

Disequilibrium in NTA coverage of Political Campaign: Analysis of the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Election

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Abstract

The pluralist theory of media ownership argues that media contents are mainly shaped by consumer demand in the marketplace giving the buying 'public' what they want. Moreover, editors, journalists, and broadcasters have a strong sense of professional ethics, which act as a system of checks and controls on potential owner abuse of the media. With this in mind, we examined the coverage of 2015 presidential campaign in Nigeria by the Nigeria Television Authority to determine the frequency and direction of coverage given to contending political parties. Findings reveal evidence of disequilibrium in the frequency of news coverage of the political parties. The directions of news coverage are suggestive of relative content censorship of campaign broadcast in terms of favourability to contending political parties. It is of critical professional concern that NTA was overly bent in favour of the ruling party – PDP, while portraying other parties in weaker directions and frequency. This finding challenges the pluralist perspective of independent media whose content are shaped by consuming public and recommends that measures such as enforcement of code of election coverage be put in place by professional regulatory bodies including the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to ensure that NTA operates on the regulatory tenets of equal opportunity for political parties to air their views during elections.

Keywords: Access to Public Media, Political Campaign, Political Parties, Nigeria

Introduction

Political campaign is one of the strategic means of winning the votes during elections. Blumler (1983; 1979) regards election campaigns as processes that live or die, gather momentum or falter via the heavy and insistent streams of messages that are prepared for delivery to all quarters of the body politic. As he puts, "It is through campaign communication that impulses to participate are energized, issues are defined,

and choices for voting decisions are conveyed". Political campaign is viewed paramount towards a successful election. Carey (1976), cited in Olayiwola (1991) argues that 'an election campaign exists in the public consciousness largely the way it exists in mass media presentation of that campaign events.' (p. 44) Political parties in every political environment is expected to make use of media to their advantage as it subconsciously promotes the choice and decision making of voters.

Since independence, the Nigerian political communication particularly during the electioneering campaigns was said to have the same the pattern of media ownership and behavior with the ruling class controlling the media (Olayiwola, 1991; Hallin, & Paolo, 2004). As Nigeria has gained grounds in democracy, it will be important for its mass media to operate in the way that contributes to political stability and national integration. However, it seems that the political affiliation of media owners still influences the editorial direction of the Nigerian mass media in their coverage of political campaigns. This is more commonly observable in the form of unequal access to coverage of political campaigns by public media institutions, which tend to pay favourable attention mostly to ruling party (Abubakar, 2005; Olukotun, 2014; Daily trust, 2015). Problems that may arise from such unequal access in public media use for political campaign include production of biased stories and compromise of professional codes of impartiality and balance. (Elias, 1969)

The media, whether publicly or privately owned, are expected to uphold the ethics of journalism, which include balance, accuracy, fairness, objectivity, factuality e.tc. However, observation shows that there tends to be favourable treatment given to ruling parties especially during elections.). As proposed by the pluralist theory, the media owners are generally supposed to be responsible in the way that they manage media contents shaped by consumer demand in the marketplace by giving the buying public what they want (Curran,2002; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2013). Editors, and journalists are presumed to have strong sense of professional ethics, which act as checks and controls on potential owner abuse of the media.

The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage as revised in 2018 provides in its section 1,subsection 1.1.1, under "the responsibilities of media organizations" that "A broadcast medium shall ensure equitable allocation of airtime at specific but similar periods for all parties contesting elections to present their manifestoes". Subsection 1.1.2 similarly provides that "A media organization shall regularly apply the principle of equity in the coverage and reportage of campaigns and other activities of parties and candidates contesting elections". It is of interest that code equally provided guidelines on matters relating to professionalism and social responsibility, ethical conduct as they relate to election coverage, which was ratified by all professional media institutions in the country, including the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON) and Radio Television and Theatre Arts Workers Union (RATTAWU). Obviously, the code of election coverage has not left the media – private and public in the dark as to how political campaigns should be reported. It is therefore

expected that the coverage of 2015 presidential campaign should reflect the provisions of the code in any media outfit regardless of the nature of ownership and finance.

The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), operates one of the largest television network in Nigeria. It's ownership and funding by the government has often been reason for a widespread complaint that its contents are guided by the interest of the government and ruling party. Specifically in 2015, the Nigerian Television Authority came under intense criticism from political parties other than the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) for focusing its political coverage to favour the ruling party at the federal level (Daily Trust, 2015). This criticism tends to correspond with the assumed owner-media relationship hence this study was conceived to obtain possible evidences from NTA coverage of the 2015 presidential campaign by analyzing the frequency and direction of the coverage given to PDP and other opposition parties.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. to examine the frequency of access to NTA coverage of political campaign by PDP and other political parties during the 2015 Nigeria's presidential election.
2. to examine the direction of NTA coverage of the political campaign by PDP and other political parties during the 2015 Nigeria's presidential election.

