

Mass Media and Social Mobilization of the Electorates towards Free and Fair Elections in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to ascertain the role of the mass media in the social mobilization of the electorates towards free and fair elections in Nigeria. The survey research method is used for the study. Data were sourced by means of structured questionnaire from 100 respondents drawn from four quarters in Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State. Opinions expressed by the respondents indicate that they are exposed to free and fair election messages in the media and the messages were aimed at mobilizing the electorate to participate actively in the voting process. The study identified specific awareness messages on free and fair election being disseminated in the media and its impact on the electorate. Based on the findings of this work, it is recommended that the messages should be featured in English and local languages when using radio to disseminate the information to ease better understanding.

Keywords: Mass Media, mobilization, electorate, elections.

INTRODUCTION

Most democratic societies are distinguished by their emphasis on citizen participation. The concept of self-government is based on the idea that ordinary people have a right to participate in the affairs of the State. One of the popular means of participation is through voting. Voting is a form of political participation which involves activities intended to influence public policy and leadership. Aside from voting, Patterson (2005) avers that political participation involves other activities such as joining political parties and interest groups, writing to elected officials, demonstrating for political causes, and giving money to political candidates. The election of people into various offices on a periodic basis, according to Ayobolu (2003), is one of the basic features of modern democracy. Appadorai (2002) contends that regular elections enable the people to choose those who will represent them and drop those who are not representing the people's interest. Elections therefore, are expected to be free and fair. In carrying out this exercise, Adegboruwa (2003) asserts that the media, which are expected to be impartial umpire, are by law supposed to be neutral in the coverage of the electoral process.

Mass media are those institutions which use sophisticated technological developments for the communication of ideas, information, entertainment and persuasion to large scale audience which is heterogeneous in nature, whether this be by means of newspapers, radio, television, magazines, books, advertising billboards, or whatever.

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Mobilization, according to Nyirenda (1995) is aimed at mustering a national support for a successful programme, and election is one of such programmes. Through mobilization, the behaviour of the people is altered positively towards participation in a free and fair election. Electorate is the whole body of eligible voters. Eligibility for voting in national elections varies from country to country. In Nigeria, only those who have attained the age of 18 and above are eligible to register and vote. According to Nnadozie (2007), election represents the modern and universally accepted process through which individuals are greatly and methodically chosen to represent a body or community in government (Egwemi, 2013).

A free and fair election is central to the survival of any democratic dispensation. If elections lack the parameters for general acceptability, they become disputed. Once elections are disputed, the government in power becomes discredited and this will lead to loss of confidence by the electorate. A fundamental axiom of democracy is that citizens must be informed if they are to play an active role in the growth of their country. As Olukotun (2002) posits, information is a crucial resource for informed choice. Free and responsible media are critical sources of information for citizens who want to choose the best leaders for their country and make sound decisions about the issues in their nation. This correlates the statement of Bussiek (1995) that the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development, maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development. Flowing from the above, it is therefore imperative that during elections, voters should know the qualifications, opinions, voting records (where they exist) and personality traits of candidates. Of equal importance is the need for voters to have information about the policies and manifestoes of the respective parties in order to make a clear choice. The strategic importance of the media during elections manifests in two key ways – through their coverage and presentation of news, information, facts, figures, editorials, and other analytical pieces about issues as well as avenues for political advertising (paid advertisements) to raise political consciousness.

The role of the media in mobilizing citizens towards free and fair election has been widely acknowledged. The enlightenment and mobilization of the citizens through the provision of information and education via radio, television, newspapers, magazines, posters and billboards is essential to efforts to create awareness of free and fair election and its relation to socio-political development. However, in spite of the awareness and sensitization campaign carried out by the media to mobilize the people during election, the electorates still show apathy towards issues bordering on free and fair election. It is against this backdrop that this study was designed. The general objective of the study is to determine the role of the mass media in the social mobilization of the electorates towards free and fair elections in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- i To find out if the people are exposed to free and fair election awareness messages being disseminated through the mass media.
- ii To identify the specific awareness messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the mass media.
- iii To determine the impact of the free and fair election awareness messages on the people.

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study.

- i Are the people exposed to free and fair election awareness messages being disseminated through the mass media?
- ii Are there specific awareness messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the mass media?
- iii What is the impact of the free and fair election awareness messages on the people?

