THE INFLUENCE OF GEOPOLITICAL AFFILIATIONS ON NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE OF NATIONAL ISSUES

By

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have asserted that societies greatly influence the operations and functions of the media that operate within those societies. On the basis of the postulations, critical theory of mass communication holds that such media operations and functions would indeed reflect the agenda of the power elite in any society. These postulations formed the basis of this study. Five Nigerian national newspapers (The Guardian, The PUNCH, the Daily Trust, the Daily Times and the Daily Champion) were content analysed to find out if their coverage of the decision by Nigeria's President Obasanjo to contest the 2003 presidential election was influenced by their relationships with the six geopolitical zones of the country. The study showed that the coverage by these newspapers was significantly influenced by their geopolitical affiliations.

INTRODUCTION

Critical theorists of mass communication have asserted that a nation's mass media generally reflect the views of those who hold economic and political power. Berkowitz (1997), for instance, argues that when media communication is viewed as the product of unspoken cultural values and beliefs by which a people manage their lives, it is plausible to conclude that journalistic products such as news, features, opinions, and investigative reports tend to reflect the preferences of the dominant power structures of the particular society. According to Hall (cited by Griffin, 2000),

The mass media in their practices and functions impose this dominant ideology on the rest of society.

These scholars indeed point to the agenda-setting function of the mass media as being consistent with this viewpoint because "the so-called agenda consist of the dominant perspectives, which, in practical terms, translate to the agenda of the ruling elite" (Griffin, 2000, p. 377). Contemporary agenda-setting theorists seem, in fact, to have come round to this position. No longer do they posit that the press is only "stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about," now they agree that it has become successful in telling people what to think. They assert that through the process of framing:

The media not only set the agenda for what issues, events, or candidates are most important, but they
also transfer the salience of specific attributes belonging to those potential objects of interest (Griffin, 2000: 366).

He defines a media frame as “the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 366).

In other words, there is a clear interactive relationship between the mass media and their operational environment. McQuail (2005) reviews a number of models that point to the inter-twining relationship between mass communication and the total life of a national society. He places them under the rubric of the “dominant media” model, which suggests that mass functions and output are strongly influenced by the immediate circumstances of political culture and historical events. The dominant media model “rests very much on the idea that the media offer a view of the world, a substitute or pseudo-environment, which is a potent manipulation of people, but also an aid to their psychic survival under difficult conditions” (McQuail, 2005, p. 94).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

These assertions informed the theoretical framework for this study. Hall (1973, 1977, 1989) characterises media functions in these circumstances as hegemony.

Hegemony is not a conscious plot, it is not overtly coercive, and the effects are not total. The broadcast and print media present a variety of ideas, but then they tend to prop up the status quo by privileging the already accepted interpretation of reality. The result is that the role of mass media turns out to be the “production of consent” rather than a “reflection of consensus” that already exists (Griffin, 2000, p. 340).

This is to say that though there might not always be a determined, policy-based decision to serve the agenda of the power elite, the modus operandi and the ingredients of media operations inexorably lead the media into functioning to promote these powerful segments of every national community. The choice of content analysis as the research method for this study was partly informed by this concept of hegemony, for, as Babbie (1992, p. 312) observes, it helps us “to learn about human behaviour by observing what people inadvertently leave behind” through writing and other documents.

The Critical Theory, based on the dominant media model, was, therefore, chosen for this study because, as will be shown in the next section, the views of the dominant power structure (the elites) almost always passes for the views of the people, especially in the political domain. Though the theory goes back to the Frankfurt School, spearheaded by Theodor Ardono and Max
Horkheimer, it has been most forcefully promoted by Stuart Hall, the arrowhead of the Birmingham School. The work of the Birmingham School has been “a major influence firstly in the study of popular culture and secondly in the development of critical cultural studies” McQuail, 2005, p. 549).

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The media in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria would most likely reflect the views and ideologies of the dominant power elites in the various ethnic formations. Nigeria's social, economic and political environments are particularly intriguing for the functions of the press. As any nation plagued by nationality and language divisions will testify, the functions of the mass media are constrained, inhibited or encouraged by the parameters of political and economic decision-making. Opubor (1985, p. 192) has observed that:

The fortunes of the mass media and the uses to which they are employed, their behaviour and achievement are intimately bound up with social issues, political and legislative considerations and factors of human psychology quite outside the confines of the normal conception of what the mass media are.

