

Setting Agenda for Leadership Recruitment: A Content Analysis of Media Treatment of Personality and Competence of the 2011 Presidential Candidates

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Abstract

This article examines the level of attention print media gave to the personality and the competence of the presidential candidates as compared to their political leverage in their coverage of the events leading to the 2011 presidential election. Agenda Setting Theory (AST) was used to give the paper a theoretical frame. Quantitative research design using Content Analysis (to evaluate three national newspapers) was adopted. The result showed that more attention was devoted to electoral strength analysis than candidates' competence analysis, while the personalities were more reported than their manifestoes. The paper concludes by recommending that the media must always resist the tendency to hunt for stories that tend to concentrate on politicking and intrigues than the competence of the candidates that have come out to contest. The public need to know more than the candidates would be willing to share with the public about themselves and only the media can fill this gap.

Key words: Personality, competence, media treatment and presidential election.

Background to the Study

Many researches have been carried out on the role of the Nigerian media in the democratization process of the nation. It is generally believed that, the media are a powerful stakeholder in the nation's quest for political stability. For instance, Maia (2001:35) observes that: "the media play an increasingly central role in the process of identity construction" – such that commentaries are hardly seen from the worth of their logic, reason and value, but motive and motivation. Also, Phillips, Roberts and Benjamin (1999:14) report that:

In Nigeria, newspapers are very important media of political communication to political parties and their candidates... Radio and newspaper (are) the most mentioned sources of information.

Similarly, Ojebode, (2008) argues that unlike what is obtainable in some advanced countries, where media messages are taken with a pinch of salt, the Nigerian people believe in the messages found in the media. This has its historical roots in the fact that the media were in the forefront of agitation for the independence of the country from British colonial power; and in the fight against successive military rules.

Opinions varied on the objectivity of the Nigerian media but it is generally believed that the media have remained relevant in the power calculus among the political elite. As a result, many have feared that the Nigerian media ought to be more open in the coverage and analysis of topical issues, so as to continue to win the trust of the reading public. Mytton (1993) however, opines that the Nigerian media would continue to suffer this perception deficit because they have political backers who give them a political role to play in the expression of the opinions and values espoused by the patrons, over the need to report facts. It is therefore common to accuse the Nigerian media of editorial bias toward certain political interests.

Apart from ownership and commercial interests that the press has to balance, the correlative influence of socio – cultural affiliation of the media practitioners is another one. Many journalists are perceived to be working as the media warlords for their primordial affiliates. However, since the media cannot survive by being totally impervious to the public mood and reality, it is expected that caution would still be a moderating factor in the direction of their content. Grandly and Davis (1999) have postulated that only the concept of social movement which places public discourse on popular social struggle can make the biases of journalists to have impact. In other words, the media will continue to be respected by the public insofar as they champion what affects the interest of the public; in other words, media agenda must not lag behind the public agenda neither should it be opposed to it (Rogers&Dearing, 1988).

In fact, scholars have observed that the main factor that will ensure the continued relevance of the media will be the public perception of the media as an instrument of social change. Mutz and Soss (1997:433) reinforce this position when they point out that:

American newspapers are making efforts to move beyond passive responses to the ongoing flowing of news... One manifestation of this desire is the idea of "Public journalism" which promotes the active involvement of journalists in community affairs and places less emphasis on the goal of professional detachment.

It is the realisation of this advocacy and enlightenment roles that many media houses in Nigeria have in their statements of mission, the need to be objective but never to be neutral on topical issues. One newspaper that has made this public is *The Sun*-whose mission statement is part of its masthead. Some of the issues considered central to its focus include: democracy, constitutionality, social rights, citizen welfare and economic prosperity. It is therefore expected that the media will continue to uphold those critical aspects of the democratic development of the nation as a major opinion molding instrument.

It is therefore important to take a look at the way and manner the media are faring in the quest for a free and fair election. It will be noted that the process of democratically choosing the president of the country has been at the forefront of media engagements for some time. Noble

as this task is, it however, is generally believed that the electorate can indeed democratically elect an incompetent leader if they are not properly educated about the choices offered by the candidates vying for elective positions.

Problem of the Study

Studies have been carried out on the performance of the Nigerian media in election coverage. Some of the studies focused on different motifs and resolved different problems. For example, Adamu and Ogunsanwo (1983) looked at the influence of ownership in the editorial bias of the media in the coverage of general elections. Similarly, Omu (1978) researched on media and identity politics in election reporting, other scholars such as Mohammed (2003), Galadima and Soola, (2012) have studied the impact of ideology, religion and economic interest on election reporting. None of these studies have focused on media coverage on competence and manifestoes of the candidates for elections. This paper is a response to this missing gap in the ongoing literature in political communication and media performance.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This paper therefore, takes a critical look at how the Nigerian print media have helped in critically analysing the candidates for elections in relation to how the candidates are perceived and projected in terms of competence. We want to find out whether the media dwelt more on the speculation of the political strengths and weaknesses of the candidate, while playing down the critical aspect of competence evaluation.

