**NEWSPAPERS’ COVERAGE OF SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATIONS IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF SELECTED NATIONAL DAILY NEWSPAPERS**

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***ABSTRACT***

*The Nigeria Military comprising of the Army, Air Force and Navy has been an integral part of the nation’s history long even before independence in 1960 judging by their efforts at maintaining law and order both internally and externally against aggressors. The activities of the military became further prominent with the return of democracy in 1999 as new threats began to emerge requiring superior firepower to suppress them. In all these, one institution that appears closely beside the military is the media, which also has edged itself in the part of relevance as far as the country exists. Past studies have proven that public confidence over the military could increase or decrease as a result of the direction of media reportage. This study, a novel one at that, examined media’s access to Special Military Operations (SMOs) as carried out between January-December, 2022. To do so, four newspapers- The Vanguard, Punch, Nation and Premium Times with a combined total of three hundred and eighty-eight (388) stories were reviewed in the period. The study was anchored on two theories of mass communication- social responsibility and agenda- setting, while relevant conceptual and empirical studies were reviewed as well. The study’s methodology was content analysis wherein the frequency (attention), sources of news, tone (direction) and depth of reports were analysed from the contents of the selected newspapers. Findings revealed that the media had access to the stories on SMOs but the access was undoubtedly limited because the military controlled the contents that got to the media. This was as the media depended heavily on the military as sources of news and slanted the stories in favour of the military, portraying the media as lapdogs instead of watchdogs. Therefore, amongst other recommendations, the study suggests the need for the media to resuscitate the tool of investigative journalism so that stories from one source irrespective of their credibility would undergo sufficient scrutiny before being published for the consummation of the public who deserve nothing short of the truth at no detected cost to national security.*

Key words: Special Military Operations, Coverage, Newspapers, Nigeria

**INTRODUCTION**

The Nigerian military could be adjudged as part and parcel of the history and development of the country. The military comprising the Army, Air Force and Navy has been at the forefront of national security especially at the wake of the 4th Republic in 1999. Although, its core mandate of protecting the nation from all forms of external aggression during war times with another or other nations has hardly come to bear, the involvement of the military in internal security matters is without doubt commendable. This development is not unconnected with the humongous security challenges the country is faced with from time to time with resultant inability and incapacity of the Police and other security components saddled with the responsibility of internal security to tackle the issues alone.

For instance, since the year 2009, the land and air components of the military have had to deal head on with the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East geopolitical zones and some parts of the north-central and western zones. This became so, following the overwhelming security challenges which greeted the actions of the group with obvious inability of the Police to handle them alone. Presently, the military’s participation in maintaining law and order could be seen in virtually all parts of the country as men and materials are often deployed to combat insecurity peculiar to respective theatres of operations. In the course of executing assignments, the texture of press-military relations has always been called to question with regards to media representation of its operations across the country against unwholesome activities which include:

* Terrorism/Insurgency;
* Armed Banditry/Cattle rustling;
* Oil theft/Pipeline vandalism;
* Farmers/ Herders clashes;
* Smuggling of contraband items;
* Kidnapping for ransom;
* Armed robbery/Sea piracy.

The aforementioned threats are within the purview of internal security but given that they continue to morph untowardly; the participation of the military has to be justified through specialised operations with accompanying timelines for suspension or conclusion depending on the level of the threat.

Aside specialized operations which the Nigerian Armed Forces embark upon with the use of force they are also involved in other activities which often bring them in contact with members of the public via non-kinetic strategies aimed at maintaining good civil-military relations. These include; deradicalization of repentant criminals; post-conflict rehabilitation, resettlement and reorganisation of ravaged areas, social engagements like Tombola nights and sports with sister security agencies, provision of medical assistance to civilians through several military-owned hospitals, provision of security coverage to Internally Displaced Persons camps, farmers on their farms and assistance to flood victims, among others. For instance, John Enenche (Major- General/Rtd), then Coordinator, Defence Media Operations disclosed through the media (Daily Nigerian online news) that the Nigerian military sometimes in October,2020, drilled 81 boreholes, renovated 14 schools and constructed 14 clinics and dispensaries in host communities. Also, being an organization, the Nigerian Armed Forces endeavour to keep the system functional through the engagement of their internal publics in diverse activities like seminars, workshops, courses, trainings, recruitment, discipline, transfers/ postings, promotions, etc.

For all these activities, the Media often make attempts to provide coverage in a bid to keep the public informed adequately. The desire of the media is not unconnected to their mandate of transmitting messages about the society regarding people, places, ideas and or situations.

Various metaphors have been created to capture different aspects of media. For example, McQuail (2005) refers to eight metaphors: media are ***windows*** that enable us to see beyond our immediate surroundings**, *interpret****ers* that help us make sense of experiences, ***platforms*** *or* ***carriers***that convey information*,* ***interactive******communication*** that includes audience feedback, ***signpost*** that provide us with instructions and directions, ***filters***that screen out part of experience and focus on others*,* ***mirrors***that reflect ourselves back to us and ***barriers*** that block the truth. The above metaphors readily summarize media relevance in the society as further derived from the under listed functions as enumerated by Oloyede (2008).

1. News-making: The media decides what news is and who is newsworthy.
2. Agenda setting: The media’s ability to determine which issues will be covered in what detail, and in what context.
3. Interpreting: The media has the power to set the context to frame the issue, to interpret the facts, and potentially to provide legitimacy for people, issues or groups.
4. Socializing: The media is an agent of socialization, teaching us political facts and opinions that help form our political belief structures and cultures.

