

# **DIRECTION OF NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER REJOINDERS**

ENO AKPABIO

*University of Lagos, Lagos*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examined rejoinders by corporate bodies and public figures to news stories and editorials in two Nigerian newspapers from 1999–2001 with a view to determining which type of rejoinders – mild or adversarial – were favoured. The findings of the paper clearly indicates that majority of rejoinders were adversarial containing abusive language directed at journalists and media organizations. The paper takes the position that these rejoinders point to the scant regard in which the Nigerian print media is held and recommends that the cherished value of balance in helping to reverse this worrisome trend.

*Keywords: rejoinders, Nigerian, direction, mild & adversarial*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Individuals, organizations, government and myriads of groups sometimes find themselves at the receiving end of false, misleading and malicious reports in the media. Such unbecoming reporting may result from the imperfect nature of journalism practice which makes précis of news events based on subjective choices. It could come from the sloppiness of practitioners or their deliberate action. Deliberate action in the sense of becoming willing tools in the hands of persons or groups who have scores to settle. The overall effect of these reports is that individuals and organizations suffer damage to reputation.

All these, of course, raise the question of accountability of the media as it is given that freedom has corresponding responsibility. So even though freedom of speech and of the media is an integral and one daresay cherished part of democracies, the media is not at liberty to damage the reputation and image of individuals and organizations. That is why libel and defamation laws have been put in place to curb the excesses of the media. But the concern for accountability goes beyond the legal framework because as McQuail (1990: 180–181) opines, it is not a case of dealing with a single mechanism hence the proposition that media accountability should meet three general criteria:

1. They should respect rights to free publication
2. They should prevent or limit harm arising from publication to individuals as well as to society
3. They should promote positive aspects of publication rather than merely being restrictive.

While the first and third of these criteria talk about free expression and media responsibility to society, the second has more relevance to this study as it has to do with “harm” to individuals in society.

In the Nigerian context, the various unions and associations within the media industry have provisions for addressing grievances arising from the activities and conduct of journalists and their various media establishments. In fact, almost without exception, they all subscribe to the truth and balance to wit, the presentation of all sides of an issue. But in practice these are not strictly adhered to. Part of the reason for this is the ethnic or political slant of the media establishment as exemplified by the publisher. In fact Abati (2000: 91) puts it succinctly when he observed that:

To speak of a newspaper in Africa (and Nigeria) without a political interest may amount to an insistence on the impossible. The pressures of survival in the continent and its peculiar historical trajectory would seem to make advocacy journalism inevitable.

But this is not the whole story. In attempts to pander to pecuniary advantage, individual and institutions suffer damage to reputation in the hands of the media. And getting redress through the fairness mechanism might prove a daunting task. The Nigerian Press Council which is supposed to sanction erring publications is actually a toothless bulldog as media houses can and do ignore its rulings.

In any case the growing realization of the power of public opinion, which is in turn driven by the media, has encouraged many to join issues with the media when they are confronted with these unbecoming news reports. Many write rejoinders to the newspapers and magazines concerned. Such rebuttals are placed under “Letters to the Editors”. In some instances and realizing the grave mistake that had been made, editors do give a little more prominence by boxing such rejoinders and making appropriate apologies. Some individuals and groups not trusting the treatment to be given their rejoinders, simply buy space in another publication or the offending publication to explain their own side of the story.

Whatever format one chooses in registering one’s protest two major strains appear in rejoinders: the mild and the adversarial. According to RELATE in its issue of February 10, 1989 many Public Relations Executives (PREs) favour “conciliation and maintaining a good relationship with the media” (Salu 1994: 99). This is the highpoint of the mild strain in rejoinders. The adversarial approach on the other hand involves confronting the media. Herb Schertz former Vice President of Mobil’s Public Affairs is widely associated with this method. He consistently engaged the press in “energetic counterattacks” (Vivian 1995: 292).

There can be no doubt that the mild approach is influenced largely by the power the media wields. The hypodermic needle, speeding bullet and other bedfellows of the power of the press theory may have been discredited but many still realize that the press is best as an ally than a foe. The way headlines are

cast, subtle innuendos contained in news stories, cartoons, etc. can turn the tide of public opinion against individuals or groups with attendant adverse consequences.

In spite of this, Schmertz credits adversarial rejoinders for improvement in media coverage and business of Mobil during his tenure (Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994: 300). It would appear that the media realizing that it would be taken on, apparently would exercise greater caution in their dealing with Mobil and other difficult customers.

