

Media Power in Elections: Evidence of the Role of Agenda-Setting Theory in Political Communication in Nigeria Evolving Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media effect has continued to dominate discussions among mass communication scholars most importantly media theorists during the last to early millennium. The scope of media impact in the coverage of elections in Nigeria from the pre-independence era to the contemporary times has received considerable attention from both political scientists and media scholars. The margin between the coverage and media type may be very high, however, the intent seem to be very similar. During the pre-independence era, newspaper and radio were the only source of media outlet and information dissemination. The politicians and their party affiliates dominate the news during the election campaigns. The newspapers front page were very popular in reporting news pertaining to the candidates and where they stand on the polls. Their pictures and utterances became news worthy while their manifesto resonated with the party lines and the electorates few of whom were literate enough to read.

As the television invention took the Nigerian market by surprise in 1959, the use of the television become yet another dynamic source of reporting news and information

on political standings of the various party candidates. The television in collaboration with the newspapers and radio significantly covers political campaigns. They significantly become very influential in bringing campaign messages including party choice of candidates, their promises to the electorate which sometimes becomes a mirage when elected, their financiers and what they bring to the campaign table. The media coverage of these campaigns most of the times involves endless political rallies where political information is disseminated to the voters to attract their support.

Looking at the pre-independence era from 1930-1959 to the recent times, media effect has significantly changed due to technological advancement which has changed the means of information abstraction and dissemination process. The advancement in technology also has impacted political campaigns as well as election processes. It is perceived today that the media is faster in reaching its audience in today's political election process than ever before. The reason for the speedy process of information and dissemination is as a result of the advancement in new technological means.

In Nigeria, for instance, the growth in mobile telephone ownership and usage has significantly increased in the past ten years. In 2001, for instance, very few Nigerian had a telephone even in their offices (Onwumechili, 2010). However, today, mobile or cell phones are owned and used by a considerable high percentage of the citizenry including an average farmer in the village (Onwumechili, 2010).

The growth in Africa's Internet and Broadband sector, mobile telephones, electronic mail system, you-tube, my space, satellite capabilities as well as computerized database access technologies and lower tariffs has significantly changed the method of information retrieval and dissemination by the mass media. The duties of the media to

inform and educate its audience which was previously accomplished through newspaper, radio and televisions has been diversified through miniaturized technology driven outlets which is a driving force in the restructuring of news and information dissemination. This dynamic change has also resulted in a much fascinating mode thereby increasing media influence as they use the new technological tools in telling their stories to the audience. The media is also used for political campaigns and the introduction of party candidates and their manifesto which in most instances assist the audience in making choice of a candidate to support.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of media during elections and provide evidence as to the role agenda setting effect plays in political communication in Nigerian evolving democracy. In addition, the paper provides a comparative analysis of the agenda setting influence between the Nigerian electronic media systems: Radio Nigeria and NTA broadcast stations and three Nigerian Newspapers: The Sun, The Guardian and This Day. Furthermore, in order to provide perspective on media impact, the literature review will look at how these effects also impacts candidates during political election campaigns.

Methodology

This study adopted the use of survey method in the process of eliciting responses from Nigerian immigrant residents in the Washington Metropolitan Area. The choice of Washington Metropolitan Area was informed by the fact that (1) the author is resident in the area and (2) Washington Metropolitan Area has a vast majority of Nigerians. Simple open ended questions were drawn and administered among respondents on their opinions

of the power of the media during elections. The study used an open-ended questionnaire of manageable size of the interviewees coupled with the need to provide them with greater latitude to express themselves. The sampling frame was enough that could conveniently handle unstructured questions. The questionnaire was administered to 100 randomly selected Nigerians resident in the Washington Metropolitan Area who were well informed about the recent democratic April election in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The mass media can attract and direct attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favor a popular candidate or even the opposition candidate during elections. In some cases, the media can serve as a channel for persuasion and mobilization of resources, information and manpower. Looking at the impact media plays in disseminating information during elections, this chapter attempt to shade lights on media impact during elections. It also looked at how media influences the values and standards by which objects of the media attention can be judged, and looking at the extent of media effects literature reviewed, this study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Do the media create issue of relative importance and agenda correlation between the media agenda and public perception on political issues?
2. How influential is the agenda setting role of the The Sun, This Day and Guardian newspaper compared to Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) news outlets?

