

Media Usage and Abusage in Nigeria's 2015 Election

Ben U. Nwanne*, Ph.D.

The Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Mass Communication,
Delta State University, P.M.B 1, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at print media content with respect to the 2015 General elections in Nigeria. By their nature, media provide a free market place of ideas for those who have something to say hence the paper is anchored on the agenda setting theory of the mass media. However, in the run-up the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria, many politicians have had undue access to the mass media thereby confusing the electorate in the process. However, the peace pact signed by the political parties is a refreshing exception. In order to have a more reliable media content it is recommended, among others, that the media should handle their gate keeping function more effectively and professionally, be more objective and less corrupt their operations.

Keywords: Mass Media, Credibility and Propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

For reasons not totally unconnected with underdevelopment, elections elicit terrible feelings of unease, even apprehension, in Nigeria. Apart from the huge national budgets that go into preparation and execution of elections, security concerns are often heightened during such periods. The struggle for power by different contenders is often vicious even violent. Part of the problem arises from the fact that people of one ethnic group believe that their group would be marginalized if they are not in power or in the good books of those in power. In fact, the struggle for power is dangerous, with practically no boundaries as there are no effective institutional machinery to either deter or punish heinous crimes that are carried out usually on behalf of certain candidates who wish to have undue advantage. In the 2011 elections, a presidential candidate was quoted on saying he would make the country ungovernable if the election did not go his way. Not unexpectedly, most of the statements are channeled through the media of mass communication.

Rationale of the Study

The struggle for political power is often fierce in Nigeria and other developing countries partly because possession of political power gives certain persons or groups undue advantage over others. The distribution of the nation's wealth is often lopsided to the disadvantage of the poor while the elite often have a disproportionate advantage. The result is that the rich is becoming richer while the poor is becoming poorer. Apart from the economic advantage of the rich and powerful, they also have almost uninhibited access to the mass media. Whatever they say or do finds its way into the mass media, the print and electronic versions. In the process, the news makers often abuse their access to the mass media by making frivolous or even false allegations against political opponents.

This paper assesses some of the sore issues that have been used unethically in Nigeria's mass media in the run up to the 2015 general elections which the United Nations secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, described the contest between incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and former Head of State Rtd. Major-General Muhammadu Buhari as a "grave contest."

Definition of Terms

In order to establish a measure of clarity, there is need to define some terms as they are used in this presentation. The expressions under consideration are: mass media, credibility and propaganda.

Mass Media: Many scholars and practitioners define media in different ways, even if everyone has a good idea of what the media are all about. Raufu (2003, p. 8) describes the mass media as "the modern means of giving information to a large number of people. Although simple and straight to the point, the definition gives a good idea of what the mass media do. It would be expedient to add that the communication is technology-assisted as it is done through newspapers, radio, television and even the Internet. Taken together, the mass media would suggest, therefore, all the channels or avenues through which information is passed to a large and heterogeneous audience. The media industry in Nigeria has grown phenomenally in the past two decades when the government of military President, General Ibrahim Babangida deregulated the broadcast sector. This has led to the establishment of many private broadcast outfits and increased access to media products by the citizens.

Credibility: Apart from the availability of a large array of media, the rate of believability of the media is not necessarily high as a result of partisanship of some of the media outlets. In Nigeria ownership has a strong influence on content and slant of presentation. This often affects credibility. As noted by Uyo (1987) credibility is not an intrinsic feature of the media, since it is attained by media operators. That explains why a medium may

attain different levels of credibility under different management settings.

Propaganda: Defining propaganda is often a difficult endeavour because there are fierce contentions on each side of the divide. Shultz and Godwin (1986, p. 32), for instance, see propaganda as “written or oral information which deliberately seeks to influence and or manipulate the opinions and attitude of a given target grouping”.

Abodunrin (2003, p.3) in defining propaganda, emphasizes its function, describing it in the following words: “The function of propaganda is not necessarily to convert, but rather its function is to attract followers and to keep them in line”

Essentially, propaganda aims at canvassing a particular view point which the audience is expected to swallow without questions. It does not give allowance for other viewpoints. That is where it differs from public relations which allows, even encourages, a two-way communication.

Theoretical Anchor

This paper derives a theoretical anchor from the agenda setting theory which suggests that the mass media have an influence on what issues society regards as being important at any point in time. According to Severin and Tankard Jr. (2001, p.219), “the agenda setting function of the media refers to the media’s capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public’s mind”.

