

## **Audience Perception of NTA's Coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election Campaign**

**Nkechi A. Chukwuma**  
Madonna University, Okija

**Nkiru C. Ezeh, *Ph.D.***  
Madonna University, Okija

**&**

**Nkechi A. Umuze**  
Delta State Polytechnic Ogwasi-Uku, Delta State

### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to evaluate how the dominant Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) covered the 2015 Presidential Election campaign that involved an incumbent President running for re-election and a strong opposition candidate polled to beat him. NTA is a government-owned station and since other studies have established a strong link between media ownership and editorial influence, did the station show partisanship in support of the incumbent against his political opponents?

Using the survey research method and anchored on the cultivation and agenda-setting theories, this paper found NTA's coverage to be unfair, partisan, and unprofessional. The paper thus argues that to develop an involved, well informed and rational electorate, the media must be at the centre of civic education and enlightenment

of the voting electorate on the political process. To this end, the paper recommends that all legitimate measures and strategies should be exploited to make it possible for the citizens to have the required information or alternative sources of getting information before making very important political decisions.

**Keywords:** NTA, Power, Government media, Audience perception, Campaign, Election, Media.

## **Introduction**

An essential element to the principal-agent approach to understanding politicians and voter behaviour is the notion that political incumbents both at the national, state and local government levels act in certain ways to raise their chances of re-election and to further their political careers. They often do this by taking undue advantage of the government media at their disposal to spread political propaganda that favours their re-election ambitions. Media and politics have had a contentious relationship since the beginning of democratic rule in Nigeria (Ekeanyanwu, 2007); however, the pivotal role the media play in politics has never been in contention. This makes it attractive for politicians to venture into media ownership so as to control the political narrative that influences electoral outcomes (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

After the transitional elections of 1999, Nigeria has witnessed two other General Elections conducted respectively in 2003 and 2007. At the heart of the issues surrounding these elections appears a strong intervening variable namely the abusive use of the incumbency factor by those already in power to block the alternation of power between the ruling party and the opposition. This phenomenon constitutes a serious threat to the

process of democratic consolidation. A good case in point is the election conducted in April 2007 won by the late Musa Yar'Adua whose success in the primary was attributed to the support of incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo (*Ashby and Bloomfield, 2006*).

Obviously, the mass media especially the broadcast media (radio and television) are the means by which the citizens of Nigeria are informed of current events in politics. Aliede (2003, p. 30) says, "the broadcast or electronic media are... the most convenient, speedily and reliable means of transmitting values, information, ideas, message and culture as a result of their unique attribute like immediacy, audio-visual qualities, linguistic barrier breakage, massive outreach, portability and availability." The immediate task of political mobilization, Okafor (2000) submits must be anchored on how to ensure that the environment and activities of partisan politics contribute towards the realization of the major objectives of natural developments through establishing awareness and civil liberty. Pate (2003) submits that political reporting is very necessary for the sustenance of democracy, where the system of checks and balance is required for good governance.

It is self evident that television and radio reporting affect politics in Nigeria and there is no way an individual can obtain for himself or herself the information needed for the intelligent discharge of his political responsibilities but it should be realized that the potency and relevance of the broadcast media is on its ability to reach a large number of scattered audience members simultaneously with concrete information about the activities of different candidates, interest groups, events and issues particularly during periods of election. The media are thus arrogated the responsibility of mobilizing the masses for responsible participation in the electoral process. The quality of the information conveyed to the public by broadcast media structures is capable of encouraging and stimulating massive

participation in the electoral processes and increasing the credibility of such processes too.

However, the biased, inaccurate and one-sided coverage of electioneering campaigns and the projection of certain candidates and political groups in the manner that exonerates them high above the others is capable of causing deep-rooted crisis that can escalate into bloody disputes in the quest to exert relevance, competence, and achieve political objectives or goals. The audience accusation of unethical practices among mass media practitioners and the allegation of unfair coverage levelled against the government media during election periods seems to find support in Orhewere (2003, p. 140), when he argues that the Nigerian media in the past did not show enough commitment to professional ethics in the build-up to the 1965 electoral crisis in western Nigeria.

Umechukwu (2003) aptly captures the political character of Nigeria in the democratic dispensation by stating that “the word politics in the Nigerian context conjures up images of power, domination, and struggle to grab state apparatus”. At the moment, a deep source of worry is on the mind of every rational thinking Nigerian, about the current practice of politics, for even with the coming of democracy since 1999, much has not really changed (Iwokwagh, 2005). It is on this premise that this paper sought to determine the audience perception of the NTA's coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election campaign.

