

REPORTAGE OF THE RIVERS STATE 2016 RERUN ELECTION BY THE PUNCH AND THE TIDE NEWSPAPERS: A COMPARATIVE APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This study examined the coverage of the Rivers state 2016 rerun election by two newspapers; The Tide and The Punch. Quantitative content analysis method of research was used to review the publications of these newspapers between 1st of August and 31st December 2016. It examined news stories, editorials, interviews, opinions, comments, letters to the editors and feature stories as published by the selected newspapers between August 2016 and December 2016. Quantitative method of content analysis was used in determining the prominence given to the (Benue state farmer's/herdsmen crisis) by the understudied newspapers. The purposive sampling technique was used to select only issues bordering the rerun election in Rivers state within the 5 months studied. In all, a total of 89 issues were found, coded and analysed from the two newspapers publications using the Constant Comparative Technique. The findings reveal that: The publications by The Tide and The Punch newspapers on the Rivers 2016 rerun election were straight news, editorial and feature stories and had straight news as the major story category. Also, the reports were episodic mostly reported as they unfold with no editorial tilt giving it is hasty form (immediacy form). Only The Tide newspaper gave enough prominence to the story as it allocated 36,908 column centimeters of space to the reports. It was therefore recommended among other things that: Topical issues like elections should be reported in a detailed and thematic format where cause can be linked to effects and events properly investigated. Also, stories should be properly investigated before publishing. Investigative journalism is advocated for to avoid the risk of reporting speculations as facts.

Keywords: Reportage, Rivers state, 2016 rerun election, Newspapers; The Tide, The Punch

Introduction

Elections are generally associated with a democratic system of government, where people are giving the freedom to exercise their political civic responsibility to either vote or be voted for. Since the inception of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed series of elections

ranging from presidential, governorship and local government elections. These various elections at some point have been marred by irregularities, following reports from the print, electronic and even social media. The 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections have had their shortcomings with attendant security implications about the type of democracy practiced. Subsequently, the 2007 general elections also suffered great set-backs. According to the African report 2007, Nigeria's third general election since the country returned to democracy were recorded with wide spread election malpractice, a fact affirmed by the late president Yar'adua in his inaugural speech. According to the speech, it was revealed that during the 2007 general elections, the Nigerian police, Army and other state officials committed the act of forced voting in states like Enugu, Ondo, Rivers and so on. The statements also revealed that voters were forcefully induced by the various security agencies as to where to thumbprint. For instance, in Ondo State, Mbah and Augustine (2014, p. 19-20) revealed that "during the 2007 general elections, the deputy governor assisted by the Nigeria police snatched ballot boxes and stuffed them at various parts of the state". The Independent national Electoral Commission (INEC) on its part demonstrated partisanship by taking actions including flouting Court orders, and initiating court cases of its own, all of which conspired to advance the electoral fortunes of the ruling party, (EU Observer, 2007).

Rivers State is one out of the thirty-six states that make up Nigeria. In 2015 general elections, the state (Rivers state) was reported by the mass media to be among the states with high level of electoral violence and irregularities. This was revealed by the high rate of casualties and deaths recorded during the election. Conducting the 2015 elections was not without some challenges. According to David, Manu & Musa, (2014) there was reports of rampant cases of underage registration and voting, cases of ballot box snatching in spite of the open/secret system of voting as well as multiple thumb printing despite the availability of direct data capturing machine that were used electronically, 60% of polling units were unable to receive the necessary materials and also accusation of outright fraud and collusion amongst INEC agents. For this reason, Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006), revealed that the provisions of the electoral bill made in 2011, expose the plans of the power elite to limit democratic space and pursue a narrow political agenda at the expense of the Nigerian people.

Reporting electoral proceedings in the state, by some journalists turned sore as many journalists were critically injured and their camera destroyed. In Nigeria today, electoral violence has been a feature of politics since the return to democratic rule. This is why Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) asserts that "Elections in Nigeria's fourth republic were marred by irregularities such as ballot box stuffing, ballot snatching, Falsification of results and abuse of electoral Act" (p. 27).

Elections in Rivers State are often marred with tension, conflicts, crises and fraud such that it is always difficult to use results or outcome as a yardstick to ascertain people's choice. Dudley cited in Enojo (2010), maintains that violence and other state apparatus is always employed by political elite such as power mongers and power holders, in a bid to secure and retain political power through any means available. Such means could result to killings, looting and breakdown of law and order.

At some point, there were indications of some media houses reporting in such a way that indicates that they have sympathy for a political party. This is because according to Ndolo

(1998), the development of Nigeria's politics is linked to the history of the media in Nigeria. The media are so unique and exceptional in achieving set goals and objectives that has to do with entertainment and aid disseminating messages anchored on societal development. Ndolo (1998) further states that some of the media houses lacked balance and objectivity in their reportage. Hughes and May (1988) disclose that in a democratic system of governance, election is one process that aids in providing peaceful succession. Furthermore, they postulated that election remains the only acceptable means of choosing leaders in a political system that adopts democracy.

The beauty in newspapering is its ability to pass on a message in clear and understandable patterns that is detailed for the readers to understand. In line with the above, Okon (2017) posits that newspaper articles, in contradistinction to broadcast news, are enriched with details that serve to broaden perspectives on socio-political and socio-economic ideologies making it more explanatory than broadcast news articles. This precise specification of the importance of newspaper reports places a huge responsibility on reporters as well as newspaper houses to report from a neutral and professional perspective. It is for these reasons that the researcher seeks to review how *The Punch* and *The Tide* newspapers reported the 2016 Rivers rerun election and the possible effects these reports had on the outcome of the election.

