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SOCIAL-RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MEDIA IN REPORTING POLITICAL OPPOSITION: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
Political opposition in Nigeria is generally weak due to widespread party defections among opposition party members. These defections are often attributed to socio-economic and political factors, with the media's influence frequently overlooked. Little attention has been paid to exposing the media's clandestine role in contributing to these defections. It is on this basis that this paper examines the role of the media in reporting political opposition parties during internal crises, using the theoretical perspectives of framing theory and social identity theory. Through qualitative analysis of data derived largely from secondary sources, this paper argues that negative media framing of opposition parties is one of the contributing factors responsible for widespread defections among opposition party members in Nigeria, as it erodes their social identity. The paper concludes that the Social Responsibility Theory of the press guides on the role of socially responsible media in reporting opposition parties in Nigeria. The paper also recommends among others, that stakeholders, including journalists, academic experts, and policymakers should advocate for a definite national communication policy that will serve as a guide and operational frame work for Nigeria media.

Keywords: Defection, Framing, Opposition, Social identity, Social responsibility theory

INTRODUCTION

In an open, democratic, multi-party system operating country like Nigeria, the range of political parties that can be formed is typically large. Political parties are traditionally the most significant intermediary organization in democratic societies (Aduku &Imoru, 2014). The most common route to elected offices is through political parties. One notable reason why most nations adopted a multi-party system is to provide representation for diverse interests. The number of politicians seeking public office exceeds the available positions, creating a competitive landscape. The unwavering determination of politicians to secure political power, regardless of the cost, can spark intense opposition, ultimately leading to internal crisis. When this internal crisis is not properly managed, it breeds full-blown political

conflict, a major determinant of news. Notably, Botes (1996:2) affirms, 'conflict is the bread and butter of journalism'.

Prevalent cases of party defections are a common phenomenon among major opposition parties in Nigeria. These defections are largely attributed to socio-economic and political factors, with the media's influence often overlooked. The media's reporting on opposition parties, during times of crisis is crucial for democratic growth. It is essential to acknowledge that favourable depictions of a particular group (the ruling party) can promote positive impressions and enhance its image. Conversely, negative depictions of a group (the opposition party) can damage its reputation. Unfavourable media coverage can have profound negative effects, impacting the individual's or party's social identity. This drives party members to seek a positive identity by switching parties because they want to be associated with a party that has a positive image (social identity theory). Social identity theory suggests that part of our self-concept relies on the significance and relevance of group memberships (Turner & Oakes, 1986).

In Nigeria, unfavourable media coverage has contributed to widespread party defections among politicians and supporters seeking to protect their ambitions, offices, and reputations. Identity shapes our sense of self, encompassing core beliefs, values, and group affiliations, which we tend to protect. When individuals' identities are threatened or challenged through conflict, they respond in ways that reinforce their allegiance to these affiliations. Our sense of identity is deeply connected to our group memberships. Additionally, our self-esteem largely depends on how we and others perceive the groups we belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, negative media framing of opposition parties would determine how others associate themselves with the party which may also contribute to the defection of existing party members to a more favourable party to enhance their social reputations.

Empirical Works on Media Reporting on Political Opposition in Nigeria

Saka, Adebiyi and Bakar (2019), in their work titled 'Political parties and opposition politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic' through qualitative analysis of data derived largely from secondary sources discovered that political opposition in Nigeria is generally weak due to some factors which are attributed to the fear of losing political office, lack of ideology, low level of political party institutionalization, and godfather politics among others. Nnenna, Alexander and Paul (2017) further issues of political opposition from the angle of media coverage.

Nnenna, Alexander, and Paul (2017) conducted research titled 'Newspaper Coverage of Political Opposition in Nigeria from October, 2014 to March 2015,' which revealed the nature of newspaper coverage on political opposition in Nigeria towards the 2015 general election. The researchers carried out a content analysis of selected newspapers based on their ownership structure and found out that the media were used as oppositional tools. Their findings showed that The Daily Sun owned by Orji Uzor Kalu, former governor of Abia state and also a member of the then-ruling party as at then was more favourable in their reporting of issues related to the then ruling party (PDP). Their findings also show that The Nation newspaper owned by Ahmed Bola Tinubu, (a former governor of Lagos state and a national leader of APC) was more apologetic towards its cause and also found out that some certain amount of its political messages are unfavourable towards PDP. It is evident in the work of Nnenna et al, that the media play a crucial role in the political struggle and ambition of political leaders/elites. It is also crucial to note that the way, the selected media outfits framed and covered the activities and policies of the two political parties positively towards the 2015 general election go a long way to promote more positive impressions and upsurge

their images and a negative depiction of them also discredit their reputation. (Social Identity theory).

