



**DISCOURSE  
PHENOMENOLOGY OF  
A REFORM AGENDA:  
EXPLORING THE  
EDITORIAL FRAMING  
INTERVENTION OF SELECTED  
NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS ON THE  
RESTRUCTURING DEBATE IN  
NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

**T**he imperative to restructure Nigeria's federal configuration is a decentralisation reform agenda that has risen in prominence in recent years. The demand for restructuring, with the ambiguity and sublimity with which political actors often engage the discourse, has generated strident debates. It is against this background that this study examined the multifaceted discourse on the restructuring phenomenon through the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers. The study adopted the qualitative research design in content analysing five national newspapers- Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian, The Punch and Nigerian Tribune.

The complete enumeration technique was applied in examining all editorials on restructuring found in the weekday editions

**KEYWORDS:** Media framing, Nigerian newspapers, Editorials, Restructuring, Political reform, Decentralisation, Federalism.

of the selected newspapers published between May 1, 2017 and May 30, 2019. Findings revealed that the selected newspapers were largely uniform in projecting the restructuring discourse along the framing dimensions of problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and

*treatment recommendation. It was concluded that the advocacy stance of the newspapers on restructuring reflected the editorial judgment value of social proximity, but that they were mainly issue-focused and not ethnically fixated. The study's contributions to media framing literature and empirical research on the restructuring debate in Nigeria were also established.*

## INTRODUCTION

The media play a significant role in the public affairs of nations. They fundamentally set political agendas and raise the salience of policy issues- facilitating debates that are generated thereby- in the public domain. Although the public policy process, for instance, is a complex information processing endeavour in which politicians, policy entrepreneurs, interest groups, the media and the public interact (Jones & Wolfe, 2007; Russell, Dwidar, & Jones, 2016), the flow and negotiation of ideas through media coverage is central to the entire process. The media allocate attention, steer public interest, and provide a forum for social and political actors to propose, elaborate and contest varying views on the problem definition and solution to issues (Happer & Philo, 2013; Jones & Wolfe, 2007). It is as a result that concerned actors may come to reach a political consensus critical to micro and macro change processes in the society (Zhao & Hackett, 2005).

Meanwhile, the media are not mere information purveyors for political actors on policy debates. Through their correlation function, they also actively attempt to evaluate the different emerging viewpoints, and, possibly, project a stance of their own. For newspapers, the editorial constitutes a major content format that helps fulfill this correlation function. McNair (2011) posits that newspaper editorials are generally intended as a form of political intervention; be it that the articulation of political opinion is constructed as a “voice of the reader” or as the “calm, authoritative voice of the editor” targeted at policymakers (p. 12). The editorial page is the only space whereby newspapers, as corporate entities, can select and present issues based on their own agenda, wade into political debates, convey their stance and even take sides without the invariable answerability to the journalistic obligation of objectivity (Eilders, 1997; Firmstone, 2008; Firmstone, 2019). Notwithstanding its

subjective-constructivist format, the editorial can be effectively used by newspaper organisations to set agenda and frame issues in such a manner that can influence the level of issue interest, understanding, engagement, and opinion formation in the public sphere.

This study represents an attempt- from a media framing standpoint- to elucidate on the restructuring discourse phenomenon in the Nigerian political landscape through the editorial positions of selected national newspapers. The restructuring discourse in Nigeria is a complex political reform cum public policy issue that has drawn sharp debate, occasioning an advocacy-versus-antagonistic issue systematisation, among political actors in recent years. The agenda to restructure the political and socio-economic frameworks of Nigeria's federal system is fundamentally a demand for decentralisation reform. As Bardhan (2002) avers, decentralisation can be devised to mean a variety of things by different people, especially when the issue in focus "draws advocates from sharply different viewpoints" (p. 186). Indeed, the term "restructuring" has been given different complexions of meaning in the context of Nigeria's federalism (Yaqub, 2016; Oni & Faluyi, 2018). With the complexity of a scattered cacophony of perspectives on the restructuring discourse, the correlation function of the Nigerian mass media, then, becomes imperative, if only for the ordinary citizens who still wonder what the fuss on restructuring is all about. It is on the premise that media framing directions tend to illuminate on "what the controversy is about, [and on] the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143) that this study sought to qualitatively explore the framing dimensions of the editorial intervention across selected national newspapers on the restructuring debate in Nigeria.

## **Literature Review**

### **Restructuring as a Decentralisation Reform Agenda in Nigeria**

The restructuring discourse in Nigeria is primarily hinged on the notion of bringing about decentralisation reforms to the country's federal system. In the realm of governance, decentralisation is mainly viewed as a reorganisation process in which there is the diffusion of power, responsibilities, resources and functions- through devolution, deconcentration, or delegation- from the central government to

subordinate levels of government (Bardhan, 2002; Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; Smith, 2001). Meanwhile, decentralisation, in a more advanced conception, is not merely about the allocation and distribution of power, authority, responsibility and resources within government. It also encompasses a public ramification in which public policy can be shaped by ordinary citizens, with equality entrenched in the larger society in terms of access to power and participation in economic as well as political processes (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; Demir & Aktan, 2016; Smith, 2001). Decentralisation can be applied in different facets of governance. These include political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation dimensions. According to Breton (2000), the federal system of government is superior to other systems in entrenching the attributes of decentralisation.

Although the restructuring discourse in Nigeria has been given much scholarly focus, the approach of exposition has mainly been conceptual or historical (see, for example, Abah & Nwoku, 2017; Abutudu, 2010; Okpevra, 2020; Oni & Faluyi, 2018; Yaqub, 2016; Yauri, 2018). Comparatively speaking, empirical research on restructuring is quite sparse as studies only started emerging recently. Even then, many of such studies tend to be built on the positivist paradigm. In other words, there are more of quantitative studies, which generally suffer the limitation of not being able to explore the restructuring phenomenon in-depth. One exception to this research trajectory is the qualitative study by Dan-Zumi et al. (2019), which explored the challenges associated with the restructuring debate in Nigeria. For the study, the researchers interviewed a total of 167 Nigerians across the six geopolitical zones in the country. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of being public servants or opinion leaders with good knowledge about the restructuring discourse. The study revealed there were points of convergence and divergence among the participants in their opinions about devolution of powers, state police creation, revenue sharing formula, regionalism and other restructuring-related themes.

