

An Analysis of Online News Media Coverage of 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study analyzed how online news media covered 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The aim is to establish the level of attention different parties received, portrayal of parties and direction of reports. Three online media (Sahara Reporters, Scannews and Premium Times) were purposively selected. The period of the study was 1st January to 27st March 2015. A total of hundred and twenty-three (323) items (news and feature articles) that touched on 2015 presidential election were generated through Google search and websites of the three media. One hundred and sixty nine (169) items were randomly selected as the sample size. Data were analyzed using frequencies and simple percentages. Findings revealed that PDP and APC received most attention from the media with PDP having the highest number of reports. Aside the two parties, all the remaining parties were mostly invincible in the reports published by the media during the period studied. It was also discovered that the media were more interested in conflict related matters than issues like voter's education. Among other recommendations made, the researcher called on government communication regulatory bodies to organized special workshop for online journalists on issues of ethics and responsible practice while legal and technological strategies need to be design to curtail excesses of online journalists.

Keywords: Online, media, coverage, attention, objectivity, interest, Portrayal, election

Introduction

The mass media are elemental in effective functioning of almost all spheres of the society especially the political sphere. Studies have confirmed that the media play significant role in the political process of any society (Curan 1991, McCombs & Shaw 1993, Akinfeleye (2004), McQuail, 2005, Okunna, 2009, Pate 2011, etc). Mass media are institutions that democracy cannot do without. Obot (2013, p. 176) concurs that, "a political system that lays claim to democracy without a virile mass media would certainly be a 'malnourished' and 'still-birth' political contraption". That is why former United State president Thomas Jefferson states that "if I had to choose between "a government without newspapers [mass media] or newspapers [mass media] without a government, I

should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter". This profound statement shows how important media are to the society especially to governance.

The strategic position of the mass media in any political process cannot be over emphasis. McNair (2002) cited in Obot (2013) aptly captures this reality why he opines that, in democratic political systems, the mass media inform citizens of what is happening around them, educate the audience about political happenings, provide a platform for public political discourse, facilitating the formation of 'public opinion', and feeding that opinion back to the public from whence it came. He further states that the mass media give publicity to governmental and political institutions as well serve as channels for the advocacy of political viewpoints. This implies that in a democratic set up, the media's major role is to inform enlightened, mobilized people and create platforms for public discourse. Obot (2013) succinctly explains that, the mass media provide a link between the political party/candidate and the electorates. Through coverage of electioneering campaigns and airing of political advertisements, the media help in influencing voters' decision either in favor or against a given political party or candidate. Olukotun (2014) echoed a similar point that during elections, the media are the principal vehicles where voters receive information concerning political parties, the voting process, the electoral commission and the other issues germane to the exercise of their rights.

Ende (2011) goes on to explain that, the strategic importance of the place of mass media during elections in particular manifest through their coverage and presentation of news, information, facts, figures, editorials and other analytical pieces about issues in order to raise political consciousness among the populace. This shows that, in an electioneering period, the mass media are strategic and expected to regulate the political atmosphere by bringing to fore all that the audience need to know and do in order to ensure peaceful and successful elections. Aghamelu (2008) adds that, the media's role in an election extends to monitoring of the electoral process. To this extent, media's emphasis should no longer be limited on when and how the leaders will be voted, rather go out to cover how the entire process fared. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage, section two states the responsibility of media organizations thus:

A media organization shall ensure accurate and impartial voter education on parties, candidates, registration, verification, voting centres, voting procedures, complaint procedures, etc as provided by relevant agencies...A media organization shall uphold the right of the people to free expression by providing opportunity for ordinary citizens to express their views during electoral processes...

The Nigeria Media Code of Election further pin-points that "As the chief purveyor of information on the electoral processes, the media shall at all times embrace best professional practices by acting in accordance with the principles of social

responsibility”. Similarly, the Nigeria Electoral Act (Section 52(1) (b)) buttresses the role of electronic media in improving the transparency of the electoral process and useful tool in facilitating participation of various segments of the society in the political process (PLAC, 2012).