Statement of the Problem

Print media reports in Nigeria sometimes tend to drift towards the idiosyncrasies of the owners. This is because as Ibraheem, Ayedun-Aluma and Adewoye (2013) puts it, newspaper ownership in Nigeria is often driven by political considerations rather than the desire to give accurate account of the day's events in a manner that is objective and in public interest. Ordinarily, the latter should have been the reason newspapers should be set up. That is the reason owners of some newspapers can dictate the stories that will be published and those that will not (Ojebode, 2013). In effect, the owners end up becoming the 'gatekeepers' themselves, rather than the editors. This poses an ethical dilemma for journalists working for such newspapers as they are often torn between their commitments to professionalism, and projecting the interests of their employers. Ojebode (2013) further attempts an evaluation of the influence of allegiance to the publisher's interests on the editorial independence of some Nigerian newspapers. Using textual analysis, he finds that journalists in Politicians and Businessperson Owned (PBO) newspapers encounter difficulties in reporting facts accurately. More so, the agenda setting role of the media places a premium on their surveillance function. It is in the light of the foregoing that this study sets out to appraise how the Rivers state re-run election was covered by *The Punch* and *The Tide* newspapers so as to run a comparison. The problem of this study is therefore preconceived in the foregoing.

Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to address the issue of re-run elections in Rivers state and how its reportage by *The Punch* and *The Tide* newspapers with a view to making a comparative analysis. The study among other things seeks to:

1. Find out how the newspapers reported the re-run election in terms of straight news and interpretive formats.
2. Ascertain the degree of prominence the newspapers accorded the issue.

Research Questions

1. What forms did the newspapers employ in their reportage of the Rivers state re-run election?
2. To what extent did the newspapers accord prominence to the subject matter?

Literature Review

Newspaper Ownership and Editorial Freedom

Ownership determines to a large extent, media behaviour and performance. Ownership describes the proprietorship rights that an individual, a group, or an institution, exercise over a media house (Omenugha, Uzuegbunam and Omenugha, 2013). These rights confer on such proprietors, the power to determine editorial viewpoint and content of media organisations. Okunna (2003) observes that a newspaper publisher can coerce an editor to write an editorial in a manner that he wants. This makes media owners, and not the editors, the 'ultimate gatekeepers.' That is the reason some media owners can hire and fire reporters and editors at the slightest whim (Omenugha et al, 2013). But editors who are not comfortable working under such restraining conditions are at liberty to leave. Uko (2002) cites an instance when several senior editors resigned from the then Concord Group of newspapers between 1984 and 1985, to establish their own titles. This followed the disagreement they had with the publisher, Moshood Abiola, a politician and a businessman, over editorial independence (Mordi and Ogbu, 2017).

It is difficult for journalists to be objective in their reports when their proprietors have a 'list' of persons and organisations that should not be touched. The proprietor's political party, associates, family and friends are often regarded as 'sacred cows.' Reporters often lament how their editors 'killed' good stories that they wrote, because such articles were considered not to be in the best interest of their employers. Those who are deemed to be too obstinate are often deployed to 'boring' beats as punishment. Ojebode (2013) says that such newspaper owners often coerce their editors into reporting the activities of their politician friends positively, while reporting those of their opponents negatively. But it is not all media houses that compromise their integrity. *The Guardian* Newspaper is an example of such a media organisation that still maintains its editorial independence. The publication demonstrated objectivity in its report of the arrest and trial of the proprietor's sister-in-law, who was then an influential managing director of a bank, over her financial peccadilloes. It may be argued that *The Guardian* can do this because it is not owned by a politician or a businessman with vested interests.

It is worth stating that the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees freedom of expression, and of the press. This, theoretically, gives the press the freedom to publish their stories without interference. Similarly, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act that ex-president Jonathan signed into law in 2011, is designed to guarantee Nigerians right to public information. But, in practice, this is not often the case.

Media in Nigerian Democracy between (1999-2011)

The mass media have been very important pillars in the Nigerian democratic system. Specifically, they have played critical roles in the electoral process by acting as major sources of information, providing essentially costless and reliable details leading to a more balanced education and opinion formation among the voting public. Specifically, the Nigerian media, known for their vibrancy, diversity, boisterousness and, as in the case of the public owned

broadcast media, blind follower behavior have performed their roles within existing circumstances during electioneering periods in the country. (Pate 2015 p3). The above assertion by Pate can be fully understood looking back at the history of Nigerian election which come along way with media as an integral part of Nigerian political system. The Nigerian political history is never complete without highlighting the important role played by Nigerian media. It has become very important to assess the roles of mass media in Nigeria (Aghamelu, 2013).

Presently, since the return to democratic rule in the country in 1999, the Nigerian media have been one of the critical stakeholders in the nation's current democratic dispensation. They have been actively involved in setting agenda for political discourse, providing perspectives and direction on political debates and framing the agenda for political decisions and mobilization for mass participation in political activities. Some of the salient political developments in the Nigeria's current democratic dispensation that have been influenced by media discourse include: the aborted third term agenda attempt by former President Olusegun Obasanjo; the management of the illness of late President Umaru Yar'Adua; the emergence of President Jonathan as acting President and eventual election as substantive president; and the on-going debate on who emerges as Nigeria's president in 2015. These and other remarkable political developments have been the dominant political communication issues in Nigeria, since the return to democratic rule over a decade ago (Ibraheem et al., 2013).

