

**PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN
COMMUNICATING THE 2023 ELECTORAL PROCESS: A STUDY OF THE
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS IN DELTA STATE**

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Abstract

The public's education and awareness of issues and events in their environment, particularly those related to elections, is greatly aided by the mass media. In addition to acting as a mobilizer, the media sets the agenda, dictating what the public believes. This study, however, looked at how the public perceived the mass media's role in disseminating information about the 2023 election process: a study of the Delta State gubernatorial elections. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were employed as data gathering tools in a qualitative study design. Twenty adult male and female voters who were registered to vote in the 2023 governor's race made up the sample size. Results indicated that the media provided information to voters about the different candidates in each political party, and that voters, or electorates, used this information to form their opinions about candidates. It was also found that the media did not report on the candidates in an unfair manner. Accordingly, the study suggests that more research be done to ascertain how messages from the mass media affected the electorate in Delta State during the 2023 election process. It also suggests comparing the functions of print, electronic, and social media in the state's electoral processes.

Keywords: *Gubernatorial Elections, Mass Media, Public Perception, Delta State.*

DOI: 10.58934/jgss.v4i16.227

1. INTRODUCTION

The mass media played a crucial role in the recently concluded gubernatorial elections in Delta state. Malachi Adams (2017) defines mass media as a diversified collection of media technologies that reach a large audience via mass communication. Okunna (1999) defines mass media as communication channels that transmit information and entertainment to large heterogeneous audiences. Daramola (2003) posits that mass media are the means of communication that reach large audiences, especially television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Mass media are the instruments for the transmission of information, news, and entertainment to a large heterogeneous audience. (Sobowale, 1993). With the advent of social media and the proliferation of online news publications, misinformation, fake news and propaganda are disseminated alongside accurate and concise news reports and editorials. The role of the mass media in communicating information about the electoral process has become increasingly important during the electoral timeframe. The media, which includes newspapers, television, radio, and online platforms, played a critical role in shaping public perception of political candidates, parties, and issues, and ultimately, influencing voters' behavior.

The media shape public opinion, and the electoral process is a key component of Nigeria's democratic system. The mass media are the primary sources of information for voters. One critical role of the media in the 2023 Nigerian elections was to provide voter education and information about the electoral process. The media play crucial role in disseminating information about the election process to the public, especially in rural areas where access to information is limited. The media provides information on the voting process, including voter registration, polling units, and the voting procedure.

According to Olusola (2019), this information is crucial in increasing voter turnout and promoting electoral participation. In the 2023 gubernatorial elections, BVAS (Bi-Modal Voter Accreditation System) was introduced by INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission) as a measure to checkmate election irregularities and provide real-time collation and verification of electoral results in Delta state. Sensitization and adoption of the new technology was carried out by INEC in collaboration with the media who provided a platform for the electorates to be educated about how to use this nascent technology so as not be disenfranchised. The media played a crucial role in disseminating information about the latest developments in the election process, including how to be accredited and vote using BVAS, how to check for one's registration status, how to report electoral irregularities.

The media plays a crucial role in mobilizing voters to participate in the democratic process. Media campaigns, offline and online played a significant role in mobilizing voters to participate in the presidential elections. Political parties and candidates relied on the media to reach out to voters, with many using social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to engage with voters. The mass adoption of social media platforms especially in urban areas in Delta state sensitized Deltans, especially the youths to the electoral process and helped in recording the average voters turnout during the gubernatorial elections.

The media also plays a critical role in monitoring the electoral process to ensure that it is free, fair, and credible. In 2023, several media organizations in Nigeria collaborated to monitor the elections, including The Guardian, Premium Times, and Sahara Reporters. These media outlets provided real-time coverage of the elections, including live updates on voter turnout, reports of electoral irregularities, and analysis of the election results. According to Olowookere and Oladosu (2019), the media played a crucial role in exposing election malpractices. The media's monitoring role was critical in ensuring transparency and accountability in the electoral process.

In Delta State where gubernatorial election held, it is crucial to understand how the public perceived the role of the mass media in communicating information about the electoral process. The gubernatorial elections in Delta state has three frontrunners in the governorship race – Rt Honourable Sheriff Oborevwori (People’s Democratic Party), Senator Ovie Omo-Agege (All Progressives Congress) and Kennedy Pela (Labour Party) with Rt Honourable Sheriff Oborevwori eventually winning the elections.

This study aims to explore the public's perception of the mass media's role in communicating the 2023 electoral process in Delta State. The study will examine the extent to which the media is seen as an effective tool for communicating electoral information and how the public perceives the media's objectivity and impartiality.

