

Framing of the 2015 Electoral Campaign Issues by Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to find out the issues prioritized by the print media during the 2015 election period amidst the numerous campaign messages from different politicians and political parties. Anchored on the Agenda Setting theory, the paper argues that there was a paradigm shift where the power to say “what to think about” was rather exercised by the politicians rather than the mass media to the masses/electorates. Using content analysis; news reports, features and editorial contents of selected newspapers were analysed. The paper found out that the issues promoted by the papers were not good for democracy and national development. Manifest and latent contents indicated that dominant campaign messages were mostly along ethnic

sentiments, political rivalries, opposition politics, and hate messages against issue-based political discourse. The paper recommends that journalists should re-appraise and attach significance to issues that best guide the electorate's thoughts for candidates with the best leadership prospects and national interest.

Keywords: Mass media, Print media, Political campaign, Election, Agenda setting, Framing

Introduction

In democratic societies, particularly during elections, the media is caught in a knotty bearing with the sources of power, and the political system. In the first place, the media have a responsibility to serve their audiences by providing necessary information for the people to decide among numerous political options, issues and candidates. On the other hand, the media are the flute by which political parties and interests groups address the electorates. The media integrate these strands of responsibilities by circulating news, information and opinion within the politically minded publics.

McQuail (2010, p. 524) highlights that media are commonly used vigorously by competing politicians and parties during periodic campaigns and election. While the politicians exert their influence, resources and sophistication to negotiate with journalists on issue dominance during the democratic process, the media are bound to a media-centred political process characterized by established guidelines and professional practice of presenting the news with particular reference to the ethics of electoral coverage. These influences from both the journalists and

politicians during the electoral process shape the public agenda on what the electorates perceive as the priority issue for voting decisions. The preferences of electorates and their aggregate demand for political candidates though dynamic are largely dependent on the issues journalists give prominence and priorities. For each political campaign according to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the mass media set the agenda and influence the salience of attitudes towards the political issues.

For a country like Nigeria, the periods of political campaign are usually defining moments for politicians and contesting candidates to unravel their manifestoes for the nations good. The print media are expected to direct attention to policy aims of competing candidates for the electorates to make the right choices on who fits the pendulous precipice of Nigeria's democratic and national travails. Since the return of civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has been challenged by deep structural challenges like dependence on oil, high poverty levels, poor infrastructure, geographical divisiveness, and the recent insurgency cum insecurity. Meanwhile, these demands have been unduly ignored in the history of Nigeria's democratic reign. Campaign thrust has been scrambled within ethnic, religious and geographical climes. Party principles, manifestoes and personal promises during campaigns reflect political vagueness in a nation besieged with pressing political needs.

These considerations whether promoted in the media or other means sensitize the consciousness of electorates on who should assume the mantle of political leadership. The essence for campaign periods becomes the struggle between the politician's quest to structure issues along their interest and the media responsibility to remind the politicians of the needs of the country. The politician's interests are vested in a power tussle mechanisms that create political divisiveness, ethnic rivalry, tribal politics, violence, hate and ego against oppositional parties. However, it is

the duty of the media to direct voters' attention to politicians with the right national prospects by reporting issue based campaigns along economic, social and political needs of Nigeria. What and how the media present the issues promoted by the politicians in their campaign determine what the public conceive as the electoral campaign issues. Where the media deviate from their watchdog function, the tendency is for the people to think and accept the politician's selfish motives at the detriment of the nation's most wanted quest for a virile leadership.

Historically and imperatively too, the mass media especially the print media have been credited with the function of spotlighting the salience of issues. Specifically, in periods of campaign, the power to highlight priority issues is much demanded from the mass media because the issues reported by the mass media during elections determine what the electorate conceive as subject matter to talk about politics, leadership and political profiles of competing candidates.

Along this premise, the 2015 election campaign in the Nigerian newspapers was characterised more by low politics than by high-mind pledges on policy. The general elections typified the power of political interest groups and candidates to structure issues and build campaign messages that either promoted their ideals or slammed opposition's integrity or worse still incited further Nigeria's divisiveness. Cases of ethnic differentiation, religious affiliations, regional and zonal expressions, as well as mud-slinging which have become pillars of Nigerian politics attracted media attention. Bues (2001) believes that with such political campaign in the media, the electorates were misguided, helpless, overloaded, ignorant and politically apathetic. Tador (2014, p. 11) therefore suggests that media reportage of electoral campaign creates a synergy between the needs and aspirations of the citizenry on the one hand and the manifestoes of the political actors and their political parties on the other hand.

