

INFLUENCE OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of media coverage of 2023 presidential election in shaping public opinion. The study focused on residents of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The study was guided by Vale's Persuasion Theory and the research was carried out using the descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised 1,085,860 voters in Port Harcourt and 131 staff of Nigeria Info FM, WAZOBIA FM and Rhythm FM which are radio stations operating in Port Harcourt. The sample of the study comprised 400 residents of Port Harcourt and 6 media representatives. The sampling technique used in the study were multi-stage cluster sampling and purposive sampling technique. The instruments used data gathering for this study were structured questionnaire and interview guide. Data gotten from the questionnaire was presented using frequency distribution tables, they were analyzed using weighted mean score. Data from the interview sessions were thematically analyzed. Findings of the study showed that the mainstream and social media were instrumental in spreading of diverse narratives and alternative perspectives; facilitating public understanding of the political landscape; and shaping public opinion by providing context, background and expert commentary on political issues. The study recommended that mainstream media organizations should create more social media platforms for their news stories since virtually everyone sources news stories on social media platforms. This would help increase access to the information and boost the ratings of such stories on the social media platforms.

Keywords: Media coverage, presidential election, public opinion, influence, radio

Introduction

Election is lifeblood of modern democracy and the frequency, impartiality and openness of such elections are central to the political stability of any society. It serves as the medium of recruiting credible leaders by the populace into various political offices to pilot the affairs of the state. Going by this global requirement, African states have since taken to the path of democratization with diverse degrees of victories. Nigeria incorporated this global demand on May 29, 1999 after many spans of military authoritarianism thereby launching the nation's Fourth Republic. Iyayi (2004) purport that an election is a formal decision-making process by which the populace chooses individuals they deem best to hold public offices; however, some of these individuals in most cases are imposed on the citizen. According to Dye (2001), election is a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies, thus constitutes the core to participation in a democracy and the way of giving legitimacy to government.

The political and cultural impact of media is obvious in any election; this is because the media is the life wire of any nation. According to Edegoh and Asemah (2014), besides media being used to inform, entertain and sensitize about happening in the society it is also employed in national campaigns like HIV/AIDS awareness, cancer awareness campaigns, drug abuse, child trafficking, female genital mutilation, traffic codes and population census, the media are also used by politicians and support groups, it is also used business men to project and sell their ideas/goods. For example, during the 2011 to 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), used the media as great deal for campaign. The essence of using the media for campaign is that, it is believed that mass media are persuasive in nature; they can be used to convince the audience to accept a particular idea/candidate whether from the government or individuals.

Prior to the 2023 Presidential election, Aborisade (2022) foreseeing the relevance of the media said that it will have an imperative role to play in the 2023 general election in particular and in general, in the country's development. This goes on to establish the instrumentality and importance in determining the outcome of the 2023 Presidential election. The existence of a practical media is central to the survival of any electoral system and in turn, to any democracy in the world. This is because there would be no credible election without credible media that stimulates transparency, advocacy and accountability.

The media has been used by nations, organizations, and people all around the world to attract voters' attention and increase public political engagement (Erubami, 2020). The media has also been used to coordinate some of the most successful social media campaigns against perceived failures by governments and candidates of different political parties in addition to their general effectiveness for electioneering campaigns. Access to information is the heart of any democracy from two different perspectives. One is that it ensures that citizens/voters make responsible, and informed choices especially when they are called upon rather than act ignorantly. Another is that information serves a 'checking function', by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the desires of those who elected them (United States Agency for International Development, 1999).

The mass media serves important purposes for the survival of any democracy in a society. It educates the electorate in making a guided decision before and during election; and sensitizes voters on the manner of running government. In view of this, the media performs pre-election, election, and post-election duties.

Furthermore, not only do the media provide information about political affiliations, candidates and their party manifesto, it also provides a platform through which voters across cultural divides can relate, interact with themselves on issues about these candidates and also uses its sites to encourage political involvement by uniting like-minded people.

Statement of the Problem

The media play a vital role in shaping public opinion and influencing the outcome of election through information dissemination, sensitization and campaigns/awareness programs, etc. These messages are geared towards molding and shaping the minds and decision of the citizens in choosing their preferred candidates. To this end, mainstream media like television, radio newspaper, as well as social media like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, X, etc. were used by the presidential aspirants of all the political parties to a large extent in communicating with the citizens in a modified, responsive, and dialogue-based manner.