In the case of the role of the media during elections, Pate (2011) argues that the mass media have remained in the fore of the struggle to promote the rights of our people through a credible election process. However, this is not to suggest that the media have been perfect in all circumstances. They have been severely criticized for complicity in truncating and subverting the election process at various times. Several scholars looked into the nature of media coverage in Nigerian election between the periods of 1999 to 2011, but this paper will concentrate on assertion of Pate in paper title "Advancing Media Roles in Elections and Democratic Development". In the paper he rightly pointed that from 1999 Nigerian election are attached with acquisition and counter acquisitions from civil society, the political parties and international agencies, but this can be fully understood by looking at Egbala, (2014).

Scholars like Pate, (2011), pointed out that media coverage on election issues increase from 1999 to 2011 but the issue still remains about the media behavior in looking into the background of the candidate, the promise in their campaign and the actual implementation of that promise (Pate, 2011). This shows a vacuum in media practice creating a need for professionalism in media practices.

Influence of Newspaper Ownership on Elections Coverage

The 2015 presidential election in Nigeria showed how influential newspaper owners can be when they choose to promote some candidates and malign the others, using the power of the press. PBOs practically used the media at their disposal to launch vitriolic attacks on their candidates' opponents during the elections. Petersen (1993) agrees that newspaper owners seem to possess great powers in society and over the editors and reporters. It is important to state that it is not only in Nigeria that newspapers influence the outcome of elections. Whittington (1977) also reports how the owner of Australia's *Daily Telegraph*, Frank Packer, instructed reporters covering the country's electoral campaign in 1943, to praise his choice of candidate, who happened to be the then Prime Minister, and to criticise his opponents. This

shows that media ownership can play an important role in the editorial direction of a newspaper. Uko (2002) supports the assertion that a publisher's orientation has serious implications and valuable lessons for media practice.

The Rivers rerun election, which is the focus of this work, is not different from the one held in Australia, as some politicians and businessmen used their ownership of media houses to project their candidates with the aim of safeguarding their political and economic interests. However, unlike in Nigeria, where there is multiplicity of media ownership, Uko (2002) observes that proprietorship is concentrated in a few hands in Australia. Just two newspaper chains publish approximately 90 percent of the national daily newspapers in Australia (Henningham, 1996). Cryle (1989) who also amplifies this fact, notes that few individuals and families have controlled newspapers in Australia, for centuries. Concentration of media ownership in a few hands has several implications. According to Anaeto et al (2007) this makes such media proprietors so powerful that they begin to oppress the weak in society. This happens due to the near monopoly that media owners enjoy. Media monopoly stifles plurality of opinion, which is not good for democracy.

The Nigerian Newspaper History in Brief

In Nigeria, the first newspaper *Iwe Irohin* was published in Abeokuta in 1859 by Reverend Henry Townsend, an English Missionary of the Anglican Mission. Since then the country has witnessed phenomenal growth in the newspaper sector so much so that it has become something of a tool in stating and defending ideology by individuals and political entities. This is perhaps due to its accessibility and portability over other media (Brown, 2013), even though the reading culture of an average Nigerian has greatly dropped owing to various internal and circular excuses (Baran in Brown, 2014). Despite the transcendental advancement of electronic media, the newspaper is a popular channel of mass communication, and an integral part of Nigeria's political consciousness.

Dominant Focus of the Media during Elections

Every day the media face the task of what to report. This is because several issues are happening daily. This becomes more critical during electioneering. The traditional news values may serve as guide to selecting what to report, during elections, media need to be more careful and responsible in deciding what to report because their reports directly or indirectly shape publics' attitude negatively or positively. Tehranian (1996) in Popoola (2015, p. 2) states that the media are naturally attracted to conflict. Popoola (2015) in his work, "A discourse on personality-induced conflicts in Nigeria's politics: The media and their narratives" explains that the media in Nigeria have developed penchant for reporting conflict, a phenomenon that often contributes to tension and insecurity during elections.

Nigeria Democratic Report (2015) in a study titled, "Final Report on Media Coverage of 2015 Elections: A monitoring Scorecard of Print and Online Media", discovered that the 2015 general election, mass media gave more attention to conflict related issues against issues like voters education and serving as early warning system. No wonder, there was high tension during the 2015 presidential election, which made many people to travelled long distance to their villages for fear of the unknown.

The mass media are elemental in effective functioning of almost all spheres of the society especially the political sphere. Studies have confirmed that the media play significant role in the

political process of any society (Curan 1991, McCombs & Shaw 1993, Akinfeleye (2004), McQuail, 2005, Okunna, 2009, Pate 2011, etc). Mass media are institutions that democracy cannot do without. Obot (2013, p. 176) concurs that, “a political system that lays claim to democracy without a virile mass media would certainly be a ‘malnourished’ and ‘still-birth’ political contraption”. That is why former United State president Thomas Jefferson states that “if I had to choose between “a government without newspapers [mass media] or newspapers [mass media] without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter”. This profound statement shows how important media are to the society especially to governance.

