

The Politics of Newspaper Framing of the 2015 Presidential Election Results in Nigeria

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Abstract

The 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria is one that was speculated and predicted by different groups and members of the society as well as the media. These speculations came against the backdrop of seeming believe and expectation that the ruling political party will carry the day. But this usual trend was broken and that made the year's election unique, being the first of its kind where an opposition party (APC) will unseat a ruling party (PDP). The election was characterized by many political tussles and strife between the two major contending political parties. Media research however, have examined media framings on certain issues such as politics and elections but there is less research dealing with media framing of election results. In view of this, this paper examines print media framing of the 2015 presidential election results from March 28 to April 1, 2015 among five randomly selected national newspapers in Nigeria. The study employed the Agenda-setting theory as well as the Framing theory to explain the phenomenon under investigation. Using the quantitative content analysis method, the findings reveal that victory frame (i.e. who is winning) as well as Contestation frames (i.e. reactions/protests over results) and doubtful frames (i.e. fake results) were predominantly used alongside frequency (as a frame) to set the tone of readers' view of the outcome of the election. We therefore conclude that patterns of newspaper frames of the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria were influenced by the political culture and the characteristics of the political values that shape our polity. Based on this, we recommend among others that media frames of issues of public interest should develop constructive discourse on electioneering in Nigeria to shape our framework for policy development.

Keywords: .Print media .Framing .Presidential election .Results

Introduction

People like to think of reality as fixed, as something we can all agree on. People rely on the media for information, though they know the media may make mistake, but largely, they trust the media to present reality "the way it is." The news media make every effort to promote this view by trying to appear neutral and objective. But the writers and editors construct a subjective picture of reality, selecting and organizing a flood of information in a way that make sense to themselves and their audiences. Everyday, literal events or occurrence according to Gofman (1959) seem to have differnt episodes and interpretations by writers .This process is called framing. Golding and Murdock (2005, p. 67) opined that production of meaning is an exercise of power. This is related to media ownership which consequently has influence on the activities of the media firm.

Framing in the media comes in diverse ways and it include the decision on which of the day's many happenings will be awarded significance and how it will be presented, and the placement of such news in the day's edition etc. The pattern of media framing of issues in Nigeria tends to inform the aggregate thought and opinion held by observers who depend on the media for up-to-date information; hence, there is the belief that news framing has corrupt undertones. The only difference with current revelations is that stories are filtering out from within its camp. Okoro and Odoemelam (2013 p.1) pointed out that the act of framing is one of the ways the media influence perception of key events and one of such events is the 2015 presidential election result. Hallahan (1999 p.207) sees framing as a "window or portrait frame drawn around information that delimits the subject matter and, thus, focuses attention on key elements within". Also, Lippmann (quoted in Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2008, p. 52) notes that "news is responsible for providing the 'pseudo-environment' upon which people get the day-to-day happenings which they can not on their own experience and understand directly and rely on news to experience and understand events they cannot observe directly that news frames are important in how these events are reported since they reflect a process of recurring selection and emphasis in communicating perceived reality."

Statement of the Problem

The 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, the fifth since 1999 when the military handed over power to elected civilians, was the first time the opposition party had a realistic chance of wresting power from the then ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). It was a two-horse race between the ruling party (PDP) and the main opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC), the party that was formed in February 2013 from a merger of three ethnically and regionally based political parties. Before the emergence of the APC, opposition parties were mostly fragmented along regional and ethnic lines, making it impossible for them to mount a credible challenge to the then ruling PDP. Thus, at election times such as the Presidential elections which according to Merge (2013, p.2) "is an appropriate place to study the issue of equitable coverage that has a high-profile event that has two clear, legitimate, opposing sides." The ability of the media to influence salient events on the public's minds has been part of Nigeria's political and economic culture to date (Udeze, 2005 p.187).

