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# REPORTING THE PARLIAMENT:

## a Nigerian case study



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ORCID: 0000-0002-8801-1809

DOI: 10.25200/BJR.v18n2.2022.1478

Received in: October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Desk Reviewed: October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Desk Review Editor: Nélia Del Bianco

Revised on: March 07<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Revised on: April 08<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Approved on: April 08<sup>th</sup>, 2022

**ABSTRACT** – The study investigated, using content analysis, the patterns of reportage of Nigeria's Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly by Comfort 95.1 FM, Planet 101.5 FM, and Inspiration 105.9 FM between 2018 and 2019. Results showed similarities/divergences in the news coverage and reportage approach of the stations. Budget/bills/public hearings and motions dominated the news focus. Critical analysis in reportage of the House was almost non-existent. No clear case of media agenda-setting was established, as there was little or zero influence the media had on directing the course of the Assembly. Rather, the media's focus was determined by the steps of the lawmakers. It was recommended that a weekly magazine program dedicated to the activities of the Assembly be adopted by each radio station. This would help incorporate information that a timed-news bulletin cannot accommodate and fan the flame of investigative journalism and critical analysis of the activities of the Assembly.

**Key words:** Media coverage. Parliamentary reporting. Legislature. Agenda setting. Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly.

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## REPORTANDO O PARLAMENTO: um estudo de caso nigeriano

**RESUMO** – O estudo investigou, por meio da análise de conteúdo, os padrões de reportagem da Assembleia Estadual Akwa Ibom da Nigéria por Comfort 95.1 FM, Planet 101.5 FM e Inspiration 105.9 FM, entre 2018 e 2019. Os resultados mostraram semelhanças/divergências na cobertura jornalística e na abordagem da reportagem das estações. Orçamento/projetos/audiências públicas e moções dominaram o foco das notícias. A análise crítica na reportagem da Câmara foi quase inexistente. Não foi estabelecido nenhum caso claro de definição da agenda da mídia, pois havia pouca ou nenhuma influência da mídia na direção do curso da Assembleia. Em vez disso, o foco da mídia foi determinado pelos passos dos legisladores. Foi recomendado que cada estação de rádio adotasse um programa de revista semanal dedicado às atividades da Assembleia. Isso ajudaria a incorporar informações que um boletim de notícias cronometrado não pode acomodar e atizar a chama do jornalismo investigativo e da análise crítica das atividades da Assembleia.

**Palavras-chave:** Cobertura da mídia. Reportagem parlamentar. Legislatura. Definição da agenda. Assembleia do Estado de Akwa Ibom.

## INFORME AL PARLAMENTO: un estudio de caso de Nigeria

**RESUMEN** – El estudio investigó, mediante análisis de contenido, los patrones de reportaje de la Asamblea Estatal de Akwa Ibom de Nigeria por parte de Comfort 95.1 FM, Planet 101.5 FM e Inspiration 105.9 FM entre 2018 y 2019. Los resultados mostraron similitudes/divergencias en la cobertura de noticias y el enfoque de reportaje de las estaciones. Presupuesto/proyectos de ley/audiencias públicas y mociones dominaron el foco de las noticias. El análisis crítico en el reportaje de la Cámara era casi inexistente. No se estableció un caso claro de establecimiento de la agenda de los medios, ya que hubo poca o ninguna influencia de los medios en la dirección del curso de la Asamblea. Más bien, el enfoque de los medios estuvo determinado por los pasos de los legisladores. Se recomendó que cada emisora de radio adoptara un programa semanal dedicado a las actividades de la Asamblea. Esto ayudaría a incorporar información que un noticiero programado no puede acomodar y avivaría la llama del periodismo de investigación y el análisis crítico de las actividades de la Asamblea.

**Palabras clave:** Cobertura mediática. Informes parlamentarios. Legislatura. Establecimiento de agenda. Asamblea estatal de Akwa Ibom.

### 1 Introduction/Rationale for the study

Journalism has over the years taken on different definitions by scholars, practitioners, and even the public. These definitions vary based on the point of view and experience that shape them. According to Udoakah (2017, p. 24), “journalism is the totality of efforts at gathering, processing, evaluating and disseminating facts about current events, ideas and occurrences under the guidance of editors or producers, through the media of mass communication”.

Journalism involves gathering, analyzing, verifying, and serving the public with news and current events of relevance, especially through the conduits of mass communication. It makes enormous demands on journalists and their media organizations, and practitioners view it as a public trust.

Good journalism consists of an intelligent assembly of relevant facts, which is the most important responsibility of the reporter. And this entails reporting the what, who, where, when, why, and how of any event or person considered newsworthy by the reporter. To achieve this task, the reporter needs the special skill of “nosing for news”. This, MacDougall (1977, p. 9) describes as “the ability to recognise the news possibilities of an item of information” and chase hard after it. Journalists may work for newspapers, magazines, television or radio stations, as well as online sites. However, for this paper, we shall refer to only those who work in radio stations. And journalistic write-ups come in different forms such as breaking news, investigative stories, commentaries, and side-bars. Radio, like other mass communication media, has the key role of being the “watchdog” of society as it is part of the Fourth Estate of the realm. Radio has over the years proven to be the fastest means of mass communication and since the advent of private-owned radio stations in Nigeria, the medium has reached out to more people, meeting their needs in diverse ways.