Rejoinders seem to say a lot about attitude towards the media. If the media is seen as critical to success, rejoinders are bound to be mild – correcting a wrong impression while leaving the door open for continued good relationship. This is in spite of the fact that serious damage to reputation may have been done in the offending report. Adversarial rejoinders, on the other hand, indicate a suspicious attitude to and scant regard about the media and media professionals. They are usually characterized by combative language.

## 1. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE MEDIA'S QUEST FOR RESPECTABILITY

In any sphere of human endeavor, subscription to high ethical standards has many rewards including respectability. Thus organizations, professional bodies, religious organizations etc. whose activities are guided by ethical codes are respected and valued. This truism applies equally to the media. In fact it is the quest for respectable and responsible press that informed the commission on freedom of the press (Hutchins Commission) (Vivian 1995: 419).

The commission and its work became the precursor of the social responsibility theory. The main principles of the theory which on the whole is meant to bring about high ethical standards and respectability are:

1. Media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society.
2. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
3. In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of law and established institutions.
4. The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offence to minority groups.
5. The media as a whole should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to various points of view and rights to reply.
6. Society and the public, following the first named principle, have a right to expect high standards of performance and intervention can be justified to secure the, or a, public good.
7. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employees and the market (McQuail 1990: 117–118).

There can be no doubt that these principles when put in practice would add value to media practice. This would translate to media operating within high standards of information dissemination practice, having a concern for truth and guided by accuracy, objectivity as well as the cherished value of balance. It means media that would do nothing that is antithetical to society's well-being and progress.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The media has and, is still being used to fight private wars, settle scores, and demonize people and nations amongst other evils. And one sure way or barometer of the level of performance of the media is the study of rejoinders – a feedback to the media on their performance.

The study therefore sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the direction – mild or adversarial – of Nigerian newspaper rejoinders?
2. What constitutes the themes and issues in Nigerian newspaper rejoinders?
3. What is the character of the writers of rejoinders?
4. Does there exist a relationship between publications, themes and issues treated in rejoinders as well as the character of rejoinder writers and direction of Nigerian newspaper rejoinders?

## 3. METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY

Two Nigerian newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Punch*, were studied to discover what kinds of rejoinders were favoured. The editions of the paper covered a period of three years 1999, 2000 and 2001. The publications used for the study were deliberately chosen because they appeal to different segments. *The Guardian* is aimed at the middle and upper class segment. It is characterized by high intellectual content and detailed treatment of stories. *The Punch* on the other hand is a mass circulation newspaper marked by simple language and shorter news stories. Both are national dailies that circulate in most urban centers in Nigeria. Rejoinders used for this study were those by corporate bodies both in the public and private sectors of the economy and public figures reacting specifically to news and editorials carried in the two newspapers. These rejoinders are found in the “Letters to the Editors” column of the two newspapers and some took the form of advertorials. Excluded from this study are rejoinders by individuals reacting to contents of the two newspapers. Rejoinders by groups and organizations to advertorials and opinion pieces also are not reflected in this study and the findings.

## 4. FINDINGS

There were one hundred and sixty six (166) rejoinders that satisfied the criterion of being reaction of corporate bodies and public figures to news and editorials carried in the two newspapers.

The study found out that *The Punch* newspaper had more rejoinders (86) than *The Guardian* newspaper (80 rejoinders) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distribution of Rejoinders in Nigerian Newspapers.

YEAR	NEWSPAPER	NO. OF REJOINDERS	%
1999	The Punch	36	21.7
	The Guardian	14	8.4
2000	The Punch	29	17.5
	The Guardian	51	30.7
2001	The Punch	15	9.0
	The Guardian	21	12.7
TOTAL		166	100

As regards themes, organizational issues understandably attracted more rejoinders (41.6%). Understandably, because organizations guide their image scrupulously and would respond promptly to any perceived attempt to damage their reputation or image which must have been cultivated over time. Individuals who wished to correct misconceptions or join issues with the media constituted 24.7% while themes bordering on government affairs and politics constituted 23.5%. Issues involving associations such as town unions, ethnic groups etc. had very few rejoinders (10.2%) (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Themes of Rejoinders.

THEMES	NO. OF REJOINDERS	%
Personal Issues	41	24.7
Organizational Issues	69	41.6
Association Affairs	17	10.2
Governance And Politics	39	23.5
TOTAL	166	100

From Table 3 more rejoinders emanated from corporate bodies (41.6%) such as banks, manufacturing companies, the Police, examination bodies etc. Individuals who wrote rejoinders accounted for 24.7% while those from government sources constituted 18.7%. Associations and politicians accounted for 10.2% and 4.8% respectively.

