



ASSESSMENT OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF DECLARATION OF STATE OF EMERGENCY IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study assessed newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State, Nigeria, focusing on how selected national and regional newspapers framed, reported, and interpreted the event. Specifically, the study analyzed the frequency of coverage, dominant frames, tone of reportage, democratic implications emphasized, and the manner in which the resolution of the crisis was presented. Using a census sampling technique, all 223 relevant newspaper articles published within the study period were analyzed from five newspapers namely: The Nation, Daily Trust, The Sun, The Tide, and Port Harcourt Telegraph, in order to capture both national and regional perspectives. The study adopted a mixed-methods content analysis approach, combining quantitative descriptive statistics with qualitative thematic analysis. Validity and reliability of the coding instrument were ensured through expert review, a pilot study, and inter-coder reliability testing, which yielded a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.82. Findings showed that national newspapers, particularly Daily Trust and The Nation, accounted for the highest volume of coverage. The most prominent frames were security breakdown, political conflict, and governance failure. Reportage was largely neutral, with supportive and critical tones fairly balanced. Democratic implications were framed both as a constitutional necessity for restoring order and, to a lesser extent, as a potential threat to democratic governance. Coverage of the resolution phase emphasized political reconciliation and dialogue. The study concludes that the Nigerian press demonstrated relative professionalism through balanced and diverse reportage of the Rivers State emergency. It recommends that the media strengthen emphasis on political solutions to conflicts while consistently promoting democratic values, constitutionalism, and accountability. The study contributes to scholarship on media framing, crisis communication, and democratic governance in emerging democracies.

Keywords: Newspaper Coverage, Rivers State, State of Emergency, Media Framing, Democratic Governance

Introduction

In democratic societies, the media serve as a foundational pillar in sustaining political accountability, facilitating public deliberation, and shaping collective understanding of governance processes. Newspapers, as traditional yet enduring instruments of mass communication, continue to function as authoritative platforms for in-depth analysis, interpretive reporting, and institutional critique. Their influence extends beyond mere information dissemination; they participate actively in constructing political meaning, legitimizing authority, and framing national conversations. This responsibility becomes especially critical during periods of political instability, constitutional tension, or executive emergency interventions, when democratic norms may be tested and public trust becomes fragile (McNair, 2018; Akinfeleye, 2019).

A state of emergency represents one of the most consequential constitutional mechanisms available to an executive authority. It authorizes the temporary adoption of extraordinary powers in response to perceived threats to public order, security, or governance stability. Under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), such declarations permit suspension of normal democratic procedures and, in certain circumstances, the curtailment of civil liberties (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as amended; Okpara, 2023). While constitutionally legitimate, emergency declarations are inherently sensitive because they shift the balance of power, concentrate executive authority, and may alter federal-state relations.

The dual nature of emergency powers as both stabilizing instruments and potential vehicles for democratic erosion makes them particularly dependent on responsible media scrutiny. Scholars have long argued that the press does not simply report crises but actively interprets and structures them through framing processes (Entman, 1993). Through selective emphasis, lexical choices, and source privileging, newspapers can define problems, assign responsibility, evaluate morality, and suggest remedies. Thus, media coverage of emergency declarations is not neutral; it becomes a site where legitimacy is constructed or contested.

On March 18, 2025, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu declared a state of emergency in Rivers State following escalating political instability, security challenges, and economic concerns (Tinubu, 2025). Rivers State occupies a uniquely strategic position within Nigeria's political economy due to its oil-producing capacity, revenue contributions, and regional political significance. Instability within the state therefore carries implications that transcend its geographic boundaries, potentially affecting national economic performance, federal cohesion, and investor confidence (Ekanem & Diri, 2025).

The crisis that culminated in the declaration was deeply rooted in an extended political confrontation between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor, Nyesom Wike, who serves as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory. The conflict manifested through legislative fragmentation, public accusations, defections, and the burning of the State House of Assembly complex in December 2023. These developments intensified institutional paralysis and deepened factional divisions within the state's political architecture (Vanguard, 2025). The Supreme Court of Nigeria reportedly observed on February 28, 2025, that governance structures had effectively collapsed due to the absence of a functioning legislature (Supreme Court of Nigeria, 2025).

In response, President Tinubu suspended the Governor, Deputy Governor Ngozi Odu, and members of the State House of Assembly, and appointed Retired Vice Admiral Ibokette Ibas as sole administrator. The National Assembly approved this intervention on March 20, 2025 (National Assembly of Nigeria, 2025; Channels TV, 2025). While supporters framed the declaration as a constitutionally grounded effort to restore order, critics questioned whether the situation satisfied the conditions outlined under Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution (Adeyemi, Eke, and Asak (2025)). Concerns were also raised regarding federal overreach, erosion of democratic institutions, and the long-term implications for the separation of powers (Olumide & Nwafor, 2025).

Beyond immediate political rivalry, Rivers State has historically grappled with structural challenges including militancy, pipeline vandalism, oil theft, youth unemployment, and governance deficits within the broader Niger Delta region (Ekanem & Diri, 2025; Ibeanu, 2020). Analysts argue that while emergency measures may temporarily stabilize volatile environments, they rarely address underlying socio-political drivers of instability. Consequently, the declaration in Rivers State was not merely a security intervention but a complex political event situated within longstanding regional tensions and national democratic consolidation processes (Aiyede, 2021).

