Reflecting on the Nigerian Media, Elections and the African Democracy

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Abstract

This paper examines how the media could more effectively be deployed to enhance the conduct elections in Nigeria while discussing the implications of the 2007 Nigerian election on public assessment of the Nigerian democracy. The outcome of the 2007 elections was particularly worrisome following the electoral irregularities that occurred in the elections. The internal and the external observers that monitored the elections noted these irregularities which were later confirmed by the Nigerian Judiciary when the results of the elections approved earlier by the Independent National Electoral Commission were nullified by the court. Since the Nigerian press has the constitutional responsibility to hold the government accountable to the people (justifying the rationale for the study), the paper therefore reviewed the role the media played in the elections using the content analysis approach to determine the frequency and the major issues the media reported in the elections. The findings revealed that the media gave adequate attention to the coverage of the elections, and relied on the views expressed by government officials in determining their editorial stance on the elections.

Keywords: Campaign, Voting, Election Results, Democracy and Media

Introduction

The leadership problem in some African countries today is traceable to the inability of the leaders to organise free and fair elections in the region. Many crises that occur in Africa usually emanate from the elections held in the region. Notably, although African countries are sovereign nations, not all the countries in the region are able to conduct credible elections**.** Therefore, the media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm have a duty to hold African leaders accountable to the people for the political conflicts in the region. The symbiotic relationship between the media and society is such that every country creates its own media system that in turn provides the information network for the peace and development of the society. Hence, the constitution of every democratic society empowers the media to hold the other three estates of government (the legislature, the executive and the judiciary) accountable to the people, and thereby sustain the interactive process between the government and the citizens. However, every country evolves its own media system based on the political philosophy and ideology of the nation concerned, which explains why the media are able to play different roles in the development of society, depending on the nature of the political system guiding the operations of the media.

In a democratic society, the focus of the government would be to promote the fundamental human rights of the people while providing leadership for the growth and development of the society. Thus, the media systems in democratic countries are able to report on any issue as long as they do not infringe upon the rights of the people and those of the state. The sovereign power of every country resides in the state**.** Therefore, in an authoritarian society, where the government seeks to preserve the political philosophy of the state even at expense of the rights and liberties of the citizens, the media would find it difficult to objectively report on the issues where the interests of the government are at variance with the hopes and expectations of the people. African countries are among the emerging democratic societies of the world. Therefore, the media have a duty to ensure that African leaders entrench democratic principles and values in governance. For example, Nigeria is an emerging democratic society, but how soon the country joins the other African nations with global democracy will be determined by the ability of the federal government to conduct credible elections, where the people can elect competent and experienced individuals into government and parliament.

Nevertheless, the purpose of elections in every society is to enable the citizens to select a proportionate representative of the people, who would in turn represent the interests of the other citizens in the government and parliaments. Representative democracy is an improved version of an indirect rule system of government that enables the citizens of any country to elect a few people into public office to represent the interests of the other citizens in the government and parliaments. Democracy in this context is a mechanism that enhances the efficiency of the public decision-making process in modern society. Nwabueze (1993, p. 67) believed that: "representative government, after all is only resorted to as a substitute for direct democracy because of the impossibility, inconvenience and expenses in a large country in which every question touching upon its government is decided by the people at large." This is why it is important that politicians get regular feedback from the people on the effects of government policies on the living standards of the citizens in order to know when it would be necessary for the government to re-adjust its policy framework for development. This would help the government to accommodate the immediate needs of the people, but without compromising government's ability to meet the future needs of the people. Mazey (1996, p. 123) disclosed that in the French context: "Prominent campaign issues, public opinion polls and debates, together with the programmes put forward by candidates and their parties usually constitute important indicators of the current socio-political problems, public concerns and competitive policy agendas of the country." This is because the French political leaders probably understood that the sovereignty of the state, upon which the government derived its legitimacy, belongs to the people, and democracy allows the citizens to meet at every interval to elect their leaders.

This is the beauty of democracy. Gordon (2006, p.37) believes that true democracy is people-oriented when he stated that: "I frequently feel that other people would be better off if, instead of doing as they wished, they followed my advice; but in a democracy, there is not much we can do about imposing our views upon the people." This statement does not imply that the public is stupid; it only means that governments sometimes find it difficult to differentiate between the honest remarks made by citizens from the distracting comments of political opponents regarding a government programme of activity. In fact, there is nothing wrong in any government accepting public criticisms made in good faith, so long as they are constructive. This is because most times members of the opposition parties in parliament actually complement the efforts of the government by making useful suggestions on better ways of implementing the government's policy agenda for development. Nevertheless, it is through credible elections that reliable governments can emerge that would formulate policies and programmes aimed at meeting the needs of the people. Dalton (2002 cited in Stromback and Johansson, 2007, p. 80), believes that: "voting is the one activity that binds the individual to the political system and legitimises the rest of the democratic process." Unfortunately, some leaders in the African region and the Arab World still occupy political positions without the mandate of the people. In order for the leaders to retain their positions in government, they harass and oppress the more vociferous groups in society, who challenge the legitimacy of their governments. The public media usually brand the members of these groups as dissidents in order to make them appear as deviants in the estimation of a reasonable public.