This study, therefore, seeks to find out whether the media have helped in the shaping of our knowledge of the candidates and their ability to lead the nation.

This study is significant in that it will equip us with some salient media intelligence about the editorial disposition of the Nigerian media towards presidential election coverage and to further expand the stock of researches into the behaviour of the Nigerian media to electioneering coverage generally.

The study will also help us to know how the media are fulfilling their roles as agent of political education and a major stakeholder in the process of leadership recruitment for the country.

Research Questions

- 1 Did the media give more coverage to competence analysis than electoral strength analysis of the candidates?
- 2 Did the media focus more on personality analysis than manifesto analysis?

Review of Relevant Literature

Theoretical Framework.

This study will be built on the foundation of Agenda Setting Theory (AST). A lot has been said about the agenda setting function of the media in relation to how the media can in effect, influence the process of our thinking. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972:179) who

first expounded on the theory believe that “the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda”. It is from this thesis that the maxim: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about”.

Emory Griffin (2003:391) writing on the influence of the media in public agenda process in America, quoted Theodore White, as follows:

The power of the press in America is a primordial one: It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what we talk and think about – an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.

White’s conclusion on the power of the USA’s media has an even greater telling effect in Nigeria, where researchers say more Nigerians believe the media than their American counterpart do of their own media (Ojebode, 2008).

In spite of this enormous power and privilege of the media in Nigeria socio-political firmament, it could be argued that the Nigerian media have not been known to be proactive in agenda setting, but most often than not, has been reactive or corrective agenda setters. By taking this posture, the Nigeria media have perpetually found themselves in the adversarial and protestation position (Olukotun, 2005). As an agenda setting and the official “whip” of national policy directive of objectives of state as enunciated in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the media are expected to be in the vanguard of setting yardsticks and parameters for recruiting national and provincial leaders for the nation by promoting certain virtues, standards and insisting on some irreducible attributes.

The imperative of the media agenda setting for leadership recruitment could not have more urgency in our nation than ever. The media that set the pace will be in a position to positively influence the choices that electorate make during elections. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that: “A true test of agenda-setting hypothesis must be able to show that *public* priorities lag behind the media agenda”. Even though, by nature, news reports are mimetic and reactionary as it merely give back to the larger society what occurs in its part, the media can through the instrumentalities of features, articles, opinion editorials and commentaries set the agenda for public engagement. An agenda setting media is not the one that merely hunts for breaking news but the one that enlightens and focuses on certain issues of public survival.

The critical question to be asked is: how do the media set agenda? Miller (2001:259) provides the answer as follow:

The media influences the public agenda not by saying “this issue is important” in an overt way but by giving more space and time to that issue and by giving it more prominent space and time. That is, if headlines of newspapers and lead stories of television newscasts all highlight a study touting the role of cholesterol in increasing heart disease, this issue is likely to be seen as an important item on the public agenda.

From the foregoing, the ability of the media to bring to the fore what can engender public discussion/agenda, is media agenda. The agenda is made effective through the volume of stories generated and the prominence given to the stories. Some terms are used to describe how the media set agenda, they include: *framing, slanting, angling, priming and valence* among others. For this study, *framing* is considered apt in the process of agenda setting. Severin and Tankard (2001) describe media frame as: "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is, through the use of *selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration*". Similarly, Entman (1993:52) says:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and or treatment recommendation for the item described.

Entman's definition is even more succinct, yet highly encompassing. The transfer of salient issues from a mass of issues, the distinction through emphasis and nudging through valence, encapsulate the major cannons of agenda-setting theory of the media

Stated in another manner, framing can be likened to the summation of the entire process of gate-keeping which revolves two key activities: "what to live in and what to live out", which are, in any case, mostly guided by editorial policy and perceived public expectation. This further reinforces the assertion that for agenda-setting to take place, the media will certainly have to frame their content to establish clarity and set focus - the need to "nag" and "nudge" on issues of public importance cannot be overemphasized (Scheufele, 1999).

The major concern of scholars on the effectiveness of agenda-setting theory is its inherent inability to show cause and effect. It is difficult to say whether media agenda will automatically lead to public or policy agenda. Kosicki (1993) opines that there is a web of ambiguity about the level of effect, nature of effect and the mechanism through which the effect may take place. This does not however detract from the fact that we know most things about our modern life through the media (McQuail, 2010).

