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Perception of stakeholders on media reportage of Supreme Court decisions in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study investigates the extent and accuracy of Nigerian newspaper reportage of Supreme Court decisions and examines how key stakeholders perceive media performance in communicating judicial outcomes. Six landmark public-interest cases decided between 2006 and 2012 were purposively selected, as reported by four national dailies (The Guardian, The Punch, Daily Trust, and Daily Sun), chosen for their national reach and editorial diversity. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press and Perception Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach consisting of quantitative content analysis and qualitative in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected stakeholders, including judiciary correspondents, editors, legal practitioners, and retired justices. Findings reveal a moderate level of coverage dominated by reactionary news, limited analytical depth, and only fair accuracy across key judicial parameters. Stakeholders attributed these patterns to inadequate legal literacy among reporters, editorial and commercial pressures, delayed access to certified judgments, and ownership influence. The study concludes that shortcomings in judicial reportage contribute to fragmented public understanding of the Supreme Court's work and may undermine judicial legitimacy. It recommends enhanced legal reporting capacity, improved media–judiciary engagement, and stronger ethical oversight to support accurate and context-rich communication of apex court decisions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Supreme Court of Nigeria; media reportage; judicial communication; stakeholders' perception; accuracy, legal journalism

1. Introduction

The judiciary stands as the fulcrum of democratic accountability and the rule of law. Within this framework, the Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) occupies a central place as the final arbiter in constitutional, electoral, and public interest disputes. Its decisions not only interpret the law but also influence governance outcomes and the public's confidence in justice delivery. Yet, for most citizens, understanding these judicial pronouncements depends largely on how the media report and interpret them. The press therefore serves as the vital bridge between the judiciary and the public, shaping perceptions of justice and institutional credibility.

Despite the judiciary's pivotal role, the accuracy and depth of media reportage of judicial decisions have remained a subject of concern among scholars and practitioners. Previous studies have examined judicial independence, court–media relations, and media coverage of

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political and electoral matters (e.g., Alabi, 2002; Akeredolu, 2006; Folarin, 1998). However, few have focused specifically on how Nigerian newspapers report decisions of the Supreme Court, especially in cases of broad public interest. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on the accuracy, framing, and interpretative clarity of such reports, as well as how key stakeholders—journalists, lawyers, judges, and academics—perceive the media's performance in this sensitive domain.

Guided by these concerns, this study aims to investigate the extent and accuracy of Nigerian newspaper coverage of six landmark Supreme Court decisions rendered in public interest cases. It is also set out to examine the perceptions of stakeholders regarding how effectively the selected newspapers communicated the substance and implications of the judgments to the public. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

i. How did the selected newspapers communicate the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria to the public in selected public interest cases?
ii. What is the stakeholders' perception of the newspapers' reportage of the selected decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the selected public interest cases?

The paper focuses on six landmark decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria delivered between 2006 and 2012, as reported by four national dailies—*The Guardian*, *The Punch, Daily Trust,* and *Daily Sun*.

The study is significant for both scholarship and practice. By empirically assessing the quality of judicial reportage, it contributes to media and communication studies in the area of court reporting—an underexplored dimension of public affairs journalism in Nigeria. The findings are expected to inform media training programmes, enhance judicial transparency, and promote better understanding between the press and the judiciary in the service of democratic governance. The paper is structured into five sections, including a review of relevant literature, theoretical framework, methodology, data presentation, and discussion of findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Reportage of Supreme Court Decisions in Nigeria

Media coverage of the Nigerian Supreme Court plays a crucial role in ensuring open justice, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and shaping public understanding of constitutional matters.

Although the SCN has been widely studied from legal and political perspectives, few works had examined its representation in the media. Early Nigerian studies, such as Adesanoye (1974), Alabi (2002), and Akeredolu (2006), analysed judicial language, profiled justices, and explored institutional roles respectively, but did not assess media coverage.

However, few recent studies show persistent concerns regarding accuracy and depth of reportage. For instance, Ige, Aderogba and Abimbola (2016) found that Nigerian newspapers often prioritize political context over legal reasoning, leading to simplification or omission of key judicial parameters. Akpan (2019) confirmed this pattern in the reportage of governorship election petition rulings, where editorial emphasis focused more on political actors than judicial interpretations.

More recent scholarship indicates that structural pressures within Nigerian newsrooms further constrain the ability to report legal affairs with precision (Adams & Ofordi, 2024). Limited space allocation, tight deadlines, and inadequate legal training diminish the interpretive depth necessary for communicating the substance of apex court decisions. These constraints result in the dominance of short, event-driven stories, reinforcing what Musah (2025) describes as "commitments and alienations" that weaken the judiciary correspondent's role as a guardian of public accountability.

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2.2 Global and Comparative Insights on Court Reporting

International evidence reveals that the difficulties facing Nigerian journalists are not isolated. Chamberlain et al. (2021) report a crisis in court reporting in England and Wales, driven by shrinking local newsrooms and reduced specialist expertise. Jones (2025) observes that news values increasingly elevate courtroom stories with political or dramatic appeal while marginalizing technically legalistic but constitutionally significant decisions. This mirrors the Nigerian pattern where Supreme Court decisions with high political salience receive disproportionate attention.