It is imperative that journalists enlighten the citizenry on

the ideologies of individual candidates and their party affiliations instead of issues that have elements of national disparities. According to **Siebert et al (1956)**, the main pre-occupation of the press is serving the political system by providing information, discussion and the debate that safeguards the electorates from pressures of special interests. Were the media able to frame electoral campaign to spotlight national and developmental needs or were they prioritising campaign thrust to suit the interests of candidates? What is the relevance of campaign discourses promoted in the media to national unity and governance? Answers to these questions are relevant in this instance for the media to evaluate its traditional agenda setting functions. It is based on the perceived power of the mass media to create and influence cohesive campaign issues that this paper tries to investigate the campaign issues reported by the Nigerian media during the 2015 General Elections to determine if there were ethnic, religious, regional, and bigoted clauses of any kind.

Statement of the Problem

During elections and other activities that mark the political system, the mass media are relied upon by the people for important information, education and direction for the right voting choices (Obot, 2009, p. 56). Unfortunately, it is obviously common placed that imbalanced reports, hate speeches, cultural and ethnic sentiments appear in the reportage of electioneering campaigns by the Nigerian print media.

As a result of this, political information in the media becomes lopsided with nagging, venting of anger and expression of frustration. Where the print media help in spreading such messages, the expected outcome is conflict which heats up the polity.

Regrettably, expression of ethnic and religious sentiments in electoral reports of previous elections in Nigeria has led to a number of religious, ethnic and regional conflicts and violence

especially in the Northern part of Nigeria (Osuagwu, 2011). Consequently, media coverage of elections in the past has failed to educate the electorates and challenge contesting parties on the pressing structural needs of the nation. It is against this backdrop, that this study tries to x-ray the campaign issues covered by the print media in the 2015 electoral campaigns.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To ascertain the issues that dominated campaign reports in the 2015 presidential elections by the Nigerian newspapers.
2. To determine the campaign elements of the issues reported by Nigerian Newspapers.
3. To examine the prominence given to message elements reported by Nigerian newspapers.

Research Questions

The following research question guided this investigation:

1. What issues dominated campaign reports in the 2015 presidential elections by the Nigerian newspapers?
2. What were the message elements of the issues reported by Nigerian newspapers?
3. What level of prominence was given to various campaign elements reported by Nigerian Newspapers?'

Literature Review

Historical Thought on Nigerian's Democratic Elections

After the oscillatory military reign, Nigeria returned to democratic rule with the 1999 civilian election. Successively, the 2003, 2007, and 2011 elections were held. The most recent 2015 election became the fifth in the history of Nigeria's democracy. Each of these elections in their series had their pitfalls and

shortcomings. Analysing Nigeria's electoral records, People's Daily (2015) recalled that the 1999 and 2003 elections were not devoid of fraud and political thuggery. The Human Rights Watch (2010) reports that 2007 polls displayed harsh realities of violence, corruption and outright criminality as mainstay of Nigeria's political system; to which officials and institutions at all levels of government accept, encourage and participate in those abuses. The April 2011 Presidential Election divided the country further along ethnic and religious lines. This also made electorates to vote along ethnic or religious sentiments rather than on the pedigree, conviction, or a political party's manifesto that spell-out what the candidate would ensure done when elected.

Galadima and Soola (2012) describe Nigeria's democratic scenario as a group identity politics which have expanded the activities of ethnic, religious, regional and communal groups to mobilize and hatch the votes of electorates. The 2015 election was quite similar with parochial campaigns that marked the political environment. In all these years of democratic elections, the presence of Nigerian press was felt. The Nigerian press, particularly the newspapers have been powerful and highly respected in the political history of Nigeria. The virile activities of earliest Nigerian newspapers recorded some remarkable milestones that are still forming the basis of research into the effects of media coverage on politics. First, was the power of the press in the struggle for Nigeria's independence, heightened political sphere for Nigeria between 1966 and 1970 and several other draconian laws that were short-lived following media reports (Udejah, 2013, p. 368).