Prior to the 2023 presidential election, candidates and supporters of all the political parties were involved in media attacks and counters attacks. The mainstream media and the social media platforms were agog with propaganda, name calling, lies, etc. aimed at discrediting the presidential aspirants of the political parties at their strong hold. The supporters of the major political parties in Nigeria including All Progressive Congress (APC), Labour Party (LP), and People Democratic Party (PDP) were very vibrant and loud in making statement, taking stands and resolving to support a particular candidate against the other on the various media platforms. These accusations and counter accusations informed media coverage of the 2023 Presidential election that generated controversies, divided opinions and protest within and outside the shores of Nigeria.

It is expected that media coverage of these events played an imperative role in influencing public opinion and shaping political discourse of Port Harcourt residents. However, despite the pivotal role of the media in shaping public opinion and educating the resident about political events, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how Port Harcourt residents perceive and engage with media coverage of the 2023 presidential election. The gap in knowledge hinders the ability to assess the impact of the media coverage on democratic process and formation of informed electoral election among Port Harcourt residents. Thus, there is a need to investigate the opinion and perspective of Port Harcourt residents regarding media coverage of 2023 presidential election to address potential biases, misinformation and influence on voting intentions. It is against this backdrop that the researcher sought to embark on this research.

Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. assess the role of both mainstream and social media in shaping political discourse and public opinion in port Harcourt during the election;

2. determine the extent to which media coverage influenced voter participation and political knowledge;
3. provide recommendation for improving media coverage of elections to support a more informed and democratic electorate in future Nigeria elections.

Research Questions

1. What role did the mainstream and social media play in shaping the political views of Port Harcourt residents during the election?
2. To what extent did media coverage influence the political knowledge and voter participation of Port Harcourt residents during 2023 presidential election?
3. How can the media improve its election coverage to foster informed political engagement among Port Harcourt residents in future elections?

Vale's Persuasion Theory

Vale's Persuasion Theory was jointly propounded by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in 1986, a mass communication theory that deals with messages aimed at subtly changing the attitudes of receivers. The theory posits that information is provided to influence the receiver's behavior. The media serves as the one of the many alternatives in educating, entertaining, sensitizing, informing/misinforming the residents to make a decision and also cajoling them to see things from one perspective.

The concept of persuasion originated with studies in the 1940s and 1950s aimed at defining the optimal persuasive effectiveness of propaganda. Researches on persuasion theory turned their focus to the audiences and the content of messages. Political campaigns are persuasive in nature aimed at manipulating the mind of the electorates and it tends to influence the voters' choice of candidates. The media attacks and counter attacks, name calling, propagandas and lies that besiege the 2023 presidential election campaigns was aimed at discrediting a particular and painting another candidate in good light. However, messages are successful only if they embed the same opinions of the receivers. Therefore, the focus of any campaign must be on individual psychological factors.

Attempting to change people's values or create new ones (thus changing culture) has proven to be highly ineffective. Those who do not take part in media communications are less likely to be persuaded. In other words, electorates who do not take part in media political campaigns are less likely to be influenced on their choice of candidate. Persuasive messages are able to stimulate changes in attitude that in turn modify behavior of the receivers.

The theory helps us understand the how messages are geared towards modifying the decisions and opinions of the people with campaigns messages, it also transforms the mind of the electorates and enable them gain more knowledge with voting proceedings and the aspirants. Though sometimes the messages are manipulative, the theory guide voters to make inform and sound decisions. These decisions are witness during balloting, discussion, argument and communication. The theory avails voters with freedom, the knowledge of analyzing campaign promises and become involve themselves. Voting involves electorates thinking sensibly about who to vote for without any pressure or external influence that could cloud their decisions.

Literature Review

Election holds a central place in a democratic government to the extent that any problem associated with the electoral process has direct impact on the political system. This makes free and fair elections which are unhampered by violence and terrorization central to functional democracy (Oni, Chidozie & Agbude, 2013). According to Simfukwe (1997) elections is defined as the democratic methods used by citizens to choose their leaders by casting votes. Banerjee (2007) defines elections as sacred expressions of citizenship. It provides a crucial opportunity for the citizen's political participation and representation. Princeton (2005) holds that whatever else is essential to make democracy effective and sustainable, elections are the lifeblood of the structure, the endless affirmation of legitimacy for its leaders and the oath that links the leaders with the public. Elections have an impression on persons only in a democratic setting, because they lead to choose decision makers by the mainstream of citizens.