2.3 Public Perception, Media Influence, and Judicial Legitimacy

The literature underscores a reciprocal relationship between journalism and judicial legitimacy. Hanych, Smekal and Benák (2023) demonstrate that judges themselves are aware of media scrutiny and adopt varying strategies to shape public reception of their rulings. Weak or distorted reportage can contribute to public mistrust, while accurate communication can enhance institutional confidence and civic understanding of law.

In democratic societies, citizens cannot practically follow court proceedings: media serve as the primary conduit for knowledge of judicial action. Thus, inaccuracies or sensationalized framing of Supreme Court decisions may produce misperceptions that affect trust in justice, political stability, and constitutional authority.

2.4 Gaps in Literature and Contribution of This Study

While previous studies in Nigeria have established the extent and accuracy of media coverage of Supreme Court rulings (e.g., Ige et al., 2016; Akpan, 2019), stakeholders' perceptions — including those of senior journalists, legal scholars, and judicial actors — remain under-examined.

Moreover, no recent study integrates content analysis with in-depth interviews, and existing works rarely analyze reportage of post-2015 Supreme Court decisions, a period marked by intense electoral contestation and digital media evolution.

Therefore, this study provides updated empirical evidence on coverage of major Supreme Court decisions, qualitative insight into stakeholders' perceptions of reportage, a unified interpretation through methodological triangulation and the implications for judicial transparency and media policy

In filling these gaps, the study deepens understanding of how the Nigerian press mediates the public's relationship with the apex court, and how this shapes democratic rule-of-law outcomes.

3.Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press and Perception Theory. Together, they provide a dual analytical framework for examining how the Nigerian media report Supreme Court decisions and how various stakeholders interpret such reportage.

The Social Responsibility Theory, a normative model of the press, establishes the ethical and professional parameters guiding media practice in democratic societies. It posits that media freedom is not absolute but conditional upon a commitment to public welfare through accuracy, fairness, balance, and accountability. McQuail (as cited in Baran, 2010) emphasizes that the media's social contract entails truth-telling, fostering pluralism, and promoting informed public discourse. Similarly, Folarin (2002) argues that the press must "raise conflict to the plane of discussion," thereby enabling reasoned deliberation on national issues rather than promoting sensationalism or bias. This theory, therefore, provides a benchmark for evaluating whether the Nigerian press fulfils its civic duty in reporting Supreme Court judgments by offering factual,

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contextual, and ethically responsible coverage that strengthens public confidence in the judiciary.

Accuracy and accountability are central to this framework. Ganiyu (2004) identifies accuracy as the foundation of journalistic integrity, while Okoye (2007) underscores that the avoidance of distortion and bias enhances media credibility and audience trust. The Social Responsibility Theory thus serves as a normative guide for assessing the quality and ethical soundness of media reportage of judicial decisions, reaffirming that responsible journalism is essential to the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The Perception Theory complements this by explaining how audiences interpret and respond to media representations. Moving beyond the early Stimulus–Response paradigm, which regarded audiences as passive recipients, Perception Theory conceptualizes them as active interpreters whose evaluations are shaped by prior knowledge, socio-cultural background, and cognitive predispositions (Burgoon & Ruffner, as cited in Folarin, 2002). Perception operates through selective exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention—processes that determine how individuals make sense of information and form attitudes toward institutions such as the judiciary.

In this study, Perception Theory helps explain why different stakeholder groups—journalists, legal practitioners, policymakers, and citizens—may perceive and assess media reportage of Supreme Court decisions differently. Their interpretations are filtered through existing beliefs about media credibility, judicial integrity, and national politics. Integrating both theories provides a holistic framework for understanding not only how responsibly the media perform their watchdog role but also how that performance shapes public trust and confidence in Nigeria's Supreme Court.

However, it is important to acknowledge that both theories emerged largely from Western liberal-democratic traditions, whose assumptions about media autonomy, institutional trust, and audience agency may not always align with African socio-political realities. In contexts such as Nigeria—where media systems are often constrained by political pressure, financial instability, and evolving democratic cultures—the full realization of social responsibility ideals may be limited. Similarly, perceptual responses to media messages are influenced not only by individual cognition but also by communal values, ethnic affiliations, and collective experiences that shape meaning-making in African societies. Recognizing these contextual differences enriches the analytical power of both theories, allowing their adaptation to the Nigerian environment and deepening the study's theoretical relevance.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a methodological approach designed to investigate the extent and accuracy of Nigerian newspaper coverage of six landmark Supreme Court decisions rendered in public interest cases on the one hand and explore how key stakeholders perceive the performance of the media regarding how effectively the selected newspapers communicated the substance and implications of the judgments to the public on the other hand. The subsequent subsections describe the research design, participant selection and data collection procedures, validity and reliability of instruments, analytical techniques employed to ensure methodological rigour and credibility and ethical consideration.