As an empirical study, Adegboyega (2018) carried out a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of selected newspapers in Nigeria to ascertain their coverage of the crisis that rampaged the Peoples Democratic Party (as an opposition party between 2016-2017). He discovered that most of the selected newspapers contributed to the escalation of the political conflict that rampaged the opposition party by using more of a conflict frame than peace framing that advocate for conflict resolution. Adegboyega (2018) approach confers importance on Critical Discourse Analysis, which is the supplementary research method adopted in his study. Discourse Analysis proves valuable in unearthing and ascribing meanings to the contents of newspapers selected for the study. He examines how words are deployed and mobilized used of outbursts, abusive words and defamatory languages between major players in the political conflicts were published and therefore contributed to the collapse of peace initiatives in resolving the crisis. Therefore, in line with social identity assumptions, Adegboyega (2018), found that the nature of newspapers framing of PDP crisis (as an opposition party) such as naming calling, inciting reports, as well as stressing some specific social context such as groups' differences as against group agreement and common interest, visible effects of conflict as against invisible effects, reactive framing against proactive/preventive framing, demonizing languages, and the presence of good or bad tagging intensify the conflict to a point that it appears the crisis will stay longer than usual mostly till the 2023 general election. In other words, the newspapers frames affect the political party's identity as a dying political party; with different political office holders and supporters of PDP defecting to the Ruling party (All Progressives Congress) citing the ongoing division in the party and the failure of the party to project their political ambition as the reason for their defection.

The work of Popoola (2015) in his book titled 'A Discourse on Personality-induced Conflicts in Nigeria's Politics. The Media and their Narratives' also address the insights of this study in some respects. This work exposes various cycles of sensationalism in media reportage of political entanglement between some political leaders of the state which resulted in cases of defections (Ladoja and Adedibu, with the former defecting to another party at the later stage of the political fracas, Attah and Akpabio; Lawal and Saraki and many others). All these related works seem to have focused on media reportage of political conflicts but less insight is given to how this may have contributed to party defections among politicians and their followers. This study, through its theoretical insight suggests the way the media frame political opposition between individuals or the ruling party versus the opposition party goes a long way in shaping the identity of the party or the individual involved.

Societal Implications of Media Reportage of Opposition in Nigeria

Based on the above and a thorough analysis of media texts, it is essential to note the Nigerian media's involvement in reporting opposition parties. Within the context of framing political opposition and conflict, their reporting has become increasingly acrimonious, affecting the political system.

Over the years, the mass media have been alleged to be one of the contributors to the political pitfalls of Nigeria's democracy by looking at issues through the prism of ethnicity and religion (Popoola, 2015). It is common in Nigeria for the ruling party to exploit crises within opposition parties to its advantage. This often leads to members defecting, which weakens the opposition party's resolve by destabilizing its structures. The ruling party typically achieves this using state resources and controlled media. According to Olaniyan and Amao (2015, p. 80), 'Democracy thrives in the presence of genuine and vibrant opposition. Any threat to the

existence of opposition is therefore a threat to democratic sustenance". Beyond the power struggle, genuine and vibrant opposition offers several benefits. These include unmasking the ill-conceived policies and agendas of the ruling party/government that have little or no importance to the general public. A strong opposition also acts as a watchdog, holding the ruling party accountable to the public. Furthermore, it ensures that the ruling party remains innovative and focused, delivering its promises to the electorate.

As stated in the European Commission for Democracy through Law draft report, opposition is seen as an essential component of a well-functioning democracy as it offers a reliable political alternative to the majority in power by providing other policy options for public consideration. Lastly, preparation to form the next government by making their points and demonstrating how their policies might have achieved better results.

The implication of a weakened or failed opposition is that it leans the country towards a one-party system. Since the end of the 2023 general elections, a host of elected opposition figures have defected to the ruling All Progressives Congress, APC, with more, including governors expected to jump ship, ahead of the 2027 polls. For instance, the Labour Party, which emerged as the Third Force after the election, has lost no fewer than 18 lawmakers to the APC. The main opposition Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, has also lost scores of elected officials including 27 members of the Rivers State House of Assembly, some members of the House of Representatives and senators. The inability of Nigeria's opposition to provide a credible opposition to the ruling party has hurt governance, leading to a lack of accountability, wide-scale corruption, weak institutions, and inefficiency. The lack of a vibrant and robust opposition emboldens the ruling party, allowing it to govern unchecked and unchallenged.