It is unfortunate that elections that are supposed to be a mere gateway to democracy are yet to be conducted without external supervision in many countries. For instance, in some African countries, if elections are free and fair, people are surprised. Hence,   Smith (2009, p. 868) observed that: "the peaceful conduct of Ghana's very close national elections in late 2008 was unusual in that it did not lead to any sustained questioning of the outcome. In contrast, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Kenya each have witnessed a degree of post-election violence in their recent elections." The European Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) confirmed that the 2008 Ghana Elections were held in line with the international and regional standards for conducting elections. The presidential and parliamentary elections took place under an open, transparent and competitive atmosphere, where the parties and the candidates for the elections had equal opportunity to solicit for public support to win the elections notwithstanding their different political affiliations. The electoral commission, the judiciary and the security forces played an impartial role in ensuring that the elections were conducted with transparency and openness (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2008, p. 4). Apart from Ghana, the other African countries that have a good reputation for conducting free and fair elections are South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia. A study of the democratisation process of eight countries in the East and South Africa (Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa) by Kalyango (2011, p. 59-60) reveals that: As far as the procedural elements of democracy are concerned, the only exceptions are Tanzania and South Africa.

The two countries have successfully regulated their parliamentary and presidential elections, and have institutionalised their electoral commissions, which are regarded as autonomous from government interference [….] The data show that South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia (in that order of preponderance) placed regular contested elections at the core of procedural democracy. Burundi, Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Nigeria are among the African countries that are yet to conduct very free and fair elections. This is because of the possibility of the governments influencing the results of the elections in favour of the members of the ruling parties. When a candidate used a fraudulent means to secure a seat in government or parliament, the person is likely to be a part of the people that would lay the foundation for injustice and oppression in society; and such individuals would not have the interests of the public in mind. In such countries, government can abuse the fundamental human rights of the citizens who are without any possible redress, as the corporate image of the countries concern suffers a loss of indignity in the estimation of other members of the community of nations. Commonwealth of Nations (2007, p. 1), maintains in its Report of the 2007 Nigerian elections, that: If indeed the Nigerian people are demonstrating disenchantment with the democratic process, this must be a matter of concern to us all. Losing faith in democracy would be a serious setback for Nigeria. It is something this nation- indeed, Africa, the Commonwealth and the entire international community- can ill-afford. The electoral irregularities that featured in the 2007 Nigerian elections were indeed a replay of the electoral malpractice that characterised the 1964/65 general elections. The 2007 elections revealed a naked display of injustice against some of the candidates who contested in the elections. Boutros-Ghali (2000, p. 106) noted that governments, which are responsible and accountable, are likely to be stable and promote peace, and that many internal conflicts stem from the belief, justified or not, that the state does not represent all groups in society or that it seeks to impose an exclusive ideology. African leaders would have probably avoided most of the ongoing crises in the region if the governments had conducted proper elections in the countries currently facing political problems, and the citizens had the opportunity to vote for the leaders of their choice.

Some African leaders have reduced the role of the political party to that of being a mere platform that politicians used to contest for elections. Yet, it is the duty of political parties to present their candidates for elections and assist them to win the elections. Thereafter, the National Executive Committee of the political party upon which an incumbent government emerged should be able to advise the government on the need to fulfil its electioneering promises to the people. When a government fulfils its electioneering promises, it enhances the credibility of the party and reinforces public confidence in the government regarding the subsequent elections. Ironically, most party leaders in Africa spend their time settling the internal disputes among the members of the party. Guobadia (2009, p.153) observes that the leaders of the Nigerian political parties quarrel with one another too often. He noted that soon after the 2003 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission had to grapple with the internal disputes of some of the political parties and the divisions the problems created within the parties. He said that most of the internal conflicts within the party were due to personality clashes among the politicians who wanted to gain control of the parties' machinery and resources. Most party executives in Nigeria spend their time daily trying to resolve the intra-party conflicts created by the ruling elite, so that the members of the National Executive Committee of the party have little or no time at their disposal to collaborate with the government regarding the implementation of its policy agenda for development. "Ideally political parties on whose platform the political office holders were elected into office should have been able to bridge the gap in governance and carefully explain the factors (whatever those may be) that have withheld the materialisation of the democratic dividends" (Enemaku, 2003, p. 84). This is because in modern politics, party decisions should ideally take precedence over the personal views of party members on public issues. The national executive of the ruling party on whose platform the people voted the incumbent government into power can also provide the policy framework that could assist the government to align its policies and programmes in line with the party manifestoes and ideology hence the objective of this paper would be to identify the interface between the media and elections with a view to identifying how the media could more effectively be deployed to enhance the conduct of election and support the development of the Nigerian democracy.