4.1 Research Design

Specifically, this study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve methodological complementarity. Primary and secondary data were generated through quantitative content analysis of Nigerian newspaper coverage of selected Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) decisions and through qualitative in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. This design was chosen to integrate the

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strengths of both methods—quantitative precision and qualitative depth—thereby enabling a comprehensive understanding of media performance in judicial reporting.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised three major components: media texts, certified true copies of Supreme Court judgments on the selected cases, and human participants. The first consisted of selected editions of four leading national newspapers—*The Guardian, The Punch, Daily Trust,* and *Daily Sun*—that reported six landmark Supreme Court decisions in political and constitutional cases. These newspapers were selected based on their national circulation, editorial reputation, and historical involvement in judicial and political reporting.

The second component of this study is based on the secondary data derived from the certified true copies of the six selected Supreme Court decisions (lead judgment and concurring decisions where the decision was unanimous on the one hand and lead judgment together with dissent decisions where the judgment of the court is split) delivered during the SCN's legal years from 2006 to 2012 (Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, 2016). The certified true copies of the judgments were obtained in the following cases:

1. *Governor James Ibori's ex-convict trial — May 19, 2006*
2. *Governor Rashidi Adewolu Ladoja's impeachment case — December 7, 2006*
3. *President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's election petition — December 12, 2008*
4. *Sack of five sitting governors — January 27, 2012*
5. *Dispute over 76 oil wells between Cross River and Akwa Ibom States — July 10, 2012*
6. *Governor Aliyu Wamakko's election validity case — November 26, 2010"* (Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, 2016, p. 246)**.**

The third component included 15 purposively selected stakeholders drawn from key professional groups: judges (specifically, justices of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, including a one-time Chief Justice of Nigeria who were on some of the panels that decided the selected cases), politicians, academics, and journalists (specifically, reporters and editors who covered the selected decisions). The purposive sampling technique ensured the inclusion of respondents with substantial experience and informed perspectives on both judicial communication and media practice, thus guaranteeing the relevance and richness of the data collected.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection in this study was structured to achieve two complementary objectives: first, to assess the extent and accuracy of newspaper reportage of six landmark Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) decisions; and second, to obtain contextually grounded insights into how key stakeholders perceive media representations of these judicial outcomes. To this end, both primary and secondary data were collected using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were generated through a systematic content analysis of selected Nigerian newspapers' coverage of the identified Supreme Court decisions, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with purposively selected stakeholders directly or indirectly engaged with judicial processes and media practice.

4.3.1 Content Analysis

The content analysis component systematically examined how selected print newspapers reported six landmark decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN). Content analysis, as defined by Kerlinger and Lee (2000) and Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1991), is an objective, systematic, and replicable technique for describing and quantifying both the manifest and latent content of communication. Krippendorff (1980) emphasizes that the method enables valid and replicable inferences within specific contexts, while Borden and Abbott (2008) recommend its use for identifying recurrent themes, categories, and patterns in written discourse.

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A total of twenty-four editions from four national dailies—*The Guardian, The Punch, Daily Trust,* and *Daily Sun*—were purposively selected for analysis because they contained reports on the six Supreme Court decisions under review. These editions featured diverse journalistic genres, including: (a) main news reports on the judgments; (b) news stories capturing stakeholders' immediate reactions; (c) analytical or interpretive commentaries; and (d) relevant pictorials published shortly after the rulings were announced.

The study was delimited to these 24 print editions to maintain analytical focus on the textual and visual representations of Supreme Court decisions as presented in the newspapers. This deliberate restriction means that other media forms—such as broadcast, online, and social media platforms—were excluded. While this focus on the print media allows for detailed textual scrutiny and archival consistency, it also constitutes a methodological limitation, as it does not capture the broader multimodal and digital dimensions of contemporary judicial reportage.

Although digital and broadcast platforms now play an increasingly prominent role in media communication, print newspapers remain a crucial site for scholarly analysis of judicial reportage. They provide a verifiable and enduring record of public discourse and are often regarded as agenda-setters for other media forms in Nigeria. Their editorial gatekeeping practices and structured reportage offer a stable basis for comparative analysis and textual coding. Focusing on print media, therefore, enables a systematic and historically grounded evaluation of how the judiciary is represented, while recognizing that future studies should extend this inquiry to digital and cross-platform contexts.

Coding categories—developed from relevant literature and refined through pilot testing—addressed key variables such as accuracy, balance, prominence, contextual adequacy, and interpretive depth, enabling systematic evaluation of the quality and framing of judicial reportage across the sampled print newspapers.