It is historically accurate to state that generally, the Nigerian press has served the country well. In the colonial days, it championed the cause of national self-determination. Indeed, the press pre-dated British colonialism and, therefore, the nation-state itself. After all, Iwe Irohin, generally accepted as the first secular Nigerian newspaper, began publication in 1859, about two years before the annexation of Lagos by the British (Hachten, 1971; Uya, 1991). Many newspapers were to follow, founded on an agenda that established the reputation for nationalistic and uncompromising journalism. This nationalist press agitated for the improvement of the lot of the Africans by publicising African grievances and criticising the colonial rulers. Then, it became embroiled in the struggle for independence (Coleman, 1958; Hachten, 1971; Ekwelie, 1985).

Press historians thus usually attribute the strength of the pre-independence press to the struggle against British colonialism. As Ugboajah (1980, p. 16) notes, “Press history in Nigeria also serves as a history of Nigerian nationalism. The editor and the nationalist were one and the same.” However, once independence was assured, a subtle shift began from militant nationalism to internal political struggles among rival regional groups. This tendency to defend sectional interests has more or less continued to be a feature of the press community though in a different garb. To put it another way, the national and cultural diversity of the country impinges greatly on the operations and performance of the print media as on most areas of national life.

Like many a national press, the Nigerian press has the desire to guide people, consciously or unconsciously,
into seeing national issues from perspectives that are beneficial not only to the nation but also to specific interests within the nation, among them, the interests of the geopolitical groups with which the newspapers are associated. In other words, national newspapers will most likely report and present issues and arguments in a way that is favourable to the geopolitical region from which they derive their legitimacy. Ugboajah (1980) shows, for example, how, in covering the controversial 1973 national census, “the Nigerian Tribune, representing the southern constituency whose population decreased, manifested anti-government behaviour on the issue; whereas the New Nigerian, representing the northern states whose population increased, was neutral, editorially speaking” (1980, p. 37).

This study examined five major Nigerian newspapers, namely, The Guardian, the Daily Times, The Punch, the Champion, and the Daily Trust, and how they covered a major national issue. The issue chosen for study was the decision of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002 to seek the ticket of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to contest the 2003 presidential election. The President's decision to contest the election did not only involve the private troubles of an individual politician, but it also had implications for the social, economic and political well being of Nigerians. As Hale (1990, p. 5) notes, “Troubles stem from private matters that lie within an individual’s character. Issues, on the contrary, go beyond the personal, local setting, to broader social forces that affect the life experiences of many people.”

There were different views on the President's performance in his first term (1999-2003). In the build-up to the 2003 presidential election, an increasingly loud collective voice had arisen, even within the People's Democratic Party, which said he had failed the country and should not seek another term. The threat by the National Assembly, in which the PDP had a vast majority, to impeach the President in early 2003, came hard on the heels of his decision to run for a second term, and provided even more opportunities for opponents of his second-term bid to voice their views with impunity.

**PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to find out to what extent geopolitical affiliations influenced the five national newspapers in their coverage of that decision by President Obasanjo to seek re-election on the PDP ticket. The concept of geopolitical affiliation in the study was based on the grouping of the country into six geopolitical zones: South-East, South-South, South-West, North-East, North-West and North-Central.

Studies by Udoakah (1998) and Anim. (2004) suggest that strong regional groupings have played more decisive roles in recent nation-wide political affairs than ethnic affiliation or individual state interests. This study, therefore, set out to establish whether the newspapers' coverage of the President's decision reflected the currents of political information, opinions and sentiments in the various
parts of the country with which the newspapers were associated.

In selecting the newspapers, then, the following assumptions were made:
* The Times represented both the interests of the federal government and, to some extent, a South-West perspective
* The PUNCH represented the interests of the South West
* Trust represented the interests of the three northern geopolitical zones
* The Guardian represented the interests of the South-South
* The Champion represented the interests of the South East.

The study covered a period of five months, from February 1 to June 30, 2002. This period covered the weeks before the President announced his decision, which constituted the period of greatest apprehension for the public. It was during this period that 19 state governors, some ministers and political party officials went to the President's country home to "plead" with him to seek re-election in 2003, an event which ignited nationwide controversy. Also, the President finally made the declaration of his intention to seek re-election on April 24, 2002. The weeks following that decision led up to May 29, the third anniversary of the Obasanjo administration and of the country's return to democratic government. It was to be expected that the weeks after the anniversary celebration would also generate news, views and comments on the President's performance and his decision.

