

Children: as ‘invisible’ and voiceless as ever in the Nigerian news media

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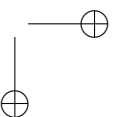
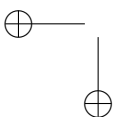
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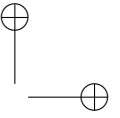
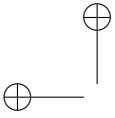
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TEN years ago, that is in 1999, the Norwegian Government and UNICEF launched the Oslo Challenge. It was a call to action with the aim to ensure that the overwhelming power of the media for good in the lives of children is identified, encouraged and supported, while the potential harmful effects are recognised and reduced. The call went out to everyone engaged in exploring, developing, monitoring and participating in the complex relationship between children and the media (The Mediawise Trust, 2003). This includes governments, organizations and individuals working for children, media professionals at all levels and in all media, the private sector, including media owners, children and young people, parents, teachers and researchers.

The Challenge to media professionals at all levels and in all media is:

- to raise awareness in the media professions about the rights of children and how they can be protected and promoted by good professional practices or harmed through inappropriate policies or actions;
- to work ethically and professionally according to sound media practices and to develop and promote media codes of ethics in order to avoid sensationalism, stereotyping (including by gender) or undervaluing of children and their rights;
- to resist commercial pressures that lead to children's issues and the rights of children to freedom of expression, fair coverage and protection from exploitation, including as consumers, being given low priority;
- to work to enhance the relationship between children and the media so that both grow and improve in understanding of the positive and negative power and potential of the relationship





The challenge thus places responsibility on media professionals in ensuring that the rights of children are protected and promoted. One way of doing this among others is to bring issues affecting children to the fore, thus setting agenda for them. This also implies that the voices of children are heard on issues affecting them. It is against this background that this study examined how Nigerian newspapers have covered children issues as to bring such issues to the fore, thus setting agenda for them as required by the Oslo challenge.

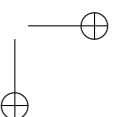
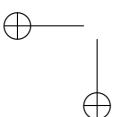
Theoretical Underpinning

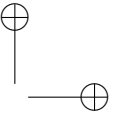
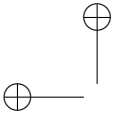
The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the agenda-setting theory of the media. Agenda setting refers to the operation of the media which results in prioritisation of the issues that arise and engage the attention of the society. Thereby the issues focused upon by the media become the issues that the public accepts as important for attention and discussion (McQuail, 2005:512). In other words, it is the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues. The media agenda influences public agenda not by saying ‘this issue is important’ in an overt way but by giving more space and time to that issue and by giving it more prominent space and time.

Cohen’s (1963:13) study of foreign policy has been a stimulant of the agenda setting research. Cohen notes that the press:

may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read.

McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) investigation lends great credence to the agenda setting hypothesis. They did a content analysis of newspapers and television coverage of the 1968 American presidential election. The analysis considered the time and space accorded to various issues and served as a representative of media agenda. McCombs and Shaw then interviewed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina area and asked them what





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issues they believed were most important. This public opinion polling served as representation of the public agenda. In looking at the relationships between the two variables (that is, media agenda and public agenda), McCombs and Shaw found an incredible correlation. The public agenda was a virtual reflection of the media agenda.

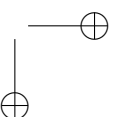
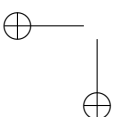
Severin and Tankard (1997) define this agenda setting process as the media’s capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public’s mind. It is a causal hypothesis suggesting that media content has an influence on the public perception of the importance of issues. They argue that the media can be used to influence policies and the way people think. Moreover, since the treatment of the children’s rights by individuals hinges heavily on their attitudes and behaviour, the media, through the agenda setting process, can immensely change them into positive attributes towards the children’s rights.