4.3.2 In-depth Interviews

To complement the quantitative findings, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders. Eight journalists comprising four judiciary reporters of the selected newspapers and their editors and seven key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interview. The reporters were: Mr. Lemmy Ughegbe (The Guardian), Barrister Tobi Soniyi (The Punch), Mr. Godwin Tsa (Daily Sun), and Barrister Adelanwa Bamgboye (Daily Trust). The four editors were Steve Ayorinde (The Punch), Steve Nwosu (Daily Sun), Gbolahan Gbadamosi (The Guardian), and Theophilus Abbah (Daily Trust). The seven (7) other key informants were: Justice Muhammad Lawal Uwais, former justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria and the second longest serving Chief Justice of Nigeria between 1995 and 2006; Justice George Adesola Oguntade, former justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria; Prof Awa Kalu (SAN), law scholar, politician and former Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice in Abia state; Mr Joseph Bodunrin Daudu (SAN), former President of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA); Chief Akinlolu Olujinmi (SAN), former Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice in the defunct President Olusegun Obasanjo's government; Mr Bayo Atoyebi, retired civil servant and former Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and Dr Ola Olatawura, consultant to the Supreme Court of Nigeria

The interviews elicited detailed insights into participants' perceptions of the newspapers' performance in communicating Supreme Court decisions to the public. As Wimmer and Dominick (2006) explain, the in-depth interview is a qualitative research method designed to obtain elaborate, context-rich data from a smaller but information-rich sample. Kvale (1996) similarly argues that qualitative interviews enable researchers to access participants' lived

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experiences and personal interpretations—"to unfold the meaning of people's experiences and uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (pp. 1–2).

The interviews explored themes such as media accuracy, interpretive challenges in judicial reporting, editorial decision-making, and public understanding of court judgments.

4.4 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

To ensure instrument validity, both the coding sheet and interview guide were subjected to expert review by scholars in mass communication and judicial studies for content and construct adequacy. Reliability of the content analysis was tested through intercoder checks, and agreement levels were measured using Holsti's formula (Holsti, 1969) and Scott's Pi (Scott, 1955), both of which yielded coefficients exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

In the qualitative component, credibility, dependability, and confirmability were maintained through triangulation of data sources, member checking with selected interviewees, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytic procedures and interpretive decisions.

4.5 Data Analysis Procedures

Data obtained through the content analysis were examined using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to capture patterns and relationships in the coverage of Supreme Court decisions. Descriptive statistics—such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores—were employed to summarize and interpret trends in the data, while inferential statistics were used where appropriate to test relationships among key variables. The quantitative data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), ensuring analytical precision, consistency, and replicability.

For the qualitative component, in-depth interview transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis, following the inductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved several stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading, (2) initial coding to identify meaningful textual segments, (3) organization of codes into broader categories, and (4) synthesis of related categories into overarching themes and subthemes. The emergent themes centred on stakeholders' perceptions of media accuracy, fairness, interpretive balance, and institutional challenges affecting judicial reportage.

To enhance methodological transparency and credibility, the qualitative data were managed and coded using NVivo 14 software. This facilitated systematic data organization, visualization of thematic relationships, and verification of consistency across coders. Where software access was limited, manual coding was cross-validated by multiple researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability and reduce subjectivity.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study complied fully with established ethical standards for social science research. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent. Participation was voluntary. Data were used solely for academic and scholarly purposes.

4.7 Rationale for Mixed-Methods Approach

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods provided both numerical measurement and interpretive understanding. While the content analysis quantified the extent and characteristics of media coverage, the in-depth interviews illuminated the contextual, institutional, and perceptual dynamics shaping such reportage. This mixed-methods approach thus strengthened the study's validity and offered a holistic perspective on how Nigerian newspapers mediate public understanding of Supreme Court decisions.

5. Findings

5.1 Extent of Newspaper Coverage/Volume of Coverage

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As shown in Table 1, the four newspapers collectively produced 117 reports on the six selected Supreme Court decisions. The Punch recorded the highest number of items (33), closely followed by Daily Sun (32), while The Guardian and Daily Trust each published 26 items.

Table 1: Cumulative quantity of newspaper reports on the selected SCN decisions

Genres	*The Guardian*	*The Punch*	*Daily Trust*	*Daily Sun*	Frequency	%
Main news	6	6	6	5	23	19.6
Support news	12	18	15	19	64	54.7
Analyses	0	1	0	2	3	2.5
Pictorials	8	8	5	6	27	23.0
Total	**26**	**33**	**26**	**32**	**117**	**100**

Source: Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, (2016)**.**

Support or reactionary news dominated the coverage, accounting for 54.7% of total reportage. Main news reports that directly communicated the substance of Supreme Court judgments constituted 19.6%, while pictorials and analytical pieces represented 23% and 2.5%, respectively. This distribution indicates that Nigerian newspapers placed greater emphasis on responses to judicial decisions rather than the substance of the judgments themselves.

Among individual newspapers, The Punch demonstrated the most extensive coverage, suggesting an editorial orientation toward judicial-political issues, while Daily Sun showed comparable volume but less analytical depth.

5.2 Prominence of Coverage

Prominence was assessed through report placement and size.

Table 2 shows that out of the 117 coded items, 44 (37.6%) appeared on front pages, while 73 (62.3%) were published on inside pages.