Significance of Media Power in Elections

The important identity of a responsible media is playing an unbiased role in reporting issues of newsworthiness without giving unnecessary hype to attract the attention of the gullible public with the object of making money or ranking. During elections in a democracy, the media's role as an effective tool for getting the public opinion in its favor makes it very necessary to sway them on a particular candidate against the other. In recent years, the media has become completely prejudice in favor of one political party or candidate even when their coverage tend to show lack of favoritism, thereof. The support of one candidate against the other or in the case of party affiliation, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), or APGA creates a hostility among the major political parties. In the process of selecting one or two political parties and reporting more of their manifesto and candidates' platform completely negates the principles of equal time that should be upheld by the media. Reporting a specific party more than the other could result to misunderstanding among the supporters of one group against the other. It may also result to partisanship on the part of the media which is expected to be neutral in its news coverage and reporting. In the just concluded April 2011 general election in Nigeria, the popularity of the PDP against other parties which may have given them an edge was not only because of their longevity, but because of their ability to pay the media advertising price tag which resulted to their candidates and issues highly reported than other parties.

Generally, media's role in politics is mainly to mislead the public. Garret (2010) in support of the role media plays today during elections stated thus: the current role of media in politics seems intent on misleading the public into a particular way of thinking, which is further described as propaganda. As a propaganda tool, the media sole purpose

during political campaigns is to get candidates of their choice elected into power. In so doing, they consistently misinform the electorates.

Nigeria's media landscape has always been to broadcast commercial jingles, slogans or what Garret (2010) referred to as bumper sticker slogans such as "change we can believe in;" "if I can make it to the presidency of Nigeria, you can also make it." "During my early school days, I didn't have shoes." These sound bites or slogans emit emotions on the people and make them to identify and empathize with the candidate. The media capitalizes on this slogan, and sometimes use it for a commercial jingle and ran it as often as possible as it finally becomes not only what people think but also what they should think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In view of creating an image out of their candidate of choice, the media makes everything possible to present this candidate as the one to beat and in so doing hide the entire negative issues about him. A typical example of how media impacts its audience during election was the campaign for reelection in the gubernatorial election in Imo State. The incumbent governor used all possible propaganda tools including the pages of the newspaper and radio adverts and television commercials to buy support. At an outward view, he was winning the election on the media as he controlled the media but due to his unpopularity among the electorate his opposition was also using the same media to counteract his message. The opposition party, All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) won the propaganda war and finally beat the incumbent governor on the election because the media was able to sway the people to believe more of the opposition's manifesto than the incumbent Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) governor.

In the United States of America during Obama's campaign for Presidency, he ran under the platform of change. He made it clear that he will bring a change that American can believe in. The electorates ran with that slogan without asking or investigating what the change they believe in means. At the end of the day, the American media ran with the change "yes-we-can slogan consistently and in November 2008, they elected the first Black President to the White House.

The ability of the media to consistently use the bumper sticker slogans to distract the people from the facts and in process make the opponent look like incapable to lead impact significantly the outcome of the elections. During the presidential primaries in Nigeria, the media presented the former vice president, Atiku Abubakar who was running on the People's Democratic Party (PDP) platform as lacking the skills and hyped his presentation so negatively that at the end of the voting, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the ruling party, People's Democratic Party (PDP) won so convincingly and even beat Atiku Abubakar in his home turf of Adamawa State in the Northeastern Nigeria.

