

Article

Nigerian Democratic Behaviour and Protest Reportage in 2015 General Elections

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Abstract: Over the ages, the media have been charged with the statutory role of enhancing individual and societal well-being through unfettered sharing of information, values and opinions to engender informed decisions especially on political matters. Through communication, the mass media strengthens the capacity of individuals and groups in the society towards actively contributing to democratic growth, electoral behaviour and development. The question: how far have the media succeeded in discharging this social responsibility in Nigeria? It remains a burning national issue. This study presents the media role in expanding the democratic horizon in the country by focusing on the 2015 general elections and the reportage of protests that followed. The article went further to identify the diverse challenges facing the media, which include misinformation, stereotype and insecurity of journalists and offers plausible recommendations for enhancing the place of the media in democratic culture and governance in Nigeria. The study used mixed method to gather materials from the field on electoral protests. Histogram were used to present a clear analysis of findings, which were supported by secondary research. It found that there were discrepancies in the election reportage and also that the protests, which manifested during the election affected nation building activities and electoral behaviour in many parts of Nigeria. It consequently recommends peace journalism and improved media training for Nigerian journalists.

Keywords: Communication; mass media; democratic consolidation; elections; Nigeria

Introduction

Democracy is today a thriving and popular culture across the globe. While the Americans dominate the claim of been the citadel and model for democratic ideology, culture and governance structure, it remains an undeniable fact that many African societies like the Igbo people and the Yoruba did not just practice democracy in the past but they had checks and balances that made the system work well at that time.

Democracy as a concept was derived from Greek words, *demos* and *kratos* (the people and authority). Schmidt, Shelley II and Bardes (1989, p. 666) succinctly describe it as “a system of government in which ultimate political authority is vested in the people”. Contemporary democracy is championed by the USA and the entire West. Though it is contentious, to them, it is the definitive desired type of government that the whole world should pursue. The nature of contemporary democracy is that it is characterized by the periodic conduct of elections as one of its basic features. It has other features that is often undermined, which is the freedom of the press that is anchored on the vital role played by the press in granting democratic information to the masses. It is worthy of note that democracy is viewed as the government of the people for the people and by the people, (Holzer, 2012, p. 234). However, there is the increased criticism of the brand of democracy and electoral culture that is practiced in Africa. It appears that the electoral culture in Africa is centred on the manipulation

of violence to rig elections and attain power by force thereby disenfranchising the greater percent of the population of the electorates across different African countries.

Nevertheless, democracy, is however, faced by numerous challenges in different parts of the world, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. These challenges include cultural resistance, its expensive nature, the tyranny of criminal minority that uses violence and its threats on majority of the electorates, ethnicity and religious fanaticism, monarchical cultures, the crisis of accusing and banning a group that has attained political power like Hamas in Palestine or Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as being a terrorist organization etc. Yet, one of the major instruments of democratic and electoral consolidation and solidification is communication through the media.

Communication, anywhere, is seen as a critical ingredient of democratic sustenance. While portraying communication as the lubricant of the interface between democracy and the people, it should be noted that communication go a long way in transforming the electoral and democratic culture of the people positively or negatively. It goes further to add that for instance, societies as a whole cannot survive today if they are not properly informed about political affairs, international and local events, or weather conditions, etc. This is because the changing dynamics of governance affects the people primarily as the policies of the ruling elite has direct effect and implications for the lives of the poor masses. Thus, the quest to bring timely information on the changing governance and electoral culture to the masses is often influenced by the media. However, the rise of the social media has even made information dissemination speedier, while creating room for widespread outreach that can transform the culture and practice of educating the electorates.

Social media has brought about tremendous facelift to various human endeavours, including the field of politics and accordingly democracy and democratisation process. Similarly, it has assisted the growth and development, solidification and consolidation of democratic process and its dividends to the people. It is against this backdrop that this study is designed to explore the role of the social media in consolidating democracy in Nigeria, especially as it relates to the reportage of political culture, political behaviour and the protests that went with elections in the country.

The process, nature and dynamics of reporting news differs from one event, media, environment and another. However, the act of protest reportage centers primarily on reporting news that has protest as its central topic. Hence, the agenda setting role of the media naturally brings to the fore, the significant manifestations within a historic protest experience. Ugbudian (2022) has maintained that elections since 1999 in Nigeria have been controversial, contested and violence prone. From 2003 to 2007, to 2011, there were reported cases of protests and violence in different parts of the country, which made the 2015 elections “a litmus test in the democratic governance and continued existence of the country. This explained the various level of interest in the 2015 general elections” (Ugbudian, 2022:210).

