

Discourse, Power, and Corporate Responsibility: A CDA Approach to Oil Spill Narratives in Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract- Oil spillage in the Niger Delta represents a persistent environmental crisis with severe socio-economic and ecological consequences. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Nigerian newspapers—The Punch and Vanguard—frame oil spill incidents, revealing the underlying power structures, corporate responsibility, and state inaction. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the study analyses textual features, discursive practices, and sociocultural contexts to uncover dominant narratives, linguistic strategies, and their implications for public perception, policy-making, and environmental justice. Findings indicate that media reports often construct oil spill narratives through emotionally charged language, historical references, and victim-oppressor framings, emphasising community suffering while downplaying corporate accountability. The government is frequently absent from these narratives, reinforcing patterns of regulatory failure and corporate impunity. While the media serves as a platform for environmental advocacy, its framing strategies sometimes reflect broader ideological biases that obscure deeper systemic issues. The study concludes that a more critical and investigative media approach is essential to holding corporations and the government accountable, fostering environmental justice, and influencing more robust policy interventions.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Oil Spillage, Media Framing, Environmental Justice, Corporate Accountability*

I. INTRODUCTION

Oil spillage in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents a paramount environmental issue, manifesting as a multi-dimensional crisis that profoundly impacts the region's economic fabric, ecological systems, public health infrastructure, social cohesion, and political milieu. The depth of this crisis is articulated in the scholarly works of Aro et al. (2010) and Atakpo & Ayolabi (2009), which detail how oil spills, originating from a variety of

sources including operational failures, equipment defects, or intentional sabotage, unleash crude oil into marine and terrestrial habitats. Once released, the oil can spread extensively across water surfaces.

The 1979 disaster at the Forcados terminal, operated by Shell in the West Niger Delta, epitomises the potential scale of such catastrophes. This event alone led to the spillage of approximately 560,000 barrels of oil, inflicting severe damage on land, vital mangrove ecosystems, and the Atlantic Ocean (Imobighe, 2011). Furthermore, an alarming historical pattern emerges from data collated over four decades, with the Directorate of Petroleum Resources (DPR, 1997) documenting over 6,000 oil spill incidents—an average of 150 spills per year. Between 1976 and 1996, the Niger Delta experienced 647 spill events, resulting in the loss of 2,369,000 barrels of oil. Notably, a substantial fraction of this oil—amounting to 1,820,410 barrels—was not recuperated, thus seeping into and contaminating the ecological matrix (Atakpo & Ayolabi, 2009).

The construction-related impacts of the oil industry significantly distort the region's hydrological patterns, particularly affecting the seasonally inundated freshwater swamps and the brackish ecosystems of the mangrove forests. These alterations provoke a cascade of ecological consequences, undermining agricultural yields, decimating fish habitats, and compromising the quality of drinking water (Anyakora & Coker, 2009). The extensive dredging practices employed by multinational oil companies have further exacerbated these disruptions, instigating soil erosion and causing structural damage to buildings, thereby dislocating communities.

Oil spillage in the Niger Delta remains one of Nigeria's most pressing environmental challenges, causing widespread ecological devastation, economic dislocation, and public health crises. Despite the frequency and severity of these spills, their representation in the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, influencing policy responses, and holding corporate actors accountable. However, the way oil spills are framed in Nigerian newspapers often reflects broader power dynamics, where corporate negligence, government inaction, and community struggles are either amplified or downplayed through specific linguistic and discursive strategies.

Existing studies on environmental discourse in Nigeria have largely focused on the scientific, economic, and political aspects of oil spills, with limited attention to how media representations shape public understanding and policy responses. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers report oil spills in the Niger Delta, focusing on narratives, linguistic framing, and their implications for public discourse and environmental policy.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Pioneering research in media studies, such as those conducted by Fowler (1991) and Fowler et al. (1979), has substantially leaned on the British cultural studies framework, positing that news is not a mere mirror of reality but a construct significantly shaped by an array of political, economic, and cultural factors. These studies extend their focus to the intricate linguistic elements—the 'tools' of discourse analysis, including transitivity in syntax, lexical configurations, modality, and speech acts. Renowned discourse analysts like van Dijk (1988a, 1988b, 1992, 1995) have further expanded the application of these theories, critically examining news discourse within various contexts such as international news, racial representation in media, and the portrayal of marginalised groups.