Election Campaign

Election campaign provides the platform whereby political aspirants who are contesting for elective positions in government and parliament solicit the support of voters in their constituencies to win elections.

Contestants in elections usually carry out political campaigns in the places where they publicly declare their candidacy together with the programmes and manifestoes of their parties, which they intend to implement for the benefit of their people when they are elected into office. Therefore, a political constituency is simply a geographical area, which comprises of a group of the electorate with common goals and aspirations toward the peace and development of their community. Nevertheless, the form and size of a constituency vary from one country to another depending on the political ideology of the country. Under the Presidential System of Government, like the case of Nigeria and the United States of America, there are three levels of government in each of these countries. During election campaigns, political candidates meet with the members of their constituencies to discuss the problems affecting the growth and development of their communities, and how the candidates intend to solve the problems when elected into office. According to Leighley (2004, p.200): Elected officials are expected to adopt policies that are consistent with voters' preference. How closely officials' policy decisions mirror the preferences of citizens is a critical feature of democratic politics. The more closely they do, the more representative the democracy, and the less likely that elected officials are enacting policies [at variance] to the wishes of the public. With this understanding, it is obvious that the public indirectly controls the activities of the parliaments, which is why the elected officials in the house should guide parliamentary proceedings and debates to meet the needs of the citizens and preserve the sanctity of the constitution in the interest of the state.

However, in the nature of modern politics, it is impossible for political candidates to reach all the voters in their constituencies and to solicit their support to win elections without the help of the media. Thurber, Nelson & Dulio (2000 cited in Swigger, 2012, p.367) noted that television advertisements have become ubiquitous features in American political campaign at every level of government, and one of the most expensive tools of a political campaign. This is why the services of the media are very important in the conduct of elections. The news media are now the modern platforms from which party candidates disseminate information to voters and solicit their support to win elections. According to Kurfi (2010, p.295): "It is arguable that without access to the full range of information about their world, citizens cannot fulfil their roles, and democracy will wither." Nevertheless, the aims and objectives of the media are sometimes different from what politicians actually use the media for during the elections. Balkins (1999, p.396) agrees with this assumption. He said that politicians and the mass media do not necessarily regard the public as an adversary. Rather, as politicians are seeking to shape and draw benefit from public opinion, so the mass media are seeking to entertain the public and maintain public attention and influence. Although both the government and private individuals can establish media organisations, the fact remains that the media are social institutions, which the operators use to deliver services in the interest of society. This is why both the public and the private media should reject any course whose aims and objectives are inimical to public interest. The role of the media in electioneering campaigns is to provide information on the registered parties-their programmes and candidates- that would enable the citizens to decide on the party and candidates that they may wish to vote for during the elections. Norris (1997, pp.223-224) noted this in his study:

One of the primary functions of the media's coverage of the campaign is to increase information about the choices on offer, stimulating interest in public involvement in the process, [....] watching politicians debate the major issues during the campaign may stimulate viewers to feel better informed, more aware of the choices on offer, and therefore better equipped to exercise their choice at the ballot box. The public relies on the media to provide adequate information on the electoral process that would enable the people to exercise their civic responsibility in the elections. What most enlightened voters usually consider before casting their votes for any candidate in an election is the public character of the individual concerned, his or her experience for the job, as well as the previous commitment demonstrated by the candidates toward the well-being of society. Maisel (2007, p.2) noted that: "democratic regimes span a wide spectrum in terms of how freely those in power can be criticised by the press or by the opposition […] the amount of information to which citizens have access in reaching their judgements, and the freedom that candidates have to express their views and that citizens have to vote." This is why Nigerian journalists should provide enough information on the political parties and their candidate during the elections through their editorials, news coverage and feature stories that would enable Nigerian voters to make intelligent decisions on the candidates to vote for in the elections. Konkwo (2003, p.85) advised that the media should provide information that would enable the electorate to decide wisely on who to vote for in the elections, not on the basis of what the candidates can immediately provide for the people, but on the basis of public assessment of the capability of the candidates to perform in public office.