Elections are highly organized channels of popular expression (Aderibigbe, 2006). This implied that it is only through the system of elections that the citizens express their wishes. Uwagboe (2009) asserts that elections are the medium by which the masses choose and exercise some degree of power over their representatives. It is an official decision-making procedure by which a population selects an individual to hold public office. Balloting in any elections is one of several potential forms of meaningful participation. To make sensible choices, however, the people must be aware of an elections purpose, their polling rights and responsibilities, the dates and procedures, the range of electoral options, and they must know how to vote (National Democratic Institute, 1999). According to Ejeba (2012) the major reasons of elections are to: Ensure that voters freely select those who will represent them; enable citizens to make choices among the parties, candidates' and agendas; ensure that elected officials are held responsible to the people; promote citizens sense of belonging in government; indorse public confidence, trust and care for government and its plans; and provide the mechanism for communal efforts towards the growth and expansion of the country.

According to Egbulefu and Nwaobol (2023), an election is a formal process through which individuals, typically citizens of a country or members of an organization, choose their representatives or leaders. It is a fundamental aspect of democratic systems and provides a means for people to participate in the decision-making process and have a say in the governance of their society (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). According to Mackenzie (1968), elections are "ritual of choices and that their binding character are derived from the participation of the individual as a chooser in a social act which offers legitimate authority in the person chosen". Here Mackenzie recognizes the importance of elections as legitimizing the power of elected individuals. It also enables the citizens to participate in the political affairs in their respective polities by exercising their franchise rights to choose candidates of their choice. One of the possible shortcomings of this definition was that, it failed to acknowledge the tendency at which elections can be marred by irregularities which consequently usurp the power of the individual voters and thus create questions on the legitimacy of elected office holder.

Election is defined by Osumah and Aghemelo (2010) as a process through which the people choose their leaders and indicate their policies and programme preference and consequently invest a government with authority to rule. Election is perceived as one of the means by which a society may organize itself and make specified formal decisions, adding that where voting is free, it acts simultaneously as a system for making certain decisions regarding the power relations in a society, and a method for seeking political obedience with a minimum of sacrifice of the individual's freedom. Eya (2003) however, sees election as the selection of a person or persons for office as by ballot and making choice as between alternatives. Ozor (2009) succinctly gives a more encompassing and comprehensive definition of election when he notes that the term connotes the procedure through which qualified adult voters elect their politically preferred representatives to parliament legislature of a county (or any other public) for the purpose of forming and running the government of the country. Thus, Osumah and Aghemelo (2010) elucidate what the basic objective of election is, which is to select the official decision makers who are supposed to represent citizens-interest. Elections, according to him extend and enhance the amount of popular participation in the political system.

Election is an imperative element in the full satisfaction of a wide range of human rights which influence on the rule of law, and its success relying on the legitimacy of institutional frameworks. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of Government, this will be expressed in the episodic and sincere elections which shall be the Universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures (United Nations, 1948). The Declaration assets to the people the opportunity and right to change their minds and reconsider their choice of leaders at periodic elections that are prescribed and an avenue to express their wish and determine the structure of government.

Election is one of the key pillars of democracy. It is the means of translating the critical element of equality of citizens in democratic societies into relating through 'one person, one vote', in the constitution of the elective offices of the state. However, this is so only, if elections are free, fair and credible (Alemika, 2011). Democracy as a form of government thrives when elections are predictably regular, credible and the outcomes are acceptable to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, both local and international. An election is a process that is central to states' emerging from transitional democracy and attempting to consolidate democracy. The nexus between electoral process and democratic consolidation indicates the extent to which the election process is free and fair (Huntington, 1991). The measure of a free election is when the process is free of any form of inhibitions and contradictions. The role of the judiciary in the electoral process is generally acknowledged as being crucial, perhaps even more so when electoral petitions must be considered. Democratic governance is an electoral contract between the governors and the governed through free and fair elections because qualified citizens in democratic societies have the constitutional right to elect who leads them. The electorates can also negotiate the terms of governance with political candidates by the choice of who they vote for or against (Ifukor, 2010). Clapham (1993) posits that democracy is a process that requires consensus building among all stakeholders. It involves an agreement over the management of political competition, including competition to hold the major offices in a nation, by means short of escalated violence, save in very limited and containable circumstances. It calls for accountability of

rulers to the governed according to procedures which are broadly accepted by those rulers, and which can be enforced on them should they dissent. Elections in post-independence Nigeria have been characterized by fraud and the subversion of the sovereign will of the people.