Meanwhile, the media were not spared of accusations of prejudices, sensationalism and allegations of ethnic divides. Perhaps, Udejah further reports that the divisions in the Nigerian press led to the emergence of early regional newspapers like *Nigerian Tribune* of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, in the western

region, *Gaska Ta fi Kwabo* and *Citizen of the North*, and the *Eastern Outlook* of the Eastern Region. The parochial positions of these regional newspapers according to Daramola (2006, p. 82) led to the establishment of the *Sunday Post* and *Nigerian Morning Post* to articulate federal government policies. Many other state Newspapers like *Daily Star* of Anambra State, *Herald* of Kwara, *Observer* in Edo State and *Triumph* of Kano sprang up. The list of newspapers that came into existence is endless as privately owned newspapers joined the reportorial scene. Consequently, the mass media are perceived as a significant influence in the electoral history of Nigeria with regards to the salience given to campaign issues.

Nigerian Elections, Media and Responsibility

Generally, the major charges against the mass media during elections include: partisanship, ethnic and religious chauvinism, blackmailing of some political candidates, distortion of reality, exaggeration, sycophancy, corruption, inciting polarisation and most particularly heating the polity. The statutory responsibility of the mass media as the fourth estate of the realm according to Dukor (1999, p. 283) is founded on the “fundamental right to receive and impart information”. Supportively, the former Director General of Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Iredia (2007, p. 12), states the responsibility of the media in this regard very clearly thus:

The people must be assisted to premise their choices of rationality to vote wisely during elections. They must have all information that is needed to elect the right candidates who can ensure good governance. Where such public awareness is lacking, those of us in the media must accept a share of the blame of failed elections in Nigeria.

Premised on the need for a virile journalism during electoral campaign, the late renowned politician Chuba Okadigbo

warned that journalism loses its objectivity and ethical foundations and becomes a bellicose instrument for political vilification and personal vendetta, when reports of national interest are compromised on the platform of partisanship (Nwosu, 1990, p. 32).

One of the main constitutional roles of the media in a democracy is to objectively monitor governance while remaining consistent, objective and professional in reporting political issues. The Nigerian Press Council, cited in Aghamelu (2014) nevertheless says this of the Nigeria media:

The Nigerian media have fallen victim of manipulations by government and politicians. We are being witnesses to the fallen standard of journalistic profession and its negative contributions to nation building through a hackneyed uncouth and indiscrete reporting of events and issues...ethnic polarization of media houses and consequent undue influence on power and political tussles. As a result, in moment of crisis, the media become ready tools for those actively involved in the crisis of power.

Moved also by Nigeria's tribalistic makeup, Marcia Grant, cited in Edogbo (1994, p. 33), reported that the character of political reporting and commentary has been entirely dependent on media ownership structure and the owner's relationship with the political structure in place. This according to him prompts the newspapers to speak for one political party or one region against another, which meant that the press has always acted not as impartial estate, but as mouthpiece of the political divisions in Nigeria. Also Mohammed (1994) observes that much did not change in the role of the media with regard to its impartiality in the

series of democratic elections and electioneering campaign. For him, press partisanship has always manifested in political reporting. As Agba (2007, p. 71) points out, these scenario represents a failure on the part of the media to engage in thorough analysis of party manifestoes and campaign promises.

Similarly, political campaigns are increasingly less dependent on the interests of the electorates and more on vague image based campaign commitments. A prime concern of media coverage of elections is the right of voters to full and accurate information and their rights to participate in debates and dialogue policy matters with politicians. However, Bues (2010) cautions the press not to take for granted the assumed dependence of the electorates on media information during electoral campaign. He noted that the electorates are becoming active and critical of campaign issues whether typified by politicians or presented as news by the print media. He therefore suggests that the media promotes two divergent perspectives in campaign issues for a virile democracy and national development: First, where the audience thinks retrospectively of the politician's achievement in previous responsibilities. Second, where the politicians are challenged to reason retrospectively on the electorates' scorecard of their previous performances and philanthropic profiles.

Oyesomi and Oyero (2012, p. 140) simplified this expectation from the media when they said: “ by unfettered scrutiny of and discussion of successes and failures of governments, the media can inform the public about how effectively representatives have performed and help hold them to account”. In a seaming disgust, Alemika and Omotosho (2008) reported that the media fail in that regards because journalists and some sections of media institutions are under obligations to carry materials under the editorial control of parties and candidates with gratifying inducements. Electoral campaign reports when subjected to newspaper's editorial policy, ideology, spread,

ownership and political inclinations disseminate information on the programme and the agenda of affiliate parties, and in the process, engage in political vendetta, public contempt and ridicule of the political contestants.