Understanding the public's perception of the media's role in communicating the electoral process is essential for ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections in future electoral processes. This study will provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the media in Delta State and help to identify areas where improvements are needed. Ultimately, the findings of this study will contribute to the development of strategies to improve the media's effectiveness in communicating information about the electoral process and promoting democratic values in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Although the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Delta State have been concluded, the role of the mass media in communicating information about the electoral process remains a crucial issue. This study seeks to address the following problems:

1. **Lack of Objectivity and Impartiality:** One of the major problems that this study aims to address is the perceived lack of objectivity and impartiality in the coverage of the electoral process by the mass media. The study will examine the extent to which the public perceives the media as biased towards certain candidates or political parties, and how this affects their trust in the media.
2. **Limited Access to Information:** The study will also explore the extent to which the public has access to information about the electoral process through the mass media. In particular, it will examine the availability and quality of information on political parties, candidates, and

electoral processes, and how this affects the public's perception of the media's role in communicating electoral information.

3. Limited Understanding of Electoral Issues: Another problem that this study aims to address is the limited understanding of electoral issues by the public. The study will explore the extent to which the mass media has been effective in educating the public about the electoral process, and how this affects the public's perception of the media's role in communicating electoral information.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to explore the public's perception of the role of the mass media in communicating information about the 2023 electoral process in Delta State, with a focus on the gubernatorial elections. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the extent to which the public perceives the mass media as an effective tool for communicating information about the electoral process, including information on candidates, parties, and electoral procedures.
2. Investigate the public's perception of the mass media's objectivity and impartiality in reporting on the electoral process, including whether the media is perceived to be biased towards certain candidates or political parties.
3. Assess the quality and availability of electoral information provided by the mass media and the extent to which this information is accessible to the public.
4. Identify factors that influence the public's perception of the mass media's role in communicating information about the electoral process, including socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and income.

Research Questions

1. To what extent did the public in Delta State rely on the mass media for information about the 2023 gubernatorial elections?
2. What is the public's perception of the objectivity and impartiality of the mass media in reporting on the 2023 electoral process?

3. How does the public's perception of media bias towards certain candidates or political parties affect their trust in the media's coverage of the electoral process?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of the Mass Media in Communicating the 2023 Electoral Process

The mass media plays a significant role in communicating the 2023 Nigerian elections. According to Gureutich and Blumler (1977), the mass media possesses enormous powers and their power comes from three sources: structural, psychological and normative. According to them, the structural root of the power of the mass media ‘springs from their unique capacity to deliver to the politician an audience, which in size and composition is unavailable to him by any other means.’ The media serves as an important platform for political campaigns, voter education, and as a watchdog during the electoral process.

Besley, Burgess and Prat (2002) emphasize that a “free or non-captured media can affect political outcomes through three routes, namely: sorting, discipline and policy salience”. Sorting they argue, refers to the process by which politicians are selected to hold office. The kind of information media provide can be important to voters who are deciding who to put in charge. This includes information about candidate’s previous track records; their actions, while in office may also be an important source of information about their underlying motivation or competence. By publishing stories or advertisements that responsibly cast light on this, the media, they claim, can be a powerful force. The role of the media in achieving discipline is most relevant in situations of hidden action. This involves exposure of activities which perpetrators do not want the public to know.

The media can also affect which issues are salient to voters which the Agenda-Setting theory fairly postulates. On their part, Zaller et al (1992) argue that the more negative information individuals “know” about a candidate, the less favorable they feel toward the candidate and the less likely they will vote for the candidate. This, when extended, would mean that a media that wants to set a negative agenda against one candidate may choose to continuously publish more negative stories about that candidate which may not allure to his/her advantage. Voters also place greater emphasis on negative campaign information than they do on positive information, thus attend to negative information more closely and place more weight on negative candidate attributes than on positive ones when forming evaluations, all of

which is consistent with models of attitude formation indicating negative information moves candidate assessment downward.

Graber (2001) also claims that media coverage is the very life blood of politics because it shapes the perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media, she continues, do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment. Indeed, the mass media are not only key avenues for providing the required information; they also determine what is available in the public domain. Mass media enrich democracy, while democracy provides conducive environment for an efficient functioning of the mass media. It is almost impossible to have a democratic society without the full complement of a robust mass media system. It can be fairly concluded that a country that could lay claim to high democratic standards but does not have very vibrant media may just be described as ‘wanting’ or at best ‘defective’. McNair (2002) thus fittingly pointed out that “in democratic political systems, media function both as transmitters of political communication which originates outside the media organization itself and as senders of political messages constructed by journalists”. This also explains why political parties spend a lot of fortune placing continuous political advertisement in the media during electioneering periods.