In Nigeria, the media could be adjudged to have come a long way, with history that precedes the country’s independence from British rule in 1960. The first edition of the first newspaper Iwe Irohin fun awon Egba ati Yoruba (the Newspaper for the Egba People) was printed on 23rd November 1859 in Abeokuta, Ogun State by its publisher, Henry Townsend. From the humble beginning of the print journalism in 1859, different newspapers and magazines have emerged. Later, the nation witnessed another development of electronic media particularly the radio services through British Broadcasting Corporation rediffusion in 1932 among other growth in the broadcast media. Oyekanmi (2018) revealed that what is now known as mass media in Nigeria came chronologically, from one stage to the other, from one technological advancement to the other, from one regime or government to the other. Since then, the growth of the Nigerian media has been on the steady rise with relative commensurate efforts at keeping the public informed of happenings around their respective and extended environments through diverse reportage. However, despite the consistency of the media at keeping up with their identified mandate of information sharing with resultant creation of public awareness, the phenomena which play out in the course of media products delivery to the audience are worthy of attention after all.

**STATEMENT Of THE PROBLEM**

Special military operations are Federal Government’s response strategy through its Armed Forces in tackling threats of national security dimensions in any part of the country. As enshrined in section 217(2c) of the 1999 Constitution as amended:

*The Federation shall, subject to an Act of the National Assembly*

*made in their behalf, equip and maintain the armed forces as may*

*be considered adequate and effective for the purpose of suppressing*

*insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order*

*when called upon to do so by the President, but subject to such*

*conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly*.

A special military operation is usually on a long- or short-term basis, with a primary objective of suppressing an act of insurrection and restoring peace in a given area. Achieving this objective should not be left for the government or military alone, the involvement of the media is also very crucial. This is with regards to the relative power of the media reflective in the attention and prominence they accord to any issue through coverage or publicities with resultant impact on the public. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2008), with the remote control, you can move through, maybe, 50 television channels with a few minutes and get impressions very quickly about what is on. Even if you pause at various stations for just a few moments, you will be brought in touch with a huge world of subjects, from surgery to animals to wars to cooking to science to art. Beginning from the year 2009 when the Boko Haram insurgency began in Nigeria, particularly in the north-east geopolitical zone, the swift responses of the military in combating this insurrection and the coverage of the media are noteworthy.

Ryan Dowdya Colonel in the U.S. Army and a graduate of the U.S. Army War College resident class of 2019 maintained that the relationship between the media and the military is not always an easy one as some may even argue that the relationship is fractured, especially because of a number of high-profile missteps and coverage critical of the military. At other times, the military chafes at unfavourable coverage, what they view as the media airing dirty laundry. Inspite of this feeling, the media’s vital role as the [Fourth Estate](https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/courses/cs181/projects/2010-11/Journalism/index7f0d.html?page_id=16) of the Realm remains unarguable as they provide the forum for public transparency, which is necessary for legitimacy and accountability. The media is a watchdog, and it serves citizens and military leaders as well by uncovering problems that might otherwise go unknown, undetected, or ignored by the bureaucracy.

Overtime in Nigeria, media -military relations has been a subject of debate within the context of national security and public interest. While the media is obligated to ensure the public is aware of happenings around them from an informed position, the military despite its critical placement within the sovereignty called Nigeria is a relatively closed system. Both parties are open and closed to the public, respectively for same reasons supposedly. By training anchored on the oath of secrecy, the military is wired to be secretive while it is an aberration for the media by her journalistic ethics to hoard information of value from the public. However, given that special military operations are geared towards suppressing insurrection and restoring peace in a given area, the importance of publicising these operations for awareness and knowledge about the military and the government cannot be overemphasised. This is in view of the overwhelming benefits that can be derived from a well-informed public especially when the issues at hand are directly related to their safety and wellbeing.

There were and still are several special military operations across the country targeted at restoring peace in Nigeria. These include: Operation Lafiya Dole, Sharan Daji, Shirin Harbi, Harbin Kunama II, Operation Dokaji, Operation Egwu Eke, Crocodile Smile, Harbin Kunama 1, Operation Karamin Goro, Operation Ayem Akpatuma, Operation Last Hold, Egwu Eke aka Python Dance II, Operation 777, Operation Egwu Eke III, Operation Python Dance III, Operation Harbin Kunama III, Operation Python Dance I, Operation Positive Identification, Operation Atilogwu, Operation Rattle Snake, Operation Yancin Tafki, Operation Long Reach, Exercise Sahel Sanity, Operation Ruwan Wuta I, II, and III, Exercise Mugun Bugu, Exercise Steel Waters, Exercise Enduring Peace, Exercise Golden Dawn, Operation Tura Ta Kai Bango, Operation Sharan Fague, among others. However, it is of concern if the media had access to the avalanche of the above operations and where there was access, if the information available to the media were sufficient enough for public consumption.

**AIM Of THE STUDY**

The aim of the study is to determine media’s access to special military operations in the year 2022.

**OBJECTIVES Of THE STUDY**

1. To establish the number of times the print media provided coverage for special military operations between January and December, 2022.
2. To ascertain the sources of information, the print media relied on to provide coverage of special military operations
3. To examine the tone of news stories about special military operations.
4. To determine the depth of the stories published by the newspapers about special military operations.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is the frequency in print media coverage of special military operations between January and December, 2022?
2. Which sources did the print media rely on for information on special military operations between January and December, 2022?
3. In which tone did the print media report stories about special military operations between January and December, 2022?
4. How comprehensive were the stories about special military operations by the print media between January and December, 2022?

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The media comprise television, radio, internet, newspapers, and magazines. They can also be categorised into traditional and new media, as well as print and electronic media. For the purpose of this study, the in-print/online media of four selected newspapers were utilized. This comprised: Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation, and Premium Times. The choices of the newspapers were informed on their respective national spread and reach.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will contribute to existing body of knowledge on media-military relations as its intention is geared towards determining the extent to which media are providing prominence and attention to military related activities for onward creation of requisite awareness and knowledge for the public about their military.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature review for the paper is segmented into three parts viz; Theoretical framework, conceptual and empirical studies.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical foundation for the research is the Agenda Setting and Social Responsibility theories of mass communication considered most appropriate in view of their respective postulations regarding the operations of the mass media.