Nigerian Media and Presidential Elections in Nigeria

The role of the media generally and the role of the print in particular, is better appreciated from the constitutional role given to them by the Nigeria constitution, which expressly confers on them the role of a watchdog and agenda setter (FGN Constitution, 1999). Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992)ed., observe that among other things, the media assist in:

- (i) The articulation and pursuit of the national interest;
- (ii) Helping to strengthen the economic, social, political fabric of the nation;
- (iii) Providing informed criticism and viable alternatives to public polices;
- (iv) Educating the public as a medium of expressing knowledge;
- (v) Monitoring government performance and;
- (vi) Setting agenda for social, cultural, political and economic development.

Cottle (1999) argues that, the print media are the most veritable platform of public education being a public sphere through which the public interact and debate issues of common interest. Philip, Robert and Benjamin (1999) also opine that the Nigerian print media remain a “very important media of political communication...” Anele (2011:9) while commenting on the editorial influence of the Nigerian media in an election period said:

For instance, in spite of the fact that Einstein’s theory of relativity asserts that light is bent within the vicinity of massive gravitational field, the concept of rectilinear propagation is still applicable in explaining how mirror reflects images placed before it. Therefore, a mirror does not choose the image it will, or will not reflect. But media executives have the power to create some national news and ignore others, project hitherto obscure individuals to national prominence, and reward politicians they like and punish others they dislike

Another important thing to know is the power of personal fulfillment that accompanies a journalist’s ability to influence people. This has been described as a major incentive to journalists wanting to set the tune for public discourse and determine the focus of talking point. On this, Lord Riddle (1991:49) offers some insights:

To begin with, we must admit that the publicity itch- the desire to communicate news or views the desire to make some sort of sensation- is the basis of all journalism. The true journalists have it.

In addition to these factors is the need to maintain a delicate balance among commercial interest, owner’s interest and public taste (Soola, 2007). Despite this limitation, Cottle (1995:276) in appraising the inescapable relevance of the media, state that:

As a democratic idea and critical benchmark, it (public sphere) provides both a normative expectation and cutting edge with which to interrogate media performance in relation to process of public debate, opinion formation and representation.

It could be said from the foregoing, that the media are irreplaceable as the “market place of ideas” in a democracy. But, studies on the performance of Nigerian media and those of other climes have not been cheering in election coverage.

For instance, Jega (2003) which focuses on the role of the media in identity politics in elections, said the media are wont of promoting ethnic or religion identity during electioneering . Similarly, Udejaja (2004), who examines the role of media in presidential elections coverage, finds out that national consideration are played down while sectional interests are played up in the media, during presidential election reportage. Agbaje (2005), in his own study, reveals that news is focused on personalities rather than issues. Jibo (2003) explains that the concentration of news on personality was as result of ownership. Previous studies did not centre on candidate’s competence but focused generally on “personality as against issues”.

Outside the shore of Nigeria, the experience seem to be the same; this writer put a question on Yahoo! Answer.Com on the “how do the media cover presidential elections in your?” Virtually all the respondents to the question, mostly from the U.S.A stated that the media are no better

than marketing strategists for the candidates. They agreed that the candidates' policies evaluation were grossly sidelined while priming electoral advantages.

The importance of the media is hardly in contention, what is of primary concern of many is the way the media carry out its assignments. As media of education and aggregation of public opinion, Grandy and Davis (1999) have advised on the need for the media to adopt the concept of social movement which makes it incumbent on the media to place higher emphasis of public discourse on popular social struggle that leads to social political- improvement of the polity. They point out that the media should properly guide the populace on major issues. According to them, the media should make reference to the past, in the path to provide background and context for a social problem orientation.

In summary, extant literature on elections in Nigeria and media behavior generally, tend to suggest that the media play a crucial role and that they command a high level of influence that draws from public perception of their credibility. Earlier researches have equally showed that the media tend to focus on sectional politics, identity construction and personality promotion. This study will further enrich the literature by looking into the areas of personality and competence appraisal in presidential election reporting.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative design and used Content Analysis (CA) to gather data. The population is all the national newspapers for the months of February and March. Three of the newspapers were however sampled, using simple random sampling procedure; they are: *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and *The Punch*.

A purposive sampling was adopted for identifying stories that were selected; only write-ups that discussed the presidential candidates in comparison were coded.

Categorization: The stories were divided into four categories of Electoral Strength Appraisal, Competence Appraisal, Personality Appraisal, and Manifesto Appraisal.