McQuail (2010, p. 282) rather proffers a neutral, informative role of the journalist giving room for objectivity and core professional value in political campaign reporting. The media are therefore expected to play their role effectively by informing, interpreting, representing the people, advocating better prospective policies, criticising unruly campaign motives and surveillance for peaceful elections. Okpoko (2003, p. 76) emphasized the role of the Nigerian newspapers when he stated that the press should provide adequate political education to enlighten the masses on the candidates with feasible policies and national interest. During elections, editorials, news coverage, feature stories and comments of Nigerian newspapers should empower Nigerian voters to make intelligent decisions on the candidates to vote for positive leadership (Okonkwo, 2003, p. 85).

The thrust of media electoral campaign is to set agenda by relative degree of prominence to certain issues that will ensure right voting choices based on national interest. Related studies in the area of media electoral coverage have been on the role of the media in elections (Osuagwu, 2011); the press and group identity politics in Nigeria (Galadima and Soola, 2012); media and voting behaviour (Udende, 2011) and Newspaper coverage of women participation in elections (Oyesomi and Oyero, 2012). While many were survey studies, few have content analysed newspaper coverage of campaign issues to determine whether the nature of campaign issues is relevant to national integration and development. This paper's study of three national newspapers; the *Vanguard*, the *Nation* and the *Guardian* will enrich the debate and probably help close the gap in literature in this area.

Theoretical Framework

Among the many theories that capture this study, the Agenda Setting theory is more pronounced. This is because the theory was advanced by media scholars to define the effects the mass media could have in creating salience of issues, setting agenda and forming public opinion particularly during elections. Coined by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the Agenda Setting theory is a phenomenon which had long been noticed and studied in the context of election campaigns. Wogu (2013, p. 89) citing the articulations of McCombs and Shaw (1972), stated thus, “in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality”. Readers not only learn about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to the issue by the amount of information in a news story and its position.

McQuail (2010, p. 512) says that the core idea is that the news media indicate to the public the electoral issues during political campaigns. This means that the mass media determine the important electoral issues and agenda of political campaign and which forms part of voting decisions of the electorates. The significance of this theory to this study lies in the fact that while politicians seek to swindle votes by imposing selfish motives characterized by various divides, the media should direct public attention to issues of national interests, shape cognitions, and sway positive public opinion to favour political candidates with the best political messages.

As earlier stated, other theories which subsist for this study include the Priming, Framing and Social Responsibility theories. These compatible theories are fallouts of the agenda setting theory and they help in supporting the primary theory of this study as well as the objectives of this paper. According to Baran and Davies (2012, p. 350) the agenda setting theory assesses how media coverage says “what to think about” by priority given to issues and candidates in election, framing tells the readers how to think about

priority issues by interpretations while priming influences the political judgments and choices following the weight of specific issues. The Social Responsibility theory is also vital to this study because the principal tenet of the theory was freedom accompanied by responsibility. Stemmed from the 1947 Hutchins Commission, it guides the media against sensationalism, commercialism, political imbalance and monopoly of the press.

Social Responsibility theory maintains that media freedom of expression on news, and agenda setting particularly on political events should be responsible in such a way that information and messages should be complete, truthful, comprehensive, intelligent and clear. The theory also accounts for defense of the public rights, responsibilities in public opinion formation, respect to standard of gathering and presenting information and respecting the integrity of the audience (Baran and Davies, 2012; McQuails, 2010). Thus, the idea of these cognate theories explains that the media coverage and interpretation of electoral issues could influence reader's judgements about elections and the Nigerian polity.

Methodology

Population

The study investigated Nigerian newspaper coverage of campaign issues in the 2015 General Elections. The aim was to examine the character of electoral campaign issues in order to find out if the issues were relevant to national integration and development. The population of the study therefore constituted all the Nigerian national newspapers in circulation during the period of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Thus, special interest newspapers in such areas as sports, fashion, business, health, were excluded. The study population was published dailies which circulate in all major towns and state capitals of Nigeria with the exception of weekend (Saturdays and Sundays) papers. These weekend papers were excluded because they mostly cover soft news and social

events that go with the weekend

Research Design

Given the nature of this study, it is only appropriate that content analysis was adopted as the research design to specifically investigate the newspapers under study. According to Walizer and Weiner (1978) in Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p. 156), content analysis is any systematic procedure devised to examine the content of documented information. Again, Kelinger (2000) cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p. 156) supports the use of content analysis for this kind of study when he argued that the design allows for studying and analysing communication content in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. It was in that order that the researchers developed the coding guide for measuring the variables.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

From the population, three national dailies: *the Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *the Nation* published from January 1, 2015 to March 27, 2015 of the electoral campaign period before the election proper constituted the sample. The months selected were at the heat of campaign, and is typical of a 90 days requirement according to section 99 (1) of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) in INEC (2014) for campaign before the actual date of election that was held in March 28, 2015.