One of the primary roles of the mass media in Nigerian electoral process is to serve as a platform for political campaigns. The media is expected to provide political parties and candidates with equal opportunities to air their views and campaign messages. In Nigeria, the media has played a crucial role in political campaigns by providing a platform for candidates to articulate their campaign messages and reach out to voters. For instance, during the 2023 gubernatorial elections, political parties and candidates used various media platforms, including television, radio, and social media, to reach out to voters. Delta State based radio stations like Trend FM, Quest FM, Kpoko Fm and newspaper outlets like Pointer, Urhobo Times among others carried political advertisements that helped to amplify the messages of the gubernatorial candidates who vied for the position of governor of Delta state.

Agba (2007:261) argues that the media should go back to the concept of journalism in public interest to be able to discharge its proper role in times of election. In this regard, the very first task of the media is how to make politicians respect people's right to candid electioneering. In this regard, news should not mean alienating the audience and keeping the electorates groping in the dark. According to Nwaozuzu (1997:87), electioneering campaign reportage should seek out relevant truths for the people who cannot witness or comprehend the

events that affect them. Cohen (1970:27), collaborates the above viewpoint and clearly defines its implications for good political culture. According to him news has gotten so complex that mere reportage is not good any more. What is required is for the journalist to add analysis to campaign news. This implies that the media must interpret campaigns in the light of the electoral needs of the people, that is, implications and actions to people and to realization of a vibrant political system. This simply means directing the goals of electioneering campaign to the desirable goal of responsible democratic principles that recognize the sovereignty of the people's votes. The media, Agba points out, should aim towards getting all political actors to truly believe in one Nigeria, to accept the rules which are made to guide the conduct of elections. These form the purview of media self-examination. Agba (2007:71), acknowledges the fact that electioneering campaign for political power in Nigeria has become part of the problem of national cohesion and integration. It has therefore, become “part of a profound socio-political rot”.

Another role of the mass media in Nigerian elections is to serve as a platform for voter education. The media is expected to provide accurate and timely information to citizens about the electoral process, including voter registration, voting procedures, and election results. Iredia (2007), opines that electoral commission does not have the capability to undertake voter education. According to him, there is a big difference between voter education and the image-making ventures which many information departments of electoral commissions undertake. “The powerful channels, the most potent strategies and the technical format for effective public enlightenment belong to the media”.

In Nigeria, the media has played a crucial role in voter education by providing information to citizens about the electoral process. For instance, during the 2019 general elections, the media provided information to citizens on how to register to vote, where to vote, and what to expect during the voting process. The media in Delta state also provided information about the gubernatorial candidates that contested for the exalted position of governor of the state. The gubernatorial candidates were Oborevori Sheriff Francis Orohedor (PDP), Omo-Agege Ovie Augustine (APC), Pela Kawhariebie Kennedy (LP), Ogboru Great Ovedje (APGA), Gbagi Kenneth Omemewa (SDP), Ofehe Sunny (YPP), Ekure Efeoghene Shedrack (ADC) amongst others.

The mass media also serves as a watchdog during Nigerian elections. The media is expected to monitor the conduct of the electoral process, expose irregularities, and hold election

officials accountable. The media's role in an election extends to monitoring of the electoral process. In Nigeria, the media has played a crucial role in monitoring the electoral process by exposing irregularities and holding election officials accountable. For instance, during the 2023 general elections, the media exposed cases of vote buying, ballot box snatching, and other irregularities during the elections. The media are not only the cornerstone of democracy, they also play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy.

The vital role of the media as a watchdog of the democratic process and in influencing political discourse, especially during elections, is essential to democratic consolidation. Universally, the role of the media in information dissemination and public enlightenment through the provision of platforms for electoral campaigns, public debate and voter education is a pre-condition for free and fair elections. Without the media, safeguarding the credibility and transparency of the electoral process would be a difficult task. While a free and objective media can foster transparency by disseminating important electoral information, a stifled or compromised media is capable of undermining the electoral process, ultimately weakening democracy.