The strategic position of the mass media in any political process cannot be over emphasis. McNair (2002) cited in Obot (2013) aptly captures this reality why he opines that, in democratic political systems, the mass media inform citizens of what is happening around them, educate the audience about political happenings, provide a platform for public political discourse, facilitating the formation of ‘public opinion’, and feeding that opinion back to the public from whence it came. He further states that the mass media give publicity to governmental and political institutions as well serve as channels for the advocacy of political viewpoints. This implies that in a democratic set up, the media’s major role is to inform enlightened, mobilized people and create platforms for public discourse. Obot (2013) succinctly explains that, the mass media provide a link between the political party/candidate and the electorates. Through coverage of electioneering campaigns and airing of political advertisements, the media help in influencing voters’ decision either in favor or against a given political party or candidate. Olukotun (2014) echoed a similar point that during elections, the media are the principal vehicles where voters receive information concerning political parties, the voting process, the electoral commission and the other issues germane to the exercise of their rights. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage, section two states the responsibility of media organizations thus:

A media organization shall ensure accurate and impartial voter education on parties, candidates, registration, verification, voting centres, voting procedures, complaint procedures, etc as provided by relevant agencies...A media organization shall uphold the right of the people to free expression by providing opportunity for ordinary citizens to express their views during electoral processes...

The Nigeria Media Code of Election further pin-points that “As the chief purveyor of information on the electoral processes, the media shall at all times embrace best professional practices by acting in accordance with the principles of social responsibility”. Similarly, the Nigeria Electoral Act (Section 52(1) (b)) buttresses the role of electronic media in improving the transparency of the electoral process and useful tool in facilitating participation of various segments of the society in the political process (PLAC, 2012).

The 2015 Election and Media Reports

Elections are conducted every four years in Nigeria and 2015 was an election year. Though there were 14 candidates vying to become president in that year, only two – then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (of the People’s Democratic Party, PDP) and former

Head of State now President Muhammadu Buhari (of the All Progressive Congress, APC) - appeared popular.

The 2015 presidential election was one of the fiercest owing to the socio-political situation which had ebbed dangerously. Security situation in the country had been complicated by the Boko Haram insurgency. Youth unemployment, rivalry of the country's north and the south over power-sharing, menace of Fulani herdsman, fragile party alliances, shortage of electricity were just a few of the tension causing factors. Nigerians needed change desperately and the 2015 presidential elections provided the opportunity to bring in a new regime that could turn things around. Ezea (2015, p.5) asserts that "since 1999, Nigerians have not witnessed a presidential poll [whose] prelude has generated much controversy, hate campaigns, tense atmosphere, intrigues, scheming, blackmail, mudslinging, allegations, divisiveness, bad blood, threats, inflammatory and unguarded utterances, propaganda like the forth coming poll which many saw as a tight race between the two top contenders namely former President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) (now president) of the All Progressive Congress (APC)." The two candidates, according to Samuel (2015) were commonly depicted in a variety of stereotypical terms, with Buhari being seen as northerner, militarist, ostensibly ascetic, jihadist; while Jonathan was presented as a southerner, civilian, indolent, and religiously moderate.

Buhari was a four-time opposition candidate who contested in 2003 and 2007 under the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP). In 2011, he contested under the platform of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) against Jonathan, who won and in 2015, he became the presidential candidate for the All Progressive Congress (APC) and emerged the winner. Jonathan became the acting President in 2010 following the demise of the President, Umaru Musa Yar'adua. He then contested in 2011 and won. These two candidates were popular and given much coverage by the media. The mass media influence the public opinion by canalizing attention toward the topics and themes that they consider important. The approaches mass media use regarding these themes can induce specific effect in their evaluation by the public (Carstea, 2012, p. 97).

The 2015 election was important such that both serving and retired high-ranking foreign diplomats including the immediate past Secretary of State of the United States, John Kerry; former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Anan; and former Commonwealth Secretary General, Emeka Anyaoku; all visited the principal actors then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, and the presidential flag bearer of the opposition party and now President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari to extract a firm commitment from them, to maintain the peace before, during and after the election (Ibraheem et al (2013),. These diplomats apparently took this step to forestall possible break down of law and order, after the announcement of the results, as had been the case in the past. Despite these assurances, a lot of mudslinging characterised the electioneering. The two dominant parties in the country the then ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), and the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), now in power employed the traditional and social media to prosecute a seeming war of attrition. But the outcome of the election was generally peaceful, positioning Nigeria as a country that is fast attaining political maturity (Owen and Usman, 2015). The presidential election was, in a sense, a test for the nation's fledgling democracy.

Also, the 2015 election was the first election in which the nation's electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), would use a permanent voters' card (PVC), an electronic card, to decide the winner of the ballot box (Owen and Usman, 2015). For the first time, also, a sitting president lost an election in a country where incumbency is an important factor in deciding a winner. In addition, it was the first time that the loser in a presidential election would call to congratulate the winner even before the electoral umpire officially announced the results. Typically, losers in some of the previous presidential elections went to court to contest the results. All these contributed to the uniqueness of the election. There were also insinuations that the European Union (EU) may have favoured Buhari above the other presidential candidates during the elections. But Santiago Fisas, the former Chief Observer of the 2015 EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), and Member of the European Parliament, described this allegation as baseless. According to the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), Fisas, who made the clarification in Abuja on October 22, 2017, while giving the EU assessment of the elections, insisted that the EU was more interested in strengthening the democratic process than who became the President of Nigeria.

