



PRESS COVERAGE OF 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *VANGUARD* AND *DAILY TRUST* NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

The paper examined newspaper coverage of 2019 General Election in Nigeria. Content analysis was used to examine headline news about the activities of the elections by the two leading political parties - the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The researchers did a comparative analysis using *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers, which were selected through a purposive sampling technique based on national reach and geographical spread. The result showed that *Daily Trust* gave more favourable coverage to the APC while *Vanguard* gave more favourable coverage to the PDP in their individual reporting of the 2019 General Elections of Nigeria. Therefore, the two newspapers covered the activities of the two frontline political parties, but there was no equitable coverage of the parties. Thus, based on the results, the two national newspapers showed biases in their coverage of each of the leading political parties. The biases found in the newspapers' coverage were basically based on the region where they chiefly operate in the country. The study recommended that national newspapers should ensure equitable coverage of all political parties and their candidates during the general elections in Nigeria, regardless of their places of operation. This is in line with the stipulations of the code of practice on electoral matters.

Keywords: Coverage, content analysis, elections, newspapers, political party,



Introduction

Since independence, Nigeria's political space has been an amalgamation of multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual groups that have coexisted peacefully on some values fostered by a vibrant media sector based on professionalism, justice, and equity. In Nigeria, the media is critical to democracy, and elections may not be possible without the mass media reporting on electoral events in a democratic atmosphere. A participatory process in which appropriate information regarding parties, candidates, policies, and the election process itself is made available to the public for them to make educated decisions and choices within the period is what a free and fair election entails (Utomi, 2018).

Elections in Nigeria date back to 1959, which was the first republic. The general election determined which parties would rule in the post-colonial period. The general elections that were held in 1964 were the first to be conducted by Nigerians, this was the second republic. The election was characterized by politics that had become polarized into a competition between two opposing alliances. Nigerian National Alliance was made up of NPC and NNDC; the other was the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). Another election that followed was the 1979 election that brought in the first Executive President of the third republic. Next was 1983, which was truncated by a military coup.

Also, the June 12, 1993, presidential election was adjudged the freest and fairest conducted in Nigeria, but was annulled (Akinwalere, 2019). The 1999 elections welcomed back democracy to Nigeria. The 1999 election succeeded in birthing other elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019, which is the sixth to be conducted since the year 1999, when Nigeria returned to democracy. Nigeria operates a multi-party system where elections are conducted every four years for the presidency and national assembly, as well as the governorship and state houses of assemblies.



Globally, the role of the media in every evolving democratic society like Nigeria is to inculcate and reinforce positive political, cultural and social attitudes among the citizenry and the political stakeholders. In addition, the media maintain a high level of professionalism, accuracy and objectivity in their coverage. The regulatory framework works to help ensure high standards. Meanwhile, provisions such as requiring the media to give fair coverage and equitable access to all parties, help ensure appropriate behaviour before, during and after election (McFaul, 2005). In a report by the “Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters” adopted at its 51st and 52nd sessions in July and October 2002, the Venice Commission distinguished two particular obligations of the authorities in relation to the media coverage of electoral campaigns: on the one hand, to arrange for the candidates and parties to be accorded a sufficiently balanced amount of airtime and advertising space in newspapers within the period. On the other hand, it is to ensure a "neutral attitude" by state authorities, in particular with regard to the election campaign and coverage by the media. The Venice Commission’s Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters also recommended the creation of an effective system of electoral appeals, among other things, to complain about non-compliance with the rules of access to the media. (European Commission for Democracy through Law, 2002).

Equal opportunity should be given between parties and candidates by the newspapers, and it should prompt the state to be impartial towards them and to apply the same law uniformly to all. In particular, the neutrality requirement applies to the electoral campaign and coverage by the media, especially the publicly owned media, as well as to public funding of parties and campaigns. This means that there are two possible interpretations of equality: "strict" equality or "proportional" equality. "Strict" equality means that the political parties are treated without regard to their present strength in parliament or among the electorate. It should apply to the use of public facilities for electioneering purposes, for example, bill posting, postal services and similar, public demonstrations, public meeting rooms.