Such foundational works have resonated within the Nigerian academic landscape, inspiring local scholars to adopt and adapt these frameworks to explore the nuanced narratives and structures of Nigerian media

content, particularly in news reporting. Studies have predominantly concentrated on dissecting elements like news headlines (Taiwo, 2004; Chiluwa, 2011), feature articles (Olowe, 1993; Chude, 2003; Daniel, 2006), and editorials (Odebunmi, 2007), with comparatively fewer dedicating their focus to news reports (Alo, 2007; Chiluwa, 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Omenugha, 2007).

Alo (2007) delved into the structural and linguistic tactics news reports employ to represent individuals and their identities, revealing how detailed descriptions are strategically used to frame persons within news narratives. From a gender-aware perspective, Omenugha (2007) scrutinised the pervasive sexism within Nigerian news discourse, highlighting a pronounced gender bias that marginalises female voices in favour of male-centric narratives.

While Chiluwa (2011b) blended CDA with Corpus Linguistics to investigate lexical choices depicting militia groups, Chiluwa (2007) approached news discourse through stylistic analysis, albeit without a focus on underlying ideological representations. The present research endeavours to transcend the scope of these prior studies by adopting a dual-focused approach that interrogates both the content (product) and the creation (process) of news narratives.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) distinguishes itself in discourse studies through its interdisciplinary approach, avoiding adherence to a single theory or discipline. This flexibility enables CDA to integrate ethical considerations into its analysis, setting it apart from other methods. It examines the complex relationship between text and its broader social, historical, and cognitive contexts, uncovering embedded ideologies and power structures.

CDA focuses on how language serves as a tool for manipulation and control, revealing hidden meanings that shape perception and behaviour. It addresses broader societal issues such as inequality, discrimination, and democratic values, aiming to expose power mechanisms and biases in discourse.

Van Dijk (1998) describes CDA as a method that scrutinises texts to reveal how discourse reinforces dominance and inequality, while Fairclough (1995) highlights its role in analysing the intersection of language, power, and social structure.

O'Halloran (2003) asserts that CDA extends beyond linguistic analysis to examine the relationship between language, societal structures, and ideologies. Huckin (1995) defines it as a socially aware and ethically driven approach that uncovers power imbalances and motivates corrective action. By exposing hidden ideologies in discourse, CDA equips individuals to question and resist manipulative narratives, fostering critical awareness and social change.

CDA's critical stance contextualises texts within social, economic, political, and historical frameworks, offering deeper insight into their impact. Weiss and Wodak (2003) emphasise its role in unveiling ideologies that shape power structures, while Wodak (2001) clarifies that CDA is not about fault-finding but recognising complexities within discourse. Through various analytical approaches, CDA provides a comprehensive understanding of how language constructs and reflects societal realities, empowering scholars and practitioners to challenge ideological influences and contribute to social transformation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers frame oil spillage in the Niger Delta. Data were collected from news reports, editorials, and feature articles published between 2021 and 2024, retrieved from newspaper archives and online databases. Four reports from both *The Punch* and *Vanguard* were analysed. A purposive sampling method was employed to select articles most representative of oil spill events, community responses, corporate actions, and governmental interactions. Specifically, a total of twenty (20) reports—ten (10) from each newspaper—were selected to provide a balanced

analysis and comprehensive representation of media framing practices.

The analysis is guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model—examining textual features (lexical choices, syntax, and rhetorical strategies), discursive practices (news production, distribution, and intertextuality), and sociocultural practices (broader socio-political and economic implications). By integrating CDA, this study uncovers the role of media discourse in shaping public perception, environmental justice, and policy-making in Nigeria.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Environmental Degradation as a Result of Oil Extraction Activities

Oil extraction activities have led to severe environmental degradation, particularly in resource-rich but vulnerable regions. This section employs Critical Discourse Analysis and Halliday's Transitivity Framework to examine how language portrays the environmental impacts of these activities. By analysing agency and processes, we reveal how responsibility is attributed and how the discourse frames the relationship between oil extraction and ecological damage.

Excerpt 1

“The Ibioete village in Odoroikot community of Mkpato Enin Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State has lamented the level of destruction to its residents following the recent oil spills which occurred in the area. It was gathered that the spill which occurred in July, devastated large farmlands and led to the loss of aquatic lives in the affected areas. The community in a statement in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State on Monday, by its village head, Eteidung Akpan J. Ekpo, and Secretary, Elder Akpan I. Akpan, recalled the devastating effect of previous oil spills which occurred in the area between 1996 and 2012. It disclosed that compensation was paid to the community by the ExxonMobil and Okoro Oilfield-AMNI International Development companies after a visit and confirmation by the oil companies.”