Election is an important aspect of the electoral process. As the purveyor of information and education, the mass media have an important role to play in mobilizing the electorate to participate actively in the voting process. The level of participation of the electorate in the voting process would depend on how effective the media have been able to perform this important function. Therefore, any research carried out in this area would be considered worthwhile. The findings and recommendations of the study will provide a framework for government, media owners and other stakeholders in the democratic process to effectively mobilize the people towards free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on development media theory. The theory was propounded by Dennis McQuail in 1987. The main thrust of the theory is that the mass media have a role to play in facilitating the process of development in developing countries. The theory assumes that the mass media and communication can positively influence the development process. Therefore, the development media theory advocates mass media support for the development goals of a country. The theory is of the view that developing nations, government and media should work in concert to ensure that media aid the planned beneficial development of the country (Baran and Davis, 2009). The theory argues that until a nation is well established and its development well underway, media should support and promote national development goals such as free and fair election. The media are to be primarily occupied by providing information to accelerate development. They are to produce contents that meet specific cultural and societal needs. Media in developing countries are to promote their country's development goals such as social and economic development, political stability, cultural development, national integration and to direct a sense of national purpose (Anaeto S. and Anaeto M. 2010). The main principles of the theory as enunciated by McQuail (1987) are:

- i Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with established national policy;
- ii Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society;
- iii Media should give priority in their contents to the national culture and languages;
- iv Media should give priority in news and information that link with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or politically;
- v Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks; and

- vi In the interest of development ends, the State has a right to intervene in or restrict media operation, and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified.

This theory is relevant to this study because development encompasses social, economic and political aspect of the society. And the mobilization of Nigerians towards free and fair election by the media falls under political development. The media, therefore, are under obligation to give priority to such issues to advance the nation's prospects of attaining full political development.

Mass Media and Social Mobilization of the Electorates

Social mobilization is a process that raises awareness and motivates people to demand change of a particular development. It is mostly used by social movements in grassroots groups, governments and political organizations to achieve a particular goal, and in most cases, the process of social mobilization takes place in large gatherings, such as processions, demonstrations, marches and mass meetings. Social mobilization is also used by organization to facilitate change. Social mobilization is used by governments to mobilize national support for goals of national importance. The population is mobilized to participate in election and other activities that require voting through social mobilization. However, political opponents can use social mobilization to overturn the government or force the government to change how it interacts with its citizens (<http://www.ask.com/world-view/social-mobilization-9a02bbfe/843a99>).

During elections, political parties use social mobilization to convince voters to support them. Organizations apply social mobilization to bring together members of institutions, civic organizations, religious groups, community networks and others in a coordinated way to attain specific goals. They bring about changes by facilitating dialogue between different groups with related interests (<http://www.ask.com/world-view/social-mobilization-9a02bbfe/843a99>). The mass media serve as the main channel of communication in modern democratic society. Hasan (2013) posits that, "the population relies on the news media as the main source of information and the basis on which they form their opinions and voting decision. In most societies, the mass media are mainly employed in the mobilization of the citizens for social, political, economic and technological development. The media do this by providing the needed information, direction and guidance to the masses by exposing them to issues of public importance; prepare them towards taking a firm stand on important issues such as election. Nyirenda (1995) opines that, mobilization is aimed at mustering a national support for a successful programme, and one of such programmes is free and fair election. Through mobilization, the behaviour of the people is altered positively towards participation in the election.

Adequate mobilization and enlightenment of the people enable them to participate fully in the political process. At the point of awareness creation, which leads to enlightenment of the electorate, the people's political culture is shaped and redirected for better participation in election. Participation, therefore, is very fundamental to election as non-participation can lead to the failure of the exercise. The mass media provide the platform for the

mobilization of the people for purposeful participation in election. Ucheanya (2003) affirms that the mass media create forum for public debate, help in public opinion formation, and such other functions like mobilization, status conferral and agenda setting. For the citizens to be effectively mobilized for any government programme, there is need for motivation, that is, they should be motivated to participate fully in the programme. The motivation here involves informing the electorate about the benefits to be derived from taking part in election.

