

ANALYSIS OF THE PUNCH AND GUARDIAN NEWSPAPERS ON FRAMING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines how ‘The Punch’ and ‘The Guardian’ newspapers framed the issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria, focusing on coverage formats, prominence, and dominant news frames. Local government autonomy remains a critical yet contested component of Nigeria’s federal system, as state governments often exercise political and financial control over local councils, undermining grassroots governance, democratic participation, and effective service delivery. Guided by Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, the study explains how newspaper coverage shapes public understanding and policy discourse on local government autonomy. A quantitative content analysis design was adopted. The population comprised all weekday and weekend editions of The Punch and The Guardian published between July and December 2024, totaling 368 editions. Using purposive sampling, 120 articles that directly addressed local government autonomy were selected and systematically coded. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine article formats, level of prominence, and dominant frames. Findings show that both newspapers relied largely on straight news reports, with limited use of editorials, features, or opinion columns that could provide deeper interpretation. Most stories were placed on inside pages, thereby restricting the agenda-setting capacity of the issue, although The Punch provided relatively higher front-page visibility than The Guardian. Dominant frames centred on governance challenges, financial autonomy, and legislative reforms, reflecting mainly elite and bureaucratic perspectives. Citizen-centred narratives that foreground grassroots experiences and service

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delivery concerns were largely marginalised. The study concludes that although The Punch and The Guardian demonstrate commitment to reporting on local government autonomy, their coverage is constrained by limited depth, modest prominence, and elite-driven framing. It recommends increased investigative reporting, sustained front-page attention, and greater inclusion of citizen-oriented frames to strengthen the media's role in promoting democratic accountability and effective grassroots governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: The Punch, The Guardian, Newspapers framing, Local government autonomy, Nigeria.

Introduction

Governance reforms are a persistent focus in political communication and public policy, especially within democratic societies aiming to enhance accountability, participation, and decentralisation. Over the past two decades, international scholarship has increasingly investigated the ways in which mass media frame governance reforms and the subsequent impact on public understanding, elite debate, and policy outcomes. The literature indicates that newspaper narratives surrounding governance reforms play a pivotal role in either legitimising or contesting these reforms within the public sphere (Aalberg, 2025). Research conducted in Europe, North America, and Asia demonstrates that media framing of decentralisation, fiscal federalism, and local governance reforms, shapes whether such reforms are viewed as democratic necessities, political threats, or administrative adjustments ((Jasim et al., 2024). Empirical studies further suggest that newspapers, through their choices of format, prominence, and interpretive frames, substantially influence the legitimisation or contestation of governance reforms in the public sphere (Ali et al., 2024; Entman, 2020).

In developing democracies, particularly those in the Global South, media framing of governance reforms is especially significant due to weak institutions, contested state authority, and fragile public trust. Recent research demonstrates that the media frequently serve as intermediaries between political elites and citizens, translating complex governance debates into accessible narratives that shape public discourse (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2021; Dhiman, 2023; Aalberg et al., 2020). Framing theory asserts that the media do not simply report issues but actively construct meaning by highlighting certain aspects of reality while minimising others. Through framing devices such as headlines, story placement, tone, sources, and thematic emphasis, newspapers shape how citizens interpret governance reforms and assess their implications (Entman, 2020).

Debates regarding decentralisation and local government autonomy in Africa, have received considerable scholarly attention, particularly as

numerous countries implement governance reforms to enhance service delivery, accountability, and grassroots participation. Empirical studies from Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda reveal that, although decentralisation policies are often constitutionally mandated, their practical implementation is inconsistent and subject to political contestation (Ayee, 2022; Resnick, 2021). The African media play a significant role in framing these reforms, at times amplifying elite conflicts rather than focusing on citizens' developmental concerns, thereby influencing public discourse and reform outcomes (Nyamnjoh, 2020; Ezeah & Mgbejume, 2022). Recent content analyses show that African newspapers frequently frame local governance reforms in terms of conflict, power struggles, and elite rivalry, with limited attention to citizen participation and development outcomes (Mutsvairo & Bukenya, 2023).