**Table 3.** Character of Rejoinder Writers.

CHARACTER	NO. OF REJOINDERS	%
Individuals	41	24.7
Associations	17	10.2
Corporate Bodies	69	41.6
Politicians	08	4.8
Government Officials	31	18.7
TOTAL	166	100

As regards types, the rejoinders in the mild category were 60 constituting 36.1% while the ones in the adversarial category were 106 constituting 63.9% (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Types of rejoinders in The Guardian and The Punch newspapers 1999–2001.

TYPES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Mild	60	36.1
Adversarial	106	63.9
TOTAL	166	100

Cross tabulation of rejoinders with publications revealed that *The Punch* newspaper had more rejoinders – adversarial and mild – than *The Guardian* newspaper (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Publication by Type of Rejoinders.

NEWSPAPER	TYPE OF REJOINDER		TOTAL
	ADVERSARIAL	MILD	
The Punch	54 (32.5%)	32 (19.3%)	86 (51.8%)
The Guardian	51 (30.7%)	29 (17.5%)	80 (48.2%)
TOTAL	105	61	166 (100%)

Majority of the rejoinders emanating from corporate bodies were in the adversarial category (28.9%) followed by those from government and political sources (16.9%) while association and personal rejoinders accounted for 5.4% and 4.5%. As regards mild rejoinders, organizations also took the lead (12.7%) followed by personal rejoinders (10.2%), government and politicians (6.6%) and association sources (4.8%) (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Themes of Rejoinders by Type.

THEMES	TYPE OF REJOINDER		TOTAL
	ADVERSARIAL	MILD	
Personal Issues	24 (4.5%)	17 (10.2%)	41 (24.7%)
Organizational Issues	48 (28.9%)	21 (12.7%)	69 (41.6%)
Association Affairs	08 (4.8%)	09 (5.4%)	17 (10.2%)
Governance and Politics	28 (16.9)	11 (6.6%)	39 (23.5)
TOTAL			166

When character of rejoinder writers was crossed with type of rejoinders, corporate bodies took the lead in both the adversarial and mild categories (28.9% and 12.7% respectively). Individual rejoinders led those emanating from government, association and political sources which followed in that order (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** Character of Rejoinders by Type.

CHARACTER	TYPE OF REJOINDERS		TOTAL
	ADVERSARIAL	MILD	
Individuals	24 (4.5%)	17 (10.2%)	41 (24.7%)
Associations	8 (4.8%)	9 (5.4%)	17 (10.2%)
Corporate Bodies	48 (28.9%)	21 (12.7%)	69 (41.6%)
Politicians	6 (3.6%)	1 (1.2%)	7 (4.2%)
Government Officials	22 (13.2%)	9 (5.4%)	31 (18.7%)
TOTAL			166

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 MILD REJOINDERS

This category of rejoinders avoided angry outbursts and abusive language but rather placed emphasis on providing information aimed at correcting erroneous impression in the original write up. Also noticeable is an attempt to create positive mental pictures about the individuals or organizations concerned in the minds of readers. Sixty (60) rejoinders were identified in this category and a sampling of content is germane.

In a rejoinder titled “That Ikeja Roundabout”<sup>1</sup>, Ayodeji Ajayi, Head of Corporate Affairs, Gulf Bank of Nigeria starts off by thanking *The Punch* newspaper on the successes the paper had recorded. Ajayi wrote that he found

<sup>1</sup> Re: That Ikeja roundabout” Sunday Punch, 11 June 2000, p. 17.

the original story “very interesting” but there was need to provide more information. The information was to sound it loud and clear that the beautification of the roundabout (contained in the original story) was done by Gulf Bank as part of its community relations activities.

One Elder R. O. A. Soyebi, in another example of a mild rejoinder, wrote in “response to your (*The Guardian*) publication about the leadership battle in the Celestial Church.” The rejoinder titled “Celestial Church and the Court Judgement”<sup>2</sup> simply traces the succession battle that has polarized the church since the death of its founder and head, Pa Oschoffa as well as how the church is depending on God to provide a new leader.

In “Re: Corps Members Protest Poor Feeding”<sup>3</sup>, the writer claimed that he did grant an interview to the paper’s correspondent nothing that as a civil servant he is “quite aware of the rules guiding the conduct of the civil service in relation to granting press interview”

The mild approach to writing rejoinders was also at play when Edoreh E. Agbah, Head Public Affairs Department of Pipelines and Products Marketing Company Limited (PPMC) wrote on “Ughelli Pipeline Fire Put Off”.<sup>4</sup> He called the attention of the editor of *The Punch* to the story which credited PPMC with ownership of the pipeline in question. When in actual fact it belonged to the Shell Petroleum Development Company Limited (SPDC). Agbah therefore called on the newspaper to correct the mix up.