Most politicians, who are in the habit of using the media for whatever reason, do so with the intention of retaining public support to maintain and advance their political career, because they are aware that most citizens usually gravitate toward the direction of the media position on public issues. The Nigerian journalists should endeavour to provide sufficient and balanced information on the personality profiles of political aspirants so that the public would be conversant with the history of each of the candidates concerned while deciding on the candidates to vote into public office or parliament. The public often rely on the media for information on the ideologies and manifestoes of political parties, as well as on the competence of the candidates contesting for the elections (Egbuna, 2012, p.1). Sometimes, the difference between a 'winning' politician and a 'losing' politician is consequent upon the kind of information that journalists provide on political parties and their candidates, whereupon the electorate can decide on whom to vote for in the elections. If a credible media organisation decides to play the role of an advocate for a candidate by singing his or her praises during an election campaign, while serialising the shortcomings of the other candidates, citizens who rely on the media to make their judgments on public issues may well fall into the temptation of voting for the less qualified candidates. Taylor & Richey (2012, p.414) note that: " [a]dvocates will try to convince others to either become active or-if active already-to increase their level of support, or even to change sides when they feel that there is a legitimate chance that their preferred candidate can win." It was for this reason Mendelsohn (1998, p.239) maintained that: "[…] we must examine the possibility that the media's interpretation of elections is due to contextual factors other than a party's ideology, and explain why some victors receive ideological mandates, while others receive personal mandates." The above statement is rather unfortunate as most citizens are aware that the media have a duty to accord legitimacy to issues of public concern and to act as status conferral to individuals in society. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to blame members of the public for relying on the media to make intelligent remarks on public issues. Noelle Neumann (1979 cited in Folarin, 2002, p. 78), confirmed that: "ideas, occurrence and persons exist in public awareness practically only if they are lent sufficient publicity by the mass media, and only in the shapes that the media ascribe to them." Hence, many politicians will stop at nothing than to secure a good public image in the eyes of the media, and ensure that their weaknesses are shielded from the prying eyes of the press. The media reports on the character and competence of the politicians have the potential to influence the perception and judgement of the public on the candidates contesting for elections.

Nevertheless, it is unethical for the media to side with one political party to the detriment of the other parties concerned. Rather, they are supposed to give equal opportunity to all the candidates to relate to voters during the elections, irrespective of their party affiliations. This is because most citizens have confidence in whatever position they take on any issue that is of public interest only when they have access to all the information regarding the issue before taking a decision. "Put another way, if an individual is unable to different between candidates during a campaign, it is unlikely that he or she will make a selection to support one candidate over another" (Krupnikov, 2012, p.390). Therefore, it is important that the media provide adequate information on political candidates, which would enable the people to cast their votes for the more deserving candidates in the elections, while the media thereafter support the government to implement its policy agenda for development. Some Nigerian newspapers usually do not provide the public with balanced and objective accounts of the integrity and competence of all the political candidates in the elections, which would otherwise enable the voters to cast their votes intelligently for deserving party members.

This is one of the dysfunctional implications of voters having to rely on the media to make judgments on the party and candidates to vote for in the elections. What journalists are expected to do during the campaigns is to provide information on the parties and their candidates and allow the voters to decide on which candidates to vote for, depending on the knowledge and experience each of the candidates possesses in relation to the office he or she is aiming to occupy. Okpoko (2003, p. 76) emphasised this point when he stated that the mass media should provide adequate political education to enlighten the masses on the appropriate electoral procedures that would enable them to shun the evils of the "money bag" politicians, and to avoid the disadvantages of voting along the lines of ethnicity and religion. Although there are many factors that could influence voters' attitudes and choice of candidates in any election, the competence and integrity of political candidate are among the major variables that voters take into consideration while casting their votes for candidates during the elections. However, the editorial policy of a media outfit often determines its stance on public issues. For example, a newspaper with an ideological mission will always struggle in the process of trying to take an objective position on public issues. This is because, most newspaper proprietors desire to see their ideological views on socio-economic and political issues reflected in the editorial content of the newspapers.

The newspapers that have an independent editorial policy are likely to take a more objective position in their news reports on public issues. Nevertheless, the newspaper owners could still covertly influence the editor and members of the editorial board on how they regard the stance of the newspaper on a given issue. The Nigerian mass media have the mixed ownership system comprising the government and the private proprietors, but with a preponderance of private dominance in the newspaper industry. The majority of the Nigerian newspaper proprietors are politicians, so the political inclinations of the newspaper owners have always constituted a major influence on the position taken by of Nigerian newspaper on national issues. During campaigns, most newspaper owners use their media outfits to disseminate information on the programme and the agenda of their parties, and in the process, attack their political opponents in order to expose them to public contempt and ridicule. This kind of journalism should be discouraged, as it is capable of creating conflicts in politics.

Voting in Election

Voting is the process whereby qualified citizens who make up the electorate of a country elect the proportionate representative of all the citizenry from the different constituencies that make up the country to represent all the citizens in government and parliament for a given period of time or tenure. Voting is one of the most important feature that distinguish a liberal democracy from other forms of government. Most of the electoral irregularities in elections occur during the voting exercise. The 1992 Ghana elections were marred by voting-related misconduct among other factors. Oquaye (2004, p.505), while commenting on the irregularities that occurred in these elections, emphasised the importance of voting in elections: "Voting is the use of a ballot paper in secret to freely determine a preference. A citizen's vote is meaningful if the system allows nothing to negate his choice by unfair means. An individual may vote in an orderly queue, but if the box is pre-stuffed with other preferences, his vote is futile." Incidentally, this was what happened during the 1992 elections in Ghana. In modern politics, the extent to which the conduct of an election is free and fair determines whether the citizens and the members of the international community will accept the results of the election.

