The Mass Media and Elections in Nigeria: a social responsibility

James Mathew, Ph. D

Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Nigeria

Mohammed A, Adamu, Ph.D Scholar

Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Nigeria

Hashim Abba Aji, Ph.D Scholar

Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri,

Maiduguri, Nigeria

Corresponding e-mail address: infornme@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study is on the mass media and election in Nigeria: a social responsibility. No credible election can take place without the participation of the media. The functions of the media in a democratic society, especially during an election is to, inform and educate the electorates about candidate's credentials, capabilities, and competence, antecedents, the party manifestoes and the electoral process, enlightened and mobilised the people to participate in the electoral process. This way, the people will make an informed decision on the party and the candidates to vote for, that best represents their interest. In addition, the mass media are agents of social change capable of changing people's apathy during an election. This paper is aimed at examining the conceptual definition of election, using the social Responsibility and the media dependency theory as a theoretical framework, media and national development, media and electoral process in Nigeria, media's justification for covering an election, code of conduct on media engagement in elections, election, the media and freedom of speech, role of the media in election, challenges and the way forward were identified.

Keywords: Democracy, Elections, Electoral Process, Media responsibility, Nigerian media

1. Introduction

In any democratic society, the mass media is vital to the survival of democracy. Democracy involves the participation of the people in choosing their representatives during elections, to represent them in government. No election can be said to be credible, free and fair without the media's involvement in the electoral process. The involvement of the media in any election is key to a successful implementation of the electoral process. The Nigerian mass media has been very active in check-mating the activities of the colonial government even before the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. Historically, journalism practice in Nigeria can be traced back to the late Reverend Henry Townsend of the Presbyterian Church located in Calabar and later relocated to Abeokuta. The first newspaper was published in December 3, 1859, which was written in Yoruba dialect and titled: Iwe Irohin Fun Aron Ara Egbaati Yoruba, meaning a newspaper publication written for Egbas and the Yorubas. The primary aim of the establishment of the newspaper was to get people to read (Ajibade, 2003; Ibrahim, Abba-Aji, Adamu & Vi, 2022).

Although the first newspaper in Nigeria was published in 1859, the "emergence of modern Nigeria in 1914" (Omu, 1978, p. 39) paved the way for a vibrant media scene, and many nationalists established newspapers for the propagation of self-government, nationalist agitations and to counter the excesses of colonial regimes in such areas as excessive taxation, the repudiation of Nigerian religions, languages and traditional-political institutions, oppression of Nigerians and abuse of their rights among others (Ajibade, 2003). Notable among the nationalists who established early newspapers include Sir Akitoye Ajasa, who established Nigerian Pioneer in 1914, Ernest

Sese Ikoli, who established African Messenger in 1921, Herbert Macaulay, who established Lagos Daily News in 1925, Malam Abubakar Imam who established Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo in 1939 and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who established West African Pilot in 1937, etc. (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Ukiwo, 2005). The Nigerian media landscape changed with the establishment of television stations in the three regions of the country. The first television station was established by the Western Region in 1959, later other regional governments followed suite to establish their own television stations.

The establishment of newspapers by private citizens was not only common during the colonial era, but also after Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain in 1960. This trend continues even throughout the military regimes and the second to the fourth republic. The media environment was dominated at the early stage by the print media, setup mainly by individuals for political reasons. "The early Nigerian print news media were inevitably political" (Omu, 1978, p.11). No wonder many of the newspapers fizzled out after the death of their owners.

Even during the military era, the print media was in the fore front of fighting the powers that be, to restore democracy in the country. Many newspapers were proscribed and many journalists jailed, while others were killed for publishing stories that were injurious to the regime in power. For example, Dele Giwa was killed by a parcel bomb, while Nduka Iraboh and Tunde Thompson were imprisoned under decree no.4 of 1984. Other Nigerian journalists in the likes of Dapo Olorunnyomi, Nosa Igiebor, Kunle Ajibade, Soji Omotunde, Babafemi Ojudu and George Mba, who was jailed for life under Abacha regime, paid the price for press freedom and freedom of expression in Nigeria (Pate, 2007). Their struggles and those of other civic rights groups led to the restoration of democracy in 1999. The story is not different under a democratic government, as many journalists were jailed and tortured for publishing stories that were of national interest but against the government in power. Under a democratic regime, the Nigerian journalists continued to suffer in the hands of the government and their officials for their role in sustaining democracy by publishing stories and expressing their opinions on issues of national interest. For example, a joint report on the state of the media freedom in Nigeria by Media Foundation for West Africa in collaboration with the Nigerian Union of Journalists, Open Society Initiative for West Africa and Hewlett Foundation revealed that not less than 500 journalists, media workers and media houses have suffered right violations and harassment under the current democratic regime of Muhammad Buhari. However, of all the mass media, the print media and especially the newspapers played the leading role in sustaining democracy and championing freedom across the globe. It is on record that, newspapers have fought authoritarian regimes in countries that had no regard for freedom of expression and differing opinions (Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2013). There is no democracy without a free press. People's opinions about their candidates, candidate's manifestos, and how they intend to implement them must be a front burner in the press before and during election.