Table 2: Placement of newspaper reports on the six selected decisions of SCN

Placement	*The Guardian*	*The Punch*	*Daily Trust*	*Daily Sun*	Frequency	%
Front Page	11	11	10	12	44	37.6
Inside Page	15	22	16	20	73	62.3
Total	**26**	**33**	**26**	**32**	**117**	**100**

Source: Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, (2016)**.**

Although over one-third of the reports gained front-page attention, the predominance of inside-page placement suggests that Supreme Court coverage was not treated as lead national news across all the papers. Front-page placement tended to coincide with cases of high political sensitivity—especially the 2007 presidential election dispute—demonstrating that editorial prominence was event-driven rather than institutionally consistent.

5.3 Size of Coverage

Table 3 indicates that 84 items (71.7%) were short reports, 24 (20.5%) were medium-sized, and only 9 (7.6%) were large stories.

Table 3: Space/size of newspaper reports on the six selected SCN decisions

Space/Size	*The Guardian*	*The Punch*	*Daily Trust*	*The Sun*	Frequency	%
Short	18	21	19	26	84	71.7
Medium	6	10	4	4	24	20.5
Large	2	2	3	2	9	7.6
Total	**26**	**33**	**26**	**32**	**117**	**100**

Source: Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, (2016)**.**

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The dominance of short stories implies limited journalistic engagement with legal details or implications. This trend reflects an economy of space prioritization, possibly driven by editorial perception that legal issues are of secondary interest to the general public.

5.4 Discussion of Extent

Overall, the newspapers reported the Supreme Court's decisions to a moderate extent. Coverage intensity correlated with the political salience of the cases: the 2007 presidential election decision received the highest reportage (32.4%), followed by the tenure elongation case (28.2%) and Ladoja's impeachment case (24.7%). By contrast, purely legalistic or less politically charged cases—such as the Ibori ex-convict case (4.2%), Wamakko's election (3.4%), and the 76 oil wells dispute (6.8%)—received minimal coverage.

These results suggest that editorial decisions regarding judicial reporting in Nigeria are significantly shaped by political relevance, elite involvement, and perceived audience interest, rather than by institutional importance or constitutional significance.

5.5 Accuracy of Newspaper Coverage

Accuracy was measured using eight analytical parameters: identification of parties and panel, statement of facts and history, issues for determination, holdings and dissents, applicable statutes, votes, headline consistency, and analysis of implications.

As summarized in Table 1, The Guardian demonstrated the highest overall accuracy (76%), followed by The Punch (55.2%), Daily Trust (54.1%), and Daily Sun (44.7%).

Table 4: Cumulative data on frequency of indices of accuracy in six selected cases

Dailies	Parties and panel	Facts & History	Votes	Issues	Holding & Dissent	Statute	Impact	H/Line Analysis	Pro	%	Degree of Accuracy
The Guardian	5	4.5	5	2.5	6	2	5.5	6	36.5	76	Accurate
The Punch	3.5	3	3.5	1	4.5	0.5	4.5	6	26.5	55.2	Fairly Accurate
Daily Trust	3.5	2.5	2.5	0	4.5	2.5	4.5	6	26	54.1	Fairly Accurate
Daily Sun	3	1.5	2.5	1	4.5	0.5	3.5	5	21.5	44.7	Inaccurate
Total	**15**	**11.5**	**13.5**	**4.5**	**19.5**	**5.5**	**18**	**23**	**110.5**	**57.5**	**Fairly Accurate**

Key: Fully Captured 1 Partially Captured 0.5 Not Captured 0

Source: Ige, Adeyemi, & Abimbola, (2016).

Across individual cases, reportage accuracy was highest in the tenure elongation (72%), Ladoja (69%), and Yar'Adua (61%) decisions—all politically consequential judgments—and lowest in the Ibori case (50%), reflecting selective editorial engagement with legal complexity.

5.6 Discussion of Accuracy

The findings reveal that the Nigerian press was fairly accurate but inconsistent in the communication of Supreme Court decisions. *The Guardian* maintained relative fidelity to

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judicial content, likely reflecting its editorial tradition of serious reporting. Conversely, *Daily Sun* underperformed, suggesting a prioritization of sensational political narratives over precise legal exposition.

In several cases, newspapers distorted or omitted key judicial parameters—particularly issues for determination, ratio decidendi, and statutory foundations. This aligns with findings from comparative studies in advanced democracies (Ericson, 1977; Bowles & Bromley, 1992; Snipke, 2013), which observe that press accounts of court rulings often "muddle" or simplify complex judicial reasoning.

The implication is that Nigerian newspapers, while serving as critical intermediaries between the judiciary and the public, often deliver fragmented or superficial representations of judicial reasoning. Such reporting diminishes the public's ability to comprehend the normative and legal implications of apex court decisions.

5.7 Findings from In-Depth Interviews

A thematic analysis of interviews with 15 key informants—comprising eight journalists and editors from *The Guardian, The Punch, Daily Sun,* and *Daily Trust,* and seven informed readers including senior legal practitioners, retired justices, and scholars—revealed multiple interrelated factors shaping the reportage of Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) decisions in public-interest cases. The major influences identified were: (1) journalists' limited legal knowledge; (2) time pressure in processing voluminous judgments; and (3) restricted access to certified copies of judgments. Other factors included editorial and ownership constraints, inadequate staffing, ethical pressures, and geographical barriers.