The leadership problems of most developing nations today would probably have been avoided if there had been free and fair elections in the countries currently facing crises, so that the citizens could freely and without any inhibition elect men and women of proven character and integrity to represent the other citizens in governments. However, many African countries have no clear reputation in conducting free and fair elections, which explains why the international community, including the United Nations, often polices and supervises the conduct of elections in African countries. The majority of the conflicts in the African region emerged following the crises that emanated from elections. Although African nations are politically independent, not many of the leaders have demonstrated the maturity of the status expected of a sovereign government when it comes to the conduct of elections that are free of external supervisions. For instance, Nigeria has changed the name of its electoral commission with each passing republic as though the inability to conduct free and fair elections in the country was due to the nomenclature attached to each of the failed electoral commissions. Otoghile and Idahosa (2008, pp. 149-150) made this observation in their studies, adding that: In Nigeria, the electoral commission in most cases has been the [main] problem with election, in other words; they have been our collective albatross. Hence, no matter the change in nomenclature (whether FEDECO, NEC, NECON or INEC as they are popularly known) as long as the orientation of the officers remains skewed toward electoral fraud, then very little can be achieved.

This is why it has become necessary for the media to collaborate with the Independent National Electoral Commission toward ensuring the smooth conduct of elections in Nigeria. Lasswell (1948 cited in Folarin, 2002, p. 59) identified three basic functions of the mass media in every society: the surveillance of the environment (news function), the correlation of different parts of the environment (editorial function) and the transmission of the cultural heritage of society (entertainment function). Under the surveillance function, Nigerian journalists should closely monitor the voting exercise in every election by visiting intermittently the polling booths in their operational environments to get an on the spot assessment of events regarding the elections. Such visits would enable the press to ascertain the degree of commitment of the electoral commission towards the conduct of the elections. Most of the cases of electoral fraud that occur in Africa during elections usually take place almost at the tail end of the voting exercise. Some desperate politicians rig elections in the constituencies where they envisaged the least possible support from voters for their candidacy. According to Hoglund and Piyarathne (2009, p. 287): "Electoral violence is used for a number of reasons: to hinder people from voting, to prevent a candidate from campaigning, to display discontent with the election results, or to overturn the outcome of the election." People will find it difficult to rig elections without the connivance and support of government officials.

Nevertheless, there has been no record of any journalist being privy or supportive of electoral misconduct in Nigerian politics. The Nigerian press provided parts of the information that assisted the Nigerian Judiciary and the Electoral Tribunals to deliver judgments on the petitions filed by the aggrieved candidates who lost in the 2007 elections. The Nigerian media should work closely with the law enforcement agencies toward ensuring that electoral misconduct becomes a stranger to Nigerian politics. The police will often get a tip off on how and where an electoral fraud may occur during the elections. Therefore, where the police were unable to prevent the politicians from rigging the elections, the media should at least have been able to provide the background information on the major electoral irregularities that occurred during the elections that could assist the court to review the petitions filed by candidates who lost in the elections. Unfortunately, apart from a few private media houses in the country, most government-owned media organisations in Nigeria are not in the position to investigate the cases regarding government sponsored electoral malpractice, except now that the government has passed the Freedom of Information Bill into law. Even at that, it might still be relatively difficult for the government media to report without bias on the activities of the government in elections. This is because government finances the public media and appoints the members of the editorial boards of the media, including the General Managers of the government owned media stations. The government will therefore expect the journalists working for the public media stations to support the government's policy agenda for development since they are staff of the government Information Ministry.

The federal government does not expect the Nigerian Television Station and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria to criticise the government policy framework for development. The public media stations simply provide the outlets for the federal government to disseminate news and information on its programme of activities, and to solicit public support to implement its policy agenda for development. Although the Code of Conduct guiding the activities of the media world over makes it mandatory for journalists to uphold truth and objectivity in their reports, some newspaper editors and the General Managers of broadcasting stations in the country have had their appointments terminated for reporting the true account of government's involvement in elections. This was the major reason why the Nigerian Union of Journalists fought to ensure that the federal government approved the Freedom of Information Bill. The Act now enables Nigerian journalists to gain access to public information, and to publish any news so long as the publication does not violate the rights of anyone, including those of the state.

Election Results

Constitutionally, it is the responsibility of a nation's electoral commission to conduct and declare the results of all the elections conducted at all levels of government. The results of elections are very important as they form the determinants of who will eventually occupy public office among the candidates that contested in the elections. Once the electoral commission completes the voting exercise, the public is usually confident in assuming that it is the responsibility of the Resident Electoral Officers and the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission to collate the votes cast, compute and declare the results of the elections. Previous experience has shown that the easiest way to rig an election is at the collation centres after the voting exercise. In fact, the use of delay-tactics in the release of the election results provides a subtle device for electoral malpractice, and this was a hypothesis that was on the verge of becoming a theory in Nigerian politics prior to the 2011 elections. Before then, each time there was an undue delay in the release of a particular election result, there was the likelihood that when the electoral commission eventually released the result, the outcome would be contrary to public expectations. This was the experience Nigerians had during the 2007 elections. The candidates who lost in those elections later contested the delayed election results and won the cases at the court. Therefore, since there is nothing in the Nigerian Constitution forbidding the media from monitoring the results of elections after the voting exercise, journalists should make an additional sacrifice to monitor the process of collating votes and announcing the results of the elections. As Supadhiloke (2013, p.211) observes: "The mass media serve as a mirror to reflect public opinion-a surveillance function. [....] So, the mass media function would be to monitor, create, crystalise, maintain, and change the public process, the ebb and flow of public opinion," if only to ensure that the results of every election reflects the mandate of the people. However, it is important to mention that it is strictly unconstitutional for the media to publish a parallel version of election results that contradicts the results released by the Independent National Electoral Commission since the commission is the only authorised body empowered by the constitution to conduct and release the results of elections.