METHOD OF STUDY

The researcher used content analysis to examine the newspapers' coverage. The universe of the study was made up of all newspapers published in the country from February 1 to June 30, 2002. Of course, to study all issues of Nigerian newspapers published during that period was impracticable. The practical route was to select a representative sample of the population. This was done by stratified sampling, which was based on well-defined criteria: The newspapers selected were daily, circulated 15,000 to 100,000 copies and over, and were registered with the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN).

Also, as noted earlier, the geopolitical zones of origin of the major shareholders or proprietors of the newspapers were taken into consideration. For the purpose of the study, the weekend papers were treated as editions of the daily press. Though they are usually scanty in news and editorial comments, the weekend papers are heavy in features, signed opinions, and interviews, which allow views and facts to be more fully explored.

At this point, it is important to draw attention to the selection of the Daily Trust, because a legitimate issue may be raised about the selection of only one newspaper to represent the three Northern geopolitical zones. First of all, two of the zones (North-East and North-West) had no daily newspaper at the time which met the researcher's selection criteria. Besides, political leaders in the Northern states still tend
to speak with one voice on major political issues, either under the auspices of Arewa Consultative Forum or the Northern Elders Forum. Newspapers operating out of the North have tended to follow this cue. Since the study was on an overtly political issue, the fact that there was no newspaper representing each of the three northern geopolitical zones was, therefore, not considered a significant factor. Above all, the Trust newspapers (daily and week-end) were nationally circulated.

Subsequently, the researcher adopted systematic sampling to select the specific issues that were eventually analysed. A sample of 750 emerged, which produced a sample size of 150 per newspaper. Thirty issues were then selected to represent the population for each newspaper.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES
The study was guided by two research hypotheses. These were tested, using the chi-square test of significance.

1. In their coverage of political and controversial national issues, Nigerian newspapers are likely to be influenced by the dominant views of the geopolitical groups to which they owe allegiance.

2. A national issue perceived by a newspaper to be detrimental to the interests of the geopolitical grouping to which it owes allegiance will receive more unfavourable than favourable coverage in that newspaper.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION
The following content areas of the five newspapers were analysed: news, editorial comments, signed opinions (included opinion articles, columns and interviews), letters to the editor, editorial cartoons, and features. The collection and analysis of data required the construction of a category system and establishing a unit of analysis.

CONSTRUCTION OF CATEGORIES
The researcher constructed a category system to meet the specific needs of the study. Because the issue under study was the influence of geopolitical affiliation on newspaper coverage, the category was considerably elaborate in order to present various options, which would enable a clear, unambiguous picture to emerge. One of the crucial criteria for category construction is that it must be exhaustive. This means, as Wimmer and Dominick (2000: 145) assert, "There must be an existing slot into which every unit of analysis can be placed." The following categories were designed to measure the coverage inclination of the newspapers in terms of their geopolitical affiliations: national interest, regional interest, ethnic prejudice, and state interest. These were used.

UNITS OF ANALYSIS
In addition, units of analysis are crucial to successful content analysis. So in the study, every news story, editorial comment, opinion article, cartoon, letter and feature article, and
The interview was considered a unit of analysis. These are universally accepted media content areas, which provided the researcher with clear-cut parameters for coding and left little room for confusion.

**DIRECTION OF COVERAGE**

The direction of coverage was also measured. There are three perspectives of direction: favourable, unfavourable and neutral. (Some researchers prefer positive, negative and neutral).

**FAVOURABLE**

This denoted any of the selected items that suggested, advocated, gave the impression or stated explicitly that President Obasanjo should be re-elected, that he had been a good president or had performed well.

**UNFAVOURABLE**

This described any suggestion, statement or advocacy that the President had failed the nation, that he had not performed well, that he should not be re-elected, or that he was insensitive to the people's suffering.

**NEUTRAL**

Items regarded as neutral were equivocal with regard to President Obasanjo's decision to contest the election. For example, if an item gave the overall impression implied that he had performed badly but that was because he inherited a bad situation, or had the same right as other Nigerians to contest any election despite his many faults, it was regarded as neutral.

**CODING OF CONTENT**

The selected issues of the newspapers were examined page by page to identify all news stories, feature articles, editorial comments, letters to the editor, opinion articles, signed columns, interviews and cartoons that made reference to President Obasanjo's decision to contest the 2003 presidential election.

At the end, 135 news stories, 40 feature articles, one editorial comment, 100 opinions and seven cartoons were identified. That is, the papers published 283 editorial items between February 1 and June 30, 2002 on President Obasanjo's decision to contest the 2003 presidential election (See Table 1).