These papers were selected for their ownership, popularity, ethnicity, geographic spread and slogan which apparently guide the stand of every newspaper in justifying issues for media dominance and agenda. *The Guardian* was established by the late Alex Ibru, and is fairly spread across all geographical region of the nation. It is, according to Abimbola (2015, p. 129), rightly or wrongly accused of hate mongering against the Igbo people irrespective of its slogan "Conscience, nurtured by truth". The *Vanguard* newspaper is owned by Sam Amuka Pemu. It has a wide range of circulation with the slogan "Towards a better life

for the people". The *Nation* newspaper is owned by Senator Ahmed Tinubu and is widely circulated mostly in the eastern region. It has reach for major cities in other zones of Nigeria with the slogan "Truth in Defence of Freedom". The study considered ownership of newspapers very important because ownership pattern often influenced the content and direction of news reports in the newspapers (Galadima and Soola 2012, p. 7).

The geographic spread ensures its accessibility and circulation, while ethnic affinity will help determine if campaign issues reported by the newspapers were sentiments from ethnic orientations. The slogan was also considered because newspapers slogans make the reader look twice, think thrice and pre-empt their contents in original ways (Nworgu and Dim, 2013).

The sample size was 108 editions of the three newspapers. By stratification, the 108 editions were arrived at by selecting three editions per days of the week in which case only Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were selected (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011, p. 162). These days were selected because they mark the beginning, middle and end of the week that would attract major events. Weekends were not considered because they were mostly days devoted to sports, entertainment and other soft stories going by reviews of some national dailies. Hence, the four weeks in each month gave us a total of 12 editions. This totaled 36 editions in three months multiplied by the three newspapers, totaling 108 editions.

The unit of analysis included the following:

1. **News:** current and straightforward information reported in the newspaper.
2. **Articles:** stories containing the opinion of the writer.
3. **Features:** stories with more investigative and interpretative depth.
4. **Comments:** remarks published in the newspaper.
5. **Viewpoints:** referring to a regular writer's position on issues.

6. **Letters to the Editor:** feedback and rejoinders from the newspaper readers to express their views over a recently published story.
7. **Advertisements:** paid notices or messages designed to promote or demote a candidate or party that were related to the 2015 presidential electoral campaign.

Only the presidential campaign was considered because this paper looked at how the issues reported in the newspapers will impact on the national unity and integration of Nigeria. Headlines, titles and text of these units were analysed to give manifest and latent interpretation necessary for better analysis and extrapolation. These variables (units of analysis) were measured for prominence; the relative value given to a story by its treatment in form of news, features, articles or any other way it was published, placement; where a story appeared in terms of front, back, inside or centre spread, frequency of reports: the number of times a given issue appeared in a particular edition of the newspaper. Other units of analysis include: frames of reports; the slant of the stories in terms of religious; Christianity or Islam, ethnicity; Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba extraction, state; whether the reports stressed particular state of origin, oppositional acrimony; whether units of analysis contained hate, or any kind of attack on opponents, responsibility; in terms of whether reports were issue based and concern for national development and source of reports in terms of whether stories were sponsored by media institution, party or identity groups, They were further grouped into mutually exclusive content categories such as name of newspaper, issue coverage, campaign elements, direction of coverage, source of story and prominence to yield better quantification. Data collection was done by using a coding sheet.

Coding/Inter-coder Reliability

To ensure reliability of the coding process, two of the researchers did a pre-coding (pilot coding) of a sub-sample to familiarize with

variables such as issues and units of analysis. The coders painstakingly went through the content of a sub-sample of the study to ensure proper understanding of the definitions. One hundred and eight (108) editions of the three newspapers were studied of which 402 issues were coded. Both coders agreed on 356 issues while they disagreed on 46 issues. Using Holst's (1969) formula for ensuring reliability, Inter-coder reliability was arrived at thus:

$$r = \frac{2m}{N_1 + N_2}$$

Where M = Total items agreed on by both coders

N_1 = Total items coded by coder 1

N_2 = Total items coded by coder 2

$$r = \frac{2 \times 356}{402 + 402}$$

$$r = \frac{712}{804}$$

$$= r = 0.88$$

The coding is therefore reliable.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 402 reports were published by the three newspapers on the presidential election campaign issues of the 2015 General Elections. The analysis was focused on the presidential candidates because they wield the national leadership and issues on how their campaign was conducted impacts on national unity and integration. From these reports, the *Guardian* had 142 issues; the *Vanguard* had 124 issues; while the *Nation* had 136 issues in all the 102 editions. This implies that for the study period of three months (January 1, 2015 to March 27, 2015), the three newspapers reported 402 issues on the 2015 presidential election campaign. The data generated were presented in simple tables of numbers and percentages. The presentation of the data was done in the order in which the research questions appeared.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution Table on 2015 Presidential Electoral Campaign issues

