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## **Reflection of Nigeria Project Challenges in Press Coverage of the Campaigns for the 2015 General Elections**

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### **Abstract**

This study was designed to determine the 2015 general election campaigns in Nigeria to establish whether their coverage by the press reflected Nigerian Project concerns as priority. The study covered six months of electioneering from 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2014 to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2015. Four foremost national newspapers were examined and they yielded 181 editions within the study period, from which a sample of 56 was extracted, using a systematic sampling technique. A coding guide and coding sheet were the instruments employed. From the study, it was found that the select newspapers glossed over featured Nigerian Project issues, scoring low on frequency, prominence and magnitude. Conversely, they were deeply loyal to their proprietors' partisan and ethno-religious affiliations, used subversive rhetoric. It was concluded that in upholding the private interest of media owners over the national interest, the newspapers studied were both unpatriotic and unethical: a pedestal from which it is impossible for them to deliver on the much desired Nigeria nationhood - the dream of the country's founding fathers.

**Keywords:** Press, Mass Media, Nigerian Project, Nigerian Dream.

**Abbreviations:** NP – Nigeria Project; ND – Nigeria Dream

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, as she exists today, is a work in progress. After nearly fifty-seven years of independence, the country is still grappling with massive unemployment and grinding poverty, endemic corruption and security challenges, notably the seeming quagmire called the Boko Haram insurgency. The country is also battling with inefficient and sometimes, non-functional public utilities, insufficient and decaying infrastructure, among other problems.

But successive administrations at the various tiers of government have been making efforts to improve Nigeria economically, politically and socially and

ensure her attainment of the status of a developed country. For instance, the immediate past federal government under Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, pursued a seven-point transformation agenda that involved large-scale infrastructural projects, mechanisation of agriculture, stemming of systemic corruption in fertilizer distribution and public service payrolls, unbundling and privatisation of the power sector and revamping of the industrial sector, notably in terms of car assemblies. These efforts led to the emergence of Nigeria as the largest economy in Africa after the rebasing of her Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2014 (*AllThingsNigeria.com*, 2014).

Efforts at developing Nigeria are ultimately geared towards creating a country that functions according to the provisions of Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution entitled "Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy." It is the building of such a country that we have named the Nigerian Project (NP) – a country in which the government and the mass media fulfil their obligations and the citizens perform their duties leading to the attainment of freedom, peace, justice and prosperity for all. Political campaigns are supposed to be platforms for incumbent governments to explain how well they have contributed to the NP or how well they have pursued the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy and for their opponents to show how they can do better in the same regard. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to ascertain how well the foregoing was reflected in the press coverage of the campaigns for the 2015 general elections.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Nigerian press is often accused of abdicating its social responsibilities in the coverage of politics and electioneering. According to Yakoob (2015), decades of studies in media coverage of elections have revealed excessive focus on horserace and personal quality of candidates at the expense of substantive issues. Horserace refers to such campaign events as "endorsement of candidates, opinion polls, who is winning and who is losing." Such a lop-sided coverage turns election coverage into entertainment which sells but "deprives the electorate the opportunity to make informed electoral choice."

But the 2015 election campaigns appeared to have more mendacious and dangerous elements than mere entertainment. The campaigns were so acrimonious with the All Progressives Congress (APC) single-minded in its bid to topple the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) wherever it was in charge and the latter consequently desperate to cling to power. There was mudslinging, *ad hominem* attacks and playing up of ethnic and religious sentiments, prime examples of which were documentaries aired on African Independent Television (AIT) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), attacking the persons of the presidential candidate of the APC, Muhammadu Buhari and its National Leader, Bola Tinubu.

Irrespective of how the politicians conduct their campaigns, the press can report in a manner that helps the citizenry to separate the wheat from the chaff

through news interpretation and analysis. They can help set the tone for the campaigns by setting an issue-based agenda, refusing to be side-tracked by politicians into base and trivial issues that bear little relevance to candidates' manifestoes and capacity for governance. They can, thus arm the electorate with the required knowledge to choose the best of the contending parties/candidates. The issues for the agenda should arise from what we have called the NP. This paper hopes to see if the press paid attention to them in its coverage of the 2015 election campaigns or whether it joined the fray with politicians and harped on base and trivial sentiments.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study determined:

1. How frequently the press covered issues in the campaign that are in consonance with the NP.
2. The level of prominence accorded by the press to issues in the campaign that are consistent with the NP.
3. The magnitude of press coverage of issues in the campaign that are in line with the NP.
4. The extent to which the press coverage of the campaign contained insolence, malicious accusations or *ad hominem* attacks.
5. The extent to which the press coverage of the campaign was biased along religious, ethnic, partisan and gender lines.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The Nigerian Project seems to be taken for a rubric under which relevant socio-political perspectives are being negotiated. Only one contributor attempted a definitive explanation of the concept. Ozekhome (2014, p. 3) captures the NP literally as "the promised land, the land laden with milk and honey, where justice, fairness, equality, egalitarianism, tolerance and mutual respect for one another reign supreme." This acceptably reflects the dream country Nigeria's founding fathers envisaged and it is specified in Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as Amended- a united federation of ethnic nationalities and a socio-political order anchored on justice, equality, equity, fair-play, social amenities, education, security, culture, employment, human rights, global citizenship, etc.

NP as a term came into usage relatively recently as, in angst Nigeria intellectuals question an ever-present national drift and comparatively low development pace in the backdrop of robust constitutional provisions and available huge natural resources. The NP debate features a diversity of themes and clearly most contributions perceive incompetent, directionless and irresponsible leadership as responsible for the country's inability to deliver on its

stated vision and obligations to state and citizenry. A leading voice in this respect is Ikhariale (2000, p. 1) who vehemently postulates that, "the Nigerian State has lost its moral authority to sovereignty due to the failure of the operator of the state apparatus to do things right and cultivate enduring and all-inclusive national ethos worth defending by the people." A military rescue again is, however, not an option for him because "the mess on the ground and the resultant debilitation of the Nigerian State are the fallout of a prolonged and misguided military domination of the political landscape" (p.5). He advised that it was time civil societies take over governance of their country. Campbell (2011), cited in Ahmed (2014, p. 79), more or less corroborates Ikhariale when he identified absence of a committed national leadership and paradoxically, their commitment to below national values of ethnicity, religious bickering, cronyism and factionalism; consequently casting them as bigoted "local champions."

Ethno-religious crises resonated as a theme of the debate. For instance, Metumara (2010) chides successive post-independence leaderships for failing to evolve policies and programmes to combat ethnic and religious disputes, thereby allowing them to fester and harm the nation. Ahmed (2013) adds that the resultant divisive process sets the various contending factions in perpetual struggle for advantages or supremacy over one another in the quest for ascendancy, retention, or even sabotage. Leading a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural federation with unitary principles and command ethics is a destructive aberration the military brought on Nigeria. Ikhariale (2000, p. 3) further argues that the act doubtlessly aborts the wisdom of the choice of a federation by Nigeria's founding fathers, exposing the military-in-politics in their true subversive uniform." But like a group possessed, the military saw no use for federalism as they govern the country as if Nigeria emanated from only one ethnic nation with a total disregard for our history." Corruption occupies a premium seat in the NP discourse. An agreed "cankers" several contributors saw it as one of the greatest NP challenges. The most eloquent anti-corruption voice perhaps, although it dated far back to 15th January, 1966, was that of the leader of the first military coup d'état in Nigeria. In the coup broadcast message transmitted nationwide, Nzeogwu (1966), cited in Ozekhome (2014, p. 2), rails against "Ministers and VIPs of waste, the ten percenters and those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles." Notwithstanding the ethnic connotation read into the coup by the northern press and the later consequences of an unfortunate three years civil war, this declaration represents a patriotic and salutary NP commentary on the state of affairs in Nigeria back then. Aside corruption ("ten percenters") the coup message also identified resource wastage and crass stupidity in handling national and diplomatic affairs, affirming the commonly held idea of incompetent leaderships.

Ojo (2015, p. 2) appreciates NP from the standpoint of executive conduct and good governance. He believes that NP issues are amenable to antidotes if managed by a president who is "well informed and technically competent to

perform his functions...ready to work hand-in-hand with the other arms of government in a purposeful and well-coordinated manner" - a president who would "eschew every form of lawlessness and abuse of office" and "does not become autocratic." Perhaps to put a stop further emergence of inept leadership in public affairs a proviso was articulated in Section 22, Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. This section mandates the mass media to as a function "uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people" (pp. LL24-LL30). So, how has this been managed?

Under civilian administrations through the various republics, the press always wants in purpose and patriotism. Chukwuemeka (2007, p. 217) traces this shocking revelation to the nature of its origin having been structured along ethnic lines to fight the causes of mass media owners/politicians and their ethnic groups. The same pattern ensued during the transitional period of the Second Republic, with Chief M.K.O. Abiola's *National Concord* newspaper propagating the views and agenda of his National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Chief Jim Nwobodo's *Satellite* championing his Nigerian People's Party (NPP) and Dr Una Akpan's *African Progress* newspaper as a megaphone for the People's Redemption Party (PRP) to which he belonged. The Third Republic transition witnessed the emergence of the *Spectator* and the *Republican* newspapers to bolster the views and political fortunes of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) - the party to which their owners belonged (Udoakah, 2017).