A twist to the mild strain is found in the rejoinder “FRSC sacks officer for taking bribe.”<sup>5</sup> G. A. Etim of the public relations department of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) Delta Sector Command expressed his dissatisfaction with the slant given the story. He expressed his desire for a situation where readers would be informed of the true situations of things, to wit, that it was actually motorists that were charged to court for offering bribes to road marshals. Similarly that the officers dismissed by the commission was “an addition to the main story and did not deserve to be highlighted in the headline.” All in all, the writer of the rejoinder wants to teach the media professional concerned the proper way of going about their duties.

An attempt to educate is also found in the rejoinder “SSS, NDLEA men flout quit order at Ports”.<sup>6</sup> The management of Plant Quarantine Service expressed dissatisfaction by being listed among agencies flouting government’s quit order at the ports. Rather it goes on to throw light on the important roles being played by the agency, one of which is the prevention of incursion of foreign plants’ pest into the country.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Re: Celestial Church and the Court Judgement,” *The Guardian* on Saturday, 20 July 2000, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> “Re: Corps Members Protest Poor Feeding” *The Punch* Friday April 16, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> “Re: Ughelli Pipeline fire put off” *The Punch* Thursday 8 September 1999, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> “Re: FRSC sacks four officers for taking bribe” *The Punch* Monday 25 October 1999, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> “Re: SSS, NDLEA men, others flout quit order at Ports” *The Punch* Tuesday, 12 October 1999, p. 8.



George Obiozor former Director General of the Nigeria Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), in his rejoinder “Obiozor returnsto NIIA”<sup>7</sup> quotes copiously from the offending report:

All activities at the NIIA was brought to a halt as the astonished workers who watched Akindele’s forcible ejection from the Director General’s wing of the complex milled around in groups discussing the strange development. Visibly embarrassed Akindele, after being forced to relocate to his former office as research professor in the complex was seen making frantic efforts to contact Abuja on the development.

He complained that the story characterized him as a “desperate and lawless person” thereby causing him anguish and sorrow. He then goes on to relate what actually transpired and ended on a note of appeal to *The Guardian* newspaper to cease from being an instrument for castigating and maligning his person.

## 5.2 ADVERSARIAL REJOINDERS

Most of the rejoinders (106) in the publications studied were adversarial employing abusive language and pouring vituperations on journalists and the media houses they represent. A sampling of the rejoinders reveals the level to which journalists and media houses are held in contempt.

As regards the news media, the rejoinders see them as creating “erroneous impression” according to Mallam Yahaya Ozi-Sadiq, Chief Public Relations Officer, National Hospital for Women and Children in his rebuttal titled “High Bills Query on FSP Hospital Status”<sup>8</sup>. Other rebuttals accused the publications concerned of being “unprofessional and highly misleading,”<sup>9</sup> “libellous and tendentious”<sup>10</sup> as well as “a study in imaginative journalism.”<sup>11</sup> Stories were also described as “literary collection of idle gossips,”<sup>12</sup> and as containing “innuendos and gross misrepresentation,”<sup>13</sup> as well as “outright falsehood and distortion of facts”<sup>14</sup> amongst others.

---

<sup>7</sup> “Re: Obiozor returns to NIIA” *The Guardian* 23 June 1999, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> “Re: High Bills Query on FSP Hospital,” *The Guardian* on Sunday, 30 January 2000, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> “The News Story: Our Position,” *The Guardian*, 1 March 2000, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> “Rejoinder on the Publications of the Weekly New Nigeria Newspapers and the Weekend Vanguard on the Recent Students’ Demonstration,” *The Guardian*, 4 May 2000, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> “Disclaimer: THISDAY, Saturday Tribune False Reports on Engr. Tosho Alabi, Former General Manager, NITEL” *The Punch*, 21 December 2000, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> “Re: Musa’s Exit Stirs Controversy,” *The Punch*, 26 May 2000, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> “Re: Musa’s Exit Stirs Controversy,” *The Punch*, 26 May 2000, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> “Re: Governor Udenwa’s Propaganda,” *The Punch* 10 August 2000, p. 8.