Given the magnitude and constitutional sensitivity of this intervention, the role of the press assumes heightened importance. Media narratives can either reinforce executive legitimacy or amplify democratic skepticism. Through framing processes, newspapers influence how citizens interpret the necessity, legality, and proportionality of emergency rule (Entman, 1993). In politically polarized environments, such coverage may either de-escalate tensions or intensify contestation.

Despite the significance of the 2025 declaration, there remains limited empirical understanding of how Nigerian newspapers reported and framed the event. Existing scholarship suggests that media practice in Nigeria is frequently shaped by ownership structures, political affiliations, and institutional alignments that may influence framing patterns and editorial tone (Oso, 2012; Udomisor, 2013). Research by Okorie and Oyedepo (2018) demonstrates that crisis reporting can exhibit sensationalist tendencies, while Adeyemi and Salawu (2021) highlight divergent framing strategies linked to political positioning.

Furthermore, Hassan, Orebiyi, & Ibebunjo (2025) note the absence of systematic, conflict-sensitive media analyses specifically addressing the Rivers State emergency. Key questions concerning frequency of coverage, prominence, tonal orientation, dominant frames, source reliance, and democratic implications remain under-examined. In the absence of such empirical scrutiny, it becomes difficult to evaluate whether the Nigerian press fulfilled its watchdog role or functioned in alignment with prevailing political interests during this period of constitutional tension.

This gap is particularly consequential because media performance during emergency rule directly affects public trust, institutional legitimacy, and democratic resilience. Without systematic assessment, claims regarding media bias, neutrality, or professional responsibility remain speculative.

Therefore, this study critically examines how selected Nigerian newspapers reported the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. Specifically, it evaluates patterns of frequency, prominence, framing strategies, tonal orientation, source usage, and highlighted democratic implications. By integrating framing theory with empirical content analysis, the study seeks to determine whether the press functioned as a democratic watchdog, a stabilizing institutional actor, or a politically aligned narrator within the crisis discourse. Through this inquiry, the research contributes to broader debates on media responsibility, constitutional governance, and democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

Newspaper coverage constitutes a central process in mass communication through which events, issues, and actors are selected, interpreted, structured, and disseminated to the public. It extends beyond mere reporting to encompass both quantitative indicators such as frequency of reportage, space allocation, prominence, and placement, and qualitative elements including tone, framing devices, narrative construction, and source attribution (McQuail, 2010; Nwabueze, 2014). As a key mechanism of agenda formation and public discourse, newspaper coverage significantly shapes public understanding of political and socio-economic developments. The gate-keeping function performed by journalists and editors determines not only which issues gain media visibility but also how such issues are constructed for audience interpretation (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In this regard, framing becomes central to understanding the interpretive dimension of coverage. Entman (1993) contends that framing involves defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and proposing remedies, thereby guiding how audiences perceive and evaluate public events.

The significance of newspaper coverage becomes particularly pronounced during periods of political instability, when the media arena transforms into a contested space for legitimizing actions, negotiating narratives, and reflecting competing societal interests (Okonkwo, 2017). Within such contexts, the declaration of a state of emergency represents a politically sensitive and constitutionally consequential

development that demands careful media scrutiny. In this study, newspaper coverage is conceptualized as encompassing the frequency, prominence, depth, tone, and framing of reports related to the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. It includes editorial decisions regarding headline construction, story placement, sourcing patterns, narrative emphasis, and evaluative language, all of which contribute to shaping public perception.

The declaration of a state of emergency itself refers to a constitutional or statutory act undertaken by the executive arm of government to invoke extraordinary powers in response to severe threats to public order, security, or national stability. Such threats may stem from armed conflict, civil unrest, natural disasters, or political crises. In these situations, governments are temporarily authorized to limit certain rights and suspend normal legal procedures in order to restore order and protect national integrity (Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004; Gross & NíAoláin, 2006). Although emergency powers are recognized as legitimate governance tools, their exercise is expected to remain within constitutional boundaries and be subjected to legislative oversight in democratic systems to prevent abuse.

In Nigeria, Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) empowers the President to proclaim a state of emergency when any part of the Federation experiences instability, breakdown of public order, or other grave threats to governance and security. Such a proclamation enables federal intervention in the affected area, often involving military deployment and temporary suspension of certain democratic processes (Odinkalu, 2010). Section 305(3) further outlines the legal conditions under which emergency rule may be declared, including situations of war or imminent danger of war, actual or threatened breakdown of public order and safety, the occurrence or imminent threat of disasters or natural calamities, the existence of public danger threatening the Federation, or upon request by a State Governor in accordance with constitutional provisions. These stipulations function as safeguards intended to ensure legality, necessity, and proportionality in the exercise of emergency powers.

International perspectives reinforce these constitutional safeguards. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2004) describes a state of emergency as a situation in which authorities adopt special measures to confront crisis conditions. Such measures may include curfews, movement restrictions, enhanced security operations, and resource reallocation (Waugh, 2000; Bullard, 2007). However, international legal standards emphasize that any suspension of rights must be proportionate, time-bound, and strictly required by the severity of the situation (Venice Commission, 2024). Different democratic systems also distinguish between forms of emergency rule, including martial law, state of siege, and civil emergency arrangements, each reflecting varying degrees of restriction and state authority.