In Nigeria, discussions surrounding local government autonomy are central to debates on federalism, democratic consolidation, and national development. The federal structure constitutionally designates local government as the third tier of government, intended to serve as the administrative unit closest to the populace and as a mechanism for grassroots development. Scholars contend that effective local governments are vital for participatory governance, civic socialisation, and equitable development within Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic context (Ata-Agboni et al., 2023; Piate & Ukere, 2024). Ideally, local governments should foster national integration, accommodate cultural diversity, and address local needs.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that Nigeria's local government system is compromised by limited autonomy, fiscal dependency, and political interference. Recent studies indicate that state governments, especially governors, maintain substantial control over local councils through mechanisms such as caretaker committees, manipulation of local elections, and management of joint state-local government accounts (Bridget et al., 2024; Adeyemi & Aluko, 2022). This dominance has diminished accountability, disrupted service delivery, and relegated local governments to administrative extensions of state governments. Financial autonomy remains a significant challenge, as local councils rely heavily on statutory allocations that are frequently diverted or delayed, while internally generated revenue remains insufficient (Anayochukwu & Ani, 2021; Ojo & Omilusi, 2023).

Additionally, to institutional and fiscal constraints, Nigeria's complex ethnic composition further complicates discussions on local government autonomy. Empirical studies indicate that ethnic identity frequently takes precedence over national identity, influencing political loyalty and governance outcomes (Tobi & Oikhala, 2021; Suberu, 2020). Historically, local government structures were established to address minority exclusion and

ethnic tensions by decentralising power and resources. However, recent evidence suggests that limited autonomy has hindered their ability to perform this integrative function, perpetuating distrust and dissatisfaction at the grassroots level (Bridget et al., 2024).

In this contested governance context, the mass media, particularly newspapers, play a critical role in shaping public discourse on local government autonomy. Newspapers continue to serve as influential agenda setters within Nigeria's political communication landscape, offering detailed analysis, interpretive commentary, and sustained coverage of governance issues. Recent research demonstrates that Nigerian newspapers significantly affect how governance reforms are framed, debated, and prioritised by both citizens and policymakers (Ezeah & Mgbejume, 2022; Oso & Pate, 2021). Through their framing choices, newspapers can present local government autonomy as a democratic imperative, a constitutional dispute, an elite power struggle, or a developmental necessity.

Empirical framing studies in Nigeria indicate that newspapers utilise a range of framing strategies, including conflict, responsibility, legal-constitutional, and development frames, each reflecting specific editorial priorities and aligning with various aspects of the political context (Adeyanju & Okorie, 2020; Ojebuyi et al., 2023). For example, conflict frames often highlight elite rivalries and power struggles, which may intensify public perceptions of discord, while responsibility frames assign causality or accountability to particular actors, shaping citizens' interpretations of reform outcomes. Legal-constitutional frames ground debates in statutory and constitutional legitimacy, influencing whether reforms are perceived as lawful imperatives or contentious issues. Development frames emphasise narratives related to service delivery and progress, resonating with grassroots expectations. In this study, the independent variable, newspaper framing, is defined by formats (news reports, editorials, features), prominence (such as headline size, front-page placement, frequency), and the dominant frames present in the coverage. Collectively, these framing elements shape the dependent variable, public discourse on local government autonomy, by influencing how citizens interpret, deliberate on, and evaluate the issue within the public sphere.

Among Nigeria's national newspapers, *The Punch* and *The Guardian* hold influential positions in shaping both elite and public opinion. *The Punch* is recognised for its populist orientation, advocacy journalism, and strong focus on accountability and social justice, whereas *The Guardian* is noted for its analytical depth, elite readership, and policy-oriented framing of national issues. Recent empirical studies indicate that these newspapers frequently differ in tone, sourcing practices, and framing of governance reforms, reflecting distinct editorial philosophies and audience expectations (Ojebuyi

et al., 2023; Adeosun & Adesina, 2021). A comparative analysis of how *The Punch* and *The Guardian* frame local government autonomy offers valuable insights into media narratives in Nigeria and contributes to broader discussions on the media's role in interpreting and contesting governance reforms in democratic societies.

