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The Nigerian Media and Global Political Reportage : Coverage/Treatment of the 2004 US Presidential Elections

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the performance of the Nigerian media in global gatekeeping using the recent United States' 2004 Presidential Election as a case study. The coverage and treatment of this important event was considered using four national daily newspapers for the print media and two frequency modulated radio stations for the broadcast media. In other words, both the print and the electronic media were content analyzed and it was discovered that the event did not get the adequate or required mention deserving its status in the Nigeria media. As an international gatekeeper for its numerous audience (Nigerians and non-Nigerians living in Nigeria), the Nigerian media did not live up to expectation as anybody who may have solely relied on them for the news about the election (pre-election coverage, election coverage and post-election reportage) will definitely be under informed about the issues concerning the election because the news was grossly under reported in the media. The researcher content analyzed the selected media houses a week before the election (Oct. 25th to Nov. 1, 2004); the week of the election (Nov. 2nd - 8th Nov. 2004); and a week after the election (Nov 11th - 16th Nov. 2004) to base his conclusions. The coverage/reportage also goes a long way to indicate that the Nigerian media have not really integrated into the global community defined and shaped by advanced and sophisticated information and communications technologies. Suggestions and recommendations were made at the end of the study to ensure that the Nigeria's media industry and thus, the Nigerian society are not left behind in the globalized world.

Introduction

Every four years, the custodians of the world's democratic values and the largest single democracy in the world today, United States goes to the polls to elect a President in accordance with the Constitution of the United States of America. Because of the strategic importance of the US as a Super Power and "the engine" of the world, whoever becomes the President of America becomes the President of the civilised world and the Chief Security

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Officer of the global community. That is why in Europe and elsewhere, the issues concerning the election are well publicized and given the required attention it deserves.

Furthermore, the 2004 Election was hotly contested between the incumbent Republican President, George Warner Bush and the Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry. Foreign policy dominated the issues followed by economy and other domestic issues. The Democrats felt that George W. Bush led America to an unpopular and unjust war against the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein and did not seek and get the support of her allies and the United Nations. The Republicans felt otherwise and insisted that with the information available to the President then, the war was justified and successfully executed. The 2004 Elections became a testing ground of the popularity of the War, which may result, either in a vote of confidence on the incumbent or a vote of no confidence on him.

The second issue that defined the importance of the war is that America has never been known to change a commander-in-chief during war periods (if it coincides with the election year). This worried Europe who feared that another four years of Bush's Presidency will further polarize Europe, undermine the power and/or authority of United Nations and further squander the global solidarity against terrorism as a result of Bush's unilateralist tendencies and disposition. The Middle East crisis is still an unresolved issue for the US.

On the domestic side, the American economy was not robust, as it should be. There were massive job losses from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was still green in the hearts of the affected families. The Democrats swooped on these sentiments and until after the ballots were counted, all global all mass media agreed that the race for the White House too tight to predict. George Bush and Senator Kerry ran neck to neck for weeks in opinion polls. Media assessment even had it that John Kerry won all the televised Presidential Debates. This was indicative of the fact that the 2004 US Presidential Election was too close to call and therefore, got the desired attention from the global media.

It is therefore, pertinent to find out if the Nigeria mass media actually played her gate-keeping role well in reporting the issues assuming they are the only source of information for the Nigerian media audience. The researcher therefore selected five national daily newspapers and two FM radio stations and analyzed their content a week before the election, the week of the election and the week immediately after the election. Efforts were also made to determine emphasis attached to these news stories in the press especially.

This particular research is, therefore, relevant in our present socio-political, ~~sum~~ cultural debates because Nigeria as a member of the global community cannot afford to live in isolation. Her reportage of a global issue like the US Presidential Election can either alienate her from the global community or integrate her better into it.

Problem Statement

Various research findings on how the Nigerian mass media reports the rest of the world or covers some prominent global issues/events have always shown serious under reportage and coverage. Reasons for this have also been heaped on the lack of adequate technology and manpower/personnel to effectively carry out their functions of keeping the Nigeria society informed.

However, in this era of globalization and information technology, is the Nigeria mass media still a local media industry? And what are the consequences of this to the Nigerian society in a highly globalized world?

These posers form the challenges of this study.

Study Objective

Generally, this study is meant to find out how the Nigerian mass media plays her international gatekeeping role using the 2004 US Presidential Election as a case in point. The study also aims at finding out the level of integration of the Nigerian mass media to the global community through the importance attached to global issues and events.