**Agenda-setting theory**

Agenda-setting theory was propounded between 1972/1973 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw. Baran and Davis (2012) stated that the theory proposes that the facts which people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media present to them. Also, the significance which they ascribe to the same issues tend to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to same issues in the media. Here, it is assumed that the media sets the agenda for our general discussion. The media may not always determine what we think, but what we think about. Although we have a right to think what we want to think, but surprisingly, we tend to think most of those things the media highlight as important.

Furthermore, Tejumaiye (2009) noted the number of times an issue is reported,using headline and picture display strategies to play up a report in the media and reports that give room for points and counter-points are phenomena which can determine agenda setting.

The agenda-setting theory comes from a specific perspective, because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will place importance on the same issues. According to Chaffe and Berger's (1997) criteria for scientific theories cited in Anaeto *et al*., (2008) agenda-setting is a good theory because:

1. It has explanatory power because it explains why most people prioritize the same issues as important.
2. It has predictive power because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel the same issues are important.
3. It is parsimonious because it is not complex, and it is easy to understand.
4. It can be proven false. If people are not exposed to the same media, they will not feel the same issues are important.
5. Its meta-theoretical assumptions are balanced on the scientific sides.
6. It is springboard for further research.
7. It has organizing power because it helps organize existing knowledge of media effects.

**Social Responsibility Theory**

According to McQuail (2010) the theory of social responsibility involved a view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private franchise. It received its philosophical basis in the American commission of 1947 which was put into practice with much more determination and effects in countries other than the United States, especially in Western Europe in the two decades following the Second World War. The impulse was threefold based on the wish to make a new beginning after the war, the general rise of more progressive politics and the experience of a wave of press concentration that revived fears of private media monopoly. McQuail (2010) enumerated the main propositions of the theory to include the following:

1. The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust
2. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
3. The media should be free, but self-regulated.
4. The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.
5. Under some circumstances, government may need to intervene in the interest of the public.

Therefore, both theories are not only relevant to the study but also complement each other. This is because the media in their coverage of special military operations do so not only to set the agenda for public discourse but equally out of obligation which must be done within the boundaries of truth, accuracy, fairness, objectivity and relevance.

**Conceptual/Empirical Studies**

It remains the duty of the media to inform the public about issues for the purpose of fulfilling their obligation to society and to do this, they critique and evaluate the activities of other people and institutions. Without doubt, what they publish can influence the people, businesses and institutions they cover. For this cause, media reports are expected to reflect truth, fairness and sincerity which are hallmarks of journalistic integrity.

Snow-Capparelli (2013) enjoins reporters to seek out intelligent and articulate sources from all relevant perspectives and viewpoints. Journalists are encouraged to seek out both those who have power and those who do not, to ensure balanced representations especially of the groups under examination. This study strongly aligns with the above principle and desires that when reporting about military operations, the media should include statements from the military, corroborating information from the residents in the area, civil society organisations and Think-Tanks, and if possible, the insurgents who received the actions of the military for their own side of how their engagement with the military fared.

Ndinojuo, *et al*., (2020) investigated the sources of news about military operations against Boko Haram, using content analysis of four Nigerian dailies; Daily Trust, Premium Times, The Nation and Vanguard. The research analysed sources of news about military operations against Boko Haram from 2014-2016 and found out that 185 stories with an average of 1.5 sources, reported with sources from mainly one side of the divide without corroboration and the dominant sources were military sources. The findings refuted the claims by the military that the media was bias in their reportage of special military operations in favour of the Boko Haram terrorists. Rather, the media relied more on sources within the military on the issue in the period under review.

Afomachukwu (2020) conducted a study on Newspaper Framing of the Nigerian Armed Forces Operation Python Dance II in South-East Nigeria. The study analysed how the Nigerian newspapers framed the Nigerian Armed Forces’ “Operation Python Dance II” with a view to identifying the dominant frames in the stories published. With the use of content analysis research methodology, findings revealed that the human-interest frame was the dominant frame of reportage, while the security and attribution of responsibility frames had a considerable number of stories as well. Findings from the study recommended that the media and the military should in subsequent exercises prepare the members of the society for an upcoming exercise by carrying public service announcements on the issue while the military should organize press conferences on its operations to avoid misconceptions and create awareness.

In another study on Effects of Real-Time News Coverage on Military Decision-Making, Adamson (1997) stated that concern over how the media may portray military operations affects the planning of them. The research indicated political and military decision-makers are compelled to make more and more decisions about things they know less about at a faster rate and equally found that concern over coverage of tactical events, when covered real-time, has operational and strategic planning implications. Adamson (1997) in reference to news coverage during the Somalia special military operation (operation Restore Hope) noted the lack of understanding from the media as their cameras and flood-lights greeted Navy SEAL teams as they infiltrated onto the beaches. Due to the nature of the mission, the action seemed absurd. By mere watching a television set it was easy to see the temperament of the SEALs. They were concerned with accomplishing their mission as microphones were being shoved in their faces. They had no intention of giving a cordial interview to a news correspondent in the middle of an amphibious infiltration.

In a similar development, Adamson (1997) recalled how one of the broadcast stations in Somalia broadcast with the aid of graphics, a dead soldier’s body during a raid conducted by US Army Rangers to capture a warlord, Mohammed Aideed. During the raid, eighteen Americans were killed, 77 wounded and one captured. The Somali’s celebration was broadcast while the US news organizations did not film the event. They had left Mogadishu two weeks prior for fear of their safety. However, an international reporter from the Toronto Star photographed the scene and a home video camera was used to film the event which was aired later on American television. Bernard Kalb, an ex-reporter who later became the Director of the Harvard Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy said the picture was a symbol of American power being dragged through the Third World, unable to master the challenges of the post-Cold War era. That the sequence of events, broadcast daily over several months, was the last straw for Congress and the public as Congress’ amendment to cut-off funding for the Somalia operation was a result of the report. The American law makers had noted thatpolitically, the cost-benefit ratio of continuing the peace operations in Somalia was too great and the psychological effect on the American public, created by television, raised the risk to the Administration. Therefore, President Clinton ordered the troops home and discontinued the special operation in Somalia. In the meantime, Adamson (1997) called on Commanders to use their public affairs professionals as insulators and advisors while instituting standard procedures for dealing with the media in various operational environments. Military members should receive awareness training on the potential impact of news coverage prior to deployments. Those leaders entrusted with authority to execute military operations on politically sensitive missions must develop diplomatic skills to be effective with reporters.