Udoinyang (2015) identifies core characteristics typically associated with emergency declarations, including heightened security presence through military or police deployment, restrictions on movement such as curfews or travel limitations, emergency funding allocations, and the granting of special administrative and legal powers to manage the crisis effectively. Despite these structured provisions, scholars caution against the inherent risks of emergency governance. Agamben (2005) and O'Connell (2010) warn that poorly defined or prolonged emergency measures may erode democratic norms and civil liberties, thereby transforming temporary exceptions into enduring governance practices. The tension between crisis management and democratic preservation therefore remains central to debates surrounding emergency rule.

Existing scholarly works provide insight into media engagement with crises across different thematic contexts. Adeyemi, Eke, and Asak (2025), anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, examined public perceptions of government public relations strategies during the declaration of emergency rule in Rivers State. Employing qualitative email interviews with purposively selected communication experts and stakeholders, the study found that government communication was largely

reactive and intensified only after public outcry. Although the declaration was framed as security-driven, limited stakeholder engagement weakened public confidence.

Similarly, Ire and Eke (2025), drawing on Uses and Gratifications and Framing theories, explored radio broadcast engagement during the emergency period in Rivers State. Through qualitative interviews with purposively selected residents of Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, and Oyigbo, the study concluded that radio played a crucial role in simplifying complex political pronouncements, providing timely updates, and fostering public awareness and resilience.

Empirical studies further demonstrate the influence of media coverage across diverse crisis situations. Nwakpa and Didiugwu (2018) found that newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta sufficiently informed readers without escalating conflict. Adaja, Talabi, and Ogundeji (2020), grounded in agenda-setting theory, observed extensive and prominent newspaper coverage of natural disasters, emphasizing the media's educational function. Akinnola, Akinwalere, and Akinnola (2023) demonstrated that newspaper reportage significantly influenced compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures. Eke, Adeyemi, and Ochor (2022) reported that although Monkeypox coverage received low prominence, public awareness remained substantial. Nwafur et al. (2023) identified discrepancies between youth perceptions of IPOB/ESN and newspaper portrayals. Ugondo (2018) found strong correlations between editorial positions and voter attitudes during the 2015 elections. Wogu (2018) revealed limited behavioral impact of media campaigns on Lassa fever prevention. Ndukwu et al. (2024) highlighted high but alarmist COVID-19 coverage lacking reassuring tones. Amanawa and Amanawa (2023) found that radio coverage of flood disasters was timely and informative, though politically and economically framed.

Despite these contributions, several research gaps still persist. Prior studies largely emphasize militancy, separatist movements, health crises, natural disasters, elections, or radio-based crisis communication, with limited attention to newspaper coverage of politically sensitive emergency declarations. There remains a thematic gap concerning media framing of political emergencies, particularly within volatile contexts such as Rivers State. A geographic and contextual gap also exists, as few studies interrogate the intersection of political crisis, media construction, and public perception in this region. Furthermore, while some research examines audience attitudes, little empirical work integrates systematic newspaper content analysis with evaluative public perception of emergency declarations. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing on print media coverage of a contemporary political emergency and linking media framing patterns to democratic implications and public interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in Framing Theory, originally conceptualized by Goffman (1974) and elaborated by Entman (1993). The theory posits that media do not merely report events but actively construct meaning by selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient. Frames serve as organizing principles that structure information, define problems, attribute causality, offer moral evaluations, and recommend solutions. Goffman (1974) distinguishes between natural and social frameworks through which individuals interpret reality, while Entman (1993) emphasizes the dual processes of selection and salience in shaping communication.

Entman's model outlines four principal framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. These functions provide an analytical template for examining how newspapers construct the declaration of a state of emergency, whether as a security necessity, political maneuver, democratic safeguard, or constitutional overreach. Framing operates at both the communicative level, where journalists construct narratives, and the cognitive level, where audiences interpret them. By translating these abstract theoretical constructs into measurable variables such as frequency, tone, prominence, framing patterns, and democratic implications, this study establishes a clear

linkage between theoretical principles and empirical analysis. In doing so, it strengthens analytical rigor while providing a structured framework for understanding how newspaper coverage may influence public discourse and democratic evaluation of emergency governance.

Table 1: Entman’s Four Main Types of Frames

Type of frame	Description
Define a specific problem	Identifies the issue and highlights why it matters.
Diagnose a cause of the problem	Attributes responsibility or blame for the problem.
Make a moral judgment	Provides an ethical evaluation of the problem and its causes.
Suggest remedies to the problem	Proposes solutions, actions, or policies to address the problem.

Source: Entman (1993).

The relevance of Entman’s (1993) framing theory to this study is evident in the way the objectives align with the four core framing functions problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation alongside the broader concepts of selection and salience. The first objective, which seeks to examine the frequency of newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State, reflects the principle of selection and salience. By analyzing how frequently newspapers reported the issue, the study highlights the degree of importance the media assigned to the matter, thereby showing whether it was framed as a central national concern or treated as a peripheral issue.

The second objective, which focuses on identifying the reasons framed by the newspapers for the declaration, corresponds with Entman’s notion of diagnosing causes. In framing the declaration, newspapers may have attributed responsibility to political actors, governance failures, or security challenges. Such causal interpretations are central to how the public understands both the origins and implications of the crisis.

