

## POLITICAL ACTORS' USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MEDIA PROPAGANDA IN INFORMATION DISSEMINATION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Political Communication can be determined not by its source, but by its contents and purposes. Political actors, media and propaganda are the most notable cum inseparable variables that describe political communication contents and purposes. In today's information society, where majority of the citizens now have variety of media platforms, government and political actors have attempted to manipulate and leverage on these multiple communication platforms to reach-out, share and sell various political ideas, information, policies and programmes to the people. But there are indeed assumptions among citizens that most government policies and information through the various media channels are laced with half-truths and propaganda and often geared towards, either casting aspersions on the opposition or covering up leadership ineptitude. Political actors in Nigeria seemed to have known how effective propaganda is in information dissemination, especially in Nigeria's political system. Since they have every need to reach and convince the populace, employing the propaganda technique, designed to actualize their ambition becomes an option that may not have a substitute. On daily basis, political actors, invariably use the media of Mass Communication – print and broadcast, traditional media, the opinion leaders and now the social media to share political information. This paper did a conceptual review of political actors' use and effectiveness of media propaganda applications in their information dissemination in Nigeria in the last few years.*

**Keywords:** Political Actors, Media, Propaganda, Leadership and Governance.

### Introduction

No democratic government all over the world can do without citizens' acceptance and positive public opinions in programme and policy constructions. Political actors, the media and propaganda are the greatest inseparable variables that aptly describe Political Communication contents and purposes in a democratic setting. But, in most cases, the methodology of applications and handling of the media and public opinions in a democratic state like Nigeria, no doubt, can make or mar government policies and programmes, as well as drastically define or redefine citizens' perceptions of leadership and governance of the society. Vivian (2009, p. 466) justifies the above assertion when he opines, “Media coverage shapes what we think about as well as how we think about it. This means the media are a powerful linkage between the government and how people view their government”.

However, before the First World War, 1914- 1918, climaxing to the setting up of the League of Nations on January 10, 1920, precisely during the scramble for the partitioning of Africa, the driving force which led to the war was the inordinate desires among the most powerful nations of Europe and America to expand their territories and foist political and economic control over Africa, hence, natural resources became the basis for struggle to win and control the people. Recently, the era of Information and Communication Technologies has exposed the wide information and knowledge gap among nations, especially in the developing societies, such as Nigeria. However, within the less developed or developing political economies, the political actors and government in power have leveraged on the extant information and knowledge gap or lack of media literacy among citizens to manipulate public opinions in line with the desired objectives of both government and political actors. Today, any political actors, political organizations or the government that can effectively manipulate the people through the media and propaganda, could rule and sustain favourable public opinions on policies and programmes. This is rather a complete paradigm shift from resource control to mind management cum public opinion control through information.

In a democratic polity, the mass media and other media are seen as the 'market place of ideas', both the people and the government use the media in an expressive ways. But given the multi-faceted media platforms and the fact that in democracy, the government alone cannot decide media contents, individual citizens now participate actively and share their opinions in media contents and discourse with ease.

### **Political Actors**

Political Actors are politicians, those elected or appointed and those aspiring for political offices. Political actors through their various organizations, political parties, unions or institutions struggle to hold political powers, control the polity and influence the people and government policies and programmes. Political actors are individuals who aspire through organizational and institutional means to influence the decision making process through attaining political power in government or constitutional assemblies through which preferred policies can be implemented. ([www.answers.com/Q/What are political actors](http://www.answers.com/Q/What_are_political_actors)). Agbanu (2014, p.161) defines political actors thus:

... The political actors here include both those in government and those in opposition. While those in government take the decision that affect the lives of the electorates, and aspire to remain in office, those in opposition try to disrupt the existing power structure and through the democratic process, replace those power holders. Both groups try to influence the electorates and win them to their sides.

From the foregoing explanations, political actors in Nigeria include all present and past leaders, political activists, such as the embattled Nnamdi Kalu of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), all politicians in the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), both those appointed to head various government ministries, agencies and parastatals, and those elected at various levels of government in local and national levels. Others are politicians in opposition parties, such as the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), The Social Democratic Party (SDP), as well as individuals who have latent or overt political aspirations and those who lead political Non-Governmental

Organizations and Civil Liberty Groups, among others. They aim at influencing decision making processes in Nigeria, as well as struggle to win political power or disrupt government of the day.