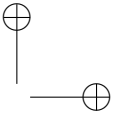
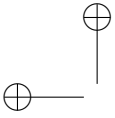
As contained in Folarin (2005), the elements involved in agenda setting include:

- The quantity or frequency of reporting by the media.
- Prominence given to the reporting.
- The degree of the conflict generated in the reports.
- Cumulative media-specific effects over time.

Lang and Lang (1983) expanded further on agenda setting by introducing agenda building which they break into six steps:

1. The press highlights some events or activities and makes them stand out.
2. Different kinds of issues require different kinds and amounts of news coverage to gain attention.
3. The events and activities in the focus of attention must be ‘framed’, or given a field of meanings within which they can be understood.
4. The language used by the media can affect perception of the importance of an issue.





5. The media link the activities or events that have become the focus of attention to secondary symbols whose location on the political landscape is easily recognised.
6. Agenda building is accelerated when well-known and credible individuals begin to speak out on an issue.

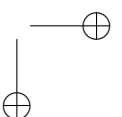
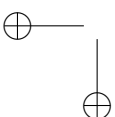
The concept of agenda building **introduced** here suggests that the process of putting an issue on the public's agenda takes time and goes through several stages. It suggests that the media frame an issue and the code word they use to describe it can have an impact; and that the role of well-known individuals commenting on the issue can be an important one. Agenda setting concept thus raises important questions of responsibility for the journalists. The labels that journalists apply to events can have an important influence on whether the public pays attention to the issues connected with the event (Severin and Tankard, 1997).

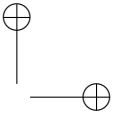
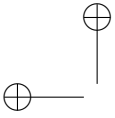
The agenda setting theory thus provides the basis for examining how the press has been able to set agenda for the rights of children by assigning relative importance to them through frequency of reporting, the prominence given to such reports and the conflict generated in them.

Media role in Protection and Promotion of Child Rights

While communication is central to development, the media of mass communication play active role in that process because of their efficiency in information spread. Melkote and Steeves (2001) noted that mass media play the role of a catalyst to bring about change in development process. Deane et al (2002) stipulate that the mass media are fundamental to development. The mass media enable people to learn about issues as well as make their voices heard. They can exert a powerful influence, for good or for ill. Free, independent press are important to ensure freedom of speech (guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), promote democracy, good governance, peace and human rights, combat poverty and crime, inform people about issues and enable them to participate in public debate.

Okigbo (1991) notes that the print media can contribute to development by disseminating truth and useful information, correlating the parts of society





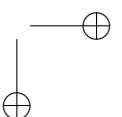
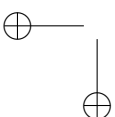
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and sensitizing (or conscientizing) the people to the need for planned development and social change. Other important functions of the print media in development process are persuasion, motivation, providing learning materials and appropriate development information for educated members of the society.

Media also shape public opinion and influence public policy. Graves (2007), citing Jaime Abello Banfi, notes that media are used to give voice to marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic and religious minorities, as well as to promote their rights. In Burundi, for example, the association BonSem produces a weekly radio show and publishes a newsletter designed to encourage discussion about how civil society can work for the political and economic inclusion of the marginalized Twa communities. Similarly, according to Panos London’s 2007 report *At the Heart of Change*, information and the media that deliver it are powerful agents of change that can help reduce poverty and the debilitating effects of disease in the developing world. Sustainable development demands that people participate in the debates and decisions that affect their lives. They need to be able to receive information, but also to make their voices heard. The social impact of media includes improving the quality of education, informing the public about health threats and safe practices to avoid them, serving local communities by bringing attention to their needs, and in times of disaster, providing information and sources of assistance to people displaced from their homes (Graves, 2007).

Article 17 of the Convention on the rights of the child specifies the role the media should play in the promotion and protection of children’s rights (UNICEF 2002:65-66). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (1996) believes that the media – both written and audio visual – are highly important in efforts to make reality the principles and standards of the Convention. The media can play a pivotal role in monitoring the actual implementation of the rights of the child.

