Media Trials and Objectivity: Nigerian Journalists' Assessment of *Sahara Reporters'* Framing of Corruption Allegations by Buhari Administration

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Abstract

The emergence of President Muhammadu Buhariset the stage for the resonance of anti-corruption war in the Nigerian chequered polity with a great expectation that the shifting political paradigm will result to purging of the system from every iota of corruption. Expectedly, the government spent time accusing, arresting and sometimes prosecuting some of the suspects. However, the reverberation of these arrests and detentions has been the dominant contents of media bulletins and forms a topical issue for public discussion and debate in the social media. Whether the framing of these corruption allegations by online media sites like *Sahara Reports* set a stage for media trials of the accused persons and questions the efficacy of objectivity is an issue which forms a core objective of this study. Using survey research method with a sample size of 400, the study was anchored on framing theory and it found that *Sahara Reporters* framing of the corruption allegations sets a stage for media trials of the accused persons before they are convicted by any court of competent jurisdiction thereby creating bias and subjectivity. The study recommends that social media publishers should be more socially responsible in their news.

Keywords: Media Trials, Objectivity, Framing, Corruption Allegations.

Introduction

The emergence of a new political dispensation in Nigeria with a wholesome mandate to fight corruption escalated the rascality of social media platforms like *Sahara Reporters* to objectively report news relating to suspected corrupt individuals in Nigeria thereby setting the stage for media trials of the accused persons. This was evident in the way they framed those anti-corruption news stories which technically suggests to the public that the accused persons are guilty even without being pronounced so by a court of competent jurisdiction. This explains why De Vreese (2005) asserts that one influential way that the media may shape public opinion is by framing events and issues in particular ways which tends to have prejudicial impact on the suspects, accused, witnesses and even Judges and in general, on the administration of justice.

Boydstun, Gross, Resnik& Smith (2013) also explain that framing which is portraying an issue from one perspective to the necessary exclusion of alternative perspectives is a central concept in political communication. It is widely accepted that framing can have a significant influence on public attitudes toward important policy issues (Chong &Druckman, 2007; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Schaffner& Sellers, 2009) and on the application of policy issues directly (Baumgartner et al., 2008). As engagement by citizens in the political discourse broadens via the widespread adoption of blogging and commenting in social media platforms, scientific study of the political world requires reliable analysis of how issues are framed, ideally in real time especially by social media.

In view of the extensive use of the social media, especially by the youths in Nigeria,the whole pattern of publication of news has changed. According to Tripathi (2008), the media have now reincarnated into a 'public court' (JantaAdalat) and have started interfering into court proceedings. It completely overlooks the vital gap between an accused and a convict keeping at stake the golden principles of *'presumption of innocence until proven guilty'* and *'guilt beyond reasonable doubt'*. Tripathi observes that media trial involves the media carrying out a separate investigation and through framing, builds a public opinion against the accused personeven before the court takes cognizance of the case. By this way, it prejudices the public and sometimes even judges. As a result, the accused, that should be assumed innocent, is presumed as a criminal thereby inhibiting all his rights and liberty.

Sahara Reporters is an online news agency based in New York City that focuses on promoting citizen journalism by encouraging everyday people to report stories about corruption, human rights abuses and other political misconduct in Nigeria. A frontier news source for advocacy journalism,*Sahara Reporters* has been referred to as the "Wikileaks of Africa" (Shenon, 2010). Based in New York City, *Sahara Reporters* was founded in 2006 by Nigerian political activist OmoyeleSowore.The mission according to the website is to encourage citizen journalists to report ongoing corruption and government misrule in Nigeria using photos, texts and videos. Dynamically, the site informs, prompts concerned Nigerian citizens and activist globally to act, denouncing officially-sanctioned corruption, the material impoverishment of its citizenry, defilement of environment, and the callous disregard of the democratic principles enshrined in the constitution.