However, Yaqub (2015) explains that, the role the mass media had played in 2015 general elections “In most cases was negative, condemnable, utterly and blatantly partisan as well as unpatriotic”. Thus, he argues that, the 2015 General Elections could easily be described as the most rancorous, in the history of Nigeria and most threatening to Nigeria’s territorial integrity, and the most empty of ideological content, rather full of personal abuses as well as the potentials for personal vendetta”.

According to the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) cited in Aghamelu (2008), the Nigerian media have been victim of political manipulations from different powers such as government, proprietors and wealthy politicians to the detriment of public interest. NPC goes on to states that, Nigerians are witnesses to the fallen standard of journalistic profession and ethnic polarization of media houses and undue influence over the media and public information especially in the political arena. However, the emergence of social media and subsequently news sites has brought hope to masses especially on aspect of accessibility and openness.

Since their inception, online news sites have rapidly grown in importance as platforms for political information dissemination. The sites are gaining popularity among citizens because they pass information freely without control of government, powerful politicians and advertisers as well as free of conventional professional bottlenecks like gate-keeping. The media are also popular because they do not only disseminate information but also provide readers opportunity to engage in debate or discussion; hence, online media sites stimulate citizen engagement in political life of their society (Shadrach, 2016). However, they have been heavily criticized for their recklessness, excessiveness and lack of professionalism (Oyenuga, 2015; Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). Wasswa (2013) asserts, online media platforms are common avenues, where unscrupulous politicians and supporters spread hate speech, propagate falsehood capable of inciting people to violence.

In Nigeria, and in particular during the 2015 general elections, online media sites such as Sahara reporters, Scannews, Premium times, Naij.com among others together with conventional media have been actively involved in coverage of political discourse, providing perspectives and direction on political debates and framing issues for political decisions and mobilization (IPC& NPC, 2015).

Considering the freedom that abound for online news publishers, the popularity of the media among Nigerians as well as their activeness in the 2015 general elections, it is relevant to examine online news media coverage of 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

Online news sites like Sahara Reporters, Scannews and Premium Times among others have become vibrant platforms of political communication in Nigeria (Ifukor

2010). The media's ease of use, speed and wider reach have made them trendy and preferable channel of political news stories among citizens especially young adults since 2007 electioneering (Nkwachukwu, 2014). In spite of the vibrancy of online news media especially in election period, questions have emerged about the reliability of news and information through online news sites or sources bearing in mind that, publishers (citizen journalists) of news and information online are mostly amateurs and might be people with partisan, religious and ethnic interests. Thus, news report and information via online sites may be full of biases, may lack accuracy and reliability. Nwachukwu (2014) further states that during 2011 general elections in Nigeria, messages online were subjected to little or no verification thus, Ekine (2010) concludes that, online platforms were largely misused as vehicles for spreading false information, rumors and inflammatory messages that contributed to violence that marred the 2011 elections.

In 2015 election, online news media were also at the vanguard of political coverage in the country. Hence, it becomes imperative to examine their actions during the election. Against this backdrop, this work looked at online news media coverage of 2015 general elections with a view to established the extent online news media report stories about the election, how they portrayed major political parties and direction of their reports.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to analyzed online media coverage of 2015presidential election. The specific objectives as follows:

- (i) To examine the attention given to different parties by the online media during 2015 presidential election by the selected online media;
- (ii) To examine how the selected online media portrayed major political parties during the 2015 presidential election;
- (iii) To find out the direction of reports about 2015 presidential election as reported by the selected online media during the election.

This study is very important in a time like this when the quest for political power is “do--or-die” affair in Nigeria and online journalism is fast growing while journalism ethics is fading. Thus, the work will contribute toward debate and subsequent formulation of laws and technologies to curtail excesses of online news media and or citizen-journalists. Thus, the work will lead to revisiting of the Nigeria Electoral Act in order to incorporate the place of online media in Nigeria electoral process. As such, the work will contribute toward responsible journalism beyond “off-line” (conventional journalism) practice.