The media are powerful because they penetrate every segment of modern-day society and effectively influence how people view themselves, their neighbours, their communities and their world. Media representations are the primary source of information on social problems for many people (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994). Maley (2000: 37) for instance, notes that: "In social and cultural matters, the various media provide the main platforms of debate, and their choices of subjects, participants and opinions shape the agenda and much



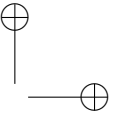
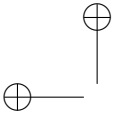
of its content." The media play a significant role in forming and influencing people's attitudes and behaviour (Brawley, 1995).

Goddard and Saunders (2001), draw attention to the essential role of the media in increasing the society's awareness of, and response to, child abuse and neglect. News and features could be used to report child abuse cases, research and intervention strategies. Such media attention to child abuse can positively influence public opinion, professional and political responses to the circumstances in which children and young people find themselves. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987:3) observe that journalists play a major role in constructing what is considered "deviant" in our society and, therefore, what is "normal". Journalists do not merely reflect the work of others who define deviance and attempt to control it, but are themselves in some ways agents of social control; they are "a kind of deviance defining elite" who articulates the "proper bounds to behaviour" in our society.

In addition to news stories, feature articles and investigative journalism, sporadic mass media education and prevention campaigns could be launched. These campaigns will broaden community's knowledge of child abuse and neglect, influence people's attitudes towards children and young people and change behaviours that contribute to, or precipitate the problem of child abuse and neglect in our communities.

Though it has been argued that complex attitudinal or behavioural change requires more direct forms of citizen contact and intervention, the media at least are effective in building citizen awareness of an issue (O'Keefe, and Reed, 1990; Saunders and Goddard, 2002; Reger, Wootan and Booth-Butterfield, 2000; Freimuth, Cole and Kirby 2001). Besides, mass media campaigns and coverage of the rights of children perform a significant role in placing the relevant issues on the public and political agenda. Lindsey (1994:163) also asserts that: "media has a central role in mediating information and forming public opinion. The media casts an eye on events that few of us directly experience and renders remote happenings observable and meaningful".

Parajuli (2004) also notes that the media can bring forth children's issues by allowing children who have been working (in the worst form) as domestic servants, on the streets, in factories and mines/quarries as well as those rehabilitated from any organization to participate in their media programme. He adds that children, being the future of a country, must be provided with education, socialized, motivated and equipped with all the basic necessities for their



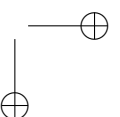
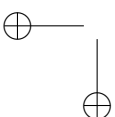
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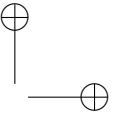
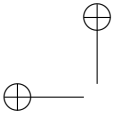
personality development. In this connection, the rights of the children like education, health, communication, participation, physical and moral support are some of the major components for their well-being. So, the media have to raise the awareness of children’s situation to the concerned NGOs or government. In other words, mass media education and child rights campaigns present one means of breaking the cycles of suppression and denial.

Public attitudes and perceptions, however ill-informed, may profoundly influence political action (Walby 1996). In their analysis of the social construction of youth homelessness, Hutson and Liddiard (1994) argued that media representations are the prime source of information on social problems for many people. The media have been essential to the growth of societal awareness of child abuse, not so much from specific community education campaigns as through the news and features reporting on specific cases, research and intervention initiatives. As Goddard notes:

[...] in Victoria, if not the rest of Australia, the media coverage of child abuse has played a significant part in the development of “solutions” to the problem. A major restructuring of child protection services, together with a large increase in resources, followed one extensive media campaign (Goddard and Carew 1993). Another intensive print media campaign following the death of an abused child referred to the police and protective services, led to the introduction of mandatory reporting in Victoria. Such campaigns lead to “policy development by press release” rather than responses developed through community consultation, research, and reflection (1996b:305).

