

Impact of the Media on Elections and Good Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

The phenomenon of paid news endangers the functioning of an independent media when skewed to propagate a socio-political agenda. This has dire implications for the workings of democracy and good governance in the country. The crux of credible electoral outcomes as a sine qua non to good governance is more in question since citizens decisions are much more vulnerable to political advertisements and distorted news. This paper attempted to Xray the Nigeria's political system while making a succinct overview of elections, political parties and the incidence of money politics in the electoral milieu. It also appraised the impact of the media on good governance. The researcher adopted the qualitative research method and the Agenda Setting theory to analyse the role of the media in the Nigeria State. This paper finds that the media is a strong institution which plays pivotal role in forming opinion public¹, however, it affirms that the Media is susceptible to being manipulated, especially, by the political class to suit their interest to win elections and hold on to power at all costs. It therefore concluded that for the media practitioners to contribute effectively to enthroning good governance, they should, as a matter of responsibility, apply the basic principles of patriotism, accountability, transparency, and objectivity in the discharge of their duties while upholding the sanctity of truth and fairness at all times. It therefore recommended, amongst others, that the media channels, and the content they deliver, should be truly independent, free, fair, become accessible and affordable for all, to rightly perform her watchdog role towards engendering credible electoral outcomes, transparency and accountability for good governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Elections, Governance, Media, Opinion Public

Introduction

The Classical economist assumes that human behaviour is rational. However, there is strong tendency man behaves less patriotic than expected when spurred to act in particular ways, which deviates from this assumption. Accordingly, it is expected that the government in power meets citizens aspirations and uphold the mandate bestowed

¹ Opinion public posits the differing and divergent views members of the public holds true. Thus, since there is no clear and or generally accepted view about an issue by members of the public, opinions are only categorized into different publics which holds them.

through their vote power as a symbol of the Social Contract. While elections provides the platform for the citizenry to determine their representatives in government and the socio-economic policies it promotes, the decision of who to vote at the ballot still remains subject to influence by differing factors including ethno-religious, socio-political, economic amongst other factors. Therefore, the continued hues and cry for a free, fair and credible electoral process and outcomes which promotes a people-centred ideology, meeting the needs of the people, focusing on public interest, transparency and accountability cannot be overemphasized.

Dahl (1971) has argued that for a democracy to be representative, it has to be built on values like popular sovereignty, popular political participation, independent judiciary credible election based on universal adult suffrage, among other democratic values. The entrenchment of these values in a political system made. Amaryta Sen (1999) argued that democracy is a universal human value, not limited to the affluent advanced industrial societies. Similarly, there is continued increase in the usage of media in Nigeria, specifically, the new media with exodus of users across differing social media platforms. The freedom of expression is exercised by the media, by promoting democratic values cum constructively criticizing the shortcomings in policy implementation. It helps to form public opinion around issues of National discuss. Through this function the media helps to ensure increased citizens awareness and participation in the electoral and governance processes.

The Nigeria 1999 Constitution (as amended) in Section 16 (1) a, b, c, and d, and Section 16 (2) entrenched some of the principles of “good governance” as possible criteria for democratic sustainability in the country. Despite these constitutional provisions, including the social and economic policies that have been implemented by successive administrations, democratic dividends continue to elude the average Nigerian citizen. Challenges rapt in sustainable democratic structuring in the Nigerian society manifest within the context of poor welfare of the citizenry, apathy towards governance activities, lack of transparency in governance, deep rooted corruption within governance structures, electoral malfeasance, amongst others. Thus, spurring frustration and aggression in form of high-level unemployment, insecurity, insurgency, kidnappings, etc. remain the focal threat to economic advancement and democratic sustainability in Nigeria. All these happen because of poor political education and/or apathetic poise of the people towards governance issues.

The recent developments in the transformation of traditional media have made the term ‘global village’ real in Nigeria. The role of the media in shaping public perceptions about socio-political, religious and economic issues as reported in newspapers and communicated through the medium of radio, television and the social media remains largely expedient for electoral and governance outcomes in Nigeria. The media plays a central role in informing the public about what happens in the world. People rely on media such as television, the press and online to get news and updates. It is touted as the fourth pillar of government. However, is susceptible to being manipulated, especially, by the political class to suit their interest to win elections and hold on to power uninterruptedly.

The main theme of this study is to investigate the impact of the media on elections and good governance in Nigeria. The first part of the article after this introduction deals with the theoretical framework adopted for the work. The second part examines the political

history of Nigeria. The third part examined the conduct of elections in Nigeria and the role of media in elections and good governance while the last part draws inferences, conclusions and makes apposite recommendations around key findings on the subject matter. The researcher adopted the qualitative research method and the Agenda Setting theory to analyse the role of the media in engendering credible electoral outcomes and good governance the Nigeria State.

