

**Mass Media Reportage of Police Harassment and Brutality of Nigerians in a
Democratic Dispensation
(A Study of *the Punch* and *the Guardian* Newspapers)**

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Abstract

The mass media serves as a vital component in the day-to-day life of the public as helps to keep the members of a society, community, state, country well informed about what is happening around them. When mass media organisations are unable to carry out their duties to the public objectively, this causes public distrust in the media. In view of this, this paper focuses on mass media reportage of police harassment and brutality of Nigerians in a democratic dispensation with special attention to The Punch and The Guardian newspapers. This paper borders on giving insight to the issue of police harassment and brutality of Nigerians and how the media portrays/reports such negative activities of the Nigerian Police to the general public. This study is premised on Social Action, Social Conflict and Agenda Setting Theories. The paper adopted content analysis and a multi-stage sampling technique, that is, simple random and systematic sampling techniques to conclude on the sampling size. From coding guide developed, it was discovered that there are gaps in newspaper reportage and even contents on Police harassment and brutality of Nigerians. The study discovered that less prominence is given to this issue of social menace that could degenerate into violence and unrest in the country. The paper therefore recommends that stories on police brutality and harassment of Nigerians should be given more prominence and frequent reportage in order to build public trust in the mass media as an agent of positive societal change.

Keywords: *Mass media, Police, Police Harassment, Police Brutality, Nigerians*

Introduction

Information sharing and dissemination is very important in the lives of human beings as it makes them aware of what is going on around them, hence, it is key to the growth of any given nation. The mass media professionals through various channels are central to the provision of relevant communication for nation development. This is done through the press/media by bringing to public awareness, issues that require urgent attention with a view to mobilizing development efforts in that environment.

Security is very vital in any nation of the world. The police make people to obey law and prevent crimes. Human and industrial growth cannot be achieved in the atmosphere of anarchy and disorder; hence the police are very important in any society (Nwabueze and Ugochukwu, 2014).

The present Nigerian Police are deep in corruption; hence the public see the police with anger and disdain. Agudosy (2006) cited in Nwabueze and Ugochukwu (2014) opines that, “The police need to restore confidence in the people with respect to their job of crime fighting”. Nigerians see the police as the most corrupt institution in the country. Nwosu (1990) cited in Nwabueze and Ugochukwu (2014) says that police brutality and unfriendliness are definitely the greatest contributors to the problem of lack of understanding between the police and the public. This has led citizens of the country to see the police with disdain and express reservations in employing the services of the police in distress situation (Agudosy, 2006 cited in Nwabueze and Ugochukwu, 2014).

The mass media are powerful tools in information dissemination. This includes disseminating the activities of the Nigeria Police. These activities are seen mostly on the pages of newspapers hence, it makes newspaper a powerful tool of mass communication. According to Adegbamigbe (2012) cited in Nwabueze and Ugochukwu, (2014), there is a total system collapse in Nigeria with regards to security. Training and re-training which should be the hallmark of police in Nigeria is no longer what it ought to be. The cardinal functions of the police are arrests, crime prevention, investigations, maintaining law and order among others. In recent times, police is not performing up to expectation; hence crime is on the increase in Nigeria. The crux of this study is to ascertain the volume of coverage and direction of stories concerning the police harassment and brutality of Nigerians by the selected newspapers. This is to see how

newspapers through their reportage, are helping to reform the police by enlightening the public on activities of the police.

Literature Review

Police brutality or excessive use of force by law enforcement can be legally defined as a civil rights violation, where law enforcement officers exercise undue force against a subject (Soladoye and Ojo, 2020). Use of torture as interrogative technique and other wanton abuses of human rights remain some of the major flaws of the Nigeria Police Force which has attracted public odium, opprobrium, and condemnation (Amnesty International, 2014; Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015).

Torture, described as one of the most extreme forms of violence, resulting to both psychological and physical consequences is sometimes considered as an indispensable interrogation mechanism for gathering strategic intelligence (Constanzo & Gerrity, 2009). Worried by the incessant reports of human rights abuse of the members of the Police Force, the former Inspector-General of Police, Ibrahim Idris, once warned the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) operatives against torture and extrajudicial killings, saying “no policeman in the world has the right or authority to kill crime suspects” (The Punch, 2016, September 23). He admonished the SARS personnel to always respect the right of every Nigerian, noting that this was the way they could change the negative public perception about them. Protests against police brutality previously have arisen in Nigeria, as advocates and researchers have documented extensive evidence of human rights abuses by SARS officers and other NPF personnel.