The online news website was instrumental in collapsing the administration of Former President Goodluck Jonathan and labeling him and his administration as the most corrupt government in the history of Nigeria. The site was also seen as the media wing of the ruling party All Progressive Congress because of the role it played in bringing the government into power and because of the suspected affiliation the publisher has with the APC leader, Ahmed Bola Tinubu who was rumored to have tipped the publisher of Sahara Reports with huge sum of money amounting in dollars to work assiduously against the former administration of President Goodluck Jonathan.

Statement of Problem

Since the coming into power of the present administration and the declaration of the anti-corruption war by Buhari administration, Sahara Reporters has been acting as whistle blower claiming to be exposing the misappropriation and mismanagement of funds by the former administration. Considering the fact that the majority of those being arrested and prosecuted were in the last administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan, Sahara Reporters has been very active in reporting alleged figures, facts and information regarding corrupt practices of past government as alleged by the present administration of President MuhammaduBuhari.It is therefore pertinent to study the ethical and professional basis with which Sahara Reporters carry out its function considering the fact that the mass media must operate within a certain ethical and professional standard raging from objectivity, credibility, balance and healthy news reportage bearing in mind that the way mass media frame issues determine the kind of agenda they set and how the public opinions are formed and molded. Whether Sahara Reporters framing of news stories on these corruption allegations by Buhari administration amounts to media trial and prejudices justices as well as whether it falls short of media ethics of objective news reporting are the questions which Nigerian Journalists provide answers to in this study.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives guided the study:

1. To ascertain whether respondents are exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration.
2. To determine how respondents perceive*Sahara Reporters*framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration.
3. To identify the dominant frames *Sahara Reporters* adopt in reporting corruption allegations by Buhari Administration.
4. To determine whether*Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration sets a stage for trial of the accused by the media.

Research Question

1. Are respondents exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration?

2. How do the respondents perceive *Sahara Reporters*framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration?
3. What are the dominant frames *Sahara Reporters* adopt in reporting corruption allegations by Buhari Administration?
4. Does *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration set a stage for trial of the accused by the media?

Theoretical Framework

The framing theory propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974 is used to situate this study. In his book, *Framing analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*,Goffman explains that framing is used to explain how the media frame events and the impact it has on the audience (Scheufele&Iyengar, 2010). The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. The theory explains how media cover various issues, determines what is included and what is excluded, what is the kind of language, tones, details which are used, and also the effects of all these decisions on the readers or the audiences (Severin& Tankard, 2001).

Other researchers have also given various definitions of frame. Saleem (2007) says that framing was an analytical technique which was developed from the social psychologists to explain how the media define issues to the publics. Entman (1991) defines frames as information processing schemata while, Gitlin (1980) sees frames as ―persistent patterns of cognition, presentation, selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual. Ngoa (2012, p.13) sees framing as "a means through which an issue is given a particular meaning", Ngoa (2012, p.13) further explains that:

> Framing, therefore, means the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

Snow,Rochford,Worden, &Benford(1986) believe that these frames are not only media frames used in news coverage it is more like ―schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. That is also clear in Gamson,Croteau,Hoynes,&Sasson, (1992). definition of frame as a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols. Nelson, et al. (1997)while speaking about the framing effects explainsthat:

> The Choices Journalists make about how to cover a story- from the words, phrases, and images they convey to the broader angle they take on a controversy-can result in substantially different portrayals of the very same event and the broader controversy it represents. These frames can exert appreciable influence on people's perception of the issue and ultimately, the opinions they express.

In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. The media draws the public attention to certain topics, it decides where people think about, the journalists select the topics. This is the original agenda setting 'thought'. In news items occurs more than only bringing up certain topics. The way in which the news is brought, the frame in which the news is presented, is also a choice made by journalists. Thus, a frame refers to the way media and media gatekeepers organize and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audiences interpret what they are provided. Frames are abstract notions that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence the perception of the news of the audience, this form of agenda-setting not only tells what to think about, but also how to think about it. This theory is therefore suitable for this study since it helps to understand how *Sahara Reporters* frames news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration.