A modest number of content analysis studies have been conducted to examine media coverage pattern on the restructuring discourse. A further few- all being quantitative studies- have specifically focused on media framing. For instance, Oluyemi and Imoh (2019), in their study of

sampled editions of three selected national newspapers published between January and June 2017, found that the dominant framing themes on restructuring in the selected newspapers ranged from agitations, violence, protest, marginalisation, to advocacy. Similarly, Gever et al. (2018) conducted a dual content analysis study of newspaper and television stories on restructuring between May 30, 2015 and March 30, 2018. They discovered that media ownership significantly influenced the framing of reports on the restructuring agitation.

In a restructuring-related study, Nwafor and Ogbodo (2016) examined the framing of group identities in the coverage of the 2014 National Conference by *Daily Sun* and *Leadership* newspapers. Sample selection was purposively based on the ownership profiles of the newspapers, with *Daily Sun* owned by a Christian affiliated with the Igbo ethnic group in Southern Nigeria, and *Leadership* owned by a Muslim affiliated with the Hausa ethnic group in Northern Nigeria. It was discovered that the narratives about the Conference conveyed sectional undertones as unsupportive slant was given to opposing ethnic groups' viewpoints. Furthermore, it was found that dominant frames in the newspapers focused on issues of sectional interests such as power rotation, creation of additional states for equity, religion, state police, security and secession. Despite the insights provided by the foregoing, there is the tendency for quantitative content analysis studies to present media framing pattern on the restructuring discourse with a "broad brush". Adopting a qualitative approach would help provide an in-depth, nuanced understanding on how the Nigerian media have been framing the multi-issue discourse phenomenon of restructuring.

### **Media Framing Theory and the Research Imperative of Editorial Framing**

The media framing theory underpins the present study. The theory posits that the media set their messages in narrative frameworks that convey a particular field of meaning. The perspective from which the media present messages is, then, bound to have consequent influence on issue dispositions among the media audience. When the media frame events or issues, they "select certain facets of a perceived reality and make them more salient in such a way that endorse a specific *problem*

*definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation”* (Entman, 1993, p. 52; emphasis added). This seminal definition by Entman (1993) offers a practical framework for nuanced inquiry into media framing outputs.

Generally, conceptual and empirical explications on media framing tend to prioritise news as the artifact of inquiry, or the journalistic routines in the news production process as the operation of focus (see, for example, Boesman, Berbers, Haenen, & Gorp, 2015; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012). From this news framing paradigm, it can be complicated making a distinction between frame sending and frame setting; considering that news reporting often constitutes an admixture of sources’ frames directly relayed by journalists (frame sending) and frames which are from the active selection of journalists (frame setting) in the frame-building continuum (Bruggemann, 2014).

Exploring the under-researched area of editorial journalism (Firmstone, 2019) may prove valuable in this direction. Editorials, as Izadi and Saghaye-Biria (2007) note, are basically set along the schematic categories of summarising news events, evaluating the situation (particularly of actions and actors), and reaching a pragmatic conclusion by way of proffering recommendations or expectations. Clarity on frame setting patterns at a meso-level can potentially be expanded through the study of newspaper editorials- being an interpretative content with an institutional, rather than an individualised, authorship profile. The present study is specifically aimed at examining the framing dimensions of selected national newspapers’ editorial intervention within the context of the restructuring debate in Nigeria. The following research questions are thus advanced:

**Research Question 1:** What are the problem definition dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?

**Research Question 2:** What are the causal interpretation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?

**Research Question 3:** What are the moral evaluation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?

**Research Question 4:** What are the treatment recommendation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?

### **Method**

This study adopted the qualitative content analysis approach. *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, and *Nigerian Tribune* newspapers were purposively selected for the study. They are all leading national newspapers that have their operational base in Southern Nigeria (composed of South-East, South-South, and South-West geopolitical regions), where the debate on restructuring has been more strident-compared to Northern Nigeria (composed of North-Central, North-East, and North-West geopolitical regions). Complete enumeration was applied in selecting all editorials with specific focus on the subject of restructuring that appeared across the 2,835 weekday editions of the selected newspapers published between May 1, 2017 and May 31, 2019. The timeline represents a period of intense scrutiny and debate on the restructuring agenda, given the anticipation and eventual outcome of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

A total of 142 editorial articles on restructuring were found, read and coded (see Table 1 for the editorial distribution breakdown). From a rigorous coding process, prevalently recurring ideas were organised along a categorisation gleaned from Entman’s (1993) seminal definition of media framing. The elements of problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation were thereby used as content categories in evaluating the framing dimensions of the editorial intervention on the restructuring debate across the national newspapers selected for this study. Qualitative data analysis was conducted manually using the thematic analysis approach.

**Table 1: Selected Newspapers, Operational Base, Publishers’ Affiliation, and Frequency of Editorials on Restructuring Published between May 1, 2017 and May 31, 2019**

<i>S/N</i>	Newspapers	Operational Base	Regional Affiliation of Publisher	Number of Editorials
1.	<i>Daily Sun</i>	Lagos, Southern Nigeria	South-East	19
2.	<i>Vanguard</i>	Lagos, Southern Nigeria	South-South	14

3.	<i>The Guardian</i>	Lagos, Southern Nigeria	South-South	47
4.	<i>The Punch</i>	Lagos, Southern Nigeria	South-West	40
5.	<i>Nigerian Tribune</i>	Ibadan, Southern Nigeria	South-West	22
			<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>

## Results

### **Research Question 1: What are the problem definition dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?**

In the course of analysing what the problem definition was in the framing of the restructuring discourse across the selected national newspapers, three dominant themes emerged: the dysfunctional reality of Nigeria’s federal system, the complicit nature of the country’s constitution, and the conundrum of marginalisation.

