

Beyond Influence: Media and the 2015 Presidential Election

By

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Introduction

A number of previous studies have shown that the media are powerful agenda-setters for the public and have significant impact on the political process. The effective functioning of democratic institutions is assumed to rest on the pervasiveness of the media in the society. Thus, media are often deployed by different power interests in the society to achieve power leverage. However, in so far as each society consists of different cleavages and social, political, and economic interests, each concerned with furthering its own objective, the influence of the media should be examined within the nuanced context in which they operate.

Using the 2015 Presidential Elections, this paper examines the limited and sometimes muted influence of the media during the period leading to the election and immediately after the election. It uses two issues to engage with the key theme of the study in this paper. The first issue is the disparity between media projections of the outcomes of the result of the Presidential election and the actual result. The second is the muted influence of the negative media campaigns on the result of the election. The paper makes a case for a rethink of the role of the media (especially mainstream media) in elections.

Media and Political Praxis

In the discussion of media power by both Habermas (2006) and Castells (1994) there is an underlying assumption of a pivotal role for the mass media in politics and political participation. They also raise the question of media and power processes in the society. Downing (1995) stressed that the media are structures of power in any society. The media mediate; they do not stand independent of a given social system but instead provide channels of communication between elements within it. To varying degrees this has meant that they are instrumental to dominant institutions and interests within the society (Randall, 1998). The mass media also act as the platform through which people and interests in the society express their views (Ibraheem, et.al., 2013).

The media are universally referred to as agents of power and political control, such that those who hold sway of political power and authority are always conscious of the fact that information management and control is central to the capturing, retention and exercise of political power. The larger implication of this is that the ownership, control and accessibility to the media are considered to be critical to the wielding and sustenance of political power. This recognition of the role of mass media as agents of power and political control is partly responsible for the decision of the governments of developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) to either own their own media or regulate news and information flow within and into their countries (Sussman: 1989, pg. 125).

In Nigeria, the mass media (particularly the press) since its inception in 1859 have played significant roles in shaping the social, political and economic landscape and setting the agenda for the country's political development. It is a widely held notion that Nigeria's political history is inextricably intertwined with that of its media history because of the prominent role the media have played at every strategic point in the country's political

development and the influence of politics on the development and focus of Nigeria's mass media (Ibraheem et al., 2013).

From the struggle for and attainment of independence, to the struggle for the return to democratic rule during the period of military intervention in Nigerian politics, and the sustenance of the nation's nascent democracy, the Nigerian media have featured prominently in setting the agenda and charting the course for Nigeria's political development. During the era of independence struggle for instance, the Nigerian nationalist journalists such as Horatio Jackson, Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, A.Y.S Tinubu, Anthony Enohoro, Smart Ebi, Increase Coker, among others effectively and successfully deployed the mass media (particular the newspaper) to mobilize support and to champion the course of freedom from colonial domination. (Okoye, 2003; Ajibade 2001). This was perhaps why Alhaji Babatunde Jose (popularly referred to as the doyen of Nigerian journalism) posited that the war for Nigeria's independence was fought and won on the pages of newspapers. This Era is popularly referred to as the era of nationalist press in Nigeria media history (Ibraheem et al., 2015).

During the era of military dictatorship, the Nigerian media also gallantly rose to the occasion as the major opposition and dissenting voice to the various military governments that seized political power intermittently between 1966 and 1999. The country's vibrant media played an influential role in championing the struggle for the return to democratic rule and in challenging the excesses of the various dictatorial military regimes that held sway of power within that period. This period is again referred to as the era of guerilla journalism in Nigeria media history (Olukotun 2005, p.9).

Presently, since the return to democratic rule in the country in 1999, the Nigerian media have being one of the critical stakeholders in the nation's current democratic dispensation. They have been actively involved in setting agenda for political discourse, providing perspectives and direction on political debates and framing the agenda for political decisions and mobilization for mass participation in political activities. Some of the salient political developments in the Nigeria's current democratic dispensation that have been influenced by media discourse include: the aborted third term agenda attempt by former President Olusegun Obasanjo; the management of the illness of late President Umaru Yar' Adua; the emergence of President Jonathan as acting President and eventual election as substantive president; and the on-going debate on who emerges as Nigeria's president in 2015. These and other remarkable political developments have been the dominant political communication issues in Nigeria, since the return to democratic rule over a decade ago (Ibraheem et al., 2013).