"Proportional" equality implies that the treatment of political parties is in proportion to the number of votes. Equality of opportunity (strict or proportional) applies in particular to radio and television airtime, public funds and other forms of backing. Certain forms of backing may on the one hand, be submitted to strict equality and on the other hand, proportional equality (Haider, Mcloughlin & Scott, 2011).

The standard practice for election matters stipulates that the political forces should be able to voice their opinions in all the organs of the country's media and that all the political forces be allowed to hold meetings, in conformity with freedom of expression. There are also provisions made to ensure that all parties have access to the media for their election campaign and advertising. Spending by political parties, particularly on advertising are limited in order to guarantee equality of opportunity to political parties and their candidates. To further guarantee an effective system of the electoral law, provisions were made for candidates or parties to sue for fair play and if not satisfied, the electoral law is open to challenge before an appeal body in the Judiciary. This applies in particular to the election results: individual citizens may challenge them on the grounds of irregularities in the voting procedures. It also applies to decisions taken before the elections, especially in connection with compliance with the rules governing the access to media free airtime/space. Parties and candidates should be provided with direct access to the media free of charge, especially in newspapers. No registered contesting parties or candidates should be excluded from receiving free space. The allocation of space is supposed to be on an equal basis or on a proportional basis according to the specific context in which the elections are taking place.

The primary goal of the contestants and parties is to reach the widest possible audience. The media is expected to give direct access in a non-discriminatory basis to parties. Therefore, the process for the allocation of (free) space in the newspaper needs to be fair and transparent. The order of appearance should guarantee non-discrimination against any of the



parties. An independent body that is able to effectively and promptly remedy any violations should monitor compliance with provisions regulating the allocation of free space.

The media's democratic role focuses on the professional journalistic ethic of objectivity. McNair (2003) argued that the media's political reporting is biased and flawed by subjective, as opposed to objective, and partisan reporting. The newspaper's ability to reach the readers is as a result of a whole series of selections of items to be printed, how much space each shall occupy, in what position they should be placed, and what emphasis each should have. There is no objective standard in the process of printing (Lippmann cited in McNair, 2003 p.28). This paper seeks to examine whether there was equitable access to newspaper coverage of political parties in the 2019 general election using two selected newspapers in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the extent of coverage which the two Nigerian newspapers gave to the two major political parties in 2019 general elections in Nigeria.
2. To compare the slant of coverage of the two selected newspapers on the activities of the two leading political parties in 2019 general elections in Nigeria.
3. To ascertain whether there were areas of biases portrayed in the selected newspapers coverage of the activities of each of the two leading political parties in Nigeria's 2019 general elections.
4. To ascertain whether the newspapers gave presence to some particular candidates and political parties during the election without giving others.

Research Questions

1. Was there equitable access to coverage by the two Nigerian newspapers to the two major political parties in 2019 general elections in Nigeria?



2. What was the slant of coverage of the two selected newspapers on the activities of the two leading political parties in 2019 general elections in Nigeria?
3. Were there areas of biases portrayed in the selected newspapers coverage of the activities of each of the two leading political parties in Nigeria's 2019 general elections?
4. Did the newspapers give presence to some particular candidates and political parties during the election without giving others?

Literature Review

Concept and overview of a Political Party

Political party is a concept in a democratic environment and is the only platform to elect people into various public offices. A political party is defined as an organized group of people with at least similar political aims and opinions that seek to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office (Olanrewaju, 2015). In a sustainable and well-functioning democracy, parties tend to be deeply entrenched in specific substructures of the specific society they represent. They can link the governmental institutions to the elements of civil society in a free and fair society, and they are regarded as necessary for any modern democratic system. To ensure equitable coverage, IDEA (2014) asserts that there is a provision that facilitates equitable access for political parties that ensures candidates and political parties are able to relay their party policy messages to voters regardless of the party size, financial ability to buy media space, and geographical location during an election. This is designed to create an equal forum in which campaign messages are heard.

