

The Effect of Broadcast Media Campaign on the People of Ekiti State, Nigeria: An Evaluation of the Application of the Agenda-Setting Theory of Mass Communication on an African Society

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Abstract: Recent studies of media effects have cast doubts on whether the agenda-setting theory of mass communication which offers a way of connection between information and a possible opinion effect has a universal application, especially when considering its application on other climes like African developing countries where majority of the people reside in rural areas and are isolated from print and broadcast media. This study examines the effect of Ekiti State broadcast media (election) campaign on the people of Ekiti State, Nigeria during the Ekiti State 2014 gubernatorial election with a view to evaluating the application of the agenda-setting theory on an African society. The study adopts a qualitative research method. Through participant observation, the study discovers that the Ekiti State broadcast media (election) campaign which favoured one political party at the expense of others had no significant effect on the majority of the people of Ekiti State. Pointing out the limitations of the application of the agenda setting theory on an African society, the study concludes that media effects vary in relation to different communication situations, issues and people involved.

Keywords: Media, Effects, Agenda-Setting, African Society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Research and studies on media effects have brought out a number of conclusions on how media content affects the receivers. These conclusions constitute theories which have been acceptable by the scholars. According to Denis McQuail, cited in Sambe (2005), the media effects studies started from the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1930s. "During this time, the mass media was considered to have considerable power to shape opinion and belief, change habits of life, actively mould behaviour and impose political system even against resistance" Sambe (2005:207). The conclusions of this period led to the passive-audience theories which contend that the media audience is naïve and takes anything the media feeds him with.

The second stage of media effects studies was from 1940 to 1960s. The conclusion of this period is that the media "emerged unlikely to be the major contributors to direct changes of the individual opinions, attitudes or behaviour or to be a direct cause of crime, aggression or other disapproved social phenomenon" (Sambe, 2005:208). Klapper (1960), cited in Sambe (2005), comments that mass communication does not ordinarily serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effect but rather, functions through a nexus of mediating factors. During this period, it was discovered that very many factors and not only media contributed in affecting people after being exposed to media content. The conclusion of Biagi (1996) is that, better educated people were much more likely to decide that the broadcast was a fake. The dominant conclusion for this period was that of 'limited or no effect'.

The third research stage from the 1960s to the present finds the conclusions of the second stage troubling, because, researchers felt strongly that media content could have limited or no effect on receivers. McCombs and Shaw, the pioneer researchers of the third stage of media effects studies, were uncomfortable with the notion that mass media have limited if any effect as held by Lazarsfeld, his colleagues and other limited-effects theorists. The result of McCombs and Shaw's research is the agenda setting theory which, according to Ngoa (2012:1), "offers a way of connection between information and a possible opinion effect".

Citing McCombs, Shaw & Weaver (1997), Mustapha (2012) observes that agenda setting theory has been established beyond its America origin to include other locales in Europe, Asia, South America and Oceania. Hence the theory has been considered as a robust contribution to mass communication scholarship and literature. Mustapha however notes that, Africa is not included on the list of the locales where the agenda setting

theory has been established. And, since universal application is one of the canons of a good theory, the absence of Africa on the list calls for concern. Citing McQuail & Windahl (1981), Ngoa (2012) notes that, both early and more recent empirical research have also cast doubts on generally accepted notions concerning powerful effects of the mass media, arguing that a good deal of media content is potentially informative rather than persuasive.

This study examines the effect of Ekiti State broadcast media (election) campaign on the people of Ekiti State, Nigeria during 2014 gubernatorial election in the state with a view of evaluating the application of the agenda setting theory on an African society. The outcome of the study is to test the veracity of the agenda setting theory. The study therefore attempts to provide answers to the following pertinent questions.

- What is the effect of the broadcast media (election) campaign on the people of Ekiti State, Nigeria?
- To what extent does the agenda setting theory apply in Ekiti State as an African society?

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in the society. According to this theory, the media influences and determine what people think about as they, listen to, and watch media contents, especially on political, economic, social and cultural issues.