Review of Literature

The impact of mass media during elections in Africa changing political landscape has been strongly exemplified in the most recent April 2011 general elections in Nigeria. More than twenty political parties participated in the election; however, about five of the parties were the leading parties whose candidates were winning elected positions in different position. During the election campaign, the media used various campaign strategies to attract the attention of the electorate in making one choice against the other. The news of the demise of the former president, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yardua under whose presidency, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan served as a vice president before assuming the power

of the presidency, the humble beginning story of president Jonathan at Otueke village in Bayelsa State, his political slogan “I am one of you,” “during my school days I have no shoes,” his down-to earth personality was obviously used by the media to build a very strong media agenda as a trustworthy man who can obviously take Nigeria to prosperity. His transformation agenda became the talk of the nation as he promised to resuscitate the decayed power in the entire nation, enhance the educational sector and support agriculture.

These issues and others very pertinent to national growth were incessantly reported by the media. They were built as a national issue of importance by the media such that it became the talk of the nation. People in no distant time having been overly fed with these issues by the media began to identify with these issues and place them with the candidates. By this process, the media influences the audience perception and by their consistent report of certain issues make those issues salient and gear their audience to believing them and responding to them.

Definition of Agenda-Setting Theory

The definition of Agenda-Setting Theory dates back to McCombs & Shaw (1972) primary article on the agenda setting function of the mass media in a *Public Quarterly*. In their research, they saw the media mainly the news media not able to always successful at telling the audience what to think but rather quite successful at telling them what to think about. In practical terms, agenda-setting theory deal with mass media’s ability to influence the perception of its audience and what they consider the most important issue of the day. This definition has led the format of other definitions by various communication and media scholars ; Walter Lippmann (1922), Theodore White (1972),

Perloff (1998) whose views about agenda-setting likened it to power of the media to set the agenda of public discussion which determines what people will talk and think about.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) for their numerous contribution in agenda-setting research are widely viewed as the intellectual godfathers of the agenda-setting research approach . Their research has shown that the media force attention to certain issues. They also stated that by the impact the media has on its audience, they have the ability to build up public images of political figures and through their constant presentation of these people mostly during political campaigns suggest to its audience the importance of such candidates.

The media exerting such tremendous influence over its audience members uses the opportunity to mold their minds and significantly influence the flow of news and information thereby directing their thinking. In so doing, the media creates an awareness through their consistent dissemination of information and news which in turn stirs the attitudes of their audience and cause them to change their behavior. Looking at the political campaign in Nigeria prior to the April general election, the PDP presidential candidate, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan was presented as a more suitable candidate by the media. In so doing, the media was able to create a significant awareness of him to the Nigerian electorate by using all means of available information to stir the attitude of Nigerians towards him and his likable personality because of his humble beginning. This perceived attitude of presenting Jonathan as a favorable candidate by the media, positively influenced the opinion of Nigerian electorate as a result of which he was overwhelmingly elected the president of the nation in the April 2011 general election.

The General View of Agenda-Setting Theory

The general understanding of agenda-setting by the audience is that the media has the ability to influence the important events or what McCombs and Shaw (1972) referred to as salience events in the public mind has become part of how political influences of the media are described. In his research “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”, Lippmann argued that the media has the power to create a certain picture which registers in the head of its audience. It is by the creation of this picture that the audience makes decision as to what candidate to vote for or what news item to place importance on.

Most recently, the audience view of media power gleans from the observation of Theodore White (1972), a presidential observer whose article titled “The Making of the President” reported thus:

“The power of the press in America is a primordial one which sets the agenda of public discussion...it determines what people will talk and think about...”

The idea of agenda-setting is that the priorities of the press to some degree become the priorities of the public. In keeping with this assertion, therefore, what the press upholds and put emphasizes on is in turn upheld privately and publicly by the audience members (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The power of the media to influence issues, shape and restructure societal values, define political objectives, construct knowledge, and create symbolic reality form what Okoro (2010) referred to as the emerging corpus of communication research which indicates that the press is an influential and a significant segment of the social and political process that creates issue salience.