Media researches however, have examined media framings on certain issues such as politics and elections, there is less research dealing with media framing of election results. Hence, this paper examines print media framing of the 2015 presidential election results from March 28 to April 1, 2015 among five randomly selected national newspapers in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following were the research questions formulated for this study:

1. What is the frequency of coverage given to the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria by the sampled newspapers?
2. What is the level of prominence (importance) given to stories on the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria?
3. What were the frames used by the sampled newspapers in their coverage of the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria?
4. What are the implications of these frames used by the sampled newspapers in covering the 2015 presidential election results?

Literature Review

Framings like every other mass communication research has also appeared to be popular in the daily discourse as it relates to media critics, politics and religious or ethnic issues. for instance two linguistics scholars, Noam and Chomsky used the term as cited in

(Tankard, 2001) in an interview discussing New York Times coverage of the crisis in Kuwait prior to the Gulf war. They argued that the Times story framed an offer by Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in a way that trivialised the offer. It is becoming clear to media and political analyst that wording a question in a particular way can frame the issue in a specific way. Even though journalism is thought to be a neutral profession, it is common phenomenon to see media being biased to certain groups either positively or negatively. Such tendency of the media is what Hallin and Mancini (2011) call political parallelism in the media.

Furthermore, on the relationship between the picture frame and media frames, talking on its further functions, Tankard (2001) observed that as the picture frame gives the tone for the viewing of the picture so also the news media can set a tone for an event or issue by the choice of frames. The study by De Vreese, Banducci, Semekko and Boomgaardan (2006) supported this claim. In their study on media coverage of EU's (European Union) democratic and communication deficit; a link was discovered between media coverage of the EU and public perception of EU legitimacy, mass support and citizen engagement in elections. The study analysed two most widely watched public and private main evening television news shows and three newspapers. The findings reveal that the negative tone in coverage of EU have contributed to the democratic deficit in terms of negative attitude about the EU and low participation in European Parliament elections. Garber (2006) also elaborated on this when she stated that framings provide "interpretative background by which the story is judged" Giltins also defined framing in this direction when he stated that frames are "patterns of interpretation and presentation".

The frame of house is another way media framing can be related as metaphor. Frames in building, puts together and provides the structural elements of the building. In other words, it is an organising structure used to construct a building. In newsworld, a frame according to Tankard (2001) can be the "organising idea on which a story is built". Similarly, Gamson (1989) suggested that a frame "is a centrally organised idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue."

Literatures abound on the role of the mass media in political reporting, locally, nationally and internationally. Mass media are the means of political communications and propaganda, Umechukwu (2001) agrees to this. Political culture in a nation tends to influence the political news of its media. In a study conducted by Floss and Marcinkowski (2008), to find out the macro-determinant of news frame and the extent to which a nation's political culture is reflected in the framing of political news in Switzerland and Germany. Two newspapers from the countries were analysed, 366 issues with a total of 878 articles. The result from the study supported the assumptions that a nation's political culture influences the political news frames.

Politics has been identified as one of the disciplines that heavily use mass media. Abate, (2013), pointed out that election is one of the major activities of politics that attracts media's attention all over the world. It has also been stated earlier in this paper that the framing pattern of the media is heavily determined by the political culture prevalent in the country. Different studies have been conducted to investigate how framing election by the media differ among different countries ranging from the western developed world where the political and socio-economic systems are different from the developing world.

Scholars identified the following as kinds of frames adopted by news media outlets. They include: game frame, issue frames, personality-centered frames and episodic frames (Domke et al 1997, Mantler & Whiteman 1995; Woong, 1997; Porto 2001; Braden, 1996; Rhee, 1997; Abate, 2013).

The game frame (strategic or horse race frame) has been identified by various studies as the most commonly used frame by journalists in covering elections. Abate (2013), opined that game frame involves the use of game or competitive language. Here, the journalist's coverage of election focuses on the candidates' strategy, win-or-lose aspect

of the campaign and politicians interest (Garber, 1993; Jamieson, 1992; Peterson, 1993). Iyenger (1991), explains this in his book titled "Anyone Responsible"? as cited in Abate (2013), as the way of detailing the candidates' electoral prospects, their poll standing and fundraising efforts rather than the policy position or personal characteristics. The game frame therefore focuses on the strategy employed by the candidate while campaigning for elections.