Significance of the Study

First, this study is looking at the Nigeria mass media industry holistically by studying both the electronic media and the print media at a time. Most researchers avoid this method. Again, the researcher deviated a little from ~~an~~ conventional practice of analyzing content studies using the quantitative technique only. This study adopted the more deeply involved qualitative approach in the analysis of the study findings.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To place this study in proper perspective, we shall hinge our discussion on two related theoretical constructs. These constructs are the Gatekeeping and the Agenda - Setting theories of the press.

The Gatekeeping theory is a child of the gatekeeping function of the mass media of communication. Kurt Lewin coined the term "gatekeeping" in about 1951. He used the term to describe those individuals who control the "gates" or channels through which information or news passes from the source to the

final consumers. Lewin's point here is that no media house, no matter the size and level of operation, can transmit all the messages it receives in the course of a day's business. Some persons have to decide which news to transmit, which to defer its transmission to another date and time, which to modify, which to delete completely or which to kill outrightly. Such persons, according to Lewin (1951) open and close the gate that stands between the news sources and the receivers. Note, gatekeeping as a mass media activity and function does not stop at opening and closing the news gate, or rejecting and accepting news information for publication or broadcast, it also involves the shaping and reshaping, display, timing, repetition etc. of the news and information in the various media establishment.

The journalist is first and foremost a gatekeeper and may have to perform this role at different periods in the news process. According to Folarin (2002) the factors influencing gatekeeping decisions include timing, ownership pattern, management policy, perceived needs and preference of the audience, editor's perception of reality, views held by editor's colleagues, influence of advertiser, appraisal of offering by the competition, availability of photography or film footage, legal consideration, professional ethics, ideological perspectives and political orientation. The Gatekeeping Theory, therefore, revolves around the media role of news selection and dissemination in line with the influential factors listed above. With the principles of this theory in mind, this study will help us to evaluate the Nigerian media performance in global news coverage and reporting.

The second theoretical construct, which will also help us to analyze the performance of the Nigerian media industry in reporting the recent US Election is the Agenda-Setting Theory. According to McComb and Shaw (1974) the media's emphasis on an issue influences the audience to also view the issue as important. The media attaches certain weights to news stories through placement, size and frequency of appearance of such stories. Agenda setting posits that audiences learn these salient issues from the news media, thus incorporating a similar set of weights and importance into their own personal agenda. Shaw (1983:132) reaffirms this view when he opines that the media, by focussing repeated and major attention on an event or set of related events, can transform that event into an issue.

Umehukwu (2001:148-150) and Folarin (2002:75-76) also agree that the press has an impact on agenda-setting in that they have the ability to choose or emphasize certain topics thereby causing the public to perceive the issues or topics as important. This implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are considered as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda Setting Theory does not give to the media the ultimate power to determine what the

public actually thinks; but it does give them the power to determine what the public should be thinking about. The above view is a reaffirmation of Bernard Cohen (1963) statement that the media may not be successful in telling people what to think but they may be very successful in telling them what to think about

Sandman et al (1976:19) also sees agenda-setting as the editorial decision that a particular event is not news if the news media ignores it or says so. Globally an event given major emphasis in the mass media ultimately becomes a major event. The journalist, therefore, effects cognitive change among individuals and at times thinks for them. This is exactly what is referred to as agenda-setting which gave birth to the Agenda Setting Theory of the press.'

Again, the literature on the role of the mass media in political reporting (nationally, locally and internationally) abounds in published materials. We shall, therefore attempt a summary here.

Shaw and McCombs (1977:106) did a comprehensive work on agenda-setting and are in acknowledgement of the fact that public surveillance of the media revolves around setting agenda for civic concern and action. This is politically significant. Generally, it is held that newsmen determine what is news, which political happening or condition will be covered or prescribed. Undesirable political conditions that may be tolerated while they remain obscure may quickly become intolerable in the glare of publicity (Umechukwu, 2001:103). McCombs and Mauro (1977) on their part note that the media also provides clues to the public about the degree of importance of an issue. Political issues covered more prominently by the media are likely to be considered most important by media audience.