In the case of the role of the media during elections, Pate (2011) argues that the mass media have remained in the fore of the struggle to promote the rights of our people through a credible election process. However, this is not to suggest that the media have been perfect in all circumstances. They have been severely criticized for complicity in truncating and subverting the election process at various times. For instance, Enahoro once observed that "whoever and whatever ruined the first republic did so with the active connivance and collaboration of the greater part of the Nigerian press". Similarly, James (1984) cited in Pate (2011, pg 2) had decried the high degree of professional breaches in the media during the second republic as manifested through "character assassination, false accusations, blackmail and misrepresentation of facts to the extent that facts were muzzled and whole media organs became megaphones and machineries of propaganda to political parties and vested interests to the extent that the unity of this country was shaken to its very foundation".

Akinfeleye (2004) also expressed a similar opinion in his work “Fourth estate of the realm or Fourth estate of the wreck?” These assessments notwithstanding, the media are part as well as facilitators of the public sphere, where electoral issues are discussed. Again, elections in democratic settings affect everybody either directly or indirectly and the expectation is that whenever there is fair, balanced and inclusive participation of all people in the election of leaders without discrimination on the ground of sex or any other factor, the society will progress. Achieving inclusive participation during elections requires the media. Indeed, the Nigerian Broadcasting Code (2012, Section 0.2.2.4) states that the goal of the broadcast media is to contribute to the development of national unity and participatory democracy; while the political objectives of broadcasting are to create and promote political awareness amongst the people in order to achieve a democratic society, inculcate in the people the spirit of tolerance of all shades of opinion, and promote social justice based on the responsibilities and rights of individuals in society.

Olukotun (2014, p.3 and 2) echoed a similar sentiment when he argues that “...during elections, the media are the principal vehicles where the voters receive information concerning the political parties, their platforms, the voting process, the electoral commission and the other issues germane to the exercise of their rights. [As such] The media are crucial to the dissemination of credible information as well as providing a communication level playing field to the principal competitors and even to the electoral umpire, namely the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)”.

Buttressing Olukotun (2014), Ogwezzy-Ndisika (2014), states that the role of media particularly during elections is immense. It provides voters with unbiased information regarding political parties and their candidates so that the society would empower politicians out of informed choices. As, such the role of the media is indispensable during elections. Furthermore, Pate (2011, p. 2) quoting McQuail (2005), opined that in democracies, “the media have a complex relationship with sources of power and the political system” (because politics and the media seek to promote the individual as well as the collective interests of the general society).

Essentially, the media on their part operate in the public sphere to expand the frontiers of freedom and enable the citizens to have access to quality information that will influence their judgments and decisions for sustainable democracy. They are the channels of mass communications that are actively engaged in the gathering, analyzing and disseminating issues of and about elections. So, the media institution is very important and centrally located in the lives of the people and elections. In Nigeria they are acknowledged as key actors in the struggle for Nigeria’s independence and the process of democratisation, they are also important in deepening democracy. In fact, media constitute the “oxygen” of democracy. It is one of the five major institutions critical to elections; the other being the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties and candidates, police and judiciary.

So, given the fact that elections in democratic settings affect everybody either directly or indirectly and the expectation is that whenever there is fair, balanced and inclusive participation of all people in the election of leaders without discrimination on the ground of sex or any other factor, the society will progress; people should be empowered with valid information to participate in elections. However, media communication within any political context, especially during elections is usually influenced by the nuanced context in which media as institutions and the professionals working in the media have had to operate.

This is because communication through the mass media has been widely identified as a major source of gaining that control and influence. This is perhaps the reason why rulers, public officials, leaders of organizations, and their advisors have always been aware of the importance of the media in advocating and advancing their views, and attacking the arguments and positions of their opponents. The control by leaders of an organ of communication is often essential in building and sustaining a political group or movement (Paletz and Lipinski, 1994). This is so because as Karl Deutsch, cited in Olukotun (2005:11) rightly observed, communication and information flows are viewed as the nerves of government.

The Nigerian scenario in which ownership of the bulk of media organizations lies with politicians and their allies, is a practical confirmation of the positions of Paletz and Lipinski as stated above. This is so because the flow of information determines the direction and the pace of dynamic social development. It is therefore possible to analyze all social processes in terms of the structure, content, and flow of communications, as mass media provide the opportunity of a quick dissemination of new ideas into a society and hence the possibility of more rapid changes in political cultures. (Paletz & Lipinski, 2004; Pye, 1963).