Literature Review

Media Trials or Trial by the Media: An Overview

The term Media Trial or 'trials by media' has been in use since early 1980s to describe the impact of media coverage [electronic, print and social media] on an ongoing legal trial and hence formulating the sense of right or wrong in the minds of the public. A more formal definition of the phrase according to Chowdhury (2013) would be "the impact of television, newspaper and social media coverage on the reputation of a person, organization or institution by creating a widespread perception of guilt or innocence before the verdict is announced by a court of law". Sometimes media trials are held even after the verdict is announced when the public is unhappy with the judgment (Chowdhury, 2013).

According to Kalu (2016), Trial by media is a term which became popular in the late 20th and early 21st centuries when the ubiquity of media became a part of the daily lives of ordinary people. 24-hour news stations, cable and satellite television able to transmit occurrences from one jurisdiction to another in the blink of an eye, make it irresistible for laymen who may or may not be aware of the full scope of evidence available, to nevertheless come to their own conclusions about the guilt of someone whose name and suspected offence creep into the media. This term was later augmented by the phrase 'Trial by Television' used as a pejorative by lawyers who recognize that the conduct of TV personalities in interviewing those who might have been accused of wrongdoing is often adversarial. Thus, it creates the unwelcome impression of their culpability in the minds of the public even before they are brought to trial. Trial by the media, more often than not, damages the possibility of a fair hearing for the accused and limits their access to justice for a number of reasons.

As documented in the Law Commission of India, 200th Report (2006),the subject of 'Trial by Media' is discussed by civil rights activists, constitutional lawyers, judges and academics almost every day in recent times. With the coming into being of the social media channels, the amount of publicity which any crime or suspect or accused gets in the media has reached alarming proportions. Innocents may be condemned for no reason or those who are guilty may not get a fair trial or may get a higher sentence after trial than they deserved. There appears to be very little restraint in the media in so far as the administration of criminal justice is concerned.

Murali&Iyer (2011) explains that the media, in certain cases, conducts "sting operations" and private investigations to expose the scams prevalent in the society, often quoting "unnamed, but reliable" sources. They also sensationalize and create causal connections between things that are and things that are not; they feed the psychology of their readers and viewers by providing them images of things as those that they do not seem to be.

Law Commission of India, 200th Report (2006)explains that if media exercises an unrestricted or rather unregulated freedom in publishing information about a criminal case and prejudices the mind of the public and those who are to adjudicate on the guilt of the accused and if it projects a suspect or an accused as if he has already been adjudged guilty well before the trial in court, there can be serious prejudice to the accused.

Murali&Iyer (2011) identifies other kind of media trial to involve the continued defamation that media causes to persons acquitted by the Courts on grounds of lack of proof beyond reasonable doubt. Such victims of media trial find it difficult to resurrect the social standing they held before the public outcry. The media in its quest for sensationalism does not realize that such an exposure is likely to jeopardize the right to a life of dignity.

Social media platform like blogs and other news websites have recently come under the pressure to push up their ratings and circulation numbers. Everyone manipulates the media to serve their own purpose, and the media in turn manipulates the minds of the general public to serve its own interests (Murali&Iyer , 2011). Nobody questions the intentions of the media as it exposes lacunae in criminal investigation or exposes the corrupt and selfish interests of people in power.

The problem is when the media defiles its legitimate jurisdiction of reporting the facts to pass judgment and not fair comment on the criminally accused and under-trials. Media trial is slowly transforming itself into media verdicts and media punishment: this is definitely a transgression into the arena of the Courts

of Law to ensure that justice prevails. Clearly, the media has escaped its limits (Murali&Iyer, 2011).Chowdhury (2013) avers that in justification of the unwholesome act by the media, an immediate reaction would be that media trials are an essential part of an authentic or truly justified democracy. However, as a matter of fact trials by media are seen as a violation to the international code of journalistic ethics and also grounds for defamation and contempt of court. This has been reiterated by law experts time and again.