Months	January	February	March	Total %
Guardian	38	55	49	142 (35%)
Vanguard	32	40	52	124 (31%)
Nation	39	51	46	136 (34%)
Total	109 (27%)	146 (36%)	147 (37%)	402 (100%)

A total of 402 issues were reported on the 2015 Presidential Electoral Campaign by the newspapers with the *Guardian* leading with a total of 35% issues in the three months. *The Nation* followed with 34% issues, while the *Vanguard* published the least number of issues at 31%. Within the period under review, the newspapers carried more stories on the campaign in the period of March with 37% issues, followed by February which published 36% issues while the least number of issues representing 27% were published in January 2015. From the data, the Nigerian newspapers demonstrated its role of informing and educating the Nigerian populace on the political situation by reporting more issues as the campaign progressed.

Research Question 1: What issues dominated campaign reports in the 2015 Presidential elections by the Nigerian newspapers?

Table 2: Issues Coverage Dominating in the 2015 Presidential Electoral Campaign.

Campaign Issues	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
Politics	84	50	61	195(49%)
Crime	7	12	12	31 (8%)
Health	5	15	7	27 (7%)
Economy	12	13	10	35 (9%)
Science	2	1	8	11 (3%)
Human interest	14	18	11	43 (10%)
Foreign investment	-	-	9	9 (2%)
Education	18	15	13	46 (11%)
Energy	-	-	5	5 (1%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)

Data in table 2 showed politics dominated issues reported in the newspaper with 49% of all the issues published. This indicated the heat of political tussle; interest of politicians to define the climate of event prior to the 2015 electoral polls. Other pressing national issues were majorly under- reported and expressed in the campaign messages of politicians and media reports.

Research Question 2: What were the message elements of the issues reported by Nigerian newspapers?

Data generated for this research question were presented in tables 3, 4 and 5 below:

Table 3: Campaign Elements in 2015 General Elections According to Frames

Campaign Elements	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
Religion	27	22	20	69 (17%)
Ethnicity	34	31	45	110 (27%)
Oppositional acrimony	45	42	33	120 (30%)
State	27	24	19	70 (18%)
Responsibility	9	5	19	33 (8%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)

From Table 3 above, greater number representing 30% issues of oppositional acrimony dominated campaign elements. This was followed closely by ethnic frames at 27%, State at 18%, religion at 17% that featured dominantly. Responsibility which was determined to indicate the action and motives of the contesting parties were the least framed at 8%. It is therefore noticeable and conclusive that the issues dominated in the presidential electoral campaign were capable of dividing the country into aggressive, ethnic, religious and state differences. This situation is capable of disintegrating the nation and harbouring distrust against sections of people that were not supportive of the winning team after the election.

Table 4: Campaign elements that Divided Nigeria in 2015 presidential election following Direction of coverage

Direction of Coverage	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
Positive	36	43	56	135 (34%)
Negative	59	39	47	145 (36%)
Neutral	47	42	33	122 (30%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)

Data from Table 4 was a follow up of Table 3 to find out the sensitisation that was fed to people even while campaigns were championed along ethnic, state and religious enclaves. It was determined also to know the position of the issues canvassed by the contending parties and how the newspapers reported it. In this sense, reports that did not speak favourably of the candidate or issue reported was classified as negative report, while reports that spoke favourably of the candidate or issue reported were classified as positive. The Negative issues reported were also capable of dividing the country along ethnic, state and religious lines. Meanwhile, neutrality as classified was used to indicate that the reports were balanced without bias.

Consequently, as shown in Table 4, the direction of reports on presidential election campaign was mostly on the negative side with 36% of issues from all the newspapers reviewed. Thirty-four percent (34%) of the entire reports were positive with the less number of direction of reports. The positive stories were in other words devoid of divisive undertones. This underestimated the objectivity of the media in heightened political situation and showed subversion to political interests and wordings of politicians. This was against what (Okunna, 2003, p. 74) posited that journalists should not show favour to either side in any issue but treat everybody alike to avoid creating divisions on people's consciousness.