Historical Evidence of Agenda-Setting Theory of the Media: A Review of the 1968

U.S. Presidential and 2011 Nigerian Elections

The history of agenda-setting theory may have emanated from Walter Lippmann's 1922 book, *Public Opinion* which clearly addressed the issue of media impact to its audience. In this book, Lippmann asserts that the media creates a picture of the world and through their constant reportage on this picture, influences the audience mindset positively about the picture. Graber (1990) opined that the first empirical attempt at verification of the agenda-setting function of the media was carried out by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Using the Chapel Hill undecided voters reaction in North Carolina, there was a correlation between what the media emphasized in the news and what the undecided voters regarded as the key issues that may have swayed their opinion about the election. In view of their later reaction, it was evident that the media news about the election and candidates significantly motivated the way the undecided voters voted.

The Chapel Hill, North Carolina example of agenda-setting may have been an empirical test of the power of agenda-setting, however, the Elmira 1948 (Graber, 1990) example also shows how the media influences its audience through the new. The Elmira voters presents a voting situation where electorates who has less contact with the media tend to vote differently than those who had constant contact with them (media). At the period of voting, it was found that those voters who had minimal contact with the media voted independently of the candidate or views presented by the media while those who had regular contact were significantly influenced by the media messages.

In the April 2011 general election in Nigeria, The South Western Nigerian political movement which featured Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) as a consensus party used the media messages to influence voters in the South West as a Yoruba party

with its leadership strongly affiliated with the party's manifesto. At the end of the campaign, the media message registered with the voters who voted on the ACN party lines. The result of the day was that ACN swept the entire South West, however, they gave their mandate to a PDP presidential candidate.

In Imo State, Nigeria, the outcome of the election even when there was a need to cancel some of the voting in some specified local government area for a fresh voting, the frustration of the citizens of the state presented by the media plays a significant role in the voters behavior change. The APGA gubernatorial flag bearer cruised to victory because the voters saw him as a messiah, the one the people are looking for to remedy their anguish and suffering from the terrible leadership of the incumbent governor. These examples of media power shown in the agenda-setting principles support Lippmann (1922) statement that "the media is like the beam of a search light that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision."

The mass media (Graber 1990) is responsible for structuring voters' perceptions of political reality because through their reporting capability and ability to reach large audience members, they can considerably influence issues that make up the agenda for any particular election. In view of their power, the media controls the political messages, influences the political playingfield in which an election campaign is conducted and in most instances defines the agenda that would assist a particular party win election. Prior to the April 2011 general election in Nigeria, the Citizenship and Leadership Training Center (CLTC) embarked on a sensitization campaign against political violence. Although this group deployed his staff to strategic places where they hand out handbills and other campaign materials to members of the public, the media also played the

agenda-setting function by reporting the campaign purposes to the people regularly. This awareness campaign with the theme “SAY NO TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE helped significantly in the reduction of political violence that was synonymous with political campaigns in Nigeria.

Theoretical Perspective

Theoretically speaking, prior to 1968 Chapel Hill, North Carolina research by McCombs and Shaw there has been other relevant and influential theories or perspectives that account for media impact and how such impact has shaped both political attitude and behavior. As it became very prevalent after the Chapel Hill undecided voting behavior as a result of the media influence, Lippmann (1922) had analyzed data to support media impact. Trent (2008), Perloff (1988) reported that the relationship between social and economic characteristics coupled with newspaper reading habits could subsequently influence voting behavior.