### **Dysfunctional Reality of a Centralised Federation: Establishing the Paradox**

The selected national newspapers were unanimous in establishing what was at the core of Nigeria’s problem. According to them, Nigeria is a federal system merely in principle and not in practice. This is because the country operates a centripetal arrangement of governance in actuality rather than the ideal centrifugal template which characterises a federal system. The newspapers were in concord in remarking that too much political powers resides with the Federal Government (central government) compared to the powers the state governments (component federating units) are vested with. This pattern of power concentration, ordinarily, should stir no cause for concern were Nigeria a unitary system. However, political governance functions in Nigeria, according to the newspapers, are quite over-centralised for a supposed federal system. This explains why expressions along the lines of “pseudo-federalism”, “quasi-unitary system”, “centralised federalism” and “unitary federalism” kept recurring in the selected newspapers as misnomers to describe the country’s current political system. These paradoxical depictions more or less render a disparaging verdict on the structure of Nigeria’s governance system with its attendant political, economic, and social ramifications.

The problem definition of Nigeria's federal system was also projected from an economic perspective. The selected newspapers generally considered it an anomaly that the resources found in the federating units (states) are largely out of their control, but rather superintended by the central government. They also viewed the revenue distribution pattern from the central government to the federating units as a major hindrance to the development of the country. With the current revenue sharing formula, the Federal Government is entitled to 52.68 percent of the total revenue stream generated, while states get 26.72 percent and local government areas collect 20.60 percent. To this end, the selected national newspapers often portrayed states in the country as hapless appendages which are at the mercy of the Federal Government for economic sustenance. The subservient status of states in the extant fiscal arrangement was frequently framed by the newspapers with metaphorical imageries. For instance, the 36 states in the country are depicted as "beggarly units" (*The Punch*, April 9, 2018, p. 22) bearing "bowls in hand" (*The Guardian*, August 31, 2017, p. 16) or with "caps in hand" (*The Punch*, June 18, 2018), "trudging to the federal capital to receive handouts, which they never worked for" (*The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, p. 16); ultimately making them "grovel, every month, for crumbs from the central government, in a hollow ritual tagged federal allocation meetings" (*Daily Sun*, June 8, 2017, p. 15).

### **The Complicit Constitution: A Country Stood on a Crooked Framework**

In the editorial intervention of the selected newspapers, salience was placed on the notion that the presently subsisting 1999 Constitution is complicit in the problem of Nigeria's dysfunctional governance structure. The constitution was depicted to be a framework of support for the over-concentration of power in the centre, as 68 items are vested with the Federal Government in the Exclusive Legislative List (responsibilities within the sole preserve of the Federal Government) and a further 30 items in the Concurrent List (responsibilities shared between the Federal Government and state governments).

One inference that can be drawn from the common editorial stance of the selected newspapers on the power-distribution provisions of the 1999 constitution is that the country, even though now within a civilian

dispensation, is yet to be completely exorcised of the command and control approach to governance entrenched during the military interregnum in the country. The 1999 Constitution is, after all, still deemed a parochial document because it was drafted and ratified by the military, in the transition back to democratic rule, without recourse to public consultation nor consensus. As one of the editorial articles averred, “At no time did Nigerians as a people agree on the terms of the 1999 Constitution. It is fraudulent... Having been established on a fraudulent premise, its practitioners have lived the spirit of the pretensions, of course to their own advantage” (*The Guardian*, April 23, 2018, p. 16). The sentiment expressed here traversed all the selected newspapers in taking exception to the opening sentence of the 1999 Constitution which states, “We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly resolved...” (Emphasis added).

### **The Marginalisation Conundrum: Burden of a Lingering National Question**

The newspapers were in agreement in linking emergent ethnic agitations in the country to the imbalanced structure of Nigeria’s political system. To them, the current structure has become too centralised to cater equitably to the aspirations and developmental needs of the different ethnic nationalities in the country, placing Nigeria’s corporate existence as one united country under threat from time to time. Therefore, the rise of extremist agitations from aggrieved groups in recent times should come as no surprise. As *The Punch* newspaper captured it, “The fragility of the country has become ever more glaring, the mantra of ‘unity in diversity’ more hollow and agitation for a fundamental restructuring, louder and more inclusive” (*The Punch*, May 29, 2019, p. 38). Similarly, the *Daily Sun* newspaper observed, “The sad reality is that this nation is not working for the vast majority of the people” (*Daily Sun*, March 4, 2019, p. 15). The resource control militancy in Niger-Delta and the demand for self-determination in the South-East region are cases readily used to illustrate the issue of ethnic agitations induced by protracted marginalisation.

The lingering effect of perceived marginalisation only further accentuates what has become interrogated as the “national question”

in Nigeria. The national question conveys the identity dilemma of whether one's loyalty first belongs to Nigeria as a country or, alternatively, one's ethnic nationality within the country. With perceived realities of political, economic and social unfairness of the Nigerian structure, social identity among citizens may tend to find a stronger attachment and expression in tribal affiliations than on the basis of being called Nigerians. *The Punch* newspaper identified this scenario to be a problem, stating that “where a citizen's loyalty to tribe is more than to the Federal Republic, [with] mutual suspicion among ethnic groups spiralling... then we are all gyrating on the cliff.” (*The Punch*, June 26, 2017). Corroboratively, *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper averred that “it is precisely because Nigeria is today riven into contentious ethnic groups with no grand affiliation to the Nigeria project that the country remains a mere geographical expression” (*Nigerian Tribune*, August 7, 2017, p. 13). Meanwhile, the *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper had earlier made an argument on how federalism in Nigeria can be entrenched with the citizen mindset that one's ethnic affiliation takes a foundational place to identifying oneself as a Nigerian. The newspaper stated that the cultural exemplar of striving, first and foremost, to “be a good Igbo, Yoruba, Fulani, Kanuri or Tiv before you can aspire to be a good Nigerian... is encompassed in the principle of federalism which entails the regions are fortified and strong, while the centre is like a superintendent over the collective affairs of all the regions” (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 9, 2017, p. 13).