This study is important because Nigerians are tired of politicians promising the electorates many things only to get into office and failed to fulfil them. The Nigerian electorates are worse than they were when the present regime came into power in 2015. They promised to fix the economy, tackle corruption and insecurity. Today Nigeria is in a bigger mess economically, insecurity is virtually everywhere, and Nigeria has fallen further in the corruption index. Therefore, the media must perform her role of educating and informing the people about the manifestoes of the political parties, the character and competence of the candidates and their qualifications and antecedents, to enable the people make informed choices. Also mobilising the electorates to participate in the election is critical to getting the right candidates into power at every level.

2. Conceptual definition

This section explains the meaning of term used by the authors in relation to the topic of study. Albert, Olasehinde-Williams & Aremu, (2013) conceptual definition simply means that the author or research is drawing attention to the key concepts or terms that need to be comprehended in relation to the topic under investigation. The key term conceptualized is; election.

Election

Election is one of the pillars of democracy, Collins Dictionary defines election thus "Election is a process in which people vote to choose a person or group of people to hold an official position". Simply put, it is a legitimate way of transferring power from one person to another through the ballot box (Nnoli, 1978). People express their choice of a candidate by casting vote for him or her during elections, after which, the votes are counted and the candidate with the highest vote is declared a winner. The winner is then sworn in to occupy an office for a specific period after which, another election is conducted. Nkwede (2015) describes election as "a widely and universally accepted means through which, by voting, individuals are openly and periodically chosen to represent a body or community in a large entity or government, is one of the cardinal features of a democratic

process". Peter & AbdulRaham (2018) see election differently, According to Peter & AbdulRahim, election is the formal process of selecting people for various public office or of accepting or rejecting political positions. This is usually done in a democratic environment where people can be selected to various positions for a certain period of time.

3. Theoretical framework

This paper is premised on two theories, the *media dependency* and *social responsibility* theory.

3.1. Media dependency theory

The theory is one of the theories used in mass communication to study the effects of mass media on audience. It was introduced by two American communications researchers Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. Dependency theory is concerned about relationship between the media and the audience. In the industrialised societies, especially in the western world, members of the society are noted to have dependency on the media for information on virtually everything, in order to satisfy their information needs. Such needs could range from information about the economic conditions, politics, relaxation and entertainment to assist them in making the right decisions. They therefore, see the media as a supplier of information that helped individuals satisfy their need in those areas. This theory is an extension of the use and gratification theory. However, the difference is that while uses and gratification theory talks about the media consumption that helps the individuals meet their information needs, the media dependency theory talks about the media information helping audience to make decision on what to do to satisfy a need. Individuals have different needs. Individuals who have lots of their needs taken care of by the media are likely to be more dependent on the media. Littlejohn (1999) urged that "first you have to become dependent on media that meet a number of your needs than media that provide just a few" Lin (2022) listed two fundamental aspects of media dependency as put forward by Ball-Rokeach and Defleur. They are; (1) "the greater the number of social functions performed for an audience by a medium (e.g informing the electorate, providing entertainment), the greater the audience's dependency on the medium, and (2) the greater the instability of a society (e.g in a situation of social change and conflict), the greater the audience's dependency on the media and therefore, the greater the potential effects of the media on the audience. There are potentially three types of effects that result from an audience's dependency on the media: cognitive, effective, and behavioural . Cognitive effects are changes in an audience's attitudes, beliefs, and values, including changes brought about by the media in its role in political "agenda setting." Lin stated further that "affective effects include, for example, the development of feelings of fear and anxiety about living in certain neighbourhoods as a result of overexposure to news reports about violent events in such areas". This may lead to deactivation. Deactivation can take place if an audience failed to utilise the information provided to him/her by the media. Lin, said an example of a "behavioural effect which is deactivated, occurs when an individual member of an audience refrained from taking certain actions, they would have taken had they not been exposed to certain messages from the media. Not voting in political elections may be such an effect". For example, the theory can best explain why many peoples did not vote in the 2015 and 2019 election in the North East of Nigeria for fear of violence at the polling centres.