The research questions are:

1. What is the coverage of political campaigns broadcast given to PDP and other political parties on NTA during the Nigeria's 2015 presidential election?
2. What is the direction of political campaigns broadcast given to PDP and other political parties on NTA during the Nigeria's 2015 presidential election?

Literature Review

Media Access and Election Outcomes in Nigeria

Extant literature provides differing perspectives and evidences as to what is responsible for disequilibrium in media access for political campaign, and how the frequency of media coverage of political campaigns relates to election outcomes in Nigeria. John (1976) and Nwaozuzu (1999) for example cited ownership control as major reason why media institutions may not allow equal access to its content for all political parties during election campaigns. Historical evidences to this could be seen in the two phases of campaigns during Nigeria's second republic. The first phase, which occurred between 1978 and 1979 witnessed media control by the military that played supervisory role during the elections. During this phase, the media could scarcely report campaign events that contradict the supervisory directives of the military. The second phase was between 1982 and 1983 when the mass media were owned by governments and controlled by political parties of the Second Republic (Olayiwola, 1991). The second phase has ownership as the predominant factor that dictated the direction of news coverage. According to Olayiwola (1991), the amount of coverage received by the political parties and their performance in the 1979 general elections suggest positive correlation between election campaign coverage and election performance of the parties and their candidates: "NPN, which had the highest nationwide mass media coverage

came first while the UPN, which had the second highest media coverage, came second” (p.17).

The 2015 presidential election had eleven notable political parties. They included the then ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Congress (APC), Kowa Party, Hope Democratic Party (HDP), Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), Alliance for Democracy (AD), United Democratic Party (UDC), African Democratic Congress (ADC), National Conscience Party (NCP), Action Alliance (AA) and United Progressive Party (UPP). Unlike the example of election mentioned earlier, the 2015 presidential election took a new turn where the PDP as the ruling party lost to the opposition party APC. Although the opposition won the presidential election, there may still have been disequilibrium in the use of public media for political campaign across the political parties that participated during the electioneering campaign since the PDP was the ruling party at the time of the 2015 presidential election. This however requires empirical confirmation, which underscores this study.

Media Ownership and Direction of Campaigns Coverage

Since true democracy involves wide participation of informed electorate, it is almost impossible in modern times to reach all citizens through classic rallies and meetings. Thus, Hallin and Mancini (2004) note that the mass media are assuming many of the information that political parties once controlled. Instead of learning about an election at a campaign rally or from party canvassers, the mass media have become the primary source of campaign information. There has been a tendency for political parties to decrease their investments in neighbor canvassing, rallies and other direct contact activities and devote more attention to campaign through the media.

According to Mgbejume (2009), the government and some power elites or corporations own media outlets hence have strong influence on which stories are cover, and the direction of their coverage – favorability of the coverage. This is to say for as long as media stations are owned and funded by the government, they dance to the tune of the regime in power. As such it would not be surprising if the media favors the government during political campaigns.

Abubakar (2005) similarly observed that the ownership pattern of Nigeria broadcast media confers massive political and economic powers on the owners. For this reason, the media often have to dance to the tune of their owners and financiers. This gives the power of control over the direction of media content, especially on political matters, to the owners. Swanson (2004) notes that in place of or in addition to traditional campaign practices such as rallies of the party faithful, political parties and candidates relied on the sophisticated use of the mass media to persuade voters – the consumers of political communication to support them at election time, and they offered campaigns that feature the appealing personalities of party leaders and flag bearers. Television provides an aesthetic platform for the presentation of political advertising and electioneering campaign messages. Therefore political parties strive hard to gain more control of media organization so as to use them to their advantage. The assumption is

when you have controls of the media you and your oppositions can be covered in the direction you want because the media that you own cannot be critical of you or favourable to your political opponent.

This reality notwithstanding, Norris (2004) argued that fair access to the airwaves by opposition parties, candidates and groups is critically important for competitive free and fair elections. He pointed out that it is particularly important that state-owned or public television stations should be open to a plurality of political viewpoints during campaigns, without favoring the government. Corroborating these positions, Swanson (2004) asserts that editorial independence, freedom from close government supervision and censorship, and the like creates society. It should also assist collective organizations to mobilize support; help them to operate as representative vehicles for the views of their supporters, aid them to register effective protest, develop and promulgate alternatives.