Lastly, the mass media serves as a platform for post-election analysis and feedback. Nigerian media with coverage of Delta state gubernatorial electoral process provided analysis of the electoral process, including the conduct of political parties and candidates, election results, and the performance of electoral officials. The media has played a crucial role in providing analysis and feedback on the electoral process. For instance, after the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial elections, the media provided analysis of the conduct of political parties and candidates, election results, and the performance of electoral officials. The electorates were able to keep up with the updated gubernatorial results on social media & media platforms within Delta state and those with nationwide coverage.

Public Perception of the Role of the Mass Media in Nigerian Elections

The public perception of the role of the mass media in Nigerian elections is mixed. While some view the media as a tool for promoting transparency and accountability in the electoral process, others view the media as biased and partisan. Some members of the public believe that the media is used by political actors to propagate their interests, rather than serving as an independent watchdog.

According to a study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Nigerian voters' perception of the media's role in the electoral process is generally positive. The study found that 77% of Nigerian voters believed that the media had played a positive role in the 2019 general elections. The study also found that 76% of voters believed that the media had provided them with accurate and reliable information about the electoral process.

However, there are concerns about the media's impartiality and professionalism. Some members of the public believe that the media is biased towards certain political parties or candidates, and that they do not present a balanced view of the electoral process. There have been instances where the media has been accused of sensationalism, promoting fake news, and inflaming tensions during the electoral process.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For research of this kind, a very relevant theoretical framework is the Agenda Setting Theory of mass communication.

Agenda setting theory refers to the media's ability to influence the public's perception of issues by highlighting and emphasizing certain topics. In the context of politics, agenda setting theory is particularly relevant, as the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion about political issues and events. This essay explores the concept of agenda setting theory as it relates to politics.

According to media scholar Herbert Gans, agenda-setting theory refers to the way the media influence public opinion by selecting which issues to cover and how much coverage they give to those issues. Gans argues that the media have the power to shape public opinion by determining what issues are deemed important and newsworthy. (Gans, 1979) In political communication, agenda-setting theory is the process by which the media influence the public's perception of what is important or newsworthy. It involves selecting which issues to cover and how much coverage they receive. (Entman, 2004)

Agenda-setting theory is a theory in communication studies that explains how the media shape public opinion by selecting which issues to cover and how much coverage they give to those issues. The theory suggests that the media play a crucial role in shaping the public's perception of what is important or newsworthy. (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Agenda-setting theory is a concept in political communication that explains how the media influence the

public's perception of what is important or newsworthy. It involves the selection of issues by the media and the amount of coverage given to those issues. (Mitchell & Jensen, 2010). Agenda-setting theory is a concept in communication studies that explains how the media influence the public's perception of what is important or newsworthy. It involves the selection of issues by the media and the amount of coverage given to those issues. (Entman, 2004). Agenda-setting theory is a concept in political communication that explains how the media influence the public's perception of what is important or newsworthy. It involves the selection of issues by the media and the amount of coverage given to those issues. (Hajer, 1989)

Agenda setting theory posits that the media's coverage of certain topics and issues can influence the public's perception of those issues. The theory suggests that the media has the power to determine which issues are considered important and relevant, and which issues are ignored or downplayed. The media's agenda-setting function is particularly significant in shaping public opinion about politics, as it can influence how people perceive political events, policies, and actors.

The media's ability to set the political agenda is rooted in its power to determine what issues are newsworthy and deserving of coverage. The media's coverage of political events and issues can determine the public's perception of the significance of those events and issues. For example, if the media devotes a significant amount of coverage to a particular political issue, such as immigration or healthcare, the public may perceive that issue to be particularly important and relevant.

Agenda setting theory suggests that the media's influence on the public's perception of political issues is not direct but rather indirect. The media's coverage of political events and issues does not necessarily change people's opinions, but it can influence which issues people consider important and relevant. In this way, the media's agenda-setting function is particularly significant in shaping public opinion about politics.

Agenda setting theory is particularly relevant in the context of politics, as the media's coverage of political events and issues can influence public opinion about political actors, policies, and events. The media's ability to set the political agenda can influence how people perceive political events and issues and can even shape the political discourse itself.

In the context of political campaigns, agenda setting theory is particularly relevant, as the media's coverage of political candidates and their policies can influence how voters

perceive those candidates and their policies. The media's agenda-setting function can also influence which issues are considered important and relevant in political campaigns. For example, if the media devotes a significant amount of coverage to a particular policy issue, such as healthcare or education, that issue may become a central focus of the campaign which according to Oji (2011) help ascertain the reach information to the grassroots.

Agenda setting theory is also relevant in the context of policymaking, as the media's coverage of policy issues can influence public opinion about those issues and can even influence policymakers' decisions. The media's coverage of policy issues can shape the public's perception of the importance and urgency of those issues, which can influence policymakers' priorities.