The modern art of reporting has constricted the areas of reporters’ specialization. Some reporters have been assigned to report crime or security, court, legislature, industries, sports, labor, entertainment, business, and even religious activities. Each of these specialized areas called “beats” has unique languages, slang, and terms, which help carry the right message to the listener. One of such beats is the legislature, which is the focus of the study.

The Legislature is the deliberative assembly and law-making body of a country or state. It may be unicameral (having a single legislative chamber), or bicameral (a two-chamber House). Irrespective of the type of legislature, its powers range from the passing of laws to redressing constituents’ grievances, approving the government’s annual budget, confirming executive appointments, ratifying treaties, investigating the executive arm of government, and even removing members of the executive and judiciary from office (Appadorai, 1975; Nnoli, 1986; Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999; Nwaozuzu et al., 2000; Nyong, 2008).

Members of the legislature, who are generally referred to as lawmakers or legislators, may be appointed or assume their seats through direct or indirect election by the people they wish to represent. In this case, the legislature is the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, south-south Nigeria. The first Assembly was inaugurated on January 20, 1992, following an Executive Proclamation by the then Governor Obong Akpan Isemin in Nigeria's third republic. Between 1992 and the time of the study, the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly has had twelve Speakers, with Honourable Jimmy Ntuen as its first. Within the same period, the House has had seven Assemblies.

In a lecture to mark the Assembly's 25th anniversary, Senator Effiong Bob noted that: "It is an indisputable fact that you cannot have democracy without the legislature because the legislature is the engine room of democracy (...) the legislature is without any argument, the only institution that represents the people in any democracy. It is the tonic that gives life to democracy" (Bob, 2017, p. 2). The statement underscores the importance of the legislature as an arm of government, which the searchlight of the journalist beams on, in a bid to ensure and maintain accountability and transparency as well as to strengthen democracy.

As Eggington (2018) has pointed out, legislative reporting demands sufficient depth of background knowledge from the reporter to be able to make sense of proceedings. In other words, a parliamentary reporter or correspondent is expected to provide adequate context and analysis as well as put developments into perspective. This is a relevant part of news reporting called interpretative journalism (Ohaja, 2005; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Through their coverage, they should set the agenda for debates in the parliament and draw lawmakers' attention to issues of public concern. As research evidence has shown, media influence the parliamentary agenda. For instance, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) found that media coverage for an issue results in subsequent issue adoption by parliament. Other studies using surveys have reported that MPs agree that the media are important agenda-setters of their daily parliamentary business (Walgrave, 2008; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Midtbø et al., 2014). This is hinged on the fact that the media are an important source of information not only for the political elites but also for society at large. Even though the media are not the only source of information, they are nonetheless regarded as credible in most societies and are the channels for gauging public opinion

(Herbst, 1998), purveyors of societal problems and possible solutions (Wolfe et al., 2013; Vliegenthart et al., 2013), inter alia. Media coverage of an issue can be a measure of issue salience in society (Wolfe, 2012) – and this is particularly important for parliamentarians as representatives of the people.

Media political agenda-setting research dominates the corpus of literature on studies focusing on the media and the parliament in several Western societies, and a large number of these studies employed survey and content analysis of newspapers and public documents as data sources (Walgrave, 2008; Walgrave et al. 2008; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Midtbø et al., 2014; Melenhorst, 2015; Sevenans et al., 2015; Vliegenthart, et al., 2016). Little attention has been paid to dominant issues in media coverage of the parliaments on the African continent (Dzisah, 2016; Akinwalere, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, none of the few available studies on the continent has investigated how the radio, a pervasive medium on the continent, has covered any African parliament, let alone a state Legislature.

The study, therefore, sheds empirical light on how the Legislature is covered in Nigeria, with attention to the dominant issues in news coverage. The focus is on the radio coverage of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. The State has grown in prominence over the years as a major center of oil production in Nigeria, and her Legislature has enjoyed relative peace and stability, allowing it to concentrate on its core mandate of law-making, because of a one-party dominance of the 26-member Assembly. Besides, the willingness of the radio stations to make available hard copies of their evening news bulletins to the researchers played a further role in deciding the study's focus. It is against this backdrop that the study analyzes the patterns of reportage of the House between 2018 and 2019 by three Uyo<sup>1</sup>-based FM radio stations. The stations are Comfort 95.1 FM, Planet 101.9 FM, and Inspiration 105.9 FM.

## **2 Research questions**

The following are the research questions the study addressed:

1. What are the dominant themes in the news coverage of the three radio stations?

2. What is the house style of Comfort, Planet, and Inspiration FMs in reporting the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly? Are there similarities or divergences in reportorial styles among the three stations?
3. How promptly was news about the Assembly aired by the three radio stations? How deep were stories on state budget presentation, consideration, and passage by the Assembly?
4. Were resolutions and laws made by the House analyzed by the radio stations? Was there any clear case of media agenda-setting (providing direction for the Assembly)?
5. Were sound bites used in reports? If so, how regularly and with what degree of clarity?
6. Were journalistic values of objectivity, accuracy, and clarity adhered to by the radio stations in reporting the Assembly?

