



The Role of Media in Presidential Electoral Outcome in Nigeria between 2009 to 2019

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The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the media in electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The methodology used was the examination of secondary data. The paper established that the Nigerian media had come a long way from its colonial past the media was also buffeted by other negative factors that affected its professionalism like the military dictatorships which tried but were unsuccessful in muzzling the media. The media in Nigeria though vibrant is limited in its professional and ethical reportage and broadcast due to issues considered primordial like ethnicity, religion, ownership among others. While it can be said that the media does indeed affect the electoral outcomes because of political advertisement, coverage etc they are not the sole determinants of electoral outcomes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Mass media; electoral process; presidential elections.

1. INTRODUCTION

Elections in Nigeria over the years have been recognized as been notoriously characterized by unprofessional media reportage, hype, frenzy, abuse and mudslinging. Politicians often dominate the media space with little attention on the salient issues of national development. Media coverage of elections has progressively grown in relevance. The role of the media in every society is often to educate, inform and enlighten. It is assumed that, where those roles are effectively carried out, elections are bound to be free and fair [1].

The freedom of the media has become the norm for representative liberal democracy and development. [2] argued that a state's promotion of development is ideal, and that the media can quicken the process. [3], opined that due to the nature of the uniqueness of the Nigerian population, the mass media in Nigeria serve as a major system of communication. Some scholars assert that, the media mediates, and is not independent of a particular social system but instead provide channels of communication between components within it. [4] argued that media exist as a tool for information sourcing and dissemination thereby making the media very important.

The Nigerian media without doubt, is reputed for its vibrancy, diversity and freedom during electioneering periods in the country. However, this assertion can be fully understood by looking back at the history of Nigerian elections in relations to media as an integral part of Nigerian political system. The Nigerian political history is never complete without highlighting the important role played by the Nigerian media.

Historically, according to [5] journalism which is an aspect of media genre started in Nigeria along with the rise of the Scottish missionary, Reverend Henry Townsend published the first tabloid "*Iwe Irohin Awon Ara egba*" on November 23, 1859. Ever since, the profession has grown in leaps and bounds. The global media landscape and ecology has radically changed over the last two decades thus putting Nigeria in a cockpit of dynamics in terms of changing media use; for instance, in just over ten years, Nigeria has gone from being mostly unconnected to the internet to having millions using it through different platforms and devices. Nonetheless, social media hasn't totally replaced mainstream

media because low-middle classes still subscribe to main stream media.

In the case of the role of the media during elections, [3] argued that the mass media have remained in the fore of the struggle to propagate the rights of the people through a credible electoral process. The traditional role of the media in the electoral process however is to act as a check on the abuse of governmental power, to propagate different political ideologies which enables the electorates make informed decisions during voting. They also advertise candidates and political parties who want to present themselves to a new voting base, they also scrutinize and criticize not just the electoral process but the stakeholders in the electoral process, this help limit the arbitrariness some stakeholders may want to display.

Whatever nature or circumstances the society in which the media operates, there are certain basic factors that determine the depth and spread of their influence; these factors are the media themselves, the society they operate in and the public they are able to reach specifically their audience. If the media is professional in the discharge of its duty the society benefits but if they are not professional the reverse is the case. In order for the media to positively impact on the socio-economic and democratic development of a state, it must be seen to play certain critical roles including checks and balance by acting as a watch dog against government excesses, this is what makes them the fourth estate of the realm. In the modern interpretation of the fourth estate of the realm the media are regarded as the "fourth power" that checks and counter balances the "powers" of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary [6].

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

2.1 Mass Media

Mass media as a word was first used in the beginning of twentieth century to explain the feature of the then emerging new world that was being developed on the backdrop of industrialization and liberal democracy. According to [7] mass media refers to the mediums adopted in communicating to a vast audience, not only through electronic devices but also the institutions that use them to transmit messages.

[8] holds that mass media refers to an organized way of communicating and interacting with a large public normally through an electronic facility in a short space of time at a distance. [9] explained; we need to recognize that mass communication is no longer the single means of society wide and or global communication. New technologies have been developed and have taken up what can be considered as an alternative potential network of communication. He was referring to new technologies like the internet, which offers assorted platforms for broadcasting news. Types of media; include the following broadcast such as the radio and television, print such as dailies and magazines and social media

2.2 Electoral Process

Electoral systems are sets of rules that define how elections, plebiscites and referendums or any other issue tabled for voting are conducted. The electoral systems are organized by governments [10]. Electoral systems contains some set of rules that guide all areas of the voting process; when elections occur, persons allowed to vote, persons who stand as a candidate, how the ballots are marked and or cast, how the ballots are counted, ceiling on campaign spending, and such related factors can affect the electoral outcome. Political electoral systems are defined by constitutions, statutes, precedents and electoral laws they are normally conducted by statutory electoral umpires in the form of an institution, and can use different models of elections for different offices [11].