Kalu (2016) observes that Nigeria today is awash with scintillating and sometimes puerile corruption scandals which receive trial by the media. Needing a villain to shore up their stories of massive fraud, embezzlement and plain stealing, the media especially, social media platforms accept tip-offs pointing the finger at a number of the ruling class and leading professionals, artistes and business figures. Once these scandals are published across media channels nationwide especially in the social media platforms like *Sahara Reporters*, the culpability of these figures is assumed and becomes a foregone conclusion in the minds of the watching masses. Therefore, whereas the canon of criminal trial dictates the presumption of innocence, which is also our inherited jurisprudence and our Constitutional imperative, any person who suffers the blemish of a media allegation is presumed guilty even before being taken to court and proved one way or the other.

Some of the instances trials by the media or prosecution via 'court of public opinion' as observed by Ojo (2016) are mostly in corruption cases. These include trial of Bank Chief Executives such as CecilaIbru, Erastus Akingbola, Francis Atuche, in 2009. The Femi Otedola versus FarukLawan fuel subsidy probe saga; trial of immediate past National Security Adviser, SamboDasuki and beneficiary of largesse under him especially PDP chieftains and military high command including ex-Chief of Defence Staff, Alex Badeh and several military top shots. There is also the case with the current trial of Senate President, BukolaSaraki at the Code of Conduct Tribunal. Ojo notes that trial by media also takes place in murder cases as well as any other matters involving high profile individuals especially politically exposed persons.

Ojo (2016) avers that media practitioners conduct media trials through editorial, news report, features story, voxpopuli, opinions of columnists and public affairs analysts. He note that it is also done through the use of social media such as blogging, tweeting, posts on Facebook, parade of suspects on camera and many more. Ojo pointed out that this trial by media exposes perpetrators to libel suits as it is in most cases defamation of character or character assassination of the accused. He instructively noted that trial of accused persons in the 'court of public opinion' is not rooted in law and that the conclusions reached by the public most times are at variance with that of the legally constituted courts whose decisions are arrived at after considering the weight of evidence provided by the prosecution team.Bello (2016) warns that the repugnance of trial by media should be consistently condemned by all and sundry because of its potential ability to "hijack" matters which are pending before courts of competent jurisdiction.

Methodology

For this study, the survey research method and qualitative content analysis were adopted to investigate the perceptions of Nigerian Journalists on *Sahara Reporters* framing of corruption allegations by Buhari administration using members of Nigerian Union of Journalists Anambra State Chapter as respondents. Survey research method was chosen because of its effectiveness in studying the attitudes and opinion of the people and its suitability for this study (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo&Okpanachi, 2012). Qualitative content analysis was used to establish that there were stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration which was reported by *Sahara Reporters* and other media outlets. This method was also used to establish the dominant frame used by *Sahara Reporters* in covering news on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. In using this method, stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration were randomly selected from *Sahara Reporters* website and were observed, analyzed and compared based on framing, objectivity and balance. The period of study is between June 2015 to October 2016.

The population of practicing journalists in AnambraState according to the Secretary of Nigeria

Union of Journalists (NUJ), Anambra State Chapter is 525. The Taro Yamane formula was used to select the sample out of the large population of 525 as shown below:

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

Where S = Sample size

N = Given Population

e = Margin of error = 5%.