Issue frame is a kind of frame that explains the candidates' position on specific issue. This kind of frame according to Abate is interpretative in nature and it requires a lot of time, and this makes it like to be used in the print media rather than the broadcast media. Joseph and Jamieson (1996) opined that framing has a neutral effect on audience's cynicism towards politicians. Most studies conducted on the framing of election news revealed the prevalence of game and issue frames media coverage of elections. However, they differ in the sense that issue frame focuses on stories about policy problems and solutions describing politicians' policy stand and implications, while the game frame relates to stories about winning elections and how political processes affect politicians or their parties (Lawrence, 2000).

Personality-centered frame focuses on the individual characteristics of candidates, their abilities and the responses of voters to their personalities (Porto, 2001). It is also known as the image frame. Abate, observed that this kind of frame is dominant in countries with presidential system than those in parliament. On the other hand, Bystorm, Roberston and Banwaet (2001) observed it is commonly used in elections that involves female candidates. Findings from studies have shown that the way media cover or portrays candidates' image influences voters' preferences (Sullivan, Aldrich, Borgida & Rahm, 1990).

Episodic frame involves telling stories of facts in episodes. According to Iyenger, Episodic framing involves case study reporting that tends to follow a story line. This type of frame is mostly used in the electronic media and studies revealed that personality-centered frame and episodic frames are scarcely used.

framings whether game, issue, episodic and personality-centered affect peoples' perception of an event. Most, studies conducted on media framing were carried to show the common framing patterns used by journalists while covering events or the effect of the frames on public opinion.

In the study conducted by Abate, (2013) on the framing of the 2005 Ethiopian National election using privately owned print media outlet, the findings from the study reveal that the issue frame was predominant in covering the election related news. This is so, as the study was set to identify the dominant type of frame used by the print media that were studied. Findings from the study also revealed a shift in the findings of other scholars. Findings from scholars reveal that game frame is more likely to be used as the election draws closer. However, findings from this study reveal a decrease in the amount of game frames used as the election date approaches.

Studies conducted in United States of America (USA) (Lawrence, 2000; Angelo, 2006), revealed that game frame is predominantly used. Kovac & Rosentiel (2001) discovered in their study that this is so because it is easier and safer for journalist and media personnels to assess candidates' campaign strategies than to explain what the candidate's issue stand on some specific topic is.

In another study conducted in Nigeria by Brown and Udomison (2015), on the evaluation of political news reportage in Nigeria, using two national dailies. The study was set to also examine how political news is been reported by the print media and the level of prominence given to it. The findings revealed that the stories were framed to favour the government, thereby jeopardizing the prestige and dignity of the press as being the tool of government. The study also revealed that the political news was not given prominence by way of catchy placement or location in the newspaper.

Theoretical Framework

To provide a theoretical foundation for the explanation of the phenomenon under study, we adopted the Agenda Setting and Framing Theories of Communication.

Agenda Setting

In the words of Folarin (1998, p.68), "agenda setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society." According to him:

Agenda setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

This suggests that the media do not actually set agenda because already the masses have something in their mind (what they think) but the media provide the how to think about what is already in their mind.

Agenda setting deals with the importance attached to issues as they are generated from the activities that go on in the society. The media provide the cues that help people to ascertain the importance of an issue.

McCombs and Reynolds (2002, p.17) pointed out that: "in the absence of other cues, people tend to judge the importance of issues from their salience in the media and to focus their attention on those presumably most important issues."

Petty, Priester and Brinol, (2002, p.14) stress that: "the media have little power to change people's opinions but more power to re-enforce existing views." Hence, what Nigerians actually know about the 2015 presidential election results is largely re-enforced by newspaper reports on the issue.

Framing Theory

The concept of framing was drawn from the word 'frame' as used in pictures, where only what is within the frame (i.e. the image) of the picture is seen while other parts covered by the frame of the picture are not seen.