**Research Question 2: What are the causal interpretation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of the selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?**

The causal interpretation on the restructuring discourse in the selected newspapers' editorials flowed from the above problem definition perspectives. Emerging themes include: restructuring as a timely reform agenda, restructuring as “true federalism”, restructuring as a multifaceted reform approach, and restructuring as a polarising discourse between Southern and Northern Nigeria.

**Restructuring as a Timely Reform Agenda**

The newspapers grounded their overall interpretation on the premise that everything with Nigeria's governance system has been faulty for so

long. They were unanimous in the assertion that the protracting dysfunctional system- with its enduring political, economic, and social consequences- makes a reformist intervention necessary. In this regard, national reform was emphasised not only in terms of its substance importance but also in terms of time urgency. The inference here is a firm rejection of the status quo, and, as a logical corollary, the imperative of effecting immediate modifications in the extant system.

The editorials of the selected newspapers encapsulated the imperative of change for the Nigerian governance system by placing salience on the restructuring agenda. They consistently presented national restructuring as the reform intervention needed to remedy Nigeria's dire situation. This interpretive direction was reflected in the editorial titles of the selected newspapers across different timelines. Title instances of this include: "It's time for restructuring" (*Nigerian Tribune*, July 20, 2017), "The restructuring imperative" (*Nigerian Tribune*, August 7, 2017); "Restructure the country now!" (*The Guardian*, June 22, 2018), "The imperative of restructuring" (*Daily Sun*, September 10, 2018), "2019 elections: Restructuring is the issue" (*The Punch*, October 15, 2018); "Low-hanging fruits of restructuring" (*The Guardian*, January 7, 2019), "Restructuring Nigeria: Another way forward" (*The Guardian*, March 20, 2019). The titles suggest that the restructuring agenda was accorded a positive framing valence by the newspapers.

### **Restructuring as "True Federalism"**

Recognising the ambiguity with which the term "restructuring" can be used, the newspapers made it a discourse priority to always operationalise the term in the context of Nigeria's political system. To them, restructuring is tantamount to reforming the Nigeria system back to a fully functional framework of federalism characterised by genuine governance decentralisation. The term restructuring was often adopted as a broad synonym for what has become known as "true federalism". Essentially, when the newspapers referred to "true federalism", power devolution occupies the kernel of discourse. As *Nigerian Tribune* stated, "Devolution of powers, we aver without fear, constitutes the meat of the restructuring process" (*Nigerian Tribune*, August 11, 2017, p. 13). In other words, political decentralisation forms the nucleus of the reformist

focus of the restructuring agenda. *The Guardian* newspaper clarified that “the ultimate aim of what is called restructuring is to make Nigeria an effectively governed and stable country” (*The Guardian*, April 4, 2018, p. 16).

Meanwhile, the newspapers sought to provide an interpretation of restructuring not only by establishing what it means but also clarifying what it does not mean. Particularly, there was a conscientiousness across the newspapers to refute the opposing claim that restructuring is nothing more than a furtive agenda aimed at disintegrating the country. The counter-argument from the newspapers was slanted towards the notion that restructuring does not equal breaking up the country but that suppressing the demand for restructuring would rather leave secessionist agitations to thrive. They claimed that restructuring can only be advantageous to Nigeria’s heterogeneous society; to the extent that its implementation would help improve political governance, bolster economic viability, alleviate security challenges, allay fears of undue dominance, and address cases of marginalisation in the long term.

### **Restructuring as a Multifaceted National Reform Approach**

Restructuring was interpreted across the newspapers as a multi-dimensional reform approach required to resolve the diverse problems resultant from the wrongly-skewed governance system in Nigeria. From their editorial directions, the selected newspapers demonstrated that the restructuring discourse can be given a generic reform slant, while its interpretation can also take an issue-specific reform thrust. The issue-specific reform dimensions on restructuring fall along the sub-thematic lines of political decentralisation reform, fiscal decentralisation reform, and administrative decentralisation reform.

The selected newspapers considered political decentralisation to be a core restructuring approach for Nigeria to get on the path of sustainable development. When the term “political restructuring” is used by the selected newspapers, the discourse is usually hinged on the need for devolution of powers as well as constitutional review and amendment. “Economic restructuring” and “fiscal federalism” are terms often used by the newspapers to address specific fiscal decentralisation-related issues such as fiscal autonomy, resource control, revenue allocation, and

derivation. To the newspapers, fiscal restructuring involves empowering state governments to retain a larger percent of revenues generated from the natural resources within their boundaries, including proceeds from Value Added Tax (VAT) and other sales tax, but then having a mutual agreement on what portion to remit to the Federal Government. The newspapers were, however, unsupportive of fiscal autonomy for local government areas. *The Punch* newspaper in its November 26, 2018 editorial entitled, “Autonomy for LGAs, farce in a federation”, deemed it a matter of inequity that revenue sharing is made on the basis of the presently existing 774 local government areas which are disparately distributed in states across Northern and Southern Nigeria. In the same vein, *The Guardian* newspaper, in its May 23, 2019 editorial, explained that the recognition of the 774 local governments in the country’s constitution is an anomaly because the creation and funding of local government should be a prerogative of state governments as expected in a federal system.

The imperative of administrative decentralisation reform was unanimously expressed by all the selected newspapers by placing salience on the issue-specific topic of police decentralization. This was often made a distinct editorial subject matter, and not merely an addendum under the broad discourse on restructuring. Restructuring, in this light, was interpreted to mean the creation of “state police” as a pathway to fostering “community policing” or “local policing”.