The three-year Nigerian civil war from 1967-1970 with its catastrophic loss in human and material values seems to be a price Nigeria paid for a press that has no sense of nationhood, but grovelling to please political and ethno-religious demagogues. An empirical study by Chukwuemeka (2007) finds that "the pogroms of May 29, September 29 and October 2, 1966 in the major Northern cities against the Igbos on which the secessionist moves were predicated, were as a result of editorials and commentaries run by Radio Nigeria Kaduna and the *New Nigeria Newspaper*; while the *Outlook Newspaper* an Eastern paper took its turn to continually expose the genocidal killing of the Igbos across the North." Fifty-seven years after independence, has the Nigerian press internalised the national interest with the narrow partisan and ethnic interest of media owners? During his Inaugural Lecture as professor of political communication at the University of Uyo on 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2017, Udoakah (2017, p. 54) used the forum to give an update on the topic he has followed with passion - Nigerian press. Since journalists' welfare is not a priority to their employers, many of them are not committed to the profession, and are living on the politicians. The result is that they do what they can to protect their benefactors and raise issues about those they cannot benefit from. Put differently, journalists are now after what they can get from covering an event. If no money is likely to get into their pocket, then no coverage. But in order not to go without something, they may twist the story to embarrass, scandalise or blackmail, thus making the source to look for them for settlement.

The face of the Nigerian journalist seems to get dirtier during electioneering reportage. Agba (2006, p. 194), perhaps peeved, portrays them as phoney public servants, stooges of the powerful and robots who merely act out the scripts of callous politicians....this is the face of the Nigerian mass media in electioneering campaign reportage.....and (they) have done little to change it (round brackets ours). Have they or not?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theories were adopted for this study. These are agenda-setting and social responsibility theories. Agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) states that the audience not only seek information from the mass media, but somehow end up following the direction indicated by the press. Several placards have been raised against this theory, but they all seem to be gossips around a great find. AST would help to explain the Nigerian condition, as well as it may justify the various authorities that fault the press. The theory would also help to predict the future of Nigeria without a patriotic press institution to set the right and proper agenda and monitor politicians for compliance. On the other hand, the social responsibility theory - the fallout of the Hutchins' (1947) "Commission on Freedom of the Press." It is premised on the belief that a workable society is essential and an imperative for even mass media practice and rather than destroy the same society with unethical journalism, the press as citizens have serious obligation to ensure social cohesion and sustainability. Under social responsibility, the press accepted to as well defer to society, as to media owners and market forces. It also commits to observing a range of ethical values and self-regulation. As a result, the government is forbidden from interfering with press freedom except to secure public morality and through the instrumentality of the judiciary only. SRT is introduced herein to show that the press cannot safely run away from its heritage of a strong obligation to ensure the safety and wellbeing of society generally.

### **Methodology**

Content analysis design was used for the study. As a result, a coding guide, which contained instructions that guided the coding exercise was employed. The instrument of data collection was a coding sheet which specified the data sought by the study. The population of the study is 181 newspaper editions, out of which a sample of 56 dailies, drawn equally from the select media, was elicited, using the combination of continuous week and constructed week sampling techniques. The sample of 56 newspapers represented 31 percent of the population. This was adjudged hugely adequate for the study based on Stempel (1952), in Ohaja (2003, p. 86) that a systematically drawn sample of 12 newspaper editions for a one year study will produce equally effective results as one involving higher figures.

Purposively, *the Guardian, Daily Trust, The Punch* and *Daily Sun* newspapers were selected as representative of the Nigerian press. *The Punch* and

*Daily Trust* are private media organisations based respectively in Lagos and Abuja, while *The Guardian* and *Daily Sun* are Lagos-based private presses. The media outfits were chosen for the study primarily as mainstream newspapers which have nationwide circulation, on newsstand regularly and the public are exposed to them. The choice of all private media was informed by expected media independence or freedom from government pressure. The study covered 1st November, 2014 to 30th April, 2015, inclusive. This is a six months period of intense electioneering with politicians hopefully expounding their political manifestoes among the electorate and the press ideally delivering on its agenda-setting and social responsibility functions.