Olanrewaju (2015) states the key roles political parties perform in a democratic society, they include, among others:

1. Aggregating and articulating needs and problems as identified by members and supporters



2. Socializing and educating voters (and citizens) on the functioning of the political and electoral systems
3. Balancing opposing demands and converting them into general policies.
4. Activating and mobilizing citizens to participate in political decisions and transforming their opinions into viable policy options.
5. Channelling public opinion from citizens to the government.

Political parties, according to Olanrewaju (2015), are frequently regarded as institutionalized mediators between civil society and those who make and implement decisions. They make it possible for the demands of their members and supporters to be heard in parliament and in government. The nomination and presentation of candidates in the electoral campaign is the most visible function to the electorate, despite the fact that parties play many important roles and perform numerous duties in a democratic society. A political party is a type of political group that aims to gain and keep political power within a government by engaging in activities such as education outreach and protests. Parties frequently proclaim an ideology or vision that is backed up by a written platform with specified objectives, forging a coalition of diverse interests. Political parties are supported financially.

Similarly, McNair (2003) asserts that a political party is an established aggregate of more or less like-minded individuals who come together within an agreed organizational and ideological structure to pursue common goals. This goal will reflect the party's underline value system, such as the All Progressive Congress (APC) adherence to the change matrix, while their opponent, the People Democratic Party (PDP), believes in power to the people and change the change. Despite the ideological differences that exist between political parties, they share a commitment to constitutional means of advancing their objectives by convincing the audience of their political correctness and putting policies to the test during an



election. The smooth functioning of the parties is dependent on the party's ability to communicate with the people who will vote for them. Parties prefer to use wide coverage, in examples are newspapers, radio, and television, to reach their constituencies. A lot of communication strategies have been developed by political parties, which include techniques of influencing mass behaviour and corporate affairs like marketing.

The Media

The media refer to the printed press, as well as radio and television broadcasts, which are all traditional forms. The new media include online journalism and social media (Olumuji, 2021). The media play indispensable roles as the fourth estate of the realm in a democracy, especially in ensuring full public participation in elections. Such roles include: educating voters in the exercise of their democratic rights, reporting on the development of an election campaign, providing a platform for the political parties and candidates to communicate their message to the electorate; providing a platform for the public to communicate their concerns, opinions, and needs to the parties and candidates; allowing the parties and candidates to deliberate with each other; reporting results and monitoring vote counting, scrutinizing the electoral process itself, in order to evaluate the fairness of the process; providing information that, as far as possible, avoids inflammatory language; helping to prevent election-related violence (IDEA, 2014, Akinwalere, 2019).

In political communication process, the media function in a democratic system both as transmitters of information that originates outside the media organization and as senders of political messages created by journalists. Political actors use the media to communicate messages to the audience in order to ensure political programmes, policy statements, electoral appeals, and pressure group campaigns are communicated effectively and received by the audience. McNair (2003) opines that these political communicators gain access to the media



either through rules of political balance and impartiality or by the media sufficiently ensuring that the messages are reported in a neutral and impartial way about the events around them.

The media play a pivotal role in the functioning of any democratic government. A lot of arguments have been brought forward to support the freedom of the press. The media provide a "free marketplace of ideas." The media are usually assigned a more passive role, serving as a forum where a variety of groups and individuals are given the opportunity to express their views. For the development of any civic society and to overcome the autocratic dominance of political elites, it is important that alternative views have access to the media, regardless of the validity of their claims. There is a disputed argument about the market place of ideas and whether they may actively contribute to the public debate by promoting a particular point of view. In other words, are partisan media a legitimate part of the market place of ideas, or is their role confined to that of a national conveyor of the horizontal diversity of ideas? (Vltmer, 2006).