Each of these themes reflects how structural, institutional, and individual variables collectively shape the media's social responsibility to inform the public accurately and influence public perception of the judiciary.

5.8 Inadequate Legal Knowledge among Journalists

Most respondents emphasized that limited understanding of legal concepts among journalists impedes the accuracy and interpretive depth of Supreme Court reporting. Justice Muhammadu Lawal Uwais observed that "journalists sometimes misstate the legal issues and misunderstand what the court has said," highlighting the danger of misinformation. Similarly, Dr. Ola Olatawura noted that even without formal legal education, reporters must understand "the precedents involved and the implications of the dispute for law and society."

These findings confirm the assumptions of Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that the media's duty extends beyond mere information transmission to ensuring accuracy, balance, and contextual depth. By failing to meet these standards due to inadequate legal literacy, judicial reporters compromise their social obligation to support an informed citizenry. From the perspective of Perception Theory, journalists' misinterpretations also distort how audiences perceive the judiciary's competence and fairness, thereby influencing collective trust in judicial institutions.

5.9 Time Constraints and the Volume of Supreme Court Judgments

Respondents identified time pressure as a major constraint. Lemmy Ughegbe (The Guardian) explained that Supreme Court judgments often exceed 100 pages, requiring "time and calm reflection" that newsroom deadlines rarely permit. As a result, reporters rely on excerpts or oral summaries, risking omission of crucial details.

Joseph Daudu (SAN) insisted that such shortcuts undermine the audience's ability to form a fair impression of justice being done.

This pattern extends Social Responsibility Theory by highlighting the tension between market-driven news imperatives (speed and brevity) and ethical responsibility (accuracy and completeness). The findings reveal that even when journalists intend to fulfill their civic role,

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organizational pressures distort this function. From a Perception Theory standpoint, this selective representation contributes to a public image of judicial opacity or inconsistency—an unintended consequence of structural newsroom limitations.

5.10 Limited or Delayed Access to Certified Judgments

Almost all reporters mentioned delays in obtaining certified copies of judgments. As Adelanwa Bamgboye (Daily Trust) noted, "If you want your report to be accurate, you cannot rely on the oral summary… but by the time you get the certified copy, the deadline will have passed."

This dilemma underscores the systemic disconnect between judicial bureaucracy and media operations.

These findings challenge the adequacy of Social Responsibility Theory in explaining constraints external to the media system. While the theory assumes media autonomy in fulfilling public duties, institutional bottlenecks within the judiciary limit journalists' capacity to do so. Consequently, the Perception Theory lens explains how incomplete or delayed information fosters public suspicion and weakens confidence in judicial transparency.

5.11 Limited Space and Editorial Constraints

Editors acknowledged that even when reporters filed detailed stories, much was omitted due to space and readability concerns. Daily Sun editor Steve Nwosu stated that judgments "require a lot of space to capture accurately," but newspapers "write for the average reader, not lawyers."

This structural compression often sacrifices analytical clarity for accessibility.

This outcome confirms Social Responsibility Theory's warning that media commercialization can erode informational depth. By prioritizing market readability over civic education, editors inadvertently narrow the interpretive frame through which the judiciary is understood. In terms of Perception Theory, such simplifications influence cognitive framing—making people to think that court decisions are simple or politically motivated rather than legally sophisticated.

5.12 Ownership Interest and Institutional Orientation

Several participants identified ownership influence as a subtle yet powerful determinant of coverage tone. Dr. Ola Olatawura observed that "ownership patterns in Nigerian media sometimes dictate how legal outcomes are interpreted," particularly in politically charged cases.

This reinforces critical extensions of Social Responsibility Theory, which argue that concentrated media ownership compromises editorial independence. The theory's normative ideal of "media as public trustee" is challenged when proprietorial interests dictate judicial narratives. The findings also support Perception Theory, showing how ideological bias in reporting shapes public attitudes toward the judiciary as either partisan or compromised.

5.13 Ethical Pressures and the 'Brown Envelope' Syndrome

Several informants acknowledged the persistence of unethical inducements in judicial reporting. Chief Akinlolu Olujinmi (SAN) warned that such practices "distort the sanctity of judicial communication."

From the perspective of Social Responsibility Theory, this undermines the media's credibility as a watchdog and erodes professional ethics. It also extends Perception Theory by explaining why the public often views both journalists and the judiciary as morally compromised institutions—an interlinked erosion of trust fed by unethical media practices.

5.14 Inadequate Staffing and Reporter Fatigue

Understaffing was widely reported as a chronic issue. Barrister Tobi Soniyi (The Punch) noted that "one or two reporters often cover not only the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal but

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also other levels of court," leading to shallow coverage. Joseph Daudu (SAN) added that such overstretching reinforces event-driven rather than analytical journalism.

These findings align with Social Responsibility Theory by emphasizing institutional support as a precondition for ethical journalism. Without adequate human resources, the normative ideal of socially responsible reporting becomes unattainable.

5.15 Geographical and Logistical Barriers

Geographical disparities also influenced coverage timeliness. Newspapers headquartered outside Abuja faced delays in obtaining real-time updates or certified judgments. Barrister Gbolahan Gbadamosi (The Guardian) explained that reliance on "second-hand copies of judgments" often led to inconsistencies.