This, perhaps, has to do with the character of the state, or what most scholars describe as the politics of primitive wealth accumulation in Africa. Corroborating this fact, Luqman (2009) observed that the history of elections in Nigeria's efforts at democratization has been a checkered one. Since independence, electoral conduct in the nation's democratization efforts has been an exercise in futility. This is due to the fact, that conduct of elections in the nation's political history has been marred by fraudulent practices, corruption, misinformation, propaganda and violence. It is therefore, little surprise that past efforts at democratization have collapsed on the altar of perverted elections and electoral process. So bad was the situation, that election period has come to be associated with violence and politically motivated crises. That politics has turned to money making venture has re-enforced the notion of election as a contest that is meant to be won at whatever cost possible. This has turned electoral conducts in Nigeria to a war-like process (Odoziobodo, 2015). Be that as it may, Luqman (2005), further remarks that while a great deal of the problems confronting elections and electoral process in the nation's democratic history can be linked to behavioural and attitudinal dispositions of the political elite, a substantial portion of the blame must be placed on the door step of institutions that have been saddled with the responsibility of conducting elections in Nigeria.

Experiences have shown that rather than being independent of the executive arm of government and maintaining a non-partisan stand, past electoral commissions in Nigeria's political history were indeed tied to the apron strings of the incumbent executive. Rather than being independent of the executive arm of government, transparent in its dealing, impartial in the discharge of its functions, accountable and responsive to the stakeholders involved in the process, electoral commissions in Nigeria have exhibited the opposite of all these virtues. A cursory look at all the election management bodies Nigeria has had from 1959 to date reveals a disturbing degree of partiality and gross incompetence in the discharge of those sacred duties they were established to perform for Nigeria. In the opinion of Luqman (2009), their inability to effectively manage the conduct and administration of elections and electoral process has had deleterious effects on the nation's efforts at instituting credible and virile democratic system. The most glaring of such effects was the truncation of the democratic process through military intervention in the nation's politics (Odoziobodo, 2015). It is important to note that as at the time of conducting the 2023 general election get closer, ten general elections had already been conducted in Nigeria since political independence in 1960. These included 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. Of this number, the military conducted the 1979, 1993, and 1999 transition elections as the country transited from military to civilian governments. On the other hand, the 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 as well as the 2019 general elections were organized by civilian governments as transition from one civilian administration to another.

According to Oronsaye (2008), elections, in Nigeria suffered credibility problems. Some of the setbacks can be attributed to poor media coverage of the election, propaganda, attack, etc. In the same vein, the different electoral commissions including the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), National Electoral Commission (NEC), National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have been accused of being partisan and pandering to the whims and machinations of the government in power. Several election-monitoring groups, both domestic and international, including the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Yiaga Africa, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa, IFRA-Nigeria had adjudged the 2023 elections as the worst election ever conducted in the history of Nigeria since independence. This observation was occasioned by the poor preparation and execution of the election by INEC leading to disputed results in virtually all elections held for various political offices in 2023. INEC introduced new technologies to improve administration of the 2023 polls, including Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV).

The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IREV online portal. Publishing polling unit-level results through IREV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. It is a new innovation to ascertain a credible election, but the question is how neutral, objective, and innovative the operators are. It is incumbent on the media to sensitize every citizen about the proceedings and bring what is happening to the awareness of the people to guide them make a decision.

Electioneering is the process of asking for people's votes prior to an election. It involves managing political parties, electoral umpires, the electorate, and the candidates. It is a process of communicating, responding, and determining the political future of states. Political campaign forms part of the electioneering process. It is an opportunity for candidates to sell themselves to the electorate using both interpersonal and mediated communication systems. Electoral campaigns offer platforms for political policy articulation and debates that enable the electorate to decide on objective information, which economic and political policies they want the government to adopt.

Various experiences with competitive electoral politics in Nigeria have brought the worst in political thuggery and brigandage, unmediated and unrestrained violence. Meanwhile, Akintude (2007) reports that electoral malpractices have been the bane of party politics in Nigeria, and are usually, the greatest challenge most politicians seeking elective office face. They spend more time seeking for ways to counter the rough electoral plans of their opponents than they do in actually campaigning for votes. Most painful is the fact that when an election is rigged, the choices of the citizens are invariably annulled and the government that emerges cannot represent, protect, and affect the interest and aspirations of the people. A government that takes over power through fraudulent electoral processes cannot claim to be democratic or legitimate.

