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# **MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE ON VOTING PATTERNS IN RURAL AREAS OF NIGERIA**

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**Abstract:** Political survival and democratic process are dependent on how well the citizens are informed, enlightened and mobilized. Mass information, in a democracy, is a necessity. As a result, the roles of mass media as harbingers of information, education and providers of entertainment become indispensable. However, the mass media of mass communication have failed in their effort to provide the traditional social responsibility functions with which they have been identified for ages, especially in the rural areas of Nigeria. The rural dwellers in Nigeria are not adequately informed about the political process and development like their urban counterparts. Many newsworthy events, which should be reported by the media, are not given attention in the rural areas. Radio, which is the favourite and the most loved among the rural dwellers, has not also done enough to orientate, re-orientate, educate, enlighten, and mobilize the rural areas. This is because most programmes done on radio are elitist and are carved in a foreign language-English-which most rural dwellers do not find easy to comprehend. Programmes about agriculture which concern the rural dwellers, if done at all, are aired in English Language. The study is driven by agenda-setting theory and two stepflow of information theory. The agenda setting theory posits that the media think for the audience by disseminating information which they think is important. The two step-flow of information theory states that some individual have better access to the media than others in the society. These people are called opinion leaders, while the others who have less access to the media of communication are called opinion-followers. The study recommends the establishment of community radio station in rural areas for political mobilization and information.

**Keywords:** Influence, Mass Media, Voting pattern, Rural Areas.

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### **Introduction**

The indispensability of mass media of communication cannot be over-emphasized in a democratic process. Besides from the traditional functions performed by the mass media in democracy, they keep the government responsible to the governed. The mass media are the watchdogs of the elected representatives of the people in government. Isola (2010:1) asserts that the activities of the mass media in democratic political contexts can be understood within a number of theoretical frameworks which expound the importance of the media in governance. The media is better understood as a public sphere which provides a space that mediates between civil society and the realm of power. Isola (2010:1) citing Habermas (1989:49) defines the public sphere as: organs of information and political debates such as newspapers, journals as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliament, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs, coffee houses, meeting halls and other public spaces where socio-political discussions took place.

Furthermore, having been established as an indispensable institution in democratic governance, the mass media perform eight important functions in a democratic society:

- i.** Surveillance of contemporary events that are likely to affect citizens positively and negatively.
- ii.** Identification of key socio-political issues.
- iii.** Provision of platforms for advocacy for causes and interests' dimensions.
- iv.** Transmission of diverse contents across the various dimensions and factions of political discourse
- v.** Scrutiny of government officials, their institutions and other agencies.
- vi.** Giving of incentives and information to allow citizens to become actively informed participants rather than spectators.
- vii.** Provision of principled resistance to external forces attempting to subvert media autonomy.
- viii.** Respectful consideration of the audience as potentially concerned, sensemaking efficacious citizen.

Isola (2010:10) avers that also closely relevant to media interaction with politics and elections are the agenda-setting roles of the media. This media functional theory explains how the media through their contents determine issues that attract public attention from the importance attached to such from among a plethora of issues that arise daily in the public domain. Isola (2010) notes "the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think about" In essence, the media attach more importance and prominence to issues that it thinks are important to the public by the positioning of its contents, while neglecting other issues that it thinks are less important. McComb and Shaw (1974:176) offer a practical and more articulate interpretation of agenda-setting theory: in shaping and displaying news, Editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position.....The mass media may well determine the important issues-that is, the media may set the agenda

### **Understanding Mass Media and their Rural Audience**

Audience of mass media in rural areas of Nigeria outnumbers their urban counterparts. In many developing countries such as Nigeria, the majority of the population lives in rural areas. An estimated 70% of the total Nigerian population lives in rural areas (Wilson, 1999) where literacy levels and vital services such as health, education, and social services are scarce compared to urban settings. In terms of information needs, rural

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populations have limited access to information. Information sources such as press-magazines and newspapers-are not readily accessible due to literacy challenges, poor infrastructure such as lack of roads and high costs of newspapers which are beyond the affordability of many low-income rural dwellers. As a result, access to press is through opinion leaders, but this can only cope with a limited number of people. With these limitations, the rural population in Nigeria continues to rely on opinion leaders and, of course, radio for information about politics, health, agriculture, economy, justice, human rights, James (2014).