The third objective, which examines the tone of newspaper coverage regarding the legitimacy of the declaration, connects with the moral evaluation function of framing. The tone whether supportive, critical, or neutral reveals the ethical judgments embedded in news reports, reflecting whether the declaration was presented as a constitutionally justifiable action or as an undemocratic infringement on civil liberties.

In a similar vein, the fourth objective, which examines the implications of the declaration for Nigeria’s democracy, is grounded in the problem-definition function of framing. By highlighting the wider consequences of emergency rule for democratic governance, newspapers not only emphasized the importance of the event but also situated it within the context of Nigeria’s democratic stability and the resilience of its institutions.

The fifth objective, which focuses on identifying how newspapers framed the resolution of the state of emergency, aligns with the treatment-recommendation function of framing. Through their coverage, newspapers may have advanced solutions such as political dialogue, compliance with constitutional procedures, or governance reforms, thereby outlining possible approaches for resolving the crisis.

When considered collectively, the objectives of the study are firmly rooted in Entman’s framing theory. Each objective represents a specific dimension of how newspapers, through the processes of selection and salience, constructed meaning around the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. This demonstrates the suitability of the theory as a strong analytical framework for explaining how media framing shapes public perception of political events and their consequences for democratic governance.

Method

This study adopted a content analysis research design to systematically examine newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State in the year 2025. Content analysis enables the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of communication content (Krippendorff, 2018). Through this approach, the study investigated patterns of reportage, including frequency, tone, thematic framing, and source attribution, in order to identify underlying narratives and media portrayals of the emergency declaration.

The population of the study comprised 223 newspaper articles published between March 1, 2025, and August 31, 2025. These articles were drawn from five selected Nigerian newspapers:

- Daily Trust
- The Nation
- The Sun
- The Tide
- Port Harcourt Telegraph

The five newspapers were purposively selected based on their national prominence, regional relevance, and consistency of coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. Daily Trust, The Nation, and The Sun were chosen for their wide national circulation and agenda-setting influence in Nigeria's media landscape, while The Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph were included to capture regional perspectives from the Niger Delta. This combination ensured diversity in editorial orientation and provided a balanced representation of both national and local media framing of the issue.

The study employed a census sampling technique, which involved analyzing the entire population of relevant newspaper articles rather than selecting a subset (Neuendorf, 2017). This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of media narratives surrounding the emergency declaration and eliminated sampling bias. Only articles that directly addressed the declaration, federal and state government actions, political developments, security concerns, public reactions, and democratic implications were included.

Data were collected using a structured content coding sheet designed to capture both manifest and latent variables from each article. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations with the aid of SPSS (Version 27) and Microsoft Excel. In addition, thematic qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret framing patterns, narrative styles, and ideological orientations.

Categories and Measurements

The coding instrument translated the theoretical assumptions of framing into measurable content variables. Each newspaper article was systematically coded under the following categories:

(a) Frequency and Prominence

- Frequency was measured by counting the number of articles published by each newspaper within the defined study period.
- Prominence was operationalized through article placement:
 - Front page (high prominence)
 - Inside pages (moderate/low prominence)

This allowed assessment of agenda-setting and salience.

(b) Type of Article

Each article was categorized as:

- News Report
- Editorial
- Opinion
- Feature

This enabled identification of interpretive versus factual presentation formats.

(c) Headline Tone

Tone was measured based on the evaluative orientation toward the legitimacy of the declaration. Each article was coded as:

- Supportive / Positive
- Neutral / Balanced
- Critical / Negative

Tone classification was determined by lexical choices, descriptive language, and the overall evaluative direction of the report.

(d) Thematic Frames

Drawing from framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), dominant frames were identified based on the most emphasized issue in each article. Frames included:

- Security breakdown and violence
- Political conflict and party crisis
- Governance failure and leadership vacuum
- Threat to democratic order
- Federal intervention necessity

For resolution framing, additional categories included:

- Political reconciliation and dialogue
- Federal intervention success
- Continued instability
- Institutional reform and lessons learned
- Civil engagement and peace building

The dominant frame was coded based on the primary narrative emphasis of each article.

(e) Democratic Implications

Articles were further coded for the democratic implications highlighted, including:

- Threat to democratic governance
- Violation of civil liberties

- Restoration of law and order
- Strengthening constitutional authority
- Public trust in institutions

This allowed assessment of how newspapers positioned the emergency within broader democratic discourse.

(f) Sources Cited

Source attribution was categorized as:

- Government (Federal or State officials)
- Security Agencies
- Opposition
- Civil Society
- Citizens
- Mixed sources

This measurement enabled analysis of whose voices were privileged in constructing media narratives.

(g) Use of Visuals

Articles were coded for the presence or absence of visuals such as:

- Photographs
- Info-graphics
- Charts

Visual inclusion was treated as an indicator of presentation emphasis and communicative reinforcement.

Inter-Coder Reliability Test

To ensure methodological rigor, the reliability of the coding instrument was tested using an inter-coder reliability procedure.

Two trained coders independently coded a randomly selected sub-sample of fifteen (15) newspaper articles drawn from the main population. The level of agreement between coders was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which yielded a reliability index of $\kappa = 0.82$. According to Landis and Koch (1977), this value indicates almost perfect agreement, confirming that the coding scheme was stable, consistent, and replicable.