Another fundamental revelation that will emerge from the critical evaluation of the media ownership pattern in Nigeria is that, in most cases, political, more often than profit motives, underlines the decision of most media proprietors in Nigeria to establish and run media houses. A cursory look at the history of the Nigerian mass media reveal that most of them were established mainly to champion one form of political interest or the other. From the earliest newspapers set up by nationalists to fight colonial administration and champion the course of Nigeria's independence like: Beele Blaize's Lagos Times established in 1862, J.B. Benjamin's Lagos Observer established in 1882, the Eagle and Lagos Critic, set up by Emric Macaulay in 1887, to the chain of newspaper titles under the defunct Concord press newspaper conglomerate owned by the acclaimed winner of the controversial June 12, 1993 presidential election, late Chief M.K.O Abiola, and the present day crop of newspapers - majority of which are owned by politicians or their cronies fronting for them as publishers in disguise, such as Tinubu's The Nation, Orji Uzor Kalu's The Sun newspaper, Gbenga Daniel's Compass, the Nigerian Tribune owned by the Awolowo dynasty, Ibru's Guardian newspapers, Jimoh Ibrahim's National Mirror, Nduka Obaigbena's ThisDay and Mohammed Haruna's Trust titles, to mention just a few, ownership of media outfits (particularly newspapers) in Nigeria can be seen to be driven more by political motives than mere profit orientation (Ibraheem et al. 2013).

Similarly, if we use the popular North-South divide and geo-political zones as our basis of analysis, a current checklist of private media proprietorship in Nigeria will reveal two clear patterns viz.: ownership concentration in the southern part of the country's north-south political divide. A further analysis will also reveal that; although, the Lagos-Ibadan axis in the south-west geo-political zone has the highest concentration of media outfits in terms of location, the south-south geo-political zone (often regarded as ethnic minorities in the Nigerian political calculation), ironically has the highest number of media proprietors, if we consider the states of origin of these media proprietors.

Apart from the patterns of private media ownership discussed above, one other dominant pattern in media ownership structure in Nigeria is the ownership of media outfits by states and federal government. The main objective of this category of media outfits is to serve as the mouthpiece of the governments that own them.

What this portends for the power relations among the contending groups within the Nigerian political landscape is that, there may be a correlation between the patterns and direction of media ownership and control on one hand, and the patterns of political outcomes in the country as manifested in the 2015 Presidential elections in the country. This will now be examined in relation to two cases in relation to the 2015 Presidential election. This paper puts to test the underlying assumption of the enormous influence on the decisions members of the public make following their exposure to media messages.

Media Projections of The Outcomes of the Result of the Presidential Election and the Official Result of the 2015 Presidential Election

There is no doubt that the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria was one of the keenly contested elections Nigeria ever witnessed since her independence in 1960. This is attested to by not only the high level strategy for strategy and tactics for tactics political advertisements embarked upon by the two major political parties (APC and PDP) but also the volume of interest the election generated across the nation and beyond. It will be recalled that the high level of tempo and tension the election generated culminated into the international community getting tangentially involved via encouraging the two major parties and actors involved in the election to sign a peace pact. The tempo it generated led to some Nigerians relocating to their local government and land of birth due to perceive violence that might erupt after the election.

The election also witnessed unprecedented mass media coverage ever in the history of elections in Nigeria. The mass media were inundated with not just political advertisements but also news analysis, news features, news stories, editorials, opinion articles, predictions among other media genre to the extent that on daily basis before the election on March 28th 2015, the mass media (print and electronic) became the mass educator that they are. This is because the mass media became not just the rallying point of garnering people’s views but also the barometer with which political parties gauge their popularity.

This section of the study examines the disparity between mass media projections of the outcome of the Presidential Election and the actual result. The examination is however restricted to the print media. The national daily newspapers selected are: The Guardian, The Nation and Punch. These national daily newspapers were selected because of their national reach, frequency as well as their general acceptance among the populace.

Table 1: Mass media Projections and actual result of the 2015 Presidential Election

<u>Mass Media Projection</u>	<u>Actual Result</u>
<u>GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER</u>	
PDP 26 states	PDP 16 states
APC 11 states	APC 21 states
Including the Federal Capital City	

PUNCH NEWSPAPER

PDP 14 states

APC 23 states

Including the Federal Capital City

PDP 16 states

APC 21 states

THE NATION NEWSPAPER

PDP 12 states

APC 19 states

Including the Federal Capital City

PDP 16 states

APC 21 states

6 states as battleground

The table above (Table 1) is the mass media projections and the actual result of the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The table shows where the two major political parties were projected by the mass media to have a clear win. It is important to stress that *Guardian* newspapers projected that the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was going to win but the contrary was the case. The two other newspapers projected that All Peoples Congress (APC) was going to win and their prediction was valid though there were variations in the newspapers actual states to be won and lost. For instance *the Nation* newspaper projected Adamawa, Benue, Kogi and Plateau states were going to be battleground between the two major parties but the APC won. The newspaper also projected that Rivers and Edo states were going to be battleground but PDP won. As a matter of fact PDP won a landslide in Rivers state.