Agenda setting theory is a significant concept in the field of political communication, as it highlights the media's power to shape public opinion about political issues and events. The media's ability to set the political agenda is particularly relevant in the context of politics, as it can influence how people perceive political actors, policies, and events. Understanding the media's agenda-setting function is crucial for policymakers, political candidates, and other political actors who seek to influence public opinion about political issues and events.

To ensure that the media's agenda-setting function serves the public interest, it is essential to promote media professionalism, independence, and ethical standards. This can be achieved through the implementation of laws and regulations that protect media freedom and promote media accountability. Since the focus is on media perception and not involvement, we made an effort to avoid using Oji and Bebenimibo's (2021) adoption of participatory theory. It is also important to encourage media organizations to promote balanced and accurate reporting and to avoid sensationalism and the propagation of fake news.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative method of research design to find out the Public Perception of the Role of the Mass Media in Communicating the 2023 Electoral Process: A Study of the Gubernatorial Election in Delta State. The research method employed for this study is the in-depth interview method of qualitative research. In-depth interview is a type of qualitative research method that involves a structured conversation between the researcher and an individual or a group of individuals. The goal of in-depth interview is to gain a deeper

understanding of a particular topic or phenomenon by exploring the participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes.

According to Rogers (2004), in-depth interview is a qualitative research method that involves a structured conversation between the researcher and an individual or a group of individuals. The goal of in-depth interview is to gain a deeper understanding of a particular topic or phenomenon by exploring the participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. In-depth interview is a qualitative research method that involves a structured conversation between the researcher and an individual or a group of individuals. The goal of in-depth interview is to gain a deeper understanding of a particular topic or phenomenon by exploring the participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

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In-depth interview is a widely used qualitative research method in which the researcher conducts a structured conversation with a participant in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. The purpose of an in-depth interview is to uncover information that cannot be obtained through other research methods, such as surveys or

observation (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews are typically conducted one-on-one, although they can also be conducted in groups.

In-depth interview is a powerful research method that can provide rich and detailed data about participants' experiences and perceptions. However, it is important to note that the researcher must be skilled in conducting interviews and in analyzing the data. Researchers must also be aware of ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent from participants and protecting their privacy. It requires careful planning, skilled interviewing, and rigorous data analysis in order to be effective.

The population of the study were matured adults of 18 years and above who are registered voters in Delta State who are politically inclined and understand, talk about and involve in politics in the state. In-depth interview shall be used to elicit response from them on their Perception of the Role of the Mass Media in Communicating the 2023 Electoral Process, especially the Gubernatorial Election held on March 18, 2023.

Wimmer and Dominick (1987) defines sample as a subset of the population that is taken to be the representative of the entire population. Due to time and financial constraints, the researcher limited the population of the research to interview 20 adults male and female who were registered voters of any status and conducting a focus group discussion in Abraka township among adult members of the community who are also registered voters to represent the population. Structured and unstructured interview questions was used during the interview.

The purposeful sample technique was employed in the study. Purposeful sampling is a research method used in qualitative research where the researcher selects participants based on specific criteria to ensure that the sample is representative of the population of interest. This technique is used to gather data that is rich, detailed, and relevant to the research question (Patton, 2002).

According to Charmaz (2006), the purpose of purposeful sampling is to "identify the salient characteristics of the population, choose participants who exemplify those characteristics, and develop in-depth descriptions of the phenomena of interest" (p. 133). The researcher uses their knowledge of the population of interest to select participants who are likely to provide valuable information for the research study (Patton, 2002).

In addition to ensuring that the sample is representative of the population of interest, purposeful sampling also allows the researcher to select participants who are most likely to provide valuable information for the research study. By selecting participants who have the necessary knowledge and experience, the researcher can ensure that the data gathered is rich, detailed, and relevant to the research question (Patton, 2002).

The instrument that was used as data collection by the researcher was in-depth interview to elicit responses from respondents for this research work. The in-depth interview was face-to-face/one-on-one interview, where the researcher asked the respondents questions on their perception of the role of the mass media in communicating the 2023 electoral process, especially the gubernatorial election held on March 18, 2023. Both prepared structured and unstructured questions were used during the interview. Since Abraka is a university community, the respondents to be interviewed comprised of matured students who are above 18 years and are registered voters, lecturers, non-academic staff, market/business men/women, transporters and others that constitute the inhabitants of the town who are also registered voters.