### **Restructuring as a Polarising Discourse between Southern and Northern Nigeria**

It was clear that the restructuring agenda divided opinions. The disparity in public posture on the agenda was at some points given a sectional representation by the selected newspapers. The positional schism on the restructuring agenda tend to be visible among the political elite, opinion leaders and interest groups in the country. The broad interpretation is that those in Southern Nigeria are advocates of the restructuring agenda while those in Northern Nigeria are opposed to the agenda. For instance, in 2017 the National Assembly deliberated on the bill to amend the 1999 Constitution in order to devolve more powers to the states. Northern legislators, who were in the majority in terms of number, voted against

the bill while many southern legislators, in the minority, voted in support of the bill. It is this eventuality that led *The Guardian* newspaper to the verdict that “the lawmakers’ voting pattern reflected a failure of consensus building abilities of political leaders from the north and south and indeed advertised all the geopolitical divisions in the polity” (*The Guardian*, August 9, 2017, p. 16).

Another layer to the sectional representation accorded the restructuring discourse by the newspapers was a stratification along regional lines. The six geopolitical zones of North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South and South-West were portrayed as being either for or against the restructuring agenda. In doing this, the newspapers frequently classified the North-Central (also referred to as the Middle Belt) alongside the South-East, South-South, and South-East as regions in support of the national restructuring agenda, while the North-East and North-West were presented as regions opposed to the agenda. *The Punch* made this distinction, stating that “while popular organisations in four of the six zones are committed to restructuring, a majority of the elite in two- the North-East and the North-West- are adamantly opposed to it, preferring the system that inhibits the majority, entrenches poverty, but bestows them with advantages in access to power and resources” (*The Punch* October 15, 2018, p. 18).

The discourse framing in this regard can be interpreted to take a conflict direction, pitching Northern Nigeria against Southern Nigeria, and vice versa. Yet, the newspapers were able to establish some balance. There were instances when the north-south dichotomy on the restructuring discourse took a consensus perspective across the newspapers. *Nigerian Tribune*, for example, enthused, “Happily, while, for many decades, the clamour for Nigeria’s restructuring has been largely a Southern affair, powerful voices from the Northern part of the country have recently joined the restructuring train, harping on the need to address Nigeria’s unitary and unprofitable structure” (*Nigerian Tribune*, July 20, 2017). In the same vein, *The Guardian* stated, “it is heartening to acknowledge though that genuinely informed northerners and southerners have lent their voices to the pro-restructuring views of their compatriots” (*The Guardian*, April 4, 2018, p. 16).

### **Research Question 3: What are the moral evaluation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of the selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?**

Debate on restructuring was often portrayed as a moral decision to be made between the binary options of right and wrong. In terms of the moral evaluation on the restructuring discourse, two major themes emerged: advocacy for restructuring as a moral stand for equity, justice and fairness; and antagonism against restructuring as betrayal of civic trust and interest.

#### **Advocacy for Restructuring as a Moral Stand for Equity, Justice and Fairness**

The editorial framing direction across the selected newspapers was generally supportive of the restructuring agenda and the proponents of the agenda. Supporting or championing the cause of restructuring- either in its generic or issue-specific form- took a connotative slant of being the stance of one who is not only ideologically progressive but also morally rational. There is the recurrent notion across the newspapers that the restructuring agenda is ultimately about producing the moral or ethical goods of equity, justice and fairness to reform a corrupted national system. The newspapers seemed to suggest that making sound moral judgment within the context of the restructuring debate is being able to see that everything with the status quo of Nigeria's federal system is dysfunctional, and that the extant defective system requires urgent political and socio-economic reforms. By this, people who demand political decentralisation, fiscal decentralisation, policing decentralisation, constitutional amendment, and other cognate reformist approaches were portrayed by the newspapers as doing the right thing.

Furthermore, the selected newspapers evinced themselves as advocates of the restructuring agenda. They do this overtly at times, but latently at other times. In this regard, there was a general support across the newspapers for the regions in Southern Nigeria (South-East, South-South, and South-West) as well as the North-Central region (also referred to as the Middle-Belt), which were mainly casted as victims in an imbalanced political system. In certain instances, the editorial advocacy

on the restructuring agenda by some of the newspapers took a direction reflective of the socio-geographical affiliation of their respective publishers. For instance, *The Guardian*, having a Niger-Delta (South-South region)-affiliated publisher, used its November 8, 2017 editorial piece, “That police-aborted PANDEF meeting”, to question why a flagship socio-cultural interest group in the South-South region, Pan Niger Delta Elders Forum (PANDEF), would get its general assembly meeting suspended by the Nigeria Police when socio-cultural interest groups from other regions in the country had held similar meetings around the same timeline without any interference. The editorial was also deployed to spotlight the protracted marginalisation of the South-South region in terms of government’s insensitivity to the infrastructural deficiencies and environmental challenges in the region, despite the fact that the bulk of the country’s crude oil revenues are generated from there. On its part, *Nigerian Tribune*, with a Yoruba (South-West region)-affiliated publisher, showcased the restructuring agenda perspectives emanating from the South-West region with its editorial focus on such exclusive subjects as “The South-West governors’ meeting” (August 4, 2017), “South-West governors and constitutional amendment” (December 15, 2017), “The Yoruba leaders’ summit” (October 18, 2018).

Meanwhile, *Daily Sun*, with an Igbo (South-East region)-affiliated publisher, had the editorial entitled, “A Senate President from the South-East”, headlining on the front page of its March 4, 2019 edition, coming shortly after the February 23, 2019 Presidential/National Assembly elections. The thrust of the editorial was to draw attention to the marginalised status of the South-East region, compared with other regions, in the political leadership composition of the country at the central government level since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. The newspaper, thus, made the case for the position of the senate presidency to be zoned by the ruling party, the All Progressives Party (APC), to the South-East while also tasking the re-elected President Muhammadu Buhari to give the region a sense of belonging when making federal appointments during his new tenure.