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the secondary analysis of published sources. Regarding the impact the media has on electoral outcomes generally, I reviewed the scholarship on media and elections. Regarding the role and impact of the media on electoral outcomes in Nigeria, I reviewed scholarly articles and used news stories and reports published by various entities specifically related to Nigerian elections from the colonial to the most recent elections in post-colonial Nigeria.

3.1 Media and Elections

According to [12] the media in Nigeria has always been at the forefront for democratic advocacy, this means they are very much interested in every electoral outcome. During the

colonial era the media was used as a very credible platform for the campaign of self-rule for the colony. The Nigerian nationalists used the media as a tool to create the much needed awareness and mobilize the locals to resist colonial rule.

During the post-colonial era the media played very important roles in the determination of electoral outcomes. During the Nigerian 1st republic, the media became a means through which politicians and political parties used to articulate their ideas and positions on issues. This state of affairs was not properly managed; the politicians in the 1st republic mismanaged the situation in collaboration with the media that had become polarized along regional lines, this contributed remotely to the military intervention which later led to the civil war.

The post-civil war and military era gave rise to a very vibrant media that desired to return the Nigeria state to democracy; the media inadvertently became anti-military and paid very high prices for their stand on issues. This state of affairs helped to galvanize public opinion towards the need for democratization, in 1999 this was achieved through a combination of various circumstances but the media did contribute immensely [13].

The media in Nigeria has impacted on all electoral outcomes since the return of democratic government in 1999 the impact of the media was felt in the 1999 election because it helped shape the issues and talking points for that election. Sequel to the death of MKO Abiola the perceived winner of the annulled 1993 elections, the two key contenders in 1999 were evaluated by what the media reported about them. The eventual winner of that election which according to various sources was massively rigged, Obasanjo was portrayed as a man who represented the much disliked military establishment while Falae was seen as representing the democratic values long fought for.

While Obasanjo emerged the winner of that election the media held the opinion that the election was massively rigged in his favor by the military regime that conducted the election, this opinion would shape the feeling of the public towards his administration. Subsequent elections conducted clearly showed that the media impacted on voter's attitude, Chiwendu [14] was of the opinion that not only did the media dictate the talking points, they directly influenced voter's

perception of candidates, he further asserted that the media was in most cases very unprofessional in its report due to issues related to ownership, patronage, religious and ethnic considerations.

In the 2003 elections the media played a huge role in exposing the fraud in the electoral process. While it is a well-known truth that incumbent governments in Africa generally and in Nigeria specifically hardly lose elections, the media kept the failure of the government in the public domain in terms of conducting a free, fair and transparent elections. The 2007 elections was a watershed in the country's history because the media had before the general elections called for electoral reforms to enable a transparent electoral process but the government acted as if all was well with the electoral system, it was therefore a huge surprise when the main beneficiary of that election President Yaradua acknowledged that the electoral process that brought his ruling party was very flawed which was another name for rigged, he in his nationwide public address thanked the media specifically for pointing out the obvious flaws relentlessly [14].

The media in the 2011 elections played even a greater role especially in creating the needed awareness with regards the two leading contestants. This bigger role was helped by the upsurge in the use of the social media. The explosion in the use of various social new media platforms and its unrestricted use caused a change in the way the media impacted elections because the normal gatekeepers which were the journalists in the traditional media were bypassed. This tremendous media impact was replicated in the 2015 elections in a way that has never been done before; it was the media that set the agenda for discussion. The impact of the media in 2015 general elections was unprecedented.

These findings stated above can be viewed through the work of [15] in which he argued that the media influence elections by making the voter recognize the name of a candidates or parties name or logo or slogan, this is very true with regards the Nigerian situation where most of the voters are illiterate, hence party logo or slogans become a very useful tool for recognizing their preferred party and candidate, nevertheless this presents a huge challenge because of media bias and selectiveness in broadcasting preferred parties and candidates

are the ones these category of voters will vote for because these are the ones they know.

[15] research also showed that some candidates or parties can be virtually made invisible due to the fact that they can't win enough interest from the media, this invariably makes them unknown and unheard to the electorates who don't know about them or their party personally, especially in a multi-party system like Nigeria where you have over fifty parties contesting for various positions in any general elections. From the works of [16] and [17] they further collaborated these assertions when they independently argued that the media impacts on elections through political biases in their coverage. This factor may be motivated by a number of reasons such as business, politics etc. The media's growing political schisms drives polarization in the populace which in turn impacts on actual voting therefore affects elections generally.

The media can impact elections because according to McQuail [9] images, particularly of political candidates or their parties, convey and or carry emotions, actions, realism, feelings and credibility. These visual outputs imprint themselves in the minds of the voting public. What the media chooses to broadcast or print with factors such as size, color, time, page and layout can also influence voter perceptions and reveal possible bias. These images also become part of the permanent record preserved on different media platforms such as the print, broadcast and the internet therefore influences voter's perception about the various political candidates.