Additionally, a pilot test involving thirty (30) articles was conducted prior to the main content analysis. The pilot test helped identify ambiguities, overlapping categories, and unclear operational definitions. Necessary revisions were made to refine the coding categories and improve clarity.

Together, these procedures strengthened the internal validity and reliability of the study, ensuring that the findings were scientifically robust and methodologically sound.

Table 2: Population and Sample Size of Newspaper Articles

Newspaper	Total Articles(N)	Sample Size(n)
Nation	58	58
Daily Trust	69	69
The Sun	51	51
The Tide	34	34
Port Harcourt Telegraph	11	11
Total	223	223

Source: Fieldwork (2025).

Findings

This section presents the findings from the content analysis of 223 newspaper articles published between March 1, 2025, and August 31, 2025, across five selected Nigerian newspapers. All retrieved articles that met the inclusion criteria were coded according to frequency, prominence, thematic frames, tone, source attribution, democratic implications, and resolution framing.

Although all newspapers covered the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State, variations emerged in reporting intensity, framing emphasis, tonal orientation, and interpretive depth. National newspapers produced a substantially higher volume of reports compared to regional newspapers, thereby exerting stronger influence over national discourse. However, regional newspapers provided context-sensitive interpretations shaped by proximity to the crisis environment.

Findings are organized according to the four research questions guiding the study.

Table 3: Distribution of Newspapers by Ownership Category

Category	Number of Newspapers	Percentage(%)
National Newspapers	3	60.0
Regional Newspapers	2	40.0
Total	5	100.0

Source: Authors' primary data

Table 3 presents the categorical distribution of newspapers analyzed in the study according to ownership and coverage orientation. Out of the five newspapers examined, three (60%) were national newspapers, The Nation, Daily Trust, and The Sun while two (40%) were regional newspapers, The Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph. This classification illustrates that national newspapers made up a greater proportion of the sample, ensuring that broader national narratives were captured alongside regional perspectives from Rivers State.

RQ1: How frequently did newspapers report on the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State?

The first research question examined the distribution and intensity of newspaper coverage.

Table 4: Frequency of Newspaper Coverage of the Declaration of a State of Emergency in Rivers State

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentages(%)
Nation	58	26.0
Daily Trust	69	31.0
The Sun	51	22.9
The Tide	34	15.2
Port Harcourt Telegraph	11	4.9
Total	223	100.0

Source: authors' primary data

Table 4a: Aggregate Distribution by Newspaper Category

Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
National Newspapers	178	79.8
Regional Newspapers	45	20.2
Total	223	100.0

Source: authors' primary data

Table 4 presents the frequency distribution of newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State across the five selected newspapers. The data reveal clear variations in reporting intensity, reflecting differences in editorial orientation, geographical scope, and news priorities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that national newspapers were the principal drivers of public discourse surrounding the Rivers State emergency declaration. Through sustained and prominent reportage, they shaped the dominant interpretative framework at the national level, emphasizing the political and security dimensions of the crisis. At the same time, regional newspapers fulfilled an essential complementary function by situating the emergency within the everyday realities of affected communities. The coverage pattern therefore operated across multiple communicative levels, with national outlets setting the broader agenda while regional papers grounded the discourse in contextual specificity and lived experience.

National Newspapers

The three national newspapers - Daily Trust, The Nation, and The Sun collectively drove the national narrative surrounding the emergency declaration. Their combined 175 articles demonstrate sustained editorial engagement and strong agenda-setting orientation.

Daily Trust emerged as the most prolific, suggesting a deliberate emphasis on the political and security implications of the declaration. The Nation followed closely, maintaining consistent coverage through straight news and interpretive pieces. The Sun displayed slightly lower but still substantial reporting volume, reflecting strong engagement with both political and human-interest dimensions.

The dominance of national newspapers underscores their broader institutional capacity and wider circulation, positioning them as primary shapers of national interpretation.

Regional Newspapers

The Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph together produced 48 articles. Although quantitatively lower, their reporting carried contextual depth and proximity-driven insights.

The Tide demonstrated moderate yet steady coverage, while Port Harcourt Telegraph focused more narrowly on immediate local developments. Regional newspapers thus complemented national narratives by grounding the emergency within local realities and community-level implications.

RQ2: How did the newspapers frame the reasons for the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State?

The second research question examined dominant interpretive frames used to explain the declaration.

Table 5: Newspaper-by-Framing Distribution of Reasons for the Declaration of State of Emergency

Framing Category	The Nation	Daily Trust	The Sun	The Tide	P/H Telegraph	Total
Security breakdown and violence	17(29.3%)	25(36.2%)	15(29.4%)	10(29.4%)	5(45.5%)	72(32.3%)
Political conflict and party crisis	18(31.0%)	16(23.2%)	15(29.4%)	9 (26.5%)	3(27.3%)	61(27.4%)
Governance failure and leadership vacuum	12(20.7%)	14(20.3%)	9(17.6%)	7(20.6%)	2(18.2%)	44(19.7%)
Threat to Democratic Order	7(12.1%)	9(13.0%)	8 (15.7%)	6(17.6%)	0(0.0%)	30(13.5%)
Federal intervention necessity	4(6.9%)	5(7.2%)	4(7.8%)	2 (5.9%)	1(9.1%)	16(7.2%)
Total	58 (100%)	69 (100%)	51 (100%)	34 (100%)	11 (100%)	223(100%)

Source: Authors' primary data

Table 5 presents a dis-aggregated account of how individual newspapers framed the reasons for the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. Examining the data at the newspaper level provides clearer insight into editorial priorities that are not fully captured by aggregate figures alone.