3. 2. Social Responsibility Theory

The Social Responsibility Theory, which is the variant of the libertarianism free press normative philosophy of media operation was propounded in 1956 by F. S. Siebert, T. Paterson and W. Schramm. The major premise of the theory is that freedom carries concomitant obligations, and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to the society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication. This responsibility comes with it the acknowledgement of media obligation for taking custody, care and safeguarding their audiences (Oriola, 2019; Ineji, Nkanu, & Ekoi, n,d). Oriola (2019) added that in its broader perspectives social responsibility connotes that the media and their practitioners shall protect the needs and interest of the society, while freely performing their functions in a democratic society. These needs may include sustainability, cohesion and harmonious living of that very society.

In the book "Four theories of Press" (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm) stated that "pure libertarianism is antiquated, outdated and obsolete." That paved way for replacement of Libertarian theory with the Social responsibility theory (First Class Information, 2012; Obagwu & Idris, 2019).

According to Ineji et al. (2021), the basic assumptions and components of the social responsibility media theory includes the fact that media have obligation to society, media ownership is a public trust, news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant, media should be free but self-regulated, media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). One of the foremost communication scholars McQuail (2005) summarized the basic principles of Social Responsibility Theory as follows:

1. Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to the society

2. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

3. In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self- regulating within the framework of law and established institutions.

4. The media should avoid offensive content triggering crime, violence or civil disorder and harm to minority groups.

5. The media as a whole should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to various points of views and rights of reply.

6. Society and the public have a right to expect high standards of performance, and intervention can be justified to secure the public good.

7. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employers and the market.

Society expects journalism to serve the interests of the people. Therefore, it is expected that journalism not only informs, educate, but also entertains. In the recent past the expectations of the society has grown to include a forum for discussion, watch dog functions, leadership to the community, empowerment and many emerging functions of the press, (Obagwu & Idris, 2019).

4. Media and National Development

Many scholars in the field of development have propounded their definitions of national development to mean different thing because of the broad and vast nature of the subject. However, national development should naturally cover such areas as political, economic, technological, educational cultural changes in a nation. Okigbo(1983) observed that national development is the process through which a nation improves the standard of living of its citizenry not only in the material realm but also in the realm of value system. Ekwechwu (1990) urged that people's abilities and attitudes toward economic, political and cultural institutions will determine whether a nation can achieve national growth or not. Koroma & Ubasi (2009) were supportive of the fact that given the right conditions, national development can be achieved for everyone in a nation. He asserted that "These are the basic ingredients that ought to be present in the right doses before a polity can convert its material endowments into resources for the attainment of national development. They stated further that national development is the systematic realization of the full potentialities not only of individual members within the nation but also of the state as a whole." For the members of the society and the nation at large to realize their full potentials in every sphere of human endeavour, the mass media must be seen to be playing her part. The media has a crucial role to play in national development. The media's role must not be restricted to informing, educating and entertaining the populace, but also must be seen to be a change agent and mobilizing the people for national development. Daramola (2008) quoted Schramm, as saying "the mass media in the contribution to national development are agents of social change. The specific kind of social change they are expected to accomplish is the transition to new customs and practices and in some cases, to different social relationships. Behind such changes in behaviour must necessarily lie in substantial changes in attitudes, beliefs, skills, and perhaps the most general way to describe what…increase flow of information does in a national development". These changes in behaviour, attitude and beliefs through the media acting as an agent of change, must be reflected in both the members of the society and those in government for the attainment of a true national development.

5. Media and the Electoral Process in Nigeria

The electoral process consists of two fundamental parts, namely the constitutional aspects and the non-constitutional aspects. The constitutional aspects are contained in the 1999 Constitution, while the non - constitutional aspects are contained in the electoral acts and the INEC regulations and guidelines enacted into law by the National Assembly. In other words, the electoral process is meant to help individuals seeking elective office navigate the political terrain without running fouled of the law, and also assist the umpire (INEC) to conduct credible elections. Nkwede (2015) says "electoral process is sometimes conceived to be equivalent to election or electoral system. Nwabwueze sees electoral process as an institutional arrangement on how a free and fair election should be conducted. According to Nwabueze (1993) and cited in Nkwede, (2005), the electoral process has within its institutional procedures, arrangements and actions necessary for an election. Thus, the electoral process includes election observers, both local and international observers, in place to verify the conduct of the election (Omu & Momoh, 2005). Nkwede added that "It includes the establishment of institutions

and structures that will mobilise the people to participate in the electoral process, and spelt out the role and regulations that govern the process.