To ensure that the agreement between the coders did not occur by chance, the entries coded were subjected to an intercoder reliability test, using Scott's pi index. The intercoder reliability coefficients ranged from .75 to .89.

Table 1: Distribution of all editorial items published by the selected newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Areas</th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Times</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Coverage Inclination of the Selected Newspapers (Figures in bracket indicate percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Times</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>Punch</th>
<th>Champion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Interest</td>
<td>23(19)</td>
<td>17(14)</td>
<td>25(21)</td>
<td>32(27)</td>
<td>21(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Interest</td>
<td>9(6)</td>
<td>44(29)</td>
<td>35(23)</td>
<td>35(23)</td>
<td>46(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Interest</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>1(16.7)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>1(16.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Prejudice</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>2(33.3)</td>
<td>2(33.3)</td>
<td>2(33.3)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Direction of Coverage by selected Newspapers (Figures in bracket indicate percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Favourite</th>
<th>Unfavourable</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Times</td>
<td>21(20.8)</td>
<td>8(5)</td>
<td>3(5.1)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>12(11.8)</td>
<td>45(28.6)</td>
<td>7(12)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>16(15.8)</td>
<td>33(21)</td>
<td>9(36)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUNCH</td>
<td>31(30.6)</td>
<td>22(14)</td>
<td>4(16)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champion</td>
<td>2(20.8)</td>
<td>49(31.2)</td>
<td>2(8)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANALYSIS OF DATA

COVERAGE INCLINATION

Table 2 shows the Coverage Inclination of the newspapers for all editorial items. The data show that 118 items were classified under national interest. Out of this, The PUNCH recorded 32 (27%), The Guardian: 25 (21%); the Times: 23 (19%); Champion: 21 (18%); and the Trust: 17 (14%). The PUNCH thus led the pack with a score of 27%, followed by The Guardian: 21%; Times: 19%; the Champion: 18%, and the Trust: 14%. On the basis of the operational definition of national interest, this meant that The PUNCH and the Times were strongly supportive of the President’s decision, whereas the Trust and the Champion were not, while The Guardian appeared to be middle-of-the-road. However, when these data were juxtaposed on the data from the regional interest category, a more definitive picture emerged.

The regional interest data showed the following trend: the Champion: 46 (30%); the Trust: 44 (29%); The Guardian: 35 (23%); The PUNCH 19 (12%), and the Times: 9 (6%). The Champion and the Trust, which recorded the lowest percentages under national interest, recorded the highest, 30% and 29% respectively, on the regional interest index; The Guardian’s 23% was also higher than the 21% it recorded under the national interest category. The 12% recorded by The PUNCH and the 6% recorded by the Times were the lowest scores in the regional interest category, reflecting their pro-Obasanjo tendency.

DIRECTION OF COVERAGE

Direction of coverage shows the nature of the items published with regard to their favourability or otherwise. From Table 3, it can be seen that all the items published by the five newspapers recorded a total of 101 (36%) favourable ratings, 157 (55%) unfavourable, and 25 (9%) neutral. A look at the individual newspapers, presented an even clearer picture. Based on the total of 101 favourable responses, The PUNCH recorded 31 items (30.6%); the Times: 21 (20.8%); the Champion: 21 (20.8%); The Guardian: 16 (15.8%); and the Trust: 12 (11.8%).

The unfavourable scores showed the following trend. The Champion recorded the highest score of 49 items (31.2%); the Trust: 45
(28.6%); The Guardian: 33 (21%); The PUNCH: 22 (14%), and the Times: 8 (5%). On the neutral scale, the following trend emerged: The Guardian: 9 (36%); the Trust: 7 (28%); The PUNCH: 4 (16%); the Times: 3 (12%); Champion: 2 (8%). Since the newspapers scored very high in either the favourable or the unfavourable indices, it was no surprise that they recorded correspondingly low scores on the neutral scale.

With regard to the Direction of Coverage, the Times and The PUNCH were very close to each other. The Times scored higher (20.8%) on the favourable than on the unfavourable scale (5%). The PUNCH scored 30.6% favourable and 14% unfavourable respectively. The same trend was evident under Coverage Inclination.

In sum, the Champion published the highest number of editorial items that reflected an unfavourable disposition towards the President's decision to contest the election. The Trust came next; The Guardian followed, and then came The PUNCH and the Times. The percentages on the neutral scale were as low as the favourable and unfavourable were high, which can be interpreted as the unequivocal disposition of the newspapers towards President Obasanjo's decision to contest the 2003 election. In other words, depending on where the newspapers identify with in terms of geopolitical affiliation, they felt strongly for or against the President's decision to contest that election.