Njemanze and Arogundade (2015, p2) argue that the 'actions or inactions of media professionals can impact positively or negatively on the credibility and fairness of the electoral situation under which people exercise the right to choose.' But there are legislative and institutional frameworks in place that provide practical guidelines on how the media should or should not perform their constitutional role during elections. According to Njemanze and Arogundade (2015) such guidelines are contained in the Electoral Act 2010 (sections 100 and 101), the Nigerian Broadcasting Code (section 5), the Code of Ethics of Journalists in Nigeria and the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage.

The media and political parties should share a symbiotic relationship. This is because the former generate income from electioneering advertisements while the latter need publicity to get their message across. This arrangement is a critical component of the discourse on media commercialism (Omojola & Morah, 2014). Sambe (2015, p.119) asserts that "Governments around the world, knowing the power of the media ...tend to hold unto it or fear the level of freedom allowed because of the power of the media toward public opinion and mass mobilization." According to Ekeanyanwu, (2015) "Media and politics are inseparable in any democratic culture and environment", (p. 198). In media contents, frames exist or are created which affect election fortunes and influence political destinies. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to investigate the frames used in reporting PDP and APC Presidential candidates during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria.

Rather than reporting the facts of a story, the media have been accused of inserting their personal biases or opinions in news content (O'gara, 2009, p. 1). The lack of objectivity in news presentation has made visible the existence of alternative media which are usually online based. This is not just a Nigerian phenomenon. Sani's (2014, p.71) study of Malaysia's 13th general elections concluded that "...there was an element of contradiction between the mainstream print media and alternative online media. The biased coverage of mainstream print media has pushed readers to look for alternative news in online news portals." This is in line with Ekeanyanwu's (2015, p. 17) assertion that "the media are not the sole source of information for voters but in a world dominated by mass communications, the media determine the political agenda."

The history of political crises in Africa appears to be incomplete without references to the media as a promoter of the problem (Onyebadi and Oyedeji, 2011). In their study of the newspaper coverage of the post political election violence in Africa, specifically Kenya, and the authors concluded that “the media and ethnicity are readily blamed in conflicts” (p. 216). Olayode (2015) supports the assertion and stresses that from the presidential through gubernatorial, national and state assemblies elections, aspirants are largely chosen on the basis of ethno regional identities. He adds that “political parties and candidates are easily perceived as representatives of a particular ethnic or religious group and voting pattern in Nigeria largely mirrors the various cleavages in the country” (p.3).

Several studies have been conducted by researchers on the framing on the coverage of elections, debates and campaigns in different countries (Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, 2014; Groshek and Al-Rawi, 2013; Schuck, Vligenthart, Boomgaarden, Elenbaas, Azrout, Spanje and DeVresse, 2013). Carstea (2012) studied the opinion articles on the 2009 presidential elections in Romania and found that the mass media provided mainly negative interpretation (attack/conflict type) to the electoral campaign and focused mainly on secondary themes that were rather related to the candidates’ moral conducts and characters than their manifestoes. On the 2015 presidential election campaign in Nigeria, Samuel (2015) opined that:

what is in contention in the election may not be the superiority of one ideology over the other, as understood in the Western democracies. Rather, what is becoming evident is that the election is about two quarrelsome camps, each seeking a popular mandate to determine the fortunes (or the lack thereof) of nearly 170 million Nigerians. (para 1)

Issues like insecurity, corruption, religion, ethnicity and the economy were popular in the public discourse. The 2015 general elections were seen by northerners as their golden opportunity to wrestle back power, which they felt had been unjustly denied them after the untimely death of kinsman President Musa Yar’adua that saw Jonathan taking over as the acting President (Olayode, 2015, p. 17).

Studies have been conducted on the 2015 elections in Nigeria. While some researchers looked at political participation, voting behavior and the role of the media in Nigeria (Olowojolu, 2016; George-Genye, 2015), others analyzed the 2015 elections political advertisements (Alawole and Adesanya, 2016; Batta, Batta and Mboho, 2015). The study by Alawole et.al (2016) on political advertisements in selected newspapers on the 2015 elections found that PDP and APC dominated the political landscape with low presence of adversarial contents.

The mass media in their everyday duty of informing, educating and entertaining the society, create frames that can serve as a prism through which the audience understand issues and events as they happen in the society. Mchakulu (2011, p. 30) opines that frames are deliberately created by political organizations or their agents to be used publicly, disseminated widely, and repeated often by speakers that are affiliated with one political party or another.

Sambe (2015, p. 115-6) asserts that contemporary writings on political communication must be a serious theoretical and empirical- evaluation of the importance of the mass media in relation to public opinion. Although researchers have conducted studies on the influence of the

media on voting behavior and also analyzed the 2015 elections political advertisements, there exists a dearth of study on newspaper framing of the two presidential candidates of the two most influential party-PDP and APC during the 2015 elections. How this election was reported in the print media with regard to the similarities and differences between *The Punch* and *The Tide* newspapers informed this study.

