

An Evaluation of the Views of Editors on Factors Affecting Coverage of Clergy-related Scandals among Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The study examines the views of newspaper editors on the coverage of allegations of scandals against the clergy. The study attempts to provide the context that explains the attitudes of editors towards such stories. Anchored on the agenda-setting theory, the study adopted personal interview of editors of ten highest circulating national newspapers in Nigeria. Four editors were selected through the simple random method. According to the findings, the editors acknowledged that they received stories about clergy-related scandals often, although there was still low coverage and low prominence given to such. Lack of evidence and delays by the police also affected the prompt reportage of stories as well as the use of other genres apart from news stories. The sensitive nature of religion in Nigeria, possible legal implications and lack of evidence were reasons given for the low coverage and prominence given to such stories. The researchers recommend that editors should not entirely shelve the responsibility of investigation and evidence to the police. They can conduct their own investigations, and based on evidence-based features, provide better guidance to the reader through features and editorials.

Key Words: Clergy, Scandal, Newspapers, Editors, Coverage

Introduction

The clergy are priests or ministers of a religion, especially of the Christian faith. Around the world, they are mostly called by different titles depending on their denomination. Some are called bishops, priests, pastors, reverends, apostle, and prophets. They are believed to be God's representatives on earth and ambassadors of God's kingdom, hence they are respected and treated with much honour. The status of a clergy in the society is a unique one and it is the expectation of all and sundry that he or she is above board both in character and in the discharge of his or her ministerial assignments. Consequently, there are high spiritual and moral expectations from him since he is supposed to be a person of integrity in the human society.

Over the years, however, the public have had to contend with increasing cases of scandalous behaviour involving the clergy. These cases are not limited by geography, race, religion or denomination. Such cases seem to have spread across different categories like sex, theft, murder, ritual practices, fraud, and homo-sexuality among several others. Nkem, Onuegbu, Duru, Ebirim, Edukugho and Anibeze (2015) note that contemporary churches and indeed the clergy have deviated from the norms as the clergy are now involved in different scandals. Nkem *et al* noted further that pastors and priests now get involved in all manner of scandals.

There was the case of a pastor who killed his wife and stuffed the body in the freezer for many years. This case was reported by the Cable News Network (CNN) (2008). In Nigeria, the *Punch* of August 11, 2015 carried a story wherein the operatives of the Abia State Police Command were reported to have arrested a pastor, Onyenweaku Chibunnam, for allegedly stealing a Toyota Camry in Ebem Ohafia community, of the Ohafia Local Government Area of the state. It was reported that the pastor was arrested with an accomplice, Prince Nnabugwu, who confessed that they belonged to a car-snatching syndicate.

Among the many scandals that the clergy commit, sexual scandal appears to be more common. The BBC (2010) chronicles sexual scandals committed in Europe and the US, and these revealed scandals in countries like United States of America, Belgium, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Malta and Spain. The involvement of many countries is indicative of the prevalence of sexual scandal among the clergy globally. In Nigeria, there have been many established cases of sexual scandal against the clergy. For example, Daily *Sun* of August 14, 2016, carried a banner lead with the title: 'Abomination! Catholic priest married two wives.'

Following many episodes of scandals committed by the clergy, researchers have attempted to study the matter. In communication research, content analytical studies have been done to assess prominence, magnitude, slant, depth of coverage, framing and subject matter of coverage (Evangelista, 2014; Jimenez, 2004; Reneau, 2011; Waisbord, 2004). Studies have also looked at the influence of media coverage of clergy-related scandals on public opinion (Mancini & Ryan, 2013; Waisbord, 2004). However, there is also need to uncover the context of coverage. That is, what factors affect the coverage of the scandals? It is not unusual to hear members of some denominations accuse some media of spreading falsehood or making hate campaign to tarnish the image of a certain religion or its clergy. This study therefore attempts to examine the views of editors of newspapers on the factors affecting the reportage of cases of scandals against the clergy.

Literature Review

Scandal: Conceptual Clarification

Scandal is a word which refers to the acts of corruption that have become public knowledge through the media. Scandal is used as "the publication of information about corruption (Tumber & Walsbord, 2004, p. 1032). It is also used when reporting acts of transgression and violation of moral codes. These transgressions could be corrupt practices which public officials are trying to hide, excessive use of power to maintain political relevance or in some cases involving extra-marital relationships.