The media is best suited than any other means of mobilising the people for an election. The critical role of the media in a democracy cannot be over-emphasised. Some scholars hold the view that democracy is impossible without the press. This position is rooted in the recognition and understanding that the media undergirds and monitors the entire electoral process from the registration of voters, through the actual voting process to the announcement of electoral outcomes or results, as well as the management of public opinion and perception in post-election period. An election is credible not just because of the ability of INEC to ensure that voters have the requisite information about the process to exercise their rights to vote whom they want; credibility is also judged by the participatory process in which voters have adequate information on policies, programmes, political parties and their candidates, and the entire electoral process, including the level of public debate and quality of information that informed the choice of the electorate (Balkin, 1999; INEC News, 2018; Oboh, 2016).

Similarly, the media acts as an ombudsman, a general overseer safeguarding the transparency of the electoral process, ensuring not only that information is available to voters, but also that the activities of stakeholders in the electoral and political process are consistent with laid down rules and international best practice. The media thus, has both a duty to ensure effective coverage of the electoral process and through it, the obligation to protect voters' rights to the full and provision of accurate information, participation in debates and dialogues on the electoral process and engagement with stakeholders in the entire process (Norris, 1997; Oboh, 2016).

Beyond protecting the rights of voters, the media should, by the token, also protect the rights of political parties and candidates to have access to, and use of media platforms for public engagement. Similarly, INEC ought to rely on the media as partners in the delivery of credible elections, e.g. in voter/civic education, respect for electoral codes on political conduct by all stakeholders. In general terms therefore, the media should serve as communicators and information channels for voters, political parties, candidates, INEC, civil society organisations and other stakeholders in the electoral process, as well as an informal regulator of the entire process (INEC News, 2018; Swigger, 2012).

In performing these three-dimensional roles, the media must be professional, accurate in its reporting and impartial in its coverage. Without professionalism, the media could become an impediment to the democratic process. Hence, an election would be considered not credible.

6. Media's Justification for Covering Elections

More than 200 years ago former US president Jefferson observed that the press is indispensable in any ideal society. He concludes that if I had to choose between "a government without newspapers or newspapers without government. I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter", (OLL, n.d). Consolidating along this ideal, President JF Kennedy is quoted to have said, "The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all." The relevance of the press in any society can be understood from the centrality of information to socio-economic and political progress. The political system of a society suffers when there is mismanagement, hoarding or absence of credible information. Lack of credible information breeds rumour with its counterproductive effect on the political processes and the society at large. Rumour is powerful and its transmission is fast and strongly effective on many people – especially on those with very weak internal control mechanisms (Ineji, Nkanu & Okoi, 2021; Obagwu & Idris, 2019).

Thus, correct information shields the citizenry from rumour and keeps them better informed in a quest for national transformation. Credible and quality information by the mass media helps the people repose confidence not only in the media practitioners but also in the leaders, and this promotes legitimacy for the government (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). The mass media in general are vital weapons whose roles are paramount in providing understanding of different political, social, economic and cultural systems of the society. They make events and ideas common knowledge, which is crucial to national-building (Ineji et al., 2021; Obagwu & Idris, 2019).

7. Code of Conduct on Media Engagement in Elections

The International Federation of Journalists Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists (IFJDPCJ), UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression (UNSRFOE) Annual Report 1999 and International IDEA, Code of Conduct: Political Parties Campaigning in Democratic Elections (IICC-PPCDE)

have outlined a number of codes of conduct or rules of engagement for media organisations on how to cover elections. Individual journalists and the media in general have adopted codes of conduct, or ethical and professional standards, in most countries as well as through their international organisations. Likewise, a growing number of countries have adopted codes of conduct, either voluntarily or through laws, governing the behaviour of political parties and candidates in elections. The conduct of electoral administrators is also subject to strict professional standards (IFJDPCJ, 2019; IICC-PPCDE, n.d.; UNSRFOE, 1999).