Waters (2004) in a study titled, “Influencing the Message: The Role of Catholic Missionaries in Media Coverage of the Nigerian Civil War” recollected the heavy reliance on Catholic missionary priests of Irish nationality in the Biafra region by some foreign Journalists in the coverage of the war. These persons include; Frederick Forsyth formerly with the British Broadcasting Corporation turned freelance Journalist and Allen Hart of the British Television. Both reporters at different times relied on the eyewitness accounts of Kevin Doheny, a veteran missionary of the ongoing war. Others were; William Bernard of Mark press Agency, Norman Kirkhan of the Daily Telegraph, Walter Parlington of the Daily Express, William Norris from the Times of London, Brian Dixton of the Life tabloid. Also were, John Sullivan, a reporter for the National Catholic Reporter, John M.C Lauglin of the Catholic Weekly America, amongst others. Waters (2004) maintained that the above-mentioned journalists with sources mainly amongst catholic priests from Europe, Biafran soldiers and some humanitarian aid workers from France presented their respective accounts of the war from the perspective of Biafra.

**Mass Media and National Security in Nigeria**

Croteau and Hoynes (2003) assert the importance of the media in our lives to the effect that life is meaningless without the media because with no television, radio, newspaper or the internet, we would have a great deal of time in our hands. According to Oloyede (2008) ever since its foundation the Press throughout the world has generally been in the forefront of social, educational and political progress. It has been a standard bearer in the struggle against poverty, oppression, deceit, tyranny and other clogs of mankind. It has remained a most important and indispensable entity in jostling entrenched atrocity and dismantling robust oppression.

The American Press, for instance fought in the struggle against British rule until independence was attained in 1786. Similarly, the Nigerian Press fuelled the hostility against British colonialism until it terminated in 1960. Without the Press, it is doubtful whether there could have been an American or French Revolution neither could there have been a return to Democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999. Furthermore, Oloyede (2008) maintained that the roles which the Press perform in modern society are numerous. Beyond the traditional functions of the Press to inform, educate entertain and help sell goods and services, they now perform other equally important and indispensable duties in the service of the modern society.

* **Social-Cultural Role:** the role which the press plays in the transmission and advancement of culture is generally beyond question. It constantly feeds both the adult and upcoming generation of society with the acceptable modes and norms of social behaviour. It also helps to enforce these norms by publicizing sanctions against transgressors.
* **Mirror of Society:** As an imitator and reflector of the modes of human apprehension and judgement, the press function to mirror the society. The nature and perception of every community is easily perceived through the press
* **A Forum for the Free Expression of Opinions and Ideas-** the media serves well in this capacity particularly under the relatively free press environment because whoever has anything new or newsworthy to say simply says and the press beams the information to the world.
* **A Bearer of Danger Signals:** the Press foresees, predicts and warns society against impending dangers and catastrophes.
* **A Crusader for Social Justice:** they also crusade for social justice and function as the tribune of the people. Whenever and wherever any individual or a group of people are unduly harassed or their fundamental rights trampled upon, the Press put up a crusading mantle and champion their causes. It is for this reason the mass media is commonly referred to as the voice of the voiceless.
* **A Mass Mobilizer:** Given the right direction and necessary paraphernalia, it mobilizes people for political and economic causes. Such causes include effecting positive change in health habits, prosecuting economic revolutions, fighting national wars, and others.
* P**illar of Public Opinion:** the press serves as the foundation and sustainer of public opinion in society. Without the press through which society feels the pulse of its entire membership and without the news media which simultaneously encodes the aggregate of such feelings to the generality of the people, it will be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible to collate the feelings of the mass of the people.
* **A Most Indispensable Instrument of Governance:** The press conducts information flow between governments and the governed and ensures that the citizenry are not kept in the dark about the thinking of government. It reports, explains and meaningfully conveys to the people the policies and actions of government.

The media perform the aforementioned functions through news gathering, compilation, news presentation and news explanation on daily basis. It communicates to the people what is happening around them; in different sectors and spheres of society. It also provides explanations of news stories telling people how a particular news event or story affects them. Sometimes, media can overstep its boundaries and give too much information based on rumour or choose to come up with sensational and or inciting news stories (Duyile: 1987).The Nigerian media, in term of size, are the biggest in Africa, followed by Kenya and South Africa, and are regarded as the epicentre of Nigeria’s magnificent civil society. They have emerged as the arbiters of national conversation, partly because of their antecedents in the seminal anti-colonial and anti-military struggles. Most recently, they played heroic oppositional roles with respect to the brutal dictatorships of the 1990s and are regarded as the vanguard of the crusade to return Nigeria to civilian rule after 16 years of unbroken military rule.

On national security, Holmes (2015) defined the concept from the perspective of power, military strength, force and national defence. As power, it means a nation’s possession of control of its sovereignty and destiny. It implies some degree of control of the extent to which outside forces can harm the country. Hard power is about control, while soft power is mainly about influence, trying to persuade others, using methods short of war, to do something.National security as military strength refers to military capacity and the capabilities of the armed forces, and it is a capacity that may not actually be used. It often is understood as a static measure of the power of a country, but in reality, military strength is a variable that is subject to all sorts of factors, including the relative strength of opponents, the degree to which it is used effectively, or whether it is even used at all. Force is the use of a military or law enforcement capacity to achieve some objective. Using force unwisely or unsuccessfully can diminish one’s power and strength. By the same token, using it effectively can enhance power. Force is an instrument of power just as a tool or some other device would be, but unlike institutional instruments like the armed forces, its use in action is what distinguishes it from static instruments of strength like military capacity. Thus, force should be understood narrowly as an applied instrument of coercion. Finally, there is national defense which refers to the ability of the armed forces to defend the sovereignty of the nation and the lives of its people.

