

Imperative Of Media Policy And Usage By Political Parties In Nigeria

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Abstract: The main thrust of this paper is to determine the expedience of politicians employing certain strategies for getting their messages to people especially the electorate. The paper hypothesizes that no strategy is as effective as the use of the media for the purpose. Anchored on the Selective Perception and Uses and Gratifications Theories, the paper relied on questionnaire and interview as instruments for data gathering for the study. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on three hundred respondents made up of politicians and civil society groups in Nigeria while five mass communication and political science scholars were interviewed to corroborate the response or throw light on them. Findings revealed that whereas it is helpful to diversify the strategies and methods of political communication in a polity, the pervasive nature of the mass media makes them the best harbinger of information to the greatest number of people. The paper therefore recommends that politicians should design and adopt a media policy for their political parties while ensuring that their officials and supporters keep to the philosophy and format of their chosen policy as guiding principles in publicizing their activities.

Keywords: Imperative, Media, Nigeria, Policy, Political Parties

I. INTRODUCTION

The long-standing acknowledged role of the media in society is to inform, educate and entertain the people. It is therefore not unexpected that many people who are conscious of this position would justifiably rely on the media to keep them informed about every societal event, be it political or socio-economic. Indeed, in Nigeria, the nation's constitution (1999) which in its Section 39 provides for freedom of expression including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, underscored the subject by going further in Section 39(2) to explicitly empower the citizens to "own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions." On their part, the organs of the mass media conscious of this mandate bequeathed to them, have over the years taken steps to develop the best way to implement the mandate. They appreciate that it is not enough to just spread information about events to all and sundry; rather, the order, sequence and inter-relatedness of such events or their

segments ought to be professionally collated and aligned so that the events can be meaningful to people. One group that can greatly benefit from the expertise and mandate of the media is the political class.

In fact, media professionals and politicians can be said to have a common interest which is that both are permanently anxious to reach the public with information. But while political parties are essentially embroiled in political communication which is to a large extent limited to the dissemination of information and messages about politics and elections, every event of human interest is of importance to the media. It is also not in dispute that both groups belong to different kinds of organizations and subscribe to different codes of conduct. They also have dissimilar motivations for what they do. While the political activist often perceives the media as a distraction to his own highly rated project, the average journalist sees the politician as a usurper of his own freedom and independence. Again, whereas political parties and their members would prefer that the public is exposed to only information which present them in good light, the media

and their operatives do not bother about whether the information they publicise about any person or group is positive or negative provided the said information is true. The significance of truth as an ethical value of the media is best appreciated against the practice whereby once a piece of information published by the media is accurate; to kill the story is not quite easy just as it is hard to make the journalist liable for defamation on account of such reportage. Conflict could therefore feature prominently in the transactions between the two groups especially whenever a media report derogates from the popularity of a political party or any of its members. But because of their already stated commonality of mission which is reaching the audience with messages, both groups have learnt to build some conflict resolution schemes within their interactions which usually take place at press conferences, briefings, interviews, etc. It is an interaction which is premised on their dependence on one another.

In the handling of transactions between both groups, it can be argued that the media appear better positioned to have an upper hand. This is because among other things, media professionals are better prepared for their assignment through professional training. Indeed, 'Political Reporting' in which journalists are tutored on the intricacies and processes as well as procedures of specialized reportage is a core course of study in mass communications in institutions of higher learning. Thus, when a journalist is appointed as a political correspondent, he is virtually at home with the prescription of Scanlan (2011) that specialized reporters who are expected to be knowledge-driven are to be judged by the breadth of their knowledge and their success at putting across stories from their customary beats. On the other hand, political party management is known to be generally weak especially in developing societies where democracy is not fully institutionalized. African politicians are known to be more interested in forming and running governments than in running their political parties. Yet a good knowledge of the latter is crucial as political parties are the vehicles for getting authorization to form government. In Nigeria, institutions of learning especially research centres like the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, NIPPS, have sought to redress the situation by organizing interactive sessions for politicians on different aspects of party management. Among the crucial areas that have always been in focus is how parties can put the mass media into good use. This is an exciting mandate to which this study seeks to contribute.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are multiple methods and strategies for mobilizing people especially the electorate to patronize a particular political persuasion. They include house to house campaign, community leader's endorsement (*two-step flow*); newspaper, radio and television features such as news, jingles and other programme-types in addition to the latest method of instantaneous dissemination of information worldwide through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter etc. Perhaps out of anxiety if not desperation to win elections at all cost, political parties especially their candidates engage in what may pass for panic publicity using each and every type of the

strategies irrespective of the type of election. Sometimes they deploy inappropriate strategies such as using network channels to publicize a purely local event. At other times, crude methods instead of basic skills in communication are utilized. As one notable Nigerian politician once revealed during a political turmoil in his state, "my mistake for which I ask for understanding stemmed from my belief that election is like a battle and since all is fair in war, I believed that the end justified the means in an election (Uba, 2004, p2).