The purpose of this code of conduct is to address the areas where all three sets of ethical standards overlap. The mass media are increasingly recognised as playing a crucial role in free and democratic elections. The media are vital in conveying information to the electorate, helping the latter to make a free and informed choice (IFJDPCJ, 2019; IICC-PPCDE, n.d.; UNSRFOE, 1999). They do this in three ways in particular:

1. By communicating political messages from parties and candidates;

2. By relaying important voter information from election administrators;

3. By subjecting the whole election process to independent scrutiny and comment.

This important role for the mass media imposes particular ethical obligations on individual journalists, editors and media proprietors, political parties and candidates and election administrators. It is recommended that a joint code of conduct be adopted by all these stakeholders to ensure that each behaves in an ethical manner and respects the rights and freedoms of the other (IFJDPCJ, 2019; IICC-PPCDE, n.d.; UNSRFOE, 1999).

The following draft code of conduct is in four parts, covering the different obligations attaching to: individual journalists, editors and owners, political parties and candidates and election management bodies. Certain issues are not directly addressed in this code. In particular, the question of what system is adopted for direct access by political parties and the media is likely to have been addressed already at a national level in the form of laws, regulations or an agreement between the stakeholders (IFJDPCJ, 2019; IICC-PPCDE, n.d.; UNSRFOE, 1999).

Likewise, the question of how the provisions in this code are to be enforced is a matter that would have to be determined at a national level, depending on whether such a code was entirely a voluntary agreed between the different stakeholders or acquired through the force of law (IFJDPCJ, 2019; IICC-PPCDE, n.d.; UNSRFOE, 1999).

Individual Journalists:

- The first duty of a journalist is to report accurately and without bias.
- A journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which s/he knows the origin. A journalist shall not suppress essential information.
- A journalist shall observe professional secrecy regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.
- A journalist shall report in a balanced manner. If a candidate makes an allegation against another candidate, the journalist should seek comment from both sides wherever possible.
- A journalist shall do the utmost to correct any published information that is found to be harmfully and inaccurate.
- As far as possible, a journalist shall report the views of candidates and political parties directly and in their own words, rather than as they are described by others.
- A journalist shall avoid using language or expressing sentiments that may cause discrimination or violence on any grounds, including race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national or social origins.
- When reporting the opinions of those who do advocate discrimination or violence, a journalist shall do the utmost to put such views in a clear context and to report the opinions of those against whom such sentiments are directed.
- A journalist shall not accept any inducement from a politician or candidate.
- A journalist shall not make any promise to a politician about the content of a news report.
- A journalist shall take care in reporting the findings of opinion polls. Any report should wherever possible include the following information:
    - who commissioned and carried out the poll and when,

- o how many people were interviewed, where and how were they interviewed and what is the margin of error, and

  o what was the exact wording of the questions?

- A journalist shall regard the following as grave professional offences:
  - o Plagiarism,

    o malicious misrepresentation,

    o calumny, slander, libel or unfounded accusations, and

    o acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.

Media Organisations:

- In all media, there shall be a clear separation between fact and comment. News reporting should reflect the facts as honestly perceived by journalists. Comment may reflect the editorial line of the publication.
- Publicly owned media shall not express an editorial opinion in favour of or against any party or candidate.
- Publicly owned media have a duty to be balanced and impartial in their election reporting and not to discriminate against any party in granting access to air time.
- If media houses accept paid political advertising, they shall do so on a non-discriminatory basis and at equal rates for all parties.
- News, interviews, information or current affairs programmes or articles in the public media shall not be biased in favour of or against any party or candidate.
- The media shall provide equitable and regular coverage to all political parties, their candidates and platforms.
- The media shall encourage and provide access to the voters to express their opinion and views.
- The media shall promote democratic values such as the rule of good law, accountability and good governance.
- Any candidate or party that makes a reasonable claim of having been defamed or otherwise injured by publication shall either be granted the opportunity to reply or be entitled to a correction or retraction by the publisher or by the person who made the allegedly defamatory statement. The reply or correction shall be broadcast or published as soon as possible.
- News coverage of press conferences and public statements concerning matters of political controversy (as opposed to functions of state) called or made by the head of government, government ministers, or members of parliament shall be subject to a right of reply or equal time rules. This obligation acquires even greater force when the person making the statement is also standing for office.
- Publicly owned media organisations shall publish voter education material.
- Voter education material shall be accurate and impartial and must effectively inform voters about the voting process, including how, when and where to vote, to register to vote and to verify proper registration; the secrecy of the ballot (and thus safety from retaliation); the importance of voting; the functions of the offices that are under contention; and similar matters.
- Voter education shall include programmes in minority languages and programmes targeted for groups that traditionally may have been excluded from the political process, such as women and people with disabilities.
- Media houses should monitor their own output to make sure that it conforms with the standards set out in this code of conduct.