### **Content Category**

The underlisted are prominent among other obligations of a Nigerian government or president as specified in the “Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy” (Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution of Nigerian); hence they were summoned to guide the study.

- (i) Economic challenge - news of unemployment, poverty, crime rate and corruption.
- (ii) Insecurity challenge - reports of terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery and criminality.
- (iii) Education challenge – accounts of inadequate educational infrastructure, qualified teaching staff, low or delayed emolument and associated “strikes” or downtime.
- (iv) General Infrastructural challenge – media content on absence of social amenities, non-functional utilities, inaccessible roads, death-traps on highways, irregular and non-availability of electricity supply and lack of potable water.

Ethical conduct of the Nigerian press was also tested using:

- (v) Propaganda - marked by malicious accusation, name-calling and insolence, anonymity and threats of violence.
- (vi) Prejudice - predicated on religion, ethnicity, partisanship and gender.

### **Coding and Coding Parameters**

These were frequency, prominence, magnitude, propaganda and prejudice. Frequency is the total media content found in each and all the select newspapers and the chosen NP categories. Prominence used sub-parameters of high, medium and low indicating media value attachment. High are stories carried at the front, back and editorial pages; medium are contents presented as supplements, inside full page and centrespread; while Low were news stories placed at less significant inside pages of a newspaper. Magnitude is space allocated to a NP report



measured in full, half, quarter and micro pages abbreviated as Fp, Hp, Qp and Mp respectively. Propaganda is the diversionary use of the press, in this study characterised by malicious accusation, name-calling and insolence, anonymity and threats of violence. Prejudice refers to bias and the applicable parameters of religion, ethnicity, partisanship and gender.

### Intercoder Reliability

Two researchers were oriented to the specific needs of this study and independently coded the sampled media editions, using the same content categories, codal cues and coding sheet. The Scott's (1955) *Pi* index (formula: % observed agreement - % expected agreement over 1 - % expected agreement) was used in calculating the intercoder reliability co-efficient. The results were 0.50%, 0.53% and 0.52% for frequency, prominence and magnitude respectively. Although, the results falls short of Scott's benchmark of 0.75% IRC (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 169), the degree of reliability remains high.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1: Number of Press Reports on adopted NP Issues across the chosen Media**

Select Media	Overall Frequency	%	Score Per Medium	%	%of Overall Frequency
<i>The Guardian</i>	1,511	25	101	34	7
<i>Daily Trust</i>	1,272	21	72	24	6
<i>The Punch</i>	1,634	28	79	27	5
<i>Daily Sun</i>	1,566	26	42	14	3
Total	5,983	100	294	100	5

Table 1 above shows that out of overall frequency of 5,983 published issues, 294 were NP reports. The *Guardian* recorded 101 (34%), *Daily Trust* 72 (24%), *The Punch* 79 (27%) and *Daily Sun* 42 (14%), representing five percent (5%). The study considered five percent a most meagre score based on several factors rationalised below.

**Table 2: The Priority the Press attached to the Select NP Issues**

Media	Prominence Variables						Total	
	High	%	Medium	%	Low	%	Score	%
<i>The Guardian</i>	16	55	13	31	72	32	101	34
<i>Daily Trust</i>	3	10	2	5	67	30	72	25
<i>The Punch</i>	6	21	19	45	54	24	79	27
<i>Daily Sun</i>	4	14	8	19	30	14	42	14
Total	29	10	42	14	223	76	294	100

Table 2 analysed the importance the newspapers attach to NP concerns by the location of relevant items within an edition. The scores were: high 29 (10%),

medium 42 (14%) and low 223 (76%). This scores show a reversal of the order of importance with the least prominence (low) scoring overwhelming 223 (76%) and the most prominent (high) scoring the least - 29 (10%). This is again indicative of poor press attitude to NP issues.

**Table 3: Measured Importance the Press attached to NP Reports**

Media	Magnitude Variables								Total	
	Fp	%	Hp	%	Qp	%	Mp	%	Score	%
<i>The Guardian</i>	22	49	30	47	30	26	19	28	101	34
<i>Daily Trust</i>	4	9	11	17	32	27	25	37	72	25
<i>The Punch</i>	10	22	18	28	32	27	19	28	79	27
<i>Daily Sun</i>	9	20	5	8	23	20	5	7	42	14
Total	45	15	64	22	117	40	68	23	294	100

Magnitude measured press enthusiasm about NP issue through the space allocated to them. The scores were Fp 45 (15%), Hp 64 (22%), Qp 117 (40%) and Mp 68 (23%). Compared to prominence above, the scores were more equitable, except Qp which recorded 117 (40%). No intense media favour is, however, indicated.