This conclusion extends Perception Theory, revealing how infrastructure disparities impact the informational ecology through which audiences experience judicial transparency.

5.16 Reporter Attitude and Professional Diligence

While structural issues were dominant, some respondents attributed poor reportage to personal indifference. Justice George Oguntade observed that "some journalists exhibit intellectual laziness," whereas Lemmy Ughegbe emphasized the role of self-education in improving competence.

These insights reaffirm the individual-level assumptions of Social Responsibility Theory, which stress professional integrity and continuous learning as ethical imperatives. They also reveal how Perception Theory operates bi-directionally: public perception of journalists' competence depends on journalists' self-perception of their social mission.

5.17 Integrated Analysis

5.17.1 Extent, Prominence and Size of Coverage — Integrated Interpretation

The quantitative findings show that the four newspapers produced 117 reports on the selected Supreme Court decisions, with support or reactionary news dominating at 54.7%. Only 19.6% of stories reported the substance of judgments, while analytical pieces were extremely rare (2.5%). Most stories were also short (71.7%) and appeared on inside pages (62.3%), indicating moderate visibility but low editorial priority. The interviews reinforce these patterns. Journalists and editors confirmed that space limitations, market-driven editorial priorities, and limited legal knowledge reduce the ability to fully interpret complex judicial decisions. As one editor explained, newspapers "write for the average reader, not lawyers," which explains why reaction-driven and event-focused coverage dominates over legal analysis — consistent with Social Responsibility and Perception Theories. Thus, content analysis shows limited depth of judicial reporting, while interview findings explain why this occurs — rooted in both newsroom constraints and perceived audience interest.

5.17.2 Accuracy of Coverage — Integrated Interpretation

Content analysis indicates that accuracy across the newspapers was only fair to moderate (average 57.5%), with significant omission of judicial fundamentals such as: issues for determination, statutory basis, ratio and dissent. Accuracy was higher in politically significant cases, revealing that political salience shapes journalistic diligence.

The interview data provide insight into this selectivity:

Quantitative Pattern	Qualitative Explanation
Errors in legal issues and holdings	Reporters lack legal training and rely on oral summaries
Omission of statutory basis	Journalists face time pressure and struggle with long judgments

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Superficial framing of judgments	Editorial and ownership interests prioritize political angles
Variation by newspaper	Institutional culture and staffing differ between newsrooms

Thus, journalists' structural limitations (access delays, staffing gaps) and professional capacity issues (legal literacy, ethical pressures) directly account for the uneven accuracy observed.

5.17.3 Factors Affecting Coverage — Connected to Quantitative Results

The interviews reveal interrelated constraints that shape content and accuracy:

Factor Identified in Interviews	**How It Explains Content Analysis Outcomes**
Limited legal knowledge	Low analytical depth; reliance on support news
Time pressure	71% short stories; omission of complex legal details
Delayed access to judgments	Event-driven reports rather than institutional reporting
Editorial/ownership influence	Higher prominence only for politically charged cases
Space constraints	Few full-page/large reports; truncated legal elements
Staffing and logistics issues	Regional disparities in speed and accuracy
Ethical pressures (Brown Envelope)	Sensational bias in political matters

Through this triangulation, the qualitative voices directly illuminate the quantitative patterns — demonstrating strong methodological complementarity.

5.17.4 Synthesized Conclusion of Integrated Findings

By integrating the findings, the content analysis established that Judicial reporting in Nigeria is moderate in volume, politically selective in prominence, often brief, and only fairly accurate while the interviews reveal behind the numbers the Newsroom realities — limited legal expertise, commercial pressures, difficulty accessing judgments which produced the superficial patterns in coverage.

What this means theoretically is that Social Responsibility Theory is challenged by commercial and institutional constraints while Perception Theory explains how shallow legal reporting shapes (and sometimes mis-shapes) public understanding of the judiciary.

In sum, newspapers serve as key intermediaries between the Supreme Court and the public, but structural and professional barriers result in fragmented and politically skewed knowledge of judicial decisions.

5.18 Summary and Theoretical Synthesis

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the quality of Supreme Court reportage in Nigeria is shaped by a complex interplay of individual competencies, institutional limitations, and systemic pressures.

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In linking back to theory, Social Responsibility Theory is confirmed but problematized. This is so because while journalists and editors recognize their civic role, structural constraints—economic, editorial, and institutional—hinder full realization of responsible reporting. Perception Theory is, however, extended: media representations not only shape public perception of the judiciary but are themselves shaped by journalists' perceptions of institutional access, ownership control, and professional ethics.