The work will also motivate communication regulatory bodies and stakeholders like Nigerian Union of Journalists to organized special programmes for online publishers in order to educate and stimulate them toward imbibing professional journalism ethics as well as social responsibility tenets in their daily posts especially regarding political issues. Similarly, this study will enable online media practitioners to re-assess their roles in bringing about political stability in the society.

In addition, outcome of the will add to existing literature in new media or computer mediated communication (CMC). Hence, subsequent researchers interested on similar phenomenon will find the work useful in their discussions.

Literature Review

Media and Election Coverage

The role media play in coverage of election is indispensable. International Press Council and Nigeria Press Council examined media coverage of 2015 elections and concluded that, the media are the catalyst for successful election. Pate (2011) argues that the mass media have remained in the fore of the struggle to promote the rights of our people through a credible election process. They provide education for electorates regulates tension and provide platforms for candidates to meet the electorates. Oboh (2015) asserts that, the media's coverage of election increase information about the choices on offer, stimulating interest in public involvement in the process. He further argues that the public relies on the media to provide adequate information on the electoral process that would enable the people to exercise their civic responsibility in the elections. The emphasis here is mostly on the conventional media like radio, television and the newspaper/magazine.

Recent studies have shifted attention to the place of new media like social media and or online news sites in electioneering. Abubakar (2012) found that social media are at the forefront of election coverage. They give the electorates platform to engage in political discourse and help political parties to sell themselves to the electorates. Ende (2013) explained that, with the involvement of online media in the coverage of election, there exists significant improvement in terms of timeliness of reports, documentation of official routine information and access to information generally.

What the above implies is that both the conventional media and the new media are central in the coverage of electoral process in Nigeria. As such, Oboh (2015) concludes that, the Nigerian journalists should endeavor to provide sufficient and balanced information on political aspirants and parties so that the public would make informed decision at the poll.

Media portrayal of political parties and candidates

The mass media remain the most important instruments through which political thinking of the masses is influence (Ojo, 2003). Sobowale in Daramola (2013) asserts that, "virtually all information published by the media is suspect. To him, "Choosing what events to cover on the lead, involves a lot of subjective decisions". He further pointed out that even those news sources that provide information to reporters do not do so out of genuine desire to make information available to the public but with intention to create certain impression.

Mass media provide perspectives, shape images of candidates and parties, and help highlight issues around which a campaign would develop. They define the unique atmosphere and areas of sensitivity with any particular campaign (Lang and Lang 1999 in Oyesomi & Oyero, 2012). They do this by deliberately distorting the information they

disseminate to their audience and by conscious exclusion of some vital information that are likely to lead the citizens into drawing a conclusion. Another way is by remaining simply quiet over some crucial issues where the population is thirsting for information or seek to divert the people's attention from very important issue, by crowding the people's mind with trivialities (Ojo, 2003, p. 829).

During electioneering, the mass media in Nigeria serve as platforms of political advertisement where TV/radio jingles, large billboards, posters and newspapers have been used to framed and primed candidates in good light showing records of accomplishment and enticing promises all with the intension to win favor of the electorates. Such advertisement are paid or sponsored by the party or the candidate and mostly in media organization that are friendly to the party or the candidate. Similarly, the media in Nigeria are also employed by politicians to destroyed the image of their opponents through unfounded publications and documentaries. Good example is the the "Lion of Bourdillon" documentary ran by African Independent Television" against Bola Tinubu and Muhammadu Buhari.

Arogundade (2014) asserts that, hate speech or programmes could lead to violence and threaten the democratic fabric of a society. Hence, journalists are expected to make use of temperate language in reporting and refrain from pejorative comment. It also bacons on the media to reject any material that contains hateful or inciting words and messages. Over the years, online media sites have become virile platforms for different and cheap portrayals of parties and candidates, through the platforms, different party faithful attack one another using every kind of words. Ende and Dzukogi (2012) found that with the emergence of new media, large number of the online community found delight in passing derogatory statement on the bases of politics among others.