The word scandal has a religious connotation as "the word was first used in a religious context in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament" (Thompson, 2000, p. 12). According to Thompson, the word scandal, which appeared in English language in the sixteenth century, is used to describe a religious person who discredited the religion or the action of the followers of the religion who begin to doubt their belief in the Creator, to any defamatory action or an abominable behaviour that is frowned at by the people (Thompson, 2000). Thus, scandal "involved a transgression of moral codes which could be, but did not have to be, religious in character, and with reference to which the action or the event was denounced" (Thompson, 2000, p. 39). It is a behaviour that is "in conflict with society's moral standards" (Funk, 1996, p.2).

Thompson offered a working definition of scandal which he defined as "actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which becomes known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit public response" (Thompson, 2000, p. 13). As such, scandal is not hidden. Many corrupt practices and actions that violate the norms of the society are conducted in the secret but they may not qualify as scandals until they have been exposed to the public. Once the cover of secrecy is removed, that is when scandal sets in, and in the words of Lull and Hinerman (1997, p. 3) "the secrets of desire are unlocked, the curtains of *privacy* are pulled back. The unspoken is articulated, observed and pondered". Jimenez (2004) states that scandal in colloquial language is used in two different senses:

1. It is used to qualify certain scandalous behaviour before it brings about social reprobation at all. *Scandalous* in this usage is synonymous to *deviate*.
2. On the other hand, the word scandal also refers to the "social reaction brought about by the public knowledge of behaviour qualified as deviate" (Jimenez, 2004, p. 1100).

Lull & Hinerman (1997, p. 5) have identified ten criteria that constitute a scandal. The criteria include:

1. Violation of social norms
2. Some people have to be identified as the perpetrators of the scandal
3. Their actions should clearly aim at satisfying their personal desires
4. There should be individuals who committed the acts
5. The actions should be done deliberately
6. They must take responsibility for their actions
7. The events should have an effect on the person involved
8. Such actions have to be widely reported in the mass media
9. They should be structured and narrated as stories
10. The stories must illicit public responses by attracting public attention and wide discussion.

Similarly, Ronald Enroth (1995) in his work titled “Churches That Abuse” identifies what is meant by abusive church leaders and their traits, using the five identifying traits of:

1. **Authority and power:** The church leaders arrogate to themselves power and authority that lacks the dynamics of open accountability and the capacity to question or challenge decisions made by leaders.
2. **Manipulation and control:** they are characterized by manipulation of members, perceived persecution, lifestyle rigidity, suppression and harsh discipline of members.
3. **Spiritual elitism and persecution:** they depict themselves as unique and have a strong organizational tendency to be separate from other bodies and institutions.
4. **Life-style and experience:** this group foster rigidity in behaviour and in belief that requires unwavering conformity to the group’s ideals and social norms.
5. **Dissent and discipline:** abusive church leaders suppress any kind of internal challenges and dissent concerning decisions made by leaders. Acts of discipline may involve emotional and physical humiliation, physical violence or deprivation, acute and intense acts of punishment for dissent and disobedience.

Review of Empirical Studies

Mancini and Ryan (2013) studied the impact of media coverage of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church on public opinion, using data from a 2010 CBS/*New York Times* national poll. They investigated how exposure to news coverage of the sexual abuse affected levels of public confidence in the church. They found out that Catholics with greater media consumption about the scandals were significantly more confident in the Church’s ability to prevent sexual abuse. Secondly, Catholics who felt the media coverage unfairly targeted the Church held more optimistic views. Thirdly, the Non-Catholics who perceived the media coverage to be biased felt more positively about the Church’s ability to address sex crime in the future. The researchers concluded that media consumption of the sexual abuse scandal does not exert a negative influence on public confidence in the Church.

Reneau (2011), conducted a study to determine *New York Times* framing of The Catholic Church scandals from 2006-2011. Through a qualitative content analysis of 55 articles, Reneau revealed three frames portraying the Catholic Church: The Catholic Church is divided, the Catholic Church suffers a loss of membership and the Catholic Church is increasingly irrelevant to parishioners. Although this study is related to the current one because it investigated media framing of the Church, the study did not include scandals in other churches.

In a study carried out on the construction of the Christian leader’s failure narrative by Bradley and McDonald (2012), it was discovered that Christian leaders are most likely to view the media as hostile to their faith. Active Christians are the people who encounter most often the Christian leaders and that divorce rate is higher among Christian leaders.