The above assertion points to the fact that framing provides meaning to what people already have as agenda. In other words, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic. While agenda setting theory deals with the salience of issues, framing is concerned with the presentation of issues. (De Vreese, 2005)

Framing theory is often called the second-order agenda setting theory. (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Here, they argue that the agenda setting operates at two levels or orders namely:

- The Object Level
- The Attribute Level

Agenda setting focuses on what to think about (object level), while framing extends to how to think about (attribute level). Framing tells which attribute of the object is important and which ones are not. Hence, emphasis is laid on the more important attributes of the object leaving the less important. Relating this theory to the study, it is important to point out that attributes of the presidential elections results were downplayed in order to make the readers see what the media used as their attention getting technique.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the researchers used the quantitative content analysis method which examines the manifest content of communication in the sampled newspapers in themes to bring out the frames. This study focused on stories from the sampled newspapers on the 2015 presidential election results (i.e. between March 28 to

April 1, 2015), as well as other related stories that do not explicitly mention the results but contained issues related to it.

The population of the study consists of all the editions of the five selected national dailies (*Daily Trust, Daily Independent, National Mirror, The Nation and Daily Sun*) which were randomly picked from the 24 national newspapers in Nigeria (source: www.masterweb.com).

The data were analysed using the simple percentage and frequency as shown in tables which provide answers to the research questions formulated for the study. The themes that bring out the frames were guided by the objectives of the study.

Discussion of Findings

Here, the findings emanating from this study are discussed in relation to that of similar studies on the variables under investigation. This was guided by the objectives of the study and the proposed research questions.

Research Question One: *What is the frequency of coverage given to the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria by the sampled newspapers?*

The answer to the above research question shows the preponderance of frequency of coverage among the sampled newspapers. The findings reveal an average of seven stories per edition ($142 \div 19$) on the 2015 presidential election results.

More specifically, *Daily Trust* recorded the highest number of stories on the 2015 presidential election results (54 stories in 4 edition) representing 38% with a variety of frames to capture the different aspects of the election results.

Frequency of coverage (as a frame) sets the tone for readers' perception of an issue. This is what Folarin (1998) meant while he was explaining the Agenda Setting theory. According to him:

Agenda setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

This implies that the media do not actually tell people what to think since they already have something in mind, the media only re-enforces what the audience is thinking and gives it a frame. This is achieved using frequency of coverage of a particular frame of an issue. This is because the number of times an issue is presented in the media speaks volume of the relative importance attached to that issue. This agrees with the observations of Tankard (2001) that "Picture frames give the tone for the viewing of the picture" just as news media use frequency (as a picture frame) to tell readers how important it is to think about a particular aspect of an issue.

Generally, the findings reveal that frequency of coverage was extensively used within the context of this study to set the tone and guide readers' thought on the presidential election results.

Research Question Two: *What is the level of prominence (importance) given to stories on the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria?*

Figures presented answer the above research question as it considers story placements and headline use. The placement of stories considered alongside headline use is important within the context of this study because emphasis is not just on where the stories appear but with what headline size (how were the stories graded in the mind of readers).

Seven of the front page stories used banner headlines (i.e. headlines with font size of above 60 points) as a frame not just to grade the news but to tell readers of its relative importance. These headlines include:

- **Buhari in early lead in South-West** (Sunday Mirror, March 29, 2015)
- **Jonathan, Buhari in Final Showdown** (The Nation, March 28, 2015)
- **Buhari Shoots Ahead** (Sun, March 31, 2015)

- **Anxiety over polls results** (Sun, March 30, 2015)
- **Buhari wins big in Lagos, Ogun, Osun** (Daily Trust, March 29, 2015)
- **Buhari leads Jonathan, wins in 10 states** (Daily Independent, March 31, 2015)
- **Buhari Ahead in Kano, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Osun, 4 Others** (The Nation, March 30, 2015)

From the above Banner Headlines (used as frames), five speak of "who is winning," (**Victory Frames**) one talks about "reaction over results" (**Contestation Frames**), while the other one has quite a neutral slant. This shows that much of the frames in the use of banner headline tilted towards the candidate or party that is on the lead. Apart from getting the attention of readers to the story, this kind of frame also "cuts a slice" from the entire picture (i.e. presidential election results) and excludes other possible slices (Tuchman, 1978).