Dominant Focus of the media during elections

Every day the media face the task of what to report. This is because several issues are happening daily. This becomes more critical during electioneering. The traditional news values may serve as guide to selecting what to report, during elections, media need to be more careful and responsible in deciding what to report because their reports directly or indirectly shape publics' attitude negatively or positively. Tehranian (1996) in Popoola (2015, p. 2) states that the media are naturally attracted to conflict. Popoola (2015) in his work, "A discourse on personality-induced conflicts in Nigeria's politics: The media and their narratives" explains that the media in Nigeria have developed penchant for reporting conflict, a phenomenon that often contributes to tension and insecurity during elections.

Nigeria Democratic Report (2015) in a study titled, "Final Report on Media Coverage of 2015 Elections: A monitoring Scorecard of Print and Online Media", discovered that the 2015 general election, mass media gave more attention to conflict related issues against issues like voters education and serving as early warning system. No wonder, there was high tension during the 2015 presidential election, which made many people to travelled long distance to their villages for fear of the unknown. Another

study by International Press Council and Nigeria Press Council, titled, “The Monitoring Report of Media Coverage of 2015 Elections for January, 2015”; revealed that, the media have shown commendable concern for the conduct of peaceful polls. They had given adequate attention to early warning signals on possible outbreak of violence especially on conflict issues and in conflict-prone areas. However, they still published series of sensational headlines that are capable of igniting conflicts. This revelations show that, the focus of the media during election in Nigeria has dominantly been conflict. Conflict is a news determinant, Botes (1996) in Popoola (2015, p.2) aptly states that, “conflict is the bread and butter of journalism”. Umar (2002) also in Popoola (2015) argues that, several researches have shown that the greater the element of conflict in an event, the greater the probability that it would be reported and given prominence in the media. However, Osho in a forward for Popoola (2015) argues that, the media should be concerned and interested in promoting conflict resolution instead of fanning the embers of discord and social disharmony.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the social responsibility theory. Okunna, (1999), describes the social responsibility theory as a modern theory because it emerged in the twentieth century. The theory is an offshoot of the libertarian theory. The theory emerged due to the failure of free press as manifested in excess cases of defamation of character, invasion of privacy, sedition, sensationalism, distortions of information and other unethical practices among media practitioners. Thus, the social responsibility theory came to correct these wrongs without necessary denying the press their right. McQuail (2000), posits that, the theory talks about responsible press. According to him, independence of the media is attached with obligation. Schramm (2005) further explains that, “freedom carries concomitant obligations and the press which enjoys privileged position under democratic government is obliged to be responsible to the society”. The responsibilities attached to rights of the media are based on high professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

Based the theory, it is the responsibility of the media to give accurate and balance report of all events and ensure that their reports and activities in no way encourage conflict or raise tension. Hence, the theory implores media practitioners to conduct themselves under high ethical and moral standard. Summarily, the theory rests on notion- “free media acting responsible”.

It is based on the above notion that this theory finds relevant to the present study. Online media has made information a cheap commodity hence, tens and hundreds of posts are publish within short time and without limit or gate-keeping, but in the midst of all this bombardment, it is important to re-echo that, the responsibility of journalists to the society has not change rather increases. Online media are expected to make deliberate and responsible efforts in ensuring peace, stability and proper function of the society via their posts especially on political issues like election. They should also hold that it is their

responsibility to serve as unbiased umpire of political “games” as well as facilitates constructive discourse that will lead to the development of the society.

Methodology

This study investigated how online media covered 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Thus, content analysis research method was used. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) states, that, content analysis allows for an objective, systematic and qualitative description of communication content for measuring variables. This technique of research helps the researcher makes valid inferences base on context or purpose of the study from an existing data.