Folarin, (2002, p. 75) in the same vein asserts that “agenda-setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what are regarded as important at a given time in a society”. He further explains that “Agenda-setting does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about. They set the agenda for political campaigns”

Indeed, the media are the avenues for the public to know what is going on with a view to a better understanding of their environment. This is critically crucial especially during political campaigns just as Nigeria is involved in for the 2015 general elections. It is practically impossible to communicate with everyone on an interpersonal basis. Even when campaigns are carried out in a particular town, it is unlikely that every eligible voter in that area would be physically present. What is likely is that many would have to depend on the media to be informed of what transpired at the campaign ground. Even those who attended the event would want to see how the media reported it. In reporting events, the media, using different professional techniques such as bold type, display of stories, prominence given to stories, frequency of reportage of certain events, demonstrate the relative importance of certain stories over others. By so doing, they cause members of the public to perceive, and perhaps, accept certain news developments as being more important than others. This is the essence of agenda setting as it affects the media.

Media Role in Society

The mass media institution has become so important that it cannot be completely ignored in modern society. Just imagine how it would be if all media houses were to shut down for a week. In fact, as Severin and Tankard Jr. (2001, p. 218) have posited that:

The mass media has become a major force in society and it is reasonable to wonder about the effect that this force is producing. Are the effects of mass communication large or small? Are they malevolent or benign? Are they obvious or subtle?

This suggests that the media are so important in today’s society. The importance of the media was succinctly brought home long ago in America when a former President, Thomas Jefferson, noted that if he had a choice, he would rather choose the existence of a media institution without a government instead of a government without the media.

Indeed, apart from Jefferson’s personal confidence in the media, the American system has a profound respect for the media, hence the first Amendment to the American Constitution states without any equivocation that “Congress shall make no laws abridging the freedom of the press”. This clearly explains the high level of press and personal liberties enjoyed in the United States of America.

Taken together, the role of the press may be articulated from the following perspectives as enunciated by scholars or practitioners. Generally, the traditional functions of the media include information, education and entertainment, Raufie (2003, p. 12) further identifies other functions of the media to include surveillance of the environment, correlation and coordination of facts, persuasion, transmission of social heritage and opinion moulding.

These functions are performed through the stories that the media publish, the frequency and the emphasis they bestow on the news stories and features. Given this scenario, many persons in powerful positions have sought to exercise undue influence on the media. At a recent event organized by the **Sun Newspaper**, a former military President, Rtd General Ibrahim Babaginda had confessed that even as head of state, he tried unsuccessfully to dominate the press. Indeed, many still make this mistake, believing that they can use the press as their propaganda tool.

Politicians and Access to the Media

If there is any group that enjoys access to the media, it must be the political class on account of their economic and social standing. Many of them are owner's or part owners of the media; others have what it takes to have access to the media. The result is that many politicians make up the majority of people in the news. Political office holders, especially the President, Governors, members of the National Assembly, political appointees are daily in the news on account of their prominence, which is one of the major determinants of news. Being relatively unnewsworthy, the rural population and other disadvantaged groups are hardly in the news, except when they suffer disasters.

This theme has been well explored in academic media circles encapsulated in what has been described as media imperialism in which international media focus attention on the developed world to the detriment of the developing countries. The international media remember the developing world only when there is disaster, famine and other negative news. Ironically, this is replicated at national levels where the weak and oppressed hardly have access to the media, except in bad light.

The politicians who have access to the media often want to use it to their advantage or that of their political party or candidate. Many make wild allegations; others embrace malicious claims and indeed some come up with outright lies and fraudulent claims. The next segment examines some issues that have been used unprofessionally, callously and even maliciously by desperate politicians eager to score cheap political points at the expense of unwary voters.

The Buhari Certificate Saga

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prescribes the West African School Certificate to be the minimum academic qualification for a person seeking the office of the President as well as attaining the age of 40. However, the issue of General Muhammadu Buhari, the Presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), the main opposition party, not possessing the required certificate was thrown up. In reacting, General Buhari had sworn to an affidavit to the fact that his credentials were with the authorities of the Nigerian Army where he spent all his working years.

In handling the certificate issue the media exhibited what could best be described as "double speak" when two different newspapers published two versions of the same story, from the same source leaving the readers wondering what the true situation is. In a front page story, **Saturday Vanguard** of January 3, 2015, reported the Nigerian Army as saying that it did not have General Buhari's certificates explaining that they "do not keep the certificates of any serving or retired officer or soldier". In the story another source corroborated the above claim, stating that "the Army cannot keep any body's original certificate because it is the personal property of the owner", adding that "such original certificates were only needed at the point of entry into the service".