According to Ali (2013), national security means the protection of the lives, rights, dignity, and property of citizens. It also means the protection of resources, cultural integrity, territory, sovereignty and lawful institutions of a country. Nigeria’s national security means the protection of its resources, territory, sovereignty and lawful institutions of the country from threats. The aim of national security is to secure the just and equitable living conditions of the country. Former President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in appreciation of the need for closer co-operation and collaboration among the various security agencies and all other components that make up the Nigerian society stated in March 2001, that the concept of national security shall be the aggregation of the security interest of the individuals, communities, ethnic groups, political entities and institutions which inhabit the territory of Nigeria. According to Afomachukwu (2020) the media is a principal player in the arena of national security. National security has been greatly threatened since independence. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, the mass media orientation shifted towards reinforcing tribal and sectional loyalties in preference to national unity, identity and integration.

**Research Methodology**

Content analysis was employed in the study to analyse four Nigerian newspapers’ coverage of special military operations between January and December, 2022. Tejumaiye (2017) said content analysis as a research methodology is one of mass communication’s great contributions to scientific inquiry. That the main unit of analysis in content analysis is written or recorded messages. Three in-print newspapers: The Punch, Vanguard, The Nation and one online news paper- Premium Times were purposively selected based on their national spread, accessibility and wide availability. Digital versions were used because the Internet provides the technical capability for researchers to scrutinize an article, assess its sources, and communicate using channels that other media do not provide. This has been validated in a number of studies (Freyenberger, 2013; Wang and Riffe, 2010) in Ndinijuo, et.al (2020). The primary substance in the choice of newspapers for the study was the prominence of the selected media, as manifest in their circulation and regional representation. Vanguard was the highest rated Nigerian newspaper; Premium Times was the most read online newspaper in Nigeria (Alexa, 2017),The Nation was rated as the third best newspaper in Nigeria (Adewuyi, 2023).Within the study period, the total editions of dailies published and circulated by the Punch, Vanguard and Nation were1,095, being 365 editions multiplied by the three newspapers. That is the three papers produced copies every Monday to Sunday. However, that was not the case with Premium Times as it released posts on daily basis but did not post issues related to the military on such basis. A total of 25 stories on military activities were posted across all the months except July. Of all the stories, only 13 were on Special Military Operations (SMOs).Table 1 below highlights the breakdown of the numbers of stories published in the year 2022.

***Table 1: All military related stories published in 2022***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Newspaper** | **Military Related Stories** | **Special Military Operations Related Stories** |
| Vanguard | 534 | 195 |
| The Punch | 230 | 113 |
| The Nation | 120 | 67 |
| Premium Times | 25 | 13 |
| **TOTAL** | **909** | **388** |

All editions were painstakingly searched out in order to avoid missing out on any military related issue reported in the period under review. Also, the search was necessary so as to enable a proper selection of SMOs related stories from general stories on the Nigerian Military. At the end of the exercise, a total of 909stories on military related activities were published out of which 388were reportage on SMOs. For the purpose of this study, the population of study is the military related stories (909) while the sample of study is the reportage on SMOs (388). Tejumaiye (2017) defined a sample as a subject of the population that is taken to be representative of the entire population. Majid (2018) explained that a population of interest is a target population that a study intends to investigate. Adamu-Iria (2006) defined population as a collection or set of individuals or objects whose properties are to be analysed.

**Unit of Analysis**

The units of analysis for this study are the frequency of publications; sources relied on by the newspapers, direction of reportage and depth of the reports on Special Military Operations (SMOs). The frequency of publications was represented by the numbers of stories on SMOs published in the period under investigation. Sources relied on by the newspapers were explained taking into cognizance the numerous categories of people who provided information about SMOs such as the military, Government officials, civilian eye witnesses, embedded journalists, NGOs and anonymous. Direction of reportage reflects the tone deployed by the newspapers in reporting SMOs in the period under review, whether positive, negative or neutral, while depth represents the extent of comprehensiveness of the reports relative to the name of special operation, nature of operation, location of operation, confirmation of information on SMOs from other sources, date operation executed, military components involved, exact figures of casualties during SMOs, etc.

**Data Collection Instrument**

The coding sheet was used as an instrument to generate data on the manifest contents of the reports in the selected newspapers on SMOs from January to December, 2022. The coding guide also was used to provide a guide on the units of analysis and contents categories under study.

**Method of data presentation**

Data from the investigation were presented in tables and simple percentages given the fact that the study is concerned with the examination of the manifest contents of newspapers on Special Military Operations in the year 2022.

***Table 2: Frequency of newspapers’ coverage of SMOs in 2022.***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables** | **Vanguard** | **The Punch** | **The Nation** | **Premium** | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
| January | 15 | 17 | 10 | 2 | 44 | 11.34 |
| February | 9 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 4.38 |
| March | 12 | 12 | 4 | 2 | 30 | 7.73 |
| April | 16 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 26 | 6.70 |
| May | 23 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 36 | 9.28 |
| June | 9 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 16 | 4.12 |
| July | 10 | 9 | 8 | 0 | 27 | 6.96 |
| August | 21 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 38 | 9.79 |
| September | 25 | 12 | 5 | 0 | 42 | 10.83 |
| October | 20 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 34 | 8.76 |
| November | 24 | 9 | 12 | 1 | 46 | 11.86 |
| December | 11 | 13 | 8 | 0 | 32 | 8.25 |
| **TOTAL** | **195 (50.26%)** | **113 (29.12%)** | **67 (17.17%)** | **13 (3.35%)** | **388** | **100** |