The essence of media role during elections is underscored by the fact the citizens depend on the media to help them define issues, sort out complexities and participate meaningfully in democratic process as informed participants (Ciboh, 2010). It is in the light of this that McNair (2000) averred that:

any study of democracy in contemporary conditions is therefore also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues; of how they facilitate the efforts of politicians to persuade their electorates of the correctness of policies and programmes; of how they themselves (i.e., editorial staff, management and proprietors) influence the political process and shape public opinion (p.1).

In view of the role the media plays before, during and after elections, cross scrutiny of the function and effects is needed to keep the media on the right track. Nichols and McChesney (2013) insist that in a modern society with increasingly sophisticated communications, credible journalism is a necessary precondition for effective elections and for self-government. What determines the quality of a press system during elections is how it prepares voters for elections.

Methodology

The population comprised 1,085,860 voters that reside in Obio Akpor Local Government Area (LGA) and Port Harcourt City Local Government Area (PHALGA) which constitutes Port Harcourt metropolis, and 131 media professionals from three selected radio station in Port Harcourt which are Nigeria Info FM, WAZOBIA FM and Rhythm FM. The sample for the study was calculated using Taro Yamane formula sample size determination formula to be 400. For the second stream, two media representatives from the Programming Department of each of the radio stations making a total of six respondents, were purposively selected for interview for the study. The multi-stage cluster sampling was used to identify the voters from the population. In the first stage, Obio Akpor LGA was divided into 17 electoral wards, out of which the researcher randomly selected Rumuokoro, Rumueme and Rumuolumeni. PHALGA was divided into 20 electoral wards out of these, the researcher randomly selected Port Harcourt Township, Abuloma and Elekahia. For the second stage, two streets from each of the wards were purposively selected. The criteria for selection were that the selected streets are the busiest in the area. In the third stage, the researcher used the systematic sampling technique to select the compounds where the questionnaires were administered. This was done using the three-step skip interval method. Data were elicited from respondents using structured questionnaire and interview guide. Reliability was established after a test-retest method using Cronbach Alpha coefficient value as 0.82. Data were presented and analyzed using weighted mean score. Data from the interviews conducted were thematically analyzed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Role of mainstream and social media in shaping political discourse and public opinion

No	Question	SA	A	D	SD	Total	WMS	Decision
1	Mainstream media was instrumental in building narratives that shaped my perception of 2023 presidential election	189	134	25	39	387	3.3	Agree
2	Social media platforms were instrumental in shaping public discussion about the 2023 presidential election	205	114	39	29	387	3.3	Agree

Source: Researcher’s field survey, 2025

On Table 1, with a weighted mean score of 3.3 in both variables, it shows that mainstream and social media were instrumental in shaping political discourse and public opinion.

Table 2: Extent to which media coverage influenced voter participation and political knowledge

No.	Question	SA	A	D	SD	Total	WMS	Decision
1	Media coverage influenced respondents’ knowledge of electoral schedules and proceedings	203	95	66	23	387	3.2	Agree
2	Media coverage influenced respondents’ knowledge on how to vote during election	217	98	52	20	387	3.3	Agree
3	Media coverage influenced respondents’ willingness to vote during the poll	45	76	98	168	387	2.9	Disagree
4	Media coverage influenced respondents’ knowledge of the electoral candidate and their manifestoes	173	110	68	36	387	3.0	Agree
5	Media coverage of the 2023 presidential election shaped respondents’ opinion for public discourses about the elections	207	89	67	24	387	3.2	Agree
6	Media coverage of the 2023 election was responsible for high voter turnout during the 2023 presidential elections	21	51	103	212	387	1.6	Disagree

Source: Researcher’s field survey, 2025

On Table 2, with a weighted mean score of 3.3, it is agreed that media coverage influenced respondents' knowledge on how to vote during election. However, with a weighted mean score of 1.6, it is disagreed that media coverage of the 2023 election was responsible for high voter turnout during the 2023 presidential elections.

Table 3: Suggestions on improving media coverage of election for more informed and democratic electorate in Nigeria

No.	Suggestion	Total	Frequency	Percentage
1	Exhibit cultural and social sensitivity	387	236	61
2	Organize debates forums	387	211	54.5
3	Amplify critical local perspectives	387	302	78
4	Report on the integrity of the electoral process and advocate for fair practices	387	279	72.1
5	Conduct electoral literacy campaigns	387	201	51.9
6	Objectivity and independence of the media	387	297	76.7

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2025

Table 3 show the suggestions on improving media coverage of election for more informed and democratic electorate in Nigeria. Majority of the respondents constituting 78% suggested amplify critical local perspectives, this was followed by 76.7% of the respondents that suggested objectivity and independence of the media.