Corroborating on the role of the media, Akinwalere (2019) posits that the media keeps the citizenry abreast of current events and raises awareness of various issues in any society, an extremely significant impact on public views and ways of thinking. The media are the means through which public opinion is shaped or manipulated. It then becomes imperative for the media to be exceptional in the electoral period. An election constitutes a basic challenge to the media, putting its impartiality and objectivity to the test.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory. Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media – the ability to tell the citizens what issues are important. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential



campaigns in 1968, 1972, and 1976. McCombs and Shaw concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign. The agenda-setting function of the media is observed by many to be the main contribution to the political process (University of Twente, 2004). Citizens are unable to grasp or assimilate anything like the totality of events in the real world, and thus we rely on the media to search and sift reality for the most important happenings.

During election campaigns, for example, McNair (2003) points to the considerable support for the conclusion that the news media are crucial in determining the public importance of issues, at least those issues generally outside the experience of most of the public. Political communication's key objective is to set the public agenda in ways favourable to an organisation's achievement of its goals. Politicians, thus, direct considerable energy to having their preferred agendas accepted and endorsed by the media.

The media, however, are agenda-setters in their own capacity as providers of information, highlighting some issues and neglecting others, for reasons which are often beyond the capacity of politicians to influence significantly. The 2019 electoral agenda was set by the media, rather than the politicians. By contrast, the general election campaign of 2019 witnessed careful and largely successful efforts by all the major parties to set the news agenda from day to day, with APC emphasis on the next level and the People's Democratic Party focus on getting Nigeria working again. It is then difficult to distinguish the agenda-setting activities of the media from those of the politicians in this way, but the distinction is important analytically.

Methodology

The primary aim of this paper was to critically analyse access to media coverage of issues relating to Nigeria's 2019 general elections. Content analysis was used in the study, it is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and



quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Data for the study were retrieved from two Nigerian newspapers, the *Vanguard* and the *Daily Trust*. The newspapers and news stories that were eventually analyzed were chosen using a purposive sampling method. The newspapers were selected because they extensively reported stories about the 2019 general election and, because of their geographical spread, they are national newspapers. Only political stories about two major political parties - the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) during Nigeria’s 2019 general elections were selected for analysis. The parties were chosen because they were dominant political parties during the elections and participated in the presidential media debate that was organized. Only the electioneering issues published between February and March of 2019 were selected. This period was the peak of the election campaigns and the election itself. The selected stories were not beyond the election dates because the outcome of the elections could influence the editorial postures of the newspapers in their coverage of the political parties.

Result and Discussions

In the data analysis, three content categories were selected for the result of the study of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Table 1 attempts to ascertain if stories and reports were focused mainly on a political party or a combination of the major political parties. Since only two major political parties (APC and PDP) were reported by the two newspapers, their contents were considered to examine the equitable access that was given to each political party.

Table 1: Access/Equity

	APC	PDP	APC/PDP	Others	Total
<i>Vanguard</i>	5	10	5	0	20
<i>Daily Trust</i>	9	7	9	1	26

The result of *Vanguard* in table 1 shows that APC had five news stories, PDP had ten news stories, while a combination of the two newspapers had five news stories. The result from the



Daily Trust shows that APC had nine news stories, PDP had seven news stories, while both parties shared nine stories that were fairly equitable. The result shows that *Vanguard* gave more access to the PDP and the *Daily Trust* gave more access to the APC in the 2019 general election in Nigeria using the front pages of the selected newspapers.

Table 2: Placement/Space

	Full Size	Half	Quarter	Others	Total
<i>Vanguard</i>					
APC	0	1	4	6	11
PDP	0	2	3	9	14
<i>Daily Trust</i>					
APC	0	0	9	6	15
PDP	0	0	7	8	15

The placement of stories of the political parties during the 2019 general elections in Table 2 shows that none of the parties occupied the full front page. On the front page of *Vanguard*, the All Progressive Congress (APC) had one story that covered half a page, four were in quarters, and six were of other sizes of between 10” x 6 and 4” x 2, while the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) had two half page stories, three quarter, and nine other sizes of between 10” x 6 and 4” x 2 on the front page of *Vanguard*. It is possible to conclude that *Vanguard* gave PDP more space than APC.