Given this context, the primary objective of this study is to examine how *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers frame the issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria and to assess how such framing influences public discourse on grassroots governance and democratic consolidation.

Statement of the Problem

Local government autonomy has remained one of the most contested governance issues in Nigeria, largely because of its implications for grassroots development, fiscal decentralisation, and democratic participation. Although the 1999 Constitution recognises local government as the third tier of government, empirical studies consistently show that this constitutional status has not translated into genuine political, administrative, or financial independence (Suberu, 2020; Bridget et al., 2024). A major obstacle has been state-level control over local councils through the State–Local Government Joint Account, which allows governors to appropriate or delay statutory allocations meant for local governments (Ojo & Omilusi, 2023). Recent empirical evidence indicates that this practice continues to undermine service delivery, accountability, and citizen trust at the grassroots level (Adeyemi & Aluko, 2022; Piate & Ukere, 2024).

In addition to fiscal control, the widespread use of caretaker committees instead of democratically elected councils remains a persistent challenge. Studies between 2019 and 2024 show that many state governments routinely dissolve elected councils and appoint caretaker committees loyal to governors, thereby weakening local representation and participation (Bridget et al., 2024; Nwafor & Okeke, 2022). Although recent constitutional amendments and policy pronouncements—particularly under the Tinubu-led administration in 2024, have reaffirmed the principle of local government autonomy, implementation remains uneven. While landmark court rulings, including Supreme Court judgments affirming the illegality of caretaker committees and the autonomy of local councils, have strengthened the legal basis for reform, empirical reports suggest that state governments' compliance remains limited (Adeosun & Adesina, 2021; Ojo & Omilusi, 2023).

Within this context, the media play a critical role in shaping public understanding and policy discourse on local government autonomy. Newspapers, as agenda setters and framing agents, influence how governance reforms are interpreted, prioritised, and debated in the public sphere. However, a review of content-analysis studies conducted between 2014 and 2024 reveals

notable gaps. Many studies focus broadly on decentralisation or federalism without sustained attention to framing devices such as prominence, tone, and interpretive frames, while others examine single newspapers or short time frames, limiting comparative insight (Ezeah & Mgbejume, 2022; Adeyanju & Okorie, 2020). Moreover, few studies integrate recent constitutional reforms, court rulings, and post-2024 policy debates into their analyses.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comparative framing analysis of *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers. By examining formats, prominence, and dominant frames in their coverage of local government autonomy, the study provides systematic, post-reform empirical evidence on how media narratives shape public discourse and potentially influence the trajectory of local governance reform in Nigeria.

Objective of the Study

The main goal of this study is to examine how *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers frame the issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria and to how such framing shapes public discourse on grassroots governance. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the major formats of coverage used in presenting local government autonomy in the selected newspapers
- ii. determine the level of prominence given to the issue of local government autonomy in the selected newspapers.
- iii. Ascertain the dominant news frames adopted by the selected newspapers in reporting local government autonomy.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the major formats of coverage used in presenting the issue of local government autonomy in the selected newspapers?
- ii. What is the level of prominence given to local government autonomy in the selected newspapers?
- iii. What are the dominant news frames adopted by the selected newspapers in reporting local government autonomy?

Literature Review

A Brief of Nigerian Newspapers

Newspaper journalism in Nigeria began in 1859 when Reverend Henry Townsend founded *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Egba Ati Yoruba*, widely recognised as the country's first newspaper. Missionary presses introduced printing and vernacular literacy through these early publications. By the 1930s, newspapers shifted from missionary and colonial instruments to platforms for nationalism. Nnamdi Azikiwe established the *West African Pilot* in 1937, symbolising this change by challenging colonial authority and mobilising public sentiment for independence. After independence in 1960, newspapers rapidly expanded,

with titles such as *Nigerian Tribune* (1949) and *Daily Times* becoming key outlets for political mobilisation, identity construction, and civic debate (Ademosu, 2025). Over the past few decades, newspapers have faced major economic and technological disruptions. Between 2011 and 2021, internet penetration and online news competition eroded print readership, while rising production costs undermined sustainability. Indigenous-language newspapers, once central to regional identity, have been particularly affected by declining patronage and struggles to adapt to digital media). (Onyenankeya, 2021). Nonetheless, preservation initiatives such as Archiving are digitising archival editions, ensuring Nigeria's journalistic heritage remains accessible to researchers and the public.