Presentation of Interview Data

Interview question 1: Which media platform had the most influence in shaping public opinion?

Interviewee 1 said that both media are instrumental in shaping public opinion. However, the most credible is the mainstream media. Interviewee 3 said that both mainstream media and social media shape public opinion but social media creates vulnerabilities for manipulation and division. Interviewee 5 said that the mass media is more instrumental in disseminating information that can help the citizens to make informed decision.

Responses from the interviewees show that both the mainstream media and the social media platforms are instrumental in shaping public opinion. However, the most credible is the mainstream media, while there may be misinformation and division attributed to the social media platforms.

Interview question 2: In your opinion did the social media positively or negatively influenced public opinion and discourses about the 2023 presidential election?

The responses for the Interviewees indicate that the social media influenced public opinion and discourses about the 2023 presidential election both positively and negatively.

Interviewee 2 said that the nature of the social media allows for the perpetration of misinformation and disinformation. Interviewee 4 said that social media is important in influencing public opinion and discourses during elections is tremendous, however, it has

the problem of spreading false stories, rumors, and propaganda which can sometimes incite violence.

Responses show that social media influenced public opinion and discourses about the 2023 presidential election both positively and negatively. Social media spreads information fast and wide; it provides an avenue for citizens to share information and voice opinions. It also allows politicians to connect directly with voters. However, it poses a risk in spreading misinformation, propaganda, verbal attacks, name calling, etc.

Interview question 3: How does media coverage impact on public opinion and public discourses?

Responses show that the media plays a major role in facilitating public opinion and public discourses through the reporting process. Interviewee 1 said that the media facilitate public understanding of the political landscape and shaping public opinion by providing context, background and expert commentary on political issues. Interviewee 3 stated that it was borne out of the agenda setting role of the media saying that focusing on the trending developments, critical and important issues in the country guides public discourses and opinion formation of the members of the society. Interviewee 5 said that the media informs the people to guide them to make informed conversations and discourses in public settings. Interviewee 6 said that the media in a democracy informs citizens to enable informed decision-making and participation.

Responses indicate that media coverage impact on public opinion and public discourses by providing information that can enable informed decision-making and participation by the citizens.

Interview question 4: Do you think the media was responsible for the large turnout of the residents of Rivers State during the 2023 presidential election?

Responses from the interviewees indicate that the media created a lot of awareness which resulted in large voter turnout in Rivers State during the 2023 presidential election. Interviewee 1 said that the media provided information about the elections like the dates, voter education, how to vote and other relevant information. Interviewee 4 said that during periods of elections, people seek out for authentic and credible information from the media, most especially the radio. Interviewee 3 said that there was a lot of media jingles, advertisement and voter education to sensitize and mobilize the people which was very effective.

Responses indicate that the media played a big role in in the turnout of citizens during the 2023 presidential election. The media was instrumental in informing the citizens about the polls, voter education, sensitization and voter mobilization. The media also provide information on the political parties, candidates and party activities.

Interview question 5: Based on audience feedback, how did Port Harcourt residents perceive media coverage of the election?

The interviewees were of the view that the media stations tried as much as possible to be objective in their reportage. Interviewee 2 said that they gathered diverse perspective which generated a good perception.

Responses indicate that the perception of media coverage of the 2023 presidential election was positive. As the media provided information on issues and election activities.

Interview question 6: How can the media improve election coverage in future Nigerian elections?

To improve on media coverage in future Nigerian elections, Interviewee 1 said that the journalists should encourage discussions about the published agenda of the political parties to avoid losing track of the original purpose. Interviewee 2 said that the media should be objective and independent. Interviewee 4 said that the media should host public debates forums for the political candidates. Interviewee 5 said that the media imbibe public participation and audience-centric reporting.

Responses indicate that to improve on media coverage in future Nigerian elections, the media should be objective, independent, check facts, balance reporting and avoid being as biased or partisan. They should encourage discussions about the political agenda with the politicians, host public debates forums for the political candidates, imbibe public opinion polls, surveys, public participation and audience-centric reporting.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What role did the mainstream and social media play in shaping the political views of Port Harcourt residents during the election?

The mainstream and social media were instrumental in spreading of diverse narratives and alternative perspectives; facilitating public understanding of the political landscape; and shaping public opinion by providing context, background and expert commentary on political issues.