Agenda setting theory presupposes the correspondences between the media and public prioritization of issues that warrant the attention of a political and the social system. It is a “theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media pictures of the world to the pictures in our head” (McCombs, 2004:68).

The first systematic study of the agenda-setting hypothesis was reported in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw (1972). They studied agenda setting and hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues. They conducted their study by focusing on undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They interviewed a sample of 100 respondents and simultaneously conducted a content analysis of the mass media serving these voters. Respondents were asked to cite the major problems in the country as they saw them. The findings supported an agenda-setting effect. For major items, the correlation between emphasis in the media on an issue and voter perception of that issue was .967. For minor items, the correlation was .976. These data suggest a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and the judgments of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics (Ikachoi, 2012).

Besides its use in political communication, agenda-setting has equally proved useful in non-election studies. Coleman et al. (2009) document the application of the theory by researchers in areas such as unemployment, nuclear disaster, poverty, crime, federal budget deficit, the economy, environmental issues, health issues, including HIV/AIDS and smoking. The heuristic value of agenda-setting, couple with its scope, parsimony, precision of prediction and accuracy of explanation has no doubt enriched and refined the field of communication studies (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997).

Since 1990s, agenda-setting has been operationalised at two levels of analyses: first-level or first order agenda-setting and second-level or second order agenda setting. Traditionally, first-level agenda-setting tests the transfer of issue salience from the media to public agenda. By telling members of the public *what* to think about (Baran and Davis, 2010:282), “first-level agenda setting considers objects as the principal component in the transfer of salience from the media to the public” (Kensicki, 2000). It establishes the relationship between objects that were given priority attention in the media and those deemed important by members of the public. These objects could be public issues, public figures, candidates, organisations, countries, events, or any problem that is the focus of attention (McCombs & Velenzuela, 2007; Baran & Davis, 2010; Mustapha, 2012).

Second-level of agenda-setting, on the other hand, expand the object salience by incorporating the agenda of attributes defining the objects of attention. It refers to significant correspondence between saliency of issues’ attributes in the media and the public (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002; Sheaffer, 2007). Each object is considered to have certain characteristics that define and stand it out from the others. Through narratives and provision of contexts, therefore, mass media extend the focus on objects of news and guide the understanding of the topics under consideration. Attributes agenda defines the very way we perceive and think about issues, political candidates, or other topics in the news, thus assigning the media an even more powerful role in the political process” (McCombs et al, 1997). While first-level agenda setting focuses attention on the issues that are given prominence, second-level agenda setting deals with how issues are presented and defined (Mustapha, 2012).

Research findings have expanded the realm of agenda-setting effects from its initial domain of cognitive influence to incorporate affective and behavioural influence. Agenda setting does not stop at impacting knowledge about political and social system on the public. Since cognitions, according to Shaw (1979), lead to behaviour, it is expected that issues receiving much attention will trigger not only cognitive and affective responses, but attitudes and behavioural effects. “The end result of the total agenda setting process is an influence on either our cognition or actual observable behavior as evidenced by, say, buying or voting decision” (Shaw & Martins, 1992:917).

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research method. Qualitative research techniques according to Ajewole and Odaibo (2014:59) “involve the identification and exploration of a number of often mutually related variables that gives INSIGHT into human behaviour”. Ajewole and Odaibo note further that qualitative research techniques include flexible techniques, such as loosely structured interviews using open-ended questions, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

The study therefore adopts a participant observation approach by personally and naturally observing the media (election) campaign, the reactions of the people during the campaign on the Ekiti State media and the outcome of the election. The reason for the choice of this approach is to guide against hypocrisy usually experienced during election. Data collection through interview or questionnaire may not help to achieve the objectives of this study because people are not always sincere when expressing their feelings during campaign.

Ajewole and Odaibo (2014) explain that observation is a technique that involves systematically selecting, watching and recording behaviour and characteristics of living beings, objects and phenomena, and that, in participant observation the observer takes part in the situation he or she observes.