Klapper (1960) theoretical perspective may have countered the hypodermic needle effect theory of the media which argued that the media had unlimited power to persuade. The hypodermic needle effect perspective likened the media messages as literally being injected into the minds of the people. Klapper, rather, argued against and in his 1940's study began to challenge the hypodermic needle theory. He rather conceptualized a new paradigm of media effects where he asserts that media could stimulate people's interest during elections but the media message may not have been the reason why people may have voted for one candidate against the other. Klapper's

perspective looked at another option, the opinion Leaders in the community as contributing to the behavior change in voting than the direct media message.

Cohen (1963) before agenda-setting research became an accepted methodology for studying media effects had argued that “the press may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about. The control or power of the media offers several important possibilities which will stated thus:

the media can attract and direct attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favor those with power and correlatively divert attention from rival individuals or groups; it can confer status and confirm legitimacy; always is a channel for persuasion and mobilization which can help top bring certain kinds of public s into being and maintain them (Grabber, 1990).

The agenda-setting theory is good looking at from the individualistic perspective because it explains why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same issues. Although different people may feel differently about the issue, however, most people feel the same issues are important. In review of Media power in elections with evidence of the role agenda-setting plays in political communication in Nigeria, data collected for this study will be analyzed to infer as to how much power the media has in changing people’s attitude and behavior.

Data Analysis

In view of the sample size of the study which represents one hundred Nigerians as identified in the literature review, a much thorough overview of the evidence of media power during elections were obtained from the sample questions addressed to the selected respondents. This study in an attempt to show whether the media have power over its audience during elections presented about six questions which are directly related to the

two research questions asked for in the study. The questionnaire administered on the respondents had the objective of providing answer to the research question.

Table 1

	Options	Frequency	Percentage
To what extent do the media create issue of relative importance and agenda correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda for political issues?	(a) to greater extent	(a) 95	(a) 90%
	(b) to lesser extent	(b) 4	(b) 8%
	(c) non applicable	(c) 1	(c) 3%
	Total	100	100

Based on the data analysis, 90% of the respondents tend to favor the position of this chapter which has shown that media has power during elections which is evident in the role agenda-setting plays in political communication. All the respondents who are domiciled in the Washington DC Metropolis and are from Nigeria who are monitoring the election exercise in Nigeria agreed that the media create issue of relative

importance and agenda correlation between the media and public agenda and for political issues.

They also agreed that the media system in Nigeria impacts the audience through its influencing power by repeatedly presenting issues and news reports about news events, political candidates, and issues in the public mind. The candidature of Alhaji Mohammed Buhari the presidential flag bearer of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) who has repeatedly vied for the presidency in more than three different election years beginning in 1999, coupled with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) presidential front runner, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau of the ANPP gave the media more opportunity in presenting news and issue of importance as it pertains to this candidates to the Nigerian electorates.

Playing the agenda-setting role by placing importance to the most acceptable candidate, the media paved the way for the electorates to view the candidates based on their yardstick to measure who should be electable. At the end of the presidential election, Dr. Jonathan won in 23 states, including 16 out of 17 southern states and seven Northern states including Federal Capital Territory (FCT). He scored 25% or more votes in 32 states and Federal Capital Territory (FCT); scored less than 25% in 4 states and polled highest votes (1,817,762) in Rivers State. The rest of the presidential candidates scored as follows:

Major Gen. Mohammed Buhari: won in 12 states all in the North, scored 25% or more in only 11 states scored less than 25% in 24 states and polled the highest (1,624,354) votes in Kano. Mallam Nuhu Ribadu: won only in Osun State and scored 25% or more in

three states, scored less than 25% in 33 states and FCT and the polled the highest (427,000) votes in Osun state, while Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau won in no state and scored 25% or more in no state, scored less than 25% in 36 states and FCT and polled highest (526,310) votes in Kano.

