

THE MEDIA AND THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Regular elections were held in Nigeria since the country's return to democracy in 1999. The national constitution has provided that general elections must hold into elective positions at the state and federal levels at the interval of four years. Accordingly, general elections are held every four years across the country. Such elections are often accompanied by a series of activities and high excitement that involved the media, particularly in reporting and advertising of the candidates, parties and their programmes.

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Normally, elections are important news events that are of significant interest to the media because they are events that entail conflicts, disagreements and tensions. They are important social and political events that engage the attention of the media as part of their traditional responsibility of informing, educating and mobilising the society for sustainable democracy and development. In the same vein, the reporting of elections is part of the surveillance function of the media in which the citizens are educated on the quality of the individual candidates presenting themselves for elective offices and warn the society on any impending danger in the process. Indeed, the media have remained a critical element in the organisation and holding of elections in the country.

Enormous literature exists on the conduct of the media in Nigeria's elections at various times. While many scholars have criticised the performance of the media as often partisan, non-critical, personality focused, unethical, elite and urban centred, and highly commercialised, many others have, however acknowledged the role of the media in educating and moulding the opinions of the people during elections and for investigating and challenging wrong doings in the process (Omu, 1978; Ogbondah, 1994; Yusuf, 2001; Nwosu, 2003; Oso, 2010 and Pogoson, 2015). Thus, this paper reviews the performance of the media in covering elections in Nigeria since 1999, with specific attention on the conduct of the media in the March 2015 general elections.

The Electoral Process

Holding elections in Nigeria usually involves elaborate preparations, rancorous exchanges and post-election court cases that sometimes lasted for a year or longer to conclude. Each general or national election goes through a series of stages that impinged on the legitimacy and credibility of the outcome. The steps are:

- Registration of voters.
- Registration of political parties/political party campaigns.
- Preparations by the electoral body (like the procurement of electoral materials, recruitment of temporary staff, etc.).
- Holding of the elections.
- Post elections (complaints and litigations).

The above steps and arrangements characterised the build up to the 2015 elections. Perhaps, one major issue that distinguished the preparations in 2015 from the earlier periods was the shifting of the dates for the holding of the elections at the instance of the government "so that it can complete the fight against the insurgency in the North East part of the country". Understandably, the action was reluctantly and suspiciously received by many citizens as indicated in the content of the press during the period (Arogundade, 2015). Thus, the shifting of the dates, the insurgency war, and the merger of the opposition political parties and the adoption of the card reader by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) had, in several ways, affected the direction, credibility and legitimacy of the elections. They were characterised by suspicions, complaints, accusations

and counter accusations, and even litigations by the various stakeholders. All of that were generously covered by the media.

Perception of Elections in Nigeria

Elections and electioneering periods mean different things to different people in Nigeria. Over time, we have observed, correctly or not, that Nigerians perceive elections in the country in the following forms. Equally too, these perceptions appeared definitive in the conduct of the stakeholders as well as the media:

- For every election, the end justifies the means.
- Elections are equal to 'wars' with battles that must be won at all costs.
- In politics, there is no morality. Securing the victory by whatever means and trick should be uppermost.
- Politics is business. Elections provide opportunity for interest groups, agencies and individuals to make big monies.
- Irrespective of a candidate's moral, ethical and performance records, his money and connections are factors that can qualify him into a political office.
- All levels of government and agencies are liable to illegal behaviours depending on their levels of interest.
- The media serve the interest of those in power, their owners or those who can pay for their ways by whatever means.
- In elections, politicians insist on "making sure you are not defeated to go to court but win and be taken to court".
- Political offices are routes for corrupt acquisition of wealth. Therefore, it must be paid heavily by the seekers, who in any way, will recoup their electoral investments in office.
- Staying in the opposition is the least of options. The typical politician should be in office or relate "well" with successful ones.

The Media and Elections

The mass media have been very important pillars in the Nigerian democratic system. With a very wide media landscape covering conventional, online and social media channels, the country has over 100 newspapers, magazines, 250 broadcast stations in addition to numerous online sites. The

media sector is vibrant, diverse, and boisterous; and, as in the case of the public broadcast media, non-critical to the government. Over time, these channels have played critical roles in the electoral process by providing costless and reliable details for education and opinion formation among the voting public, which had differently adjudged the performance of the media in elections.

For instance, an audience survey by the National Broadcasting Commission on the Broadcast Media Coverage of the 2011 General Elections showed that 64% of Nigerians adjudged the coverage as unfair among the various parties and candidates as against 34% who rated the performance fair. The coverage was characterised by partisanship in the public stations, high cost of coverage and weak investigative and non-critical posture in reporting (NBC, 2011). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in a study on the media coverage of electoral issues in the 2011 elections in Nigeria concluded that women were marginalised in media coverage; rural areas were insignificantly covered; the big three political parties (People Democratic Party, Action Congress of Nigeria and All Nigeria Peoples' Party) dominated the media space (IMS, 2011). Similarly, a study by the European Union (EU) on the coverage of the 2011 Elections revealed the absence of balance towards the candidates and their parties, since 21 out of the 63 parties contesting in the elections were insignificantly or merely mentioned during national television (NTA) prime time broadcast as 80% of its coverage of political actors was devoted to the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP), and lowly 5% to the leading opposition parties, the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC).