Loane (1997) also observes that without media attention, governments will not act to improve the protection of children. For example, the New South Wales Government set up a panel to provide specialist advice to child protection workers as a direct consequence of media coverage of the state of the child protection system and, in particular, 19 cases of fatal child abuse which had occurred in the previous two years. Loane (1997) notes that it is only by the production of stories that shock that a response can be gleaned from politicians or the public. She notes that the ‘first rule for any journalist who wants to change something ... is to get a politician to react. That is achieved, more often than not, by hitting them between the eyes with a page one scandal (Tomison).





The United Kingdom National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse (1996) recommended that the media should ‘take a more balanced and sympathetic view of children’. In line with a belief in the importance of ‘listening to children’ the Commission felt that the media should take the views of children into account when presenting an issue in which children have some interest. The Commission recommended that the media should have an obligation to consider a child’s best interest in stories in which children feature, and that the failure to do so would constitute grounds for a complaint to a relevant authority.

Method of Study

The method adopted in this study is content analysis research design. Content analysis, according to Kerlinger (1986), is a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003:141). Two national newspapers were selected; a privately-owned newspaper and a government owned newspaper. We thus arrived at the selection of *the Guardian* and *Daily Times*. The study covered a period of five years; from 1999, the year that Oslo challenge was launched, to 2003, the year that Nigeria’s national assembly passed the Child Rights Act. It is hoped that the study will be a continuous one as to monitor the trend of the coverage of children’s issues by the Nigerian press.

A total of 600 issues of the newspapers constituted the sample size. Through the use of simple random sampling, 5 issues were selected in every month for the five year period. Thus, 300 issues per newspaper yielded 600 for the two selected newspapers. The unit of analysis comprised all articles or stories on child issues in the form of news, features, opinions, editorials, pictures or letters to the editor. They were examined for frequency of coverage, prominence given to the reports in terms of newspaper page placements and people quoted as regards individuals that were contacted as news sources in the reports. The data were analysed using percentages.

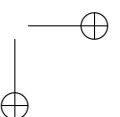
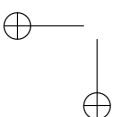


Table 1: Coverage of children's issues by the selected newspapers

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentages
<i>The Guardian</i>	96	49.7
<i>Daily Times</i>	97	50.3
Total	193	100

Result

Table 1 shows the coverage given to child right issues by the four newspapers. A total of 193 stories were covered over the five-year period of study. *The Guardian* had 49.7% of the stories while *Daily Times* had 50.3%. *Daily Times* reported child right issues more than *the Guardian*.

Table 2: Prominence of coverage by the newspapers

Story Placement	<i>The Guardian</i>	Percentage	<i>Daily Times</i>	Percentage
Front Page Lead	6	6.3%	8	8.2%
Front Page Minor	5	5.2%	3	3.1%
Back Page Lead	2	2.1%	4	4.1%
Back Page Minor	5	5.2%	2	2.1%
Inside Page Lead	40	41.6%	57	58.8%
Inside Page Minor	38	39.6%	23	23.7
Total	96	100%	97	100%

Table 2 reveals that most stories on child rights are found inside the pages of all the selected newspapers. *The Guardian* published 81.2% of all its stories on children (for both lead and minor stories) in the inside pages of the papers. The remaining 18.8% were found on the front and back pages. *Daily Times* had 58.8% inside page lead stories, followed by 23.7% inside page minor stories, 8.2% as front page lead and 3.1% as front page minor. Stories on the back page (lead and minor stories) were 4.1% and 2.1% respectively.

Table 3 focused on people quoted in the news. NGOs and advocates were mostly quoted in the selected newspapers, For *the Guardian*, NGOs and advo-