Evangelista (2014) studied media coverage of sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church. The aim was to investigate the differences and the similarities in the news coverage by an Austrian mainstream medium and by an Austrian church medium, to find out which of the two media respected the international guidelines on reporting about minors and to present further themes. To achieve the study aim, Evangelista studied articles published in 2010 from *Der Standard* and *Kathpress*, the Catholic press agency on the debates around sexual abuse cases in the Church. The articles were sorted according to themes that were covered by several articles of both presses. To investigate the applied media frames, the Evangelista made use of the framing analysis to demonstrate the problems and their causes, moral judgments made and suggested remedies that were presented by both the mainstream and the Church media. The findings showed that the news coverage of *Der Standard* and *Kathpress* differ in several aspects and that they sometimes reported on wholly different subjects. *Der Standard* was reported to rather do person-centered reporting by highlighting tensions between people and mainly following up the progress of negotiations with the Austrian Catholic Church, whereas *Kathpress* also reported on negotiations in Belgium and Germany in detail.

Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI was more criticized by Der Standard for being allegedly involved in many cases of cover ups during the time he was a Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Also, the findings showed that from both analysed media, Kath press was the one emphasizing on the willingness to cooperate and suggested remedies from the side of the local Church, which, in Der Standard, was only evident in the reports about the Austrian Church. The study of Evangelista is relevant to the current study but limited in scope. This is because the researcher was limited to only the Catholic Church and only sexual scandal. From the empirical studies, it was seen that most journals and books centered on catholic clergy scandal than other denominations. Moreover, the dimension of the views of media workers who decide what to cover above clergy-related scandals have yet to be researched. The present study addresses this gap.

Agenda-Setting

Agenda - Setting theory describes the ability of the media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda. That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. The theory was first put forth by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. They originally suggested that the media set the agenda, in the sense that the media (especially the news media) are not always successful in telling us what to think, but are quite successful at telling us what to think about (Cohen in Asemah, 2011).

Cohen (1963, p.13) argued that the press is rarely successful in telling people what to think, but then in addition, that the world looks different to different people depending on what the press offers them. Notwithstanding, Cohen's writing became the basis for what we know today as the agenda-setting function of the mass media. The perspective was made popular in an empirical research carried out by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. They made their interpretation of agenda setting more specific that in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play a vital role in shaping political reality. Readers and listeners do not only learn about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story, the mass media may determine well the important issues that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176).

The concept of agenda- setting was further reinforced by Lang and Lang (1996) with the notion that the mass media pay attention to certain issues, they are constantly presenting objects, suggesting what individuals should think and have feeling about. The agenda-setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think, but does ascribe the power to determine what we are thinking about.

This theory posits that the press sets an agenda and impresses this agenda on the public and consequently, the public tends to perceive the agenda as important. Because of this dependence on the press by the public, it becomes "dangerous" if the press deliberately sets an agenda to mislead the public. The study attempts to ascertain the factors affecting the agenda being set by the media on clergy-related scandals.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey method. The survey method involved using personal interview to elicit behavioural responses from media practitioners. Four editors were selected by simple random method from the 10 highest circulating newspapers in Nigeria, according to the Director of Research and Documentation in Nigerian Press Council, Lanre Mohammed (Personal interview June, 2017). Personal Interview guide was adopted as the instrument to collect the data used for the study. A schedule was also developed to guide the fixtures and duration of interviews. The interview took place on 8, 11, 15, and 19th of May 2017. Each interview lasted between 15-30 minutes. The interviews were held differently in Lagos and Abuja at the offices of the Editors. Data were presented and analysed using the Constant Comparative Technique of identifying subject matter categories, refining them and integrating them into coherent theoretical statements (Glasser and Strauss, 1967, cited in Wimmer and Dominick, 2003) The process involves four steps as noted in Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 112):

1. Comparative assignment of incidents to categories
2. Elaboration and refinement of categories
3. Searching for relationships and themes among categories
4. Simplifying and integrating data into a coherent and theoretical structure.