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#### **Political Communication Platforms: The Role of Mass Media and Social Media**

Many political leaders are preoccupied with media coverage because they know the power media messages exert on human beings. Over the years, they have developed mechanisms to influence coverage to their advantage, Vivian (2009, p.470). In Nigeria, there are established print and broadcast mass media organizations that government and political actors utilize as platforms to propagate political activities.

Some of these mass media (print media) include: Sun, Punch, Vanguard, This-Day, The Guardian, the Authority newspaper and other online print media like the Sahara Reporters, the Premium Times, Leadership newspaper etc. For the broadcast media, the NTA, Channels TV, AIT, TVC, Silverbird TV, FRCN, Sapientia FM, Odenigbo FM, Metro FM, among others are frequently used. Each of the mentioned electronic and print mass media has spaces for both on-the-spot, live and recorded political news, political editorials, columns, articles, news commentaries, political debates, discussions, analysis of political events, adverts and commercials etc.

For instance, the Channels TV has programmes, such as: "POLITICS TODAY", anchored by Mr. Seun Okinbaloye, and another one called "FACE-OFF", as well as SUNRISEDAILY. The African Independent Television (AIT) has "KAKAKI...THE AFRICAN VOICE". In these programmes, guests and analysts on political issues and events are often invited to analyse, interpret, discuss and debate on variety of topics, while members of the public participate through phone calls, and other social communication channels. Aside the commonly known information, education, socialization and entertainment functions, the mass media have a lot of roles it plays in political communication. Both the APC-led Federal Government of President Mohammadu Buhari, the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), other political organizations and political actors across Nigeria, use the mass media to reach out to their supporters, present their candidates for campaigns, woo potential followers and bring their political policies and programmes to limelight.

Government and political actors also appear on television to discuss political issues, make press releases, organize and showcase press conferences and political rallies for and

against political programmes, events and candidates (a case in point here is the broadcast on Channels TV, and Leadership newspaper report of the advocacy rally held concurrently on Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 in Biu and Abuja, by the people of Southern Borno State against the Senate's suspension of the former Senate Majority Leader, Senator Ali Ndume). The Leadership newspaper edition of Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2017, reported on its headline thus, "Borno Residents Protest Senate Suspension of Ali Ndume". Government and political actors also sponsor political adverts and purchase airtime for commercials, on pages of print and broadcast media respectively. This is where mass media play the roles of political advertising and agenda setting to the government and political actors. No wonder, while writing on political advertising, Agbanu (2014, pp. 210-211) states:

Political advertising is one of the functions of the mass media especially in an era of party politics where different political parties and candidates contend for attention and endorsement of the people... political advertising has become so essential and plays an important role in the political system that political aspirants, candidates and political parties budget millions if not billions of naira for advertisement.

Agenda setting on the other hand is the mass media role of bringing an issue to attention of the people. Dominick (2002, p.492) captures agenda setting in these words, "When we say that the media have an impact on agenda setting, we mean that they have the ability to choose and emphasize certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important". Government and political actors use the mass media to highlight issues they deem worth talking or thinking about. No doubt, a flurry of events – socio-political activities and economic malpractices, happen in Nigeria, but government and political actors always use the mass media to highlight only the issues they want the people to know or focus their attention. Observations have shown that whenever government and political actors want to divert attention on severe national issues, it picks on a supposed to be trivial matter and put it to limelight, using all mass media posts available.

Another role of the mass media which is related to agenda setting is framing. The mass media present certain topics in a certain way that the government and political actors want the people to perceive such topics. Framing goes beyond mere telling the people what to think or talk about, as in agenda setting, but tells people how to think about certain topics. Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue to provide a particular meaning, Dunu (2014, p.57). This is further described as 'information distortion', by Udeze (2005, p.23).

It is against this backdrop that one can unarguably assert that some latest news reports on conventional mass media, as well as unchecked, unedited, and unfettered posts and comments on the social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google+ and even on WhatsApp) for and against certain issues and events in Nigeria, are not only a case of media 'warfare', but also framed reports; a blatant way to cover up government's poor handling of the economy, levity and laxity, as well as divert attention of the people from the current economic conundrum faced by many Nigerians today. There is, therefore, a boom in information bombardment for and against people, issues and events across Nigeria on daily basis through the mass media. Too many information flood the Nigerian mass media space on different events, even as such events happen live, hence, the Nigerian public are often confused about what to accept, thereby, floundering in 'the more you look, the less you see'

kind of scenario.