From the data in table 2, it can be seen that the newspapers under investigation reported the issue adequately in the period under review. This is as it appeared three hundred and eighty-eight (388) times in the pages of the four newspapers concerned, being an average of one story on SMOs per day. The Vanguard had the highest number of stories on SMOs with 50.26% of the total stories for the year, a representation of 195 reports from 126 editions. The Punch followed after with 29.12% representing 113 reports from 83 editions, while reports on the issue by the Nation stood at 17.27% which reflected 67 stories from 29 editions and 3.35% of the total reports was from Premium Times being 13 stories from 11 posts. The adequacy of media coverage in this instance may not be unconnected to the state of insecurity in the country occasioned by myriads of threats to national security. These include; terrorism in the South-East, insurgency in the North-East, oil theft in the South- South, armed banditry in the North-West, crime and criminality in the South-West and Ethno-Religious/ Farmers-Herders conflicts in the North-Central geopolitical zones. The foregoing underscores a seeming synergy between the media and the military in efforts to combat the above threats with one waging the war using guns and the other putting its pen to active use. The table further implies that as the challenges against national security persists across the nation, the military continues its offensive and defensive while the media relentlessly provides coverage accordingly.

***Table 3: Sources relied on by the newspapers in coverage of SMOs in year 2022.***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Newspaper** | **Sources** | | | | |
| **Military** | **Government Officials** | **Civilian Eye Witnesses** | **Journalists** | **Non-Governmental Organization** |
| Vanguard | 172 (88.21%) | 5 (2.56%) | 13 (6.67%) | 0 (0.00%) | 5 (2.56%) |
| The Punch | 107 (94.69%) | 2 (1.77%) | 3 (2.66%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (0.89%) |
| The Nation | 57 (85.08%) | 3 (4.48%) | 6 (8.96%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (1.49%) |
| Premium Times | 11 (84.62%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (7.69%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (7.69%) |

The above table shows that the newspapers relied more on military sources for information on SMOs as well as other issues related to the subject matter. The researcher presumes no one will be in a better position to inform the media about the operations better than the military themselves. Investigation revealed that sources such as government officials and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) whose views the newspapers captured were based on the assessment of the SMOs not necessarily the accounts of what transpired in the theatre of war. Also, since the study stretches its frontiers to issues related to the SMOs as well, these persons easily fit into those categories as stories in such directions were more of commentaries on the issue. In the meantime, civilian eye witnesses which the newspapers relied on were mainly community dwellers whose communities the military carried out operations which they witnessed. Eighteen of the eye witnesses supplied their detail to the newspapers, respectively, while 5 chose to remain anonymous. However, in the period under review, the newspapers did not receive any story on SMOs from journalists whether as embedded, correspondent (covert/overt) or freelance. The military either through their spokespersons or theatre commanders supplied information on the operations as they occurred. Also, on one occasion, account on SMO was given by a government official. For instance, the Punch of 19th January, 2022, reported that the Kaduna State Commissioner for Internal Security and Home Affairs, Samuel Aruwan, said troops of the Nigeria Army troops rescued eight kidnapped victims in the Chikun LGA of the State and killed three terrorists during the operation. This undoubtedly is at variance with investigative journalism and the principle of balanced reportage given the over-reliance of the media on one source which could result to bias and tendency of the dominant source controlling the pattern and direction of the news.

***Table 4: Tone of reporting on SMOs by the newspapers***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Newspaper** | **Tone** | | |
| **Positive** | **Neutral** | **Negative** |
| Vanguard | 177 (90.77%) | 11(5.64%) | 7(3.59%) |
| The Punch | 100(88.50%) | 9(7.97%) | 4(3.54%) |
| The Nation | 58(86.57%) | 5(7.46%) | 4(5.97%) |
| Premium Times | 11(84.62%) | 1(7.69%) | 1(7.69%) |

Table 4 above shows that the four newspapers reported SMOs for the reviewing period mostly in a positive tone. This was reflective in stories which portrayed the military as winning the fight against insecurity through diverse special operations across the country as well as positive commentaries from military high authorities and government officials on the efforts of troops at decimating enemy forces. However negative toned reports were those which the papers captured as either attacks on troops by terrorists or allegations of unlawful invasion of communities by the military and killing of innocent civilians during some airstrikes. Meanwhile, neutral tone was represented by reports which were neither positive nor negative. They were more from NGOs and institutions saddled with appraising SMOs and proffering solutions on ending insecurity. Below is one sample each of stories in positive, negative and neutral tone, respectively.

1. ***“Troops kill 10 bandits, destroy camps in Kaduna villages”***

Vanguard Newspaper, December 23, 2022.

1. ***Military invades Ebonyi community in search of IPOB/ESN camp***

The Nation Newspaper, December 12, 2022.

1. ***Support troops with your reports, military tells media***

The Punch 22nd January 2022.

***Table 5: Depth of reportage on SMOs by the newspapers in the year 2022***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Newspaper** | **Depth of Reportage** | | | | | | |
| **Code name of Special Operation** | **Nature of Operation** | **Location of Operation** | **Confirmation of information on SMOs from**  **other sources** | **Date Operation was executed** | **Military Components involved** | **Exact Figures of Casualties during SMOs** |
| Vanguard | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Nil | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Not mentioned in all the reports |
| The Punch | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Nil | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Not mentioned in all the reports |
| The Nation | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Nil | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Not mentioned in all the reports |
| Premium Times | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Nil | Mentioned in all the reports | Mentioned in all the reports | Not mentioned in all the reports |

In addition to frequency (attention), sources of news, tone (direction), the study was concerned about the representation of stories on SMOs by the newspapers with regards to the quality of information they passed to the public in the period under review. To ascertain the completeness of the reports, they had to be measured using the variable of depth. The table above shows that the newspapers mentioned the code names of the operations, nature of the operations, location, and date operation was carried out and the military components involved in a given special operation. However, none of the newspapers dedicated either a sentence or paragraph to verification of any of the stories on SMOs as provided by the military. Also the military through the newspapers mentioned exact figures of casualties recorded against enemy forces but were not always exact with the number of civilian casualties who were affected negatively by their operations like in cases of air strikes.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