Theoretical Framework: The Agenda Setting Theory

This paper adopted the agenda setting theory as a theoretical underpinning owing to the fundamental roles the media play in determining intricately opinions of the citizenry, specifically, towards electoral and governance issues. The agenda setting theory, first introduced in 1972 in *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Drs. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, espouses how the mass media influences public communication channels in making a certain issue as a public agenda. Also known as the Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media, the theory suggests that the media sets the public agenda by telling you what to think about, although not exactly what to think. It describes a very powerful influence of the media; the ability to tell the citizenry what issues are important and how they react to them.

McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976. In the research done in 1968 they focused on two elements: awareness and information. Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign. McCombs and Shaw concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign.

The core assumption of agenda-setting theory is that the media create public awareness and raise concerns about salient issues facing the society. Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it and (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is that different media have different agenda-setting potentials. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to understand the pervasive role of the media (for example on political communication systems).

This theory is relevant to the work because it demonstrates the need for the media to be careful while exercising their freedom under the Freedom of Information Act and in communicating right to setting the opinion of the public towards a specific national issue. Moreover, the phenomenon of paid news endangers the functioning of independent media when skewed to propagate a socio-political agenda. This has dire implications for the workings of a strong democracy and good governance in the country. The crux of credible electoral outcomes as a sine qua non to good governance is more in question when citizens decisions are much more vulnerable by political advertisements and distorted news. While the media is susceptible to being manipulated, especially, by the political class to suit their interest to win elections and hold on to power uninterruptedly, it must put the

public interest and the national security at heart. This is part of the onus of the Agenda Setting Theory.

Political Structure, Political Parties and Election in Nigeria: A Succinct Overview

Nigeria's political landscape has been inundated with military interventions and unhealthy competitions since 1960. To a large extent, these incidents have shaped conversations, different forms and dynamics of politics in Nigeria today. They have also influenced democratic practices, maintenance of peace and tranquility and Nigeria's development trajectory. The transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999 served as a turning point in Nigeria's politics. So far, it has been the longest period of democratic governance in Nigeria, and one that has seen Nigeria's political landscape transition from an embryonic state towards maturity.

Nigeria is a federal constitutional republic with a presidential system. The bi-cameral National Assembly is composed of the House of Representatives (HoR) with 360 members and the Senate with 109 members. Nigeria is composed of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Each state has a Governor and a State House of Assembly. For the HoR, Senate and the State House of Assemblies (SHoA) elections, the first past the post (FPTP) system is in place. For the presidential and governorship elections, the 1999 Constitution (as amended) establishes a majority run-off system. It states in section 134 (3-4) that if the highest-scoring candidate does not obtain at least 25% of the votes cast in at least two-thirds of all the states of the Federation and the FCT - or Local Government Areas (LGAs) for the governorship elections - in the first round, a run-off takes place between the candidate who scored the highest number of votes and the candidate who has the majority of votes cast in the highest number of states (or LGAs). The tenure of the President lasts for four years, with presidential and gubernatorial candidates being disqualified if they have "been elected to such office at any two previous elections" (Section 135-2 of the 1999 Constitution as amended).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the constitutionally recognized body with the main responsibility of organising all elections in the country, including gubernatorial and local government elections (Section 153 of the 1999 Constitution as Amended). It also registers and monitors political parties, registers voters, and delimitates constituencies. After a widely adjudged incredible 2007 general elections, INEC gained some level of credibility in the outcomes of elections that followed due to the appointment of a new chairperson, Professor Attahiru Jega in 2010. The integrity of the Professor was widely acknowledged due to the introduction of many innovations that led to the improvements in the electoral system, the Chairperson's extent of institutional reform was quite evident (Final NDI Report on Nigeria's 2007 Election).

Noteworthy is to state that political parties are strategic to Nigeria's electoral system. As applied to every democracy all over the world, they are fundamental to the institutionalization and sustainability of democracy in the country. They exemplify the nucleus for interest's aggregation and articulation, political competition through periodical election. Thus, competition among these political parties is part and parcel of the democratization process.

The survival of the nation's democracy rests on the emergence of a strong and virile opposition party which helps shape government's policy decisions. It also acts as a shadow

government providing alternatives for the citizenry to express their ideological differences, one key element which democratic governance seeks to accentuate. Sadly, with the total number of political parties in Nigeria currently standing at 18, after the supreme court's recent pronouncement to uphold the deregistration of 75 political parties, Nigeria's politics is currently dominated by two major political parties: the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC).