### **The Role of Social Media in Political Communication**

Social media or new media play very important role in political communication. The social media otherwise called the pull media have sustained and given greater boost to political communication, especially in this 21st Century information society.

Political Communication is now more massive, expressive and expanded, as well as accommodating flurry of users cum participants. With the advent of these software media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter etc.) citizens can now make informed choices and decisions as they wish. One of the most significant and humdinger roles of social media in political communication is that social media provides means for political participation of citizens in political activities, irrespective of distance. Some functions of social media in political communication are discussed thus:

#### **1. Citizens' Political Participation**

Thanks to ICTs! Americans and some other advanced countries in Europe now talk about e-politics and electronic voting. Politically, apart from encouraging live coverage of global political activities across the world, social media have also enhanced global knowledge of political events and situations across countries of the world, as well as ensured citizens' active participation in political events of their home countries, despite their geographic distance. For instance, one can stay at home in Nigeria and follow up political activities in America, Europe, Asia or other African countries, or even join political discussions about Nigeria from America, by simply tuning in or following online discussions on BBC, CNN, Sky News, Channels TV, NTA, CCTV, Aljazeera or log-on to political websites, or go to social media- YouTube channels, Facebook pages etc. On social media, intending participants in political discussions can tweet through the official Twitter handles of political institutions and new media organizations on politics matters. For instance, the Nigerian Channels TV has its Twitter handle, '@CTVpolitics' for citizens' participation in political discourses.

In March 2015 and February 2019, with mobile phones, tablets, laptop computers, among others, Nigerians, both at home and in the diaspora were able to follow 'live' coverage and participate actively in various political discussions, during Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 general elections. Many active Nigerian social media users followed political debates involving presidential and vice presidential candidates of political parties 'live' on international news media, through the social media on their Smartphones and other mobile technologies. Another example of the political role of social media was evident in the United Kingdom's (UK) 2015 Parliamentary elections and the United States of America's Presidential election, between Donald John Trump and Hillary Clinton. Didiugwu (2008, p. 320) in agreement to the above views states:

International communication (social media) affords various countries of the world the opportunity to follow political events and developments like elections in other countries like Britain and United States of America. During such elections, debates organized for presidential candidates cover a wide spectrum of issues in the political, social and economic life of these countries. Such information in turn set the political and economic tone in other countries



as well as set patterns of relationship between the developed and developing countries.

## **2. Live Coverage and Transmission of Political News and Events**

Today, with the advent of Electronic News Gathering, (ENG) and Satellite News Gathering technologies, live coverage and transmission of breaking and on-the-spot national and global occurrences and political news events have become possible. People, irrespective of their locations can now read and watch breaking political news events across the world, while such events are happening live on-line and on Digital Cable Televisions at the comfort of their homes, even with mobile devices while in offices, market places, viewing centres or while on transit. The social media have facilitated 'live' coverage of national and global events such as: Syrian War, religious activities like pilgrimages in Mecca and Israel, sports events (e.g. FIFA World Cup, UEFA Champions League, English Premiership, Spanish La Liga, Europa League and African Nations Cup etc.), entertainment, international diplomatic, security, economic and political summits, among others, (e.g. the United Nations Economic Summit in Davos Switzerland, Global Conference on Climate Change and Terrorism in Paris, London and Iran). Also, the first visit of the Roman Catholic pontiff, His Holiness, Pope Francis, to Africa- Kenya, Central African Republic and Uganda from November 25-30, 2015, was beamed live through satellite technology to the world by CNN, BBC, CCTV, TVC Africa, MBI, Channels TV; AIT, some online newspapers, Radio stations and on the social media- YouTube, Facebook. Other global issues that attract live coverage through social media include environmental threats and natural disaster, Tsunamis, political interregnum etc. People can now watch different videos of events posted on their Facebook walls and Instagram. Dike (2007, p.254) affirms these assertions thus:

Coverage is another aspect in which the relevance of the new information technologies to broadcasting expresses itself vividly. Radio and TV stations are always concerned with the extent of their coverage. Satellite technology offers TV and Radio stations the opportunity to take their programmes to all nooks and crannies of the globe.