Local Government Autonomy

An understanding of how newspapers shape perceptions of autonomy begins with an overview of framing theory. This theoretical approach investigates the mechanisms by which media outlets construct meaning and guide public interpretation of social and political issues. Framing theory investigates how newspapers shape public understanding of autonomy by acting as interpretive lenses that emphasise certain aspects while minimising others. Chong and Druckman (2018) demonstrate that framing affects how individuals evaluate policies and political actors. Nigerian newspapers deploy framing tools such as headlines, metaphors, imagery, and source selection (Ojebuyi & Edeki, 2021). Research distinguishes thematic frames, which portray governance challenges as systemic, from episodic frames, which attribute them to leadership failures (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2019). For example, debates over fuel subsidies have alternately been framed as economic necessity or as a punishment of the poor, shaping legitimacy. Likewise, demonstrations framed as "riots" rather than "protests" can delegitimise civic action (Okon & Sunday, 2022). Nwabueze and Okonkwo (2020) argue that reforms framed as witch hunts often lose credibility. In autonomy debates, newspapers may reinforce state dominance, amplify grassroots demands, or highlight elite conflicts.

Newspaper Framing Theory

Framing theory provides insight into how newspapers shape public understanding of autonomy. Frames act as interpretive lenses, emphasising certain aspects while minimising others. Chong and Druckman (2018) demonstrate that framing affects how individuals evaluate policies and political actors. Nigerian newspapers deploy framing tools such as headlines, metaphors, imagery, and source selection (Ojebuyi & Edeki, 2021). Research distinguishes thematic frames, which portray governance challenges as systemic, from episodic frames, which attribute them to leadership failures (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2019). For example, debates over fuel subsidies have alternately been framed as economic necessity or as a punishment of the poor,

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Media Ownership

Media ownership refers to the structures and actors that control media outlets and shape news content, editorial policy, and public discourse. Within media and political economy scholarship, ownership is understood not merely as a commercial arrangement but as a determinant of informational power that influences which issues are highlighted, how they are framed, and whose voices are amplified or marginalised (McChesney, 2019). The process by which ownership influences framing is critical: proprietors’ political affiliations or economic interests can shape the interpretive frames used in reporting, subtly or overtly biasing news agendas, particularly in political contexts (Pickard, 2022). Empirical studies indicate that ownership consolidation and cross-media holdings often lead to homogenised content that privileges elite perspectives and reduces critical, independent inquiry, thereby shaping both which frames dominate and whose perspectives are presented (Carlson & Lewis, 2024).

In the Nigerian context, media ownership patterns, characterised by politically connected proprietors and advertising-dependent revenue models, further constrain editorial autonomy and directly impact the framing of governance issues, including local government autonomy, as communicated to the public (Adekunle, 2023). Thus, understanding media ownership is essential not only for analysing news production but also for critically examining how media framing emerges and influences democratic communication.

Political Economy of Media

The political economy of media examines how economic structures, power relations, and ownership patterns influence media systems, shaping not only what content is produced but also how it is framed and interpreted by audiences. This perspective posits that media organisations operate within broader economic and political contexts, where market imperatives, state regulations, and proprietorial interests intersect to determine editorial priorities and information flows (Mosco, 2021). Rather than treating media as neutral conveyors of information, political economy emphasises media as institutions embedded in power structures that reflect and reproduce socio-political inequalities (Flew & Waisbord, 2020). Recent scholarship highlights that commercial pressures and advertising dependencies can drive news agendas toward content that is profitable rather than publicly significant, often

marginalising critical discourse on governance and accountability (Pickard, 2022).