The general aim of the study is to account for the impact of the 2015 election protest on Nigerian societal building, while capturing the role of the media in the reportage. The specific objectives of the study therefore focus on:

- i. Analysing the effects of the electoral protest on the health sector;
- ii. Discussing the impact of the electoral protest on Nigerian political culture and behaviour; and
- iii. Highlighting the impact of the electoral process on the education sector.

Consequently, the general research question remains “what were the impact of the 2015 election protest on societal building in Nigeria”. Specifically, the research would investigate:

- i. How did the electoral protest affect the health sector?
- ii. Discuss the impact of the electoral protest on Nigerian political culture.
- iii. Highlight the impact of the electoral process on the education sector in Nigeria.

Literature Review

1. Communication and Democratic Mandate in Nigeria

To Folarin (2003) and Baran (2004), communication is the spreading or sharing of messages, information, thoughts, knowledge, experience, opinions, feelings, ideas and values from source(s) to receiver(s). It is the encoding of messages that is sent through a medium to a receiver. The word communication is coined from a

Latin word *communis*, meaning common or shared understanding, Thus, communication is incomplete until the receiver interprets exactly what the communicator has encoded. Thus, there is no communication if a message is sent in English language or Portuguese to someone that has only the capacity to interpret Arabic. It can therefore be argued that communication is a planned and deliberate effort and process of disseminating and exchanging understanding. It is, no doubt, as NOUN (2008, p. 3) states; the surest way of sustaining human relations, being “very central to all human activities. This is because without communication, life will be very difficult. Again, in everything we do and do not, there is an underlining communication that goes with it. Man’s interaction with other human beings is a result of communication. Communication is the key around which human life revolves”. life on earth will be boring and difficult if man cannot communicate with his or her neighbours. As McQuail (2005, p. 551) views it, “...the central idea of communication is of a process of increased commonality or sharing between participants, on the basis of sending and receiving ‘messages’”. Indeed, its dynamism and elasticity can best be imagined.

Electoral communication is therefore a form of communication that is carried out when there is an election within a defined place, group or society. It is a form of communication that people send out in the quest to win the electorate support of the electorate as well as bring them out to cast their votes for a particular candidate. It is a form of communicate used to educate the electorate on the manifesto and ideology of different political parties. Electoral communication is very fundamental as it seeks to present what a given political party will present on the table as the dividends of democracy for the masses. In Nigeria, the electoral communication is often charged to its peak in every election year due to the fact that the electorates in the Nigerian state are ideally meant to decide who governs them. However, the combination of electoral violence, collaboration of Independent National Electoral Commission and the electoral elite to attain power at all cost and keep the masses in a life of servitude in some cases is what has created a high level of misinformation and bullying as part of the strategic electoral communication culture in Nigeria. This is because the opponents continue to misinform and lie to the masses in a bid to win cheap popularity and create false hopes on the masses.

2. The Place of Digital Media in Free and Fair Election

The media have contributed in various ways towards the rise of a democratic culture. The media advocate for the transformation of democracy and even uses their agenda setting role to demonise military rule and other forms of governance to be totalitarian and dictatorial. The central reason for media advocacy for democracy is the believe that democracy promotes the freedom of the press. However, this is not very true in the real world as the press also faces the tyranny of the democratic elite in a bid to cover their political and electoral excesses. Besides, on the other hand, the media measure as well enhance transparency and accountability in the democratic system. These media actors in democratic space cover the print and electronic media. However, the rise of the social media as a largely uncensored space for communication with minimal levels of gate keeping has made the different social media handles, major actors in the democratic space.

Therefore, in the past we have seen the social media promote the credibility of Nigeria’s electoral process, especially during the 2015 General Elections. The social media was used to mobilise people during that elections and it was also used to show case the multi-level cases of violence. It is a widely acknowledged fact that violence is a major impediment to free and fair elections in developing nations (Ani & Uwizeyimana, 2022; Anyika & Ani, 2022). This is no news in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Togo, Egypt, Uganda, South Africa, Burundi, to mention just a few. The link between electoral crisis and other forms of national conflict can also be very intractable as found in Cameroon (Ani, Wose Kinge & Ojatorotu, 2018).