Source: A'Ibom community laments as oil spillage destroys aquatic lives, farmlands. *The Punch*, August 21, 2023 (Patrick Odey)

The language used in Excerpt 1 is intentionally emotive and paints a vivid picture of the suffering caused by the oil spill. Words such as 'lamented,' 'devastation,' 'destruction,' and 'loss' are carefully chosen to evoke sympathy and emphasise the severity of the environmental damage. The use of 'lamented' in particular signals a deep emotional response, suggesting that the community feels powerless and overwhelmed by the consequences of the spill.

At the level of discursive practices, Excerpt 1 demonstrates notable intertextuality: references to both historical and current oil spills link the community's present experience to its past, emphasising the continuity of the problem and positioning the current spill within the broader discourse of environmental degradation in oil-producing regions. The historical references act as a means of framing the event as part of a long-standing issue rather than a one-time occurrence, drawing attention to the repetitive nature of environmental harm and suggesting systemic failure on the part of oil companies to prevent further spills despite past compensation and interventions.

Excerpt 1 is produced as a formal statement by the community's leaders. By choosing to make a public statement, the community is not only appealing to local and national audiences but also potentially to international stakeholders who might pressure the oil companies or government into action. This public airing of grievances suggests that internal processes—such as compensation by the oil companies—are insufficient or unsatisfactory, leading the community to seek broader recognition and external support. The production of this text can be seen as an act of resistance, where the community asserts its voice in a situation where it has historically been marginalised.

Excerpt 2

“The statement which was copied to the Executive Chairman of Mkpato Enin, the Paramount Ruler and Stakeholders of community reads in part: 'It's unfortunate that Ibioete Village, Odoroikot community in Mkpato Enin LGA, is suffering from the damages caused by the recent Oil Spillage along it

Atlantic Ocean. History will tell that this same issues happened in 1996 and in 2012 when the concerned oil company i.e. ExxonMobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited and Okoro Oilfield-AMNI International Development company limited visited the community, Tested the water and confirmed that it was a reality. Notwithstanding, the community and of course the Mkpato Enin Local Government Area was compensated accordingly. Based on this, the activities of these oil companies again have led to another oil spill this year (July 2023). This has caused a lot of damages to our fishermen at the Atlantic Ocean and within the Creeks/Rivers. We use this medium to draw the attention of the state government and the oil companies concerned to, with a matter of urgency, mop up the spilled oil and pay compensation to the affected fishermen and community accordingly.”

Source: A'Ibom community laments as oil spillage destroys aquatic lives, farmlands. The Punch, August 21, 2023 (Patrick Odey)

At the textual level, the linguistic features of the statement—vocabulary, grammar, and structure—are important in creating its meaning and effect. The words are chosen carefully, building a narrative of victimhood, historic injustice, and corporate irresponsibility. Emotional terms like 'unfortunate,' 'damages,' 'suffering,' and 'a lot of damages' foster a sense of helplessness and trauma, emphasising the degree of environmental destruction perpetrated on the victimised community.

The inclusion of 'History will tell that this same issue happened in 1996 and in 2012' is an appeal to precedent, placing the current crisis within a larger history of repeated oil spillage and environmental injustice. By citing previous occurrences, the assertion adds credence to the reality that corporate negligence is not random but methodical. The words 'Tested the water and confirmed that it was a reality' imply that there was an initial denial or scepticism on the part of corporations, consistent with a broader pattern where communities in the Niger Delta struggle to have their suffering acknowledged before any action is taken.

Excerpt 3

“Oregha, an autonomous community of about 2,000 people, in Uvwie Local Government Area of Delta State, has been hit by gas and oil pollution from a pipeline leakage. Residents of the community, which plays host to two pipelines, told the Renewlyn Development Initiative, RDI, monitors that in the later part of 2023 they started noticing that one of the gas pipelines in the bush was making a whistling noise and spraying gas and sand into the atmosphere. They had reported the incident to the firm that owns the pipeline, but got no response. Later, the pipeline started oozing black oil that has now found its way to the Orhega River. Chairman of Oregha Community, Chief Mackson Edeki, who is a fisherman told RDI monitors that after the initial attempt to get the attention of the firm, he continued to observe developments in the environment until he noticed corrosive chemicals in the Oregha River.”