In contexts where media ownership is concentrated among political elites or business conglomerates, the political economy lens reveals systemic biases in coverage that privilege establishment interests over grassroots voices (Carlson & Lewis, 2024). Understanding the political economy of media is therefore essential for analysing how media framing of governance reforms, such as local government autonomy, is shaped not simply by individual journalists but by structural forces that shape news production and public discourse. In sum, a political economy perspective is crucial for uncovering the broader influences that underpin media representations of autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

Predicated on the Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories, the study sought to examine how newspapers influence public perceptions of local government autonomy in Nigeria. It argues that while these theories explain media influence, they also highlight the limits of media power over governance discourse.

Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that the media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive prominence, frequency, and strategic placement in news coverage. While the theory does not claim that the media dictate opinions, it asserts that sustained emphasis makes certain issues more salient in public consciousness. Contemporary scholarship affirms the continued relevance of agenda-setting in traditional and digital media environments. For instance, print newspapers still play a significant role in shaping national policy debates in developing democracies (Onwe & Nwafor, 2020; Ojebode, 2021). In Nigeria, newspapers such as *The Punch* and *The Guardian* act as powerful agenda-setters by amplifying or downplaying debates over local government autonomy. Nevertheless, a key critique of agenda-setting theory concerns its limited capacity to explain *how* audiences interpret issues, as public attention does not necessarily translate into uniform understanding or policy support.

Framing Theory, associated with Goffman (1974) and further developed by Entman (1993), addresses this limitation by focusing on the construction of meaning. Framing explains how media narratives select, emphasise, and organise information to promote specific interpretations, moral evaluations, and policy solutions. Empirical studies show that frames significantly shape public perceptions of governance reforms, decentralisation, and accountability (Adesina & Sulaiman, 2022; Obi & Okechukwu, 2023). In this study, framing theory enables analysis of whether local government autonomy is presented as a constitutional right, a political power struggle, or a development-oriented reform. Nonetheless, framing

theory has been criticised for its conceptual ambiguity and methodological inconsistency, particularly regarding frame identification and measurement. Together, these theories offer complementary strengths: agenda-setting makes issues visible, while framing gives them *interpretive meaning*. By combining them, this study examines both how local government autonomy gains prominence and how narratives construct its meaning, while critically recognising that media influence constrains public discourse and policy outcomes (Okon, 2024).

Empirical Review

Empirical research consistently underscores the pivotal role of newspapers in shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions of governance, with particular reference to the issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria. By analysing how newspapers structure coverage through choices of formats, the level of prominence afforded, and dominant framing strategies, this review critically examines the mechanisms through which newspapers influence the public's understanding and evaluation of local government autonomy. Accordingly, the review is organised around three core objectives: to investigate the formats employed in reporting local government autonomy, to assess the prominence and visibility attributed to this issue, and to analyse the dominant frames shaping its representation in Nigerian newspapers.

Coverage Formats and Presentation of Local Government Autonomy

Empirical research shows that the *format* of newspaper coverage significantly influences the depth and direction of governance discourse. Chong and Druckman (2018) argue that formats such as editorials, features, and opinion articles are especially influential because they allow for interpretation and evaluation beyond routine reporting. Nigerian studies confirm this pattern. Ojebuyi and Edeki (2021) found that governance reforms are frequently covered through straight news reports during peak political moments, but deeper interpretive engagement often occurs in editorials and feature articles. Similarly, Anayochukwu and Ani (2021) observed that issues of local government autonomy are commonly framed in opinion columns and special reports during debates over constitutional amendments or fiscal disputes. These formats allow newspapers to articulate institutional positions, critique state control mechanisms, and recommend reforms. However, Adekunle (2023) notes that reliance on episodic news reports limits sustained public understanding, as such formats prioritise events over structural explanations. This suggests that the mix of formats adopted by newspapers directly affects how comprehensively local government autonomy is presented to the public.