Blumler (1978:22) cited in Umechukwu (2001:104) points out that the mass media, while surveying the environment, functions essentially as agencies of social legitimation - as forces, which reaffirm those ultimate value standards and beliefs, which in turn, upholds the social and political status quo. Since the media are the eyes and ears of the citizens, their means of surveillance which tell them about political, economic and social conditions, journalists need to be more objective in news reporting and imbibe a crusading posture in order to influence public opinion. It is through the gathering and dissemination of information that the people are assured that their political system is still relevant despite the predisposition to trial and error mechanism. This is very vital if the people must have peace of mind. They need this kind of reassurance in any political system. This is probably the reason while Edelman (1964:38) opines that reassurance tends to keep the populace politically and economical quiescent because there is no need to act if political leaders seem to be doing their job very well.

The Nigerian mass media could also perform the function of promoting political socialization through global political reportage. It is now a well-known fact that the United States is the world's custodian of democratic and libertarian values. The Nigerian society, therefore, stands to gain a lot through the mass media about United States political cum-socio-cultural values. This invariably was the expectation of the Nigerian-media audience during the campaigns and the actual elections to the exalted office of the President of the United States of America. Gerbner et al (1982:101) in this line, view the mass media as "the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality". Kraus and Davies (1976), and Chaffee et al (1970) empirically support this. These mass communication scholars and media researchers all agree that the mass media are the primary agents of political socialization. To corroborate this view, Umechukwu (2001:106) notes thus:

This being the case, the Nigerian mass media should present political values that will lead to reforms since media-cultivated facts and values are standard by which we can judge. Once basic orientations towards the political system have been formed, attitudes usually stabilize and later learning largely supplements and refines earlier notions. Much of what the average person learns about political norms, rules, values, and events...necessarily comes from the mass media. People's opinion, feelings, and evaluation about political system may spring from their own processing of facts supplied by the media. It is, therefore, imperative that journalists should task themselves with supplying the right political values, which would create response from the people.

Still on political socialization, which the mass media is expected to promote through global political coverage and reportage, Okunna (1998:108) maintains that

Through the process of socialization, the individual is made aware of and internalizes the values, norms and acceptable behaviour pattern of the society. They provide a common body of knowledge, the internationalization of which enables people to operate as effective members of their society.

Oboh (2004:47-48) is also of the view that the press objective for foreign affairs reporting, among other things, should be aimed at projecting the favourable image of Nigeria beyond its national boundaries, thereby attracting worthy investors to our economy. "Foreign affairs reporting" Oboh goes on, "is not necessarily dominating the pages of the Nigeria dailies with foreign news stories but relevant distant issues that have some bearings on our national objectives". Osuntokun (1989:353) cited by Oboh (2004:47) notes :

Just as policies were formulated at home to guarantee our national interest, foreign policy, which is an extension of domestic policies, naturally served to further the objectives of national interest.

Methodology

Study Design

This study is primarily meant to find out how the 2004 United States Presidential Election was covered and reported in the Nigerian mass media. The Nigerian mass media here include both the print media and the electronic media. For the print media, four newspapers were studied while for the electronic media, two radio stations were monitored. To achieve the purpose of this study, some content classifications were developed. These classifications or divisions were to enable the researcher determine and analyze the nature of the coverage/reporting. Consequently, the newspaper contents were classified according to the following divisions: -

1. News Story	-	NS
2. Feature Story	-	FS
3. Editorial	-	ED
4. Personality Profile	-	PP
5. Pictures/Cartoons	-	PIX
6. Interpretative Article	-	IA

However, for the Radio reports, only two divisions were made. They included:

1. News Story	-	NS
2. Commentary	-	CO

To determine the importance placed on the print reports, further divisions into **Front Page (FP)**, **Back Page (BP)** and **Inside Pages (IP)** were developed. Any material or type of report (as classified above) that appears on the front page is regarded as very important. Any report that appears on the back page is also regarded as important but second in order of priority while reports that appear on the inside pages are regarded as not too important and therefore, least in the order of priority.

For the radio reports, any story that is featured as a commentary is regarded as important. Commentaries give indepth explanation and expose some of the facts behind the news.

Population

The population of this study is the Nigeria mass media out of which four national daily newspapers were selected for analysis. The newspapers selected

are the **Guardian, the Vanguard, the Punch, and Thisday**. Two radio stations were also selected from the electronic media. They were Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) because of the way the Network operates and because it controls and owns a lot of subsidiary stations, one was actually monitored. That is 97.6 Metro FM and then Ray Power 100.5FM all in Lagos - the centre of the most developed media industry in Africa.

Sampling Method

The newspaper and the radio stations selected for study were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. The reason for using the purposive sampling technique was to meet the study objectives set by the researcher. Nworgu (1991:78) supports this reason thus

In purposive sampling, specific elements, which satisfy some predetermined criteria, are selected. Although the criteria to be used are usually a matter of the researcher's judgment, he exercises this judgement in relation to what he thinks will constitute a representative sample with respect to the research purpose.