### **Antagonism against Restructuring as Betrayal of Civic Trust and Interest**

The other side of the moral spectrum on the restructuring debate was antagonism against the restructuring agenda. In the estimation of the

newspapers, rejecting restructuring assumed an amoral stance. To oppose the restructuring agenda was, by their logic, to choose to be ethically blind to the inequity, unfairness, and injustice engendered by Nigeria's current political and socio-economic structures. The newspapers were, thus, generally critical of political and social actors who demonstrated resistance- in words and actions- against the agenda to have Nigeria restructured in line with federalist principles.

Political leaders, particularly, got the brunt of the selected newspapers' critical editorial verdict when deemed to be on the wrong end of the restructuring debate. President Muhammadu Buhari, for instance, got criticised for his antagonistic position on the restructuring agenda at various times. Criticism of President Buhari by the newspapers was often placed within the political context of him betraying public trust with his consistent aversion to restructuring. The President's position on restructuring was framed as coming in sharp contrast with the moral ideals of integrity and accountability, given that he had "change" as his campaign mantra while devolution of power was a major agenda promise in the manifesto of his political party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), towards the 2015 general elections. This context explains why one of the newspapers could assert that the "President needs to be told that his moral authority, which was pivotal to his monumental 2015 election victory, has been deeply eroded by his current stance on restructuring the country" (*The Guardian*, November 19, 2018, p. 16).

**Research Question 4: What are the treatment recommendation dimensions of the editorial framing intervention of the selected national newspapers on the restructuring discourse?**

The treatment recommendations on the restructuring discourse endorsed in the editorial intervention of the selected national newspapers went along the thematic lines of retrospection, circumspection, introspection, and activation.

**Retrospection: Returning to "our" Past History**

Allusions were frequently made to Nigeria's past history to contextualise the restructuring discourse in terms of how the problems with the

country's political system- which necessitate restructuring- all began. An impression created across the newspapers was that Nigeria's political history was instructive enough on what mistakes to reverse, what strategies to embrace, and what pitfalls to avoid towards a genuine reformation of the country with federalist principles. The newspaper recognised the incursion of the military in the governance of the country in 1966 as the genesis of Nigeria's centralised structural problems. Based on this, they tended to recommend a retrospection on the gains from the pre-military era in the country.

When giving recommendations on the restructuring discourse, the newspapers frequently referenced certain aspects of the federal arrangement that existed from the 1950s into the period of independence until the termination of the First Republic in 1966. For instance, their recommendation for there to be a constitutional reform- specifically reviewing and amending the extant 1999 Constitution- as a rudimentary framework for restructuring Nigeria was generally hinged on the notion of returning to the true federalism provisions of the pre-military era constitutions in the country, particularly the 1960 Constitution and 1963 Constitution. On having a fiscal federalism antithetical to the current revenue-sharing formula, the newspapers recommended an arrangement in which state governments would have autonomous control over their natural resources and generated proceeds in a manner modelling after the fiscal decentralisation provision under the 1963 Constitution of the First Republic.

Recalled almost always with some tinge of nostalgia are the economic and developmental feats attained through fiscal federalism in the regions- Northern Nigeria, Eastern Nigeria, Western Nigeria, and Mid-Western Nigeria- during the First Republic. Prominent regional figures such as Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and Dr. Michael Okpara were portrayed as selfless leaders of the First Republic worth emulating by the current crop of political leaders in the country. Notably, the newspapers appeared to have a consistent view of the extant 36 states as being the constituent units of the Nigerian federation. Thus, at no time did any of them directly endorse a return to regionalism as practiced in the First Republic. In fact, one of the

newspapers did make it clear that “restoring the defunct four regions today is nigh impossible” (*The Punch*, November 7, 2017, p. 18).

### **Circumspection: Taking a Cue from Other Countries**

The newspapers recurrently compared and contrasted Nigeria’s current practice of federalism against what was obtainable in contemporary political systems around the world. Advanced federations such as the United States, Germany, Australia, and Canada were often pointed to as models for emulation towards having Nigeria’s federal structure functioning at an optimal level. It was suggested that Nigeria can learn the importance of regular constitutional amendments to meet the emergent realities of its citizens from federations such as the United States, Canada, and India which have amended their respective constitutions multiple times towards this end.

The newspapers also set in a comparative framing mode the recommendation for the 774 local government areas currently recognised in Nigeria to be delisted from the constitution while granting states the power to create and fund as many local government councils as they want. *The Punch*, for instance, argued that local government should not be treated as an autonomous tier of government outside the purview of state governments in Nigeria by alluding to a supranational pattern: “The LGAs have never been federating units in the US, Canada, Australia and other models of federalism” (*The Punch*, June 26, 2017, p. 22).

Moreover, the newspapers unanimously recommended the decentralisation of the policing system as a panacea to the state of insecurity in Nigeria. Specifically, they called for urgent creation of state police. In putting this recommendation into perspective, it was often suggested that Nigeria must take a cue from the decentralised policing systems existing in the United States, Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Japan and other federal countries, where there are federal police, state police, and county (local) police. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom was also often brought into the comparative submission. It was recognised that even though the United Kingdom operates a unitary system, the country remains a model for the Federal Republic of Nigeria to emulate on the basis of its decentralised policing system. The argument advanced

is that if a unitary system like the United Kingdom could maintain a reasonable level of power devolution in its policing system with about 45 territorial police forces and three special police forces, then Nigeria, being a federal country, has no business with a single, overcentralised police force.