### **3 Parliamentary reporting**

Parliamentary reporting refers to the media reportage of the activities of the parliament. These activities range from plenary sessions to committee engagements and even oversight visits to Ministries, Departments, and Agencies of government. Parliamentary reporting is considered an off-shoot of political journalism (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2018). It comprises the writing of straight reports on parliamentary debates, as well as critical analysis of the outcomes of such debates. And this can have a profound effect on citizens' understanding of the parliament and by extension their political attitudes, opinions, and behavior towards the parliament and parliamentarians.

Reporting legislature is considered a highly tasking job. This informs the decision by media houses to assign only experienced reporters to cover such a beat. However, a reporter experienced in another beat is green in legislative reportage matters. Therefore, he or she would need to learn the ropes, especially the lingo of the beat. To cover the parliament effectively requires not only a thorough understanding of parliamentary procedures and Standing Orders but also good writing and researching skills.

In covering the parliament, several styles of reporting could be adopted, ranging from straight news format to feature stories, interviews, and even live coverage of matters of critical state importance<sup>2</sup>. In broadcast news, for instance, it is important to play up the most important aspect of the issue early in the story due to time constraints, while maintaining the conversational style of storytelling, since one is writing for largely an audio or audio-visual medium. However, because legislative proceedings are often technical, an interpretative style is required in the print media, even though some legislative stories can be told in a straight news pattern.

An interpretative reporter is aware of the fact that a news item (emanating from the House) is not an isolated incident, but has an inevitable link to a chain of important events (MacDougall, 1977). The legislative reporter should put more effort into news interpretation (where necessary). This is described as the news behind the news. Due to the ever-growing complexity and intellectual advancement of our world, the public's news taste has moved from consuming the conventional straight or descriptive news story to that which breathes life into the story, especially in covering the Legislature. For this reason, the reporter is expected to interpret facts, analyze issues, explain actions and inactions (often through experts in the field), as well as make comparisons. Yet the reporter is still expected to maintain fairness and detached reporting. All these task the reporter covering the Legislature.

The functions of the media, according to one of the early communication researchers, Lasswell (1948), are surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of society in response to that environment, and transmission of the cultural heritage from one generation to the next. All of this provides the rationale for covering the Legislature. By surveillance, the media monitor the excesses of legislators, minimize abuse of power, and by asking questions, they make legislators account for the exercise of their public trust. Again, by creating awareness about the activities of parliament, the media can build an informed citizenry required for democracy to thrive, since citizens are empowered with information to hold their representatives in check. Similarly, the media are able to stimulate lively debates on policies and other issues through critical reporting of the parliament.

In recognition of these functions and their impact on society, the reporter is tasked with providing news that is relevant, useful, and

of interest to the people. How can a reporter achieve this? There are certain traditional elements that the news story must possess. They are impact, conflict, novelty, prominence, proximity, and timeliness. But engagement and solutions have been added to the criteria for assessing news value (Brooks et al., 2014).

Engagement, according to Brooks et al. (2014), speaks of members of the public reacting or responding to the news, offering correction and criticism. In recent times, the reporter's job does not simply end with stating the facts of events or problems; it extends to offering solutions to such issues in society through experts in those fields. These solutions and engagements bridge the gap between proposed or already effected government policies and the people (how these policies affect the people and ways to improve on them).

In making this happen, parliamentary reporters have a huge burden on their shoulders. They are expected to report the activities of the lawmakers, especially on the floor of the House; explain how these would affect the lives of the people; get the pulse of the people on proposed laws and finally report the same to the lawmakers. Some studies have shown that the media can set the agenda for the Parliament (see, for example, Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; Walgrave, 2008; Midtbø et al., 2014; Vliegthart et al., 2016). Parliamentarians and their constituencies rely on the media for information. The media thus provide the coupling link that holds society together.

It is expected that parliamentary reporters must walk the path of self-improvement daily because the legislature is a dynamic beat requiring persons with an active and self-motivated reportage style. Such styles would include the use of more voice-pieces and wraps than straight news style in presenting the news. Doing so would help breathe life into each story and remove the dull reportorial style employed by some broadcast media. Shying away from controversies in the legislature during plenary sessions or banter during committee engagements is unhealthy for effective reporting of the parliament.

The ability of the parliamentary reporter to cover the beat effectively can be affected by their educational background, remunerations at work, continuous training to keep up with the times, welfare packages available, and assigned job specifications by their media organization, among others. A parliamentary reporter interviewed (cited with a pseudo name) complained of multi-tasking (playing different roles in the organization). As the reporter pointed out:



Private radio stations are out to make money and minimize costs. This leads to multi-tasking. For instance, I was the House Reporter, Editor-On-Desk, and Business Newscaster... These roles could have a clash of interest and be exhausting, thereby making me lose focus sometimes. There were days I had to quickly finish editing the news bulletin and then run to the House to catch up with plenary or committee engagement, or even vice versa. (Jerry Jack, personal communication, February 10, 2022).