The days to be analyzed were also purposively selected for the newspapers, the week before the election was analyzed (25th Oct. to 1st Nov. 2004); the week of the election (2nd Nov. to 9th Nov. 2004) and the week after the election (10th Nov. to 16th Nov. 2004). For the Radio Station, only the week of the election and the week after the election were monitored and analyzed. (2nd Nov. to 16th Nov. 2004).

Instrument of Data Collection

This study demands the use of content analysis, which according to Dare (1991:6) is a research technique an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Rivers (1975:6) also defines content analysis as a research method or a technique that enables researchers to study written works systematically and quantitatively. For the radio stations, they were monitored at the time of the broadcast.

To make this work easier, the researcher employed the services of the Third Year Class (2002/2003) set of Mass Communication students, Covenant University, Canaanland, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria. Some of them monitored the Radio Station under the supervision of the researcher while the selected others content analyzed the selected newspapers.

Summary of Data Presentation**This Day Newspaper (Table 1A)**

News Placement	Frequency	Percentage
Front page	06	21%
Back page	01	10%
Inside page	20	69%
Total	29	100%

Table 1B

News Category	Frequency	Percentage
News story	12	41%
Feature story	06	21%
Editorial	02	07%
Personality Profile	None	None
Picture News	04	14%
International Article	05	17%
Total	29	100%

Vanguard Newspaper (Table 2A)

News Placement	Frequency	Percentage
Front page	07	19%
Back page	—	—
Inside page	30	81%
Total	37	100%

Table 2B

News Category	Frequency	Percentage
News story	28	76%
Feature story	02	05%
Editorial	01	03%
Personality Profile	—	—
Picture News	04	11%
International Article	02	05%
Total	37	100%

Punch Newspaper (Table 3A)

News Placement	Frequency	Percentage
Front page	09	36%
Back page	—	—
Inside page	16	64%
Total	25	100%

Table 3B

News Category	Frequency	Percentage
News story	11	44%
Feature story	0	0%
Editorial	01	04%
Personality Profile	01	04%
Picture News	09	36%
International Article	03	12%
Total	25	100%

The Guardian (Table 4A)

News Placement	Frequency	Percentage
Front page	08	18%
Back page	—	—
Inside page	37	82%
Total	45	100%

Table 4B

News Category	Frequency	Percentage
News story	23	51%
Feature story	06	13%
Editorial	02	5%
Personality Profile	04	5%
Picture News	05	11%
International Article	05	11%
Total	45	100%

Radio Broadcast Table 7

Name of Radio Station	Frequency of Broadcast	News Types	%
FRCN (Metro FM)	06	News Story	100%
Ray Power 100.5FM	09	News story (06) commentary (03)	67% 33%
Total	15	(2)	100

Data Analysis and Discussion

From the above Tables it is obvious that the Nigeria mass media did not give the 2004 United State Presidential Election the desired attention it required and the stories did not receive adequate treatment either. For the three weeks under study (about 23 days), Thisday mentioned the story of US Election 29 times, Vanguard 37 times, Punch 25 times and Guardian 45 times. The radio stations were not left out in this gross under coverage and reportage of a global event. The two radio stations monitored only discussed the issue in 15 separate broadcasts. However, the stations were monitored between Nov. 2nd to 16th 2004.

Furthermore, all the newspapers under study did not give the event the prominence it required. Only 31% of the entire Thisday reports were deemed important to appear in the Front and Back pages. The rest 69% were buried on the Inside pages. Vanguard and Guardian's cases are even worse. Vanguard only had 19% of the news reported on the front page and the rest 81% were lost on the inside pages. Guardian also had 18% of the news reported on the front page and the rest 82% on the inside pages. Punch was a little bit more global in the coverage and reportage of the event. About 36% of the reports appeared on the front page while the remaining 64% appeared on the inside pages. This is a significant improvement from the other three sample newspapers.

On the quality of the treatment, there is not much to be desired. All the papers concentrated on the news aspect of the event and gave inadequate coverage to the facts behind the news. The United States Presidential Elections of 2004 was beyond the personalities of George W. Bush and John Kerry. The global war on terror was a prominent issue in the elections; the unending war in Iraq was another thorny issue. Afghanistan is still not a safe haven and the Middle East has remained as volatile as ever. Europe is disenchanted and unhappy with George Bush and the Republican Party; United Nations is not entirely comfortable with George Bush's disposition towards unilateralism and the nuclear threats from Korea, Syria, Iran etc. cannot just be wished way. These and many more issues made this particular election a global event, yet the Nigerian mass media choose not to be part of it to the detriment of the average Nigerian that may likely and totally depend on them for the coverage and reportage of the elections.