The present political dispensation which started in 1999 witnessed many years when the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was in government and never witnessed a strong opposition until the wake of 2015 general elections. The reason for this was that the political parties which could have stood in opposition were not well organized as they were bedeviled with serious internal crisis which did not give them the opportunity to act as a virile opposition to the government in power. Again, those in the political parties were not consistent as they kept jumping from one political party to the other. The beneficiary of the internal hegemonies and wrangling in other political parties was the PDP, which to some extent consumed them because of members flocking to the ruling party on daily basis based on the notion that it was only in the PDP that they could benefit politically.

The Action Congress (AC) which came after the Alliance for Democracy (AD) in the South West and which could have acted as a virile opposition party, did not have the muscles under the presidency of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo to do so. Nigeria in the past 16 years of the PDP administration started experiencing real opposition with the emergence of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) which had six states of Lagos, Osun, Oyo, Ekiti, Ogun and Edo. These six states gave the party some level of credence and the strength to mount formidable machinery used to confront the PDP. It also set up a powerful publicity organ at the National level, headed by a lawyer and a journalist, Alhaji Lai Muhammed.

The same powerful publicity machinery was set up in all the state of the federation but was more effective in the states under the party's control. The Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) which could have played this role in the North only had one state and lack the financial capability to do so unlike the ACN with six states that had enormous resources from their states to act as watchdog on the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) which was relied upon to play the role of opposition in the South East, failed to do this because of the inconsistency of their leaders who after using the party to get to power always abandon it. This is a situation which has always made the party to be left in the cold with local loyalist who never had the strengths and the financial wherewithal to fight as members of opposition in the Eastern states. The roles played by the opposition in upholding the sanctity of the legislature in years past cannot be over-emphasized. Obnoxious policies by the government which would have been passed unhindered following the majority of the members of the ruling party in the parliament are being checkmated by the opposition members.

It is noteworthy to state that opposition to government policies in liberal democracies comes from various sources and takes numerous forms, including interest groups and social movements. This has long been recognized in liberal political theory, in which political parties are understood to either straddle civil society and formal institutions or act as conduits for societal demands conveyed through civil society. Much of the interest in this form of opposition, however, has been in complementing or supporting competitive party systems rather than as opposition in its own right.

Unlike in the developed democracies, the party system in Nigeria is still weak and vulnerable. Its future seems precarious and endangered by politicians who through their whims and caprices have become greedy, selfish, dubious, thoughtless and irrational. Nigerian political parties have shown to be undemocratic, lacking internal democracy and institutions without clear ideological orientation. The political parties in Nigeria's fourth republic are un-institutionalized as they revolve around some prominent and influential individuals instead of establishing themselves as strong institutions driven by values and ideologies for virile opposition.

Conduct of Elections and Money Politics in Nigeria

Elections in Nigeria have experienced continued critical incidences ranging from voter intimidation, vote-buying, ballot fraud, electoral violence and several other critical incidences. These incidences are at the centre of inhibiting free, fair and credible electoral outcomes. Regrettably, since most sub-Saharan African countries gained independence, it has been very difficult to conduct less rancorous, non-controversial and faultless elections. Thus, the right of the people to elect their leaders has been hijacked by activities of political gladiators who see elections as a must win either by hook or crook.

The phenomenon of money politics in elections and democratic governance across the world cannot be over emphasized. In Nigeria, the 1999 Constitution (as amended), specified in section 225 (1-6) conditions for scrutinizing the sources of funds and expenses of political parties. Section 225 (3) (a) and (b) forbid political parties from foreign funding of any kind. Section 226 (1-3) demands annual report of accounts from political parties. By extension, Section 91 of the Electoral Act (2010) stipulates the ceiling of expenses by candidates and political parties for specific elective positions. The maximum limits are pegged at One billion naira only (N1,000,000,000 naira) for Presidential candidates, Two hundred million naira (N200,000,000) for governorship candidates and Forty Million (N40,000,000) and Twenty Million (N20,000,000) naira respectively for Senate and House of Representatives candidates.