Prominence and Visibility of Local Government Autonomy

Beyond format, the *level of prominence* accorded to local government autonomy strongly shapes its salience in public discourse. Agenda-setting studies emphasise that frequency of coverage, headline placement, and front-page visibility signal issue importance to audiences. Soroka et al. (2019) demonstrate that issues receiving sustained prominence attract increased public attention and elite response. In the Nigerian context, empirical findings indicate that local government autonomy receives fluctuating prominence, often tied to political triggers. Bridget, Okechukwu, and Uzodinma (2024) found that coverage intensifies during Supreme Court rulings, constitutional review processes, and conflicts between governors and local councils. Bukar (2025) further shows that during debates surrounding the 2024 autonomy reforms, newspapers increased front-page mentions and editorial references, temporarily elevating the issue on the national agenda. However, studies by Okon and Umoh (2022) reveal that such prominence is often episodic rather than sustained, leading to declining public engagement once political attention shifts. This inconsistency suggests that while newspapers can elevate autonomy debates, limited continuity weakens long-term policy pressure and citizen mobilisation.

Dominant Frames in Reporting Local Government Autonomy

The most extensive body of empirical literature focuses on *news frames* used in reporting local government autonomy. Framing studies show that frames guide interpretation by defining problems, attributing responsibility, and suggesting solutions. Ate and Ikerodah (2021) demonstrate that Nigerian audiences interpret autonomy narratives through political, ethnic, and partisan lenses, making framing particularly consequential. Empirical analyses reveal several dominant frames. Anayochukwu and Ani (2021) identify financial dependency, caretaker administration, and corruption as recurring frames, portraying local governments as structurally weak and politically constrained. Ojebuyi et al. (2023) add that conflict frames, emphasising power struggles between state governors and local councils, dominate coverage, often overshadowing development-oriented perspectives. Hassan and Olanrewaju (2020) further observe the use of economic consequence frames, where autonomy is presented either as a pathway to efficient service delivery or as a fiscal burden on the federal system.

Comparative African studies reinforce these findings. Mutuma (2022), analysing Kenyan devolution coverage, and Mphahlele (2023), studying South African local governance reporting, both found a dominance of elite conflict frames over citizen-centred development narratives. These parallels suggest that African newspapers generally privilege political dramatisation in governance reporting. In Nigeria, this tendency is shaped by ownership

structures and editorial ideologies. Ojebuyi and Edeki (2021) show that newspapers often reflect proprietorial and ideological interests, influencing whether autonomy is framed as a democratic right or an administrative risk. Consequently, *The Guardian* tends to emphasise institutional reform and constitutionalism, while *The Punch* more frequently adopts accountability and conflict frames, reflecting its populist editorial orientation (Okon & Umoh, 2022).

Overall, empirical evidence indicates that newspapers actively construct public discourse on local government autonomy through strategic choices of formats, prominence, and frames. These choices influence whether autonomy is perceived as a democratic necessity, a political struggle, or an economic challenge. By comparatively analysing *The Punch* and *The Guardian*, the present study builds on this body of research to provide systematic insight into how framing practices shape public discourse on local government autonomy in Nigeria's evolving governance landscape

Gap in Literature

Extensive research exists on media framing and governance reforms, but significant gaps persist in the literature on local government autonomy in Nigeria. Many studies focus on only one newspaper or use broad qualitative approaches, which limit the comparison of how editorial differences influence framing. Research often treats local government autonomy as a minor issue within federalism or decentralisation, overlooking its specific effects on grassroots governance and public debate. Many analyses rely on data collected before major constitutional changes, court rulings, or post-2024 autonomy debates, reducing relevance to current events. Few works systematically analyse coverage format, prominence, and dominant frames using an integrated framework. This study closes these gaps by comparing content from *The Punch* and *The Guardian* and examining recent coverage to offer updated, rigorous insights into the media's influence on public discussion of local government autonomy in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design using content analysis to examine newspaper coverage of local government autonomy in Nigeria. Content analysis was considered appropriate because it enables the objective, systematic, and replicable examination of media texts, allowing for the identification of patterns in frequency, prominence, and framing within news discourse. The study is methodologically significant for its exclusive focus on national newspaper reportage of local government autonomy, thereby providing empirically grounded insights into how governance reforms are represented and prioritised in the Nigerian press. The population comprised all weekday and weekend editions of *The Punch* and *The Guardian*

newspapers published between 1 July and 31 December 2024. Within this six-month period, a total of 368 editions were published, with 184 editions from each newspaper.