The instrument of data collection was 10 structured and unstructured questions, although, questions may be elicited from respondent's response to elicit and expatiate on point made. This may not have been written among the questions intended to be asked initially.

Since the researcher dealt with a qualitative research type, the responses elicited from the respondents during the in-depth interview and the focus group discussion session were analysed and used to write the report of the research work.

5. RESULTS

Question One: To what extent did the public in Delta State relied on the mass media for information about the 2023 gubernatorial elections?

On this research question, the researcher designed other questions to elicit response from respondents during the interview and focus group discussions on the February 2023 Presidential and Gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. These questions include,

- a. What were the sources of information to the electorates about candidates during the presidential and gubernatorial elections?

- b. Which media/medium effectively reported the elections, the electronics, prints or the social media?
- c. How were the reports from these medium, bias, partial, objective, factual etc.?

In answering the question, both respondents during the interviews and focus group discussions stated that they got information about the various candidates from the prints, the electronics and the social media. However, they rely mostly on the prints and electronics than the social media. That these are more believable than the social media which sometimes misinformed the public since most of those who post news on the social media are not trained journalists or media men, except the online link of some prints and electronics media.

During the focus group discussion, one respondent stated that, “I deliberately blocked my mind on any information emanating from the social media because I believe they are ‘fake news’ due to the fact that information from the social media were not regulated. Also, those who post information on social media are not trained journalists but those most of the time repost what was not verified.”

The participants particularly mentioned radio to be the most authentic source of information for them during the elections. While a few stated that, news from television stations, Arise Tv, Channels, AIT and TVC provided the needed information about the candidates during the elections. But, bothering on the most effective, they stated that Arise TV and Channels were most effective because they provided information about the candidates unbiased.

One of the interviewee in Abraka, stated that, he particularly trust Arise TV because of one of the Arise TV anchormen, Mr. Rufai, a seasoned journalist who always say it the way it is. According to him,

“I don’t missed programmes on Arise Tv during the elections since I get authentic information from them especially because of Mr. Rufai and Dr. Reuben Abati and the other lady that anchored the morning programme in Arise Tv.”

From the print media, respondents stated that, “All the major newspapers available to us, Guardian, Vanguard, Punch, Daily Telegraph, Daily Independent, Leadership and our local newspapers like Urhobo Voice, Ndokwa Vanguard, Isoko News also tried their best to feed us with information we needed about the candidates during the elections.” Some also mentioned

that they got information from posters, flyers, Billboards and from the campaign programmes of the candidates during the elections.”

On the issue of believability of information from these sources, the respondents stated that they believed information they got from the prints and electronics than those from the social media and other sources, other than the main media.

Furthermore, some respondents stated that they got information about the various candidates who contested for the president position and the governorship from friends, neighbours, leaders, opinion molders, classmates, party leaders even from ‘hearsays’ sources which to an extent influenced their decision during the elections.

Research Question two: What is the public's perception of the objectivity and impartiality of the mass media in reporting on the 2023 electoral process?

On this question, the researchers want to know the public perception on how fair, neutral, objective were the various information received by respondents about the various candidates during and after the elections.

The following questions were designed to elicit response to this question

- a. How would you rate the information from the mass media on the 2023 presidential and gubernatorial elections?
- b. Would you say the reports from the mass media were factual, true, fair, objective or bias about the elections or the candidates for the elections?
- c. Were there adequate reports from the mass media about the elections that helped the electorates in making their decisions?

In providing answers to these questions, during the interviews and focus group discussions - to the first question, rating information from the mass media on the 2023 elections. Respondents categorically stated that, there was adequate information about the elections before, during and after the elections from the mass media. They stated that the mass media truly played their role of informing and educating the them on the elections, the candidates and the entire electoral process during the period.

The radio was mentioned first, as the most viable channel which disseminated information to the people during the elections. Those interviewed in Abraka mentioned Quest

Fm in Ughelli, Kpoko Fm in Warri, DBS Warri, Crown Fm, Warri and Delsu Radio. They stated that they were glued to the radio stations because they were portable and even with their mobile phones. The respondent particularly mentioned that during phone-in programmes and sometimes discussions and during news bulletins in these stations provided them with adequate information.

A respondent in Abraka, stated that he relied on the television during the elections to get information, especially, Arise TV and TVC Television. He stated that, he did not believe information from government-owned television stations because he thought that,

“The news from the government-owned stations were ‘doctored’ to favour government candidates, to sell government candidates.” Some other respondents interviewed shared the same thought with the respondent interviewed earlier, saying that, they never bothered to listen to NTA or DBS Warri since Delta State is a PDP state any information coming from there would be pro-PDP and would never say anything against the government.”