Methods such as physically over-powering an opponent in place of dialogue are not only undemocratic and unduly costly, they hardly guarantee optimum results and could end up as misuse of resources and undue commercialization of politics. An election is not a battle but a game which is best won through effective communication that can turn voters and political opponents into converts of the philosophy and manifesto of a well-organized political party. Regrettably, many political parties that seek to use the media do not know the media. To perceive the media simply as one organ because of the general classification of the phenomenon into a two-sided entity - print and electronic, poses great difficulty in managing transactions between the media and political parties. Instead, it is crucial to recognize the nature of each medium particularly its operating procedures as well as who constitutes its target audience. For example, whereas press releases and feature articles may satisfy the Print media which do not require motion pictures and sound, they are not suitable for the electronic media. Even within the latter, graphic illustrations which are fundamental in television productions are not needed by radio. Put differently, no one can successfully manage the media without a policy that is broken down into strategies. Thus, one of the aims of this study is to assist politicians and their parties to determine the best media outreach (strategies) that can endear them to the public in general and voters in particular. Two research questions formulated to aid the study are:

- ✓ Why is media policy an imperative for political parties?
- ✓ What media strategy guarantees maximum effect in the publicity of political activities?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Everyone needs the media and as Strom (2002, p1) suggests "everything we know or think about events outside our neighbourhood or circle of acquaintances come to us via our daily newspaper or our weekly news media. They affect not only the way we interpret what we see or hear, they shape our attitude to events and our environment." This is probably why Iwokwagh (2017, p1) asserts that "the mass media are so central to the operations of modern societies that it is inconceivable for those societies to survive without them." It is therefore necessary for organizations, political parties inclusive, to continue to use the media to meet their goals as they have always done since the emergence of the era of modern organs of mass communication

Until very recently, the newspaper was the major modern organ for reaching large audiences. The emergence of the media type which electronically transmits information has since broken the monopoly. In a recent study of the impact of

political advertising on the electorate in Ogun State South west Nigeria, it was revealed that radio was the most effective channel for political mobilization. According to Abati (2016), the study's respondents claimed to have been influenced in their choice of candidates as a result of the credible messages they got through their radio sets. The real attraction of radio is that it is more affordable and available to people in addition to the fact that it operates for longer hours than television in many developing societies. Pate (2013) aptly sums it up with the argument that radio use is prevalent across all major demographic segments.

Other scholars canvass different perspectives. There is the viewpoint that the social media platforms are the best because through them everyone is now free to relate instantaneously with others everywhere as if everyone is now a journalist. As argued by Asemah and Edegoh (2012, p252), thousands of people can be reached with what amounts to a click of the mouse button in which "a properly prepared piece posted to the social networks, for instance, can go viral in a matter of minutes, bringing hundreds, thousands and perhaps, even tens of thousands of people to your site and ultimately, to your message." This prowess notwithstanding, there is doubt if a political party would embrace the social media for its political coverage when it realizes that it can hardly find a source for seeking redress if negative statements about it are attributable to anonymous bloggers of the system. This probably influenced Irekia (2016) to conclude that the transmission of political materials through the media is essentially a television business in which the eloquence and gestures of party representatives are more attractive to the average voter who desires not just to hear but also to see a candidate who is appealing to him for his vote.

The import of these various claims is that using the media to publicize any event especially political activities is an imperative because no one disputes the immense power of the media. Indeed, the belief that the media do function as a very powerful tool is not just a public opinion; it is supported by the "S-R Mechanistic" theory in communication studies which posits that the media can achieve instant success in whatever they determine to do. They can instigate war, just as they can serve as a tool for national integration. Consequently, what is usually called to question is not media power but when, where and how a medium should be put to use. The implication of this is that there ought to be a plan on how to use the media as well as strategies for implementing such a plan. In other words, each user ought to have a media policy- an articulated workplan which covers all the objectives that the entity intends to use the media to achieve. Preferably, it should be in one document covering all relevant areas in an integrated manner with all relevant actors fully educated on all its dimensions. This would ensure uniformity in operations as well as a unity of direction.