This indeed can affect the reporter's ability to deliver on the job. Besides, recognizing that legislative reporters chase only news items, events, or sources they are aware of, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with the Chief Press Secretary; Chairman, Committee on Information; lawmakers and their media aides; the Information Unit; Clerks of the House who are attached to Committees; Technical Unit of the Assembly and even colleagues who cover the parliament should be prioritized by journalists. This is because these are the major players in the information business of the parliament. Connecting to these individuals would aid the job of the parliamentary reporter in obtaining information for news reports. It needs to be emphasized that reports should reflect ethical values of journalism such as truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability.

#### **4 Theoretical framework**

##### **Agenda-setting theory**

Empirical evidence shows that the media set and influence policy agendas (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Soroka, 2002; Tan & Weaver, 2009) by shifting policy makers' attention to policy problems or a solution (Wolfe et al., 2013). The media, therefore, constitute the most important political agenda-setters in open societies (Lengauer et al., 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2008).

Agenda-setting research points to the fact that media coverage calls policy attention to public problems and engenders a sense of urgency to find solutions (Yanovitzkt, 2002). In law-making in particular, it is a fact that media focus can influence political debates and the resulting legislation. Media attention to a bill may influence the legislature's handling of such a bill. It indeed can fast-track the process of passing a bill into law (Wolfe, 2012). The media

can structure legislative debates, by pointing the Legislature to what society considers important at a given time. Through parliamentary coverage, the media serve as a link between lawmakers and their constituencies on the one hand, and between lawmakers and the other arms of government on the other.

Generally, media parliamentary reportage keeps society informed about the substance of parliamentary activities and serves as a source of information for the parliament (Sethi, 1980; Melenhorst, 2015). How the media's information role is carried out has serious implications for a nation's democracy and society as a whole.

In the present study, did the media reportage patterns incorporate critical analysis to build a mass of citizenry adequately informed about bills, motions, and resolutions of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly? Were the media mere professional observers, rehashing parliamentary proceedings in their coverage? Or was there a clear case of media agenda-setting?

## 5 Research design

Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was applied in studying news reports aired in the evening bulletins of Comfort, Inspiration, and Planet FM concerning the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly between January 2018 and December 2019. The period was carefully selected due to the transition from the sixth to the seventh Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. This period is always characterized by a flurry of activities in the Assembly and reporters have their hands full with reporting the Assembly.

The researchers focused on the evening bulletin due to the freshness of news stories placed in that package. Usually, at 5 p.m. (Nigerian time) most news events have been rounded off for the day, allowing reporters to return to the office and file their stories before the evening bulletin. The evening bulletin for Comfort FM is aired at 6:30 p.m. daily, while that of Inspiration FM and Planet FM is aired at 6 p.m.

Between January 2018 and December 2019, two thousand, one hundred and ninety-three evening bulletins were aired on all three radio stations. This is as both 2018 and 2019, which are non-leap years, had three hundred and sixty-five days each. Out of that number, each radio station aired seven hundred and thirty evening bulletins within the period under study. Ten percent of the total population

was selected and this amounted to two hundred and nineteen news bulletins. The bulletins that contained news about the Assembly were isolated and arranged by date, and every third bulletin of each radio station was selected. The random sampling technique was adopted in selecting fifty news bulletins of each radio station that contains news about the Assembly. These stories that focused on the activities of the House constituted the unit of analysis. In the end, a total of one hundred and fifty news bulletins were studied in the two years covered by the study. The sampling processes ensured the selection of representative samples and made possible the generalization of the findings.

The selected stories were manually coded for the following content categories: dominant themes, house style, promptness of news reports, depth of analysis and critical reporting, use of sound bites, and adherence to journalistic values of objectivity, accuracy, and fairness<sup>3</sup>. Even though laborious and time-consuming, our approach is considered more rewarding than a computerized content analysis program that could omit or fail to capture a large number of distinct and potentially vital elements contained in the bulletins. To establish the intercoder reliability, 10% of coded items were tested using the Cohen kappa, and our result gave 0.86. This is considered acceptable in content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). Descriptive statistical analysis of the results was carried out to establish frequencies, where applicable, while explanation building was applied to analyze data qualitatively. This entailed offering robust explanations to substantiate a given result (Yin, 2009).

## 6 Results and discussion

We return to the research questions earlier stated for proper analysis and discussion of findings.

RQ1: What are the dominant themes in the news coverage of the three radio stations?

Table 1 shows themes that dominated the news reports of the three radio stations between January 2018 and December 2019. From table 1, 21.25% of news stories from the three radio stations focused on the State Annual Budget. These stories included the presentation of the budgets, reading on the floor of the House, and Committee engagement on the budget and passage.

The predominance of stories about budget presentation and passage may reflect the core mandate of government which is the provision of social welfare for the citizens. The government's capacity to meet these needs is dependent, to a large extent, on available resources, which annual budgets of states tend to show. Covering government budget presentations and the media analyses that follow help citizens make sense of these humongous figures and how they affect their lives. This theme was closely followed by Bill Passage/ Public Hearings and Motions which had a total of 18.75%.