On objectivity of the media in reporting the electoral processes, some says, “Yes, the mass media were objective and impartial. The mass media as a tool for information dissemination and promotion of electoral processes, have been known to be anchor on objectivity and impartiality. In the gubernatorial electoral processes, they reported their information with a high level of objectivity and impartiality without being sentimental irrespective of party affiliation. While some say, No, they were not objective and impartial, they were highly sentimental and biased in their reports, most especially the government own media.”

“To a very large extent, the public perceives the media coverage of political events in Delta state pre and post 2023 election as biased on the basis of its reportage. The government owned media outlets only reported what aligned with the governor's interest while the private media was monetized and availed to the highest bidder. The public in Delta State believe to a large extent that the media was bias in reporting the 2023 electoral process because some media houses were against some candidates.”

However, views were divided on the perception of the public on the reportage of the electoral process by the mass media while some respondents say, “Yes, the public has positive perception about the mass media on their information on the 2023 gubernatorial election. Their perception is positive, because they so much believe in the power and credibility of the mass media to effectively report gubernatorial election information. “

Others say, “No, they have negative perception, their perception is negative simple they have seen the mass media as a biased umpire in reporting gubernatorial elections mostly especially as it reports with a high level of sentiments and favorite towards the mass media owner and the political parties that controls the government.”

Stating on how the mass media reported the elections after the presidential and gubernatorial elections of February 2023, one of the interviewees, stated that,

“Well, Delta state is a PDP state. So, the result was not different from what we expected. The reason is due to the fact that we lost hope after the results of the presidential election came out. So, we just depended on the mass media to give us what those in power had already decided on.

The respondent further stated that,

“The truth is, I noticed that some TV stations were in support of a particular party and they were kind of biased when talking about the party's activities. There was a contention between Seun of Channels TV and Mr. Rufai of Arise TV. It was quite obvious that one was in support of APC and the other in support of Labor party. Although Arise TV Station is known to deal with issues without sentiments and partiality unlike other TV Stations.”

On whether there were adequate reports from the mass media about the elections that helped the electorates in making their decisions? Respondents stated that, there were adequate information from the mass media about the elections that enable them make informed decision on the right candidate to vote for.

The discussions also unravel that “There were adequate information reported by the mass media, the radio, television and the social media that enabled the electorates make informed decision. The private media especially did their best to disseminate enough information about the various candidates who contested during the 2023 presidential and gubernatorial elections in Delta State.”

“However, most of the candidates that belong to PDP got better reportage from state owned media stations because the Delta state is a PDP state and therefore, the information about government-backed candidates were favourable unlike those candidates who are of the opposing party – APC, Labour party and others who participated in the elections.”

The study found that the most reported candidate in the media, in Delta State was, Rt. Hon. Sheriff Oborewori, of PDP and former Dep Senate President, Sen, Ovie Omo-Agege of APC. That they were more prominent in the news than others in the state due to the fact that, they belong to the biggest political party. However, the candidate of Labour party, Mr. Kenneth Pella, though not well known, but because of the Presidential candidate, Mr. Peter Obi, has sympathy followers mostly on the social media, patronised mostly by the youths who believe in Mr. Obi as the game changer in Nigerian politics and a representation of openness, truthfulness and humility. Somebody who will change the fortune of the Nigeria people by his intelligent in the issues that bothers on the Nigerian Nation.

Question three: How does the public's perception of media bias towards certain candidates or political parties affect their trust in the media's coverage of the electoral process?

It was revealed that: "The mass media gave a fair report of the political candidates' during the elections because the journalists themselves know that the electorates were tired of bias report from the media and were ready for a show down. Also, the electorates were very enlightened and were not ready to accept any bias report about any candidates from the media."

Furthermore, it was noted that "The public, especially young people, abandoned traditional media in favor of social media, as narrated in Oji (2022), due to the perception that the media has been compromised and has become a tool in the hands of the political elites in Delta state." Bias reportage about political candidates was primarily seen on social media (Oji, 2022). The conventional media has turned into a biased adversary of free expression and the truth. A weapon in the hands of the wealthy and influential.

It is largely due to this perception that resulted in the massive adoption of the social media especially by young people as a means of amplifying the voices of the political oppressed during the 2023 elections. For young people, Twitter became the 4th Estate of the Realm.