When this is related to how political parties should seek to use the media, the point becomes clear that the advantage of a clear-cut and consistent policy is to position a party to speak with one voice and avoid discordant tunes by discouraging unauthorized dissemination of party information. With such an approach it is likely that the public will be kept informed at all times about political events. But care must be taken to ensure that each medium being employed is user-friendly. Thus, it

must recognize the sensibilities of different target groups including non-literate and physically incapacitated voters. There is therefore wisdom in the use of different strategies for different categories, classes and ages of people. Each campaign must take into consideration the indisputable fact that the old and the young, the literate and the non-literate, the urban and rural dwellers do not have the same opportunities, tastes and aspirations. While repeated dissemination of relevant messages is one of the strategies of effective communication, it is important to remember that to convince people to discard habits that they have developed over time could be herculean.

An elite-oriented campaign for instance, is a good strategy but it calls for caution in a developing society like Nigeria where literacy rate has for long been quite low. The implication of this is that for political education to make an impact in such a country, messages must be couched in the language of the people. Otherwise, the use of English which is regarded as the nation's official language may not make a great public enlightenment impact on majority of Nigerians. Grassroots mobilization strategy has to be added to make up for the numerous problems which people seeking information through other organs of mass communication have to encounter. In the area of broadcasting for example, there is the nagging problem of a grossly inadequate public power supply in the country. Many people may therefore not be able to listen to radio or watch television. At the same time, many people are too poor to afford batteries in place of electricity or to buy newspapers.

This clearly shows that there is need for multiple strategies for the implementation of a media policy. There are by far too many disadvantages of keeping to one strategy; the most important being that should the strategy fail, there would be no alternative. This is confirmed by a study of the 2007 elections in Nigeria where events showed that newspapers were more concerned about political crisis than the process of polls. Indeed, Oboh (2015) who studied the disposition of six newspapers found that the papers showed more interest in the activities of the Electoral Commission than those of political parties. This implies that political parties which relied on newspapers for effective publicity during the 2007 general elections may have been in error. If certain political parties took chances then, they certainly can no longer do that now especially with the alarm raised by Aliaghan (2017, p 235) that observable decline in newspaper readership in many countries including Nigeria is threatening the hitherto influence of newspaper on the lives of people. On the other hand, the fear that social media platforms are open to abuse is insufficient for political parties to avoid such global realities which attract the youths that are large in population. A good media policy ought to accommodate all media channels but at varying degrees.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are different communication theories on how to classify the usefulness of the media. For long, attention was drawn to what the media can do to people. While that viewpoint remains valid, it seems to down play another theory

which suggests that media audiences have needs they seek to gratify each time they interact with the media. To meet such objectives, it is the audiences themselves that determine which media they would be exposed to. Under the circumstance, the immense power of the media is only relevant to those who are well disposed to patronize them. Against this backdrop, this study is instructively guided by both the Selective Perception Theory and the Uses and gratifications Theory. It is assumed that the theories are more relevant to this study than any others because the choice of newspaper readers, radio listeners and television viewers as to which newspaper, radio or television they wish to read, listen to and watch respectively may happen before the media content begins to influence their political disposition

The Selective Perception Theory was propounded in 1964 by B. Berelson and G. A. Steiner who described perception as a complex process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world. The lesson which the theory teaches by this clarification is that although mass communicators would want audiences to pay attention to their messages and assimilate their contents, the situation is not always so as people may not necessarily react to media messages as expected or in the same way. Rather attitudes to messages are affected by a selectivity principle which governs the degree of exposure, attention and retention of such messages. Quite often, there is a selective exposure which refers to the tendency for individuals to expose themselves to media messages which tally with their existing attitudes and to avoid those that do not. Consequently, it is from among those to which people expose themselves that they offer selective attention and retention.

It is logical to expect that such selectivity would be premised on the needs such persons seek to gratify as they interact with the media. This is what gave rise to the Uses and Gratifications Theory which was first described in an article by Elihu Katz in 1959 and employed in a research by Blumberg and McQuail in 1969. The theory focuses on the consumers of media messages rather than the message itself. In other words, broadcast audiences are largely responsible for choosing the media that can meet their specified needs. These needs range from; self-awareness, surveillance, social integration, entertainment needs etc. which result from the immediate psychological, social, and physical needs of the audience which often vary (Littlejohn and Foss (2008).