**Table 1**  
*Dominant themes in news items*

Radio Station	Sack/ Inauguration Of Lawmakers	Breaking News	Committee Oversight	LG Chairman Suspension	Nominees Approval	Other Bills/ Motions	Budget	Empowerment Programs	Legislative Autonomy	Total
	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N (%)
Comfort FM	18(36)	28(40)	35(38.9)	47(42.7)	50(38.4)	79(52.7)	80(47)	20(100)	4(40)	349(43.6)
Planet FM	15 (30)	23(32.9)	22 (24.4)	23 (20.9)	33(25.3)	-	30 (17.7)	-	2 (20)	232 (29)
Inspiration FM	17 (34)	19(27.1)	33 (36.7)	40 (36.4)	47(36.1)	71 (47.3)	60 (35.3)	-	4 (40)	219(27.4)
	50 (6.3)	70(8.5)	90(11.25)	110(13.75)	130(16.25)	150 (18.75)	170(21.25)	20 (2.5)	10(1.25)	800 (100)

Approval of Executive Nominees was the next with 16.25%. These stories consisted of reading of the Governor's message to the House requesting its approval of the nominees, screening, ratification, the Speaker's charge to them, appreciation to the Governor by lawmakers whose constituents were selected, and others. Suspension of Local Government Council Chairman made up 13.75% of the stories. This was so because the House of Assembly is empowered by law to exercise oversight on the Local Governments. It has the powers to receive petitions on such government officials, investigate allegations and order punitive measures on them if found guilty. House Committees on various sectors have the powers to oversee the actions of State Government Ministries, Departments, and Agencies. These formed 11.25% of news stories about the House.

A total of 8.75% of reports about the House appeared as breaking news, with Comfort FM leading with 28 of such reports. Summed up, 6.3% of stories from the three stations centered on the inauguration and sack of state lawmakers. The least of the news themes were Empowerment Programmes<sup>4</sup> of lawmakers, which had

2.5% (all from Comfort FM); followed by Legislative Autonomy with 1.5% from all three radio stations studied.

RQ2: What is the house style of Comfort, Planet, and Inspiration FMs in reporting the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly? Are there similarities or divergences in reportorial styles among the three stations?

House style denotes writing and editing conventions adopted by a particular media organization to ensure consistency in writing and preference. Sometimes compiled as style sheets or stylebooks, it provides rules on the use of titles, capital letters, spellings, quotes, italics, date formats, abbreviations, numbers, etc. First, we examine Comfort FM's house style as it relates to covering the House.

### **6.1 Comfort FM's house style**

A look into the news content of Comfort FM on the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly showed that well-known abbreviations were used immediately after a full name is stated. An example is Ministries, Departments, Agencies, and MDAs. Upper cases were rarely used, except for cases of acronyms. Similarly, the first letters of the name of the legislature, place, or an individual's name were capitalized, e.g., "Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly", "Oruk Anam".

Numerals were written in words and not in figures, as in the case of budget estimates. Dates were used in the Month/Date/Year format, e.g., January 1, 2020. For instance, in the December 5, 2019 evening bulletin of the station. Spellings of some names appeared inconsistent. A typical example is the name of the House Speaker, which is Aniekan Basse. In the news item of May 12, 2019, the station wrote it as "Aneikan Bassey." Conventionally, a state lawmaker is addressed as "Honourable" as a first-timer and "Right Honourable" as a second-timer or Speaker. But Comfort FM did not use any of such, as lawmakers were referred to simply by their names or professional titles, such as Barrister or Dr. It also did not use "Mr." or "Mrs." as advanced by Fang (1991, p. 26): "The modern style does not include using Mrs., Miss, or Ms. The first identification gives the person's title, if any, and first and last names...."

## 6.2 Planet FM's house style

Except for cases of acronyms, the name of the legislator, or a place, the station scarcely used upper cases. Abbreviations were not used consistently, as MDAs were written on some occasions without the full meaning preceding it. However, acronyms of political parties were stated just after the full name.

Numerals, particularly budget estimates, were left in figures. An example is seen in the December 6, 2019 story about the House of Assembly, where the station gave the total revised 2020 budget outlay as N597.735 billion; made up of N111.250 billion for Recurrent Expenditure, N369.577 billion for Capital Expenditure, and N116.934 billion for Consolidated Revenue Fund Charges.

Dates were written in the Date/Month/Year format, e.g., 1st January 2020; as was the case in the December 6, 2019 bulletin. Spellings of names appeared consistent. As against conventional terms of address, members of the state legislature were referred to as Mr. and Mrs. However, professional titles, such as Barrister or Dr were used before the names of the lawmakers where applicable.

## 6.3 Inspiration FM's house style

In sharp contrast to the house styles of Comfort and Planet FMs, Inspiration FM used upper cases for names of individuals, including lawmakers, for emphasis. Similarly, acronyms were rendered in upper cases. Acronyms were consistently placed in brackets.

Numerals were written in figures, as against words, particularly in the case of budget estimates. The station also used the Day/Month/Year format. An example is seen in a June 7, 2018 news item where "7th day of June, 2018" was used.

There were inconsistencies in the use of titles and spelling of names of people and places. For instance, Mr., Mrs., Barrister, Dr., and Elder preceded the names of lawmakers on some occasions, while they were absent at other times. This is in breach of any known house-style rule. Consistency is the rule. Ekwelie (2005, p. 8) cautions the media not to "take liberties with names and titles".