Across newspapers, security breakdown and violence emerged as the most prominent frame (32.3%). This was followed by political conflict and party crisis (27.4%), and governance failure and leadership vacuum (19.7%). Frames emphasizing threat to democratic order (13.5%) and federal intervention necessity (7.2%) appeared less frequently.

Daily Trust adopted a strong security-oriented framing pattern, frequently presenting the declaration as a response to escalating instability. The Nation emphasized political rivalry as a major explanatory factor, while The Sun distributed attention more evenly between security and political crisis frames.

Among regional newspapers, The Tide demonstrated sensitivity to democratic concerns alongside security narratives. Port Harcourt Telegraph strongly emphasized security breakdown while largely avoiding constitutional critique.

Overall, newspapers tended to frame the declaration as a response to tangible instability rather than as a purely constitutional or procedural matter. This suggests a preference for conflict and crisis narratives over legalistic analysis, consistent with framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993).

RQ3: What was the tone of newspaper coverage concerning the legitimacy of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State?

The third research question assessed tonal orientation.

Table 5a: Tone of Coverage

Tone of Coverage	Supportive / Positive	Neutral / Balanced	Critical / Negative	Total
The Nation	20(34.5%)	22(37.9%)	16(27.6%)	58 (100%)
Daily Trust	25(36.2%)	28(40.6%)	16(23.2%)	69(100%)
The Sun	17(33.3%)	18(35.3%)	16 (31.4%)	51(100%)
The Tide	9(26.5%)	12(35.3%)	13 (38.2%)	34 (100%)
Port Harcourt Telegraph	4(36.4%)	4(36.4%)	3 (27.3%)	11 (100%)
Total	75(33.6%)	84(37.7%)	64(28.7%)	223(100%)

Source: Authors' primary data

Table 5 shows that newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State was dominated by neutral or balanced reporting. At the aggregate level, neutral coverage accounted for 84 articles (37.7%), indicating that most newspapers adopted a cautious editorial posture when addressing the legitimacy of the declaration. Supportive or positive coverage followed closely with 75 articles (33.6%), while critical or negative reporting constituted 64 articles (28.7%). This overall distribution suggests that the press largely avoided extreme positions, opting instead for measured and reflective engagement with the issue.

Neutral or balanced reporting dominated overall coverage (37.7%), followed by supportive/positive tone (33.6%) and critical/negative tone (28.7%). This indicates that newspapers generally avoided extreme positioning.

Daily Trust and The Nation leaned toward neutrality while still presenting supportive elements. The Sun displayed near-equal distribution across supportive, neutral, and critical tones, reflecting editorial pluralism.

In contrast, The Tide recorded the highest proportion of critical coverage, reflecting heightened sensitivity to democratic and local governance concerns. Port Harcourt Telegraph adopted a cautious balance between supportive and neutral tones.

The overall tonal pattern suggests that national newspapers were inclined toward stability-oriented framing, while regional newspapers were relatively more skeptical. This aligns with scholarship suggesting media tone may be shaped by proximity and institutional alignment (Oso, 2012; Udomisor, 2013).

RQ4: What implications for Nigeria’s democracy were highlighted in newspaper coverage of the state of emergency in Rivers State?

The fourth research question focused on democratic implications.

Table 6: Democratic Implications Highlighted

Democratic Implications Highlighted	The Nation	Daily Trust	The Sun	The Tide	P/H Telegraph	Total
Threat to democratic governance	15(26.8%)	18(32.1%)	10(17.9%)	9(16.1%)	4(7.1%)	56(25.1%)
Violation of civil liberties	9((25.0%)	10(27.8%)	7(19.4%)	6(16.7%)	4(11.1%)	36(16.1%)
Restoration of law and order	18(28.1%)	22(34.4%)	14(21.9%)	7(10.9%)	3(28.7%)	64 (28.7%)
Strengthening constitutional authority	12(25.0%)	15(31.3%)	10(20.8%)	8(16.7%)	3(6.3%)	48 (21.5%)
Public trust in institutions	4(21.1%)	4(21.1%)	4(21.1%)	4(21.1%)	4(21.1%)	19 (8.5%)
Total	58 (100%)	69 (100%	51 (100%)	34 (100%)	11 (100%)	223(100%)

Source: Authors’ primary data

In Table 6, the distribution of democratic implications highlights how individual newspapers prioritized different aspects of the emergency declaration. Among the national dailies, Daily Trust consistently focused on restoration of law and order, with 34.4% of its coverage in this category, while also emphasizing threats to democratic governance (32.1%) and strengthening constitutional authority (31.3%). This indicates that the newspaper framed the emergency as both a stabilizing measure and a constitutional exercise, blending concern for governance with the practical need to restore order.

The most frequently highlighted implication was restoration of law and order (28.7%), followed by threat to democratic governance (25.1%) and strengthening constitutional authority (21.5%). Violation of civil liberties (16.1%) and public trust in institutions (8.5%) appeared less frequently.