Table 3: People quoted in child rights reports of the newspapers

Categories of People	<i>The Guardian</i>	Percentage	<i>Daily Times</i>	Percentage
Government agents	11	15.5%	10	17%
NGOs/Advocates	29	40.8%	20	33.9%
Police/court	7	9.9%	7	11.9%
Parents/relatives	4	5.7%	1	1.7%
Individuals	3	4.2%	4	6.8%
Donors	2	2.8%	4	6.8%
Teachers/Administrators	3	4.2%	2	3.4%
Politicians	4	5.7%	3	5.1%
Researcher/Professor/ Experts/Doctors	5	7%	4	6.8%
Children	2	2.8%	3	5.1%
Others	1	1.7%	1	1.5%
Total	71	100%	59	100%

cates received 40.8%, followed by government agents or officials, with 15.5% and police/court had 9.9%. Others were researchers/experts (7%), politicians (5.7%), parents and relatives (5.7%), individuals and teachers/school administrators received 4.2% each. Likewise, donors and children had 2.8% each. Other individuals quoted like clerics took 1.7%.

Daily Times had 17% for government agents, 33.9% for NGOs/advocates, and 11.9% for police/court. Individuals, donors and researchers/experts had 6.8% each. Parents/relatives, school administrators/teachers, and politicians had 1.7%, 3.4%, and 5.1% respectively. Children had 5.1%, while other persons quoted had 1.5%.

Discussion

The extent of coverage given to children's issues by *The Guardian* and *Daily Times*, newspapers shows a gross under-reportage of children's issues. In fact, one can say that children seemed to be invisible in the newspapers' content. A total of 300 issues of the newspapers were sampled for analysis for

each of the newspapers, making an overall total of 600 issues. It is amazing that only 97 stories (21.4%) came from *Daily Times* and *The Guardian* had 96 stories representing (21.4%). This means that there were several days when children's issues did not feature at all in the newspapers' coverage. If the newspapers were to feature a child rights story everyday, we would have 600 stories. Thus, a record of 193 stories shows that adequate attention has not been given to children's issues.

While we cannot see any of the newspapers reporting better than the other as shown in the data, we can infer that the government-owned *Daily Times* performed better than the privately-owned, *the Guardian*, on the basis of volumes (i.e. number of pages) that these papers published. *Daily Times* published an average of 40 pages while *the Guardian* had twice that number, that is, an average of 80 pages; whereas *Daily Times* reported 97 stories as against *the Guardian's* 96 stories. It means then that with limited number of pages published by *Daily Times* it was still able to report more than *the Guardian* which doubled the volume of *Daily Times*.

The low coverage of children's issues in this study is similar to others carried out on children issues. McManus and Dorfman's (2002) study on the portrayal of child care in U.S newspapers showed inadequate reportage. They noted that though child care was among the most rapidly growing business in the U.S., it was surprising that the issue was underreported. Moss' (2001) study on the economic impact of the child care industry in California also showed gross underreportage of child care. The study showed that about 5.5% of the stories on news section fronts, editorial and op-ed pages were focused on education. Stories about child care, by contrast, represented a fraction of 1% of the stories in the sample newspapers. Similarly, McNamara's (n.d.) study on the representation of young people in the Irish national newspapers revealed under-representation of children and young people.

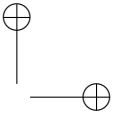
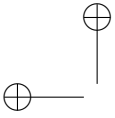
It appears then that children are generally underreported in the media. There are many possible explanations for this. Journalists may consider young people to be unimportant in societal decision-making processes, immature, ill-informed or indeed, not interested in current affairs. Besides, young people do not purchase newspapers regularly, nor do they usually have disposable incomes to do so. Not only that, some codes of practice suggest that journalists should not interview or photograph those under the age of 18 on subjects involving their personal welfare in the absence and without the consent of their

guardian. This hurdle may discourage journalists from using young people as sources for stories as it may give rise to editorial delays. Journalists tend to feed at convenient tables where information is readily available, easy to access and on the record. Thus, the special status of children and young people may serve to work against them in terms of media coverage.

The level of prominence, in terms of page placement, given to a report has implication on the extent to which the newspapers have set agenda for the issue. The results show that reports on child rights were buried within the newspaper pages. Combining the inside page stories (both the lead and minor stories), we see 81.2% of *The Guardian* stories on inside pages, while 82.5% of *Daily Times* stories, also both the lead and minor, are found inside the pages of the newspapers. This is an indication of weak newsworthiness of child rights stories.