In a swift reaction, the **Sunday Punch** of January 4, 2015 published a front page story with the headline "Buhari's Certificate with us, says Army". The story as summarized in the lead reads: "The authorities of the Nigerian Army have said the service will readily release credentials and certificates in its custody to serving and retired officers in need of them."

The availability of two versions of the same story raises issues of truth telling and objectivity in Nigeria media. What could have happened within twenty four hours for things to have changed 100 %? Could the certificates or credentials have been forwarded within twenty four hours? Have the military authorities changed their policy of not being the custodians of the credentials of their serving and retired officers? One could even pose many more questions even if nobody might provide answers to the questions. It seems that somebody somewhere was being mischievous by using the free access which the media often provide for any interested party.

Nigerians may never know who was responsible for this lie as published by the two rival newspapers. This is the situation because of the weak institutional controls in the country. In Nigeria, there are so many strong men and women in different spheres, for good or for ill, but weak institutions. However, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the constitutional supervisor of election matters in the country has released the list of candidates for the February 14 2015 Presidential Polls in which General Muhammadu Buhari is listed as candidate of the All Peoples Congress (APC) According to the list published in **Vanguard**, January 15, 2015 fourteen political parties including the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are expected to contest the Presidential Election.

The Profligacy charge Against Governor Adams Oshiomole.

Adams Oshiomole is the Governor of Edo State, South South Nigeria. A former President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Oshiomole made a name for himself with his vibrant leadership of the labour movement. In 2007, he contested the Governorship election in Edo State under the banner of the then Action Congress (AC). His rival, Prof. Osa Osunbor of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was declared winner by INEC, a decision

Oshiomole challenged in court. After a protracted legal battle, Osunbor was dethroned, paving way for Oshiomole to emerge governor. At the end of a four year tenure, Oshiomole was re-elected in 2013. Since then he has been enmeshed in a running battle with the opposition PDP who criticize almost every move he makes.

In one of such moves, the Edo State Chairman of the People Democratic Party (PDP), Chief Dan Orbih, had alleged at Iguobouzuwa, headquarters of Ovia West Local Government, during a political campaign that Governor Oshiomole spent ₦142 million to commission some projects executed by his administration by the All Progressive Congress Candidate Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (rtd) and Senator Bola Tinubu, the national leader of the party.

As reported by Sunday vanguard of January 4, 2015:

Chief Orbih displayed two Edo Government vouchers with no EXT/GOV/GHSP/2441/14/ and EXT/GOV/GHSP/2477/14, which he said, were used to sign out the sum of ₦76 and ₦66 million for the commissioning of projects on November 28 and 29, 2014.

He continued:

Governor Oshiomole sat in his office and signed two vouchers to commission two projects on 28th or 29th November. In those vouchers it was written ‘voucher to commission projects in Edo State by two eminent Nigerians, Rtd. General Muhammadu Buhari and Asiwaju Bola Tinubu. In those vouchers the sum of ₦76 and ₦66 million were signed away simply to cut tapes for projects that had earlier been commissioned.

This is a serious allegation bordering on misappropriation of public funds. However Governor Oshiomole would have none of that as he vehemently rejected the allegation and also came up with his own version of the story. Speaking through his Special Adviser on Media, Prince Kassim Afegbua, he described Orbih’s allegation as spurious, adding: “Do we run Edo State Government in PDP Secretariat, anybody can cook up memos but I am not aware, that our memos are missing.”

The State Commissioner for Information, Louis Odion came up with a strong rebuttal, describing the vouchers paraded by the PDP Chairman as forged. As recorded by **Sunday Vanguard** of January 4, 2015;

With Governor Adams Oshiomole commissioning world class projects all our Edo State in the past two months we knew PDP would be gnashing their deformed teeth in envy. But we least expected that malice would force them into forging vouchers to back up a shameless lie in their evil desperation to tarnish Oshiomole golden records.

From the allegations on both sides certain issues become apparent. Some of the matters arising from the cross fires are encapsulated in the following questions:

- (i) Did Governor Oshiomole really spend as much as ₦142 million to commission projects?
- (ii) Did Chief Orbih actually forge the vouchers?
- (iii) Can the language of both parties be said to be enlightened?
- (iv) Are security agents investigating the allegations?
- (v) Will Edo State residents ever get to know the truth of this matter?

Obasanjo and Foreign Reserves

Over the years, managing Nigeria’s economy has been a major challenge. Hardly can any administration claim to be above board, largely because of Nigeria’s weak institutional framework where those in power often behave with impunity.