## **3. Tool for Socio-Political Crusading and Public Opinion Formation Political Issues**

Social media are desideratum for socio-political activism. This is where social media play agenda setting, public opinion formation and crusading functions. Social media can be used to crusade for change –negative and positive in the status-quo and cause certain opinions to be widely shared by majority of the people across the world on an issue. There are too many issues that happen at local levels without global awareness and attention; such issues can be maladministration, human right violation in the hinterlands, child abuse and neglect, rape of minors, gender inequality and other unhealthy social vices against humanity. Against this backdrop, social media, with the aid of ICTs have given voice to the voiceless by creating a platform for socio-political crusading, revolt against injustice, as well as public opinion formation on national and global political issues. Hence, it is very common all over the world today for certain groups of people to converge and protest against certain wrong doings of their governments. In many cases, these groups are not often given the opportunity to express themselves through the mainstream media; they are always described by the most powerful ruling class as renegades or detractors. To such groups, social media- especially Facebook

and Twitter have become tools for social crusading and invitation of international community to form opinion, and share in their plights. Application of social media in this regards, has been evident in Nigeria, since 2014.

After the purported abduction of about 219 Chibok school girls in Chibok, a town in Borno State, a group led by the Nigerian Former Minister of Education, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, emerged to campaign for the release of the kidnapped girls, with the hash tag, #BBOG# (BringBackOurGirls). This campaign has since become a household name all over the world, courtesy of the social media. Also, as tools for political revolution, Nigerians and supporters of the All Progressive Change (APC) used the ICTs-social media to kick against the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and government of former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and eventually opposed his re-election bid before and during March 2015 general elections. Another vital reference point is the failed attempted military coup which took place in Turkey, on 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2016, during which the Turkish President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had earlier clamped down on social media usage in Turkey, urged the Turkish nationals to protest against the failed coup, through a nationwide "social media" live broadcast.

Social media have dramatically changed the way in which modern political campaigns are run. With more people coming into the voting population, social media is the platform on which the politicians need to establish themselves and engage with the voters. In a digital age, social media remain more important than traditional media to the politicians. On the Twitter for instance, political parties and political actors have Twitter handles through which they reach out to the voters and followers.

Some of such political Twitter handles are: @OfficialPDPNig, @APCNigeria, @ApgaHQ, @femigbaja, @dino\_melaye, @NGRSenate etc. However, political actors and government utilize many other platforms to propagate political activities and seek support from the people. Apart from the conventional mass media and the new media or social media, government, political organizations and actors, also use pathways such as: interpersonal communication, Machine-Assisted Interpersonal Communication (SMS, E-mail etc.), small group, as well as macro group (town hall meetings), among others, to reach their followers. Today in Nigeria, the emerging trend in political communication is the use of religious organization platforms – churches and mosques. Government, political actors and their supporters now sponsor and attend crusades, adorations and prayer rallies, and other religious programmes, with a view to reaching out or canvassing supports from hordes of religious faithful. Each of the platforms mentioned, distinctly assist the government and political actors to inform, educate, sensitize, mobilize, influence attitude of their followers and interact with the people etc.

### **Political Actors and Government Manipulation Strategies: A Discourse on Propaganda Techniques**

Political actors and government adopt different strategies to manipulate the people and win favourable public opinions. Some of the propaganda techniques often used in political communication and advertising include:

- i. **AD HOMINEM:** Ad hominem is a tactical attempt to shy away from taking responsibility on an issue. This is a propaganda device in which a propagandist

deviate or move away from a question, issues raised, point of discussion or message put forward to him or her to attack the messenger. The use of ad hominem is very common to Nigerian political actors, commentators and government spokes persons. During media interviews by reporters to find out certain information on a nagging national problem, political actors at times resort to name-calling or verbal attack on reporters and perceived opponents, instead of addressing the issues being raised.. For instance, recently, Nigerians reacted on the health of President Muhammadu Buhari, following his long medical vacation to London, many questions were raised as Nigerians sought clarity about the health of their President, but instead of addressing the main issue, which is PMB's health, Premium-Times of February 25, 2017, reported Mr. President as saying that Nigerians who talk about his health are 'mischief makers'. Those speculating about my health are 'mischief makers'—Buhari.

- ii. **CARD STACKING:** Card stacking technique is often used in political advertising, lobbying and Public Relations to advocate supports, acceptance and approval of a political candidate, a policy, idea, product or service.

In advertising, card stacking is synonymous to Unique Sales Proposition (USP). It is a systematic and careful presentation of one-sided statement, usually positive sides of an idea, policy, candidate or a product, in order to sell the candidate, policy, product or service to the public. Card stacking becomes more effective in political communication, especially during electioneering campaigns and town-hall meeting with a view to gaining massive support. This is the process of choosing from a variety of facts, only those, which support the propagandist's purpose, Nwammuo (2007, p. 281).