Population of the Study

All Online news sites circulating in Nigeria formed the population for this study. There are several news sites in Nigeria. Some of these sites are general interest sites as such cover politics and other matters while others are special interest sites covering specific area like politics, fashion, sport, health among others (Provide an idea by of number of online news sites in Nigeria. Although it might not be exact but a source to back the figure would suffice.

Sample Size

To realise the desired sample siz for the study. A total of 90 days (90) was chosen (1st January, 2015 to 27st March, 2015) and only reports on 2015 presidential elections published by the selected media within the said days were considered in this study. The total number of stories gathered harvested within the time was 323 from the selected online news sites. However, 169 reports were proportionately selected to form the sample site. All the reports were generated via websites of the selected media organizations (www.saharareporters.com, www.scannewsnigeria.com and www.premiumtimesng.com) and through Google keyword search.

Sampling Technique

The researcher adopted purposive sampling method in selecting the media and the period studied while the items studied were selected using simple random technique by pick lottery method in which all the generated items were given identification on cards. The card were later folded and shuffled before a pick until the required number of items needed were arrived at. Sahara Reporters, *Scannews* and *Premium Times* were selected because of their popularity among Nigerians, they predominantly focus on politics, and they have national reach and actively participation in the coverage of 2015 elections (Ifukor, 2010). The study time frame(1st January, 2015 to 27st March, 2015) was the high point of campaigns and preparation for the 2015 presidential, hence, it is presumed that, the engagement of the media, including online media in the coverage of the election was very high.

Content Categories

The content categories for a study are drawn from the specific objectives in order to effectively answer the research questions. Therefore, the categories in this study

include attention given to various political parties, portrayal of parties and direction of reports. The frequency or number of reports focusing on specific parties determined attention. Portrayal was determined by direction of reports; this could be negative, positive or neutral; while direction of report was determined by the focus of most reports. This could be conflict, voter's education and early warning.

Unit of Analysis

The manifest elements of the media, which were analyzed in this study, are news stories, features and articles posted by the selected online media.

Instrument for data collection

In order to record evidence noticed from the elements studied, the researcher used coding sheet. The sheet contents all the content categories and their codes which guide the coders to record their observations.

Validity and reliability of the Instrument

Three coders were selected and trained for this research. Additionally, trial coding was conducted to increase the chances of agreement among the coders to obtain reliable and accurate data. The inter-coder reliability coefficient obtained was 0.91 using the Holsti's reliability formula stated thus: $Reliability = \frac{2M}{N1+N2+N3}$.

Method of data analysis

The researcher used descriptive statistical tools to analyze the data obtained. In doing so, frequencies and simple percentages were employed, while tables were used to present the data. The researcher also adopted qualitative analysis in which relevant quotations were extracted from the reports to further explain the data revealed qualitatively.

Findings

Table 1: Items generated and sampled

Media	Items generated	Items sampled
Sahara Reporters	104	54
Scannews	98	51
Premium Times	121	64
Total	323	169

Table 1 shows the number of items generated and the items sampled. A total of 323 items were generated out of which *Sahara Reporters* has 104 out of which 54 items were selected, *Scannews* has 98 items generated with 51 selected (30.3%), while *Premium Times* has 121 generated with 64 selected. The table shows that, among the three online media, *Premium Times* made more coverage or reports on the 2015 presidential election within the period of this study.

RQ1: What was the attention given to major political parties by the online media during 2015 presidential election?

Table 2: Attention given to Major Political Parties

Parties	Sahara Reporters	Scannews	Premium Times	Total	%
PDP	27	30	32	89	52.7
APC	20	19	27	66	39
Others	7	2	5	14	8.3
Total	54	51	64	169	100

Table 2 shows the frequency of reports given to political parties within the period studied. The table shows that PDP received total 89 (52%) reports from the online media; APC had 66 (39%) reports while other political parties had 14 reports (8.3%). The data revealed that PDP was given more attention by the online media followed by APC while other fifty (52) parties put together received the least attention from the online media during the 2015 presidential elections.