The name General (some prefer chief) Olusegun Obasanjo, is a recurring decimal in Nigeria’s post-colonial history. He is the only one to have held power both as a military dictator for about four years (1976-1979) and as an elected President (1999-2007). While in power as a civilian President, he made strenuous effort to substantially reduce the country’s foreign debt through debt forgiveness and repayment. It must be counted for him that his administration improved Nigeria’s foreign reserves. But Obasanjo is not happy with the way President Goodluck Jonathan has managed the economy, accusing him of “squandering \$ 25 billion crude oil savings” left behind by his administration.

Quoting Obasanjo copiously, **Vanguard newspaper** of January 6, 2015 reported that:

Obasanjo claimed that the more than N25 billion inherited by his successor, Musa Yar’adua was raised to \$ 35 million, but the Jonathan administration squandered all including also the \$ 40 billion in Nigeria’s foreign reserves account after payment of the outstanding debt at the time

The former President expressed displeasure over the state of the economy, insisting that:

Our economy should not have been this bad. When I was leaving office about eight years ago, I left a very huge reserve after we had paid our debts. Almost \$ 25 billion was left in what they called excess crude including the excess from the budget we were saving as reserve for the rainy days But today that reserve has been depleted! The reserve we left when we finished paying all our debts our dents

that was about \$ 40 billion, that is including debt forgiveness, the remaining debt was not more than \$ 3 billion.

It is obvious from the above that General Obasanjo whose current book “**My Watch**” has been stopped from circulation by a court order, is not a happy man because the current administration is not leaving up to his expectations. In fact, the former commander of the 3 Marine Commando during the civil war (1967-70) has not had the best of relationships with the incumbent President. In 2014, Obasanjo had written a damning open letter to President Jonathan who also replied in the same measure.

Not unexpectedly, President Jonathan would not let an allegation of such magnitude go unreplied. Speaking through the Minister of Finance and Co-ordinating Minister of the Economy, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former Vice President of the World Bank, the administration picked holes in the former President’s allegations. Dr. Okonjo Iweala, who was also Minister of Finance for most of Obasanjo’s regime, explained that the former President got it wrong.

According to her:

Former President Obasanjo left a gross reserve of \$43.13 billion, comprising the CBN’s external reserves of \$ 31.5 billion, \$9.43 in the Excess Crude Account and \$ 2.18 billion in the Federal Government savings in May 2007.

Expatriating, the Minister stated:

The reserve peaked at \$62 billion in 2008 under Yar’ Adua when crude oil prices rose to \$ 147 per barrel before falling to \$ 31.7 billion in September 2011 as the Central Bank of Nigeria had to use much of it to defend the Naira, following the 2008-2009 financial meltdown. The Ministry maintained that President Jonathan never in any way squandered the nation’s reserves, but appropriately utilized it in the course of normal transactions required for the development of Nigeria’s economy.

The above scenario is profoundly worrisome on account of the issue involved and the personalities concerned. If an Obasanjo makes such a grave allegation it cannot be ignored. Certain questions are therefore inevitable such as (i) could Chief Obasanjo be fiddling with the truth?

- ii. Is this a mischievous or malicious allegation or both?
- iii. Is the Federal Government response satisfactory?
- iv. What are those normal transactions required for the development of Nigeria’s economy?
- vi. Who must Nigerians and the international community believe?

The Non-Violence Pact

On January 14, 2014 history was made in Nigeria. On that day fourteen Presidential candidates in Nigeria’s February 14, 2015 election came together in agreement to conduct an issue-based and non-violent poll. This is significant because election violence has been a nightmare in Nigeria politics since Independence in 1960. Furthermore, it was the first time a concerted effort was made in the form of a pact to discourage violence and enthrone a peaceful contest. As previously noted, elections often elicit a feeling of unease, or even insecurity, in Nigeria. Even the secretary General of the United Nations described the forthcoming electing as a ‘grave contest’ between the two main contenders, incumbent President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and former Military Head of State, General Muhammadu Buhari.

During a sensitization workshop with the theme “2015 General Elections sensitization Workshop on non-violence”, the leader displayed comrade, giving the impression that they were generally interested in the pact. Naturally, all the newspapers and other media captured the event, giving it prominence in their front pages while the electronic media devoted generous airtime to the story.