In recognition of the acceptable radio news writing style as stated by Fang (1991), all three radio stations used simple choice of words and short sentences. Attribution always preceded statements

giving room for the source to be identified at the beginning of the sentence. The length of stories did not exceed five paragraphs, except in peculiar cases. The inverted pyramid style of writing was dominantly adopted across the board.

RQ3: How promptly was news about the Assembly aired by the three radio stations? How deep were stories on state budget presentation, consideration, and passage by the Assembly?

Results of our content analysis showed that news about the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly was reported by the three stations on the same day it took place. This was particularly the case with proceedings of plenary sessions and engagements of the House Committees. However, the empowerment programs of the lawmakers were not reported on the same day they happened. The stations regarded them as commercial news, for which payment should be made before they can be aired. In some cases, breaking news was taken, with details aired in subsequent bulletins.

The three FM stations prioritized news items on the budget – from the presentation stage to the committee stage, budget defense, and budget passage. Comfort FM and Inspiration FM did break the news of the budget presentation and passage. The Akwa Ibom State Governor is mandated by law to present, in person, the annual budgetary estimates (in the form of an Appropriation Bill) to the House of Assembly, for consideration and approval. Usually, this is done before the end of a current fiscal year. After this, the Appropriation Bill is sent to House Committee on Finance and Appropriation for necessary legislative action. One of such actions is the defense of the budget by Ministries, Departments, and Agencies of government.

Budget presentation news reports featured the Governor's speech and the reaction of the Speaker of the House of Assembly to the speech. Again, analysis of the budget estimates was loosely done, as a breakdown of proposed allocations was allegedly inaccessible to journalists<sup>5</sup>. The three radio stations gave considerable coverage of the budget defense by Ministries, Departments, and Agencies before the House Committee on Appropriations and Finance, as well as the passage of the amended budget. In sum, priority was placed on stories from the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly.

RQ4: Were resolutions and laws made by the House analyzed by the radio stations? Was there any clear case of media agenda-setting (providing direction for the Assembly)?

Legislative discontinuity is practiced in the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. This means that pending bills from the previous Assembly die with the commencement of a new one and the legislative process begins afresh for such bills that did not complete the full legislative cycle.

The cycle consists of:

A. First reading: the bill title and sponsor are simply read out by the Clerk of the House.

B. Second reading: at this stage, lawmakers are allowed to debate the bill's provisions after the lead sponsor of the bill explains its general principles. This involves what the bill seeks to address and its benefits to Akwa Ibom State if passed. The bill receives a "for or against" voice vote from the lawmakers and is referred to the relevant House Committee to ensure a public hearing is carried out, as part of efforts to gather contributions from stakeholders.

C. Third reading: lawmakers vote for or against the passage of the bill after a report of the House Committee on the bill is presented, considered, amended, and adopted. At this point, the bill is passed into law and a clean copy is sent to the Governor for assent.

Legislative reporting does not only consist of reporting an event, it should provide an informed analysis of parliamentary debates. Analysis of parliamentary debates throws relevance on the decisions and actions taken by the lawmakers and how they affect the lives of members of the public. Since legislative processes are often lengthy and technical, it behooves the reporter to summarize the outcome in a logical manner, without losing facts in the process.

Since a journalist can never know it all about matters which come up for legislative debate, there is room for consultation (in the form of interviews) with professionals and experts about proposed matters for debate in the legislature. In the past, certain proposed bills in the Nigerian Senate and House of Representatives have either died completely or controversial provisions expunged, after second reading following media opposition or analysis (in the media) of the contents of the bill by experts<sup>6</sup>. Results of the content analysis of news items from the three radio stations on the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly show little or no critical analysis of bills.

The activities of lawmakers of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly decided the wave and turn of each news story. This means that the media's focus was decided by the steps of the lawmakers and there was little or zero influence the media had on directing the



course of the Assembly. There was no clear case of media agenda setting. This is in contrast to Melenhorst (2015) who through an in-depth analysis showed that media attention played a role in various respects from bill to law, leading to the regulation of the remuneration of senior officials in the semi-public sector in the Netherlands.

Reports on bills under consideration in the House did not reflect the opinions of relevant professionals, except for those gathered at public hearings. In general, news reports on the House were presented in a straight news manner, almost completely devoid of analysis. Results seem to suggest that journalists covering the Assembly were mere professional observers, regurgitating the daily proceedings of the Assembly in their reports.

Retrieval of draft copies is necessary for good media attention on a bill by the legislative reporter. Such documents were hardly at the ready disposal of journalists covering the House, as they are most times allegedly hoarded from their reach<sup>7</sup>. Motions brought before the House shared a similar fate of poor media attention, as they were only carried in reports of the three radio stations during the presentation by lawmakers. Assembly correspondents failed to go a step further to cross-check if indeed the resolutions of the House were obeyed by authorities or individuals concerned.

RQ5: Were sound bites used in reports? If so, how regular and with what degree of clarity?

Just like television employs visuals in news reports, radio uses sound bites. Short sound bites cut from a longer interview or recording and used in a bulletin are called clips or cuts. These audios could either serve as an explanation to the news item, as an authentication of the report or even as a break for the newscasters to catch their breath while reading the news.