Table 2

	Options	Frequency	Percentage
How influential is the agenda setting role of the Nigerian newspapers compared to Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) news outlets?	(a) very influential	(a) 96	(a) 92%
	(b) less influential	(b) 3	(b) 6%
	(c) non applicable	(c) 1	(c) 2%
	Total	100	100

Looking at table 2 in page 19 above, 96 respondents out of the 100 sampled, responded in affirmation that both news media are influential in setting the agenda for the

people during election. The high response which is about 92% agreed that both the newspaper and electronic media have the capacity of influencing their audience. Out of the 100 sampled respondents, only 3 which is 6% of the total population size agreed less, while 1, or 2% of the respondents disagreed completely that the media has no influencing authority.

From the view point of both research questions, it is deduced that significant percentage of the respondents agreed that Media do exert power during election which is evident in her role as agenda-setters during election campaigns. It also shows that the media playing the role of agenda-setters displays their ability to influence the voters perceptions of what they consider the most important issue of the day.

The percentage of the sampled respondents who did not support the questions were as low as 3% and 2% respectively, their viewpoints tend to support the limited effects theory of the media as argued by Klapper (1960). The percentage of the sampled population who were not in support of the power of agenda-setting may have obtained further reason why they think in their answers that media does not influence its audience decision as to what candidate to vote based on their issues, news coverage. In view of this position taken by a smaller group of the respondents, the population of Nigeria citizens who may not have believed the media news stories may have other reasons why the media was not able to influence this small group. The questionnaire failed in the abstraction of such answers by not addressing that issue. It may pose some reasonable question to address in future research.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how media's power most importantly during elections has resulted in a positive outcome to those parties and group of people who were influenced by the media news coverage. The paper has critically reviewed agenda-setting research and its transformational mode in influencing the general population's perception of what issues are important (saliency) during an election campaign. Looking at the April 2011 general election in Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP scored a total of 22,496,157 votes; General Mohammed Buhari of CPC scored 12,214,529; Mallam Nuhu Ribadu of the ACN scored 2,088,791 while Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau of the ANPP scored 917,365 votes to clinch the last place. The total valid votes are 37,716,842 out of 73 million registered voters, representing about 50 percent voter turnout.

It is evident from the data collected during and after the election results were published that the Nigerian media most importantly the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) utilized its power of getting to a mass audience within a limited time period to influence the audience members by not only telling them of what news item or issue is important than the other but also how to measure the candidates based on their leadership ability and who will take the nation to its dynamic state.

The coverage of the election which started from the arrival of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) staff, to giving directions to the voters who had already cued before the INEC staff arrival, accreditation of the registered voters and the actual voting were covered.. The Nigerian media did a tremendous job of reporting the election outcome to the nation and international community. The transparent way by which the election results were handled was also reported by the media which took

advantage of the opportunity of a new election strategy to showcase how powerful the media has always been. The paper has shown by the amount of questions asked and the answers rendered by the respondents that media agenda-setting works and also the influence the media exerts shows how powerful their function has always been. The media by playing the agenda-setting role has purposely and deliberately created an agenda to control the sphere of information available to the public. Critics of Barack Obama in the 2008 general presidential election in the United States will most likely argue that Obama was framed more positively than McCain in the media and that the media assisted in the election of Barack Obama as President. The same remark could be true of Goodluck Jonathan and the rest of the presidential candidate. However, in the case of Nigeria, Dr. Jonathan was more of a qualified and credentialed candidate than the rest of his opponents because of his past leadership experiences as a former governor, a vice president and of course his academic credentials.

However, one must acknowledge that politics has become “mediatized” and that politics in today’s political terrain seem to have been intertwined with media and mass communication. Hence, the recognition that the media cannot cover everything, and invariably make choices concerning content in their programming, is vital (Negrine, 2007 pg. 34). Therefore, in this respect, an agenda is not so much a conscious and deliberate notion (like having an agenda), but simply an agenda is a list of issues. In effect, mass media, including newspapers, radio and television, through its news selection, stresses the importance of certain issues over others (Wanta, 1997: 2). Likewise, the public agenda is consequently the result of people’s perception of what they regard as the most important issue during the election campaign (Kaid, 2004: 4).

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