Nevertheless, the press can keep a record of the observed discrepancies between the media version of the election results from the official results released by the electoral commission. The results of the elections compiled by the media could serve as evidence when the court and the Electoral Tribunal will be evaluating the claims and objections raised by the candidates who unconstitutionally lost their seats to their opponents in the elections. It is the duty of the Nigerian judiciary to review the petitions filed by the candidates who believed that they were deprived of their victory in elections. It is worth noting that the verdict of the Nigerian judiciary on any election result takes precedent over the result of the election approved by the independent National Electoral Commission. Hence, it is pointless for politicians to fight over election results, particularly as the Nigerian judiciary has restored public confidence in the Nigerian Electoral System following the impartial judgements the court and Electoral Tribunals delivered on the petitions filed by the candidates who contested in the 2007 elections.

Theoretical Standpoint

One of the most appropriate theories to evaluate the role of media in the conduct of election is the Agenda-Setting Theory. The theory evolved from the research work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The authors specifically examined the relationship between the media reports of the 1968 election campaign in Chapel Hill and the issues the members of the public later discussed about the elections. Nevertheless, Walter Lippmann, a prominent American journalist and scholar of the Harvard University, initiated the idea of the Agenda-Setting Theory. In 1922, Lippmann conducted a study to find out how the media determine public opinion on topical issues. He found from his study that the members of the public do not necessarily respond to the actual events that occur in society, but to the pictures of those events reported by the media (McCombs, 2002, pp. 1-2) Cohen later built upon Lippmann's ideas to create the pathway for the emergence of the agenda-setting theory. He said that the press is more than a mere purveyor of information and opinion, and that the press might be less influential in telling people what to think than actually telling them what to think about. Cohen argues that the world looks different to different people depending on what the media offer to the public. This assumption later created the basis of what we now call the agenda-setting function of the media (Du, 2008, p.4). The argument by Cohen is that the event or issue the media focused on in their reports, automatically becomes the subject of public debate. So, there is a correlation between the media reports and the major issues on the public agenda. This is because the members of the public rely on the media to know about the events and issues that occur daily within and around their neighbourhood.

Therefore, having sampled the opinion of 100 undecided voters, McCombs and Shaw found that what people thought to be the major important events of the 1968 election campaign corresponded with the issues the media reported earlier about the elections. The ranking of the response of the voters and the major issues reported by the media on the 1968 election campaign were identical with a correlation of +.967, while the minor issues the media reported on the campaign and the voters' judgements on the elections correlated with +.979. These findings confirmed the relationship that existed between the media reports on the campaign and the issues the public discussed regarding the elections (McCombs and Shaw, 1972 pp.180-181). The authors described the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda as the agenda-setting function of the mass media (Du, 2008, P. 5). This discovery confirmed the earlier arguments by Walter Lippmann and Ben Cohen that the mass media have a measure of influence to determine the direction of public opinion on any issue that is of public importance. Nevertheless, the media would normally focus their attention on the major issues that occur daily in society. Balnaves, Donald and Shoesmith (2009, p.65) note that: "[t]he mass media are selective about what they do publish. Although one of the reasons for their freedom is so that they can express the demands of individuals and pressure groups, there is not enough room for all of them and some of them are deemed un-worthy." People rely on the media as one of the most reliable sources of getting information on public issues. According to McQuail, (2005, p.512): "The core idea [in agenda-setting] is that the news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues." So, media indirectly determine what issues are important in society by the prominence they accord to the different issues that make up the editorial content of the media. Most important stories appear either on the front page or on the back page of the newspaper. Likewise, important news stories on radio and television are contained in the opening paragraph of a news broadcast. The agenda setting function is the process the mass media use to predetermine the value a target audience would attach to a story based on the prominence the media accorded to the story in their reports.

To determine the effect of agenda setting in society would involve a careful evaluation of the media reports within a given period, along with the issues that dominated public debates within the same period.