METHOD

The survey research method was used to gather data for this study. The main instrument of the survey research method is the questionnaire. According to Kerlinger (2000), survey research is a useful scientific tool to employ when a researcher is interested in the opinion and attitude of people as well as the relationship of the attitudes to respondents' overt behaviour. This study therefore used this research method to elicit information from the respondents. One hundred (100) residents of Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State constituted the sample size. They were purposively selected from four different quarters namely: Ogbe-Onicha (25), Ogbe-Ofu (25), Ogbe-Obu (25), and Agidiase (25). The respondents were located in their homes. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on those who made themselves available. Responses from the questionnaire were collated, tabulated and analyzed using simple percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this work were based on the analysis of the data obtained from the one hundred copies of questionnaire distributed and retrieved. The 100 percent high rate of return was due to the face-to-face method of instrument administration on the respondents adopted by the researcher and his team of research assistants over a period of three weeks. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents as they relate to sex, age and education. Distribution of sex showed that 58% were male while 42% were female. The distribution of age groupings showed that 38% were between 18 and 30 years; 32% were between 31 and 40 years; while 30% were 41 years and above. Respondents' level of education indicated that 52% had secondary education, while 48% possessed tertiary education qualifications.

Exposure to Free and Fair Election Awareness Campaign in the Media:

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they are exposed to free and fair election awareness campaign in the media. Table 2 shows that all the respondents (100%) are exposed to free and fair election awareness campaign messages in the media. Awareness of free and fair election through media channels. Table 3 shows a level of awareness of free and fair election among the respondents and the principal source of free and fair election information for the respondents is Radio (32%) followed by Billboards (20%) and then television and newspaper (15% each). Other channels of information were found to include posters (10%) and magazine (8%).

Specific Awareness Messages on Free and Fair Election being Disseminated through the Media: Table 4 indicates the specific awareness messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the media: vote for candidate of your choice (20%), don't sell your vote, avoid violence (26%), support free and fair election (14%), don't allow yourself to be used as thug (20%) and don't snatch ballot boxes (20%).

Impact of Free and Fair Election Messages on the Electorates

Table 5 shows the impact of free and fair election awareness messages on the electorates (respondents): it makes them to vote only once and for candidate of their choice (52%); it makes them not to sell their vote (22%); and it makes them to shun and resist thuggery (26%).

Findings from the data analyzed revealed the following:

- i The respondents are exposed to free and fair election awareness messages being disseminated through the media.
- ii The principal source of information on free and fair election for the respondents is radio followed by billboards and then television and newspaper.
- iii The respondents identified specific messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the media.
- iv The messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the media have significant impact on the respondents (electorate).

In answer to the research questions posed, the study revealed the following:

- i The people are exposed to free and fair election messages being disseminated through the media.
- ii There are specific messages on free and fair election being disseminated through the media.
- iii The free and fair election messages being disseminated through the media have positive impact on the people.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 100)

Characteristics	Percentage
Sex	
Male	58%
Female	42%
Age	
18-30	38%
31-40	32%
41 and above	30%
Education	
Secondary	52%
Tertiary	48%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

Table 2: Exposure to free and fair election awareness campaign in the media (n = 100)

Response	Percentage
Yes	100%
No	0%
Don't know	0%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

Table 3: Awareness of free and fair election through media channels (n=100)

Media Channels	Percentage
Radio	32%
Television	15%
Newspaper	15%
Magazine	8%
Posters	10%
Billboards	20%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

Table 4: Specific awareness of free and fair election messages being disseminated through media (n=100)

Response	Percentage
Vote for candidate of your choice	20%
Don't sell your vote, avoid violence	26%
Support free and fair election	14%
Don't allow yourself to be used as thug	20%
Don't snatch ballot boxes	20%
Billboards	20%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

Table 5: Impact of free and fair election awareness messages on the electorate (n=100)

Response	Percentage
It makes them to vote only once and for candidate of their choice	52%
It makes them not to sell their vote	22%
It makes them to shun and resist thuggery	26%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is crystal clear from the findings of this study that the mass media have a pivotal role to play in the social mobilization of the electorate towards free and fair election. The information provided by the media on free and fair election creates awareness of that issue among the people. And this in turn motivates the electorate to take active part in the voting process. Based on the findings, the study recommends as follows:

- i. Messages on free and fair election should be aired and published continuously to gain the attention of the electorates.

- ii. The messages should be relayed and published in national and state owned media as well as private owned media to achieve wide publicity.
- iii. The messages should be featured in English and local languages when using radio to disseminate the information to ease better understanding.

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