While harping on the sacred and critical fora the media of communication provide for societal growth and development, Bohler-Muller and Van der Merve (2011) maintain that whether it is the mainstream or the social, the media are inevitable in democratic sustenance. As sources of platforms for deliberation, dialogue, negotiation, debate, advocacy and even criticisms; the media are *sine qua non* to democratic survival. Through these avenues, public opinion on democratic culture and electoral behaviour are moulded in order to promote clear and sustainable position that should be taken by political actors or electorates on issues pertaining to democracy, electoral behaviour and other issues in the interest of the society, (Oso & Bello, 2013, p. 10). That partly makes the difference between the practice of democracy in two different environments like the United

States of America and Nigeria. In the former, the press keeps leaders on their toes through consistent critical appraisal of the actions and utterances (*Time*, 2017, Feb. 27 - March 6, p. 4; Stein, 2017, p. 12).

In the latter, as in most developing nations, the opposite is the case. While it could also be stated that the Nigerian press have continued to wrestle for sustainable independence, especially in ensuring that the political elite are kept on their toes to deliver the dividends of democracy, the truth remains that the political elite uses the instrument of the state like Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) to continuously unleash fines that are aimed at intimidating, suppressing or reducing the appetite of certain media houses in the country that boldly confront and criticise the ills of governance at the different levels of state structure in the country thereby undermining Nigerian democratic culture. The federal government wields a big stick against all the media establishments in the country while ensuring that only minimal criticism is received from the government owned national media. The state governments on their part, has effectively turned the state-owed media into a house of praise where the little they do in governance would be over-magnified.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method of research design in the quest to deliver the objectives of the study. Mixed method research is a principled complementary research style that promotes data collection in response to research questions (Dawadi, Shreatha & Giri, 2021) In the 2015 general elections, protests took place in Abuja, Jos, Gombe, Kano, Adamawa, Katsina and Sokoto, which were dominantly states within the Northern region of Nigeria. Data collection were primarily sourced from indigenes of the above states residents of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Questionnaire was the research instrument used to obtain relevant facts from the total sample size of fifteen, out of which a sample of ten were returned by the respondents cutting across adult male and female electorates.

The respondents were randomly sampled and selected considering their knowledge, experience and protest encounters in relations with the media and election reportage in 2015 General Election. Informed consent and anonymity were fundamental, considering the sensitive nature of the protest at that time. Those selected for interview include politician of the major political parties, the electoral umpire and election observers. The questionnaire was structured to analyze the real impact of 2015 election protest on societal building in Nigeria. The study used frequencies and histogram to analyze the response from the group interviewed. The study combined the use of histogram and descriptive analysis in presenting the data that were collected from the field. All ethical issues were considered in relations to the personal safety and anonymity of the respondents.

Findings

Electoral protest creates different forms of effects in different parts of the globe. The effect of electoral protest in Communist China or Putin's Russia cannot be the same as an electoral protest in Latin America or parts of Africa, where votes are deliberately rigged to serve the interest of the selected few political elites. The figure below will clearly present how the case of electoral protest affected the health sector of the Nigerian society.

The chart in Figure 1 showed that the mean rating of the respondents is 52.20 and the degree of risk associated with the response is 19.153%. The chart also showed 40-60% of the respondents agreed that health care was affected by electoral the protest in different forms, and it had negative consequences on the health of the individuals, groups and society at large. This was in line with the contribution of Khan-Gilmore, Kegakilwe and Variava (2018) where they submitted that the 2018 political protest in their country had negative impact on the health sector. The protesters in Nigeria blocked the highway and prevented access to movement in and out of hospitals in Kaduna, Kano and Gombe as well as other towns within Nigeria.

The impact of protests on politics cannot be neglected in any society whether they practice democracy or authoritarianism. In a democratic society, political protests create negative public opinion position against the ruling elite within that country. It also undermines the willingness of the electorate to participate in the electoral process of their country. When there is continuous protest whether peaceful or violent, the electorate will develop cold feet out of fear, and many will stay away from the electoral process. In a totalitarian or authoritarian society, the impact of political is worse that it leads to mass killings and deaths of both the protesters, their supporters, funders and even unfortunate political critiques, who would be unlucky to be

linked to the protest. These classes of persons are either imprisoned or even directly killed by the machinery of the state using state terrorism as a tool but still claiming innocent of the human rights abuse that goes with such operation. This has been the experience in many countries of the globe where sit-tight leaders desire to remain in power and control the machinery of the state until they die. Hence, anybody or group that threatens their grip on power or even shows defined interest to contest for the position of the sovereign as well as other adjoining offices are directly silenced. If the process of silencing them allows them to be alive, then they would be counted as lucky fellows.