1 = Constant

Therefore

$$S = \frac{525}{1 + 525\ (0.05)^2}$$

$$= \frac{525}{1 + 525 \times 0.0025}$$

$$= \frac{525}{1 + 1.3125}$$

$$= \frac{525}{2.3125} = 227.02703$$

$$\approx \mathbf{227}$$

A total of 227 copies of structured questionnaire were distributed to the Journalists in Anambra State using Purposive sampling technique. Data obtained from the questionnaire was presented in frequency tables and simple percentage method was adopted in data analysis.For the qualitative content analysis, the units of analysis for this study was the *Sahara Reporters* News Headlines on corruption allegations by Buhari administration which is that genre of media content that gives an accurate and objective account of an occurrence. The content category was the dominant frame used by *Sahara Reporters*to reports news on corruption allegations by Buhari administration, objectivity and accuracy, language and choice of words.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Return rate of Questionnaire

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Returned and found usable	200	88
Not usable	21	9
Not Returned	6	3
Total	**227**	**100**

Table one shows that the return rate of questionnaire is 88% (n = 200) while the mortality rate is 12% (n = 27). The return rate is higher than the mortality rate. The mortality rate of 12% does not affect the study because it is insignificant compared to the return rate of 88%. Thus, the copies were considered good enough

to represent the population. The presentation and analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire were therefore based on the two hundred (200) copies that were returned and found usable.

Research Question One: Are respondents exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration?

Table 2: Provision of information on respondents' exposure to *Sahara Reporters* News Stories on Corruption Allegations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	160	80
No	30	15
Can't Say	10	5
Total	**200**	**100**

Table two shows respondents' responses to research question one. Data reveals that majority of the respondents (80%, n=160) are exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration.However, 15% of the respondents (n=30) said no, stating that they are not exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration while five percent of the respondents (n=10) remained neutral. The implication of data on table two is that majority of the respondents are exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration.

Research Question Two: How do the respondents perceive *Sahara Reporters*framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration?

Table 3: Provision of information on respondents' perception of *Sahara Reporters*Framing ofnews stories on corruption allegations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Biased and Sensational	155	77.5
Objective and Balanced	36	18
Can't Say	9	4.5
Total	**200**	**100**

Table three provides information on the perception of the respondents on *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. 77.5% of the respondents (n=155) perceives *Sahara Reporters* framing news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration as Bias and Sensational, 18% of the respondents (n=36) perceives *Sahara Reporters* framing news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration as Objective and Balanced while 4.5% of those sampled (n=9) decline to state their perception on the issue. The import of the data on table three is that out of the 200 respondents that are exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration, majority perceives the frame of the news stories as Bias and Sensational.

Research Question Three: What are the dominant frames adopted by *Sahara Reporters* in reporting corruption allegations by Buhari Administration?'

Table 4: Provision of information on the dominant frames used by *Sahara Reporters* in reporting corruption allegations

Response	Frequency	Percentage

Guilty and Blame Frames	168		84
Right to Fair Hearing Frame	27		13.5
Can't Say	5	2.5	
Total	**200**	**100**	

Table four shows respondents' responses to research question three. Data reveals that majority of the respondents (84%, n=168) identifies Guilty and Blame as the dominant frames adopted by Sahara Reporters in reporting news stories on corruption allegations by Buhariadministration. However, 13.5% of the respondents (n=27) disagreed, stating that the dominant frames adopted by Sahara Reporters in reporting news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration is Right to Fair Hearing Frame while 2.5%percent of the respondents (n=5) remained neutral. The implication of data on table four is that the dominant frames adopted by Sahara Reporters in reporting news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration is Guilty, Blame and Conviction.

Research Question Four: Does *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration set a stage for trial of the accused by the media?

Table 5: Provision of information on whether *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations result to media trials

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	148	74
No	44	22
Can't Say	8	4
Total	**200**	**100**