This framing pattern in attaching relevance or relative importance to an issue from the angle of media portrayal is drawn from the political culture prevalent in the society. As pointed out by Abate (2013), media attention is drawn to aspects of an issue that can draw the largest readership or viewership/listenership. Hence, the framing of salient aspects like "who is winning" (Victory Frame) as a way of giving importance to the issue under consideration. This finding also agrees with the Game Frame syndrome.

Abate (2013), opined that game frame involves the use of game or competition language. Here, the journalist's coverage of election focuses on the candidates' strategy, win-or-loose aspect of the campaign and politicians interest.

Other story headlines that appeared in front page but not in banner headline include:

- **APC to INEC: cancel elections in Rivers, Akwa-Ibom States** (The Nation, March 30, 2015)
- **Tragedy trails polls** (Sun, March 30, 2015)
- **Card reader, logistics failure mars polls** (Sunday Mirror, March 29, 2015)
- **Buhari leads with 2.03m** (The Nation, March 31, 2015)
- **U.S., U. K. warn against tampering with polls result** (The Nation, March 31, 2015)
- **Buhari leads Jonathan** (Daily Trust, March 31, 2015)
- **Don't undermine election results - US, UK** (Daily Trust, March 31, 2015)
- **Presidential poll: We're leading in 23 states - PDP** (Daily Independent, March 30, 2015)

Here, we see various categories of frames in display. There is a preponderance of "Victory Frame" from the front page headlines used by the sampled newspapers. *The Nation*, *Daily Independent* and *Daily Trust* used more of "Game Frame." This is with a view to evoking a pattern of thought in the mind of readers. This agrees with studies carried out by Garber, 1993; Peterson, 1993; Lawrence, 2000 and Iyenger, 1991.

Daily Sun, thrives on issue frames and the unusual. This explains its sensationalism approach to covering issues. And this agrees with the findings of scholars like Domke et al (1997) and Braden (1996).

Research Question Three: What were the frames used by the sampled newspapers in their coverage of the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria?

The answer to the above research question illustrated three themes under which the various frames were presented. On the theme of "Angle of Story", much of it was on 'reaction/protests over results' which led to **Contestation Frames** (54 representing 38%). This frame is similar to issue frame and personality-centred frame discussed earlier in this study. This is because issues emanate from persons and its contradiction with an individual's interest evokes negative reaction. There were expectations from both parties (i.e. PDP and APC) that either of them will carry the day. Also, some of the newspaper

like *The Nation* and *Daily Sun* as well as *Daily Trust* framed their stories in that direction before the elections were conducted (i.e. March 28, 2015).

This explains why there were reactions over the results. The frames of Contestation coming from proponents of PDP was more on Fake results (i.e. **Doubtful Frames**) which it claimed emanated from APC; while the frames from the APC supporters were more on cancellation of results in areas perceived to be PDP states.

Obviously, the preponderance of frames on “who is winning” (i.e. **Victory Frames**) was more on APC from *Daily Trust*, *Daily Sun*, *National Mirror* and *The Nation* newspapers; while **Daily Independent** had more of frames on PDP winning. The implication here is that ownership patterns and ethnicity has a major role to play in this result.

These frames were also reflected in the theme of “Political Party of Focus”, where APC had more (37 representing 26%) than PDP with 16 (11%) and the theme on personality (pictures) of focus which showed Buhari with 12 (17%) and Jonathan with 9 (13%) as stated earlier in the analysis.

Issue frames as used in this study contradicts that previous studies (Joseph et al 1996) where they opined that it has neutral effect on audience’s cynicism towards politicians as portrayed in media contents.