The accord, as captured by Vanguard of January 15, 2015 reads in part:

We the undersigned Presidential candidates of the under listed political parties contesting in general elections of 2015; desirous of taking proactive measures to prevent electoral violence before during and after the elections; anxious about the maintenance of a peaceful environment for the 2015 General elections, reaffirming our commitment to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; desirous of sustaining and promoting the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria as an indivisible entity; determined to avoid any conduct or behavior that would endanger the political stability and national security of Nigeria; determined to place national interest above personal and partisan concerns

Without doubt this is the most practical and important step taken by the political class to address the issue of intolerance and win-at-all-cost of many politicians. Part of the problem arises from the shoddy job of the electoral umpire. It would be recalled that late Musa Yar’adua had acknowledged in a rare show of honesty that the election that brought him to power was flawed. He went ahead to set up the Uwais Panel to study the problem and come up with recommendation. Since after Yar’adua, it would seem there has been an improvement

in election management but the INEC must work hard to improve on previous performances.

The January 2015 pact is a step forward in achieving a peaceful poll and all the signatories must be commended for such patriotic move: In fact the action and the generous and faithful reportage of the media houses in Nigeria and abroad is the most heartwarming development in the 2015 election. Electing people who would run Nigeria's affairs for the next four years should not be a do-or-die affair because whenever there is a breakdown of the peace, the most vulnerable groups such as women, children and the poor suffer most. Without doubt the warm embrace between President Jonathan and his main rival General Muhammadu Buhari is a welcome development. They must all go back and faithfully abide by Letter and spirit of that honourable accord.

Summary and Conclusion

Elections in Nigeria often lead to a feeling of unease among citizens and residents of the country. Many see this as a sign of underdevelopment because it is not usually so in advanced countries. The battle for power often takes place in the mass media with the advantage of reaching so many persons almost simultaneously. Naturally, those involved in the power struggle are usually the rich and privileged. In the course of attempting to obtain political power at all costs, many of them cannot resist the use of unethical or even criminal means. The mass media are often used or abused in this process. Unfair and unsubstantiated allegations are thrown around, foul language is used freely, and other below – the – belt tactics are employed against opponents.

This paper identifies three major cases in which free access to the media has been clearly abused. Some of the cases identified include the Buhari certificate saga, the profligacy charge against Governor Adams Oshiomole, the Obasanjo allegation against President Jonathan and, refreshingly, the peace pact among 14 Presidential candidates.

From the foregoing it is reasonable to state that some persons on account of their prominence have tended to abuse their free access to the mass media, which provide a free marketplace of ideas and issues to all who approach them.

Recommendations

1. Although everyone should have access to the media, those who do so must come clean with only credible and true information.
2. The gate keeping functions of the mass media should be fully implemented so that frivolous and malicious allegations are kept out of the media.
3. The security agencies should carry out their functions effectively so that false and malicious allegations are kept at bay. This can be done if allegations are carefully investigated and those found guilty are appropriately punished. The idea that there are sacred cows should be jettisoned in the interest of fair play and justice.
4. It seems that the cause of objectivity may be better served if joint ownership of the media is encouraged as against the current practice where individuals own and control the media thus making them too powerful.
5. Many persons have also suggested that there is high level of corruption even in the media. This should be checked by relevant authorities including the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Broadcasting Organizations of Nigeria (BON) and the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN)). There is an argument that many persons gain undue access to the media because of their financial weight which they throw around. Journalists should be on the lookout for such fellows by treating stories with caution and sheer professionalism.

REFERENCES

- Abodunrin, T. (2003). Fundamentals of Public Relations. Lagos: One Soul Publishers.
- First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America.
- Folarin, B. (2002) Theories of Mass Communication: An Introductory Text. Abeokuta: Link Publications.
- Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended).
- Raufu, A. (2003) Mass Media and the Society Issues and Perspectives. Lagos: Meek Associates.
- Severin, W.J. and Tankard Jr J.W. (2001) Communication Theories: Methods and Uses in the Mass Media. New York: Longman.
- Shultz, R. and Godwin, R. (1986) The Strategy of Soviet Disinformation New York: Berkley Books.
- Uyo, O.A. (1987) Mass Communication Media: Classifications and Characteristics New York: Civilities International.
- The Guardian on Saturday January 16, 2015. Front Page
- Sunday Punch, January 4, 2015. Front Page.
- Sunday Sun, January 18, 2015 p.13.
- Vanguard, January 14, 2015 Front Page.
- Vanguard, January 15, 2015, p.9.

Sunday vanguard, January 4, 2015. Page.7
Vanguard, January 6, 2015 front page.
Vanguard, January 8, 2015 Front Page.