Source: Delta community raises alarm over gas, oil leakage from pipeline. Vanguard, September 5, 2024

The language used in the above excerpt constructs a narrative of environmental crisis and corporate negligence, shaping the reader's perception of the incident. The clause 'has been hit by gas and oil pollution from a pipeline leakage' employs passive voice, which effectively distances the causative agent (the oil company) from direct responsibility. This framing makes the oil spill appear as a natural or inevitable disaster, rather than the result of human error, regulatory failure, or corporate misconduct.

Beyond word choice, the grammar and structure of the excerpt play a crucial role in shaping its meaning. The use of passive voice ('has been hit by pollution') serves to minimise direct corporate culpability, shifting focus away from the actors responsible for the disaster. This aligns with broader discursive patterns in oil spill reporting, where corporate liability is often downplayed in favour of neutral or impersonal descriptions of environmental damage. The chronological sequencing of events—from a whistling noise to gas leakage, then to oil spillage, and finally to corrosive chemicals in the water—mirrors the worsening of environmental conditions due to inaction. Additionally, the cause-effect

structure ('had reported the incident... but got no response') explicitly links corporate inaction to worsening environmental degradation, subtly assigning indirect responsibility to regulatory bodies that should have ensured compliance and oversight.

Excerpt 4

“Obrotobo Goddey, 30-year-old community youth said: 'I am a surveyor by profession. In the course of my survey work in one of the bushes we noticed bubbling in a small point. That was last year (2023), but now it is happening in the river. The chemical is now entering the river. When I noticed this development I placed a call to the community chairman, who in turn rushed to see and then report to the company. But nothing has happened so far. It is very disturbing.' Chief Mackson Edeki, Oregha Community Chairman, added: 'There's no bunkering in this community or anything that will affect pipeline integrity so we are surprised that the leak is not being clamped at this stage. When it was whistling we never knew anything else would follow. The black oil leaking from the site of the whistling spot has destroyed our animal traps already. I am a fisherman and I fish in the Oregha River but with this incident escalating we may not be able to fish.’”

Source: Delta community raises alarm over gas, oil leakage from pipeline. Vanguard, September 5, 2024

The language used in this excerpt constructs a narrative of environmental crisis, uncertainty, and frustration, reflecting the community's helplessness in the face of corporate inaction. Through a progressive description of the oil spill's escalation, the excerpt reinforces the idea that early warning signs were ignored, allowing the crisis to worsen over time.

The statement 'Bubbling in a small point... now it is happening in the river. The chemical is now entering the river' illustrates the gradual spread of contamination, showing how what started as a localised issue has transformed into a full-scale ecological disaster. The transition from bubbling to contamination in the river serves as a cause-and-effect sequence, emphasising that timely intervention could have prevented the crisis from worsening. The use of present continuous tense ('is now entering')

reinforces the urgency of the situation, suggesting that action is needed immediately to prevent further harm.

VI. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the data examined and analysed in this study, the findings reveal how discourses in Nigerian newspapers present the problems of oil spillage in the Niger Delta through the interplay of power, corporate responsibility, and environmental justice. Newspapers such as *The Punch* and *Vanguard* construct narratives that oscillate between exposing corporate negligence, highlighting community suffering, and reinforcing state inaction. The analysis helps to understand the role of language in shaping public perception, responses, and corporate accountability.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how media discourse in Nigeria frames oil spillage in the Niger Delta, revealing the interplay of power, corporate responsibility, and environmental justice. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, it has been shown that newspapers such as *The Punch* and *Vanguard* construct narratives that oscillate between exposing corporate negligence, highlighting community suffering, and reinforcing state inaction. The analysis of textual, discursive, and sociocultural practices underscores the role of language in shaping public perception, policy responses, and corporate accountability.

The findings suggest that while the media plays a crucial role in amplifying environmental grievances, the framing of oil spills often reflects entrenched power imbalances, where corporations evade responsibility, and the government remains largely absent. The study highlights the need for a more proactive media approach that not only reports on oil spills but also critically challenges systemic injustices and demands sustainable policy interventions. Addressing these discursive gaps is crucial for fostering environmental advocacy, corporate accountability, and long-term ecological restoration in the Niger Delta.

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