National newspapers largely framed the emergency as a stabilizing and constitutionally grounded intervention. Restoration of order was emphasized as necessary for governance continuity.

Regional newspapers, however, placed relatively stronger emphasis on potential democratic risks, including erosion of civil liberties and institutional credibility.

Thus, while national newspapers foregrounded constitutional authority and stability, regional newspapers highlighted rights-based concerns and local political consequences.

RQ5: How did newspapers frame the resolution of the state of emergency in Rivers State?

Research Question Five examined how newspapers framed the resolution of the state of emergency in Rivers State.

Table 7: Framing of the Resolution*Source: Authors primary data.*

Resolution Frame	The Nation	Daily Trust	The Sun	The Tide	P/H Telegraph	Total
Political reconciliation and dialogue	16(27.6%)	20(29.0%)	13(25.5%)	9(26.5%)	4 (36.4%)	62 (27.8%)
Federal intervention success	14(24.1%)	16(23.2%)	10(19.6%)	9(26.5%)	3 (27.3%)	52 (23.3%)
Continued instability	13(22.4%)	16(23.2%)	11(21.6%)	8(23.5%)	3(27.3%)	51 (22.9%)
Institutional reform and lessons learned	10(17.2%)	12(17.4%)	8 (15.7%)	7 (20.6%)	1(9.1%)	38 (17.0%)
Civil engagement and peace building	5 (8.6%)	5 (7.2%)	9(17.6%)	1(2.9%)	0(0.0%)	20(9.0%)
Total	58(100)	69(100)	51(100)	37(100)	11(100)	223(100%)

The results of the analysis in Table 7 show that newspapers predominantly framed the resolution of the emergency in political terms. Among the national dailies, Daily Trust highlighted political reconciliation and dialogue in 29.0% of its coverage and continued instability in 23.2% of articles. This indicates a dual narrative: the newspaper acknowledged successful negotiation among political elites while signaling that tensions lingered.

The findings indicate that The Nation placed considerable emphasis on political dialogue (27.6%) and the success of federal intervention (24.1%), reflecting a framing orientation that foregrounded elite-driven negotiation and the stabilizing authority of the central government in resolving the crisis in Rivers State. By highlighting both reconciliation efforts and federal involvement, the newspaper constructed the resolution as a product of strategic political engagement and effective state action. Similarly, The Sun demonstrated a relatively balanced distribution of frames, with attention given to political reconciliation (25.5%), continued instability (21.6%), and federal intervention success (19.6%). This distribution suggests a more nuanced narrative structure in which formal resolution efforts were acknowledged, yet not presented as wholly conclusive. The recognition of lingering instability implies that, despite official declarations of restored order, deeper structural and social tensions persisted beneath the surface. Such framing reflects an interpretative stance that situates crisis resolution within an ongoing process rather than a definitive endpoint.

Among the regional newspapers, The Tide emphasized political reconciliation (26.5%) and federal success (26.5%), while simultaneously drawing attention to institutional reform (20.6%) and continued instability (23.5%). This distribution indicates a balanced perspective that recognizes both formal progress and persistent challenges, suggesting cautious optimism while questioning the sustainability of peace absent systemic reforms. Port Harcourt Telegraph, though contributing fewer articles, prioritized political dialogue

(36.4%), federal intervention success (27.3%), and continued instability (27.3%), reinforcing the prominence of elite negotiation and formal mediation in the crisis narrative. Its coverage largely reflected institutional perspectives, with less emphasis on grassroots or community-centered dimensions of recovery.

Across the newspapers analyzed, the dominant framing positioned elite negotiation as the primary mechanism for restoring order. Political reconciliation and dialogue emerged as the most prominent frame (27.8%), followed by federal intervention success (23.3%) and continued instability (22.9%). National dailies particularly foregrounded federal mediation and political compromise, portraying stability as the outcome of strategic engagement among powerful political actors. In contrast, regional outlets exhibited a comparatively cautious tone, acknowledging unresolved tensions and emphasizing the necessity of institutional strengthening and civic participation to achieve lasting peace.

Overall, the analysis reveals that Nigerian newspapers largely framed the resolution of the emergency through visible political outcomes rather than through substantive institutional reform or community-based initiatives. This tendency reflects a broader journalistic and political culture in which crisis narratives privilege elite bargaining and executive authority, while structural governance reforms and citizen-driven processes receive comparatively limited attention in public discourse. Such framing patterns have implications for how audiences interpret both the legitimacy and durability of political crisis management efforts within the Nigerian democratic context.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Nigerian newspaper coverage of the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State was neither uniform nor ideologically monolithic. Rather than reflecting a single dominant editorial consensus, the coverage demonstrated variation across newspapers in terms of reporting intensity, framing emphasis, tonal orientation, and democratic interpretation. These variations underscore the complex and negotiated role of the press during moments of constitutional tension and political crisis.

In relation to Research Question One (RQ1), the dominance of national newspapers in terms of frequency and prominence of coverage suggests that agenda-setting power was largely concentrated within nationally circulated dailies. Although this study is theoretically anchored on Framing Theory, the observed distribution of coverage aligns with broader media scholarship that emphasizes the ability of high-circulation newspapers to shape public visibility of political issues. By producing nearly 80% of total reports, national newspapers positioned the Rivers State emergency as a matter of national significance rather than a localized state-level dispute.