In a similar fashion, the second largest television network in the country, the AIT, followed a scheme similar to that of the NTA while Channels TV offered the most equitable coverage to political parties and presidential aspirants (NESP, 2011). The above findings did not differ significantly in the 2015 general elections. Stories on the elections received high attention in the local and international mass media, even though much of the attention went to the "two leading political parties; People Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressive Congress (APC), which secured more than 91 percent of political parties' media coverage". In a study on the coverage of the elections titled: "Reportage of 2015 Election: A Monitoring Scorecard of Print and Online Media" by the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and International Press Centre (IPC) with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and

the Democratic Governance for Development II (UNDP/DGD II), it was discovered that whereas 24 registered parties barely had a little over eight percent mentioning in the media, both PDP and APC had overwhelming 91.6 percent mentioning. "For the six months covered by this report, political parties were used as sources 8,318 times out of a total of 42,595 sources. The APC had the highest mention with 3,911 or (47.01 per cent) closely followed by PDP with 3,716 or (44.67 per cent). All other 24 political parties shared the remaining (8.4 per cent) of mention with a significant number without mention at all." The report also revealed media imbalance in the coverage of gender related issues as male politicians had 95 percent mentioning as sources of news reportage than their female counterparts, who barely had five percent.

Evidently, in 2015, all of the parties had received some coverage, even though like in the previous elections, much of the focus was on the APC and the PDP. For instance, after the elections, the American Consulate in Nigeria commended the performance of the media in offering a platform for the expression and amplification of ideas by contestants during the campaign season. The Consul General, Jeff Hawkins (2015) said that: "The news media, like their peers in other parts of the world, shoulder a heavy responsibility to inform and educate the electorate, in some cases placing them in harm's way. We are aware that some courageous journalists were injured during the elections." Hawkins said that by providing to the Nigerian electorate timely, factual, analytical and objective information to help them understand the issues and where the candidates stand, the news media lived up to a universal professional standard and contributed immensely to a healthy and functioning democracy in Nigeria.

In the build up to the 2015 general elections, numerous national and international organisations like the United Nations and its organs, embassies of friendly nations, international donor agencies, international and local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as well as the National Electoral Commission and regulatory agencies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) had supported or directly organised capacity building exercises for different categories of media personnel in the reporting and managing of information during national elections. The media and its personnel, in addition to the existing professional code of ethics, received a number of advisory guidelines and codes that are in line with best practices on reporting elections and electioneering issues. Widely circulated in the industry, the guidelines

sought to enforce professional handling of information in line with the code of ethics that emphasise truth, balance, fairness, and equity to all parties and candidates. In very few cases, in-house brainstorming sessions were internally held in the media houses.

The National Broadcasting Commission provided an elaborate Guideline on Political Reportage. The media also received some advisory guides from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), National Orientation Agency, Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria, Independent National Electoral Commission, the Nigerian Press Council and many others. However, the availability of these guides did not significantly prevent professional breaches in the media particularly in governments' owned and few of the private stations. For instance, in the 2011 and 2015 elections, Independent Observers had delivered mixed assessments on the conduct of the media in the electoral exercise. One of such observer groups, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), which is an amalgam of civil society organisations, reported that the media significantly and widely covered the three elections in 2007, 2011 and 2015 (TMG Election Monitoring Report, 2015).

TMG (2015) observed that while some sections of the media have tried to report ethically, professionally and in line with the Electoral Act, many others were clearly biased, one sided and culpable of professional misbehaviour. Specifically, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) had sanctioned thirty-three radio and television stations during the 2011 elections for various professional breaches. Each of the stations was fined ₦500,000 (NAN, April 4, 2011). In the 2015 Elections, the campaigns got messier with dissemination of hate campaigns and use of foul language on leading broadcast stations like the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the African Independent Television (AIT), and some national newspapers. Damaging jingles, documentaries and write ups against the leading opposition presidential candidate appeared repeatedly as advertisements in violation of the basic professional etiquettes and provisions of the Advertising Code. For instance, the study on the 2015 election revealed that "a total of 117 sensational headlines, incitement and hate speeches as well as stereotypes were recorded in the six-month period (of the study) with an average of about 20 per month across the 12 selected national print media" (Arogundade, 2015). Plus, while the campaigns lasted, regulatory agencies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and the Advertising Practitioners Council (APCON)

appeared publicly unable to sanction the individual media houses involved probably because the ruling party and the central government were largely responsible for the offensive advertisements.

The offensive advertisements were not only exchanged among the two leading presidential candidates, but some were also directed to the Chairman of the Independent National Elections Commission (INEC). For instance, a full-page newspaper advertisement was placed in several newspapers for a number of days, sponsored by a “*fresh focus*” (Jonathan support group), castigating the Chairman of INEC by questioning his commitment to free and fair elections because of his insistence of using the permanent voters card (PVC) and the card reader in the 2015 election. The advertorial by the “*fresh focus*” group questioned the Chairman on the Commission’s preparedness to hold the election as scheduled.