### **Introspection: Reviewing Resolutions of Previous National Conferences**

One major framing treatment by the selected newspapers in proffering recommendations on the restructuring agenda was emphasising the imperative of a national introspection. As *The Guardian* newspaper aptly captured it, “Within the context of perennial internal and global changes, Nigeria cannot but continuously self-assess and adapt if it is to survive and thrive” (*The Guardian*, April 4, 2018, p. 16). The general belief across the newspapers was that the blueprint to resolving Nigeria’s structural problems was already in place, and that all now required was for there to be a critical examination of the blueprint to chart a way forward. Recommendations given the introspection treatment by majority of the newspapers tended to present reports of national conferences that have been held in the last three decades as artifacts for reflection. These national conferences include the 1994-1995 National Constitutional Conference, the 2005 National Political Reform Conference, and the 2014 National Conference. Strikingly, of the five selected newspapers, only *Vanguard* newspaper did not allude to any of the national conferences when making recommendations on restructuring.

The inclination across the selected newspapers was to give prominence to the 2014 National Conference over the other two previous conferences. The reason for this is discernible from an observation made by *Nigerian Tribune*. The newspaper remarked, “The 2014 National Conference featured some of the brightest and most accomplished Nigerians and their report is to date the most authoritative document on restructuring in the country” (*Nigerian Tribune*, September 7, 2018, p. 13). Fundamentally, attempts were made to direct attention to salient resolutions from the about 600 proposals drafted at the 2014 National Conference. On why an introspection upon the National Conference Report is sacrosanct, the *Daily Sun* newspaper stated that resolutions reached at the conference “are truly a decision of the Nigerian people.

Most of them are logical and capable of reducing political tension and advancing national unity” (*Daily Sun*, May 12, 2017, p. 15). *The Guardian* newspaper also lent its voice to this position: “Indeed, profound recommendations came out of that body of eminent Nigerians. The report should be dusted up and sections on power generation and supply, state policing, economic and natural resources, local government administration, and revenue mobilisation should be closely examined” (*The Guardian*, September 5, 2018, p. 16). *The Punch* affirmed that “the National Assembly is expected to play a critical role here; the Senate should seize the moment and consider the 2014 political conference report” (*The Punch*, June 26, 2017).

### **Activation: Urgent Policy Action from the Government**

What can be described as the thematic culmination to the framing dimension of treatment recommendation across the selected newspapers was the exigency to move the restructuring discourse beyond mere rhetoric (oration and documentation) to the stage of policy implementation. The emphasis was for the country’s leaders to harness the needed political will to activate procedures and processes that would eventually make the restructuring agenda an actuality in Nigeria. The newspapers’ attribution of responsibility in this regard mainly focused on members of the National Assembly, President Muhammadu Buhari, the ruling political party (APC), and state governors. Members of National Assembly were tasked with providing a favourable legislative condition for the implementation of cogent resolutions from the 2014 National Conference while also reviewing and amending the 1999 Constitution to become a framework for the genuine practice of federalism in Nigeria. *The Punch* conveyed the urgency with which a holistic policy action on restructuring was required: “There is no need for further futile, time-buying constitution conferences; the reports of 1995, 2005 and 2014 should be harmonised and all state assemblies, political parties and national legislators mobilised to pass the necessary amendments as provided for in the 1999 Constitution” (*The Punch*, May 29, 2019, p. 38). Against such sentiment that “the President, fixed in his military ways, seems to be the main obstacle to restructuring” (*The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, p. 16), quite a number of expectations were directed

at President Buhari, including the need for him to change his antagonistic stance on restructuring, to reflect inclusivity in his political appointments, and for his administration to develop a policy action on police decentralisation and other aspects of the restructuring agenda. Connectedly, the newspapers demanded policy accountability from the APC, the President's political party. Prequel to the 2015 elections, the APC had promised in its manifesto to initiate the process of constitutional amendment for the devolution of powers and to entrench true federalism in the country if elected. Furthermore, in 2017, the ruling party set up a committee under the chairmanship of Governor Nasir el-Rufai to examine and give recommendations on the restructuring agenda. The committee's subsequent report (released in 2018) did make recommendations endorsing restructuring. *Daily Sun* observed that "many Nigerians are frustrated that the All Progressives Congress (APC) government, which promised to restructure the country, appears to be stalling it" (*Daily Sun*, November 28, 2018, p. 15). It is to this end that the selected newspapers demanded from the ruling party an activation of its electoral promise and pursuance of the restructuring agenda to a logical conclusion. *The Guardian*, for example, charged the President to call for the Nasir el-Rufai Committee's report and "create an enabling environment for the implementation of some of the recommendations therein" (*The Guardian*, July 12, 2018, p. 16).

Meanwhile, state governors were also deemed major policy actors in the process of reaching a concrete direction on restructuring, particularly in the aspect of revenue generation, economic diversification, and state police creation. On the task before state governors, *The Punch* newspaper ominously stated, "Time has run out for rhetoric; unless prudence and sensible policies to diversify revenue, reduce debt and overheads, take root without further delay, the next recession might trigger an unpalatable implosion" (*The Punch*, September 25, 2018). *Vanguard*, setting the agenda for a new political tenure after the 2019 general elections, concluded that state governors "have a duty to explore new ideas in revenue generation, frugal management of scarce resources and the push for state police to secure our communities" (*Vanguard*, May 31, 2019, p. 18).

## **Discussion**

This study has explored the framing dimensions of the editorial intervention of selected newspapers on the restructuring discourse. Findings showed that the selected newspapers deployed framing devices such as paradox, metaphors, identity cues, and historical allusions in expressing what is at issue regarding the restructuring discourse. Historicity, for one, is an integral element in the framing of the restructuring discourse. The selected newspapers' frequent allusions to Nigeria's political history constituted a "double-edged sword", functioning to either strip bare the errors of the past perceived to be stifling the present, or to direct the focus to a national nostalgia of the productive path once taken. This element was used effectively towards diagnostic and prognostic contextualisation. Indeed, historical contexts play a major role in the media's construction of reality. Carter (2013), meanwhile, observes that replicating historical contextualisation in news stories at a sustained level is near impracticable due to the limitations of time and space particularly associated with the production of that content format. This study notably suggests that the editorial content genre is not quite as beset with the same constraints.