Onabajo (2010), while citing Simon (1969) notes that, participant observation is a kind of field work an investigator does to gain insight into a subculture or organisation or activity of interest. In participant observation, the researcher participates (to varying degrees) in an activity in order to observe and better understand those involved in the activity. It is a form of ethnography carried out in one’s own society, rather than in a distant land. Brewer and Hunter (1996), cited in Onabajo (2010:45) notes:

Fieldwork promises realistic theories that do justice to the complexity of actual social life. It is distinguished from other styles of research by the fact the fieldworker personally enters natural social groups and studies them, as far as possible, in their full and natural state... most field research focuses on only one or a few groups, or upon a relatively small sample of individuals.

Mustapha (2012), while commenting on the methodology in agenda-setting research, notes that research designs used in agenda setting study, like in any research endeavor, have varying strengths and weaknesses. He, however, asserts that the choice of which design is desirable is a function of researchers’ interest, objectives and type of study. He later cited Wanta and Ghanem (2007) who carried out a meta-analytical evaluation of ninety studies and found significant agenda-setting effects for studies using a variety of methodologies. Wanta and Ghanem thus conclude that “methodological artifacts had little impact on the magnitude of effects found in agenda-setting research” (Mustapha, 2012:118).

The Effect of Ekiti State Broadcast Media (Election) Campaign on the Ekiti People

Ekiti State was created on October 1, 1996 by former Head of State, Late Sanni Abacha as one of the 36 states in Nigeria. The State has a population of about 2,384,212 people according to 2006 census figure.

Ekiti State owns two broadcast media: Ekiti State Television (EKTV) Channel 45 and Ekiti State 91.5 FM radio. These two stations were largely dominated and controlled by the Ekiti State Government, especially during the 2014 election campaigns in the State. There were two major actors in the governorship race: Dr. John Kayode Fayemi (the incumbent Governor of Ekiti State) of All Progressives Congress (APC) and Mr. Peter Ayodele Fayose (the opposition) of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Most of the media news reports were on the incumbent while little attention was given to the opposition (PDP). While all the media reports on the incumbent were positive, the ones on the opposition were negative. The media expressions used in the media reports on the incumbent were persuasive. The media made use of ‘fuji’ musicians and theater artists to persuade the electorate to vote for the incumbent. The achievements of the incumbent were regularly highlighted on the media in order to convince the voters and make them see the need to re-elect the incumbent. The achievements highlighted by the media included the salaries paid to the aged by the State Government, construction of roads, free education, free health care, the establishment of volunteer corps, rehabilitation of Ikogosi tourism centre, rehabilitation of Oluyemi Kayode stadium and construction of Ekiti State pavilion. These achievements highlighted were meant to change the attitudes of the majority of the people of the state who had formed their opinion that the governor did not meet up with their expectations in his three and half years as the governor of the state.

The complaints of the people against the governor include unemployment, non-patronage of local contractors, heavy taxation, non-payment of teachers’ peculiar allowance, payment of high school fees by the students of Ekiti State University, non-payment of Local Government staff’s salaries for many months, refusal to conduct Local Government elections, disconnection from the masses, and the arrogant and garrulous nature of the Governor. A major criticism of the Governor was that he put the state on a huge debt through the N25billion loan he took from the capital market. His government was also criticised for being too elitist.

The media news reports on the opposition were totally negative. An instance was a news report on the collapse of podium under the PDP’s candidate and his campaign team during the party’s campaign at Ifaki. This negative report featured repeatedly on the State media. The State media also reported the comments of the

governor loyalists after the collapse of the podium, saying the collapse was a bad omen for the PDP's candidate. This negative news on the PDP's candidate was meant to paint him in a bad light, discredit him and "injure" his reputation before the electorate.