However, rather than contribute effectively to the social development in both the urban and rural Nigeria, the mass media have remained an urban phenomenon. Virtually all the national newspaper and magazine titles in the country have their headquarters either in Lagos or Abuja with branches in other urban cities across the country. Also, all the radio and television stations are located in the urban cities. The snag with the present overconcentration of mass media of communication in the urban areas included development activities in the urban cities are usually given wider and more prominent attention than development issues affecting the interest of rural areas where greater percentage of the citizenry live.

Rural residents are often alienated in the fashioning of development programmes and news about them which denies them of sense of belonging. Development information and news from urban situated mass media often come to the rural residents as novel ideas thereby inhibiting proper innovation diffusion. The situation is made worse by the fact that presently, true community press and community radio do not exist in Nigeria. According to Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003), “the current situation whereby community-based radio, television, film viewing centres, and newspapers have remained tall dream is not good enough for effective and even mass communication-assisted national development”. The way out according to MacBride et al (1981), Opubor (1985) is to decentralize the mass media organs in the country. Mass media decentralization can be done in three distinctive ways which as Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) put it are:

The physical decentralization-this emphasises situating mass media organs in the rural areas from where they will operate.

Media content decentralization- this involves the inclusion of greater rural social realities in mass media content as well as fashioning out „a strong feedback mechanism to guarantee interaction between media users and media operators”(Okenwa, 2000:79).

Media reach decentralization-this requires designing a functional strategy that will ensure that many areas in the country (especially those living at the periphery) are reached with specific development messages regardless of wherever they may be located.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Electronic Media for Political Information**

The major concern here is on radio, television and film. The reason is that they are the predominant electronic media modes that are mostly employed in communications for political development and health information in Nigeria. Let us therefore begin with radio. According to Onyekwere (1990:60), “with the exception of radio which has been found to be effective in reaching the rural Nigerian masses, other channels of mass media of communication have been found to be relatively less effective”. Reinforcing this, Ansah (1991:34) agrees that “of all the mass media generally available to Africans, radio is the most widespread and accessible”. The implication is that radio by its nature has some potential that make it the most effective media tool for national development. Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003:67-68) articulate those potentials as:

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Radio appeals to illiterate audience as development news and programmes can be broadcast to the audience within their language and dialects.

It breaks distance barriers as its reach is amazingly wide and highly penetrating.

It is relatively cheap to procure compared to other channels of mass communication.

It breaks the barrier of power outage as it can easily be operated using dry cell batteries. To this Nwodu (2007) adds that with enabled GSM hand set, people now access development messages on radio without really going to buy conventional radio set.

It appeals to audio sense in which case one can easily get exposed to it while doing other things.

It has power of on-the-spot live transmission of events thereby keeping people living at the periphery adequately and timely informed about government policies actions and inactions as well as providing information about people living in other lands.

It is highly miniaturized to the extent users can conveniently carry it about while listening to development news and other contents.

### **Radio and Rural Information System in Nigeria**

Despite their vaunted objectivity and self-acclaimed commitment to fairness, it can be argued that radio broadcasting in Nigeria has over the years neglected the rural areas. The perspective of radio broadcasting in Nigeria was, and continues to be (despite some progress), strictly urban. The radio reports and writes from the standpoint of an urban dweller's world. The ills of the rural areas, difficulties, grievance, are seldom seriously reported. Indeed, over ninety-five percent (95%) of radio reports and programmes can be referred to as the urban press-après that repeatedly if unconsciously, reflects the bias, the paternalism and the indifference of the typical urban dwellers. This bias manifests in one or two forms: neglect of the majority and distortion of news about the rural populace. While the former refers to neglect of rural efforts, aspirations and overall existence, the latter refers to a situation whereby the issues, events or efforts of our rural areas, whenever reported, are inaccurately and sometimes carelessly reported in the media. In most cases, this inaccuracy or distortion stems from the typical Nigerian journalist's misguided belief that since majority of our rural populace are non-literate, all of them cannot understand whatever was being said. Talking about neglect of the rural areas by the Nigeria mass media, the temptation is to pass off such neglect as a result of prejudice, on the part of reporters and editors -- unconscious, unintended prejudice nonetheless. To a certain extent, such an argument is valid. However, a more important reason for the neglect stems from the structure of Nigeria journalism -- from the way the mass media has explicitly or implicitly defined who they are and what journalism in Nigeria is all about.