This disproportionate coverage may reflect institutional capacity, wider readership, and stronger editorial infrastructure. However, it also indicates that national newspapers became the primary mediators of how the crisis was interpreted at the federal level. Regional newspapers, while contributing fewer articles, provided contextual nuance and proximity-sensitive narratives. Their reporting grounded the crisis within lived realities and local political consequences. This division of journalistic labor demonstrates how different media tiers participate differently in national crises, national outlets amplifying political implications, and regional outlets emphasizing contextual immediacy.

With respect to Research Question Two (RQ2), the predominance of security breakdown and violence as the leading frame across newspapers reveals a tendency to define the crisis primarily as a stability problem requiring intervention. According to Entman (1993), framing operates through problem definition and causal attribution. In this case, newspapers largely defined the emergency as a response to instability, political rivalry, and governance paralysis. By emphasizing security concerns and conflict escalation, the press implicitly framed the declaration as reactive rather than strategic.

The political conflict frame also featured prominently, particularly in national newspapers. This suggests that the crisis was interpreted not merely as administrative failure but as the culmination of an elite power struggle. Such framing situates the emergency within broader patterns of intra-party rivalry and federal-state political contestation. The relative marginalization of federal intervention necessity as a frame indicates that newspapers were less focused on justifying constitutional procedure and more engaged with explaining the crisis dynamics that preceded the declaration.

These findings are consistent with the logic of Framing Theory, which posits that media outlets select certain aspects of perceived reality while downplaying others (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). The dominance of conflict and security narratives suggests that newspapers privileged immediate crisis visibility over deeper constitutional analysis. This selective emphasis shapes public cognition by foregrounding urgency and instability rather than legal proportionality.

Regarding Research Question Three (RQ3), the tonal distribution reveals an overall pattern of cautious neutrality. The prevalence of neutral or balanced reporting indicates that newspapers were mindful of the political sensitivity of the declaration. Rather than overtly endorsing or condemning the intervention, many reports adopted descriptive and interpretive tones that allowed for multiple perspectives.

However, tonal divergence between national and regional newspapers is analytically significant. National newspapers exhibited relatively higher proportions of supportive or neutral coverage, which may reflect institutional alignment with broader national stability narratives. Regional newspapers, particularly *The Tide*, displayed stronger critical tendencies. This may be attributed to geographic proximity, local readership expectations, and heightened sensitivity to the democratic implications of federal intervention within state governance.

This tonal variation reflects what Oso (2012) and Udomisor (2013) identify as the influence of institutional structures and editorial positioning within Nigerian media practice. Newspapers do not operate in isolation from political environments; their ownership patterns, audience bases, and historical alignments may subtly influence interpretive posture. Yet, the absence of overwhelming support or condemnation suggests that the press maintained a moderated stance, balancing institutional caution with limited critical engagement.

Research Question Four (RQ4) further deepens the democratic dimension of the findings. The most emphasized implication across newspapers was the restoration of law and order. This indicates that the declaration was frequently framed as a stabilizing constitutional measure rather than as a democratic rupture. National newspapers in particular foregrounded order restoration and strengthening constitutional authority, reinforcing narratives of executive legitimacy.

Conversely, regional newspapers demonstrated greater attentiveness to potential threats to democratic governance and civil liberties. By highlighting possible erosion of institutional autonomy and public trust, these newspapers foregrounded normative democratic concerns. This divergence reveals how framing functions at both problem-definition and moral-evaluation levels (Entman, 1993). While national dailies defined the problem as instability requiring correction, regional outlets were more inclined to evaluate the moral and constitutional implications of the corrective action.

The interplay between stability-oriented framing and rights-based framing reflects the inherent tension within emergency governance discourse. Emergency declarations simultaneously promise restoration and risk overreach. The media's role in navigating this tension becomes crucial for democratic consolidation (Aiyede, 2021). In this case, newspapers neither fully legitimized nor wholly de-legitimized the declaration; instead, they constructed a layered discourse where security necessity coexisted with democratic caution.

Another important interpretive dimension concerns source attribution patterns. Although not uniform, many reports relied significantly on government and security officials as primary sources. This source reliance may contribute to framing alignment with official narratives, as elite voices often shape problem definition in political crises. However, the presence of opposition voices and civil society perspectives in certain reports indicates that counter-frames were not entirely excluded.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Nigerian newspapers performed a hybrid function during the Rivers State emergency. They acted partly as stabilizing communicators by emphasizing order restoration and security concerns. Simultaneously, they retained elements of watchdog journalism by raising questions about democratic governance and constitutional proportionality.

This hybrid performance reflects the broader structural condition of Nigerian media, situated between normative democratic ideals and political-institutional pressured coverage, framing patterns, tonal orientation, source attribution, and democratic implications. By anchoring the analysis in Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), the study sought to understand not only what was reported but how the declaration was constructed and interpreted within the media space.

Drawing on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the Nigerian newspapers performed a hybrid role that did not merely reflect the crisis events as they happened, but also constructive to its democratic implications and constitutional resolution. They functioned as stabilizing communicators by foregrounding order restoration and security concerns. They were also able to retain elements of watchdog journalism by highlighting democratic sensitivities and constitutional debates. This dual performance reflects the broader structural condition of Nigerian media, positioned between normative democratic expectations and political-institutional realities.

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