On his own part [18] showed the impact of the media on electoral outcomes by arguing that the main stream media tends to see elections through the prism of competition. Campaigns of political parties and their candidates get covered as if they are games, with too much spin, publicity and emphasis on who's winning, who's losing, who's up, who's down, how they are moving ahead or behind in the polls, this spin inadvertently in the long run impacts on some voters' perception through what I may term spillover effect. The agenda the media sets, the way they cast the candidates and political parties in no small measure influences voters.

In the view of [19] the media influences elections due to the issue of selective exposure, because fact-checks can only relatively change the public perception generally and voters mind specifically.

While fact-checkers focus attention on the party candidates' stands on the issues, data analysis tools can perpetuate the media's heavy attention on the horserace. In Nigeria the aspect of fact check has taken a new twist because the media is beginning to dig up the past of politicians to see if anything that does not add up can be utilized to un-market the candidate and the political party.

Electoral outcomes are also influenced by polls conducted by the media because they influence voter perceptions, and we know that how candidates are doing in the polls can then influence the type of coverage they get and this can sway voters. The media focus on the front-runners. And the more broadcast time those candidates get, the higher they tend to climb in the polls a dynamic that can turn into a self-perpetuating cycle. During the 2015 elections several polls were conducted by media platforms some commentators were of the opinion that most of the poll results were doctored by the media to give the candidate they were supporting an edge; this gave rise to conflicting poll results.

The media also impacts on electoral outcome through the instrumentality of political advertising. In Nigeria political advertising brings huge revenues for the media, they do all they can sometimes they even over indulge these politicians and help in no small ways to sway voter perception about political candidates and their parties [20]. Advertising messages about political candidates and political parties are usually transmitted to the targeted audiences through different broadcast media available at any particular time. It is the awareness of the strategic importance of advertising and public relations that political gladiators often employ advertising. [21] understandably argued that political advertising is a very important tool in the hands of political gladiators and they use it to create awareness in order to sway the public.

4. CONCLUSION

While Nigeria has a vibrant media landscape, press freedom is anything but 'free' due to political influence and interference because media practice and particularly in Nigeria is affected by many unethical challenges such as politically polarization in terms of geographical axis, ethnic loyalty, religious bigotry, ownership interference and subjective editorial judgments. The media have fallen victim of manipulation by politicians in or out of power. Media ownership

and control constitutes a huge challenge in Nigeria especially as it affects democratic development. Media ownership is a contentious issue in social and political debate.

The freedom of press starts where the fundamental interest of the owner ends, the media can play more effective role in the electoral process if certain aspects of their output like fake news and hate speech are eschewed. These key broadcast variables can mar democratic development. Recent political events particularly during electioneering campaigns, have led to a wave of interest in phrases "Fake News and Hate speech", which is believed widely to have shaped the outcome of political contest negatively.

The media play important roles in enabling citizens to monitor the activities and actions of political office holders and policy makers and to use this information in their voting decisions. The knowledge of this power of the citizenry leads to government accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the citizens. Despite the plausibility of this proposition; very little work in the political communication literature in Nigeria scrutinizes the role of the media in fulfilling this function.

Citizens have imperfect and incomplete information about government actions hence mass media can therefore enhance citizen's ability to scrutinize government actions. While most countries have media of some description their mere existence is no guarantee that they are an effective vehicle for critical scrutiny of state actions. This requires that media outlets have real information about such action, that they are willing to print or broadcast it, the extent of media freedom or the extent to which they are regulated.

Many countries while formally democratic have a little or no media freedom. The Nigeria media even with the freedom of information Act passed by law still lacks the will and sometimes incapable of getting required information from the government ministries, agencies, departments and parastatals. How the government treats the media industry affects the development and the quality of news generated. The tradition of a free and independent media is catching up with the developing states like Nigeria albeit slowly.

The media generally to a significant extent determine the political knowledge of citizens and

drive voter turnout. The traditional role of the media is the watch dog role, to inform and educate the viewers who are also the electorates; other major roles include the enablement of public participation in electoral process. They often provide their platforms for politicians and political parties to communicate their messages to the electorates and also to get feedback from the electorates on their expectation and in extension showcase their popularity.

The media is thus considered as a primary player in the electoral process because the content of the information transmitted and consumed by the viewer, ultimately help determines the voting pattern of the viewer. The final decision on who to vote for depends on the information available at the disposal of voters most of these information or knowledge is mostly based on the media reports. But it must be stated that the media in the electoral process, does not operate in a vacuum but are attended to by the socio-political configuration of the society in which they operate, why we may argue that the media plays a crucial role in the determination of electoral outcome we must also state categorically that in Nigeria a candidates religion, place of origin, and other trivial primordial sentiments play even a greater role in the overall electoral outcome, merit is often sacrificed over these sentiments media impact or not.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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