**Table 4: Dissected the Media for Subversive Antics during the Campaign**

Media	Devices								Total	
	Ma	%	Ni	%	An	%	Tv	%	Score	%
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	6	9	43	1	100	5	46	16	32
<i>Daily Trust</i>	5	29	5	24	0	0	2	18	12	24
<i>The Punch</i>	11	65	5	24	0	0	2	18	18	36
<i>Daily Sun</i>	0	0	2	9	0	0	2	18	4	8
Total	17	34	21	42	1	2	11	22	50	100

Table 4 above tested the assumption that the media threw ethics overboard and went for subversive rhetoric during the campaign. The scores were Ma 17 (34%), Ni 21 (42%), An 1 (2%) and Tv 11 (22%). Fifty (50) non-journalistic items is not a chance occurrence but a conscious deployment of propaganda. For journalism, this is fatal and lamentable.

**Table 5: Evaluated the Press for Prejudice during the Campaign**

Media	Basis								Total	
	Re	%	Et	%	Pt	%	Gd	%	Score	%
<i>The Guardian</i>	7	100	1	25	10	36	0	0	18	46
<i>Daily Trust</i>	0	0	2	50	8	29	0	0	10	26
<i>The Punch</i>	0	0	1	25	8	28	0	0	9	23
<i>Daily Sun</i>	0	0	0	0	2	7	0	0	2	5
Total	7	18	4	10	28	72	0	0	39	100

The parade of prejudice in the political culture was also tested. The scores as revealed in table 5 above were: Re 7 (18%), Et 4 (10%), Pt 28 (72%) and Gd zero (0%). The presence yet of discrimination in the polity shows most likely that the press still condone, perhaps sometimes use them to advantage, in the effort to please media owners/politicians.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study regards the score of 294 out of 5,938(5%) as quite measly and negligible. It is impossible for NP issues to have impact and affect society positively with this rate of mention. Traditionally, public communication projects as this scarcely succeeded with low public awareness and participation. For instance, it required a content analysis frequency of 18% (survey-65%) for NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons) to cause a shift in public attitude toward Trafficking in Persons in 2011 (Okujeni, 2015, p. 120). Militancy in the Niger Delta oil region during the presidency of late Umoru Yar'Adua needed 576 stories (282 more than the score of this study - 294) also, from four mainstream media to cause government to react and subsequently bring militancy under control (Nwankpa, 2011, p. 106).

If not setting the social agenda as the case what, if not setting their master's power agenda, were the newspapers up to during the campaigns? The data at table 4 seem to have the answer. What was the necessity for Ma, Ni, An and Tv? In the Nigerian Democratic Report 2015 the president, International Press Institute, Arogundade (2015) frowned at the resort to propaganda despite the Code of Election Coverage which demanded strict adherence to objectivity and balance. Without doubt this also gives credence to Agba (2006, p. 194) that the Nigerian press always played the 'slave' of mass media owners, hence are pretenders to journalism and patriotism and in their present construct incapable of delivering on the much expected Nigerian nationhood - the dream of the nation's founding fathers. At this stage, it is irrelevant to discuss prominence and magnitude. As tools of stridence and visibility manoeuvres, they were hamstrung by the marginal score on NP issues. Five percent (5%) of overall frequency is negligible, fractions of its sub-set are immaterial. Religious, ethnic and partisan prejudices were also reported during the 2015 campaigns in Nigeria. The good news, however, is that not one case of bias on ground of gender was observed by this study.

### **Conclusion**

The newspapers studied virtually abandoned their social responsibility and agenda setting obligation to Nigeria by the measly mention NP reports received from them during six months of intense electioneering. The media worked hard at projecting their bosses' capricious political notions at the expense of the national interest. This offends the terms of the operating licence signed by media owners where they subordinated their personal interest to the public interest. Rather than

being informed, educated and properly directed on their civic duties to vote/elect the right and proper persons to offices, the citizenry were told self-serving lies of media owners/politicians; hence were misled to vote wrongly.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1. Nigerian journalists should for the sake of society uphold the supremacy of the public interest over the private and local interest of media owners/politicians.
2. They should set the social agenda according to the dictates of their social responsibility and agenda-setting obligations, not allowing dictation from politicians or whomsoever.
3. Increase in number of issues carried is not enough, they should give magnitude and prominence to whole lots of them to raise impact, awareness and participation.
4. The terms of the operating license signed by media owners should be reaffirmed and enforced.

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