Framing Reports on Candidates in 2015 Elections

Elections are conducted every four years in Nigeria and 2015 like this year (2019) was an election year. Though there were 14 candidates vying to become president in that year, only two – then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (of the People’s Democratic Party, PDP) and former Head of State (now President) Muhammadu Buhari (of the All Progressive Congress, APC) - appeared popular. The 2015 presidential election was one of the fiercest owing to the socio-political situation which had ebbed dangerously. Security situation in the country had been complicated by the Boko Haram insurgency. Youth unemployment, rivalry of the country’s north and the south over power-sharing, menace of Fulani herdsmen, fragile party alliances, shortage of electricity were just a few of the tension causing factors. Nigerians needed change desperately and the 2015 presidential elections provided the opportunity to bring in a new regime that could turn things around.

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politics are inseparable in any democratic culture and environment” (Ekeanyanwu, 2015, p. 198). In media contents, frames exist or are created which affect election fortunes and influence political destinies.

As elections draw near, citizens are faced with many choices to make regarding candidates. Since it is quite impossible for them to interact personally with these aspirants, they look up to the media for information about them. The media can influence the public opinion and perception of a candidate with the way they frame and construct news reports. Framing is a central process by which political actors and government officials exercise political influence over each other and over the public (Oksanen, 2011, p. 481). Ideally, framing research examines the construction of news stories, how these stories articulate frames, and how audience members interpret these frames (Carragee & Roefa, 2004, p. 215). Framing can affect the outcome of an election.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

This theory was propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974 (Myles, 2004). According to (Entman, 1993), framing can be defined as a process in which some aspects of reality are selected, and given greater emphasis, so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested and appropriate solutions and actions are proposed. Frames draw attention to some aspects of reality at the expense of others. Framing has to do with text manipulation to achieve set objectives. Any communicative text, either informative or persuasive, requires narrative structures to organise its discourse. In the case of the media, news stories appear to be systematised, based on narrative conventions that offer an explanation about who is doing what, and with what purpose. Tuchman (1978) describes news as a window whose frame limits the perception of reality, by limiting the perception of different realities and focusing on a specific piece of it. As a result of these processes, some aspects of the reality perceived through the news will be more prominent than others. News messages, therefore, involves textual and visual structures built around a particular line of thought, from a certain perspective, and by information professionals, who will provide an interpretive framework for the audiences exposed to the news messages (Ardèvol-Abreu 2015).

It is a fact that the way a particular issue or event is presented affects the way it is perceived and understood (Ajaero, 2014). Ideally, framing research examines the construction of new stories, how these stories articulate frames, and how audience members interpret these frames (Carragee and Roefa, 2004, p. 215). The framing approaches in media studies relate to the psychological and sociological proposition that individuals need certain interpretative frames to be able to establish an opinion or an evaluation about a matter (Carstea, 2012, p. 98). Framing is a central process by which political actors, such as government officials, exercise influence over each other and the public (Oksanen, 2011, p. 481). When Nisbet and Newman (2015) state that “there is no such thing as unframed information”, they point out how framing is such a large part of communication and society. (p.325). Ritzer and Goodman (2003) conclude that “without frames, our world will be little more than a number of chaotic individual and unrelated events and facts” (p.363). Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by the audience (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

The implication of this theory to the study is that through the use of frames by the media, several events can be understood by people in the society. Baran and Swan (2007, p. 13) see media framing as “shaping the news we are exposed to and the issues we think about. It can move people to vote against their best interests, buy products that are not good for them, and help dissolve boundaries separating facts, marketing, dogma and ideology.” Framing must be perceived as a process in which frame-building happens first, followed by frame-setting in a process that leads to positive or negative outcomes (DeVresse, 2005).

Empirical Review

Okon (2017) in a study on Rivers state rerun election and print media contents was carried out to find out how issues of alleged violence and misconducts during the election were reported by *The Punch*, *Guardian* and *The Tide newspapers*. The study utilized content analysis to evaluate whether the newspapers reports on purported electoral violence were interpretive or not. The study anchored on agenda setting theory, measured the news and advertorial contents of the newspapers under study. The theoretical foundation of the study was also centered on the Framing theory. The basis of the framing theory is that the mass media focus attention on certain events and then place them within a field of meaning. Citing Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) the author sees framing as consisting of three elements – language, thought and forethought. To use language in this regard, people must have thought and reflect on their own interpretative frameworks and those of others.

The justification given by the author for this method of study citing Wimmer and Dominick (2011) lies on “its potential to identify trends over a long period of time” (p.110). The Two national newspapers – The Punch and The Guardian - were purposively selected based on the fact that they are foremost national dailies. The peculiarities of the study also necessitated the inclusion of The Tide newspaper based on the fact that it is a state government owned regional newspaper with Port Harcourt as its area of dominant influence. From the study, it was found that newspapers understudied did not interpret the reports on the subject matter. Instead, the reportage of the electoral matters by the newspapers was shrift. It was therefore recommended by the paper that Nigerian newspapers should improve on interpretive reporting of topical socio-political issues in order to improve on the agenda setting roles of the press.

Another study by Michael and Ijeoma entitled ‘Newspaper Framing of Incumbent President and Challenger in Nigeria’s 2015 Presidential Election’ set out to examine the coverage, by four dominant newspapers, of an incumbent President and his challenger in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, to determine how the news was constructed and the framing patterns in their reports. Using the continuous week formula, 28 editions spread over four months were studied. Results show that there were 110 articles on the 2015 election that captured a total of 245 frames. The *history* frame was dominant, followed by *national security* and *corruption*. The findings also show that the 2015 presidential elections were adequately reported by the media but contents focused more on the candidates than on issues. This study recommends that the issues raised by contestants in their manifestos could be appropriated by the media to expand their discussion on matters affecting the citizens rather than the personality of the contestants.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study was designed to compare the reportage of the Rivers State 2016 rerun election by *The Punch* and *The Tide* newspapers. This study employed content analysis method of research to compare the political reports of these newspapers within the study period. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) states, that, content analysis allows for an objective, systematic and qualitative description of communication content for measuring variables. This technique of research helps the researcher makes valid inferences base on context or purpose of the study from an existing data.