Operationalization

- (1) Strength Appraisal: stories that speculated on how the candidates would fare in the election.
- (2) Competence Appraisal: stories that focus on the competence of the candidates in terms of performance.
- (3) Personality Appraisal: stories that took a look at the profile of the candidates, their character strengths and weaknesses
- (4) Programme Appraisal: stories that evaluate the programmes, manifestoes and promises of the candidates

Units of Analysis

Stories such as article, opinion article letter to the editor, feature, opinion and editorial.

Delimitation: This study only appraised the four leading candidates in the 2011 election. Adverts and advertorials were excluded from the units of analysis.

Data Presentation and Findings

The outcome of the data collected are presented in tables and expressed in percentage description. Each of the table gives an insight into the results of the CA coding.

Table 1. Extract of CA from the coding sheet showing each candidate's score from the newspaper analysis. The four candidates evaluated are denoted as follow: Jonathan Ebele Goodluck(JEG), General Mohamadu Buhari(GMB), Malam Nuhu Ribadu(MNR) and Mala Ibrahim Shekarau(MIS)

Categories of Analysis	The Guardian					The Punch					The Nation				
	JEG	GMB	MNR	MIS	Total	JEG	GMB	MNR	MIS	Total	JEG	GMB	MNR	MIS	Total
Competence	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	3	8	2	2	-	12
Personality	2	1	2	-	5	5	2	2	1	10	10	2	2	2	16
Electoral Strength	3	2	1	2	8	2	2	2	2	8	5	4	4	4	17
Manifesto	1	1	2	3	7	1	2	2	-	5	2	8	6	4	20
Total	6	4	5	5	20	9	7	7	3	26	25	16	14	10	65
Grand Total %					18%					23.4%					58.6%

Table 2.1 Summary of JEG from the Score Sheet

JEG				
Category	Guardian	The Punch	The Nation	Total
Competence	-	1	8	9
Personality	2	5	10	17
Political Strength	3	2	5	10
Manifesto	1	1	2	4
Total	6	9	25	40

Table 2.2 Summary of GMB from the Score Sheet

GMB				
Category	Guardian	The Punch	The Nation	Total
Competence	-	1	2	3
Personality	1	2	2	5
Political Strength	2	2	4	8
Manifesto	1	2	8	11
Total	4	7	16	27

Table 2.3 Summary of MRN from the Score Sheet

MNR				
Category	Guardian	The Punch	The Nation	Total
Competence	-	1	2	3
Personality	2	2	2	6
Political Strength	1	2	4	7
Manifesto	2	2	6	10
Total	5	7	14	26

Table 2.4 Summary of MIS from the Score Sheet

MIS				
Category	Guardian	The Punch	The Nation	Total
Competence	-	-	-	-
Personality	-	1	2	3
Political Strength	2	2	4	8
Manifesto	3	-	4	7
Total	5	3	10	18

Table 3. Comparative Percentage Analysis of Each Candidate's Score on the Categories

Candidates					
Category	JEG	GMB	MNR	MIS	Total
Competence	9(8.10%)	3(2.7%)	3(2.7%)	-	15(13.5%)
Personality	17(15.3%)	5(4.5%)	6(5.4%)	3(2.7%)	31(27.9%)
Electoral Strength	10(9%)	8(7.2%)	7(6.3%)	8(7.2%)	33(29.7%)
Manifesto	4(3.6%)	11(9.9%)	10(9%)	7(6.3%)	32(28.8%)
Total	40(36%)	27(24.3%)	26(23.4%)	18(16.2%)	111(100%)

Data Discussion

Table 1. Shows the distribution of stories relevant to this study as reported in the papers selected. *The Nation* had the highest number of stories of 65 (58.6%); followed by *The Punch* 26 (23.4%) and *The Guardian* which had 20, representing 18% of the total items of 111% that were coded.

Generally, the result showed that Jonathan Ebele Goodluck (JEG) had more media mention than other candidates. Stories concerning the candidate JEG counted 40; which represented (36%) of the total stories. General Muhammadu Buhari had 27 (24.3%) stories concerning him. He is closely followed by Mallam Nuhu Ribadu (MNR) who had 26 (23.4%); and Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau (MIS) who had 18 (16.2%).

Research Question 1

Did the media give more coverage to Competence analysis than Electoral Strength analysis of the candidates?