The political attack by the ruling party and its supporters took a more negative dimension when the wife of the President, Mrs. Patience Jonathan called for the “stoning” of the opposition when they went to campaign in Calabar (*Daily Trust* March, 19, 2015). On another occasion, she belittled the collective honour and integrity of a section of the country in a campaign speech in Lokoja, when she uttered some damaging remarks on the people of the North (*Sunday Trust*, March 8, 2015). The remarks by Mrs Jonathan instantly turned into a vicarious liability on the candidate she was campaigning for. The opposition APC saw it as a political capital and placed the speech in many national newspapers as advertisements. Correctly or not, the APC interpreted the comments by Mrs Jonathan as a recipe for war by comparing it to what happened in Ivory Coast after its election, where incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo lost but refused to leave. His wife, Mrs Simone Gbagbo was reported to have uttered similar statements in the pre-election period, which eventually triggered a civil war in the country after the 2010 election. Using the Ivorien analogy, the APC wrote a complaint letter to the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Mrs Jonathan, for “preaching violence” in her campaign speech and made loud noises in the local media on the subject (*Sunday Trust*, March 8, 2015).

Perhaps, observing the negative trend in the build up to the elections, the House of Representatives through the House Committee on Information invited the managers of two television networks in the country (NTA and AIT) for a hearing on the drift. The two managers defended their actions in separate submissions to the House. Specifically, the NTA Director General,

Sola Omole said; “there was nothing wrong with the documentaries titled *The Lion of Bourdillon* and *The Real Buhari* aired by the NTA— that it was not done in bad taste (*Daily Trust*, March 11, 2015). The Director General averred that, “there was nothing politically bias about the documentaries... it was a matter of perception, what you may describe as hate message, I might not consider it as such. NTA is 100% in compliance with NBC regulations“.

It was after the declaration of the results of the elections and the ruling party had lost, that the regulatory body, the NBC, announced that it had sanctioned eighteen broadcast stations for various acts of violations against the political broadcasting code. The NBC indicted the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), African Independent Television (AIT), and Nigerian Info, among others, for breaching the sensibilities rules as well as the 24-hour advertisement prohibition rules. NBC said it was particularly displeased with the breaches of the rules on the broadcast of sponsored electoral campaign materials, which failed to conform to the standards of truth, decency and good taste and clearly identify the sponsors of advertisements. The Nigerian Press Council (2015) had also documented cases of professional breaches against some publications that bordered on unfair political behaviours that were disguised as news reports and delivered a mixed verdict on the conduct and ethical standing of the press during the electioneering period. The Council specifically scored many of the leading newspapers low in carrying offensive advertorials and hate speeches.

Social Media and 2015 Election

The coming of the social media has changed the political landscape in Nigeria, especially the political campaign and processes in the 2015 general election. Various social media platforms were used by politicians to reach the electorates. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp, MySpace, YouTube, Blog and Instagram facilitated electioneering campaigns and policing of the election results in real-time. The major Presidential contenders in the 2015 election maintained Twitter and Facebook accounts, in which they interacted with their supporters and propagated their manifestos. Perhaps, very importantly, the platforms served as effective avenues for policing election results. On the Presidential Election Day, accredited election observers, civil society situation rooms,

the INEC, PDP, and APC situation rooms' deployed observers to the field that relied on various social media platforms for live reports. Few hours after voting commenced in Nigeria, observers and citizens disseminated election results as announced at various voting centres using Twitter, Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp, etc. As the election results went viral on the social media, political parties, citizens, local and international observers monitored and tracked, mostly before the official central announcement by INEC. In many cases, the officially collated results tallied with those posted on the social media. From what happened, it was clear that the social media had significantly facilitated the checking of election rigging through close monitoring of the process as well as in the tracking of the results making it difficult to manipulate or change the results already circulated in the public domain.

Generally, one can summarise the nature of the coverage and performance of the media in the 2015 elections in Nigeria as follows:

- Coverage was high and wide at all levels.
- Excessive coverage focused on fears, speculations and rumours about the elections.
- Pre-election coverage was not issue-based. Personality issues overwhelmed the attention of the media.
- The media "was not sufficiently critical" in analysing the various campaign promises made by parties or their candidates.
- There was little reporting on the track records of candidates in relation to the promises they were making and how they had performed in the past, either in public office or any other sector.
- There were no attempts to track promises made by incumbents and the extent to which such promises were implemented.
- The media demonstrated weaknesses in upholding the spirit of investigative journalism as part of their responsibility in keeping those in governance accountable to the people.
- There was absence of rigorous analysis of the manifestos of the various political parties to highlight their areas of focus and strategies.
- Most times, the media had failed to distinguish between the official and political party campaign activities of incumbents especially in the government owned broadcast outlets.
- Many government owned broadcast media violated the provisions of the Electoral Act and the Nigeria Broadcasting Code, particularly in respecting the principles of pluralism, commercialisation, decent

language and equal airtime to all political parties during electioneering periods.

- Because of the commercialisation regime in the broadcast media, investigative or even rigorous journalistic analyses on issues and candidates were given little regard.
- Hate speeches and outright lies appeared as advertisements.