Population of the Study

Generally, the population of a study is normally determined from the title of the research and as in the case of this study; the study population comprised of all political issues of *The Tide* and *The Punch* newspapers from August 1st to December 31st 2016. Within these five months, these newspapers had one hundred and fifty three (153) publications each making a sum total of three hundred and six (306) publications. This study was however concerned with only issues on the 2016 Rivers State rerun election as published by the above mentioned newspapers within this period.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

To realise the desired sample size for the study, a total of 153 days were chosen (1st August, 2016 to 31st December, 2016) and only reports on 2016 Rivers Rerun elections published by the selected media within the said days were considered in this study. The total number of 153 publications was reviewed as the newspapers under study are published daily. The study utilized a constructed calendar using the composite week method as outlined in the constructed calendar for the study. According to Riffe, Aust and Lacy (1991) cited in Okon (2015), this method is superior to the stratified random sampling technique. This method was used to select issues bordering on the Rivers 2016 Rerun election as published by the selected newspapers. This newspapers were selected purposively as they represent various areas of coverage; Regional (*The Tide*) and national (*The Punch*).

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection is the code sheet. The following content categories will be coded:

1. **Placement of the Story:** This include whether the story is on the front, center or back page of the newspapers.
2. **Frequency of report:** This involves how many times the papers wrote on the Rivers 2015 rerun election
3. **Type of Story:** Whether it was news story, editorial, advertorial, feature, etc
4. **Size of Article:** Amount of space given to the story, 2inches (very small), 3-5 inches (small), 6-8 inches medium, 9-11inches (big), 12inches (very big).

Method of Data Presentation Analysis

The data generated from the instruments were analyzed using the content analysis method of research. In doing the content analysis, the study made use of the coding categories and the unit of analysis to categorize issues according to the category they belong; straight news, feature, editorial, advertorial, comments and measure them accordingly to know the spaces allotted to them and where each story is placed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data gathered are presented below in tables using simple percentages for the elaboration purposes

Table 1: Total News Hole (TNH) used by *Punch* Newspapers

Item	Frequency	Percentage
TNH Available for All Reports	717,876 col.cm ²	98.1
TNH Dedicated to the rerun Election	13,840.8 cm ²	1.9
Total	731, 716.8 cm²	100

The table above shows that *Punch* Newspaper dedicated 13,840,8cm frequency to the coverage of the rerun election in Rivers state which is low compared to the national attention the rerun election received during this period.

Table 2: Total News Hole (TNH) used by *The Tide* Newspapers

Item	Frequency	Percentage
TNH Available for All Reports	1,762,560 col.cm ²	97.9
TNH Dedicated to the rerun Election	36,908 cm ²	2.1
Total	1,799,468 cm²	100

The above table shows that the Tide Newspapers dedicated 36,908cm of the total news hole to the rerun election, this indicate a high usage of the news hole by the Tide newspapers for the sufficient coverage of the rerun election in Rivers state in 2016.

Table 3: Category of Stories on the Elections Published by *Punch* Newspaper

Type of Story	Frequency	Percentage
Straight news	15	88.2
Editorial	0	0
Features	2	11.8
Advertorial	0	0
Cartoon/Illustration	0	0

Photos	0	0
Total	17	100

The table above shows that the category of news on the Rivers state rerun election in 2016 published by the *Punch* newspaper was majorly on straight news other than editorial, advertorial, cartoon illustration, features.

Table 4: Category of Stories on the Elections Published by the *Tide* Newspaper

Type of Story	Frequency	Percentage
Straight news	59	81.9
Editorial	3	4.2
Features	7	9.7
Advertorial	0	0
Cartoon illustration	0	0
Photos	3	4.2
Total	72	100

Table 4 shows that the major publication of the Rivers state rerun election of 2016 in the *Tide* newspaper was straight news category couple with attention in editorial, features and photos.

Table 5: Aggregation Index of Space Allotted Each Content Category by *Punch* Newspaper within the Study Period in column centimeters

Units	Frequency	Allocated Space in Col.cm	Percentage
Straight news	15	11420.8 col.cm	82.5
Feature stories	2	2420 col.cm	17.5
Editorial	0	0	0
Advertorial	0	0	0
Cartoon	0	0	0
Photo	0	0	0
Total	17	13,840.8	100

The table above shows that the aggregation index of space allotted each content category by *punch* newspaper in the 2016 rerun election in Rivers state is 82.5% straight with 17.5% feature stories.

Table 6: Aggregation Index of Space Allotted Each Content Category by *The Tide* Newspaper within the Study Period in column centimeters

Units	Frequency	Allocated Space in Col.cm	Percentage
Straight news	59	25400 col.cm	68.8%
Feature stories	7	5572 col.cm	15.1
Editorial	3	4100 col.cm	11.1
Advertorial	0	0	0
Cartoon illustration	0	0	0
Photo	3	1836	5
Total	72	36,908	100

The table above shows that the aggregation index of space allotted each content category by the Tide newspaper within the study period in column centimeters in the 2016 rerun election in Rivers state is 68.8% straight news, 15.1% feature stories, 11.1% editorial and 5% photo news.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What forms did the newspapers employ in their reportage of the Rivers state re-run election?