We now turn to Table 3 which gives us a vivid account of how the candidates were reported according to the stated categories. To start with, it is clear that the media focused more on political leverage or Electoral Strength than Competence Analysis as the data showed. The total number of stories concerning Competence was 15 (13.5%); while that of Electoral Strength stood at 33(29.7%). It is in fact, instructive to note that *The Guardian* did not report a single item of story on Competence. We found out also that *The Nation* newspaper published 12 stories representing 80% of the total stories on Competence. The remaining 80% of the total stories representing 20% of the total competence related stories were reported by *The Punch*. Similarly, nine stories representing 60% of the stories on Competence focused on Jonathan Ebele Goodluck (JEG). Both General Muhammadu Buhari (GMB) and Mallam Nuhu Ribadu (MNR) got three stories representing 20% each. Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau was not mentioned in Competence analysis by any of the newspapers selected. Interestingly, stories concerning electoral strength have the highest level of keen distribution among the candidates. The score was evenly distributed. Out of the total 33 stories representing (29.7%) and the highest in the four categories of analysis, JEG has 10 (9%); GMB 8 (7.2%) MNR 7 (6.3%); similarly the reporting pattern was evenly distributed among the newspapers. *The Nation* reported 17 (51.5%) stories, *The Guardian* eight and *The Punch* eight stories representing (24.2%) a piece. We can therefore justifiably answer the Research Question 1 to the effect that the media concentrated more attention on electoral guessing than competence analysis. For instance, *The Guardian* reported eight stories having to do with the chances of the candidate in the election based on electoral permutations but had no single story concerning the competence of the candidate. Similarly, out of 18 stories concerning Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau in the three selected papers, none of them mentioned anything concerning his competence; whereas, eight stories focused on his political chances alone. Out of the 40 stories discussing Jonathan Ebele Goodluck, nine stories discussed his competence.

Research Question 2

Did the media focus more on personality analysis than manifesto analysis?

Given that 32 (28.8%) stories of 111(100%) of the stories coded were focused on the manifesto and 31 (27.9%) focused on personality analysis, we can comfortably say there is no significant difference in the way the two categories were reported. However, a closer look at the score on-candidate-by candidate basis would give a deeper insight on the trend of coverage. To start with, whereas, JEG seemed to enjoy greater coverage than the other candidates under other categories, it is curious to find out that only four stories actually focused on his programmes. The distribution of the stories regarding his manifesto according to newspaper is as follows: *The Guardian*, one story; *The Punch*, one story and *The Nation*, two stories, compare this to 17 (15.3%) stories which dwelt on his personality out of 31 (27.9%). It means that about (54.8%) of the stories concerning personality focused on JEG whereas, only four (12.5%) stories said something about his manifesto. When one takes a look at the scores of other candidates, the same pattern of score spread across the categories was maintained throughout. For instance, GMB had five stories (4.5%) on personality and 11 (9.9%) on manifesto; MNR had 6 (5.4%) stories on personality and 10 (9%) on manifesto and MIS had 3(2.7%) stories on personality and 7 (6.3%) focused on his manifesto. On the whole, there is no much difference between personality analysis and manifesto analysis, at least, as it relates to other candidates, save for JEG. The analysis has shown that the media focused much on electoral horse trading than the competence of the candidates and that the personalities and manifestoes of the candidate received almost the same attention. This brings us back to the issue of value judgment and agenda-setting. If such an important factor is played down either involuntarily or otherwise, it only shows that the media do not consider them to be of high importance to attract their attention. This has invariably shown in the mode of what was given prominence and valence in the process of setting agenda for election coverage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study content analysed the focus of the print media on the presidential candidates in terms of their competence, personality and programme. The outcome of data analysis shows that media focused more on politics than competence and there was no deliberate effort to evaluate the candidates psychoanalytically. The electorate was not presented with stories that focused on the competence and personality of the candidates as they were presented with electoral chances of the programme of Jonathan Ebele Goodluck who happened to be the incumbent with obvious higher visibility with its accompanying challenges of exposure to critical media was not looked at from the point of view of programme. There was more focus on his person than political leverage than other categories. One reason one can guess to be accountable for this reason could be the hidden hands of media relations experts who often infiltrate editorial direction of "friendly" media houses on behalf of their principals. However, this is at the level of guessing anyway. It must be stated that that the study did not concern itself with the typology of the stories- that is, as to whether they were favourable or otherwise to the image of the candidates. the story content analysed one reason one can guess to be. It is recommended that the media

must be aware of their destiny and never be carried away by the mob impulse that normally trails elections in Nigeria. There must be deliberate editorial policy about setting agenda for presidential election coverage. Too much emphasis was put on the chances of candidates while neglecting their ability to deliver. The urge to join in propagating political view of the politicians can be very slavish as it creates a wild notoriety that leads to another cacophony; but this must be resisted by an agenda setting media. A further study could also be done on the drivers of editorial contents of the Nigerian media in an electoral time with closer look on the impact of the media relations and advert drive on editorial fidelity.

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