comprehensive coverage of issues and more content than *The Leader* and *Catholic Herald*. *The Catholic Weekly Independent* newspaper mostly focused on religion, education, politics, sports, and family and health issues. Other issues ensued, but the listed issues are the major focus of the newspaper.

Conversely, *the Leader* focused primarily on religion and gave reasonable attention to socio-economic issues, education, homily from the Pope, and Nigeria's local Church events. *Catholic Herald* focused less on religion as only a third of its contents were based on religion (35.1%). Other major contents of *the Catholic Herald* were politics, with about a quarter (24.5%), religion, education, sports, and crime/killings/kidnappings. Apart from these issues, the paper also focused on public information and Pope's homily. The trend here is that these papers apparently have similar editorial policies suggestive of the findings. These editorial policies showed dynamism towards issues outside of religion over time. In the sixties, dynamism appeared to be weak and at its formative stage. This is why Catholic Weekly Independent, in particular, gave lesser attention to independence/post-independence issues (2.4%) than religious issues (61.6%).

Understandably so, *The Leader* could not operate during the post-independence era because of the civil war, which took a great toll on its equipment, machines, and administrative and printing houses (Akodu, 2023). It appears the papers are dynamically expanding the scope of their contents as more issues outside religion are being covered. It is also good to note that only the Catholic Weekly Independent covered *the civil war*, as *The Leader* could not write in the face of a belligerent war. *Catholic Herald* was going through a phase as it was in recession because of financial difficulties it entered into in 1958 (Akodu, 2023; Traber et al., 1978). Hence, *Catholic Weekly Independent* was holding the torch and covering war crimes and killings (1.3%) as well as racial conflicts (0.2%). This coverage was abysmally poor, however. International news channels and newspapers did far better.

Research objective 2 explored the level of prominence given to issues in the process of news coverage by newspapers. Tables 3 and 4 gave credence to this objective, showing how much importance the three newspapers gave to their news articles, including religious news. For instance, most of the news articles published appeared on inside pages (94.7%), but less than 10% of issues made it to the front page lead (3.1%) and minor (4.9%). Few of the stories made it to the back page either as minor (5.7%) or lead (1.5%). The fact that they buried more stories inside pages indicates the low prominence attached to some news issues. Also, table 4 presents issues that were given prominence mostly by the papers. These issues appeared on the front page either as minor or as lead. Therefore, politics enjoyed more prominence than other issues (20%). Racial conflict and violence, Catholic events, family-related issues, and a homily from the Pope were prominent issues in the papers.

Unfortunately, some important human interest issues did not get favourable front-page attention and treatment. This category includes education, health and socio-economic issues. This means some religious papers in Nigeria have not adequately stimulated the socio-economic consciousness of Nigerians. This implies that readers are left to wallow in ignorance, helping the government do whatever it likes in the socio-economic aspect of governance without challenge. Research objective three investigated the tone of these stories. Table 5 shows the tone of language the three papers used in conveying issues to the public. Most of them are neutral (65.9%), followed by issues written in positive language (24.6%). However, some of these published articles were written in negative language (9.6%).

The concern here is to analyse the trend regarding the quality of the stories, the content, and the language of the presentation of issues being covered. If the language is neutral, the paper is undecided whether to support or criticise the issue. The paper is sitting on the fence and not taking a stand. If the language is positive, the paper supports the covered issue. If the language used is negative, the paper does not support the issue being covered; it thus criticises it. Every newspaper should criticise anti-people policies and ideas wherever such ideas come from. The only time a paper decides to be neutral is when the ideology upon which such newspaper is established or the policy of its management says so. One can then understand why, for most of the issues, the three newspapers refused to take a stand; instead, they sat on the fence.

Ironically, it is part of their prophetic function to take a stand, to look power in the face and condemn when actions are condemnable. Evil only persists when good papers refuse to take a stand. Therefore, the quality of the majority of issues covered by the three newspapers was poor.

Recommendations

1. Catholic papers should be given more editorial independence so they can sustain the current dynamics of news presentation. Nigerians need more news outside religion on the front pages, either as lead or minor.
2. Religion news/theology should be related to Nigerians' socio-economic and political lives in the form of liberation journalism. This will help the papers expand their readership and attract advertisers' interest.
3. Newspapers should applaud government policies when directed towards the public good, but they should not hesitate to be combative when anti-people policies are apparent. Church papers should always let government and non-state actors know their stand.
4. Historical records should be properly archived and documented so they are available for use during research.

Conclusion

Having explored the issues in focus in the three selected Catholic newspapers, *Catholic Weekly Independent*, *The Leader*, and *Catholic Herald*, it could be noted that there are several motives for establishing religious papers, particularly the Christian denomination. There is no gainsaying that religious papers are expected to majorly propagate religious doctrines and activities of the particular church that establishes them. Moreover, ownership influence in newspaper management has existed since the inception of newspaper publishing in Nigeria. Hence, it is expected of religious newspapers, too, for publishers to have a small influence on the editorial process/leadership of the paper. However, the results/findings from this study show that Catholic Weekly Independent, The Leader, and Catholic Herald newspapers were religious publications

owned by the Catholic Church, but they have so far accommodated stories outside the religious purview, as shown in the data obtained.

Also, these newspapers maintained neutrality in the tone of language in reporting issues. This has been further criticised, saying that they ought to speak to ‘powers that be,’ especially when it has to do with issues affecting the socio-economic well-being of the masses. Through this, a form of liberation journalism will be birthed. It was also evident in the study that issues that had prominence the most were racial conflict and violence, Catholic events, family-related issues, and homily from the Pope, among others. This reflects a diverse reportage of issues and departure from a monotonic reportage of Church matters only. Thus, the selected Catholic papers have accommodated more stories outside of religion in news presentations. Therefore, we can say hope lies in the air regarding broader coverage of events by religious newspapers.

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