During the focus group discussion held, one of the participants stated that, "Though a section of the public opinion was molded by the media bias, some persons were also of the opinion that the media reporting was biased towards some candidates and therefore did not trust the media coverage of the electoral process."

The dependability on social media by electorates for information about the candidates was due to some bias reportage of some political candidates considered as enemy or candidates of the opposing political party, especially the candidates that did not belong to the party in power. Thus, the electorates turned to the social media to get information about their preferred candidates.

Discussion of Findings

From data generated from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion, it was evident that the electorate depended on the mass media for information about the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Delta State and that the public perception of the objectivity and impartiality of the mass media in reporting on the 2023 electoral process was to an extent positive, especially, with the primary media – radio, television and the print media.

It was also found that, although some voters believe that the media has been overly critical of certain candidates who do not support the state's ruling political party, the public's perception of media bias towards particular candidates or political parties does not have a detrimental effect on the public's trust in the media's coverage of the electoral process. According to Oji (2006), lack of balance reporting could indicate that communication tools have been used for improper reasons, such as propaganda, which is a surefire way to get into problems.

According to participant responses from focus groups and interviews, Delta State voters were able to make educated decisions by using information about participating political parties' candidates from all state media outlets, including radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and social media. They also concurred that the radio was their main source of information. According to Arede and Oji (2022), this is the case.

Nonetheless, a few participants expressed their belief that the media exhibited bias when covering candidates from rival political parties. However, people resorted to social media to learn more about these candidates. At this point, this group considered social media to be the Fourth Estate of the Realm. a resource for the data they seek for the candidates they most want. Therefore, we may conclude that throughout the elections, the media did a good job of informing the population. During the election process of 2023, they also fulfilled the duty of informing the public about the electoral process.

Additionally, the respondents claimed that during the 2023 election process, Delta State's media provided sufficient information. In order to assist them in making well-informed decisions regarding their favored candidates, some people wished that the reports were factual, true, impartial, and somewhat neutral. They also concurred that, to a certain extent, the material was factual, impartial, and unbiased, with the exception of a few government-owned media outlets that reported unfavorable things about opposition party candidates and other media owners who shared a similar loyalty to the ruling political party. According to respondents' responses, electorates viewed social media as the fourth estate of the realm since they relied on it for information about their candidates when the primary or other government-owned media outlets failed to report on it.

They however stated that not all the media in the state were bias except those loyal the ruling political party. The youths mostly turned their attention to the social media to get their information.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to ascertain how the general people perceived the mass media's role in promoting the Delta State elections of 2023. It made an effort to determine how well the media carried out its fundamental duty of enlightening and educating the public throughout Delta State's 2023 election process, as well as how accurate, impartial, and fair these reports were regarding the candidates who stood for election in the state. In order to help voters make educated decisions during the elections, it also tried to ascertain where and how they obtained information on the individuals running for office. It was found from the replies given in focus groups and interviews that the media was primarily responsible for educating the public about the political candidates running in the 2023 elections and for disseminating information. All of the state's mass media outlets performed an excellent job of reporting, with the exception of a few government-owned outlets that choose to remain faithful to the political party in power.

However, there are concerns about the media's impartiality and professionalism. Some members of the public believe that the media is biased towards certain political parties or candidates, and that they do not present a balanced view of the electoral process. That there were instances where the media has been accused of sensationalism, promoting fake news, and inflaming tensions during the electoral process.

Due to the partiality of some media houses, the electorate depended on the social media for information about candidates for the elections. Aside these, the media was seen to have reported all the political parties' candidates well enough for the electorates to make informed decision during the 2023 elections.

The result of the study showed that the public perception of the role of the mass media in communicating the 2023 electoral process in Delta state played a significant role in the electorates active participation in the 2023 electoral process in the state and Nigeria in general.

Conclusion

From the data gathered and analysed, it was evident that to a large extent the public in Delta State relied on the mass media for information about the 2023 gubernatorial election and that the print media, the electronic and the social media played the role of adequate information dissemination to the public about the electoral process.

Moreover, respondents agreed that media bias towards some political parties did not affect the electorates so much but rather made them to turn to the social media for information about such political parties even though they saw news on the social media as fake and misleading.

Recommendations

The study on public perception of the role of the mass media in communicating the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Delta State is inexhaustive. Therefore, there is need to identify areas for further studies which include:

1. The effect of mass media messages on the electorates during electoral process.
2. Public perception of the role of the social media in the dissemination of information of political party during elections.
3. Comparative analysis of the role of the print, the electronic and social media in electoral processes.

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