Arguably, most radio stations in the country today believe that since they are situated in the urban areas, their primary task is to satisfy their urban audience, who, after all, are mostly those who attend to radio messages or buy up available air time to slot in their commercials. Perhaps they are right to adopt this stance of concentrating on the urban areas, even if the journalists are „socialists“ at heart.

It is easy to see, therefore, that the most important structural point here concerns the way in which the news medium has defined who they are specifically, who reports the news. Journalism in Nigeria has for long been under the control of urban minds and it can be maintained that most of our newsrooms have not yet had reporters who can, and are willing to, bring the perspectives, values and moves needed to broaden coverage.

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Structurally, then, the radio has largely been without the adequate first-hand knowledge needed to help them improve coverage of the rural areas. Most of the reporters live in the cities and are more likely to notice things that are happening within their vicinity rather than the problems, issues and developmental efforts of our rural populace.

The other reason for the neglect of the rural populace by the media over the years has been that it is less significant. Nigerian journalists, unfortunately, define news in such a way that the rural dwellers are almost automatically excluded. Unless they happen to be involved in communal clashes, or are protesting against the confiscation of their farmlands by the government without adequate compensation; this structural definition limits coverage to that which entails a sort of conflict or unusualness. What is done by people who are defined as “significant”.

On other hand, television seems to be the most least applied electronic medium to national development especially as it concerns reaching the rural masses. However, television has some potential that make it an effective medium of national development some of which included:

It appeals to senses of audio-visual which is crucial for demonstrations.

It also breaks language and illiteracy barriers.

Encourage group viewership good for advocacy and mobilization.

Although television promises to be an emerging potent medium of national development the medium suffers number of limitations which according to Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) are:

It has an acute limited reach

It is to date a highly urban affair

It is very costly to afford

It requires constant power supply to functions

Another electronic medium that is worthy of discussion here is film/cinema. Film is described as a transparent flexible material in stripes or sheets of celluloid covered with an emulsion which is sensitive to light, used in taking photographs, or making motion pictures” Although, it is argued that film is „“under-utilized medium for political massages for most parts of Africa” Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003:69-70) articulate the advantages of film/cinema in national development process as:

It helps to break illiteracy barriers via indigenous films.

It helps to create a feeling of empathy among the target audience, thereby motivating them to be desirous of development programmes.

It aids in skill acquisition and training. The audio-visual power of film can often reawaken a feeling of curiosity among the viewers. This stimulates sense of loyalty among viewers who can now learn new ideas, taste and ideals through exposure to the film.

It promotes spirit of oneness, peace and communalism among the audience as people come together to watch there is always a force of social cohesion which, could lead to greater understanding and social harmony among the target groups.

Film also has its snags in national development process. The weaknesses of film/cinema in development process are:

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Films cost a lot to produce and the cost effective nature of film often discourage Nigeria development agents from considering film in their media planning for national development. Film as a medium of development has a number of distribution problems in Nigeria. Today, it is in doubt whether mobile film vans are in existence in most states of the federation. Again the activities of pirates have not encouraged increase in the production and distribution of film for development.

The dominance of foreign films in Nigeria's social environment often makes Nigeria viewers to contextualize development in terms of foreign culture even the emergence of home video has not helped matters. This is because scenes that promote foreign cultures and orientations abound in great proportion. According to Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) not "until Nigerian film begins to address the socio-cultural, political and economic realities of the masses it cannot effectively bring about the desired social transformation.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Print Media in the Voting Enlightenment in the Rural Areas**

Print media (newspaper, magazine, book and posters) industry in Nigeria is a robust industry. The discussion here is limited to newspaper and posters which have proved to be more potent in national development and health information. Newspaper, particularly rural newspaper, has the potential of contributing to national development and creating enlightenment in the rural areas.

**The Strengths of Newspaper in the Rural Voting Education** Newspaper has enough space for in-depth reportage of development issues, news and information. Thus, it can be published in local languages.