Monitor (n.d.), illustrated the significance of front page news as showing strong newsworthiness. It noted that every front page magnifies stories that appear on it. For example, the front page story in *The New York Times* will likely be broadcast on the evening news, summarized by the wire services, ripped-off by ten thousand bloggers, and otherwise spread everywhere. *Times* front page stories influence elections, national policy – and even launch wars. The concentration of child rights reports on the inside pages then means that the newspapers did not consider child rights issues as a subject that deserved high focus.

We also examined the individuals quoted in the newspaper reports. This shows to whom the newspapers turn when they need information and reveals the dominant opinion represented in the news coverage. For the two selected newspapers, child rights advocates and NGOs are predominant voices that are quoted, followed by government officials and agents. This shows that the advocates have been in the forefront of setting agenda for the rights of the child and that they are doing a good job in getting their voices into the news. We see a generally low coverage for other categories of people such as teachers, donors, politicians and parents, as well as children themselves. It is surprising however, that the newspapers gave fewer opportunities to children's voices on issues that seriously affect them.



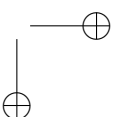
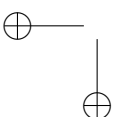
Recommendations

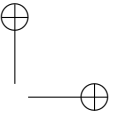
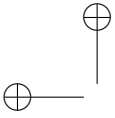
We have discovered that the coverage given to children’s issues by the two newspapers is generally low. This calls for improvement on the part of newspaper reporters and editors to step up the attention given to children. Against the backdrop of child rights as a development issue and the fact the media have great roles to play in the realisation of children’s right, there is need for newspaper organisations to expand the coverage given to children’s issues. One way of doing this is to devote specific pages to children matters where issues affecting their rights could be featured. The awareness by the public that children issues are treated on specific pages can influence their looking out for such pages when information on children is needed. In fact, children as well, can look forward to such pages to know about themselves.

It will also be needful for the government to formulate a policy guideline to compel newspapers to devote a certain percentage of their news coverage to issues that will serve the purpose of protection and promotion of the rights of the child. This will not be a strange policy since similar guideline exists for the broadcast media to give 60% of the programmes aired to local ones. This is in accord with the development media theory. The press is expected to support government policies in its quest for national development (McQuail, 2005). The news organisations can facilitate this by setting up children’s desks in their newsroom. The desk must be equipped with well-trained journalists who are familiar with the details of child rights and materials on child rights so as to ensure excellent delivery on child rights issues.

The finding showed that children’s stories lack news-worthiness due to their being buried inside the newspapers’ pages. When someone reads newspapers, the first port of call is the front page and then the back page before checking the stories inside those papers. Putting children’s stories on the front page will thus increase their newsworthiness. Though, there are many stories competing for the front page, one way around this is to set some children’s news headlines in the front page, while the stories continue in the inside pages. This will to some extent raise children’s issues to the right plane.

Besides, the children also need to be heard directly and so should be given the opportunity. Ridgard (n.d.) notes that children’s voices are valuable and have the potential to enhance reporting enormously. He adds that taking a few extra minutes to ask child sources what they think of the news-making process,





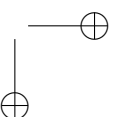
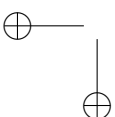
how they would like to be portrayed and building trust by treating them with respect and dignity, reflects in the reports and makes more interesting and engaging reading or viewing with which audiences are able to identify.

Conclusion

This study has shown that children remain as invisible and voiceless as ever. They are not adequately represented in the reports, neither were they given appropriate prominence. Their voices were also not heard. This scenario is not a good one for the Nigerian child. If we believe that children are tomorrow's leader, there is need to invest in them by ensuring that their rights are met. The media, therefore, need to wake up to their responsibility of setting agenda for children by giving them adequate and appropriate coverage so that government and public attention could be directed to meeting their needs.

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