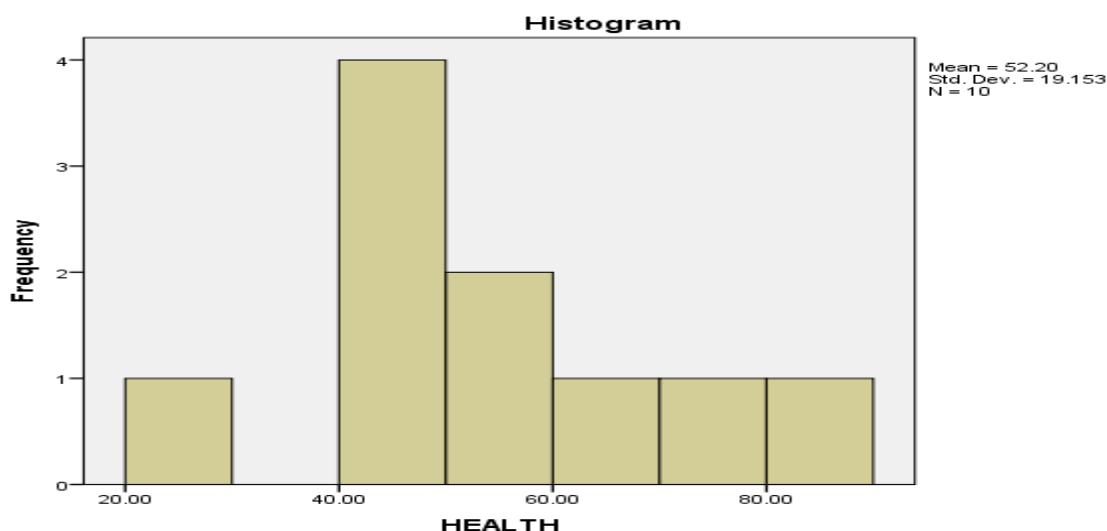


Figure 2. Chart on the protest and health

Consequently, the chart in Figure 2 below, reveals that the mean rating of the respondents is 68.00 and the degree of risk associated with the response is 28.8%. The chart also showed 40-100% of the respondents agreed that the Nigerian political environment was affected by the electoral protest. The was in support of the submission by Mahlatse and Lavan, (2018), where they found the political activities were affected in the South African country during protest. Ironically, the Nigerian experience is more complex and challenging as protest is seen as a central part of political behavior and a strong force that can be manipulated in the quest to influence the voters’ behavior. It is used to prevent voters from coming out to vote as a way of weakening the influence of a candidate. It is also useful in creating strategic opportunities for the party agents to steal ballot boxes after voting in an election.