It has the potential for an informed interpretation and analysis of issues thereby helping to put issues in proper perspectives.

It has the advantage of place and time of exposure and flexibility which ensure easy comprehension and retention of media content.

Ensure easier storage and retrieval of development information and news.

It encourages mass education and literacy by motivating or encouraging readership habits among illiterate and new literate ones.

### **The Weaknesses of Newspaper in the Rural Voting Education**

Regardless of whether a newspaper is vernacular newspaper or not, it requires some level of literacy to appreciate the contents.

The visually impaired are often cut off from development news and information from the mass media.

Newspaper medium is largely an urban phenomenon and hardly circulate to the hinterland due to bad road and low readership. Newspaper is capital intensive to establish.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Poster in the Rural Voting Pattern**

Poster is worth discussing here because according to Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003:74) it wields powerful influence in the awareness generation and diffusion of development information. Its strength lies on the following:

Well-designed poster easily attracts and compels attention.

Poster uses illustrations and few vernacular words to make important development message impactful.

It serves as effective tools in attitude and behaviour change.

To some extent, it breaks illiteracy barrier as those who cannot read the contents can easily grasp the message from the illustrations. (Nwodu, 2007) However, poster like other forms of print media is limited by the fact that



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the visually impaired cannot effectively get exposed to it. Again, though illiterate audience may understand the illustrations, they hardly have full grasp of the meaning of the message as they are incapable of reading the written words that go with illustrations.

### **Mass Media and Rural Voting Pattern: A Discourse of Interlocking Paradoxes**

The rural areas cum urban centers thrive on the media of mass communication, not only for information about politics, health, education etc, but also for information about who and how they are being governed, and the extent to which the government of the day keep its political promises as well as living up to the expectation of both sectors of the society. The mass media are essential to the conduct of democratic elections. The media give interested parties an unparalleled chance to talk directly with huge numbers of people. In election campaigns, the media is particularly important Butler (2006) as cited by Juwah (2012). A free and fair election is not only about casting a vote in proper conditions, but also about having adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself so that voters can make an informed choice. A democratic process without effective media coverage and freedom would be a contradiction. Government media, financed by tax payers, are required to give fair coverage and equitable access to not only to the rural areas of the country but also the opposition parties.

The voters, either living in rural or urban centres, have the right to full and accurate information, just as parties and candidates are entitled to use the media to get their messages across to the electorate.

The growth and progress of the country's democratic process have, to a large extent, been influenced by the overwhelming support of the mass media. Besides, the uniqueness of the media have had a positive influence on the body polity of the nation, the reason being that the media is capable of molding attitudes, behaviour and perception of the general public. For this reason therefore, Juwah (2012) citing Onyisi (1996: 132), wrote that "In a democratic system, exercise of opinion or authoritative allocation of values is mainly through communication-through the mass media".

However, the modern means of mass communication have not lived up to the expectation of Africans in terms of adequate coverage of newsworthy events in the rural areas of Africa. Wilson (1999) notes that "seventy percent of African people live in the rural areas without access to modern media of communication". Power supply is largely lacking in those places, cum access road. Though, there has been a sustained advocacy from some interest groups for the establishment of community radio, the type of radio station that enjoys communal ownership, the Federal Government is visibly and considerably unwilling to grant the licences. The only time the media, especially radio, cover the events in the rural areas is when a group of individuals decamp from an opposition party to a ruling party; pledge the loyalty to the ruling government or commend the ruling political party about fictitious projects it has been able to complete. This makes the rural Africans deformed, and gets disconnected from national grid of information.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

The agenda-setting theory has been traced to Long (1958) as cited by Daramola (2003:60). According to Folarin (2005:95), "agenda-setting implies that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda-setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what

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we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about”. According to Folarin (2005), the elements involved in agenda-setting include: **i.** The quality or frequency of reporting.

**ii.** Prominence given to the reports- through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, film, graphics of timing on radio and television.

**iii.** The degree of conflict generated in the reports; and **iv.** Cumulative media- specific effects over time.

Daramola (2003) on his own part posits that “the agenda-setting theory holds the assumption that there is a relationship between news coverage, and public perception of the important issues. The theory posits that mass media attention to an issue will elevate such issue to high point of importance by the public. Cohen (1963:13) as cited by Daramola (2003) draws home the agenda-setting power of the media by stating that:

The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about.