In a 2016 report, Amnesty International asserted that SARS officers routinely committed torture and other abuses against detainees - many of whom were arrested arbitrarily, detained incommunicado, and forced to “confess” or pay bribes to secure release (Amnesty International, 2014; Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015). The #EndSARS movement began in 2017, as Nigerians shared experiences of police brutality via social media and demonstrated in several cities to call for SARS’s dissolution. In response to those protests, the government pledged an “immediate reorganization” of SARS and an investigation into allegations against the unit. Reported abuses nevertheless persisted. In June 2020, Amnesty International concluded that SARS officers continued to commit extensive human rights violations and that impunity remained pervasive.

The 2020 #EndSARS protests have been noteworthy for their size, duration, and reach. Demonstrations began in early October and intensified as celebrities all over the world expressed

support for the protesters and as a government crackdown on marchers in mid-October provoked further demonstrations. Many activists deemed the disbanding of SARS on October 11 as inadequate, comparing it to past reforms that broadly failed to curb SARS misconduct, hence, the protest continued and as unrest continued, Governors in several states were forced to impose curfews or ban protests.

On October 20, army and police reportedly used live ammunition to disperse demonstrators in the Lekki and Alausa areas of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, killing several and injuring hundreds. Various world leaders criticized the crackdown; on October 22, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo condemned the clampdown in a terse statement "the use of excessive force by military forces who fired on unarmed demonstrators in Lagos" calling for Nigerian security services to "show maximum restraint and respect for fundamental rights and for demonstrators to remain peaceful (Tomas, 2020).). International bodies and personalities tend to hear of this brutality in real time, because the awareness was created through social media which might have taken longer time for them to get to know of the occurrence if the awareness is to be created through traditional news media, as most of these international bodies might not watch our local news media.

The activities of the police as an institution are meant to be guided at the national and international level by conventions, standards and treaties (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966) quoted by Soladoye and Ojo (2020), In spite of state prohibitions against torture and custodial misconduct by the police, torture has been reported as being commonly used in police custodies across Nigeria, which is a major reason behind deaths in custody (Amnesty International, 2014; Aborisade & Obileye, 2017). According to the Network on Police Reform in Nigeria (NOPRIN, 2010; Aborisade & Obileye, 2017), personnel of the Nigeria Police routinely carry out summary executions of persons accused or suspected of crime; rely on torture as a principal means of investigation; commit rape of both sexes, and engage in extortion at nearly every opportunity. Violent treatment of accused persons by the police or other law enforcement officers is strongly against Article 5 of the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, resolution 34/169 of 17 December 1979:

“No law enforcement official may inflict, instigate or tolerate any act of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, nor may any law enforcement official invoke superior orders or exceptional circumstances such as a state of war or a threat of war, a threat to national security, internal political instability or any other public emergency as a justification of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Aborisade & Obileye, 2017).

According to Aborisade and Fayemi (2015), constant and consistent reports are received from lawyers, human rights activists, social analysts, and journalists about police regularly demanding bribes, stealing, extorting money and engaging in different forms of brutality and abuse of rights. However, not many empirical studies have been done regarding this to give detail report about the kind of abuse and the level of the brutality that people are facing when they are being arrested or detained by the police. It may be due to the difficulty researchers face when they intend to embark on this type of research because gathering data from the police department may not be easy, as they will not want to release such sensitive data.

Aborisade and Obileye concluded that:

“The systematic brutality of the police affects virtually every Nigerian, though at different levels, as the impact weighs down more on the poor. The operations of the Nigeria Police Force bear almost no resemblance of the requirements of the Nigerian law. The activities of the NPF are at marked variance with protecting human life, safety, and security, as it rather endangers the people they ought to protect. It is evident that lack of capacity to conduct proper criminal investigation is responsible for the reliance of the Police on torture-induced confessions. As a result of the multitude of police stations in the country and the manner of development of the authority and responsibility of these police stations and divisions, there has been little supervision and control of this problem. Urgent measures are therefore required to return policing in Nigeria to the path of lawfulness, respectability, and public confidence. At present, there is no accountability for crimes committed by the police. The NPF is controlled at the federal level and its officers are not answerable to the local populations. The best approach to solve this dilemma of unlawful arrest and detention is through intelligent legislation in respect of the laws governing detention for investigative purposes. Other suggestions include, proper training and retraining of police office, deployment of advanced forensic techniques for investigations, improvement in the capacity of the police in their investigative responsibilities, encouragement of professionalism within its rank and file as well as effective