In a period commonly referred to as era of guerrilla journalism (Olukotun, 2005), Nigeria's media played important role in championing the struggle for the return to democratic rule and in challenging the excesses of the various dictatorial military regimes. Upon return to democratic rule, Pate (2011) noted that the mass media have remained in the fore of the struggle to promote the human rights through a credible election process.

Despite these roles, the media have been severely criticized for complicity in truncating and subverting the election process at various times. For example, James (1984), cited in Pate (2011), noted the high degree of professional breaches during the second republic as manifested through character assassination, false accusations, blackmail and misrepresentation of facts to the extent that facts were muzzled and the whole media organs became megaphones and machineries of propaganda to political parties and vested interests. According to Pate (2011), these shortfalls are suggestive that the media cannot be perfect in all situations, thus again underscoring the need for continued efforts towards understanding the dynamics of media's role and performance in different democratic environments.

Theoretical Perspective

This study assumes the pluralist's perspective on media ownership. Pluralism is a general theory of society that has been applied to understanding of the mass media. The theory holds that the society is made up of a diverse group of people with different interests, and that while decisions are made in central government framework, political power is organized through organized group activity, political parties, pressure and interest groups (Shwarzmantel, 1994). The core thesis of the theory is that there is not a dominant class or a set of institutionally based elite in the society that has predominant power (Domhoff, 2015; Curran, 2002) because liberal democratic system safeguards and encourages proliferation of debate and with it representation of many differing opinions.

The pluralists although agrees that there are great inequalities in power, including access and control over mass media, but the exercise of such power particularly regarding mass media, they argue, is dispersed among several groups based on availability of multiple information sources, competing networks and outlets and diversity of opinions, further aided by the growth of internet (Petras, 2008). Unlike the critical theorist, the pluralist do not see the media as an ideological instrument of domination controlled by the state or owners of capital but the mass media as a bounded organizational system, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalization pressure groups (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2013). Control of mass media, they argue lies in the hands of autonomous managerial elite who allows a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals (Curran, 2002).

In this perspective, the media is a professional entity that will not serve the interest of the state or any other particular dominant elite or hegemonic interest against their own choice in coverage primarily because the media enjoys autonomy from all of the institutions (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2013). The media is supposed to present coverage of every situation such as elections with autonomy and in an objective manner reflecting the diverse interests of all parties since pluralism grants the media a large measure of control, over its contents. The audience also enjoys control over the effect that the media messages may have on them, because their diverse opinions and varying situations and conditions and the availability of alternative information sources are utilized by them to make choices of media and limit the effects of contents.

It is important to note that pluralist theory has not distinguished public from private media in arguing out its perspective. In other words, its claim to pluralism of media access and professionalism of content production cuts across the media ownership forms. Based on this thought, the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) is expected to produce political contents that guarantee equal access of political parties during election campaigns. More importantly as a publicly owned media institution, it is expected to run inclusive coverage of political campaigns in terms of frequency and direction.

Method

The study is based on content analysis of all of the available 60 news transcripts of the Nigeria Television Authority, from May 6, 2014 to April 10, 2015. This period covered the time of declaration of interest by the presidential aspirants to the immediate period after the election. The selection of period was to enable as much data as possible from which observations could be made, especially in terms of the direction of coverage. A census study of the content population was done because the population of content was not many. This means that all of the 60 available news transcripts were included in the study. The content categories of this study are “frequency of coverage” and “direction of coverage”. The frequency of coverage means the amount (Number of times news stories were broadcast) of the news stories aired, on the political parties while the direction of coverage means the tone that the coverage bears on the political

parties, which could be favourable, unfavourable or neutral. The unit of analysis was the news transcript. This refers to the texts of news broadcasts posted by NTA on its own website. The research instrument was coding sheet, which was used to extract the data from the transcripts. The research data was presented and analyzed using descriptive method.

To determine the frequency of coverage, we used '1' to represent each unit of analysis that contains the descriptor of a particular content category and '0', where the descriptor was absent. The aggregate frequency of coverage was then calculated by counting the presence of a descriptor relative to the absence of it in relation to a particular content category. The direction of coverage was coded in the same way into the categories of 'favourable' and 'unfavourable', and 'neutral'. To follow the rule of mutual exclusivity of coding, where a unit of analysis contains two opposing descriptors, we code as present the descriptor with higher presence and code as absent the descriptor with lesser presence. This approach is consistent with existing literature in content study (see Lee & Maslog 2005).

Findings

To examine the frequency of NTA coverage of the political parties during the 2015 presidential campaign, all the available 60 news transcript were analyzed. Table 1 presents the outcome of the analysis.