Table 5: Campaign Elements in 2015 Elections According to Source of Story

Source of Story	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
Media	56	42	61	159 (40%)
Party	34	33	44	111 (27%)
Identity Group	52	49	31	132 (33%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)

Indications from Table 5 above show that greater number of campaign issues reported in the newspapers were sourced from the media institutions or in-house by-lines. This variable was used to determine the involvement and role of the mass media in the electoral campaigns advanced by the contending political parties. It is clear from the results that 40% of total number of issues originated from the newspapers or publishers. While 33% were from identity groups like NGO's, supporters group, religious communities, traditional rulers, ethnic groups and other affiliates of contested candidates. The least source of issues or story at 27% was driven by the political parties or candidates.

Table 6: Distribution of Presidential Campaign Issues According to Story type, Prominence and illustration

Stories Type	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
News	52	51	59	162 (40)
Editorial	6	2	1	9 (2%)
Column	24	29	36	89 (22%)
Advertisement	43	28	28	99 (25%)
Features	17	14	12	43(11%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)
Page placement	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
Front page	12	17	31	60 (15%)
Back page	6	12	16	34 (8%)
Inside page	109	86	75	270 (67%)
Centre spread	15	9	14	38 (10%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)
Illustration	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total (%)
No photo	44	16	41	101 (25%)
Black and white photo	23	40	33	96 (24%)
Colour photo	75	68	62	205 (51%)
Total	142	124	136	402 (100%)

Table 6 above was compressed to accommodate all the variables used to determine prominence given to campaign issues by the media. Prominence according to Okoye (1998, p. 12) in Okunna and Omenugha (2012, p.79) explains the news value because events with much importance are given more attention in the news than events involving those that may be judged less prominent. Prominence is judged in media content analysis by the kind of treatment given to reports in form of news, features, or editorial. It is also judged by the page placement of reports. Where a particular report is placed on the pages of a newspaper determines the prominence given to it by the news media. Newspaper also accords prominence to reports by illustration given to the story using photos, or graphical representations.

The analysis in Table 6 therefore showed that Nigerian newspapers gave prominence to electoral campaign issues of the 2015 election. As seen from the table, campaign issues reported as news took the lead with 40% of the entire electoral campaign issues, followed by issues on advertisement at 25%, column at 22%, features at 11%. Editorial issues were least featured owing to the limited number of editorial page in a newspaper. However, the little number of 2% on electoral campaign that was featured in the editorial showed the value given by newspapers on electoral campaign issues. Although editorial seems to be the most significant criteria for judging prominence based on story treatment (kind of story), news is a significant indicator that an issue is relevant given the criteria for news judgement and the frequency of reports provided in the news.

However, prominence was not given to placement as front page placement of the campaign issues were minimal at 15% compared to greater number given to inside page stories at 67%. Campaign issues reported in centre spread were 10%, while back

pages were least prominent with 8%.

It was also shown in the table that campaign issues were illustrated with colour photos which are also an important indicator of the prominence the Nigerian newspapers gave to campaign issues. From the table greater number of campaign issues were illustrated with colour photos at 51% more than other units of illustrations put together. Black and white photo illustrations were 24%, while 25% had no photo illustrations. The total of photo illustrations put together (colour and Black/ white) was 75% showing that in all the campaign issues were given prominence in terms of picture illustrations.

Discussion of Findings

From our data analysis, it is evident that while the politicians canvassed their political interests, pressing national issues like health, economy, education, and energy were undermined and as such were less reported and expressed in the campaign messages of politicians and media reports. In this regard, *Guardian* newspaper, (January, 13, 2015) reported in its editorial titled “*Wanted: Issue Oriented Campaign Please*” that “campaign contents generally lack depth of thinking, and breadth of fact as well as figure, and originality to urgent national question and they are rife with accusations, mudslinging, and personal attacks”. Thus, politicians and the media would have concentrated on articulated visionary plans for the country, so that the electorate's decisions were guided by national interests instead of the unfair of political activities that heralded the campaign periods.