**TESTING OF HYPOTHESES**

Based on the data presented, there was no doubt that the newspapers were overwhelmingly inclined towards the dominant points of view in the geopolitical blocs to which they owed allegiance. These dominant viewpoints were assumed from the public statements made and positions taken by political leaders and umbrella organisations representing these individual zones, which the researcher meticulously documented as a guide for the study as well as for the coders.

With regard to Coverage Inclination, the entries in the regional interest category far outweighed national interest in Trust and Champion, and marginally so in The Guardian. The national interest category worked in reverse interpretation to support the case for regional interest in respect of The PUNCH and the Times. In other words, The PUNCH and the Times were positively inclined towards the South-West geopolitical region in supporting the President's decision to contest the election.

In Direction of Coverage, the Trust, The Guardian and the Champion clearly published more unfavourable than favourable items on their pages. Taken together, the five newspapers recorded 101 favourable entries. Out of this, The PUNCH and the Times alone recorded 52, compared with 49 for the other three newspapers put together. The five recorded 157 unfavourable, out of which the Trust, the Champion, and The Guardian recorded 127.
On the basis of logic, as Stempel (1989) observes, the researcher must conclude that the coverage was greatly influenced by regional interest rather than national interest, and that it was more unfavourable than favourable. However, because the study was based on sampling, it was necessary to subject the data to a statistical test of significance, using the chi-square test.

The issue was to find out whether the results (greater influence of regional interest than national interest and more unfavourable than favourable coverage) were real or possibly due to sampling error. The question to answer then was: Did the researcher observe a real difference or a chance difference?

For the statistical test of significance, the hypotheses were presented in the null form. It was necessary, first, to find the chi-square for the data on Coverage Inclination regarding the weights of national interest and regional interest. For the computation of chi-square value based on the results yielded by the data from the five newspapers, a 5-by-2 table was constructed. The formula used for the computation is as follows:

\[
X^2 = \sum \frac{(f_o - f_e)^2}{f_e}
\]

Where \(X^2\) is the chi square, \(f_o\) is the observed (or actual) frequency in each cell of the table, \(f_e\) is the expected value for each cell and \(\Sigma\) indicates that the values for all cells are summed to equal the overall value of chi square. Total chi-square value from the data on Coverage Inclination was 32.01.

This value was compared with the chi-square value in the Chi-square Table at a probability level of \(p \leq 0.05\) and 4 degrees of freedom (df). This showed a value of 9.48. Since the computed chi square value of 32.01 was larger than this value, it had to be concluded that the difference was real, not by chance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the research hypothesis maintained.

The same procedure was used to compute the chi-square value for data on the Direction of Coverage. The obtained chi-square total value was 42.89. The Chi-square Table showed that at 4 df and \(p \leq 0.05\) probability level, the chi-square value is 9.48. Since the obtained value was larger, this showed that the difference between unfavourable and favourable was real and not a chance difference. The null hypothesis was, therefore, rejected and the research hypothesis retained.

**CONCLUSION**

The data from the study showed conclusively that in their coverage, the newspapers reflected the dominant views of the geopolitical zones with which they were associated. Both by the evidence from the data and the statistical test of significance, the Trust, The Guardian, and the Champion reflected the views prevalent in the Northern, South-South and South-East geopolitical zones at the time. That is, that each of the zones...
would have preferred a presidential candidate other than President Obasanjo in the 2003 presidential election.

By the same logic, though entered under the national interest category (based on the operational definitions of the categories), The PUNCH and the Times showed that they preferred the incumbent President, from the South-West geopolitical zone, to contest again. The data thus supported the hypothesis, which posited that, in their coverage of political and controversial national issues, Nigerian newspapers are likely to be influenced by the dominant views of the geopolitical groups to which they owe allegiance.

There also was more unfavourable than favourable coverage. The line was so clearly drawn that the neutral classification in the Direction of Coverage was only 9% of the entire coverage. There is usually little room for sitting on the fence among partisan supporters. This study showed that the sides were taken very unequivocally. This clear-cut Direction of Coverage supported the second hypothesis that a national issue perceived by a newspaper to be detrimental to the dominant interests of the geopolitical group to which it owes allegiance will receive more unfavourable than favourable coverage in that newspaper.

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