The effect of the State Media (election) campaign on the people of the state can be inferred from the outcome of the election which was adjudged by both international and local observers as free, fair and credible. The PDP's candidate (the opposition) won in all the Local Governments of the State. Out of 369,257 votes cast, the PDP's candidate pulled 203,090 votes while the APC's candidate (the incumbent) pulled 120,433 votes. The defeat of the incumbent is an indication that the State media (election) campaign had no significant effect on the majority of the people of the state. Offices of some civil servants visited during the campaign showed that the civil servants watched the campaign from the televisions in their offices with disgust and bitterness. Some hissed throughout the report. Some private homes visited when the campaign was being reported on the television showed that the people watched the campaign on the television with mixed reactions. The reactions of the majority were similar to that observed in the civil servants' offices. With all this going on, one did not need a prophet to predict the outcome of the election.

An Evaluation of the Application of the Agenda Setting Theory in Ekiti State

The agenda setting theory does not apply in Ekiti State. The Ekiti State broadcast media failed to influence the people of the state to vote for the media (APC's) candidate. There are some factors which make it difficult to apply the agenda setting theory in Ekiti State. These factors are discussed below.

The media's lack of credibility: The people of the state were not oblivious of the bias of the media as being owned and controlled by the state government. The media portrayed themselves as working for the government of the day. This was evident in their reports which favoured the incumbent only. Perceived credibility of the media, which in turn influences reliance on the media has been found to impact on the magnitude of agenda-setting effects (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Severin & Tankard, 2010; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007).

People's direct acquaintances to issues: The people, being residents of the state, got to know their real world through direct experience. They knew the real situation on ground and didn't need to rely on the media to provide information or shape opinion. They had formed their opinion about the candidates before the election campaigns. They were decided voters. Direct experience, according to Sheaffer (2007), is an alternative explanation to agenda-setting effects of the media.

Interpersonal communication: Interpersonal communication played a major role in shaping the people's opinion after watching and listening to media campaigns. Through interpersonal communication, the people were able to discard unfavourable media campaign immediately after listening to it. Mustapha (2012), while citing Severin & Tankard (2010), notes that amount of interpersonal communication about the issues in the news also intervenes in agenda setting effects.

Education level: The people of Ekiti State are highly educated people. Ekiti State is known in Nigeria as one of the educationally developed states. The state prides itself as having the largest number of professors in Nigeria. It was therefore difficult for the media to penetrate the people's critical minds. Education level has also been found to moderate the extent to which the media set the agenda for particular individuals (Kensick, 2000; Miller, 2005 cited in Mustapha, 2012).

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Ekiti State media (election) campaign had no significant effect on the people. The media campaign was merely informative. The outcome of the election, where the opposition won overwhelmingly showed that the media failed to persuade, affect, mould and shape attitude and behaviour of the people. Factors limiting agenda-setting effects of the media are the media's lack of credibility, people's direct acquaintances to issues, personal communication and educational level. The evaluation of the application of the agenda setting theory on Ekiti State reveals that media effects vary in relation to different communication situations, issues and people involved. The study supports the second stage of media effects research which credited the media with limited power.

This should serve as a lesson for African government and politicians who rely on media propaganda at the expense of good governance. When some African politicians get to power, they tend to forget the electioneering promises made to the people which induce the people to vote for them. They forget that this new position is an opportunity to showcase themselves to the electorate who immediately begin to form their opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards them. These opinions, beliefs and attitude already formed become stereotypes which determine the outcomes of future elections. Instead, the politicians begin to save money for future (media) campaign as soon as they get to power. They overrate the efficacy of the media to influence the electorate, and under-estimate the knowledge and intelligence of their subjects.

The scenario in Ekiti State has taught that, it is absolutely unnecessary to waste tax payers' money on media campaign, because the media, as it has been observed in this study, has no direct interpersonal relationship with the people. The media can only reinforce the people's stereotypes, and cannot change or influence attitude generally. The power of the media to change and influence attitude is affected by many factors which have already been identified and discussed in this study.

Rivers (1971), cited in Sambe (2005) observes that it is easy to overrate the efficacy of the mass media as persuaders. Many people see them as operating in the simple term of cause and effect of communication stimulus and individual response. Some think, for example, that if an editor writes, his readers scurry like puppets to perform his will.

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