Challenges

The greatest challenge to the organisation and conduct of elections in 2015 and, for the media in particular, was the erratic attitude of many of the stakeholders. This attitude had permeated into the general society as evidenced in the perceptions of the people. The intolerant behaviours of politicians, absence of internal political party democracies, weaknesses and gaps in institutions like INEC, security agencies, etc. had in several ways, betrayed desperation, illegality and dishonesty, aptly captured, reinforced and represented by the media. The media had repeatedly encountered mindsets, attitudes and habits that had affected their performance in the electoral process. As argued by Iyayi (2007), “election mind-sets are particularly consequential for democracy. They shape political behaviour before, during and after elections. Election mind-sets derive from other mind-sets that we have about several other conditions and factors that shape elections. These include mind-sets about power and politics, the role of the state on society, ethnicity, religion and political succession.”

These were compounded by the ownership pattern and competing interests in the media industry. Personal interests and political sympathies of owners were often mainstreamed into professional content of publications and broadcasting to demonise, advocate or manipulate public opinion. Even media organisations that claimed non-partisanship were easily betrayed by the contents on their pages or airwaves. Under the guise of performing their constitutional, structural and psychological responsibilities, many media professionals deliberately confused facts with feelings, masqueraded objective critical analyses with subjective political biases and, in many cases, engaged in defamatory contents that appeared as news, even though they were actually planted stories (Pate, 2014). Commenting on the direction of some of the campaigns during the election period, the Director of the International Press Centre, Lanre Arogundade (2015) identified moral loss as the major consequence of ethical infractions displayed by the media in the coverage of

the election, as “many readers, listeners and viewers permanently turned off the media outlets because of their excessive partisanship while swimming in the ocean of hatred“.

In fact, the situation in the government-dominated broadcast media before, during and post-election was glaringly partisan to the point that many of them were sanctioned by the regulatory authority for violating the electoral broadcasting code. State-owned broadcast media outfits jettisoned the provisions of their establishment acts, national laws, the broadcasting code or the professional code of ethics. In many of the government-owned media, there were excessive interferences by officials, overbearing influence of non-professionals from outside the media, often from the political parties and the tight control sometimes bordering to censorship, in the newsrooms. The loopholes further exacerbated such scenarios in their establishing laws, which severally, give the political leadership in the states license to directly interfere in the content and appointments of officials in the organisations (Pate, 2014).

In the private media, personnel referred to the political and economic interests of owners in the content of their media. The staffs were expected, in situations where they are not directly instructed, to understand, respect and avoid “friendly fires“. As acknowledged by the President of the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), Mr. Femi Adesina (2015), ownership structure was a factor dictating disposition of media operatives during campaigns. He remarked that: “Clearly, particularly in the electronic media, you will see that they were partisan due to their ownership, whether public or private. Once the ownership was beholding to one side, the media followed to that side. The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), is understandably owned by the government while the African Independent Television AIT is private. However, as the owner was beholding to the government in power, so the station itself took that same line. But we also saw Channels Television that was quite neutral, very professional, very ethical, so we saw all sorts“.

Perhaps, quite fundamental is the precarious economic conditions in the media houses, which in a way, led to compromising of independence for survival, personal safety and job protection by personnel. As a result, some of them became subservient to government officials and for the private media, the interests of advertisers and owners. The vulnerability of the system promoted a subtle trend among top editorial staff in media houses to secretly take up appointments as professional consultants or public relations

experts or advisers to aspirants, candidates and political parties. This is not to suggest that the so-called objectivity precludes journalists from holding political opinions, belonging to political parties and supporting particular candidates, but they were not expected to masquerade their opinions or biases to appear as objective analysis of issues with hope of misleading the audiences.

Another issue that had affected the performance of the media in the electoral process was the commercialisation regime in media houses. Even though the Broadcasting Code insists on free coverage for political parties and their activities, the rule was however, minimally respected by the broadcast media. Because of the monetary charges, some candidates, parties and members of the public were denied quality access in the media. Equally, in the name of advertisements, salient provisions of the Code of Election Coverage were violated. Below are few examples of the violated sections:

- Article 3.5.2 states that: “A media organisation shall not publish or air political adverts; advertorials and sponsored political news that seek to create hatred or incite violence“.
- Article 4.3 declares that, “A media organisation shall reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words and messages“.
- Article 4.4 requires that: “A media organisation shall refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief“.

Other Challenges

Poor Logistical Support: In most media houses, basic support facilities like vehicles, cameras, laptops and online connection gadgets were hardly available in sufficient quantity. There were instances reporters relied on commercial vehicles to cover large areas during the elections. Because of that, some of them were exposed to dangers and abuses by thugs. In some cases, they found it more convenient moving around collectively in unmarked vehicles to avoid being attacked because of what may be perceived as the “sins“ of their individual media houses or employers.

Journalists and Personal Safety: Not many journalists were covered by any kind of insurance in the event of injury or death. Journalists were left

to their own means and devices as their employers did not provide them with such cover. Some of them suffered abuses while covering the elections. The managements of media outfits confirmed the claim saying that they lack the resources for such safety cover for their staffs. For example, because of the violence that characterised the elections in Rivers State, Charles Eruka of Channels Television was injured during a violent explosion in Okrika, Rivers State. Many others suffered minor attacks and intimidation in several locations.