It is evident from the provisions of the Constitution that Politics and the crux of democratic sustainability cost money. It takes money to sustain multiple political parties that can aggregate the interest of most of the citizenry for effective articulation in form of political ideology and manifesto for election contest. It is worthy however to state that money may not guarantee electoral success, but it is rare that electoral success come without spending huge sum of money. Available evidence shows that despite the provisions of the electoral act, parties and candidates have continued to infringe on these regulations. Fundraising conducted ahead of the 2015 elections were done without regards to legal provisions (Onyekpere, E. (2015). Campaign expenses, particularly of the two main presidential candidates (PDP & APC), may have overshoot the N1 billion limit. Money was illegally used to buy votes.

A major implication of abuse of money during elections and the apparent inability to enforce regulations is the skyrocketing cost of politics at all levels. Forms for expression of interest and nomination are priced beyond the reach of many. Politicians resort to desperate measures to mobilize funds, including sales of private estates and borrowing from commercial banks and private lending institutions to meet election expenses, with

the intention of “recouping” if elected. Hence, they are pressured to repay their investments before the end of their tenure, making them susceptible to corruption.

Over the years, political parties have capitalized on election periods to make money from candidates through the sales of expression of interest and nomination forms. Though the costs of these forms are excluded from what constitutes the limit of election spending. These forms are sold at exorbitant fees that makes it tough for anyone but the very rich to obtain them. While it is reasonable that funds be charged to ascertain that only serious candidates obtain them, in reality the enormity of the cost is a barrier to participation in politics. Though some political parties’ exempt women from paying nomination fees, as a measure to encourage female participation, however, down the line the costs of participation makes it tough for some of them to succeed in politics.

Consequently, candidates crave the support of “godfathers”, also known as “oracles” and/or rich moneybags, to further improve their chances at the polls. Godfathers are mostly instrumental to the emergence of virtually every successful candidate from whichever state they control. Getting the support of godfathers does not come cheap, whether in monetary terms, which have to be paid in advance, or through a commitment to regular returns of a percentage of certain budget lines of state resources, which is usually called the security vote.

Having invested huge funds in elections, candidates and their supporters have only one mindset: to win the election and win at all costs. The candidates and sponsors are not prepared to lose the huge sum invested in the process. Therefore, elections become prone to violence, fraudulent practices and all forms of irregularity. They explore every available means, including violence, intimidation and vote buying, as well as rigging to ensure victory. This is why many electorates stay away from voting to keep safe. In such instances, the outcome of elections hardly reflects the wishes of the electorates. Therefore, representatives are more disposed to recouping huge election expenses. In the process, they become vulnerable to corrupt practices and are easily manipulated by their political overlords.

This categorizes politicians as very corrupt, reinforced over time, by the reckless lifestyles of elected and appointed public officers. As such, electorates perceive politicians to be very corrupt and very rich. Also, because of the recurring of non-fulfilment of electoral promises, electorates continually have remained indifferent to political participation. By extension, election periods are viewed by some electorates as periods to get as much money as possible from the politicians. Given this scenario, politicians who are willing buyers of votes meet electorates who are likewise willing to sell their votes. With this situation, campaigns have become very capital intensive. Elections are completely made a cash issue as voters want to grab as much money as they can from politicians; little or no attention is paid to the economic implications of selling their votes on the future of the nation and generations unborn.

The Media, Election and Good Governance in Nigeria

Media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy. As a resource hub for information gathering and dissemination, the media has been one of the important instruments of sustaining democracy and ensuring good governance. Specifically, the Media exposes maneuverings and abuses of fundamental human rights. It also castigates

election rigging, offer objective assessments of the process and results of elections and offer recommendations for improvement. The media also has a critical role to mediate between the state and citizens through the debates and discussions about the major issues of the day and informing people about the stand of their leaders on such issues. If the channels of communication reflect the cultural and social pluralism and diversity of the society, in a fair and balanced manner, then only various opinions and different voices can be heard in public debates (Anaeto, et 2008).

Democracy requires that people should have the right to know all the activities of the government, particularly the decisions of the government that affects their life, liberty and property. Information is very vital for people to make decisions regarding their involvement in the State and the civil society (Norris P. (2006). Adequate information helps the citizens to decide sensibly and take the right course of action favorable to them. Media thus helps people to know what is happening around the world and socialize them with the values of pluralism. By publicizing information, the media also make public services more responsive to the people. Media has been playing a crucial role in protection of rights by making people aware of their rights. Media also make people to be vigilant on political developments in the world and helping to stimulate debate drawing attention to all social evils including the institutional failures, corruption, inefficiency and illegal activities.

Noteworthy, however, is to state that news is to be obviously objective, fair and unbiased and it should a clear distance from paid advertisements. What happens when the difference between news and advertisements start blurring, or when "news" is published in favour of a particular politician or corporate giants by selling editorial spaces? In such situations, the reader or the viewer can hardly discriminate between news reports and advertisements. As a result, the readers or viewers are being confused by the media with their wrong and misleading information.