Severin and Tankard (1977) as cited by Daramola (2003) attempting to explain the agendasetting function of the media when he wrote:

In a sense, the newspaper is the prime mover in setting the territorial agenda. It has a great part in determining what most people will be talking about, what most people will think the facts are, and what people will regard as the way problems are to be dealt with.

Kunczick (1998: 192) as cited by Folarin (2005) points out that the opportunity for agendasetting by the mass media becomes enhanced when the value structure of a society is in a state of flux. Kunczick procedures for examining agenda-setting involve comparisons between media content over a certain period and subjects that most people in the society are discussing. The greater the consonance, the more the agenda-setting hypothesis is confirmed. Marshall McLuhan (1968: 204) as cited in Folarin (2005) concludes, that the press can colour events by using them in a particular way, or refusing to use them at all.

According to McComb and Shaw (1974), the media emphasis on an issue influences the audience to also view the issue as important. The media attach certain weights to news stories through placement, size and frequency of appearance of such stories. Agenda-setting posits that audiences learn these salient issues from the news media, thus incorporating a similar set of weights and importance into their own personal agenda.

Agenda setting is seen as the editorial decision that a particular event is not news if the news media ignores it or says so. Globally any event given major emphasis in the mass media ultimately becomes a major event. This is referred to as agenda setting, which gave birth to the Agenda Setting Theory of the Press.

### **Two-Step Flow of Information Theory**

This theory stresses that some individuals have a better access to the media. These individuals are referred to as significant others.

The theory is suitable for this study because in rural areas information has to be diffused between the opinion leaders and opinion followers. Opinion leaders, in a community, involve the kings, Igwes, Emirs, Baales, chiefs, community leaders, political leaders etc.

Whenever development messages are to be spread in the communities, the opinion leaders have to disseminate it to members of the community through various traditional media of communication such as metal gong, talking drums, town criers, village square meeting etc. This theory, which belongs in the social categories and social relations perspective, was by happenstance or serendipity. The Eric Count Study in the USA, which stumbled on



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the significance of personal influence in voting behaviour among Americans during the presidential elections of 1940, originally intended to study the role of the mass media in influencing voting decisions.

But, to the surprise of the researchers, they found that messages from the mass media first reach opinion leaders (active information seekers) who then pass them to friends or group members (less active information seekers) who consider them as influential people. For example, when those who changed their voting behaviour were interviewed in the study, they said other people had influenced their decisions. This information relay method was quickly labelled “two-step flow of information”. However, researches in rural sociology had long recognised the relevance of informal social relationship in shaping decisions. For example, it was discovered that in adopting a given agricultural innovation, two-step flow of information and influence also exists. Opinions of well-informed people are sought before adopting new weed spray and new seeds.

Opinion leaders are more exposed to the mass media, and therefore, more enlightened than those who are not. These leaders are found at every social level and are assumed to share many characteristics with people they influence.

Further studies revealed that chain of influence extends beyond the dyadic level. For example, opinion leaders interviewed say that other opinion leaders, too, influenced them. This led to the emergence of multi-step-flow. It was discovered that opinion leaders are influential only on some issues at certain times. This means that there are different opinion leaders on different subject-matters and that during crisis some individuals may become opinion leaders. Another finding is that though opinion leaders are influential because of their enhanced social status, the structure and values of the group to which they belong account for their influence.

But the theory has been criticised for crediting the opinion leaders with so much power since what they do is “opinion –sharing rather than opinion giving”. It is said that opinion-givers do not differ from seekers in exposure to media content.

Besides, the process may involve more or even fewer steps than the two stated in the original model. This is in line with current efforts towards multi-step flow of information, which in the words of Everett Rogers, regards the opinion leaders as “continuous variable”.

## **Recommendations**

Federal Government should site rural community radio stations, and even viewing centres in most rural areas for political mobilization, education, enlightenment, and information. Media organizations should focus their news gathering and reporting efforts more on the rural areas.

Media, especially radio, should give priority attention to news reportage and analyses in local languages understood by the rural dwellers.

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