- iii. **BANDWAGON:** During electioneering campaigns, political parties adopt bandwagon techniques to woo more followers. Bandwagon is an emotional social appeal or call by a candidate or a party to the people to join their party, simply because others are joining. It is an invitation to create a mass movement or simply join 'the winning team', because others are joining. For the APC, very often during party rallies, members display brooms and dance to party songs to invite others to join the party.

- iv. **PLAIN-FOLKS:** Writing about this propaganda device, Offor (2007, p. 166) opines, “Any propagandist is aware that his problems are compounded if he appears to the audience as a foreigner or stranger. He seeks, therefore, to identify as closely as possible with the values and style of life of the targets by using local slang, accent and idioms”. Plain-Folk is also called the 'Common Man' approach. By using Plain-Folk, political actors and government attempt tactfully to show the common man-target audience that the government feel their pains. This approach is highly deceptive because in reality, the propagandist only wants to use and dump the people as soon as objectives are achieved. In most cases, we see the Governor of Ekiti State, Ayodele Fayose and other politicians eating roasted corns and akara or doing some local assignments with the local people even in market places. These acts are simply Plain-Folks technique to hoodwink and gain advantage from the people.



- v. **GLITTERING GENERALITIES:** This is the use of strong emotional appeal words or phrases to describe a policy, programme, a concept or sometimes a person's profile in order to influence or manipulate members of the public. Glittering generalities are usually used in advertising and political communications. When political actors in their speeches use words or phrases such as: democracy dividends, patriotic zeal, nationalism, defence of freedom, rule of law, justice for all, peace, interest of womanhood, integrity, fairness etc., they are using glittering generalities. As put by Agbanu (2014, p.29), "They are also called virtue words... Often, these words and phrases are values that cannot easily be pinned down and connotatively suggest different things to different people".
- vi. **TESTIMONIAL:** Testimonial is also known as 'endorsement'. It simply denotes the use of quotations, autographs, statements or images of a reputable individual to endorse a product, idea, a candidate or a party programme. In the wake of Nigeria's 2015 general elections, the PDP repeatedly used quotations and images of a former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, to endorse former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Also today, images of the Late Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and other notable political actors are used on political party logos, T-shirts and billboards, by politicians to gain support from the public.
- vii. **NAME-CALLING:** Name-calling is a deliberate attempt by political actors and government to use negative words to discredit an opponent in order to make the public reject or form bad opinions about the opponent, an idea, a policy or programme. The aim is that the label or bad names will cause the audience to construct a negative opinion or feeling about the person, idea or belief that the propagandist wants them to denounce, Agbanu (2014, p.33).

Other means by which government and political actors manipulate the people through the media, apart from propaganda are discussed by Vivian (2009, pp.471-472) as follows:

- a. **Trial Balloon** – A deliberate leak of a potential official policy, usually from a diversionary source to test public response or reactions. Trial balloon is usually a barometer for public opinions on an issue.
- b. **Leak** – A deliberate disclosure of confidential or classified information by someone who wants to advance the public interest, embarrass a bureaucratic rival or political opponent or supervisor or disclose incompetence or skulduggery.
- c. **Stonewalling** – To refuse to answer questions, sometimes refusing even to meet with reporters or speak with the media on certain national issues. It is a deliberate attempt to create 'sealed lips' when asked to explain certain political or economic situations in the polity.
- d. **News Blackout** – This is when political actors or government decide to issue no statements on matter of public concern, despite public interest and also decline news media questions on a certain issue. For instance, President Muhammadu Buhari decided not to speak to Nigerians from London when rumours of his purported death spread all over the conventional and social media.

### **Conclusion**

Political communication is so powerful that it propels and sways many people, especially the most gullible citizens to accept everything or information from government and political actors. The manipulative strategies of political actors in the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries are gradually approving the fact that the media have powerful effects on the people, as obtained during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mass Society Era of Media Theory, when media was seen as influential but negative, hence, the adoption of mind management strategy and propaganda by political communicators, political actors, as well as successive government, in leadership and governance.

### **Recommendations**

The citizens should be educated to use the same media and other available means such as picketing, protests, letters-to-the-editor and in most cases, voting rights during elections, to express public opinions for or against certain political issues, thus, making political communication more expressive and participatory.

The researchers also recommend a high level of media literacy among citizens against the powerful manipulative tendencies of government and political actors who know that media propaganda is effective in creating positive image of themselves before the public.

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