punishment of erring officers as deterrence to others” (Aborisade & Obileye, 2017).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the frequency of reports on police harassment and brutality.
- Investigate prominence of the reportage of police harassment and brutality.
- Examine what type of report has the highest frequency of coverage.
- Investigate what tones were used to report stories of police harassment and brutality.
- Identify what themes were used in reporting news stories on police harassment and brutality.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is hinged on three theories which are: Social Action, Social Conflict and Agenda Setting theories. The Social Action theory counters the popular position of society being that society makes, shapes members and their decisions. This theory was developed by a German sociologist Max Weber who identifies within this theory that the attitude of people is formed through interaction between one or more subjects and how these interactions can influence the behaviour of other people and lead to social movement.

Max Weber argued that before an action can be understood, the meaning attached to it by an individual needs to be ascertained. On this basis he enunciated two types of understanding being *Aktuelles Verstehen* or direct observational understanding and *Eklarendes Verstehen* or empathetic understanding. The first understanding being direct observational understanding basically relates that one’s action can just be observed and the emotional state of that person probably ascertained while the second understanding being empathetic understanding has to do with identifying the motives behind an act.

Max Weber states in this theory that individuals don’t just shape society, societies encourage certain type of motive for action.

Social action theory is relevant to this study in the aspect of the interactions between members of the Nigerian Police and Nigerians has been identified to yield negative impact and this has led to

the social movement of citizens castigating the negative and unwarranted actions of the police towards citizens. Furthermore the perception of the society regarding the Nigerian Police Force has been affected by its negative interactions in the society.

The impact of this theory is dominant in the media reportage of the negative activities of the Nigerian Police Force as members of the society participate in shaping the society by contributing to news contents through interviews, anonymous contents, e-mails or letters to editors of newspaper organisations

As regards Social Conflict theory, it was first proposed by a German philosopher Karl Marx in the 19th century. This Marxist theory explicates that individuals and groups involve in interactions within society on the grounds of conflict rather than consensus. This theory can be expressed on the premise that the conflict that occurs in societies are linked to social inequality in terms of dominant and powerful groups using their status to maintain power at the expense of groups with less power. This theory is based on relations between a dominant group versus minority group. From Marxist point of view of social conflict theory,, social class and inequality emerges because the social structure is based on conflict and contradictions. Contradiction in interests and conflict over scarce resources between groups is the foundation of social society, according to the social conflict theory (Engels & Marx, 1848).

The basic concept of social conflict theory deals with the fact that conflict and disagreement occurs within society due to inequality but this attribute of social conflict theory has been identified to instigate and bring about change on the basis that conflict is a fact that opposite perspectives are present.

Social Conflict theory plainly depicts majority versus minority. In this study of Mass media Reportage of Police Brutality and Harassment of Nigerians, the majority identified here is the Nigerian Police and the minority are the oppressed Nigerian citizens. This theory identifies majority to be a powerful group who use their status to retain power and this attribute can be recognized within the Nigerian Police and how they channel their power towards harassing and brutalising Nigerians. Pertaining to this study, the media can be described to be treated as minority in cases whereby the media is limited in its activities of disseminating objective content in relation to police harassment and brutality.

The Agenda Setting theory is known to have been developed formally by Dr. Max McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw in their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election. This theory has been identified to rest on two basic assumptions. The first assumption being that the media filters and forms what we perceive rather than just disseminating stories to the audience. The second assumption of agenda setting theory is the more recognition the media places on an issue, the public is more likely to consider that issue to be significant.

Agenda setting theory basically denotes the capacity of the media in influencing the degree of importance placed on topics of public agenda, it revolves around how the media put in effort to influence viewers and also initiate a hierarchy of news prevalence. Therefore, this theory relates to how media coverage determines which issues attract public attention.

Agenda setting can be viewed in the following types

- Policy agenda setting: here, both the public and media agenda are identified to influence the decisions of public policy makers
- Public agenda setting: the public determines the agenda for which stories are considered important.
- Media agenda setting: within this context, the media decides the agenda for which stories are considered important.