Political Parties:

- All political parties and candidates shall respect the freedom of the media.
- Political parties and candidates shall not harass or obstruct journalists who are engaged in their professional activities.
- Incumbent political parties and candidates shall not abuse their office to gain unfair advantage in access to the media. This provision applies to all media, but is of particular relevance when publicly funded media are under direct control by the government of the day.

- Political parties and candidates shall not offer bribes or inducements to journalists or media houses to encourage them to attend campaign events or to report favourably on the party or unfavourably on other parties or candidates.
- Political parties and candidates should not misrepresent the stated positions or any other factual information about other parties and candidates.
- Political parties and candidates should avoid using language that is inflammatory or defamatory, or that threatens or incites violence against any other person or group.
- Party leaderships shall ensure that the standards of tolerance and free debate contained in this code of conduct are communicated and fully explained to campaign workers. Parties should take full responsibility for the words and actions of those campaigning on their behalf.

Electoral Management Bodies (e.g., INEC):

- Electoral management bodies shall respect the freedom of the media including their editorial independence and right to express political preferences.
- Electoral management bodies shall respect the right to freedom of expression of parties and candidates.
- Electoral management bodies shall conduct the election in an open and transparent manner.
- Electoral management bodies shall endeavour to make sure that their activities are open to scrutiny by the media to the fullest extent possible.
- Electoral management bodies should not favour any media outlet in the distribution of either paid advertising or free information material.
- Electoral management bodies should use the mass media, among other means, to convey timely and accurate information to enable the electorate to exercise their right to vote in an informed manner.
- Electoral management bodies should only impose such restrictions on reporting – for example, at the polling station and the count – as are strictly necessary to ensure the integrity of the electoral process.

8. Elections, the Media and Freedom of Speech

The range of content protected by the concept of freedom of speech is extensive. According to the UN Human Rights Committee, which takes a broad interpretation of Article 19, it protects all forms of "spoken, written and sign language and such non-verbal expression as images and objects of art" (UNHRC, 2011). It also covers political discussion, public affairs, satire, cultural and artistic expression. This includes any speech perceived to be offensive in nature or having little value to society. With respect to political speech, courts have in many jurisdictions recognized the importance it plays in a democratic society and have therefore afforded it a particularly important position. Communications and working with the media are activities that INEC will undertake throughout the cycle of an election as noted in Figure 1.
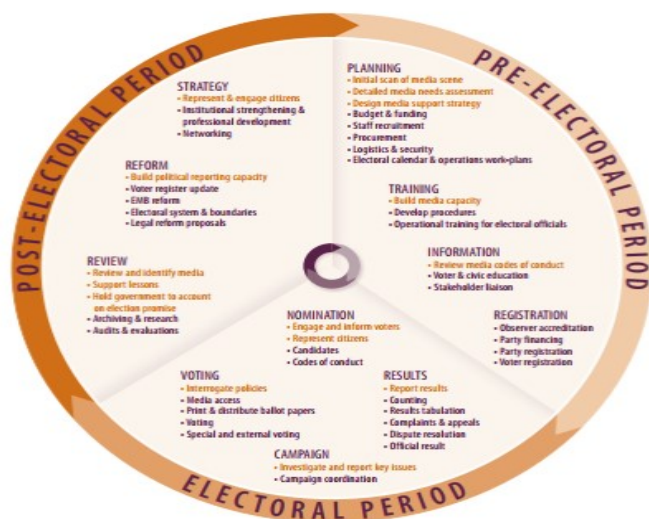

Figure 1: The media and the electoral cycle. Source: UNDP (2022, p. 2).

Discussing state institutions and their policies is a legitimate activity and these should not enjoy any special protection. Similarly, although public figures have rights related to their reputation and privacy, criticism of public figures such as members of government, is equally legitimate even if it is perceived as offensive.

While reaffirming the importance of the media as a platform for elections, the UN Human Rights Committee highlights the need for a free and unrestrained press and media with open access to candidates and voters. "A free uncensored and unhindered press or other media is essential in any society to ensure freedom of opinion and expression and the enjoyment of other covenant rights" (UNHRC, 2011). This is required to ensure that "citizens also take part in the conduct of public affairs by exerting influence through public debate and dialogue with their representatives […] supported by ensuring freedom of expression, assembly and association" (UNHRC, 1996).

Distortions that is derived from unequal access to resources for candidates may undermine the right of a voter to freely select a candidate if, for example, access to the media is disproportionate for candidates. Measures that attempt to redress such inequalities are justifiable within the human rights framework since they seek to enhance rather than restrict freedom of speech (UNDP, 2022).