Table five presents information on research question four. Data reveals that majority of the respondents (74%, n=148) agrees that the way Sahara Reporters frames the issues on corruption allegations by Buhari administration amounts to trial by the media. However, 22% of the respondents (n=44) disagreed, stating that the way Sahara Reporters frames news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration does not amount to trial by the media while while 4% percent of the respondents (n=8) remained neutral. The implication of the data on table five is that the way Sahara Reporters frames news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration results to media trials as elicited by the majority of the respondents.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The role of the media is critical in promoting good governance and controlling corruption. It not only raises public awareness about corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies but also investigates and reports incidences of corruption. The effectiveness of the media, in turn, depends on access to information and freedom of expression, as well as a professional and ethical cadre of investigative journalists (Stapenhurst, 2000). Prior to his assumption of office as president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, President MuhammaduBuhari outlined the blueprint for his government. His campaign strategy was principally anchored on the fight against corruption and the massive looting of Nigeria's wealth by political cabals. Mass media have thus far lent their support to this war against corruption but some media platforms may have exhibited unethical and unprofessional approach towards reporting news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. Some of the news headlines extracted from *SaharaReporters.com*,an online news platform confirms the above claim.

EFCC: Dasuki Used Arms Cash To Buy Assets In London, Dubai (January 16, 2016)`

The framing of the above headline implies that it has been concluded that SamboDasuki used the cash meant for procurement of arms to buy assets in London. It was framed in a way the readers who are mostly youth will believe that SamboDasuki is guilty as accused and therefore passes all manner of judgments on him. Meanwhile the accused person is still standing trial and has not been pronounced guilty by any court of competent jurisdiction. The above claim by Sahara Reporters is based on their own investigation which is ahead of the court proceeding completely designed to sway public opinion against the accused person leading to media trails.

Arms Scandal: How Jonathan Ordered DasukiTo Give Anenih N250m Refund (January 17, 2016)

The above headline connotes that Jonathan, in an Email approved the allocation of N250m to Anenih thereby trying to make the public believe that the former President was behind the misappropriation of funds by SamboDasuki. The framing of the above news headline is of guilty and blame resulting to hatred, character assassination and image laundering of the accused persons.

Ex-Nigeria Finance Minister Okonjo-Iweala Confesses: I Paid Dasuki $322m FromAbacha Loot (Dec 10, 2015)

The word "confesses" in the above headline connotes that the former Finance Minister, NgoziOkonjo-Iweala admitted being part of the embezzlement of funds meant for arm purchase. This confession was not made in the law court but in the court of mass media meaning that the media now try suspects with the masses as the judges.

OluFalae Tenders Email Evidence To EFCC Linking Ex-President Jonathan To N100m Election Funds Scam (Aug 29, 2016)

The framing of the above headline is an example of trial by the media. It is a general knowledge that evidence is tendered in the court not in the media. Readers, especially those who do not favor the former president will believe and form the opinion that he is connected to the embezzlement. Meanwhile, a copy of the email was not attached to the news story for the public to read and interpret the contents thereof.

Companies Plead Guilty To Laundering 'Patience Jonathan's $15m'

> The four companies charged with money laundering, alongside a former Special Adviser on Domestic Affairs to ex-President Goodluck Jonathan, Waripamo-OweiDudafa, have pleaded guilty to the offence. The four companies pleaded guilty to conspiring with Dudafa; a lawyer, Amajuoyi Briggs; and a banker, AdedamolaBolodeoku, to launder a sum of $15,591,700 on or about November 13, 2013. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, while arraigning the seven accused before a Federal High Court in Lagos on Thursday, told the court that the $15.6m was proceeds of theft (Sahara Reporters Sep 15, 2016).

The above extract from Sahara Reporters websites depicts the height of rascality, unprofessionalism and unethical practices in reporting court proceedings. It will amount to contempt of the court for the media to report cases which are still under trial and have not been ruled on by the presiding judges. The framing of the story portends that Patience Jonathan is guilty because of the companies that pleaded guilty to laundering of $15m thereby provoking public anger against the accused person.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question was designed to ascertain whether the respondents are exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. According to the research findings, majority of the Journalists (Respondents) said they are well exposed to *Sahara Reporters* news stories on corruption allegations. This made it evident that the respondents are abreast with *Sahara Reporters* coverage and reportage of corruption allegations by Buhari administration.