The selected newspapers were largely uniform in how they framed the restructuring discourse. To the extent that the notion about restructuring is susceptible to ambiguous and subliminal rhetoric in Nigerian politics (Yaqub, 2016; Oni & Faluyi, 2018), the selected newspapers did well to establish specific discourse attributes on the restructuring agenda. Saliency on the restructuring discourse across the newspapers encompassed issues on the devolution of powers, constitutional amendment, fiscal autonomy and resource control for states (fiscal federalism), reviewing the current revenue allocation formula, state police creation (police decentralisation), as well as local government creation and administration. Restructuring Nigeria's federal system is, indeed, a multifaceted discourse. The newspapers adopted a broad slant in certain instances and issue-specific slant at other times in their presentation of the restructuring discourse; thereby oscillating between thematic framing and episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991).

Notably, devolution of powers from the Federal Government to state governments through constitutional amendment (as political

decentralisation reform) was at the core of the restructuring discourse by the selected newspapers. They argued that political decentralisation should form the nucleus of the process aimed at reforming the Nigerian federal system. The logic advanced here is that once political decentralisation reform is put in place, there is bound to be a ripple effect in achieving other issue-specific reforms. Particularly, the newspapers portrayed political restructuring as a prerequisite to effecting fiscal federalism and police decentralisation in the country. This is consistent with Khemani's (2017) assertion that other facets of policy reform are given a framework to thrive when there is, first, a reform of political institutions. After all, political institutional reform can determine the trajectory of economic institutions, just as economic institutional reform can be crucial to the effectiveness of political institutions (Demir & Aktan, 2016; Kilishi, 2017).

It is clear that all the selected newspapers actively framed their editorials as an intervention of advocacy for the cause of restructuring. Yet, the newspapers appeared to counter the demand for local government autonomy. This would seem a contradiction to the advocacy for restructuring at first glance until it is realised that the newspapers equally promoted entrenching a democratic ambience for good governance to flourish at the grassroots level. The crux of their agenda, meanwhile, is for the creation and funding of local government areas to be placed under the purview of states. By this, the local government level is not to be considered a separate tier of government outside of the state government, as is the norm in advanced federations. It can thus be reasoned that the newspapers were simply trying to set aright an advocacy section of the restructuring discourse.

The restructuring discourse in the editorials of the selected newspapers was sometimes casted with a south-north dichotomy. This substantiates the social representation pitching Southern Nigeria against Northern Nigeria, and vice versa. Opinion leaders and interest groups in Southern Nigeria are largely viewed as advocates while those in Northern Nigeria are mainly seen as opponents in the restructuring debate (Abah & Nwokwu, 2017; Oni & Faluyi, 2018; Yaqub, 2016). Considering this pattern of representation at face value, the advocacy for restructuring by the selected newspapers may be interpreted as media activism for Southern

Nigeria. Given their operational base and the socio-demographic affiliation of their publishers to Southern Nigeria, the newspapers can be easily held as buttressing specimens by those who dismiss the restructuring agenda as a conception for parochial interests (see Wada, 2018; Yauri, 2018). This line of argument would, however, be refuted by certain nuanced considerations from this study: that the newspapers provided editorial voice for the North-Central geopolitical region (together with other regions in Southern Nigeria) as victims of a dysfunctional and imbalanced political system; supported northerners who were pro-restructuring while, yet, being critical of southerners who were anti-restructuring; and promoted the idea of maintaining states as the constitute federating units in Nigeria rather than a return to First Republic regionalism. The finding that some of the newspapers pursued editorial courses reflective of the socio-geographical affiliations of their publishers aligns with prior studies (Gever et al., 2018; Nwafor & Ogbodo, 2014) which indicate that media ownership can influence framing directions on the restructuring discourse. It should be noted that the few editorials in this regard, however, still situated their “sectional discourses” within a national context. It, then, means that social proximity as an editorial judgment criterion cannot be disregarded when considering media framing of the restructuring discourse. Importantly, this finding also suggests that the Nigerian media’s projection of issues with the implicit or explicit use of particularistic social identity cues need not always be construed with a hypercritical instinct searching for ethnic bias.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the newspapers selected for this study were quite comprehensive and forthright in their editorial intervention on the restructuring discourse. The editorial framing intervention of the newspapers effectively served the purpose of demystifying the complexity of the restructuring discourse. The positive framing valence and moral interpretation accorded the restructuring agenda, together with how discourse actors (proponents and opponents) were portrayed, generally aided the advocacy stance of the newspapers on the agenda. Although social proximity constituted an

editorial judgment predictor, the newspapers were largely issue-focused and not ethnically fixated. Overall, they maintained a national vista in framing the ramifications and relevance of restructuring to the Nigerian federation. It is, therefore, incumbent on policymakers in the country to attend to the multi-issue dimensions of the restructuring agenda with apt and timely policy response mechanism attuned to advancing national development and preserving the collective interest of the Nigerian peoples.

This study contributes to extant literature by drawing the focus on editorial framing- other than the news framing paradigm which has somewhat attained a conceptual and empirical baseline in media framing research. This study is not without limitations. For one, only newspapers operationally based in and with publishers from the southern part of Nigeria were considered for this study. Future studies should qualitatively account for the framing perspectives of newspapers in the northern part of the country. Furthermore, studies on the restructuring discourse can be set in a comparative analysis framework, juxtaposing the framing of the discourse by Southern Nigeria-affiliated newspapers against the framing by Northern Nigeria-affiliated newspapers. Despite its limitations, this study has filled a major gap by demonstrating the value of the qualitative research approach in uncovering nuances to newspaper framing on the discourse complexity of the restructuring debate in Nigeria.

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