As Justice Uwais aptly summarized, "accurate reporting of judicial decisions requires not just skill, but institutional commitment to fairness and understanding." The findings thus suggest that improving the accuracy and credibility of judicial reporting in Nigeria demands multidimensional reforms—enhanced legal literacy for journalists, better institutional coordination between courts and media, and stronger ethical oversight in newsrooms.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is limited in several important respects that should guide the interpretation and generalization of its findings. First, the sampling frame was restricted to four national newspapers—*The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *Daily Sun*, and *Daily Trust*—thereby excluding broadcast, online, and regional media that may frame judicial decisions differently. Consequently, the findings reflect only the print media landscape and may not capture the broader dynamics of contemporary multimodal news consumption. Second, the focus on six Supreme Court decisions, while enabling in-depth analysis, constrains temporal generalizability; coverage patterns may vary across different judicial periods or under shifting political climates. Third, the qualitative interviews, though rich and diverse, involved a limited number of respondents, which may not fully represent all stakeholder perspectives within Nigeria's complex media–judiciary ecosystem.

Future research should therefore adopt a comparative, longitudinal, and cross-platform approach—integrating broadcast, digital, and social media analyses— incorporating evaluations of broadcast, digital, and social media—to evaluate the emerging patterns in judicial communication. Using computational or mixed-methods approaches, like automated content analysis or sentiment mapping, could help make the results more reliable and easier to apply to more people. Lastly, cross-national research in African democracies would enhance theoretical understanding of how local settings influence the universal principles of media duty and public perception in judicial reporting.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the extent and accuracy of Nigerian newspaper coverage of selected Supreme Court of Nigeria (SCN) decisions and examined stakeholders' perceptions of that reportage. Findings from the content analysis revealed that newspapers gave moderate attention to judicial decisions but exhibited varying levels of factual precision and analytical depth. The Guardian demonstrated greater accuracy and contextual richness, while Daily Sun and Daily Trust frequently truncated legal reasoning, omitted dissenting opinions, or misinterpreted verdicts.

Qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with fifteen key stakeholders—including senior editors, legal correspondents, jurists, and legal practitioners—further clarified the systemic and professional factors underpinning these trends. Respondents identified limited legal literacy among journalists, editorial space constraints, ownership interference, weak ethical regulation, and inadequate institutional support as major impediments to accuracy and depth in judicial reporting. They also observed that sensational or politically driven frames often overshadowed sophisticated legal interpretation, thereby distorting public understanding of the judiciary's work.

Together, these findings highlight a persistent tension between the complexity of judicial communication and the simplifying imperatives of journalism. As scholars such as Oso and Pate (2019) and Akinfeleye (2011) have argued, the quality of media reportage of judicial processes bears directly on public confidence in the justice system and, by extension, on democratic accountability. Thus, improving the accuracy and contextual integrity of Supreme Court reporting is not merely a professional concern—it is a democratic imperative.

7.1 Policy Implications

The outcomes of this study have important implications for media policy, judicial communication, and governance.

7.1.1 Institutionalized Legal Reporting Training:

Journalism training institutions, professional bodies, and media organizations should embed judicial reporting and media law modules in their curricula and professional certification programs. Targeted workshops, co-sponsored by the National Judicial Council (NJC) and press associations, would enhance journalists' capacity to interpret and translate complex legal reasoning for the public (Ojebode, 2017).

7.1.2 Judiciary–Media Communication Interface:

The Supreme Court and NJC should establish a Judicial Media Communication Desk to issue plain-language summaries of key judgments and clarifications of legal terms. Such an initiative would align with global best practices in judicial transparency (Davis & Harlow, 2020) and mitigate misreporting arising from interpretive errors.

7.1.3 Ethical and Editorial Oversight:

Media houses should strengthen internal gatekeeping mechanisms, adopt explicit editorial guidelines for court reporting, and enforce verification standards before publication. A functional, independent media ombudsman or press council could help institutionalize accountability and deter unethical practices such as the "brown envelope" syndrome (Akinfeleye, 2011).

7.1.4 Ownership and Structural Reform:

To reduce proprietorial interference and political bias, Nigerian media regulators should enforce transparency in ownership structures and promote editorial independence. As McQuail (2010) notes, the credibility of public communication systems depends largely on institutional autonomy and ethical integrity.

By implementing these reforms, both the judiciary and the media can strengthen the ecosystem of public accountability and enhance citizens' informed engagement with judicial outcomes.

8. Future Research Directions

The present study opens several avenues for further scholarly exploration:

8.1 Comparative and Longitudinal Analyses:

Future research could examine coverage of judicial decisions across lower courts or over extended periods to identify evolving patterns of accuracy and agenda emphasis.

8.2 Cross-Media and Digital Platforms:

Given the ascendancy of online and social media, studies should explore how digital journalism and citizen reporting shape the public interpretation of judicial decisions in Nigeria and comparable democracies (Tettey, 2018).

8.3 Audience Reception Studies:

Further inquiry into how citizens perceive, evaluate, and trust media reports of Supreme Court decisions would help assess the democratic implications of current reportage patterns.

8.4 Cross-National Comparisons:

Comparative studies of judicial reporting in other African common-law jurisdictions could illuminate contextual differences in media–judiciary relations and identify transferable best practices for legal communication.

By extending research in these directions, scholars can deepen understanding of how the media mediate the judiciary's role in democratic consolidation and how improved communication strategies may foster greater judicial transparency and legitimacy.

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