The mainstream media like television, radio, newspapers serve as primary sources of information for many Port Harcourt residents. They report on political events, candidate platforms, and election-related issues, helping the public understand the political landscape. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow for rapid dissemination of information, often bypassing traditional media. They enable real-time updates, live coverage, and direct engagement with political figures. A lot of Nigerians have gained access to the Internet which has ensured more information flow on the Internet.

Table 1 shows that mainstream and social media were instrumental in building narratives, shaping political discourse and public opinion on the 2023 presidential election. Responses from the Interview question 1 shows that both the mainstream media and social media platforms were influential in shaping public opinion. However, the most credible is the mainstream media, while there may be misinformation and division attributed to the social media platforms. Social media influenced public opinion and discourses about the 2023 presidential election both positively and negatively as seen on Interview question 2. The social media spreads information fast and wide; it provides a fast means for citizens to share information and voice opinions, and allows politicians to connect directly with voters. However, it poses a risk in spreading misinformation, propaganda, verbal attacks, name calling, etc. The media plays a major role in facilitating public opinion and public discourses through the reporting process.

Just as the Vale's persuasion theory purports, the media messages can subtly change attitudes of the receivers. Media messages perform the functions of educating, entertaining, sensitizing, informing/misinforming the citizens to make a decision and also cajoling them

to see things from one perspective. This means that the media can go a long way to influence the people in their decision making and attitude in the electioneering process. The mainstream media outlets often set the agenda by highlighting certain issues or candidates. They can influence how the public perceives political events, often through editorial content, interviews, and investigative journalism. Through in-depth reporting and analysis, mainstream media can shape public opinion by providing context, background, and expert commentary on political issues. On the other hand, social media platforms allow for the spread of diverse narratives, including grassroots voices, opposition views, and alternative perspectives. However, they can also amplify misinformation or biased content. Political campaigns leverage social media for targeted advertising, viral campaigns, and direct engagement with voters. It is particularly effective in urban areas with high Internet penetration. Social media can mobilize voters through online petitions, hashtags, and viral challenges. It can also be used to spread misinformation, which can distort voter decisions. Media presentation on elections is important to inform and educate the citizens so that they can make informed decision, and this is necessary for sustaining and maintaining democracy.

Research question 2: To what extent did media coverage influence the political knowledge and voter participation of Port Harcourt residents during 2023 presidential election?

Media coverage during the 2023 presidential elections greatly influenced political knowledge of the citizens about political activities, emerging issues, political parties, candidates and party activities, as well as voter choice during polls. However, some citizens exhibited voter apathy which affected their voter participation in the polls.

The mass media influences knowledge during election periods by acting as the primary information source for most citizens. The media in Nigeria are sources of political information, and they are an avenue for political participation and discussion. Through the mass media, citizens are informed on knowledge about politics and this tend to help them make decisions that reflect their real interests. An informed citizenry is beneficial to democracy. The number of media stories on the 2023 presidential election is correlated with the knowledge of the members of the society. This means that when there is more coverage, it will lead to higher knowledge.

Responses from Interview question 4 showed that the media played a big role in in the turnout of citizens during the 2023 presidential election. The media was instrumental in informing the citizens about the polls, voter education, sensitization and voter mobilization. The media also provide information on the political parties, candidates and party activities. The perception of media coverage of the 2023 presidential election was positive, as the media provided information on issues and election activities. Responses on Table 2 shows that media coverage of the 2023 presidential election influenced respondents' knowledge of electoral schedules and proceedings; their knowledge on how to vote during election; knowledge of the electoral candidate and their manifestoes; as well as shaped their opinion for public discourses about the elections. It was however disagreed that media coverage influenced respondents' willingness to vote during the poll; and that it was responsible for high voter turnout during the 2023 presidential elections. The media outlets influence

citizens not only through the slant of a particular report, but also merely by choosing which to stories to cover. However, individuals are not passive recipients; they can interpret, challenge, and resist media messages. The citizens need information to make educated decisions on their voting choices and it is the journalists' job to give it to them. The media organisations therefore, need to maintain a high level of professionalism, accuracy and impartiality in their coverage.

In line with the tenets of Vale's persuasion theory, the media serves the role of subtly changing the attitudes of receivers. The media are used for political campaigns which are persuasive in nature, sometimes, they are aimed at manipulating the mind of the electorates, influencing their voters' choice of candidates. Media programmes are designed which disseminate messages that inform and sensitize the people, some of the messages are tilted towards influencing the people to vote for particular candidate. The media in this respect is used for educating, entertaining, sensitizing, informing/misinforming the residents to make a decision and also cajoling them to see things from one perspective.