The Agenda-Setting Theory in relation to this study reveals that the media plays a vital role in giving credence to the reportage of Police harassment and brutality as this trend became the focal point in the mind of every Nigerian. The mass media being the fourth realm of the estate and the voice of the masses disseminate news stories of Police harassment and brutality prominently thereby creating awareness for the masses regarding these trending issues. The media give the masses an issue to focus on in terms of Police Harassment and Brutality and also pass public opinion on this issue.

5. Methodology

This study primarily examined mass media reportage of police harassment and brutality of Nigerians in a democratic dispensation using *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers. This study was conducted by analysing the contents of these two newspapers from July to September, 2021. For the first week of each newspaper, Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday editions were

chosen, while for the second week, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday editions were selected and this is applicable to the remaining weeks and months to arrive at a total of 46 editions per newspaper which make it 92 editions for the two newspapers.

Results

Table 1: Newspaper reportage of Police Harassment & Brutality in Nigeria

Name of Newspaper	Number of Stories	Percentage
Punch	69	83.1%
Guardian	14	16.86%
Total	83	100%

From the table above, a total of 83 news stories were reported on police brutality and harassment in Nigeria within the period under consideration. *The Punch* reported 69(83.1%) of the total stories while *Guardian* reported 14(16.86%) of the entire stories. This therefore shows that *The Punch* newspaper reported more stories on police brutality and harassment in Nigeria.

Table 2: Frequency of Report within the period of Study

Months	Punch	Guardian	Total
July	24	3	27
August	19	2	21
September	26	9	34
Total	69	14	83
Percentage	83.1%	16.86%	100

The table 2 above depicts the breakdown of the total number of stories on police brutality and harassment in Nigeria as reported by the selected and sampled newspaper editions on a monthly basis. The table reveals that the month of September recorded highest number of stores on police brutality followed by the month of July. *The Punch* reported 34 cases of police brutality in September (40.9%) *The Guardian* reported 9 cases (10.8%). In July, *The Punch* recorded 27(32.5%) cases of police brutality while *Guardian* reported 3(7.1%).

Table 3: Placement of stories on Police Brutality in Nigeria

Name of Newspaper	Front page major	Front page minor	Inside page major	Inside page Minor	Back page Major	Back page Minor	Total
Punch	8	3	7	30	5	16	69
Guardian	1	2	2	5	2	2	14
Total	9	5	9	35	7	18	83
Percentage	10.8%	6.02%	10.8%	42.1%	8.4%	21.6%	100%

Table 3 above indicates that out of the 69 stories reported by *The Punch* Newspaper on police brutality and harassment in Nigeria, 8 were on the front page major story, 3 of the news stories featured as front page minor, 7 were inside page majors while 30 were inside page minors. 5 news stories featured on back page major while 16 also feature as back page minor. For *The Guardian* newspaper, of the 14 stories reported on police brutality and harassment in Nigeria during the period under review, 1 was on the front page major, 2 were on front page minor, 2 featured on inside page major while 5 feature on inside page minor. 2 stories featured on back page major and 2 features on back page minor.

Table 4: Forms of Reporting of Police Brutality and Harassment in Nigeria.

Name of Newspaper	Straight News	Features	Editorial	Opinion	Cartons	Pictures	Total
<i>The Punch</i>	32	0	0	0	0	37	69
<i>The Guardian</i>	10	0	0	0	0	4	14
Total	42	0	0	0	0	41	83
Percentage	100%	0	0	0	0	100	100

The table above presents how the diverse form of stories on police brutality and harassment was reported. *The Punch* reported a total of 69 stories within the period sampled. Of the 69 stories, 32 were presented in straight news format while 37 were in picture to depict the concept of police brutality; there are none in form of features, editorial, opinion and cartoons. *The Guardian* had the lowest number of stories, 10 were written in straight news format and 4 were pictures. There were

no editorial, no feature written no opinion and no cartoons reported. In summary, the total number of straight news stories of the two newspapers is 42(50.6%) and those that are pictures are 41(49.39%).