Misunderstanding of the roles of Journalists and the Media by Politicians: Many journalists found it difficult to operate professionally and independently because of the misperception of the place and role of the Journalists in democratic settings by politicians. Many politicians wanted Journalists to be non-critical and report everything about them in manners they desired not necessarily based on professional judgments. Many of the politicians failed to appreciate the professional and ethical requirements for news reporting during the elections.

Lessons

Based on the above observations, the following conclusions can be drawn from the coverage of the 2015 elections in Nigeria.

- The media served as an important partner in the electoral process.
- Political misbehaviour and negative attitudes in the wider society had affected the conduct of the media.
- Widespread violation of the Electoral Act, the Professional and NBC codes (plurality, access, fairness, sycophancy, hate speech, commercialisation of news, bribery, etc) affected the perception and credibility of the media as an objective fourth estate of the realm.
- Internal and external pressures mounted on operational staff (threats, attacks, sanctions, promises of appointments, etc).
- The media did little of investigative journalism to dig into the backgrounds and antecedents of candidates and behaviours and manifestoes of parties.

Recommendations

- Increase the focus of the media on existing mind-sets to address specific negative attitudes in the society.

- Strengthen professional engagement of the media with politicians, civil society organisations, institutions and agencies involved with elections to improve media performance.
- There is a need to review enabling laws of the public broadcast stations to make them professionally independent to check proprietary and commercial controls.
- The media should be encouraged to be more confident in investigating the conduct of politicians, fulfilment of promises by incumbents, behaviour of institutions like the police, INEC, and specific allegations of malpractices and other such negative acts.
- Civil society groups should pay more attention to the performance of the media at various levels.
- Strengthen regulators like the NBC to enforce broadcasting code more forcefully especially on the big stations.
- Increase the funding to media houses by proprietors to enhance the capacity of the media.
- More care is required in the professional use of language in the media.

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- In elections, politicians insist on "making sure you are not defeated to go to court but win and be taken to court".
- Political offices are routes for corrupt acquisition of wealth. Therefore, it must be paid heavily by the seekers, who in any way, will recoup their electoral investments in office.
- Staying in the opposition is the least of options. The typical politician should be in office or relate "well" with successful ones.

The Media and Elections

The mass media have been very important pillars in the Nigerian democratic system. With a very wide media landscape covering conventional, online and social media channels, the country has over 100 newspapers, magazines, 250 broadcast stations in addition to numerous online sites. The

media sector is vibrant, diverse, and boisterous; and, as in the case of the public broadcast media, non-critical to the government. Over time, these channels have played critical roles in the electoral process by providing costless and reliable details for education and opinion formation among the voting public, which had differently adjudged the performance of the media in elections.

For instance, an audience survey by the National Broadcasting Commission on the Broadcast Media Coverage of the 2011 General Elections showed that 64% of Nigerians adjudged the coverage as unfair among the various parties and candidates as against 34% who rated the performance fair. The coverage was characterised by partisanship in the public stations, high cost of coverage and weak investigative and non-critical posture in reporting (NBC, 2011). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in a study on the media coverage of electoral issues in the 2011 elections in Nigeria concluded that women were marginalised in media coverage; rural areas were insignificantly covered; the big three political parties (People Democratic Party, Action Congress of Nigeria and All Nigeria Peoples' Party) dominated the media space (IMS, 2011). Similarly, a study by the European Union (EU) on the coverage of the 2011 Elections revealed the absence of balance towards the candidates and their parties, since 21 out of the 63 parties contesting in the elections were insignificantly or merely mentioned during national television (NTA) prime time broadcast as 80% of its coverage of political actors was devoted to the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP), and lowly 5% to the leading opposition parties, the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC).

In a similar fashion, the second largest television network in the country, the AIT, followed a scheme similar to that of the NTA while Channels TV offered the most equitable coverage to political parties and presidential aspirants (NESP, 2011). The above findings did not differ significantly in the 2015 general elections. Stories on the elections received high attention in the local and international mass media, even though much of the attention went to the "two leading political parties; People Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressive Congress (APC), which secured more than 91 percent of political parties' media coverage". In a study on the coverage of the elections titled: "Reportage of 2015 Election: A Monitoring Scorecard of Print and Online Media" by the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and International Press Centre (IPC) with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and

the Democratic Governance for Development II (UNDP/DGD II), it was discovered that whereas 24 registered parties barely had a little over eight percent mentioning in the media, both PDP and APC had overwhelming 91.6 percent mentioning. "For the six months covered by this report, political parties were used as sources 8,318 times out of a total of 42,595 sources. The APC had the highest mention with 3,911 or (47.01 per cent) closely followed by PDP with 3,716 or (44.67 per cent). All other 24 political parties shared the remaining (8.4 per cent) of mention with a significant number without mention at all." The report also revealed media imbalance in the coverage of gender related issues as male politicians had 95 percent mentioning as sources of news reportage than their female counterparts, who barely had five percent.

Evidently, in 2015, all of the parties had received some coverage, even though like in the previous elections, much of the focus was on the APC and the PDP. For instance, after the elections, the American Consulate in Nigeria commended the performance of the media in offering a platform for the expression and amplification of ideas by contestants during the campaign season. The Consul General, Jeff Hawkins (2015) said that: "The news media, like their peers in other parts of the world, shoulder a heavy responsibility to inform and educate the electorate, in some cases placing them in harm's way. We are aware that some courageous journalists were injured during the elections." Hawkins said that by providing to the Nigerian electorate timely, factual, analytical and objective information to help them understand the issues and where the candidates stand, the news media lived up to a universal professional standard and contributed immensely to a healthy and functioning democracy in Nigeria.