Summary of the Interview

The editors noted that they receive information about scandals concerning the clergy often. In response to the question on whether the editors suppress stories on scandals against the clergy in their various medium. Three of the editors indicated that they suppress some of the stories for the following reasons: most of the scandals levelled against the clergy are treated as rumours from the public, and until the rumours are investigated, they are not newsworthy. Another editor responded that if the scandal story is not of public interest they are irrelevant. In a contrary opinion, one of the editors said that he and his medium had never suppressed any scandal story concerning the Christian clergies.

In response to a question, which sought to find out the reasons for the dominance of news story in reporting scandal cases among the clergy, one of the editors said accepting features and opinion articles could lead to libel if the write-ups were not well checked. According to him, a person's tribe, religious affiliation and even denomination can influence his write-up on scandals about a clergy. In his words, 'We only report features and opinion articles that have concrete information about the scandals.' To support this, another editor replied that some of the stories received were more of interdenominational attacks and abuses from the public and publishing such would be against their professional ethics. To sum up, a respondent said to avoid biases and sentiments from the public was the reason they published most of the stories on scandals among the clergy in news story form.

In reaction to perceived low coverage of stories on scandals among the clergy, the editors noted that editorial policy could hinder the publishing of such stories, especially if there is no immediate evidence to prove a damaging story about a high-ranking cleric. In addition, when there are too many stories, editors may kill stories on clergy-related abuses, because 'they are not competitive'. One editor responded:

I receive information almost every week about scandals against the clergy, though most of these scandals imposed against pastors are usually from the social media. The question then is how ingenuous and trustworthy are items in information? Well, when it comes to religious reporting, one has to be very careful, because it is a sensitive one. Our policy is that we report news as it breaks, though reporting of any issue is at the agreement of our editorial policy. In case you don't know, [our publication] is a team of media practitioners, reporting of any issue or activity that is news value is at the agreement of editorial policy. I could bring up an outrage-story against the clergy, submit it before my team (editorial board), when they look into it, we might all agree the story should not be published for some good reasons. When a clergy is alleged of scandal, we see the scandal as a rumour in the society, because it is not yet investigated by the police. Therefore, it is against our editorial policy and it is not newsworthy to publish such story, until proper investigation has been carried out and necessary interviews from both the alleger and the alleged person. This is based on the fact that religious issues are very sensitive and controversial in nature.

Similarly, the editors noted that they were more concerned on spot news rather than on feature. One editor noted:

We publish more of news stories when it comes to cases of the clergy. It is very difficult for one to say that one's religion or tribe will not influence his write-up. If features, opinion articles are not accurately checked and investigated, they could run into libel, which will end up tarnishing our image and the so-called pastors. We just look at the nature of the allegation against the clergy and make sure it's worth reporting to the public. For example, [with ample evidence] Sunday *punch* published opinion articles and features on Pastor Oyakilohme's various scandals and also on [the

fact that] churches that don't pay their pastors well. So when it's critical and the writer has concrete information about the issue, then it is worth reporting.

On the prominence given to stories, one editor noted:

There are various factors that are accountable for low coverage; you know this period coincided with the period when the press focused on more pressing and trending national issues and events. Secondly, clergy are not perfect, though there are high expectations from the society from them. When they are accused of certain crime or scandals, their activities are accorded same prominence in our paper just like any other person in the society. For instance a pastor who rapes a woman did not rape her because he is a pastor, but because he is a rapist. We don't assume because he is a clergy, the story should be prominent. When you go through our crime page you will see clergy scandals that have been investigated thoroughly by the police and confirmed by them not just a rumour. For example: you will never find a report against Apostle Johnson Suleiman alleged sexual scandal, until the police investigate into that or we, getting in touch with him. Even when investigation has been carried out and he is found guilty of the allegation, the scandal will be published inside our paper that is the crime page. Likewise, it depends on the clergy involved and the magnitude of the scandal committed. If it is a well-known or prominent clergy in Nigeria that is alleged of any scandal, it will definitely be accorded maximum prominence. Thirdly, we usually ignore some of these scandals due to lack of first-hand and straight information. There are cases of scandals against the clergy flying around, but getting in touch with them is a problem. Like the Suleiman case, our reporter tried getting him for interview but to no avail. Therefore, it is not newsworthy and prominence cannot be given to such story. We must hear from all sides (police, allegor and the clergy) for us to be balanced and objective in our story.