RQ2: How did the online media portrayed major political parties during the 2015 presidential election?

Table 3: Portrayal of PDP

Direction	Sahara Reporters	Scannews	Premium Times	Total	Percentage
Positive	8	41	13	62	36.7
Negative	37	2	46	85	50.3
Neutral	9	8	5	22	13
Total	54	51	64	169	100

Table 5 shows how the online media portrayed PDP during the last presidential election. Out of the 169 sampled reports, the party was portrayed in 85 reports (50.3%). Only 62 (36.7%) showed the party in positive light and 22 reports (13%) about the party were neutral.

Table 4: Portrayal of APC

Direction	Sahara Reporters	Scannews	Premium Times	Total	Percentage
Positive	41	3	45	89	52.7
Negative	8	40	11	59	34.9
Neutral	5	8	8	21	12.4
Total	54	51	64	169	100

Table 6 shows how the online media portrayed APC during 2015 presidential election. Out of the 169 items sampled; the party was positively portrayed in 89 reports

(52.7%). It was negatively portrayed in 59 reports (34.9%) and from neutral angle, it was portrayed in 21 items (12.4%). This implies that the APC enjoyed more coverage that is favourable by online media during the election.

RQ3: What was the direction of reports about 2015 presidential election covered by the online media?

Table 5 Direction of Reports

Interest	Sahara Reporters	Scannews	Premium Times	Total	Percentage
Conflict	39	32	38	109	64.5
Education	9	11	7	27	16
Warning	6	8	19	33	19.5
Total	54	51	64	169	100

Table 7 shows dominant issues that attracted the attention of the online media during 2015 presidential election. Out of the 169 sampled reports, Conflict related issues enjoyed 109 reports (64.5%), voters’ education took 27 reports (16%) while warning against impeding crisis or problem enjoyed 33 reports (19.5%). This implies that, the media were more interested in conflict related stories than voter’s education and warning against impeding dangers.

Discussion of Findings

From table 1 above, one can easily discern that the online media were actively involved in the coverage of the 2015 presidential election, this manifested by the total number of reports (323) generated within the period studied. Out of the 323 items published, *Premium Times* published higher number 121 (37.5%), followed by *Sahara Reporters* with 104 (32.2%) then *Scannews* (30.3%). Of the 323 items generated, sample of 169 were drawn 54 (32%) from *Sahara Reporters*, 51 (30.1%) from *Scannews* and 64 (37.9%) from *Premium Times*.

Research question one seeks to examine the attention given to different political parties by frequency of report about the parties. It was revealed that PDP received the highest attention with 89 (52.7%) reports. The major opposition party (APC) followed with 66 reports (39%) while all the remaining parties received low attention with just 14 reports (8.3%). This implies that online media failed to give voice to minority groups(parties). This finding supported the findings of International Press Council/Nigeria Press Council (2015) and the Nigeria Democracy report (2015) that access to media during the 2015 election was generally in favor of PDP and APC while the other parties were overlooked. This is phenomenon is against the tenets of the Nigeria Electoral Act 2010 which calls on the media to facilitate the participation of various groups in spite the strengths or situation.

Research question two is on the media portrayal of major political parties during the election. It was revealed that PDP was mostly portrayed negatively by the online

media. Out of the 169 reports, only 63 (36.7) favored the party, overwhelming number 85 (50.3%) portrayed the party negatively and only 22 (13%) were neutral. Of all the selected media, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* were the ones more critical of the party. *Sahara Reporters* portrayed PDP negatively in 37 reports out of 54 and *Premium Times* presented PDP unfavorably in 46 items out of her 64 selected reports. Some parts of these negative reports against PDP can be seen from the following excerpt:

...hawkish members of President Goodluck Jonathan's inner circle have convinced him to move in an aggressive and decisive manner to remove Attahiru Jega as the Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)...removal of Jega is a major part of strategy developed by President Jonathan's team to ensure that they win the presidential and other elections by hook or crook...