From Table 4, analysis showed that all the issue elements including oppositional acrimony were on the high side against responsibility element that was determined to know the plans and visions of contesting candidates in campaign messages. This

finding is against the agenda setting theory on which this study is anchored and which condition the media to play important part in shaping political reality by creating the salience of issues during elections (Wogu, 2013, p. 89 in McCombs and Shaw 1972). By extension, this finding also implies that the media could not tell the readers how to think about campaign issues that will determine their voting choices as presumed by the framing theory which was the supporting theory of this study. It is therefore discovered that the issue elements that dominated in the presidential electoral campaign were capable of dividing the country into aggressive, ethnic, religious and state differences. This situation is capable of disintegrating the nation and harbouring distrust against sections of people that were not supportive of the winning team after the election. The issue elements emphasises conflicts among groups, opposing parties and identity groups similar to the findings of Galadima and Soola (2012, p. 14) on the Press and Group Identity politics in Nigeria.

The direction of these reports on presidential election campaign were also mostly in negative or positive direction with a sum total of 70% against 30% reported in a neutral (balanced and unbiased) direction. This finding agrees with the worries of Geer (2006) that spinning; a manipulative tactics to give public biased information lie at the very centre of Nigeria's political communication. This is also consistent with the findings of Nwosu (1990, p. 31) that the mass media since the 1979 and 1983 elections were charged with partisanship, ethnic chauvinism, distortion of reality, and polarisation of the North-South dichotomy through its reports. This corroborates what experts reported in the *Nation* newspaper (February, 2015) that Nigeria's democracy suffers from partisan approach of the journalists in election reporting. It is again re-echoed in this finding that the

media have not lived up to the principles of social responsibility theory to avoid being sensational and prejudicial in their reports particularly in electoral processes in this instance.

The records of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that the media are the major primary sources of national political information, subsist in the findings of this study given that most campaign issues reported in the newspapers were sourced from the media institutions or in-house staff. This showed the effectiveness of the media in the 2015 electoral campaign coverage and the role of the mass media in the electoral campaigns. Although, other campaign issues were raised by other sources and affiliates.

On prominence given to campaign issues, it was clear that the Nigerian newspapers gave much value to covering the campaign activities, however, the issues reported were of little significance to national development and integration. Findings showed that prominence was given to campaign issues since the issues were mostly reported as news with 40% greater than other kinds of stories. Although editorial seems to be the most significant criteria for judging prominence based on story treatment (kind of story), news is equally a significant indicator that an issue is relevant given the criteria for news judgement and the frequency of reports provided in the news. However, prominence was not given to placement as front page placement of the campaign issues were minimal at 15% compared to greater number given to inside page stories at 67%. Campaign issues reported in centre spread were 10%, while back pages were least prominent with 8%. This showed that the campaign issues were not strategically placed to draw attention. This inference may not be entirely acceptable when compared with the position of Poopola (2011, p. 374) that the front and back pages of newspapers have limited space and are only reserved for the most

important and captivating news stories.

However, prominence was again emphasized using photo illustrations. Colour photos which are important indicators of prominence in newspapers was given to campaign issues. From the review, greater number of campaign issues were illustrated with colour photos at 51% more than other units of illustrations put together. However, the total of photo illustrations put together (colour and Black/ white) was 5% against non – photo illustrations showing that the campaign issues were given prominence in terms of picture illustrations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The mass media particularly the Nigerian newspapers play considerable role in electoral coverage during elections and help to define or structure the democratic process. The 2015 electoral campaign activities came with its own share of the usual accusing fingers on the media on partisanship. The politicians made the situation worse by engaging in oppositional acrimonies, hate campaigns, ethnic, and sectarian campaigns which made the electoral process lack issue based campaigns that a developing nation like Nigeria craves for.

In the light of this, it is the conclusion of this paper that the Nigerian newspapers have the right to create and nurture vivid images of campaign issues through the amount and style of coverage they give to what the politicians or their supporters say during electoral campaign. The Nigerian newspapers also have the right and responsibility to refine campaign issues to integrate diversified interests and agitations. The mass media according to Edeani (1990, p. 19) ought to reflect national development needs by giving it prominent and sustained coverage in its various dimensions. In doing this, the media would be satisfying its

agenda setting role in integrating development in democratic nations like Nigeria.

The study therefore recommends the following:

1. That the media should engage in media sensitisation prior to electoral campaign periods to educate the politicians and their supporters of the implications of vague campaign strategies. This will ensure that subsequent elections would be issue based and grounded on that basis for electoral assessment of the political candidates by the electorates.
2. Politicians should on their part desist from ethnic, identity and acrimonious campaigns capable of heating the polity during elections, sowing distrust among Nigerians and dividing the country.
3. Future studies should look into the leadership positions of elected political officers to determine the effect of ethnic affiliations, sensationalism, and sectarian politics on national integration to know if politicians base their policies on the supports from areas of support during elections.

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