The greater the consonance between them, the more the agenda-setting theory is confirmed (Kunczik, 1988). Accordingly, the issues the media reported on the 2007 Nigerian elections may have influenced the Nigerian electorate's interests of, and attitudes toward the elections. As Mondak (1995, p.62) observed: Information plays a central role in any plausible model of electoral decision-making. Unless we believe that voters form their decisions randomly, or that the vote reflects nothing more than stable partisan preferences, what the voter knows [through the media] about the candidates will influence what the voter decides regarding which candidate to support. Since McCombs and Shaw carried out the first empirical study on media agenda in 1972, more than 300 published works worldwide confirmed in 2002 the positive correlation between the media reports and the major issues that people discussed on topical issues in society. To explain the extent of the influence the media have to determine the public perception on issues, social scientists usually calculate the correlation between the ranking of issues on the media agenda and the ranking accorded those same issues on the public agenda. This quantitative measure of the correlation between the media reports and the public agenda provides a substantial degree of precision for one to compare rather like a thermometer, the degree of influence the media have on public perceptions towards issues (McCombs, 2002, p.3). Based on this discovery, it is arguable that since the media can create and sustain public consciousness over any issue through the agenda-setting model, it then means that they could also create a spiral of silence over an important issue that they ignored in their reports. The success of any election is a function of the degree of public involvement in the conduct of the elections. Correspondingly, the value the public attaches to any election is a function of the prominence the media accorded to the election activities in their reports.

Justification

The decision to review the 2007 Nigerian elections was based on the researcher's desire to identify better ways in which the news media could be deployed to facilitate the conduct of elections in Africa with a focus on Nigerian democracy. The results of the 2007 Nigerian elections were embarrassing because of the electoral irregularities that occurred in the conduct of the elections. The Commonwealth Election Monitoring Committee was among those that condemned the high rate of malpractice that occurred in the elections. The Nigerian judiciary later cancelled most of the results of the elections that were earlier approved by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which confirmed that the elections were actually rigged as alleged by both the internal and the external observers that monitored the elections. The Nigerian press, being the Fourth Estate of the Realm, has a duty to hold the government accountable for the conduct of the 2007 elections justifying the rationale for the study. McQuail (2005, p. 169) quoted Edmund Burke who used the term 'Fourth Estate' to describe the political power possessed by the press, which is equivalent to the other three estates of power in the British realm: Lords, Church and Commons.

Methods

The paper employed the Content Analysis Approach to determine the manifest content of the Nigerian newspaper reports on the 2007 elections. The method enabled the researcher to determine the number of stories the newspapers reported on the elections along with the major issues the media discussed on the elections. Content analysis approach employed in the study involves the objective, systematic and the quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952, cited in Deacon *et. al* 1999). In determining the frequency of the Nigerian newspaper coverage on the 2007 elections, the researcher reviewed 546 front-page headline stories published by the *Guardian, Tribune, Champion, THISDAY, Punch* and *the Nigerian Observer* in April, May and June being the periods of the 2007 elections. The six newspapers for the study are among the leading Nigerian newspapers. The campaign in the elections took place two weeks prior the elections, while the voting exercise in the elections took place on 14 and 21 April 2007 respectively. The analysis of the frequency of the Nigerian newspaper coverage on the elections was based on the following content categories: the stories published by the newspapers on the elections, the stories published on the activities of the government during the elections, press reports on the activities of the parliaments during the elections, and the stories published on other issues during the elections. The paper further evaluated the 195 stories the newspapers published on the elections in April, May and June 2007, to determine the frequency and the major issues the newspapers reported on the elections.

Inter-Coder Reliability

Independent researchers assisted in reviewing each of the coding instruments used for determining the content categories of the frequency and the major issues the Nigerian newspapers reported on the 2007 elections. Despite the effort by scholars and researchers to develop the indices for testing inter-coder reliability of instrument, there is still no consensus on a single best method for determining the reliability of research instruments. The simple percentage agreement employed in the study is the most widely used technique for determining reliability test across the behavioural science literature (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002, p. 592-594)

Table 1: Cross Tabulation Frequency Distribution of the Nigerian Newspaper Reports on the 2007 Elections among other Issues

Periods		Elections		Government		Parliament		Others		Not Available		Total No.	Total %
Month	Newspaper	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
April	Champion	15	50%	6	20%	1	3%	7	23%	1	3%	30	100%
	Guardian	20	67%	4	13%	1	3%	5	17%		0%	30	100%
	Observer	16	53%	8	27%	1	3%	5	17%		0%	30	100%
	Punch	19	63%	3	10%	2	7%	6	20%		0%	30	100%
	Tribune	17	57%	2	7%		0%	11	37%		0%	30	100%
	Vanguard	21	70%	3	10%	3	10%	3	10%		0%	30	100%
April Total		108	60%	26	14%	8	4%	37	21%	1	1%	180	100%
May	Champion	7	23%	9	29%	8	26%	7	23%		0%	31	100%
	Guardian	11	35%	6	19%	1	3%	12	39%	1	3%	31	100%
	Observer	3	10%	12	39%	7	23%	9	29%		0%	31	100%
	Punch	6	19%	15	48%	4	13%	6	19%		0%	31	100%
	Tribune	4	13%	12	39%	3	10%	11	35%	1	3%	31	100%
	Vanguard	14	45%	6	19%	3	10%	8	26%		0%	31	100%
May Total		45	24%	60	32%	26	14%	53	28%	2	1%	186	100%
June	Champion	6	20%	13	43%		0%	10	33%	1	3%	30	100%
	Guardian	3	10%	11	37%		0%	16	53%		0%	30	100%
	Observer	5	17%	21	70%		0%	4	13%		0%	30	100%
	Punch	7	23%	12	40%		0%	10	33%	1	3%	30	100%
	Tribune	10	33%	11	37%		0%	7	23%	2	7%	30	100%
	Vanguard	11	37%	13	43%		0%	6	20%		0%	30	100%
June Total		42	23%	81	45%		0%	53	29%	4	2%	180	100%
Grand Total		195	36%	167	31%	34	6%	143	26%	7	1%	546	100%