There was also a question of whether the editors were faced with any pressures or challenges in reporting scandals against the clergy in their newspapers, since prominence was not given to the scandals. According to an editor,

The challenge I can really figure out that affect the prominence given to these scandals is lack of first-hand information. When a clergy is accused of scandals, the next step a reporter takes is to interview the police if they have carried out their investigations on it, but sometimes the police keep turning you here and there, by not coming out with tangible answers. Their response is usually; "we are still carrying out our investigations on that". The next step is getting in touch physically or via phone calls to the clergy in person for interview, but the alleged person keeps turning you down. In such a scenario, the alleged scandal is not newsworthy in any way. Because when problem comes out, as an editor, I will find out from if he interviewed the clergy involved in the scandal. Another challenge is religious affiliation of the editors and the reporters. These affect the reportage of scandals among the clergy to an extent.

Another respondent lent credence as follows:

Well, I must confess that I work with an organization that does not influence the content of the news. We are not confronted with any pressure from the clergy. We are fearless and we don't shy away from these scandals imposed on them. If we get concrete information on the allegation and it is worth reporting, we report it. As long as we can report government misconducts, pastors are not left out. If they erred, they will be reported in our newspaper. Much importance might not be given to the scandals, due to other trending and uprising issues in our nation that should be accorded spaces in the newspaper rather than clergy scandals.

Another editor said:

The only challenge I have as an editor and likewise other reporters in *Daily Trust* is the editorial policy. We report news as it breaks and reporting of any issue in the society is at the agreement of the editorial board. *Daily Trust* is a team of media practitioners. Therefore, reporting of anything

news value is at the agreement of the editorial policy. Sometimes, as a reporter, you send your story to the editorial board or to your head office. The head office or the editorial board has the discretion to both read and publish your reports; they might end up not publishing your story for some unknown reasons, sometimes as a result of space or lack of evidence to back up your story. This could be one of the problems that led to scanty reports of scandals against the clergy.

The fourth respondent responded thus:

I don't think there is actually any factor that we are confronted with in our medium in reporting any case or story at all. Why you might not find numerous stories on clergy scandals in Vanguard newspaper is because the stories we get about clergy scandals are not newsworthy. You know Nigerians pay too much attention to religious matters and some of these matters are irrelevant. In media practice, you should have it at the back of your mind that important and respected personalities in the society make news. So when we have cases of scandals about clergies that are of high reputation in the society and the scandals are already becoming controversial, we report that. Not just clergies but other important personalities across the country in all sectors.

Discussion of Findings

The major factors affecting reportage of allegations of scandals against the clergy was the difficulty of proving allegations. The editors reported being concerned about reports engendered by hatred and ill-will. This in addition to the reporters and editors being also members of religious groups. The use of mainly news stories to report clergy abuses was a result of fear of libel. Even where libel was not the reason, concerns about professional ethics was another reason. Therefore, the editors were concerned about the reputation of the clergy, the impact of the reports on the public, the likely reactions from the public, Nigeria being a religious society, and the fact that the priests are first of all humans, who might have certain obnoxious personal characteristics, not just that they are clergies.

Summarily, the factors revolve around editorial policy, fear of court cases, competition from other newsworthy items and the requirements of journalism ethics. The implication is that although allegations against the clergy are controversial stories, the newspapers are not too eager to pounce on them. Caution, not oddity, is the news value. This is praise-worthy in view of religious riots that were triggered by media reports about certain religions in Nigeria. The agenda set by the newspapers on the reportage of allegations of scandals against the clergy is in conformity with the findings of several framing studies on clergy-related abuses, for example (Olawaju, 2017; Evangelista, 2014; Jimenez, 2004; Reneau, 2011; Waisbord, 2004). They also reflect public concerns about media involvement in the reportage of religion as noted in research (Mancini & Ryan, 2013; Waisbord, 2004).

Conclusion

Stories about abuses by the clergy are bizarre and controversial, but curiously, they are not hot and favourite news for the editors. Caution guides editors in their choice of such news, and editorial policy is usually against such stories being published. Concerns about law and professional ethics override other news values, and there is no reason to advise editors otherwise given the sensitive nature of religion in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Editors should not entirely shelve the responsibility of investigation and evidence-seeking to the police. They can conduct their own investigations, and based on evidence-based features, provide better guidance to the reader, which news stories can hardly afford.
2. By implication, editorials should also be used stridently to explore issues about clergy abuses since the media are watchdogs over all segments of society.

References

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