In the build up to the 2015 general elections, numerous national and international organisations like the United Nations and its organs, embassies of friendly nations, international donor agencies, international and local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as well as the National Electoral Commission and regulatory agencies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) had supported or directly organised capacity building exercises for different categories of media personnel in the reporting and managing of information during national elections. The media and its personnel, in addition to the existing professional code of ethics, received a number of advisory guidelines and codes that are in line with best practices on reporting elections and electioneering issues. Widely circulated in the industry, the guidelines

sought to enforce professional handling of information in line with the code of ethics that emphasise truth, balance, fairness, and equity to all parties and candidates. In very few cases, in-house brainstorming sessions were internally held in the media houses.

The National Broadcasting Commission provided an elaborate Guideline on Political Reportage. The media also received some advisory guides from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), National Orientation Agency, Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria, Independent National Electoral Commission, the Nigerian Press Council and many others. However, the availability of these guides did not significantly prevent professional breaches in the media particularly in governments' owned and few of the private stations. For instance, in the 2011 and 2015 elections, Independent Observers had delivered mixed assessments on the conduct of the media in the electoral exercise. One of such observer groups, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), which is an amalgam of civil society organisations, reported that the media significantly and widely covered the three elections in 2007, 2011 and 2015 (TMG Election Monitoring Report, 2015).

TMG (2015) observed that while some sections of the media have tried to report ethically, professionally and in line with the Electoral Act, many others were clearly biased, one sided and culpable of professional misbehaviour. Specifically, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) had sanctioned thirty-three radio and television stations during the 2011 elections for various professional breaches. Each of the stations was fined ₦500,000 (NAN, April 4, 2011). In the 2015 Elections, the campaigns got messier with dissemination of hate campaigns and use of foul language on leading broadcast stations like the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the African Independent Television (AIT), and some national newspapers. Damaging jingles, documentaries and write ups against the leading opposition presidential candidate appeared repeatedly as advertisements in violation of the basic professional etiquettes and provisions of the Advertising Code. For instance, the study on the 2015 election revealed that "a total of 117 sensational headlines, incitement and hate speeches as well as stereotypes were recorded in the six-month period (of the study) with an average of about 20 per month across the 12 selected national print media" (Arogundade, 2015). Plus, while the campaigns lasted, regulatory agencies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and the Advertising Practitioners Council (APCON)

appeared publicly unable to sanction the individual media houses involved probably because the ruling party and the central government were largely responsible for the offensive advertisements.

The offensive advertisements were not only exchanged among the two leading presidential candidates, but some were also directed to the Chairman of the Independent National Elections Commission (INEC). For instance, a full-page newspaper advertisement was placed in several newspapers for a number of days, sponsored by a “*fresh focus*” (Jonathan support group), castigating the Chairman of INEC by questioning his commitment to free and fair elections because of his insistence of using the permanent voters card (PVC) and the card reader in the 2015 election. The advertorial by the “*fresh focus*” group questioned the Chairman on the Commission’s preparedness to hold the election as scheduled.

The political attack by the ruling party and its supporters took a more negative dimension when the wife of the President, Mrs. Patience Jonathan called for the “stoning” of the opposition when they went to campaign in Calabar (*Daily Trust* March, 19, 2015). On another occasion, she belittled the collective honour and integrity of a section of the country in a campaign speech in Lokoja, when she uttered some damaging remarks on the people of the North (*Sunday Trust*, March 8, 2015). The remarks by Mrs Jonathan instantly turned into a vicarious liability on the candidate she was campaigning for. The opposition APC saw it as a political capital and placed the speech in many national newspapers as advertisements. Correctly or not, the APC interpreted the comments by Mrs Jonathan as a recipe for war by comparing it to what happened in Ivory Coast after its election, where incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo lost but refused to leave. His wife, Mrs Simone Gbagbo was reported to have uttered similar statements in the pre-election period, which eventually triggered a civil war in the country after the 2010 election. Using the Ivorien analogy, the APC wrote a complaint letter to the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Mrs Jonathan, for “preaching violence” in her campaign speech and made loud noises in the local media on the subject (*Sunday Trust*, March 8, 2015).

Perhaps, observing the negative trend in the build up to the elections, the House of Representatives through the House Committee on Information invited the managers of two television networks in the country (NTA and AIT) for a hearing on the drift. The two managers defended their actions in separate submissions to the House. Specifically, the NTA Director General,

Sola Omole said; “there was nothing wrong with the documentaries titled *The Lion of Bourdillon* and *The Real Buhari* aired by the NTA— that it was not done in bad taste (*Daily Trust*, March 11, 2015). The Director General averred that, “there was nothing politically bias about the documentaries... it was a matter of perception, what you may describe as hate message, I might not consider it as such. NTA is 100% in compliance with NBC regulations“.