Results

The Cross Tabulation Table contains the data on the frequency distribution of the Nigerian newspaper reports on the 2007 elections, along with the major issues the newspapers reported in April, May and June 2007. The six newspapers reported 546 front-page stories on the elections. Of this figure, the press carried 195 lead stories 36% on the issues regarding the elections, 167 news stories, 31% on activities of the government, and another 34 major stories 6% on the activities and proceedings of the State and National Assembly during the elections. Under the category of the other issues, the newspapers reported 143 stories, 26% on the issues that were irrelevant to the central objective of the study. However, the study was unable to account for seven newspaper issues that were not available for the review. In order to determine the issues the newspapers reported on the election campaign, the voting exercise, and on the results of the elections, the study further reviewed 195 news stories the six newspapers reported on the elections. The findings revealed that among other issues, the newspapers reported 108 news stories 60% on the elections in April 2007. The number of newspaper stories on the elections however reduced to 45, 24% in May 2007 as the attention of the media toward the elections began to diminish. In June 2007, the figure further reduced to 42 stories 23%. The reduction in the frequency distribution of the newspaper reports on the elections after the general elections in April was normal as the media would normally set an agenda on a more recent and topical issue than to dwell on the history of the 2007 elections. Based on these findings, one can conclude that the Nigerian newspapers gave adequate attention (60%) to the coverage of the 2007 elections during the period. The private newspapers condemned the electoral irregularities that occurred in the elections. For example, the stance of the *Nigerian Guardian* and the *Nigerian Tribune* on the elections agreed with the position of the internal and the external observers that monitored the conduct of the elections, and stated that the elections were characterised with cases of electoral misconduct.

Analysis of Result

The six newspapers published 108 news stories on the major issues that occurred in the elections in April 2007. The newspapers reported 28 news stories, 26% on the crises that occurred in the elections, 33 stories, 31% on the activities of the Independent National Electoral Commission, 22 news stories, 20% on the profile of the candidates that contested in the elections, and 18 stories 17% on the political parties. However, seven front-page news stories, 6% dwelled on issues outside the relevant variables for the study. The above findings revealed that the media reported more on the activities of the Independent National Electoral Commission than any other issue the newspapers reported on the elections in May 2007. Nevertheless, most people usually rely on the media to know more about the registered political parties and their candidates in order to decide on the party and the candidates to vote for in the elections. In May 2007, the newspapers reported eight stories 18% on the stance of the federal government on the elections, 20 stories (44%) on the conflicts that arose from the elections and eight stories 18% on the views expressed by the members of the public on the elections. Another eight stories 18% was the media reports on the issues relating to the results of the elections. The newspaper reported one news story 2% on the issue outside the objectives of the study. These findings revealed that the media reported more on the crises that arose from the elections than the attention they gave to the other issues in the elections. ince there is positive correlation between media agenda and public agenda, it means that the members of the public probably spent more time discussing about the electoral irregularities that occurred in the elections than the time they spent in discussing other issues regarding the elections. The six newspapers reported 42 front-page stories on the post-election activities in their reports in June 2007. Specifically, the newspapers reported 29 front-page stories (69%) on the conflicts that arose from the elections, 4 stories 10% on the judgements delivered by the court and the Electoral Tribunal on the elections, and nine stories (21%) on the issues that arose from the results of the elections. From the above data, it was obvious that the media again focused on the crises that occurred in the elections in their post-election coverage in June 2007. The newspapers reported 29 news stories, 69% on the crises that occurred in the elections.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that the Nigerian newspapers gave adequate attention to the activities of the Independent National Electoral Commission during the elections, which accounted for why the majority of the media outlets reported the views expressed by government officials regarding the elections. One would have expected that in addition to proving information on the activities of the electoral commission, the media should have also provided adequate information on the parties and their candidates that contested in the elections to enable the electorate vote for the more deserving candidates in the elections. Therefore, this study recommends that the Nigerian journalists should work out the possibility of determining public opinion in the subsequent elections based on what the majority of the people felt about the elections, including the internal and the external observers that monitored the election. This is because public policy should ideally emanate from public opinions.

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