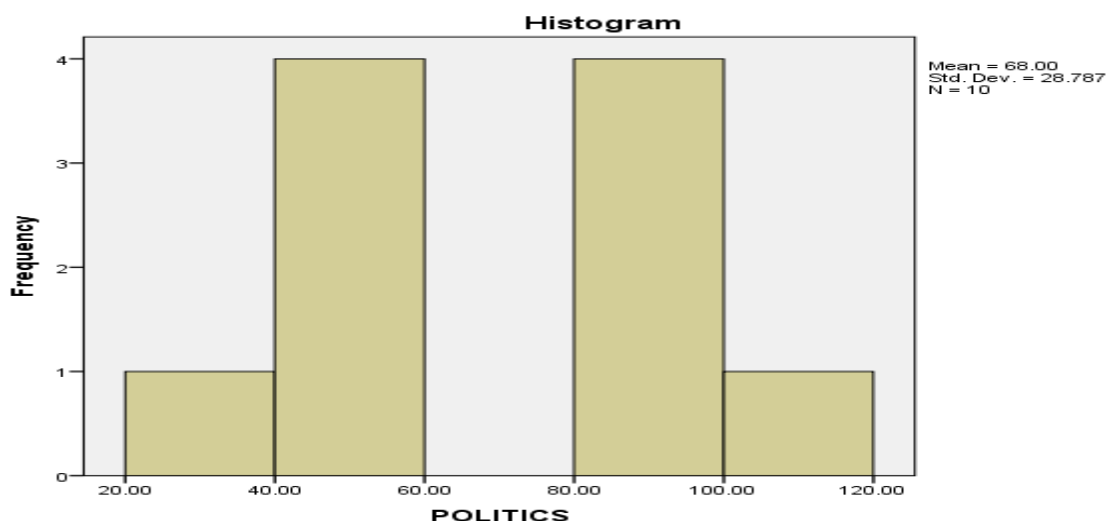


Figure 2. Chart on the protest and politics

The next part of the study showed clearly that the way electoral protest affects the education sector is not how it affects the business sector. Ironically, what a doctor calls a dangerous manifestation or implication of an electoral protest will likely be seen by the political elite as a strategy for electoral victory. Thus, this section of the study presents the impact of electoral protest on the Nigerian education history and culture. This section presents the negative impact of the electoral protest on the education sector. It is a wide known fact that Nigeria unlike some other countries declares public holidays on election days and closes down all the schools in the country during a general election at the Federal level. That alone has significant negative effect on teaching and learning before the impact of electoral protest would be added to it. When these schools are closed down, the learner at all levels loses whatever they should have been taught within the syllabus, and the chances of recovery remained minimal.

Thus, the chart in Figure 3, revealed the mean rating of the respondents is 57.50 and the degree of risk associated with the response is 24.2%. The chart also showed 40-80% of the respondents agreed that education system was affected in Nigeria during that electoral protest. Within the period of protests, students were not going to school at all levels in the in the areas affected by the protest. The plight of the students was compounded by the fact that there were no buses to move them to and fro their schools, college of education and even the university as the government officially limits movements within the election days. However, at the peak of the protest in some states, it was extended beyond the days of elections thereby affecting the official days of learning.

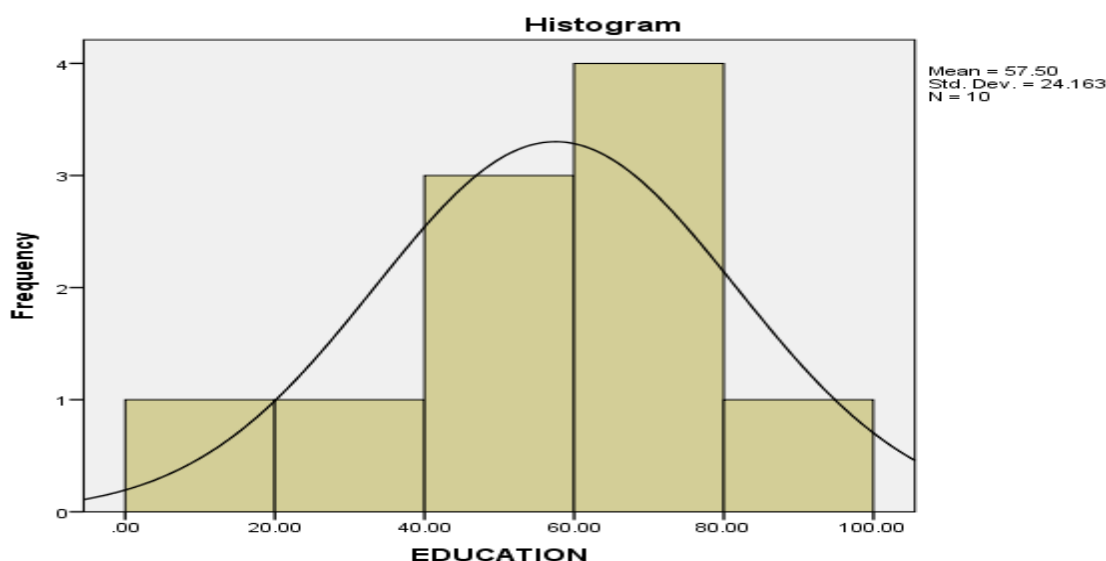


Figure 3. Chart on the protest and education

Discussion

The study investigated into the numerous effects of electoral protests on nation building in Nigeria. Specifically, the study analysed the impact of the protest on the health sector and it found that there is a significant effect. Recall that within the period of the protest, health workers, who were on essential service for human life security were either prevented from passing the blocked roads or even delayed in many cases. Unfortunately, anybody that has a critical health need would need some urgent assistance and when that does not come, the live of such group of persons would be largely at risk. That was the case in the 2018 Mafikeng protest in South Africa (Ani & Uwizeyimana, 2022).