Furthermore, research question two was designed to know respondents' views on *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. The result shows thatNigerian journalists perceive*Sahara Reporters* framing of the news stories as Bias and Sensational. This is in correlation with a study conducted by Saez-Trumper, Castillo &Lalmas (2013) which found that political bias is evident in social media, in terms of the distribution of tweets different stories receive. They further explain that this distribution is more closely related among communities of news media having the same political affiliation. Political bias is also observable in terms of the distribution of length of articles on different stories in traditional media, but to a smaller extent than in social media. Statement bias is also evident in social media which can be seen on the way issues are framed. In a sample of statements referring to world leaders, the language used in social media is more opinionated, and often more negative, than the one used in traditional news media. The third research question was designed to determine the dominant frames *Sahara Reporters* adopted in reporting corruption allegations by Buhari. The result gathered revealed that guilty and blame were the dominant frames used by the online news platform to report news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration. This was obvious in their choice of words while writing the headlines and the lead as well as the slanting of the story which was also observed from the qualitative content analysis. This correlates the suggestion of Entman (1993, p. 52) that frames in the news can be examined and identified by 'the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.' Along these lines, Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan (2002, p. 367) refer to 'choices about language, quotations, and relevant information' as the major framing devices. Gamson& Modigliani (1989) identify 'framing devices' that condense information and offer a 'media package' of an issue to include; metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, and visual images. The most comprehensive empirical approach is offered by Tankard (2001, p. 101) who suggests a list of framing mechanism or focal points for identifying and measuring news frames. They are; headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, logos, statistics and charts, and concluding statements and paragraphs.

The fourth research question was designed to know *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration set a stage for trial of the accused by the media. It was gathered from the result that the majority of the respondents agrees that *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration set a stage for trial of the accused by the media. This is also evident on the kind of comments that the public submitted of such news stories with the majority condemning and passing judgment on the accused rather than waiting the court to do so. This is in line with a study done by Tripathi (2011) who avers that the media have now reincarnated itself into a 'public court' (JantaAdalat) and has started interfering into court proceedings. He notes that the media have completely overlook the vital gap between an accused and a convict keeping at stake the golden principles of '*presumption of innocence until proven guilty' and 'guilt beyond reasonable doubt'*. Tripathi explains that what we observe is media trial where the media itself does a separate investigation, builds a public opinion against the accused even before the court takes cognizance of the case thereby prejudicing the public and sometimes even judges and as a result, the accused that should be assumed innocent, is presumed as a criminal leaving all his rights and liberty unrecognized.

The findings from the qualitative content analysis revealed that all the headlines of the news storied on corruption allegations by Buhari administration were frames of guilty and blame suggesting that the accused persons are guilty of the alleged corrupt practices making it possible for the public to hold such opinion. This in correlation with the findings from the survey where the respondents agree that *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administration is of guilty and blame. The respondents also agree that the *Sahara Reporters* framing of news stories on corruption allegations by Buhari administrations set a stage for trial of the accused persons by the media thereby undermining the proceedings of court of competent jurisdiction which uphold the right to fair hearing.

Conclusion

Heinous and horrific crimes must be condemned and the media would be justified in calling for the perpetrators to be punished by due process of law. However, the media have no right to overrule the sole

jurisdiction of the Courts of Law of the land. While a media shackled by the government is unhealthy, as has been clear from various instances in dictatorships across the world, the implications of continued unaccountability are even more damaging. The reputation of the media agents rests on unbiased and objective reporting – media trials and verdicts can only serve to undermine the credibility and bring them paramount embarrassment. It is therefore, in their own interest for the media to ensure that while reporting a case, they do not obstruct the course of the law of the land.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Sahara Reporters and other social media platforms should abide by the ethical standards guiding journalism profession while covering topical issues.
2. Nigeria Union of Journalists and other media organizations should set a high standard to be attained by prospective reporters and practitioners in order to check the wanton level of rascality by unprofessional journalists.
3. Government should find a means to effectively extend the various media laws to social media platforms with the view to curbing sensationalism and biased manner of news reporting.

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