## **Objectives**

This paper is guided by the following objectives:

1. To find out how the Nigerian audiences perceived and interpreted the 2015 Presidential Election campaign on NTA.
2. To investigate whether or not there is any marked differences in the way individuals or groups of audiences interpret the campaign.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the above objectives, the paper sets out with the following Research Questions:

1. How did the Nigerian media audiences perceive and interpret the 2015 Presidential Election campaigns on NTA?
2. Are there marked differences in the way individuals or groups of media audiences interpret the Presidential Election campaigns on NTA?

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The degree to which incumbency is viewed as a compulsory privilege to next office holding is becoming worrisome in Nigerian politics. Previous researches suggest a categorisation of views tilting towards three different but related opinions. First group of scholars have argued that the apparent advantage of incumbency factor is really a selection effect which means that there is no causal link between incumbency and re-election. According to this group, office holders and challengers are simply not comparable types of candidates; incumbents are ex ante better politicians (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Others have argued that it is incumbents' actions in office and records of service, which help their probability of re-election (Fenno, 1978). According to Trounstein (2009), both of these views are encouraging; regardless of the reason for winning, the re-election of incumbents reflects the success of representative democracy. A third, less optimistic possibility is that incumbents, once elected, become entrenched regardless of their performance in office (Key, 1949). In this view, incumbents implement or take advantage of institutional structures that decrease the contestability of the electoral arena.

Distinguishing among these causal processes is difficult because re-election is the observational equivalent for all three. Just noting high re-election rates cannot help to untangle the

source of the advantage, but doing so is crucial for evaluating the success of democracy. A lack of competitive elections is not, in and of itself, problematic (Buchler, 2007). But, if winning is disconnected from quality or from voter approval then constituents may lack meaningful representation and may be unable to control their government. As a result less policy responsiveness is expected when incumbents are protected by institutional structures. The “incumbency advantage” typically refers to the increase in vote share a party can expect from running an incumbent versus a non-incumbent. Trounsine (2009) use the term more vaguely to refer to the higher probability of winning enjoyed by incumbents compared to non-incumbents. It suffices to mean that incumbency is the assumed privilege a present office holder has over his/her opponent including the monopoly of the electronic channel of communication in the society.

The mass media should make election possible and easier by engaging in its functions of enlightening, informing, and entertaining the people (Pate, 2003; Aliede, 2003; Okafor, 2000). The mass media are expected to advance national interest and promote certain key values and behavioural patterns within a given society. Supporting the above assertion, Ekeanyanwu (2007) asserts that the media exist as an organ of information sourcing and dissemination, educational promotion, surveillance, social enlightenment and mobilization. These functions set the media apart as an important link/factor in the relationship between the government and the governed and make them a sine qua non to societal growth and development. McNair (2002) aptly pointed out that “in democratic political systems, media function both as transmitters of political communication which originates outside the media organization itself and as senders of political messages constructed by journalists”.

The only way the public can monitor the activities of their elected representative is through the fair and accurate reporting of

events by the media. If the public has the hope that the media are capable of reporting government activities well, interest and participation in the political system begins to nose drive and when this happens, it becomes almost impossible to have a free, fair and credible election. It is therefore, expected that the mass media should be involved pre-election awareness which include voter registration, electioneering campaign, actual voting and post-election activities.

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), “the mass media are assuming many of the information that political parties once controlled. Instead of learning about an election at a campaign rally or from party canvassers, the mass media have become the primary source of campaign information. There has been a tendency for political parties to decrease their investments in neighbour-to-neighbour canvassing, rallies and other direct contact activities, and devote more attention to campaigning through the media.

This investment in the media is primarily meant to control the political narrative. According to Ekeanyanwu (2015, p. 167):

What is the connection between the media, politics, and democratic practice that seems to make the link tight? The connection between the media and politics is very obvious and strong. The role of the media in politics is no longer debatable as many democracies all over the world regard the media as instruments of political mobilisation and sensitization. In advanced societies particularly, the mass media are actually an integral part of political life, serving for most people as their major and sometimes, only link with the government and a major source of information to correlate events in their environment. The media also provide their audiences the

information they need to make sense of political issues, which helps them to make political judgments based on their political attitudes and perceptions.

The mass media also play important roles in the society or social system. That is why no known government can do without the mass media. In addition to providing information about the political process, the mass media can confer status and legitimacy on political leaders and issues. This is known as status conferral function of the mass media.

The growth of electronic media, especially television has tended to diminish the role of the party. The electronic media also make it easier to communicate events and issues through personalities. Swanson (2004) notes that in place of or in addition to traditional campaign practices such as rallies of the party faithful, political parties and candidates relied on the sophisticated use of the mass media to persuade voters – the “consumers” of political communication to support them at election time, and they offered campaigns that feature the appealing personalities of party leaders.