While the media has a role to inform the citizens to boost their political knowledge to be active during elections and influence the citizens in their choice of candidates. The media's influence on citizens' participation in voting activities may not be as effective. This is a situation of voter apathy when people don't care about voting, political life, and are withdraw from civic responsibilities. Seun (2019) attributes voter apathy in Nigeria to several factors. According to him, bad governance discourages people from involving in the electioneering process in the state, governance in Nigeria is characterized by deceit and empty processes, some of the promises are made at campaign grounds, this could lead to mistrust in elected officials.

Research question 3: How can the media improve its election coverage to foster informed political engagement among Port Harcourt residents in future elections?

To improve media coverage of elections for more informed and democratic electorate in Nigeria, the media should amplify critical local perspectives; imbibe objectivity and independence; report on the integrity of the electoral process and advocate for fair practices; exhibit cultural and social sensitivity; organise public debates forums for the political candidates; conduct electoral literacy campaigns; balance reporting; and adopt public participation and audience-centric approach.

The mass media is a vital instrument to foster change in any society, especially in the political terrain. The media is an agent of democracy of which any country aiming at socio-political development needs an efficient and sound media education (Ayeni, 2010). Table 3 shows the suggestions on media coverage of election for more informed and democratic electorate in Nigeria. There are suggestions for the media to amplify critical local perspectives; objectivity and independence of the media; report on the integrity of the electoral process and advocate for fair practices; exhibit cultural and social sensitivity; organise debates forums for the political candidates; and to conduct electoral literacy campaigns. Responses from Interview question 6 indicate that to improve on media coverage in future Nigerian elections, the media should be objective, independent, check

facts, balance reporting and avoid being as biased or partisan. They should encourage discussions about the political agenda with the politicians, host public debates forums for the political candidates, imbibe public opinion polls, surveys, public participation and audience-centric reporting.

The mass media are vital instrument to foster change in any society, especially in the political terrain (Ibagere, 2009). They make messages available to members of the audience far beyond the immediate proximity of message sources, and are very effective for informing, educating and entertaining the audience (Orhewere & Onosu, 2012). In order to improve media reportage during periods of elections, the media organisations should opt for expert opinions, conduct well-meaning interviews with critical stakeholders, and encourage analyses from credible sources. The media should work according to the principles of transparency, accountability, objectivity and independence. They should remain neutral in the face of political pressure or external influence and avoid using language that could be interpreted as biased or partisan. They have the obligation to correct errors or misinformation when they were identified. The media should exhibit cultural and social sensitivity by respecting the diversity of opinions and perspectives within the Nigerian population. They should also provide a platform for victims of electoral violence or abuse to speak out.

The media should embark on electoral literacy campaigns to educate the public on the importance of voting, how to vote, and the role of the electoral commission. The media should collaborate with electoral bodies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to provide accurate and timely information. They should investigate and report on allegations of fraud, corruption, or irregularities in a fair and independent manner.

The media plays a role of influencing public opinion by framing narratives which can affect behavior of the citizens and influence their political choices. Media outlets can use this power to set the agenda by highlighting certain issues and facilitating the spread of diverse narratives, grassroots voices, opposition views, and alternative perspectives.

Conclusion and recommendations

Media coverage during the 2023 presidential elections greatly influenced political knowledge of the citizens about political activities, emerging issues, political parties, candidates and party activities, as well as voter choice during polls. The mass media in Nigeria play a vital role in election by keeping the public and citizens informed about political candidates contesting for positions and events in the political sphere. The media does not only cover current events and makes them known to the public and citizens, they also analyze reports, contextualize them, and predicts what will happen as a result of decisions that have been made. They also warn society of any imminent danger in the process of electing its leaders. The mass media is therefore crucial to the Nigeria's democratic, political and electoral processes.

The study recommends that mainstream media organizations should create more social media platforms for their news stories since virtually everyone sources news stories on social media platforms. This would help increase access to the information and boost the ratings of such stories on the social media platforms. Also, media organizations should analyze parties' press releases and statements, scrutinize campaign strategies, dissect political advertising, stunts and tricks as well as expose approximation, falsification and distortion to better enlighten the citizens so as to influence their political knowledge and guide them in selecting their preferred candidates during elections. Also, reporters and programme presenters should avoid becoming megaphones or stenographers of political candidates talk. They should act as umpire and steward of the electoral race, covering all issues independently from party positions.

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