(*Sahara Reporters*, March 01, 2015).

...my advice to President Jonathan and his handlers is to stop wasting their time trying to campaign on his job record. Those who have decided to vote for him [Jonathan] will not do so because he has taken Nigeria to the moon. His record on the economy is a clear "F" grade...

(Charles Soludo, published in *Premium Times* January 26, 2015).

On portrayal of opposition specifically APC during the 2015 presidential election, it was revealed that the party received more positive reports from online media. Out of the 169 sampled reports more than half (89, 52.7%) portrayed the party positively. Only 59 (34.9%) reports presented the party in negative light. While 21 (12.4%) reports treated the party neutrally. Among the three selected media, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* were the media that mostly shown the party in positive light. The former favored the party in 41 reports out of 54 while the latter in 45 reports out of 69. In the other hand, *Scannews* is more critical of APC, it projected the party negative light in in 40 items out of the 51 items from the media. Example of such unfavorable report by *Scannews* against APC can seen in the excerpt below:

...if we are going to deal with corruption, we must not fail to deal with the likes of Buhari, who are contemptuous of the laws of the land. Buhari's false affidavit is corruption. The disqualification of Buhari by the court will be a testament to the determination of the judiciary to show zero tolerance for corruption...APC has nobody to blame but itself for this fiasco. It has fortified its chance of presenting a candidate for the 2015 presidential election...

(Femi Aribisala, Published in *Scannews* February 10, 2015, at 12:28 pm)

Research question three focuses on the direction of reports from the media regarding the election. Out of the 169 sampled items, Conflict related matters attracted 109 (64.5%), voters' education has only 27 (16%) while early warning has 33 (19%). This implies that online media were more interested in reporting conflicts during 2015 presidential election. The findings supported the findings of International Press Council and Nigeria Press Council (2015) and Popoola (2015) among others who earlier found

that, Nigerian media are more interested in conflict reporting and their hunger for conflict lead them into sensational headlines without weighing their possible effect. Examples of conflict sensitive reporting by the selected online media in this study are:

“PDP lays fresh Ambush against General Elections” (*Sahara Reporters*, 6th March, 2015).

“...PDP to procure Court judgment to stop Buhari” (*Premium Times*, January, 29th, 2015).

“Tinubu should be chased out of Nigeria... (*Scannews*, 19th March 2015).

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown significant commitment by online media in ensuring success of the 2015 presidential election. They have activity collaborated with mainstream media in given out news, articles, features, editorials, pictures and other contents which immensely contributed to informing and motivating the citizens to participate in the election. However, in their selection and treatment of reports during the election, online media have come short of the tenets of social responsibility theory, which is a necessity in election coverage.

Recommendations

In line with above, the following recommendations are necessary if online media must be more viable and valid stakeholder in the democratic process in Nigeria:

- i. Online media journalists and bloggers should be taught or reminded that the freedom of speech or to publish has responsibility, which they are also expected to adhered to. Therefore, groups like NUJ, Nigerian Broadcasting Commission should take the lead in sensitizing online journalists on this matter; this can be actualized through special seminars, workshops and symposium.
- ii. The media should adhere to journalism code of conducts in all their activities. Hence, being objective to all parties in their reportage as well as granting access to all parties, knowing fully that they are responsible to the generality of the citizens not portion of it and true democracy rest on competition from different groups not just selected two.
- iii. Relevant communication regulating agencies should extent their checks to online media using technology to ensure that such media operate with decorum.
- iv. While we support the efforts of online media to expose the ills of government and political parties, such should be done in with all modesty and from the perspective of development-oriented journalism, rather than fostering certain interest. In line to that, more attention should be given to voters' education in future election rather than conflict matters.
- v. Further researches can be carryout on the influence of online media coverage of elections on electorates. This will enhance the frontiers of knowledge on this subject.

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