Ultimately these practices undermine the very essence of democracy and the role of the people in decision making process. The paid news is a serious threat to democracy and good governance. It affects the democratic process in various ways. Firstly, with paid news, the media being compelled to surrender its independence to the whims and caprices of political manipulations. Secondly with paid news the media deceives the citizens. The reader of the press or the viewer of the television is betrayed into believing that what is basically an advertisement is in fact, independently produced news content. Eventually this practice does harm to the decision-making process in a democratic society. How can people judge to the government without proper information? The third important question is related to media's role in protection of human rights. No market regulated media can discharge their responsibility to the masses. Their every action might be regulated by the strings of advertisement. When media is being compelled to protect the corporate interests, naturally this will lead to right violation of the vulnerable sections in the society. Above all, the paid news culture of media undermines the entire democratic process in the country.

The paid news practices are very active in election periods. Many candidates are not willing to declare the expenditure incurred on planting "paid news" items. Through this process, the candidate standing for election violates the Conduct of Election Rules. With the huge influence of paid news in the Media organizations, more and more editors today have turned their attention away from readers' interest in news and views to the promotion

of their publishers' financial achievements (Sainath P. (2000). The sad effect is to make press coverage of news and views insufficient and ineffective, to focus less on issues and more on personalities, to concentrate on today's sensations but neglect follow-ups through propagandist pursuits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper submits that the role of the media, as the fourth realm of the estate, cannot be overemphasized particularly in contributing to the aggregation of interests through the sharpening and influencing of the differing opinions of the public in electoral and governance processes in Nigeria. Citizens are acculturated to act in particular ways and towards a particular government policy by the level of information available to them through the media contents, especially, when it depicts a clear and unbiased picture without recourse to socio-political distortions and or subjective influencing by the class structures of the society.

It also finds that achieving democratic governance requires the understanding and participation of every member of the society, hence, the media, their roles, channels and content, are considered powerful enough to make this achievement a reality. However, it proposes that the work of the media should not divide the citizens into the information-rich and information-poor. In other words, there must be channels which serve the right to know of the people and the interest of the public, without any control either by the state or commercial entities. Such channels must deliver diversity of content to serve the various groups of members of the society. In particular, content must be informative and useful – it can then be turned into knowledge and wisdom which the people can use to eliminate poverty, alleviate hardship, and improve quality of life in the post-modern society.

While it is established that a free and fair media is the single most prerequisites of the good governance. But a large number of existing media, cannot take up this responsibility because of the market influence on media industry. The phenomenon of "paid news" endangers the functioning of independent media in the country and the working of strong democracy and good governance. It is a serious threat to the polity.

In this context, the media should have to introspect whether such practices will do any advantage to the society and the media industry itself. Credibility is life air of Media. Media should realize that if it does not have integrity it will cease to exist. They should be free from any kind of influence from various pressure groups. They should keep a distance from any kinds of political and commercial influences. Above all the media should be equipped with the essential investigative power to bring out the truths to the public and discharge their functions in promoting good governance.

Consequent upon the above, therefore, the following recommendations are put forward, towards credible electoral outcomes: (a) The Electoral Act (Amendment) Bill, hitherto rejected by the President, need to be revisited, passed by the National Assembly, and assented by the President. (b) INEC, CSOs, Political parties and the National Orientation Agency needs to deepen civic and voter education of the citizenry to properly enable them to make informed decisions at the ballot vis-à-vis vote appropriately to reduce the incidence of rejected ballots during counting. (c) There is need for truly transparent processes, internal party democracy, clear political party ideologies, issues-based

campaigns and credibility of party register in the selection of candidates at the primaries. (d) The cost of campaign financing needs to be strictly adhered to in tandem with the provisions of the electoral framework.

In addition, the following recommendations are put forward, towards a free, fair, and credible media: (a) Support the creation of media accountability systems such as ombudsmen and other complaints mechanisms to increase transparency and accountability of media operations. (b) Adopt, publicize and implement a firm policy of zero tolerance to any form of cash for news coverage—from simple “facilitation” payments to reporters to paid ads masquerading as objective news. This can include reviewing pay policies to remove incentives for journalists to indulge in unethical practices. (c) Acknowledge that pay can have an impact on ethics. (d) Create accountability systems for establishing more transparent relationship with their audiences. (e) Better professionalize the Media; increase salaries and incentives to media practitioners. (f) Fighting Corruption through Investigative Journalism

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