Purposive sampling was employed to select only news items that directly addressed issues of local government autonomy. This technique was justified by the study's focus on a specific policy issue and ensured analytical relevance by excluding unrelated content while capturing all substantive discussions of autonomy during the study period. The sampling process resulted in 120 relevant articles for analysis. Data were collected using a structured coding sheet designed to capture variables such as article format, prominence, and dominant frames. Instrument validity was established through expert review, while reliability was tested using Cohen's Kappa.

An inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.946, obtained from a sub-sample of 93 articles, indicated high coding consistency. Data were analysed using SPSS version 21, with results presented through descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Ethical standards were observed by analysing only publicly available content and ensuring objectivity, transparency, and accurate representation of findings without bias or distortion.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1a: Summary of Publication and Stories Analysed

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
The Punch	84	70%
The Guardian	36	30%
Total	120	100%

Table 1a shows the distribution of newspaper stories analysed in the study. A total of 120 stories were examined, with The Punch publishing the majority (n=84, 70%) of articles on local government autonomy, while The Guardian contributed fewer stories (n=36, 30%). This indicates The Punch was more active in reporting on this issue during the study period.

Table 1b: Coverage of Local Government Autonomy across Selected Months

Months	Punch (n, %)	Guardian (n, %)	Total (n, %)
July	18 (21.4%)	3 (8.3%)	21 (17.5%)
August	12 (14.3%)	4 (11.1%)	16 (13.3%)
September	10 (11.9%)	5 (13.9%)	15 (12.5%)
October	14 (16.7%)	6 (16.7%)	20 (16.7%)
November	16 (19.0%)	7 (19.4%)	23 (19.2%)
December	14 (16.7%)	11 (30.6%)	25 (20.8%)
Total	84 (100%)	36 (100%)	120 (100%)

Table 1b shows monthly variations in coverage of local government autonomy, with overall stories peaking in December. *The Guardian* peaked in December, while *The Punch* recorded highest coverage in July and November, reflecting shifting editorial priorities.

Re-Research Question One: What are the major formats of coverage used in presenting the issue of local government autonomy in the selected newspapers?

Table 2: Format of Coverage of Local Government Autonomy

Format	Punch (n, %)	Guardian (n, %)	Total (n, %)
News Report	35 (41.7%)	10 (27.8%)	45 (37.5%)
Features	8 (9.5%)	5 (13.9%)	13 (10.8%)
News Analysis	20 (23.8%)	10 (27.8%)	30 (25.0%)
Editorial	12 (14.3%)	4 (11.1%)	16 (13.3%)
Column	9 (10.7%)	7 (19.4%)	16 (13.3%)
Total	84 (100%)	36 (100%)	120 (100%)

Table 2 highlights the formats used by the newspapers in covering local government autonomy.

Re-Research Question Two: What is the level of prominence given to local government autonomy in the selected newspapers?

Table 3: Level of Prominence Accorded to Local Government Autonomy

Placement	Punch (n, %)	Guardian (n, %)	Total (n, %)
Main Lead	25 (29.8%)	4 (11.1%)	29 (24.2%)
Op-Ed Page	10 (11.9%)	5 (13.9%)	15 (12.5%)
Inside Pages	44 (52.4%)	26 (72.2%)	70 (58.3%)
Back Pages	5 (6.0%)	1 (2.8%)	6 (5.0%)
Total	84 (100%)	36 (100%)	120 (100%)

Table 3 highlight how local government autonomy stories were positioned. Most appeared on inside pages (58.3%), with *The Guardian* placing more internally (72.2%) than *The Punch* (52.4%). *The Punch*, however, gave higher front-page attention (29.8%) compared to *The Guardian* (11.1%), showing stronger prioritisation. Op-Ed contributions were moderate, while back-page coverage was minimal. Overall, autonomy stories were widely covered but not highly prioritised, except where *The Punch* elevated them to headline prominence.

Re-Research Question Three: What are the dominant news frames adopted by the selected newspapers in reporting local government autonomy?