In the year under review, the Vanguard, Punch, Nation and Premium Times published a combined total of nine hundred and nine (909) stories on Nigerian Military related activities. Out of this number, three hundred and eighty-eight (388) were on Special Military Operations as well as stories common to the issue. This figure represents 42.68% of entire stories on military in the period in focus. The attention accorded by the print media on SMOs through the frequency of reportage, being an average of one story daily could be adjudged as relatively good performance on the part of the media. The foregoing indicates that the Nigerian media had access to activities of the Military, despite the latter’s usual suspicion which often dictates the divulgence of information to the media. This may not be unconnected to the position of Rai (2000) that failure on the part of the military to involve the media in its activities will lead to the military becoming victims of rash or ill-informed public opinion. The sampled stories also showed that the media fulfilled their duty according to McQuail (2005) as the windows that enable us to see beyond our immediate surroundings; interpreters that help us make sense of experiences and platforms or carriers that convey information. To further confirm the level of media involvement in SMOs, a call was put through to the Commander, 65 Battalion of the Nigerian Army, Lagos, Lieutenant Col. Mohammed Lawal. He maintained that the attention accorded the operations by the media was encouraging and motivating as the reportage were avenues to keep the public abreast of the fight against insecurity across the country. That, the frequency of reports on SMOs point to the continued strengthening of media-military relations towards overcoming the myriads of threats to national security.

The second research objective was to ascertain the sources of information, the newspapers relied on in publishing stories on SMOs and other items related to the issue in year 2022. Findings revealed that the newspapers relied heavily on the military to publish stories on SMOs in the reviewing period. A total of three hundred and forty seven (347) out of three hundred and eighty- eight (388) publications representing 89.43% emanated from the military. This figure was distantly followed by information from civilian eye witnesses on the matter which stood at twenty three (23) being 5.92% of the total figure. Also, the newspapers relied on Government officials and Non-Governmental Organizations concerning the issue but only ten (10)/2.57% and eight (8) 2.06% publications emanated from both sides respectively all through the reviewing period. Meanwhile, no story on SMOs was gotten from journalists during the period. Gamreklidze (2015) states that long ago as in the infancy of journalism as a profession, those who aspired to report the news were trained to rely on solid sources for information and perspective on the events. News making is a business, sustainability of which depends on the product being trusted by and popular among the audiences. It is also a profession, and though not licensed, has its norms, standards, values and responsibilities. In addition, Cozma, *et al*., (2012) notes that news stories need sources the way human beings need oxygen and being far from mere information carriers, sources make the news legitimate, add credibility and authority.

Therefore, it suffices to state that the newspapers were justified for relying mostly on the military for stories on SMOs, as none other source would have been credible enough to provide insight into SMOs like the military. Perhaps this explains why no single Journalist served as source for their media outfits or those of others as they would have been accused of bias or influencing the stories against the military and could face possible litigation for compromising operational security. This is as Tiffen (2013) maintains that sourcing helps to avoid bias and protect from legal problems. However, Berkowitz (2009) said that not only journalists need sources to successfully conduct their business, but that news sources usually have a vested interest in journalists’ reports, linking news content to public opinion, and ultimately, their own success. In these relations, some sources have higher power, stakes as well as importance for reporters than others and are referred to as official. In this instance, the military and government representatives who gave account on SMOs are considered as official sources. Notwithstanding, the dominance of one source in a story over others stands the chance of being influenced by the domineering source, since the media has no say or input in the story. They only are vehicles for projecting the positive image of the originators, they publish only stories provided by the news source and from the source’s angle or perspective, no need for fact- checking as the issue is considered credible coming from a supposedly trust worthy and dependable source of news.

The ‘parasitism’ of the news institutions according to Berkowitz (2009) expresses itself in an interdependent, symbiotic, and delicately negotiated relationship between reporters and their sources in which each side relies on the other for reasons of self-interest something that Reich (2006) called a reciprocal model of reporter-source relations. Self-interest here suggest that the media being a commercial entity with the goal to sell their products and the military in the quest to be viewed as winning the fight against insecurity both do so without taking into consideration the sensibilities of the public with regards to knowing the actual truth behind the projected story. The question remains, whose duty is it to determine the truth- the media, military or the public? All reports on SMOs particularly those which were generated from the theatres of operations, portrayed the military as winning against enemy forces, yet insecurity of varying degrees still thrive.

Another reason why the military dominated news items on SMOs may be tied to Kellner (1993) position that war coverage by the media is largely uncritical and often patriotic. For example, Mueller (1994) recalled that during the first Gulf War, media generally reacted with predictable boosterism instead of asking the military forces difficult questions about the war. They served as cheerleaders for the military and did not want to concentrate on the negatives of war. But this stance is contrary to that of Paul and Kim (2004) as the authors maintained that the goals of the military and the press often conflict. The military wants the press to tell stories that build support for the war and its credibility whereas; the media want to tell an accurate account of the military operations.

One prominent example of a press/military conflict as recounted by Paul and Kim (2004) surfaced regarding the Vietnam War as American citizens watching the news received a mixed message about Vietnam because the military and the administration painted an optimistic picture of the war whereas the press often contradicted official accounts. Reporters were flown to a combat unit, saw the combat operations, wrote their stories, and then returned to their hotels. They would then attend the official military press briefing also known as the “five o’clock follies”. Reporters called the briefings the “follies” because the information at the briefing was sanitized, and the briefings did not paint the picture the journalists witnessed first-hand. Military officials tried to make the bad news good but as support for the war eroded it became clear the military was not always successful. One explanation, for the tendency of the news media to provide positively framed, patriotic stories from the warfront is that such coverage is at least in part a result of attempts on the part of the military to control that coverage. Similarly, Brightman (2003) notes that during the Gulf War, reporters had no eyewitness accounts of the war efforts. The military controlled what reporters saw and read the reporters’ stories before sending those stories to news agencies in the United States because they were trying to ensure the safety of journalists and the security of the mission.