Of course journalists were not left out in the adversarial rejoinders. Their reports were described as the “figment of the writer’s imagination”<sup>15</sup> “the handiwork of evil minds”<sup>16</sup> and “fabrication of an overcharged imagination.”<sup>17</sup>

An example of an adversarial rejoinder should serve to drive the anger of those at the receiving end home. In “How AD caucus chose Falae”<sup>18</sup> Senator Ayo Fasanmi National Vice Chairman, Alliance for Democracy (AD) South West Zone, expressed the strong view that the story contained distortions and inaccuracies. He then proceeded to specifically address these wrongs. He pointed out that it was “malicious” for the reporter to say that “all the old horses, mostly Awoist voted against Ige” since the whole affair was by secret ballot and hence difficult to tell who voted for or against whom. Continuing he posited that it was “false and wicked” to assert that Chief Cornelius Adebayo voted for Falae as the man (Chief Adebayo) had been staying in Canada since December 3, 1998! This clearly meant that he was not around to vote for any of the contestants. No wonder Fasanmi concludes that:

The story carries along with it deliberate intention to cause confusion and disquiet within the AD leadership and followership, and that it was a plan specifically set out to destroy the party’s credibility profile.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper examined reaction of corporate bodies and public figures to the content of Nigerian print media, specifically news stories. The findings clearly indicate that corporate bodies were found to have written more rejoinders than any other group or individuals. This category also accounted for more mild and adversarial rejoinders. The study also found that there were more adversarial than mild rejoinders thus pointing to the contempt in which journalists and media houses are held going by the language employed in rejoinders. Strangely, most of the stories directly affecting the publications studied were simply published without any reaction from editors.

Flowing from the above findings that study makes the following recommendations:

1. The Nigerian media should retrace its steps back to the cherished value of balanced reporting. The views of any party mentioned in a news report must be sought. Excuses that the party was “unavailable for comment” will not do. In fact this phrase has been used to portray the media as concerned about balance and the party so reported as

---

<sup>15</sup> Gemade Warms up for 2003, Chagouri to Bankroll Polls” – Saturday Tribune 16/12/2000” *The Punch* 19 December 2000, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> “Re: Governor Udenwa’s Propaganda,” *The Punch* 10 August 2000, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> “Rejoinder: Primary School Teachers’ Strike”, *The Guardian* 26 April 2001, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> “Re: How AD caucus chose Falae” *The Guardian* 7 February 1999, p. 15.

unserious – not being available at critical moments. In my thinking news reports should not be published which do not correctly reflect balance. This way, adversarial rejoinders would be kept to a minimum if not completely eradicated.

To underline the need for balance which is really the main reason informing most of the adversarial rejoinders is this reaction from Alhaji Shehu Musa of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC):

It is no doubt beyond the confines of journalistic decency to publish and credit some unfounded statements to a “source”. I wonder why your reporter did not deem it fit, for balanced reporting, to crosscheck his stories with me during his beat to the Commission as he would know that I was attending to my duties throughout the period covered by the report ... In my assessment that article was a calculated but vain attempt to smear my image and cause disaffection between me, our respected President and Dr. Abel Guobadia.<sup>19</sup>

2. In publishing the views of the other side comments should not be slanted or taken out of context as this will elicit an adversarial rejoinder.
3. The Nigerian Press Council should be strengthened and given adequate powers to sanction erring publications and practitioners so that journalism would continue to retain its pride of place in the Nigerian polity
4. Media houses who do not see the merit in a rejoinder should make their views known with a detailed postscript so that any erroneous impression about the level of professionalism of staff would be promptly dispelled.

## REFERENCES

Abati, Reuben. 2000.

The Press, Politics and Society in Nigeria. In: Tunji Oseni and Lanre Idowu (eds.), *Hosting the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Nigerian Press*. Lagos: Solasprint (Nigeria) Limited .

Cutlip, S. M, Center, A. H. and Broom, G. M. 1994.

*Effective Public Relations*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

McQuail, Dennis. 1990.

*Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publication.

---

<sup>19</sup> “Re: Musa’s Exit Stirs Controversy,” *The Punch*, 26 May 2000, p. 8.

Salu, Adekunle. 1994.

*Understanding Public Relations*. Lagos: Talkback Publishers.

Vivian, John. 1995.

*The Media of Mass Communication*. Needham Heights, Mass: Allyn and Bacon.

**About the author:** Eno Akpabio *Ph.D* is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos. Before joining the academia he had practised public relations in the Nigerian banking industry for six years. His research interest spans communication and society, popular culture and applied and indigenous communication He is the author of *African Communications Systems: An Introductory Text* (2003).