Table 4: Principal Topics Addressed in Local Government Autonomy Coverage

Topic	Punch (n, %)	Guardian (n, %)	Total (n, %)
Financial Autonomy	30 (35.7%)	12 (33.3%)	42 (35.0%)
Legislative Changes	25 (29.8%)	10 (27.8%)	35 (29.2%)
Governance Issues	29 (34.5%)	14 (38.9%)	43 (35.8%)
Total	84 (100%)	36 (100%)	120 (100%)

Table 4 shows governance (35.8%) and financial autonomy (35.0%) dominated newspaper coverage, reflecting emphasis on operational and fiscal independence. Legislative changes (29.2%) also featured prominently. Both *The Punch* and *The Guardian* reported similar proportions, indicating consensus on critical autonomy themes.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study offer revealing insights into how *The Punch* and *The Guardian* covered local government autonomy in Nigeria between July and December 2024. Straight news reports dominated coverage in both outlets. Features, editorials, and opinion columns appeared far less often. While straight news provides factual immediacy, its dominance supports Ojebuyi and Edeki's (2021) argument that Nigerian newspapers prioritise episodic over sustained interpretive reporting. This pattern limited the media's

ability to deepen understanding of local government autonomy as a structural governance issue, rather than a fleeting political topic. By focusing mostly on official pronouncements, both newspapers missed chances to show autonomy as a grassroots concern directly affecting citizen participation and service delivery.

Findings show that autonomy-related stories received only modest visibility, with most reports placed in the inner pages. *The Punch* gave more front-page coverage than *The Guardian*, but neither maintained high visibility over time. This lack of consistent prominence supports the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Onwe & Nwafor, 2020). The theory argues that the media shape public priorities by emphasising certain issues. As a result, muted coverage of local government autonomy reduced its perceived urgency in national discussions. This also limited media pressure on policymakers for reform.

The framing analysis shows that both newspapers mainly presented autonomy in terms of governance, financial control, and legislative reform. These frames were mostly elite-driven, focusing on officials, legislators, and policy analysts, while neglecting local voices. This supports Hassan and Olanrewaju (2020), who found Nigerian media often mirror elite agendas linked to ownership and politics. By highlighting institutional debates rather than community experiences, both newspapers presented autonomy as a bureaucratic rather than a participatory issue.

Overall, the newspapers highlighted accountability and reform debates, fulfilling their watchdog role. However, they did not foster an inclusive, citizen-centered conversation. A more balanced approach, including local perspectives, developmental impacts, and civic participation, could have boosted public engagement and highlighted the democratic importance of local government autonomy in Nigeria's ongoing governance reforms.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while *The Punch* and *The Guardian* demonstrated a commendable commitment to reporting on local government autonomy, their approaches were limited in depth, prominence, and inclusivity. Coverage relied heavily on straight news, with insufficient investigative or interpretive reporting that could contextualise autonomy as a developmental necessity. Guided by Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, the modest prominence accorded to the issue limited its agenda-setting potential, particularly compared to other governance topics.

The framing of autonomy was also predominantly elite-driven, limiting the visibility of grassroots demands for accountability and service delivery. Findings reveal that although both newspapers demonstrated commitment to reporting the issue, coverage relied mainly on straight news

reports, with limited investigative or interpretive depth. Key limitations include the focus on two newspapers and a six-month period. These were mitigated through comparative analysis and systematic coding.

Overall, although newspapers have the potential to shape policy discourse and strengthen democratic accountability, their current coverage of local government autonomy is constrained by structural factors and editorial choices that limit their transformative capacity.

Recommendations

To strengthen newspapers' role in promoting democratic governance and local government reforms, several recommendations are proposed. First, newspapers should diversify their reporting formats by investing in investigative features, analytical essays, and editorials that offer deeper insights into debates over autonomy. Second, editors should accord greater prominence to autonomy issues, including consistent front-page placement, to elevate public and policy attention.

Third, journalists should adopt more citizen-focused frames that highlight the lived realities of communities and amplify grassroots voices, moving beyond elite-centred narratives. Fourth, media organisations must safeguard editorial independence to minimise ownership and political interference that shape framing choices. Ultimately, collaboration among the press, civil society organisations, and governance experts can yield richer, evidence-based reporting that frames autonomy not only as a constitutional requirement but also as a cornerstone of grassroots development and democratic consolidation.

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