The *Daily Trust* report in size access shows that none of the parties occupied the entire full front page or half page. However, the All Progressive Congress (APC) had nine and six, quarter and other sizes of between 10” x 6 and 4” x 2 of the front pages. The People’s Democratic Party (PDP) had seven quarter-page ads and eight other sizes of between 10” x 6 and 4” x 2. This shows that the *Daily Trust* gave more space to the APC than the PDP.



Table 3: Preferences of News Story Reported

	Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral	Total
<i>Vanguard</i>				
APC	2	5	2	9
PDP	8	2	2	12
<i>Daily Trust</i>				
APC	6	2	8	10
PDP	4	4	9	17

Table 3 shows (un)favourable news stories reported about the political parties in the 2019 general elections. The result shows that APC had two favourable stories in *Vanguard* and five unfavourable reports. PDP had eight favourable and two unfavourable reports in the *Vanguard*. Similarly, *Daily Trust* had six favourable reports for APC and two unfavourable. On the other hand, PDP had four reports that were favourable and unfavourable each. It can be concluded that *Vanguard* reported more stories in favour of PDP while *Daily Trust* carried more stories in favour of APC in the 2019 general elections.

This study has shown that the media played an important role in inculcating and reinforcing political attitudes among the citizenry through the reportage of political parties and candidates, as presented in Table 1, *Vanguard* 20 stories and *Daily Trust* 26 stories. Although the newspapers did not ensure equitable access, APC and PDP were given coverage in the *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers. The newspaper did not accord a sufficient amount of space within the period under review as stipulated by the Venice Commission code of practice in electoral matters and did not ensure neutrality in regards to the election coverage by the newspapers. The finding opposes the position of IDEA (2014), which postulates a provision that facilitates equitable access for political parties and candidates.



The study found that the PDP and their candidates were given more prominence in the coverage of the general election by placing the PDP stories on the front and back pages of *Vanguard* newspaper, while the *Daily Trust* covered more stories on the APC and their candidates by placing them on the front and back pages of the newspaper.

Based on the results presented in Table 3, APC and political candidates were given more favourable reportage in the *Daily Trust* newspaper than other political parties. The PDP was rather more favoured in the stories carried in *Vanguard newspaper*. This shows how partisan the newspapers' coverage was in the general election. This corroborates the work of McNair (2003), which narrates how the media's political reporting is biased, subjective, and partisan in its coverage of election stories. This unequal access to traditional newspaper media has forced Nigerian politicians to rely on social media (Banda, 2010; Murphy & Auter, 2012; Olumuji & Ogba, 2018; Olumuji, 2021), which now dictates the pace of political activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examined the prominence and favourable newspaper coverage of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. However, the results show that the APC was given more access by the *Daily Trust*, while the PDP was given more favourable reportage by *Vanguard* newspaper. This uneven access to media has led to more use of social media for political activities. It may be cheaper with broader coverage, and while some practitioners are adjusting the goalpost to accommodate their own interests, Nigerians, like their counterparts around the world, maintain that "free press" is not a privilege but a necessity in the decision a journalist makes when gathering, organizing, and presenting the news requires value judgments (McFaul, 2005). These decisions could have consequences that are direct and indirect, intended and unintended, short-term and long-term. This may influence people's opinions on a political issue. The media's inability to break away from dependence on some



personalities has lost the philosophy to challenge the nation's economic logic and the capacity to pursue the theory of government in order to effectively inform the public.

Based on the findings of this study, the study recommends that national newspapers should ensure equitable coverage of all political parties and their candidates during the general elections in Nigeria, regardless of their places of operation as stipulated by the code of practices on electoral matters even when those other parties do not engage in many activities. Also, newspapers should allot sufficient space for political parties and their candidates to sell their manifestos to the voting public. The media should play an unbiased role in the democratic process of Nigeria's election by ensuring transparency, balanced reportage, providing candidates a forum in which they can share their varied visions with the citizenry, and timely reporting of results released in order to ensure a more viable electoral process in Nigeria.

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