The use of “Fake Results” (i.e. **Doubtful Frames**) as a frame in this study agrees with the use of Result Charts which is similar to episodic frame as used in previous studies (Sullivan et al, 1990 and Iyenger, 1990). These studies claim that even though the frame is scarcely used, it tends to follow a story line or pattern. Result charts as used in this study followed a pattern (i.e. consistently showing places that a particular candidate is winning ignoring where they are losing).

Research Question Four: What are the implications of these frames used by the sampled newspapers in covering the 2015 presidential election results?

Having considered the results from tables and their analysis, it is important also to assess the implication of the various frames as used in this study.

The frame of frequency of an issue shows a trend in Nigeria print media coverage of election issues. This trend is motivated by economic interest which makes most media houses to either use sensationalism (like *Daily Sun*) or a preponderance of competitive language in their frame to attract large readership.

These competitive languages influence the psychological disposition of readers to see a candidate better than another without considering the grounds on which those competitive languages emanated from. Newspapers guide the thought of readers using this frame to increase sales but end up giving them a wrong or bias impression of an issue.

This has made today’s media to be subjectively-objective, because their objectivity has an economic undertone. Newspapers achieve this through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.

The level of prominence on issue emanating from the 2015 presidential election results is found more on the “**Victory Frame**” (i.e. who is winning frame). This frame also influenced results from “reactions/protests over results” (**Contestation Frames**) which led to the preponderance of reports on it (54 representing 38%). The implication here is that the political culture and ideology of the country has largely influenced the media frames. The Game Frame, Issue Frame and Personality-centred Frame tend to be on the increase in media representation of issues in Nigeria (especially in politics) (Abate, 2013). This explains the nature of the political landscape where the media operates and the media cannot, in anyway, be different from the society where it operates.

Summary

This paper examines newspaper framing of the 2015 presidential election results in Nigeria between March 28 and April 1, 2015 (5 days study period). This paper was guided

by the following research objectives: to find out frequencies of coverage, level of prominence (importance) given to stories on the 2015 presidential election results as well as the various frames used to present these issues and their implications.

A quantitative content analysis approach was adopted on the manifest contents of communication as contained in five (5) randomly selected National Newspapers (Daily Trust, National Mirror, Daily Sun, Daily Independent and The Nation).

The findings reveal that frequency of coverage was extensively used as a frame to set the tone for what readers will think about on the 2015 presidential election results. Also, banner headlines were used more as **Victory Frames** (i.e. who is winning) as well as **Contestation frames** (i.e. reactions/protesters over results and party or candidate of focus). Most of the newspapers (4 out of 5) (except *Daily Independent*) used Buhari and APC as their candidate & party of focus in their frames as indicated below:

- **Buhari in early lead in South-West** (Sunday Mirror, March 29, 2015)
- **Buhari leads with 2.03m** (The Nation, March 31, 2015)
- **Buhari leads Jonathan** (Daily Trust, March 31, 2015)
- **Buhari Shoots Ahead** (Sun, March 31, 2015)
- **Buhari wins big in Lagos, Ogun, Osun** (Daily Trust, March 29, 2015)
- **Buhari Ahead in Kano, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Osun, 4 Others** (The Nation, March 30, 2015).

Conclusion

From the findings in this study, we conclude that media framing of the 2015 presidential election results were subjectively-objective in the sense that their 'objectivity' had an economic undertone.

Also, bias frames were informed by ownership pattern of the media and ethnicity played a key role in the kind of frames that emanated from this study. For instance, *Daily Trust* and the *Nation* presented most of their frames against Jonathan and PDP.

Lastly, the Patterns of newspaper frames of the 2015 presidential election results were influenced by the political culture as well as the characteristics of Nigerians political values.

Recommendations

In view of the findings and the conclusions drawn in this study, we make the following recommendations:

- Media frames of issues of public interest should develop constructive discourse on electioneering to serve as a framework for policy development for the media and politics.
- Any representation of an issue by the media should be such that allows individuals make value judgment themselves without pre-empting what people should think about.
- There is an urgent need for policy action by Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) to ward off attempts by media houses in their coverage to incite negative reactions with ethnic undertone.

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