Television provides an 'aesthetic' platform for the presentation (airing) of political advertising and electioneering campaign messages. Norris (2004) asserts that “fair access to the airwaves by opposition parties, candidates, and groups is critical for competitive, free and fair elections.” He points out that it is particularly important that state-owned or public television stations should be open to a plurality of political viewpoints during campaigns, without favouring the governments. Corroborating these positions, Swanson (2004) asserts that “editorial independence, freedom from close government supervision and censorship, and the like, create credibility for newscasters everywhere.” According to Abati (2006),

government-owned Nigerian Television Authority with nationwide branches was particularly notorious for unequal coverage of candidates during election periods. Newscasters were openly sycophantic, making State governors whose states had no television or radio stations prior to their assumption of office to immediately set up their own stations to court such media sycophancy.

Owolabi (2008) conducted a research study on the topic: “media ethics and the issues in the Freedom of Information Act in Nigerian democracy” using historical research methods to find out that FOI act is neither a substitute for good governance nor does it address the fundamental problems of the rich-poor divide. It is only a potent tool that certainly improves transparency and accountability rating of our nation. The public records which were, hitherto shrouded in secrecy will now be made available for public scrutiny, thus creating an enabling environment for fraud prevention and corruption control. The study therefore recommended that the practice of journalism in Nigeria should be immediately professionalized like law, medicine, and engineering and all the quacks in the rank and file of the media should be weeded out.

Ekeanyanwu (2008) also conducted a study on the “News flow controversy: the global media coverage of Nigerian democracy”. Ekeanyanwu's study found that the news flow controversy is real and there exist imbalances and inequalities in global news flow particularly from the developed world to third world. Nigeria as a third world nation, despite all its efforts to correct its bad international reputation and image, unfortunately is still a victim of this treatment by the global media. The study therefore recommended that media channels that have global reach should be established in Nigeria. This will help secure a voice for the third world to be able to actively compete with the west for the attention of the global audience.

The question now is that if we are still complaining about

news imbalance in the global media, which we know existed right from inception, what then do we have to say about news imbalance in the local media especially where the media purposefully refuse to apply the Fairness Doctrine to all politicians?

The authors used two distinct but related theories in this context to address the issues raised in the paper. The theories are Cultivation theory and Agenda Setting theory.

Cultivation theory was propounded by George Gerbner and Larry Rose in 1980. They assert that the mass media especially television, exerts a tremendous influence by altering individuals perception of reality. The theory went further to explain that among modern media, television has acquired such a central place in daily life. Put in a more classic description, the television set has become a key member of the family; the one who tell most of the time.

Miller (2005) argues that the purpose of the Cultural Indicators project was to identify and track the "cultivated" effects of television on viewers. They were "concerned with the effects of television programming (particularly violent programming) on the attitudes and behaviours of the American public." The primary proposition of cultivation theory states that the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television", Cohen and Weimann (2000) affirm that Cultivation leaves people with a misperception of what is true in our world.

The Agenda Setting theory was first introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their ground breaking research which studied the 1968 US Presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw attempted an assessment of the relationship between what voters in one community regarded as important and what the media considered important to publish (Ngoa, 2012, p. 4). The

study, however, suggests that “Although there could be other interplaying factors not mentioned, the media, to a large extent, shaped the way the American public voted for certain candidates who campaigned using the issues that were given more emphasis by media houses” (Denis, 2012, p. 260).

Folarin (1998, p. 95), classifies Agenda-setting theory as “The Conditioning Powerful Media Theory”, and defines it as “the theory that implies that mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important in a given society”. It, however, does not determine what we actually think but does ascribe them the power to determine what we are thinking about. Ekeanyanwu (2005, p. 115) is also of the view that “Agenda-setting is where the mass media is accredited with the power to set the agenda of the topics for discussion”.

McLuhan (1968, p. 204) cited in Folarin (2005) is of the view that “the press can colour events by using them in a particular way, or refusing to use them all”. This means that it is what the media want us to think or talk about that they project to the public as important and at the end, it appears important in the public's eye.

This then means that as NTA airs the 2015 presidential election campaign, it registers in the mind of the audience as important. The NTA audience may go ahead to accept the framing or perspective the station presents and are thus guided by it. Television medium therefore uses its power to influence audience perception of reality. The type of news and how often NTA showcases a particular candidate more than the other can change the perspective/meaning for the audience.

### **Method of Study**

The survey research method was used to address the research objectives and questions raised for this paper. This method

provides the most effective means of collecting the views of NTA audiences, particularly audiences of the 2015 presidential election campaign on NTA. Sobowale (2008) avers that “the survey technique is the most commonly used by behavioural scientists and it involves drawing up a set of question on various aspects of a subject to which selected members of a population are requested to react to”

The population of this study was adults living in Onitsha and Asaba metropolis who watch NTA. The total population of Onitsha and Asaba amounted to 500,312. The population was obtained from GeoHive (2015), Nigeria population statistics. The population for Onitsha is 350,280 while Asaba is 150,032. It was from this population that a study sample of 400 was drawn using Taro Yamani's formula.