Protest directly shapes the nature of politics within a given environment (Pupunyane, 2023). There are existing research works that proves the existence of strong relations between protest and the culture of politics in a given environment. The protest could be advocating for reforms or the transformation of existing political culture. It could also advocate that a particular member of the political elite should retain power or be protected

within the framework of the laws of the land. This has been the case in Cameroon (Folefac, 2022) and South African state (Masungulo, 2023; Gopolang, 2022). The scenario in Cameroon was more critical as it intensified and turned major parts of the country into full theatres of armed conflicts (Ani, Kinge & Ojatorotu, 2018). The link between protest and education cannot be over-emphasised. Education is a fundamental need of the masses and the citizenry tend to demand access to qualitative education for themselves and their offspring. Whenever, there is a threat to this form of social amenities, the masses tend to troop in their thousands to protest. That was the situation in Cameroon as found by a number of scholars (Ani, Kinge & Ojatorotu, 2018).

The implication of election protests on nation building are multi-dimensional. Protests naturally undermines the overall efficiency of elections and the democratic culture at large. Protests naturally creates the problems of legitimacy of elections. Whenever and wherever there is protest during elections, people withdraw their cooperation and best support and sometimes withdraw from active electoral participation. It creates opportunity for thuggery and the enthronement of unpopular candidates at every level of elections in Africa. It should be noted that in relations to electoral protests reportage; the media often trends on sensational issues during such period. The news of election protests often goes viral due to the fact that the digital media would easily carry them and broadcast it with the speed of light, at a time the people will be thirsty for whatever is happening at the protest location.

The situation is worsened by the challenges faced by Nigerian journalists in the reportage of protest and other societal developments in the country. Some of these challenges include the risk of death, especially during the Covid 19 pandemic (Odi, Ani & Ojatorotu, 2021) but it should be noted that a number of Nigerian journalists have been attacked while reporting elections, especially if they try to capture the quest to rig or snatch the ballot boxes. Other challenges faced by Nigerian journalist while reporting electoral protests in Nigeria include kidnapping and abduction as well as lack of insurance, lack of pension and gratuity, especially for those working in for some state media houses as well as the private media firms. It should also be stated that the media in itself faces the main challenge of lack of electricity within the country and that has largely undermined the speed of sending message to their audience while also creating room for the distortion of facts.

Conclusion

The media as an institution exerts a lot of influence on the electoral processes in different parts of the globe. This is sequel to the centrality of their functions and the power that the media wield when it pertains to political orientation on the holders of political power in the society, who only uses the media to leverage on their already existing powers in the society. The study reveals how the media was actively involved in the 2015 general elections. It clearly shows how the reportage on protest generated interest of the masses and affected nation building process within the country notwithstanding the role of the political elite to use the machinery of the state to control the media.

The study investigated three major objectives that tried to investigate the correlation and effects of the electoral protest and health sector on one hand and the impact of the protest on politics and the education sector on the remaining hands respectively. Ironically, it found that the protest affected the health, politics and education sectors of the country clearly. Consequently, there is the need for the media to recognize that the responsibility imposed on them by the society is a sacred one and they must be guided by the dictates of truth, honesty, sincerity, integrity, accountability and transparency. The media should be avoid being used as collaborators and conspirators with politicians, the electoral body, and other groups to misinform or misguide the general public in taking wrong decisions. This is because curtailing the ugly trend is a necessity in giving the Nigerian electoral process some credibility. It is instructive that some of these communicated political messages be designed and programmed, for instance for electoral purposes, for translation and transmission into vernacular languages, which would make them more massive in outreach and of course possibly more effective and efficient in attaining the communication objectives. Perhaps, what is needed now is evolving some formidable mechanisms with which to overcome the challenges impeding the media's effective discharge of its social responsibilities. Such factors like inadequate funding, poor remuneration of media practitioners, government interference and non-adherence to codes of ethics are among the impediments that must be tackled if the media are to step up their effective contribution to Nigeria's democratic development.

Finally, there must be enhanced capacity building by way of improved manpower and serious evaluation of the industry's disposition towards professionalism. A situation where the major concern of an organisation like the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) is merely the issue of welfare of its members rather than improved service delivery in line with international best practices is, to say the least, against known acceptable norm. The body should rethink what it stands for. Actions must also be taken to assert the independence of the press through strategic measures that will enable media establishments to adequately fund themselves. This is the only way they can disentangle themselves from the control and regulation of the political class that has partly marred their resourcefulness, effectiveness, efficiency and efficacy over the years. These done, the noble institution would be better positioned to champion the cause of democratic advancement in the country.

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Informed Consent Statement: All the respondents willingly gave their responses in this study anonymously hence informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflict of Interest: I wish to state that there is no conflict of interest with any individual, agency or group in whichever form in this study.

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