Mechanisms to promote pluralism in the media associated with an election campaign, such as requirements for balanced media coverage, are therefore considered acceptable grounds for public policy intervention, as Article 2 of the ICCPR places an obligation on states to respect and to guarantee all rights enshrined in the Covenant to all individuals whilst upholding the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Many of the principles related to election-specific media coverage and the rights and responsibilities of the media are noted in a 2009 joint statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, (referred to as the Special Rapporteurs in this Guide). The joint statement stresses that:

- The media should be free to report on election-related matters. They should also be [generally] exempted from liability for disseminating unlawful statements made directly by parties of candidates.

- The obligation of political figures, including candidates, to tolerate a greater degree of criticism than ordinary persons should be clearly reaffirmed during elections.

- Oversight of any rules relating to the media and elections should be vested in an independent administrative body, which should address any complaints promptly. The decisions of this body should be subject to judicial review.

It also places emphasis on the role of publicly owned media, during an election period to:

- Ensure that the electorate is informed about electoral matters, including the role of elections in a democracy, how to exercise one's right to vote, the key electoral issues and the policy positions of the various parties and candidates contesting the election.

- Respect rules of impartiality and balance, particularly when reporting on the governing party(ies) and on government decisions and actions during an election period.

- Grant all parties and candidates equitable access to the media to communicate their messages directly to the public, either for free or at subsidized rates.

- Ensure that any reporting of opinion polls and election projections is accompanied by sufficient information to enable the electorate to properly understand their significance.

8.   Role of the Media in Election

According to Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), the media are not only the cornerstone of democracy, they also play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy. The vital role of the mass media as a watchdog of the democratic process and in influencing political discourse, especially during elections, is essential to democratic consolidation (Oboh, 2016). Universally, the role of the mass media in information dissemination and public enlightenment through the provision of platforms for electoral campaigns, public debate and voter education is a pre-condition for free and fair elections. Without the print and other forms of media, safeguarding the credibility and transparency of the electoral process would be a difficult task. While a

free and objective media can foster transparency by disseminating important electoral information, a stifled or compromised media is capable of undermining the electoral process, ultimately weakening democracy (Agba, 2007; CIHRS, 2011; INEC News, 2018; Iredia, 2007).

The important role of the mass media in a democracy was highlighted at the 2005 UNESCO World Press Day Conference in Dakar, Senegal. The outcome of the Conference as articulated in the Dakar Declaration of 2nd May 2005, stressed that "independent and pluralistic media are essential for ensuring transparency, accountability and participation as fundamental elements of good governance and human rights-based development". Furthermore, the Declaration urged states to, "respect the function of news media as an essential factor in good governance, vital to increasing both transparency and accountability in decision-making process, and to communicating the principles of good governance to society" (Agba, 2007; CIHRS, 2011; Iredia, 2007).

According to Agba (2007) and INEC News (2018), in facilitating the full participation of the citizenry in democratic elections, the print media are specifically saddled with the responsibility of:

1. Providing a platform for public feedback, concerns, opinions and needs to political parties and candidates, the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) such as INEC, government and other electoral stakeholders, thus facilitating interactions on governance issues.

2. Allowing political parties and candidates to debate with each other;

3. Reporting results and monitoring vote counting.

4. Scrutinizing the electoral process itself, including electoral management, in order to evaluate the fairness of the process, its efficiency and its probity.

5. Providing information in manner devoid of inflammatory language, and helping to prevent election-related violence.

Elections are not just about the right to vote. Knowledge of the voting process, information about political parties, candidates and their programmes are also crucial. In addition, also required the acquisition of the knowledge of how to vote. It is the sacred responsibility of the media to provide avenues and opportunities for citizens' participation, political inclusion and empowerment (Oboh, 2016). The mass media should avail voters with adequate information about the electoral process and informed analyses on policies, political parties and their candidates, to enable the citizens make informed choices. To fulfil this obligation, the mass media have the duty to subject the electoral process to scrutiny and to provide public education on the activities of INEC and other electoral stakeholders, in order to hold them to account (Agba, 2007; CIHRS, 2011; INC News, 2018; Iredia, 2007).

The mass media are not the sole source of information for voters, but in a world dominated by mass communications, it is increasingly the traditional media and the new media that determine the political agenda, even in less technologically developed countries. A report by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, CIHRS (2011) put it as follows.