The result on table 3 and 4 were used in assuming the above research question. The result on table 3 and 4.4 shows that *The Tide* newspaper published the Rivers 2016 rerun election in the form of straight news, feature stores, editorials and photos while *The Punch* newspaper published the story as straight news and feature stories. This means that the two newspapers adopted the same format except that *The Tide* went a little deeper by giving some photos and editorial attention to the stories. Reporting the story majorly as straight news by the two newspapers show the episodic nature of the publications this means that the two newspapers reported the stories just as they were unfolding without recourse to the behind the scene actions that led to some of the stories. The editorial tilt of the two newspapers towards immediacy rather than further investigations deprives the audience the opportunity to get detailed explanations as to why certain events they witnessed happened.

The forms in which news is reported affects it's framing pattern which in turn affect understanding of such news. The language used in straight news reports requires immediacy and brevity as different from the detailed format of features and editorials. In straight news, the unexplained parts of the story are left at the discretion of the audience to give it whatever conclusion they (the audience) can assume. This becomes worrisome in a society where words are used to cover details with politician's people saying what they usually don't mean.

The implication of this finding is that when the details required about an election and candidates are not fully covered, the voters will be left in the dark and their decisions to vote will be made on the limited information from the media. Corroborating this finding is Pate (2015) when he posits that media coverage of elections increased from 1999 to 2011 but the issue still remains about the media behavior in looking into the background of the candidate, the promise in their campaign and the actual implementation of that promise. This background can only be gotten through further investigation and subsequent detailed reporting in the form of feature, editorial, interview and comments. This finding also corroborates that of Okon (2017) which found that *The Punch*, *The Tide*, and *Guardian* newspapers did not interpret the reports on the Rivers (2016) rerun election rather the reports were shrift.

Research Question 2: To what extent did the newspapers accord prominence to the subject matter?

The results on table 4.5 and 4.6 indicate that the two newspapers reported the Rivers State 2016 rerun elections 89 times within the five months (August – December 2016) studied. However, the two papers gave different level of prominence to the stories as *The Tide* reported the stories 72 times as against *The Punch* newspapers 17 reports. Also, the prominence given to the report can be seen from the placement of the stories as shown on table 4.10. The result on table 4.10 indicates that *The Tide* newspaper gave more prominence to the reports on the Rivers rerun elections in 2016 than *The Punch* newspaper did. The table shows that *The Tide* newspaper had 23 front page coverage of the story while *The Punch* newspaper gave the recession report no front page coverage.

The prominence given to a story is a product of the reporter's interest which is usually harmonized in line with the interest of the media house for which he/she works. Prominence draws the attention of the audience towards certain realities and this is done through framing. By emphasizing on the rerun election issues in Rivers State, *The Tide* newspaper kept the audience constantly abreast of the emerging issues pertaining to the election. These issues were presented in different interpretative frames to elicit their reactions towards the election. This is in agreement with the tenets of framing theory as explained by Carstea (2012). According to Carstea; "framing approaches in media studies relate to the psychological and sociological proposition that individuals need certain interpretative frames to be able to establish an opinion or an evaluation about a matter" (Carstea, 2012, p. 98). This means that the public need to be constantly informed on issues that affect them directly or indirectly.

The implication of this finding is that the prominence given to the election by the newspapers emanated from the ownership interest of this newspapers and their area of coverage. *The Tide* newspaper being owned and managed by the Rivers State government took it as a point of duty to cover the electoral processes more than *The Punch* newspaper which has a national coverage with other interests from other states and regions. Because newspaper owners have the power to hire and fire reporters, often time reporters work in line with the desires and ideologies of their employers.

Summary of findings

This study basically aimed at evaluating how the Rivers state rerun election in 2016 was reported by two Nigerian newspapers; *The Tide* and *The Punch* newspapers. This study was set out to achieve the following objectives:

1. Find out how the newspapers reported the re-run election in terms of straight news and interpretive formats.
2. Ascertain the degree of prominence the newspapers accorded the issue.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, elections bring anxiety, creating room for unnecessary panic which often times emanate from media reports. This means that the media through its coverage can fuel or reduce the panic and uncertainties associated with elections. Unlike the broadcast media, the print media provides evidence (copies) for every publication that can be easily referenced by readers to other citizens who might not have had access to the story. This puts the print media at a flexible position which requires extreme care to avoid easy litigation due to easily accessible evidence (copies). This means that reports on the print media are taken seriously by average citizens who hold to copies of these newspapers for further reference/clarification. This places the newspaper as an important media of communication beyond content importance is also attached to the location (placement) of a story on the newspaper hence stories that make the cover page are seen to be more topical than those on other pages. Similar to those stories placed on the center spread and the back page carry more weight than those placed on other pages. This is not to say that other pages are irrelevant to newspaper readers but many readers glance through the cover page of newspapers, flip to the center spread and turn the back to check the headlines and stories accordingly.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Topical issues like elections should be reported in a detailed and thematic format where cause can be linked to effects and events properly investigated.
2. Stories should be properly investigated before publishing. Investigative journalism is advocated for to avoid the risk of reporting speculations as facts.

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