It was after the declaration of the results of the elections and the ruling party had lost, that the regulatory body, the NBC, announced that it had sanctioned eighteen broadcast stations for various acts of violations against the political broadcasting code. The NBC indicted the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), African Independent Television (AIT), and Nigerian Info, among others, for breaching the sensibilities rules as well as the 24-hour advertisement prohibition rules. NBC said it was particularly displeased with the breaches of the rules on the broadcast of sponsored electoral campaign materials, which failed to conform to the standards of truth, decency and good taste and clearly identify the sponsors of advertisements. The Nigerian Press Council (2015) had also documented cases of professional breaches against some publications that bordered on unfair political behaviours that were disguised as news reports and delivered a mixed verdict on the conduct and ethical standing of the press during the electioneering period. The Council specifically scored many of the leading newspapers low in carrying offensive advertorials and hate speeches.

Social Media and 2015 Election

The coming of the social media has changed the political landscape in Nigeria, especially the political campaign and processes in the 2015 general election. Various social media platforms were used by politicians to reach the electorates. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp, MySpace, YouTube, Blog and Instagram facilitated electioneering campaigns and policing of the election results in real-time. The major Presidential contenders in the 2015 election maintained Twitter and Facebook accounts, in which they interacted with their supporters and propagated their manifestos. Perhaps, very importantly, the platforms served as effective avenues for policing election results. On the Presidential Election Day, accredited election observers, civil society situation rooms,

the INEC, PDP, and APC situation rooms' deployed observers to the field that relied on various social media platforms for live reports. Few hours after voting commenced in Nigeria, observers and citizens disseminated election results as announced at various voting centres using Twitter, Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp, etc. As the election results went viral on the social media, political parties, citizens, local and international observers monitored and tracked, mostly before the official central announcement by INEC. In many cases, the officially collated results tallied with those posted on the social media. From what happened, it was clear that the social media had significantly facilitated the checking of election rigging through close monitoring of the process as well as in the tracking of the results making it difficult to manipulate or change the results already circulated in the public domain.

Generally, one can summarise the nature of the coverage and performance of the media in the 2015 elections in Nigeria as follows:

- Coverage was high and wide at all levels.
- Excessive coverage focused on fears, speculations and rumours about the elections.
- Pre-election coverage was not issue-based. Personality issues overwhelmed the attention of the media.
- The media "was not sufficiently critical" in analysing the various campaign promises made by parties or their candidates.
- There was little reporting on the track records of candidates in relation to the promises they were making and how they had performed in the past, either in public office or any other sector.
- There were no attempts to track promises made by incumbents and the extent to which such promises were implemented.
- The media demonstrated weaknesses in upholding the spirit of investigative journalism as part of their responsibility in keeping those in governance accountable to the people.
- There was absence of rigorous analysis of the manifestos of the various political parties to highlight their areas of focus and strategies.
- Most times, the media had failed to distinguish between the official and political party campaign activities of incumbents especially in the government owned broadcast outlets.
- Many government owned broadcast media violated the provisions of the Electoral Act and the Nigeria Broadcasting Code, particularly in respecting the principles of pluralism, commercialisation, decent

language and equal airtime to all political parties during electioneering periods.

- Because of the commercialisation regime in the broadcast media, investigative or even rigorous journalistic analyses on issues and candidates were given little regard.
- Hate speeches and outright lies appeared as advertisements.

Challenges

The greatest challenge to the organisation and conduct of elections in 2015 and, for the media in particular, was the erratic attitude of many of the stakeholders. This attitude had permeated into the general society as evidenced in the perceptions of the people. The intolerant behaviours of politicians, absence of internal political party democracies, weaknesses and gaps in institutions like INEC, security agencies, etc. had in several ways, betrayed desperation, illegality and dishonesty, aptly captured, reinforced and represented by the media. The media had repeatedly encountered mindsets, attitudes and habits that had affected their performance in the electoral process. As argued by Iyayi (2007), “election mind-sets are particularly consequential for democracy. They shape political behaviour before, during and after elections. Election mind-sets derive from other mind-sets that we have about several other conditions and factors that shape elections. These include mind-sets about power and politics, the role of the state on society, ethnicity, religion and political succession.”

These were compounded by the ownership pattern and competing interests in the media industry. Personal interests and political sympathies of owners were often mainstreamed into professional content of publications and broadcasting to demonise, advocate or manipulate public opinion. Even media organisations that claimed non-partisanship were easily betrayed by the contents on their pages or airwaves. Under the guise of performing their constitutional, structural and psychological responsibilities, many media professionals deliberately confused facts with feelings, masqueraded objective critical analyses with subjective political biases and, in many cases, engaged in defamatory contents that appeared as news, even though they were actually planted stories (Pate, 2014). Commenting on the direction of some of the campaigns during the election period, the Director of the International Press Centre, Lanre Arogundade (2015) identified moral loss as the major consequence of ethical infractions displayed by the media in the coverage of

the election, as “many readers, listeners and viewers permanently turned off the media outlets because of their excessive partisanship while swimming in the ocean of hatred“.