Table 5: Comparison of content

Name of Newspaper	Content Category								Total
	Police Brutality	Crime	Politics	Finance	Sports	Tech	Education	Agric .	
<i>The Punch</i>	24	110	88	127	101	20	44	2	516
<i>The Guardian</i>	3	52	98	97	70	27	36	1	384
Total	27	162	181	224	171	47	80	3	890
Percentage	3.03%	18.02%	20.33%	25.16%	19.21%	5.2%	8.9%	0.33 %	100

From table 5 above, the results shows a total of 890 stories in the month of July, 2021, examining the content by the above categorization, the table depicts police brutality stories as 27(3.03%); Crime features 162(18.02%); Politics news reportage were 181(20.33%); finance 224(25.16%); Sports news stories showed 171(19.21%); technology featured 47(5.2%); Education featured 80(8.9%) and Agriculture content was portrayed with 3 story news at (0.33%). This result shows that agricultural content reportage was extremely low, followed by content on police brutality with 3.03% of the news stories for the month under review.

Table 6: Tone used for reportage of new stories on police harassment/brutality

Tone	Frequency	%
Positive	61	73.4
Neutral	5	6.02
Negative	17	20.4
Total	83	100

The table above presents tone used for reportage of stories on police harassment and brutality, 61(73.4%) that comprises of pictures and straight stories were positive as they established the fact

that there are cases of police brutality while 17(20.4) of the stories were negative and 5(6.02%) of the stories were neutral.

Table 7: Themes of reportage on police harassment and brutality

Themes	Frequency	%
Extortion	18	21.6
Bribery	22	26.5
Battering/beating	18	21.6
Killing of suspect	10	12.04
Violence against citizen	15	18.7
Total	83	100

The table above shows the percentage distribution of the identified themes from sampled newspapers on police harassment and brutality. 18(21.6%) of the stories reflect as extortion from citizens; 22(26.5%) represents bribery; 18(21.6%) depicts as battering/beating of suspects without fair hearing; 10(12.04) were presented as killing of suspect without fair trial at the court of law and 15(18.7%) were reported as violence against citizen.

Discussion

Findings reveal that stories on police brutality and harassment are not frequently covered. Unlike news stories on finance and politics featured daily in the selected and sampled newspaper, the reportage on stories on police brutality is only sparsely done. This conclusion could be drawn based on the fact that 89 stories was reported by the two newspapers in the 184 sampled editions used for this study. Furthermore, the study revealed that in terms of frequency per month, the highest number of stories on police brutality sample from July to September, 2021 was reported in September with a total of 34 stories. Of this total; *The Punch* reported 26 cases on police brutality that comprises of both straight news and pictures while *The Guardian* newspaper reports 9 stories. However, police brutality and harassment with grain of violence that erupt between police and Nigerian youth is a thing of daily occurrence, it may not be out of place to conclude that police brutality did not enjoy enough coverage in order to set agenda for the public to deliberate on before it degenerate to violence that could erupt across the country.

In terms of the prominence accorded to the stories on police brutality and harassment of Nigerian youth in Nigeria, the study reveals that newspapers do not give prominence to stories of police

brutality as revealed in 83 stories reported during the period under review of which 9 of the news stories featured on front page major. From the two sample newspapers, there were no editorial, opinion, feature writing, letter to the editor and no cartoon, however, the stories reveals 42 straight news and 41 pictures that depict police harassment and brutality in Nigeria.

Finally on the theme used in reporting news stories on police harassment and brutality the result shows that the most popular theme was bribery and extortion of money and material things from the citizens.

Conclusions

The study has revealed gaps in newspaper reportage on content especially as it relates to newspaper reportage on police brutality and harassment of Nigerians. It discovered that less prominence is given to issue of social menace that could degenerate into violence and unrest in the country. The study also found that news reportage on police brutality is lacking in detailed analysis and there is complete absence of editorial or features articles on the issue.

Recommendations

One of the functions of the media is to serve as watchdog of the society, representing the voice of the people (*vox populi*) the media should be at alert at all times to inform the society on the happenings and educate the public of the danger such activities especially if negative could cause on the polity if not promptly attended to such as police brutality. In addition, the media should play effective roles in effecting great change in the coverage of stories that are of great relevance to the society.

The media should discharge both surveillance and gate keeping functions efficiently. As gatekeepers they should see the issue of police brutality as a social menace with dire consequences that could plunge the country into chaos and violence. Hence, stories on police brutality should be handled with great maturity and sufficiently reported for public consumption. While news stories that have to do with the welfare of the teeming youth of Nigeria should be accorded prominence. The media through their editorial should keep reminding the public of the danger of brutality, harassment, marginalization and other social ills that could lead to protest and unrest in the country.

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