The third research objective sought curiosity on the tone of the selected newspapers deployed in the coverage of SMOs. Data gathered indicate that the newspapers reported the issue positively in the reviewing period with a total of three hundred and forty seven (347) stories that is 89.17% from the four newspapers published in favour of the Military. This outcome can be said to be predictable in view of the outcome of the second research question on sources of SMOs reports. However, only sixteen (16) and twenty-six (26) reports being 4.12% and 6.70% respectively reflected negative and neutral tones about SMOs. Findings showed the negative toned reports were basically reports from sources outside the military mainly civilians who witnessed such operations like air strikes and invasion with resultant civilian casualties. Their accounts painted the military in bad light, while stories with neutral tones were mostly based on appraisal of the SMOs across the country with calls on government to prioritize welfare of troops and ensure their training/retraining for better output. According to Kendall-Taylor (2020) tone refers to the way a communication conveys or elicits emotion. Lengauer *et al*., (2012) in Asker, *et al* (2016), recommended the need to differentiate between positive, negative, neutral and ambivalent tonality. A news story has a negative tonality when the story reflects indications ranging from disappointment, frustration, skepticism, threat and risk up to political failure, crisis and disaster. Indications of positive tonality range from hope and enthusiasm up to solutions, successes and gains. A news story has an ambivalent tonality when it balances elements of negative and positive tonalities and a neutral tonality when it reflects neither negative nor positive views.

Finally, the study was concerned about knowing how comprehensive the stories on SMOs were as reported by the selected newspapers. To gain understanding on this, six indicators were looked at which were: name of special operation, nature of operation, confirmation of information on SMOs from other sources, date operation was executed, military components involved and exact figures of casualties during SMOs. Starting with the name of the operation, investigation revealed all the newspapers mentioned the names of various special operations carried out by the military against diverse forms of insecurity. Some names of such SMOs include: Operation Tura Takai Bango, Exercise Golden Dawn, Exercise Golden Dawn, Operation Delta Safe, Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Hadin Kai, Operation Enduring Peace, amongst others. On nature of operation, all the papers mentioned them, some of which were; air bombardment/strikes, invasion, arrest, rescue, aggressive clearance, surveillance and reconnaissance mission, escort for humanitarian workers, gun battle, night ambush, patrols, close air support, etc. Also, all the papers mentioned locations where the operations were carried, date and time as well as the military components involved in the operations - the Army, Air Force or Navy.

In the meantime, the study stretched the phenomenon of depth further to confirmation of the stories provided by the military on SMOs from other sources. This was necessary as depth of a report should equally reflect balance reportage. It was discovered that none of the newspapers wrote on the account of the “other” about any story on SMOs. All stories were as told to the media, no line or paragraph was reserved for confirmation. In cases, where the military was accused of operational failure with resultant casualties, the military were always evasive in commenting as the papers’ comments often reflect such a statement as “efforts to reach the Army/Navy/Air Force spokesperson proved abortive as the phone was switched off or unreachable”. For number of casualties during SMOs, the newspapers were exact to some extent. For example of the 195 stories on the issue, the Vanguard were exact in providing the number of terrorists decimated by the military in 88 stories, while 30 other stories did not provide exact numbers but estimate. Words like “no fewer than”, “scores” were common features in such stories. The remainder of 77 stories was issues surrounding SMOs not the operations parse; therefore the need to look out for exactitude did not arise.

**CONCLUSION**

The foregoing analysis on newspapers’ coverage of SMOs between January and December, 2022 suggests the active involvement of the media in the fight against threats to national security through their reports. The media’s core mandate of informing and educating the public as tucked-in, in the social responsibility and agenda-setting theories of mass communication undoubtedly came to bear as a combined total of 388 stories on SMOs and other related matters to the issue by the newspapers were published in 268 editions and 11 posts in the reviewing period. The figure showed that the print media had something to write about the issue on a virtually daily basis, an indication of the military providing media access to its activities. As the fight against insecurity across the country rages on, the media relentlessly contributes significantly to keep the public abreast of the situations as they unfolded in the various theatres of operations. The stories projected the Nigeria military to be always battle- ready, equipped, tactical, strategic, motivated, professional and well-trained to take on enemy forces.

However, it appeared the media was the military’s lapdog (captured media) as described by Olukotun (2018) rather than its watchdog given the overall positive tonality of the stories and the heavy reliance on the military for information on SMOs. Agreed that no one will be able to tell the stories on SMOs better than the military themselves, yet it was not out of place for the media to incorporate other sources of information for the sake of balanced reporting. The media rather than act as partners in the project of national security chose to serve as errand agents for the military. Whatever the military provided was reproduced without sieving. In instances where other sources provided negative stories about the military to the media, the former would always evade responses as desired by the latter and no follow-up reports would be published afterwards to show efforts towards the issue. It is good to project the country’s military in a positive light because it enhances public confidence being that the military is one yardstick to measure State’s power. Nevertheless, the media must not let anyone use them to the extent that they are ridiculed and relegated to the background. The media are professionally educators based on the avalanche of information that should be at their disposal, so beyond reeling out quantity, they should be after quality as well so that the public can be sufficiently knowledgeable. The aforementioned reports indicted the media as the outcome of media management strategy of the military, that is, they were controlled by the media as against growing advocacy for press-military relations which reflects symbiosis and partnership between both parties as reiterated by Rai (2000).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of the foregoing, this study recommends that:

1. The media should sustain their news reporting efforts but in doing so must ensure balanced reporting in order not to be perceived as bias.
2. The media should as a matter of urgency, resuscitate investigative journalism through the involvement of journalists in SMOs so that the actual truth can be revealed without compromising national security.
3. The relationship between the media and military in the fight against insecurity should be synergetic and collaborative instead of one-sided where one party calls the shots at the expense of the other.
4. The media should equally invest in technological gadgets such as drones and high definition cameras that would enhance coverage of SMOs beyond story-telling; and
5. Efforts must be made by the military to loosen up a bit further in providing access to the media over issues such as SMOs considered to be within the confines of operations’ security.

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