The combined effect of the two theories adopted in this study is that media audiences are not passive receivers of messages but active influencers of the messages and their effects. As actively influencing the effect and the process, media audiences depend on the media for those messages which they selectively attend to, perceive and retain choosing a specific medium rather than a particular content which is useful to them. Whereas the Selective Perception Theory establishes that people select only a medium whose content tallies with their perception of life, the Uses and Gratifications Theory on its part, confirms that the numerous needs of diverse segregation of media audiences must be met by a medium in order for them to have a satisfactory experience with the medium. This explains why some people prefer to watch televised political campaigns instead of relying on other

media. The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is therefore a theory which throws light on why and how people deliberately seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. Any political party which is desirous of a successful media policy ought to take cognizance of the revelations of the two theories. Political parties must learn to look at the nature of a target audience before sending messages to its members

V. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research design with questionnaire as the data gathering instrument. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on a total of three hundred respondents who were divided into two- politicians and civil society activists. The first group which had one hundred and forty respondents was made up of party officers and members of different political parties in Nigeria. The second group with one hundred and sixty respondents consisted of Labour union activists, students, traders, journalists and women. Of the 140 copies of the questionnaire administered on the politicians, 20 could not be retrieved reducing the available figure to 120. All the 160 copies distributed to civil society groups were however successfully retrieved. As a result, data from a total of 280 copies made up of 120 from the politicians and 160 from the civil society groups were analyzed using simple quantification and percentages. For the purposes of illuminating and or corroborating the responses, the study also carried out in-depth interviews with five scholars in the fields of Mass Communication and Political Science.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To determine the extent of appreciation of the expedience of adopting a media policy for the publicity of political activities the study sought to task respondents especially party officials and their members on their knowledge of the importance of an orderly sequence of political communication. They were also required to comment on the best strategy for implementing a media policy. This tallied with the research questions formulated for the study and which are best discussed at this point.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: WHY IS MEDIA POLICY AN IMPERATIVE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES?

As can be seen in Table 1 below, all the respondents are aware that there are different channels of communication hence they scored them all. It can therefore be argued that the data in the Table represents what each political respondent would do if put in charge of the subject while what the civil society groups expressed would represent what they expect from political parties through the media. Interestingly, the Table seems to suggest that how the political parties use the media to send messages to the people does not tally with how the receivers of the messages would want the messages delivered. The difference is best expressed in percentages because both groups do not have the number of respondents. Whereas the politicians are more desirous of using newspapers

and radio, the civil society groups prefer the use of television and the social media. 41.7 % of the politicians prefer newspapers and radio compared to 31.2% of the civil society respondents that support the same channels. 50% of the civil society groups expect politicians to reach them through television and the social media but only 37.5% the political class prefer to use such channels; yet it is easier to assimilate television messages because of the medium’s combined features of sound and picture

SUBJECT	POLITICIANS	POLITICIANS PERCENTAGE	CIVIL SOCIETY	CIVIL SOCIETY PERCENTAGE
Local Announcer	10	08.3%	10	06.3%
Face to Face	15	12.5%	20	12.5%
Newspaper	20	16.7%	20	12.5%
Radio	30	25.0%	30	18.7%
Television	25	20.8%	40	25.0%
Social Media	20	16.7%	40	25.0%
Total	120	100%	160	100%

Table 1: Imperative Of Media Policy

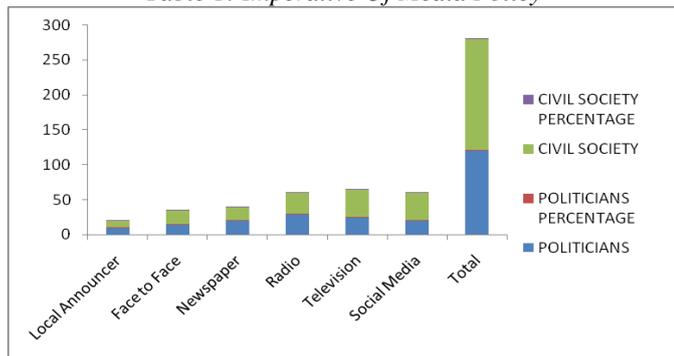


Figure 1

Civil society groups are political activists who are generally urban based. This explains why they are not attracted to media messages through the local announcer or town crier that would be of benefit to the rural dwellers. With a score of less than 10%, political party respondents seem to agree with civil society groups that the medium of the rural dwellers should be discounted. Such a position is rather unfortunate because as Ibagere (2010) reveals, over 70% of Nigerians who are poor and disadvantaged live in the rural communities and cannot afford what it takes to consummate the use of modern technology such as the digital platforms of the social media . The Scholars who were interviewed for this study explained that such an elitist policy could disenfranchise the large voting population of the rural areas. They also pointed out that should that happen, it is the parties that would bear the brunt at the end of the day. This is thus one of the reasons why a good media policy which covers the field is an imperative for political parties.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: WHAT MEDIA STRATEGY BEST GUARANTEES MAXIMUM EFFECT IN THE PUBLICITY OF POLITICAL ACTIVITIES?