The media plays a major role in keeping the citizenry abreast of current events and raising awareness of various issues in any society. It also has an extremely significant impact on the public's views and way of thinking. The media is the primary means through which public opinion is shaped and at times manipulated (Agba, 2007; Oboh, 2016). Elections constitute a basic challenge to the media in general, putting its impartiality and objectivity to the test. The task of the media, especially national media organisations, are not and should not be to function as a mouthpiece for any government body or particular candidate. Its basic role is to enlighten and educate the public and act as a neutral, objective platform for the free debate of all points of view (CIHRS, 2011; INEC News, 2018).

It is for this reason that election observation teams, for example, routinely comment upon media access and coverage of elections as a criterion for judging whether elections are fair or not. Monitoring the media during election periods has become an increasingly common practice, using a combination of statistical analysis and the techniques of media studies and discourse analysis to measure media's role in an election (CIHRS, 2011; INEC News, 2018; Oboh, 2016).

10. Challenges and the Way Forward

Nigeria being a developing nation with a relatively young democracy when compared to other democracies, especially those in the Western world, the role of the media therefore cannot be overstated. With a population of over 200 million people, the Nigerian mass media has a lot to do to make sure voters get all the information they need to perform their civic duties during an election. Given that Nigerian democracy is still nascent, the job of the media is to shape the issues at stake though reportage and editorial analysis of political and electoral processes (Ajibade, 2003; Falola, 1999).

In a country that has a deep-seated inter-ethnic, inter-religious, inter-party and mistrust of governments, there has been a repeated display of voter's apathy amongst the different voting demographics. Nigerians do not trust the electoral process. Elections are rigged through the connivance of election officials and security agents who falsified figures after collecting money from politicians. Politicians have been known to withdraw from the contest in the middle of an election, for another politician after receiving money from a wealthy challenger. The recruitment of tugs who snatch ballot boxes and even kill political opponents were witnessed in the many elections. Nigerian politicians do not accept election results and it is of common knowledge, that Nigeria has the global highest number of pre and post-election litigations. However, the 9th National Assembly would go down in history for passing the amended electoral bill which has now made it legal for election results to be transmitted electronically in real time. The Ekiti and Osun states' elections have shown that the use of technology can help to improve the electoral process.

The apathy that had been displayed by the people in the past must be allayed with more information about the improvements that INEC and other government agencies have made to make the election more credible and transparent. The trust in the process must be transmitted by the mass media to the people in a bid to get them to actively follow the process and not assume that the flawed elections of the past would be repeated (Olowojolu, 2016).

The bane of Nigerian democracy has been the fact that in the past, candidates emerged very close to the election period and had little or no time to campaign. A period of at least six months is an improvement to what has existed before. All candidates must be thoroughly reported in ways that the real choices by the people would be made with full knowledge of each candidate and their capacity (INEC News, 2018).

In developed democracies, standing for elections is putting yourself on a media magnifying glass. Every information about a candidate must be put forward so that voters would make choices based on information about the candidates. This would to a very great extent return the power to the people. They would be better empowered to choose who to give their mandate. The flawed electoral processes of the past can be consigned to the dustbin of history with the media playing their roles better than ever before.

Section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution clearly spells out the obligations of the media, which is basically to hold governments to account on behalf of the people. Beyond the constitutional demands of the profession, there are basic tenets of the profession that the mass media must compulsorily uphold at all times. If media uphold the well thought-out tenets of the profession, our democracy would gain and the country would continue to get progressively better (Kurfi, 2010). The role of the media is clearly defined and must be adhered to, the codes of conduct and the demands of Section 22 of the Constitution, must be meet, to put our country's democracy in a good stead (Ojebuyi, 2018).

11. Conclusion

Democracy requires that elections take place periodically. Democracy also expects the media to operate in an environment free from government control. For an election to be credible the media is expected to perform her role of informing, educating and mobilising the voters before and after an election, and ensuring that their votes count. Media as an agent of social change can bring about the needed behavioural change in people's apathy toward elections, as witnessed in the previous elections, by highlighting failures of government and the ruling party, and exposing the antics of politicians in whipping up religion and ethnicity sentiments, which does not determine good governance and the need to vote for a better candidate who will change their fortunes. The neutrality and objectivity of the media must not be compromised in covering of candidates and the political parties. The people must be helped to get the clarity they need to make informed choices and that must be done by the media interrogating the candidates across the board for the real issues that matter which is how to restore peace in trouble spots, tackling corruption and getting the economy back on track. All eyes are on the mass media to play her role. The watchdog must not sleep but be awake to its responsibilities.

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