Chantler and Stewart (2009) state that good sound bites have a proper start and finish in order to make enough sense and add flavor to the story. According to them, different radio stations apply different rules to the duration of sound bites. BBC stations accept a maximum of 25 seconds. Legislative news reports tend to be “straight read”, leaving the reporter in constant search of how to breathe life into the news. Among such solutions are “voice-piece” or “voicer” and “wraps” or “packages.”

A voice-piece contains only the voice of the reporter and it is used when there is too much information that the allotted time cannot accommodate, or when a big story breaks. Conventionally, it

does not exceed 30 seconds. Wraps, on the other hand, consist of at least a cut of ten seconds accompanying 20 seconds of the reporter's voice, making it thirty seconds. It could also be delivered for three minutes or more for use in a news program. Such an arrangement is best in allowing both sides of a conflict to state their position on the matter.

The three FM stations used sound bites of varying durations in their reports on the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly between January 2018 and December 2019. For Comfort FM, sound bites and wraps, not exceeding 40 seconds were used with each speaker getting only one sound per story. Wraps were allowed to take a minute or 30 seconds. Sound bites were more regular than wraps. However, the bulletin of December 16, 2019 had a sound bite of 44 seconds with the Chairman, House Committee on Education, Godwin Ekpo, speaking at a public hearing on a Bill for a Law to Establish the Akwa Ibom State College of Science and Technology, Nung Ukim Ikono.

Inspiration FM also employed sound bites of at most 30 seconds and one per speaker in a story. However, the House Speaker, in some cases, was given more than one cut in a story, especially when addressing different issues, as seen in the June 7, 2018 evening news bulletin. Wraps were used more in Comfort FM, especially during public hearings. In the case of Planet FM, sound bites were allowed to run for as much as 50 seconds per speaker, in a story. A speaker was also given more than one cut. Wraps were rarely used.

Generally, sound bites obtained from plenary sessions were largely noisy. This is attributable to the poor sound system in the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly Chambers. However, the case was different with presentation of the budget by the State Governor during plenary, due to improved sound quality on such occasions.

RQ6: Were journalistic values of objectivity, accuracy, and clarity adhered to by the radio stations in reporting the Assembly?

Journalism, like every other profession, is guided by certain ethical standards, which set the benchmark for the conduct of practitioners. This comprises news gathering, reporting, editing, and airing or publication. Frost (2010) believes that a good journalist must find stories of interest to people, research them properly, gather information and views, and then get the report to the newsroom accurately and without delay. To accurately serve news reports to the audience, the journalist must be able to separate fact from rumor; truth from propaganda. And reporters are expected to maintain

fairness, accuracy, and balance in their reports (Ohaja, 2014).

Similarly, Whitaker et al. (2004) note that accuracy even in details like a street address or numbers is highly important, as the medium's credibility depends on its accuracy in small and large matters. To guide journalists in satisfying this goal in their writing, they advise that: "If you're unsure of something, do not use it. Don't guess or assume" (p. 143). The parliament is one beat that requires the highest form of accuracy from the journalist. Violations of accuracy could drag both the reporter and the media house to the legal battlefield with the legislature.

Objectivity means reliance on evident fact. Brooks et al. (2014) also see it as a way of freeing factual reporting from the biases and values of sources, writers, or readers. Whitaker et al. (2004, pp. 2-3) insist that: "Clarity in presenting the message is extremely important: If the audience doesn't understand what is being communicated, it will turn away from or misinterpret the message". Without clarity, communication is unachievable. Fang (1991, pp. 3-4) expressed this stance on clarity:

In addition to the inevitable centrality of thinking which affects story choice and story length, a pressing concern exists for clarity in both sentence length and word choice because the radio listener, unlike the newspaper reader, is unable to stop to review and reconsider the meaning of a sentence. The eye can go back; the ear can go only forward with the voice of the newscaster. (Fang, 1991, pp. 3-4).

Use of familiar words (not jargon), avoiding unnecessary synonyms, clever figures of speech, brevity, directness, unity, vitality, freshness of expression, avoiding the use of foreign words, as well as repeating words for better comprehension, and breaking down statistics have been suggested as ways of improving clarity in news reports (Strunk & White, 1979; Zinsser, 1994; Ohaja, 2004, 2005; Brooks et al., 2014).

An examination of the stories from Comfort, Planet, and Inspiration FMs showed that efforts were made by the reporters to accurately present their reports in an objective manner and with clarity. However, there were errors in the presentation of facts in plenary deliberations. For instance, names of the lawmakers, the constituency which they represent, and places, as well as figures (budget estimates), varied in some reports. Nevertheless, those errors were corrected in subsequent bulletins.

On clarity, Assembly reporters in the three radio stations stuck with the “daily conversation style of writing”, especially in their leads. For instance, on December 3, 2019, Comfort FM captured the inauguration of a new lawmaker thus: “The composition of the membership of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly has changed, with the swearing-in (sic) of a new member, Effiong Johnson, of the All Progressives Congress, to represent Mbo State Constituency”. The same story was written in this way by Planet FM: “The Speaker of Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Aniekan Bassey, has sworn-in (sic) Effiong Johnson of the All Progressives Congress APC as Member representing Mbo State Constituency in the 7th Assembly”.