Table 1: Frequency of Coverage of Political Parties

Political party	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) DP	26	43.3
All Progressives Congress (APC)	07	11.7
Others	27	45
Total	60	100

Table 1 shows that PDP has more frequency of coverage on NTA (n=26, 43.3%), with a strong gap to APC (n=7, 11.7%) and all other parties which comprised of Kowa Party, Hope Democratic Party (HDP), Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), Alliance for Democracy (AD), United Democratic Party (UDC), African Democratic Congress (ADC), National Conscience Party (NCP), Action Alliance (AA) and United Progressive Party (UPP) all together has the highest coverage. Obviously because they comprise of many parties. 27 (45.0%) of the coverage frequency. This mean that NTA covers PDP alone to have more coverage which was more than what was given to the strong opposition party (APC, n =7, 11.7%) and almost close frequency of coverage given to the 9 political parties (n= 27, 45%), obviously because it was the ruling party during the 2015 presidential election, This confirms disequilibrium in the access to NTA coverage of the political parties campaigns during the 2015 presidential election.

The direction to which the NTA's coverage of the political parties' campaign in the 2015 Nigeria's presidential election was also sought for in terms of how favourable, unfavourable or neutral the coverage given to the political parties was. Table 2 presents the finding.

Table 2: Direction of Coverage of Political Parties

Political party	Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral	Total
PDP	23(38.3%)	1(1.7)	2(3.3%)	26(43.3%)
APC	7(11.7%)	0	0	7(11.7%)
OTHERS	4(6.7%)	3(5%)	20(33.3%)	27(45%)
TOTAL	34(56.7%)		22(36.7%)	60(100%)

This table (2) shows the direction of NTA news coverage of the 2015 presidential election where PDP had the majority (n=23, 38.3%) favourable coverage than APC (n=7, 11.7%) and other political parties (n=4, 6.7%). This also implies that NTA favored PDP more than the nine other political parties in the coverage of 2015 presidential election confirming disequilibrium in their coverage. For PDP, the 23 favourable articles were mainly campaign on the 2015 general election featuring president Good luck Jonathan's promises and declaration, some were about the PDP party advocating for its presidential candidate. Only 2(3.3%) percent of PDP coverage were neutral and 1(1.7%) as unfavourable coverage. On the other hand, APC had 7 favourable coverage most of which is about the general election and also featuring the parties presidential candidate advocating for votes. None of APC coverage is neutral or unfavourable. Other Parties coverage was mostly neutral (N=22, 36.7%) advocating for a peaceful and successful election and also promoting their respective candidates.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study suggests that coverage on the Nigeria Television Authority by other parties was a challenge during the 2015 Presidential election, in the sense that the ruling party alone had more coverage than the strong opposition party and also had a very close number of coverage given to the other 9 political parties all together. This study also found that PDP had the most favourable coverage on NTA during the 2015 presidential election. NTA was overly bent in favour of the ruling party – PDP while portraying other parties more in neutral direction thus revealing evidences of disequilibrium in the NTA coverage during the 2015 presidential campaigns in Nigeria.

However, a striking outcome of the 2015 presidential election was that the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) lost to the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC), despite the exceeding frequency and favourability of NTA's attention on the ruling PDP. This experience is a departure from that of the second republic where

research finding showed positive correlation between media coverage and presidential election outcome (see Olayiwola, 1991).

This research finding on evidences of disequilibrium on the coverage of the 2015 presidential election interms of number of coverage and direction challenges the pluralist perspective of independent media whose contents are to be shaped by consuming public. The finding of this research also implies that the NTA violated the Nigeria code of election coverage, which emphasizes equal access of coverage to the media.

NTA's attitude could be viewed from Baron (2004); Goldberg, (2002) and Alterman (2003) argument as a motive to influence the electoral outcome. Sussman (1989) similarly argue that the larger implications of unequal access of media due to ownership, control are considered critical to the wielding and sustenance of political power. This recognition of the role of mass media as agents of power and political control is partly responsible for the decision of the governments of developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) to either own their own media or regulate news and information flow within and into their countries.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that NTA gave unequal coverage to the political parties that participated in the 2015 presidential election campaign, which occurred in terms of the frequency and direction of their news reports posted on their website. This contradicts the provisions of Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage, which calls emphasizes equal access of coverage for all participating political parties to the public media. This study therefore recommends that mechanisms such as enforcement of code of election coverage be put in place by professional regulatory bodies including the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to ensure that NTA operates on the regulatory tenets of equal opportunity for political parties to air their views during elections. This is particularly necessary for promoting the cause of democratic pluralism, free and fair elections and national integration in Nigeria.

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