In fact, the situation in the government-dominated broadcast media before, during and post-election was glaringly partisan to the point that many of them were sanctioned by the regulatory authority for violating the electoral broadcasting code. State-owned broadcast media outfits jettisoned the provisions of their establishment acts, national laws, the broadcasting code or the professional code of ethics. In many of the government-owned media, there were excessive interferences by officials, overbearing influence of non-professionals from outside the media, often from the political parties and the tight control sometimes bordering to censorship, in the newsrooms. The loopholes further exacerbated such scenarios in their establishing laws, which severally, give the political leadership in the states license to directly interfere in the content and appointments of officials in the organisations (Pate, 2014).

In the private media, personnel referred to the political and economic interests of owners in the content of their media. The staffs were expected, in situations where they are not directly instructed, to understand, respect and avoid “friendly fires“. As acknowledged by the President of the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), Mr. Femi Adesina (2015), ownership structure was a factor dictating disposition of media operatives during campaigns. He remarked that: “Clearly, particularly in the electronic media, you will see that they were partisan due to their ownership, whether public or private. Once the ownership was beholding to one side, the media followed to that side. The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), is understandably owned by the government while the African Independent Television AIT is private. However, as the owner was beholding to the government in power, so the station itself took that same line. But we also saw Channels Television that was quite neutral, very professional, very ethical, so we saw all sorts“.

Perhaps, quite fundamental is the precarious economic conditions in the media houses, which in a way, led to compromising of independence for survival, personal safety and job protection by personnel. As a result, some of them became subservient to government officials and for the private media, the interests of advertisers and owners. The vulnerability of the system promoted a subtle trend among top editorial staff in media houses to secretly take up appointments as professional consultants or public relations

experts or advisers to aspirants, candidates and political parties. This is not to suggest that the so-called objectivity precludes journalists from holding political opinions, belonging to political parties and supporting particular candidates, but they were not expected to masquerade their opinions or biases to appear as objective analysis of issues with hope of misleading the audiences.

Another issue that had affected the performance of the media in the electoral process was the commercialisation regime in media houses. Even though the Broadcasting Code insists on free coverage for political parties and their activities, the rule was however, minimally respected by the broadcast media. Because of the monetary charges, some candidates, parties and members of the public were denied quality access in the media. Equally, in the name of advertisements, salient provisions of the Code of Election Coverage were violated. Below are few examples of the violated sections:

- Article 3.5.2 states that: “A media organisation shall not publish or air political adverts; advertorials and sponsored political news that seek to create hatred or incite violence“.
- Article 4.3 declares that, “A media organisation shall reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words and messages“.
- Article 4.4 requires that: “A media organisation shall refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief“.

Other Challenges

Poor Logistical Support: In most media houses, basic support facilities like vehicles, cameras, laptops and online connection gadgets were hardly available in sufficient quantity. There were instances reporters relied on commercial vehicles to cover large areas during the elections. Because of that, some of them were exposed to dangers and abuses by thugs. In some cases, they found it more convenient moving around collectively in unmarked vehicles to avoid being attacked because of what may be perceived as the “sins“ of their individual media houses or employers.

Journalists and Personal Safety: Not many journalists were covered by any kind of insurance in the event of injury or death. Journalists were left

to their own means and devices as their employers did not provide them with such cover. Some of them suffered abuses while covering the elections. The managements of media outfits confirmed the claim saying that they lack the resources for such safety cover for their staffs. For example, because of the violence that characterised the elections in Rivers State, Charles Eruka of Channels Television was injured during a violent explosion in Okrika, Rivers State. Many others suffered minor attacks and intimidation in several locations.

Misunderstanding of the roles of Journalists and the Media by Politicians: Many journalists found it difficult to operate professionally and independently because of the misperception of the place and role of the Journalists in democratic settings by politicians. Many politicians wanted Journalists to be non-critical and report everything about them in manners they desired not necessarily based on professional judgments. Many of the politicians failed to appreciate the professional and ethical requirements for news reporting during the elections.

Lessons

Based on the above observations, the following conclusions can be drawn from the coverage of the 2015 elections in Nigeria.

- The media served as an important partner in the electoral process.
- Political misbehaviour and negative attitudes in the wider society had affected the conduct of the media.
- Widespread violation of the Electoral Act, the Professional and NBC codes (plurality, access, fairness, sycophancy, hate speech, commercialisation of news, bribery, etc) affected the perception and credibility of the media as an objective fourth estate of the realm.
- Internal and external pressures mounted on operational staff (threats, attacks, sanctions, promises of appointments, etc).
- The media did little of investigative journalism to dig into the backgrounds and antecedents of candidates and behaviours and manifestoes of parties.

Recommendations

- Increase the focus of the media on existing mind-sets to address specific negative attitudes in the society.

- Strengthen professional engagement of the media with politicians, civil society organisations, institutions and agencies involved with elections to improve media performance.
- There is a need to review enabling laws of the public broadcast stations to make them professionally independent to check proprietary and commercial controls.
- The media should be encouraged to be more confident in investigating the conduct of politicians, fulfilment of promises by incumbents, behaviour of institutions like the police, INEC, and specific allegations of malpractices and other such negative acts.
- Civil society groups should pay more attention to the performance of the media at various levels.
- Strengthen regulators like the NBC to enforce broadcasting code more forcefully especially on the big stations.
- Increase the funding to media houses by proprietors to enhance the capacity of the media.
- More care is required in the professional use of language in the media.

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