Another case is the setting up of standing committees for the 7th Assembly by the Speaker on June 25, 2019. Inspiration FM's evening bulletin of the same day had the following story: “The 26 standing committees of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly have been constituted”. The same story was presented in this way by Comfort FM: “Speaker of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Aniekan Bassey today inaugurated twenty-six standing committees for the smooth running of the House”. This is how Comfort FM reported the confirmation of executive nominees on October 17, 2019:

Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly has confirmed the nominations submitted by Governor Udom Emmanuel for appointment into the Local Government Service Commission, Law Reform Commission, and State Independent Electoral Commission, AKISIEC.

Meanwhile, Planet FM put it thus: “Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly has confirmed and ratified the appointments of persons nominated by Governor Udom Emmanuel into Boards and Commissions in the State”.

## **7 Summary of findings**

From thorough analyses of news reports of Comfort, Planet, and Inspiration FMs, the following results emerged:

- There exist some similarities in the news coverage approach of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly by Comfort, Inspiration, and Planet FM. However, divergences in news reports are also noticed. The similarities include: reports following the

daily conversational format of story-telling; the use of the inverted pyramid order of news reporting; loose analysis of budget estimates, etc. The divergences were mostly seen in the house style of each radio station, etc.

- Budget, Bill Passage/Public Hearing/ Motions, Approval of Executive Nominees, Committee engagements, and Sack and Swearing in of lawmakers dominated the Assembly reports from the three radio stations between January 2018 and December 2019.

- Reporters also focused attention more on covering the legislative process, concerning bills. On the other hand, journalists only wrote about the bill during the second and third reading, or briefly in the context of other news. Assembly correspondents failed to go a step further to cross-check if indeed the resolutions of the House were obeyed by authorities or individuals concerned.

- Debates by lawmakers during plenary sessions were covered, especially when there were divergent views on a matter, as seen in votes for and against legislative autonomy in 2018. Outcomes and proposals that received the majority of support were given more attention.

- The activities of lawmakers of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly decided the wave and turn of each news story. This means that the media's focus was decided by the steps of the lawmakers and there was little or zero influence the media had on directing the course of the Assembly. There was little or no critical analysis of bills as news reports did not reflect the opinions of relevant professionals, except for those gathered at public hearings.

- Journalistic values like objectivity, accuracy, and clarity were adhered to by the radio stations in reporting the Assembly. Sound bites were employed in telling the story; however, they were largely unclear, especially those recorded during plenary sessions.

- Assembly news was promptly reported by the three radio stations, especially those concerning plenary sessions. Breaking News was also used to deliver the reports speedily (especially on rare and important occasions like budget presentation and passage).

## **7.1 Implications of results/recommendation**

Media agenda-setting role in law-making, as this research has shown, is severely impaired in the reportage of the radio stations.

The media were mere professional observers who regurgitated parliamentary proceedings with little or no analysis, thereby failing to influence the course of events in the parliament.

Again, the house styles of radio stations usually constrain each news item to an allotted time, thus reducing the amount of information a story can contain. The three radio stations suffered this fate also in presenting news about the Assembly and the audience may have suffered from inadequate information about the activities of the Assembly. Time constraints could be considered as a major factor that led to poor analysis of Assembly activities, particularly bills. If the trend continues, an audience member who craves Assembly news would be malnourished, fuelling speculations and rumors.

As a way out, a weekly magazine program dedicated to the activities of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly should be adopted by each radio station. This would help incorporate information that a news bulletin (which is usually of shorter duration) cannot accommodate and fan the flame of investigative journalism and critical analysis of activities of the House.

## NOTES

- 1 Uyo is the capital of Akwa Ibom State, south-south Nigeria.
- 2 Several Nigerian TV stations ran live coverage of the parliamentary debate on the controversial Tenure Elongation Bill proposed to give former President Olusegun Obasanjo a third term in office. It is widely believed that the live coverage of the debate contributed to killing the Bill as legislators, aware that Nigerians were watching them, did not want to incur the wrath of the viewing public by voting in support of it.
- 3 A report was considered to have been delivered promptly if it was aired on the same day the event took place; while a story was adjudged to have met the criteria of objectivity and fairness if it did not push the viewpoints of the reporter and gave voice to all sides in a controversy.
- 4 In Nigeria, empowerment programs of lawmakers are projects such lawmakers execute for their various constituencies using both state and personal funds.

- 5 Some Assembly Correspondents of the stations studied claimed they were denied access to documents containing budget breakdown; the researchers could not verify the claim before submitting their article.
- 6 The bill for an Act to Amend the Nigerian Press Council Act, CAP N180, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004 was eventually withdrawn from Nigeria's House of Representatives in July 2021 following public outcry and concerted media opposition to the proposed amendment, which many saw as an attempt to gag the media and shut down freedom of speech in the country. Nigerian media groups ran a widely circulated front-page advertorial tagged, "Information Blackout", on national dailies, including TV chyrons and lead graphics in online media.
- 7 Assembly correspondents gave the information. Again, we could not verify its authenticity.

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** the authors wish to thank the House of Assembly Correspondents of the stations studied for providing audio recordings of sound bites of reports analyzed.