To answer the above question, the study sought to gather data on what the respondents consider to be the best strategy to implement a media policy. If unauthorized information should not be given out by political parties, it means the content of each message must be approved before

dissemination and only the official spokesperson of a political party should be the only source. As shown in Table 2 below, the politicians fully accept this with a high score of 75%. The civil society respondents also agree with the view but with a lower score of 56.2%. Both groups are similarly agreed on the wisdom of using only authorized spokes persons. The two groups also share similar sentiments on whether political parties should do a lot of rejoinders to clear misconceptions about their activities and statements. Views of the groups on the use of English language also took the same pattern

SUBJECT	POLITICIANS				CIVIL SOCIETY			
	YES	%	NO	%	YES	%	NO	%
Approved content	90	75.0 %	30	25.0 %	90	56.2 %	70	43.8 %
One spokesperson	80	66.7 %	40	23.3 %	95	59.4 %	65	40.6 %
Rejoinder	90	75.0 %	30	25.0 %	64	40.0 %	96	60.0 %
Media Debate	40	23.3 %	80	66.7 %	62	38.2 %	98	61.2 %
English	96	80.0 %	24	20.0 %	66	41.2 %	94	58.8 %
Local language	98	81.2 %	22	18.3 %	62	38.8 %	98	61.2 %

Table 2: Best Media Strategy

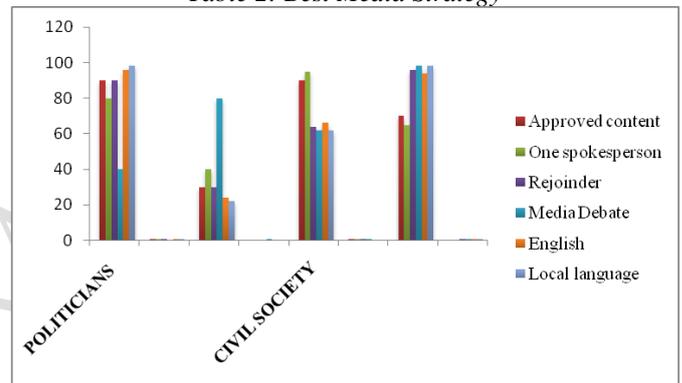


Figure 2

The real bone of contention concerning the subject of media debate was seen at the point where party respondents showed that they were not as excited as the civil society groups. The political parties confirmed this with a poor score of 23.3 % by only 40 respondents, while as huge as 64 candidates representing 40% of the civil society groups were in support of political debates. This appears self-explicit because how persuasive a speaker is at a debate as well as the level of confidence he radiates greatly matter. Considering that it is during a televised media debate that the competence of a candidate in putting across a diametrically opposed view-point would enable viewers particularly voters to use comparison of performance for decision making, why would politicians not exploit the opportunity to sell their candidacy? Some scholars interviewed imagined that the level of literacy among politicians is not quite high hence some of them are always scared of losing to a more articulate opponent.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has thrown light on the need for political parties to be effectively managed. It was argued that because the management of an entity including a political party could ensure its viability and survival over time, the study drew attention to the need for every political party which must use

the media to reach the audience with political messages to design a well-thought out and consistent media policy which can cover all likely areas of interaction with the media. It was argued that to avoid discordant tunes as well as the dissemination of unauthorized and inaccurate messages, the designated party spokespersons should be the only source of information from a party to the public. Bearing in mind that different people benefit from their preferred channels, it was also argued that the channels and strategies for implementing the policy must be diversified. Based on this the following recommendations are presented:

- ✓ There is the need for political parties to see the media as partners rather than enemies. To this end, the parties can design a robust relationship between them and the media and relate with different hierarchies of media personnel - proprietors, managers, editors, reporters etc
 - ✓ At the end of every event which attracted media support, write or simply make a call to appreciate the support.
 - ✓ Political parties should take advantage of the use of designated political correspondents who being specialized reporters can add ample value to the work of the parties
- Political parties should endeavour to appreciate media challenges and assist them to meet the goals of the parties. For example it is wise to organise lectures, workshops or seminars which can further enlighten them on a party's media policy.

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