One significant variable in the newspapers projection is that they all projected that the two major candidates, Goodluck Jonathan and MuhammaduBuhari will win in their strongholds of South South for Jonathan and the North for Buhari and these projection came to be. The newspapers were united in projecting that the South West was going to be won by the APC while the South East was going to be won by the PDP and this was correct as well based on the final result.

It is important to emphasise that some international political Risk Firms had earlier made some projections. For instance, TeneoIntelligence, a New York based political risk firm had projected that Muhamadu Buhari of the APC had an edge. The firm concluded that though a last minute upset by the incumbent President Jonathan remained a possibility. Equally, Eurasia Group stated that Buhari has a 60 percent chance of winning depending on how a considerable tranche of uncommitted voters leans.

The mass media projection above is an affirmation of the agenda setting role of the mass media. This is because the media projected the likely winner and largely this came to be. The projection also is an attestation of the significant role and influence of the mass media in moulding and shaping the direction of discussions as well as citizens views in society. Underscoring the significance of the mass media to man and society, Tejumaiye (2008, 117) stated that there is hardly any society or sovereign state that can function properly today without the news media. Tejumaiye stressed that the news media are important because they help us keep up with what is going on in the world. He emphasised that everywhere, news media inform the public of important affairs. They transmit government policies and actions

for the information of the people. They also provide information which influences readers in forming opinions. He concluded thus: “our daily newspaper reading undoubtedly affects our attitudes, our conducts and even our fundamental moral values. As a matter of fact, news media have shaped culture, influenced politics, played an important role in business and affected the daily lives of millions in the past few centuries”.

Severin and Tankard [1987: 212] arguing for the almost indispensable presence of the mass media to man and society said: “Modern industrial and post-industrial society is nearly unthinkable without the mass media of newspapers, magazines, paperbacks, radio, television and films. The mass media are many things to many people and serve a variety of functions, depending on the interest and needs of specific individuals”. Similarly, Mackay and O’sullivan (1999:2), arguing for the relevance of the mass media in modern society said: “The Mass Media are different from other industries because of the special nature of their activities and products. It is via the media that symbolic culture is communicated; through them societal values and ways of making sense of everyday living and culture are disseminated”. Mackay and O’sullivan asserted thus, “...as well as being major industries in the modern economy, the mass media occupy a very significant role in the symbolic environment as cultural institutions”.

The Muted Influence of the Negative Media Campaigns

During the countdown to the presidential election held on 28 March, 2015, there was a lot of apprehension about the elections turning violent because of previous experiences as some politicians saw the elections as a do-or-die affair, fighting dirty with acerbic words, half truths and outright lies in their electioneering campaigns. Hence, the two major contestants (GEJ and GMB) along with nine other party leaders first signed what has now come to be known as the Abuja Accord on January 14, 2015. The peace pact was witnessed by former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Emeka Anyaoku. The substance of that accord was their commitment to free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria.

In the accord, they agreed to, among other things, run an issue-based campaign and pledged that their electoral campaigns will not involve any religious incitement, ethnic or tribal profiling, both by themselves and all agents acting on their behalf. It was again renewed on Thursday, March 26, 2015, 48 hours to the election, shortly after emerging from a closed door meeting, where they affirmed their preparedness to accept the outcome of free, fair and credible elections. The meeting brokered by the National Peace Committee for the 2015 General Elections, led by Gen. Abdulsalami Abdulsalami (retd.), was meant to extract commitment from the leading candidates that the forthcoming elections would be violence-free. It was witnessed by members of the National Peace Committee, including the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah. According to General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the renewal of the accord was to “reassure the world and make Nigerians understand that this country is more important than their own aspirations and that people should live and reflect these ideals. They also called citizens and our party supporters, to refrain from violence or any acts that may in any way jeopardise the collective vision of a free, fair and credible election. So, security was a major concern that led to the signing of the peace accord. The apprehension may not be unconnected with the fact that in 2011, around 1,000 people were killed in violence after GEJ defeated GMB in the presidential election. According to Olukotun (2014, p.3):

Needless to emphasize that media reportage has been an issue in the several incidents of election-related violence in Africa. To give an example, the violence that accompanied the 2007 general elections in Kenya had to do partly with the atmosphere charged with hate speeches as well as fear and hatred that characterized reporting in some sections of the media.

Despite these and the peace pact by GEJ and GMB in the countdown to the 2015 general elections, in the course of the campaign, some people with misguided enthusiasm carried out some acts that are anything but civil. The personal attacks were not limited to sardonic jabs, the psychological war was also deployed in media advertisements, social media spaces and, in extreme cases, inter-personal discussions.