Furthermore, how much does the Nigerian living in Nigeria know about the United States Presidential system and electioneering? As the world's custodian of democratic values and institutions (whether we agree with this or not) how much did Nigeria (as an emerging democracy) learn from the United

States 2004 Elections? What was the level of interaction, socialization and education with the nature of coverage given by the Nigerian mass media, which undeniably were the major gatekeepers and agenda setters for the Nigerian media audience? What nature or type of agenda did they really set? What defined their gatekeeping processes and procedures as far as this major election is concerned?

These questions could go on because the Nigerian mass media failed to carry out their responsibilities as international gatekeepers and agenda-setters responsibly. Feature reports, interpretative articles, editorials and commentaries which could have given the news behind the news, the facts and figures behind the news, the issues that defined and shaped the election and the controversies and personalities were grossly inadequate. This smacks of press irresponsibility and dereliction of duty. Obviously, the average Nigerian media audience was the ultimate loser. The elites with access to satellite dishes and foreign print media publications could not have suffered much. The major challenges for the elites will only manifest in the lack of the Nigerian perspective to the news. For the average Nigerian/masses, it is obvious from the quantity and quality of the reportage that they don't know much about the election, the issues behind the elections, the personalities behind the news and the possible consequences of the final outcome of the elections. Whatever little they know definitely may not have come from the Nigerian mass media if one were to go by these research findings and analysis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Other issues that have reared their heads in this study included:

The Nigerian mass media still under report the Western World both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is in line with similar research findings especially the one conducted by the same author in 2003/2004. From that particular study that looked at the News Flow Controversy vis-à-vis the reportage of the Western World in the Nigeria press, Ekeanyanwu (2005) thus concludes

Available statistics from this study indicate that the Nigerian press gave more emphasis on negative or unfavourable reportage of the Western World. As could be deduced... 34.6% of the entire Western news report was devoted to the reporting of war, conflicts, defense, crime and disaster news stories. Most of the pictures published... were also about negative or unfavourable news events, which centre on conflicts, crime and disaster. In addition, only these negative or unfavourable news events make their appearances in the front pages of the Nigeria press. This is evident in the fact that about 61.7% of the entire news stories that appeared on the front

pages of the newspaper were about war, conflict, defense, crime, and disaster. All these point to one singular fact - that the Nigeria press is guilty of qualitative imbalance in its reportage of the Western World.

This conclusion is indisputable. The Nigerian mass media coverage of the Sept. 2001 terrorist attack on the US soil indicated that the average Nigerians know more about Osama Bin Laden than they know about George W. Bush and John Kerry in their coverage of the 2004 Presidential Elections. The New World Information and Communication Order debate will, therefore, remain an academic discussion in futility. The Nigerian mass media are still local channels in a highly globalized media world. To remain relevant in this era of information technology and globalization, the Nigerian media industry and society must integrate into the centre of global affairs. Their peripheral stand on global issues and events (as indicated in this study and other related studies) will further alienate them from the global community, which is gradually integrating further into a global neighbourhood.

There is gross under-utilization and application of information technology in the Nigerian media day-to-day operations and business of newsgathering and dissemination. What other reasons could they adduce for this grossly inadequate coverage and reportage of an event of this magnitude? It is either they did not have the means or the materials to adequately cover and report the Elections.

It is also obvious from this study that the Nigerian mass media is still clamoring for the unrealistic and unattainable New World Information and Communication Order when the world is gradually "disintegrating" and "integrating" into a one global neighbourhood. Even if the World Information Order must change, developing nations like Nigeria cannot define or shape or determine the nature of the New Order. The North will.

The Nigerian mass media coverage of this big event definitely lacks global international appeal. Non-Nigerians in Nigeria will definitely be amazed at the level of our integration into world affairs. These conclusions and recommendations in this study may sound unpatriotic to the South's cause but this will only be so in the minds of those who do not really mean well for the South's cause. We have been saying the same thing for a long time now and yet no change. Instead, self-marginalization is all we get as a consequence of our narrow mindedness. This researcher, therefore, believes and belongs in the new school of thought called **Positive Realism** in communication and global studies and research.

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