The purposive sampling technique was used because respondents needed to be selected based on certain criteria (the respondents watch NTA and were exposed to Goodluck EbeleChukwu Jonathan campaign on NTA). Data were collected from the respondents to determine their perception of 2015 presidential election campaign on NTA. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions and was administered personally to the respondents by the researchers. The copies of the questionnaire were shared equally to the two metropolises. Out of 400 copies of questionnaire administered to the respondents 385 copies were returned, therefore responses derived from 385 respondents formed the basis upon which data were analyzed and research questions answered.

## **Results**

From the 400 copies of the questionnaire that were administered to the respondents, only 385 were properly filled and returned. This represents a high response rate of 96%. Responses from the 385 fully completed copies of the questionnaire from the two cities are used to answer the research questions and discuss the implications

of the findings.

### **Research Questions 1**

#### **How did the Nigerian media audiences perceive and interpret the 2015 Presidential Election campaigns on NTA?**

The first research question sought to determine how the Nigerian audiences perceived and interpreted the NTA media campaign on the former president Goodluck Jonathan during the 2015 Presidential Election. Data gathered from participants who were exposed to the NTA media campaigns show that more than 50% of the respondents were unsatisfied with what they saw. Further details are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Audiences' response on how they perceive 2015 presidential election campaign on NTA**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Averagely Satisfactory	85	22.1
Very Satisfactory	45	11.7
Undecided	15	3.9
Satisfied	40	10.4
Unsatisfied	200	51.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Another research question sought to find out how the Nigerian media audiences interpreted the messages on the 2015 presidential election campaign on NTA. Data gathered from the respondents who were exposed to the NTA media campaign show that more than 80% of the respondents frowned at the way the NTA granted air time to the PDP Presidential Candidate to the disadvantage of the other presidential candidates. The details are presented in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Opinion of the respondents on unfair coverage of NTA during the presidential election campaign**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Agree	147	38.2
Strongly agree	180	46.8
Undecided	13	3.4
Disagree	15	3.9
Strongly disagree	30	7.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

**Research Question 2**

**Are there marked differences in the way individuals or groups of media audiences interpreted the Presidential Election campaigns on NTA?**

The second research question sought to find out whether there are any marked differences in the way individuals or groups of audiences interpreted the representation of 2015 presidential election campaign on NTA. Data gathered from the audiences who were exposed to the NTA presidential election campaign show that over 80% of the respondents were convinced NTA was unfair, partial and partisan in its coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election campaigns. The details are presented in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Audience Reaction to NTA Coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election campaign**

<b>Reaction to Coverage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Lacking balance and fairness	138	35.8
Partial and partisan	185	48.1
Impartial	17	4.4
Provided equal airtime	15	3.9
All of the above	30	8.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

## **Discussion**

The implication of the data presented above is that majority of the respondents who participated in the study considered NTA's coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election campaign to be unfair, partisan, and generally unsatisfactory. This conclusion is in line with Abati's (2006) position that government-owned broadcast stations are notorious for unprofessional conduct in support of a government in power in their coverage of political or controversial issues.

This situation is primarily symptomatic of underdevelopment in third world nations where such is rife. The media, in all situations and circumstances, should be fair, professional and incorruptible especially in political reporting (Ekeanyanwu, 2007) but our circumstances in the third world makes it difficult if not impossible for the media to play by the books and not support their ownership base. There are enough studies that have established a strong link between media ownership and editorial influence in the Nigerian media industry (See Ekeanyanwu, 2007; Ekeanyanwu, 2008) and most times this leads to a violation of ethical expectations by the media. In essence, one who pays the piper calls the tune.

Notwithstanding the above scenario, one cannot easily discard the pivotal role media play in the political setting of a developing nation like Nigeria. This may have informed McNair's (2002) assertion that "in democratic political systems, media function both as transmitters of political communication which originates outside the media organization itself, and as senders of political messages constructed by journalists". McNair (2002) also emphasizes that "the citizen's right to choose presupposes the availability of alternatives from which a meaningful selection could be made, a rational and knowledgeable electorate capable of exercising its rights. Democracy was real, in other words, only when it involved the participation of an informed, rational electorate."

In conclusion, to develop an involved, well informed and rational electorate, the media must be at the centre of civic education and enlightenment of the voting electorate on the political process. Therefore, all legitimate measures and strategies should be exploited to make it possible for the citizens to have the required information or alternatives before making very important political decisions. Anything short of this will truncate the democratic aspirations and expectation of any State and its citizens.

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