According to Arogundade (2014), hate speech and other forms of incitement could lead to violence and threaten the democratic fabric of a society. Hence, the social obligations of the media during elections therefore include the prevention of hate speech. As such, journalists are expected to make use of temperate language in reporting electoral processes; and presenters of live programmes should refrain from airing pejorative comment. Therefore, on ethical grounds, it is the responsibility of media organisations to reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words and messages; refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief; meticulously monitor the content of its social media platforms to stop the spread of hate and inciting messages; and prior to a recorded or a live political debate, request participants to endorse a no-hate speech memorandum of understanding (MoU) committing them not to use words or gestures that disparage others on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief.

Below are some examples of negative media campaigns:

Pre-election: “Any Igbo who votes for APC is a bastard and an enemy of Biafra” – Governor Willie Obiano; and Post-election: “Please, don’t neglect the Igbos. Give us ministerial positions” – Governor Willie Obiano (Source *APC News Alert*). Also, shortly before the governorship and state assembly elections, the Oba of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu in his palace made an unedifying comments on his wish for the “settlers” to respect his political wish and support a candidate of his choice to secure the governorship seat, failing which, according to his reported statement, any violator would end up in the lagoon. The comment which went viral, raised dust and generated bad blood, especially among the Igbo community in Lagos and across the nation. The unfortunate words, said to some notable Igbo residents who were the Oba’s guests, were considered weighty enough to be a threat to the peaceful coexistence of two of the country’s major ethnic groups (*The Guardian*, 2015). Although, there were claims by the palace that there was a gap between Akiolu’s delivery and what he transmitted, the message which went viral almost disrupted peace.

In another development, APC publicity secretary in Ekiti state, Taiwo Olatubosun in a statement released on Tuesday, March 10, 2015 says “[Fayose is an] unconscionable character who ought to hide his head in shame over his sundry activities that marked him out as a tragedy on the question of integrity.” This is derogatory and disparages the personae of Ayodele Fayose, a sitting governor. Furthermore, *Lai Mohammed of APC also accused President Goodluck Jonathan of plot to rig Lagos State Election without evidence. This accusation is in bad taste as it was a mere anecdotal assertion.*

On the part of PDP, Patience Jonathan while campaigning for her husband in Calabar, Cross River State, told the supporters of the PDP to stone anyone canvassing for change in the state. In addition, President Goodluck Jonathan during a rally in Enugu said that the All Progressives Congress candidate, Gen. MuhammaduBuhari (retd), cannot remember his own mobile phone number; while, Fani-Kayode in a media briefing alleged that the APC flag bearer was receiving funding from terrorist groups including the Boko Haram and ISIS. These were carried live by NTA. These contravene Section 5.3.4, of the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, which stipulates “In the coverage of live political campaigns/rallies, the broadcaster shall be held responsible for the content of the broadcast.” So, it is the social obligation of NTA to prevent such hate speeches from being aired. It is the responsibility of NTA prior to the live coverage, to request the client to endorse a no-hate speech memorandum of understanding (MoU) committing them not to use words or gestures that disparage others because live coverage is no more than an extended news report. As such, live coverage should air messages that are decent and uphold professional broadcast ethos, which abhors hate speech, obscene and vulgar language.

In another development, Governor Ayo Fayose also called Buhari “a diapers-wearing old man surrounded and being funded by notoriously corrupt people who cannot fight corruption.” The governor made the comments on Thursday, March 11, 2015 in a statement released by his media aide LereOlayinka in response to GMB promise to fight corruption? This was in bad taste and mere blackmail and misrepresentation of facts because the stand on GMB on corruption is unquestionable. So, carrying this without balancing the story with Buhari’s antecedents on the fight against corruption is unethical.

The negative campaigns in the media also included the newspaper adverts placed by Ayo Fayose in two national dailies indicating that GMB like some of his kinsmen former presidents might suffer the same fate of dying in office if voted into power as well as two television documentaries aired on AIT television station one with the title, the *Real Buhari* and the other the *Lion of Bourdillon*. However, the results of the election seem to whittle down the negative influence of the hate advert and the two documentaries.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, this paper therefore supports the notion that while media as an institution exerts a lot of influence due to the centrality of their function to the running of contemporary societies, the power the media wield in any society is tangentially related to the political orientation on the holders of political power in the society who only use the media to leverage on their already existing powers. While many scholars have noted the historical orientation of the Nigerian press as being highly political, it must also be stressed that the country is not monolithic. The political nature of the media mirror the existing divides in the country’s political economy.

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