According to Abrams and Giles (2007) when it comes to negative images, it may be the case that viewers actively work to buffer themselves from the harmful effects of exposure to negative images of their ingroup in the mass media. The implication of this is that leaders and party followers often defect to be on the winning side of politics. This leads to a political space that becomes less beneficial to the citizenry, weakens opposition parties, and ultimately moves the country towards a one-party state. According to Gambo (2013) research has long established a close relationship between the media and social change. Nowhere are the media desperately needed to support political, economic and social development than in developing countries like Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in framing theory and social identity theory. Framing theory is important to underpin this study because one of the ways through which the media can influence their target public is through News Framing. Herman and Chomsky (2000) cited in Saleem (2007) maintain that media framing plays a vital role in presenting, shaping, and destroying the picture of an event or story. Saleem (2007, p.134-135) further states that literature on framing indicate that:

1. Media frames can play a vital role in stimulating opposition to or support for an event or issue,
2. Media frames provide moral judgment, causal interpretation and remedy/solution for media-focused problems,
3. Media frames generally represent a specific ideology,
4. Media frames including attractive words, metaphors, phrases etc also help to determine the "tone" of media coverage of an event or issue.

Based on Salem's postulations, this study submits that the way the media frame opposition parties during crises goes a long way in influencing the perception and understanding of the public about the conflict.

Rooted in the principles of Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, the theory posits that individuals within an in-group tend to highlight negative traits of an out-group as a means of enhancing their self-image. The dynamics between in-groups and out-groups provide a useful framework for understanding how media framing influences opposition parties and shapes public perception of them.

Exposure to negative or positive media messages is a valuable tool to shape or destroy group(s) social identity through media framing. The media do not just affect the perception of the public about an issue or group but also go a step further in affecting the relationship of members (ingroup) and members of other groups (outgroup). Social identity theory posits that a portion of one's self-concept is dependent on the importance and relevance placed on the group membership(s) to which an individual belongs (Turner & Oakes, 1986). The theory suggests that individuals' drive for positive identity and esteem influences the social comparisons they make.

For example, favorable representations of APC in fact, promote overall positive attitudes and impressions about the party. Negative depiction of PDP (an opposition party) also discredits the reputation of the party. By promoting certain representations (which feature particular aspects of groups) and ignoring others, the media play a role in creating shared norms and activating the use of these constructs in subsequent evaluations (Harwood & Roy, 2005). According to Mckinley, Mastro and Warber (2014, p.1051), media messages have the potential to:

1. Influence the importance/relevance of, and ability to prime, different group memberships;
2. Contribute to viewers' perceptions about the features/dimensions that characterize different groups;
3. Provide norms of treatment for different groups;
4. Define the status and standing of different groups; and ultimately;
5. Normalize these notions by suggesting that media representations are consensually accepted.

According to Warber et al. (2014) research suggests that exposure to positive media images can improve the majority of peoples' attitudes towards a group along a variety of outcomes ranging from general support and positive judgments to sympathy regarding issues of discrimination. Therefore, with positive media representation of groups, people are motivated to maintain distinctions towards such group and vice versa.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the way the media set the agenda and frame opposition parties during crises goes a long way in determining party members' drive for positive change and identity, self-esteem, and social comparisons. To a large extent, negative media representation of opposition parties contributes to the defection of party members seeking to protect their political reputations.

Social-Responsibility of Nigeria Media in Reporting Opposition

Media narratives of conflict have been indicted in fanning the ember of conflict by multiple studies because of sensationalism and passive interests. According to renowned scholars of communication Sierbert, Peterson and Schramm (1956); Kunczick (1988); McQuail (2005) cited in Popoola (2015, p.326) "the notion of the socially-responsible media is contained and

unveiled in the concepts, assumptions and propositions of the Social Responsibility Theory of the press". The Social Responsibility Theory as propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm emerged from widespread criticism of the American newspaper press, especially because of its sensationalism and commercialism, but also its political imbalance and monopoly tendencies (McQuail, 2005).

A responsible press according to 1947 Hutchins commission should 'provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning'. It should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and be a 'common carrier of the public expression'. The press should give a 'representative picture of constituent groups in the society' and also present and clarify the goals and values of society (Igboanusi, 2006; McQuail, 2005). McQuail (2005, p.171) affirm that "social responsibility theory support the concept of a diverse, objective, informative and independent press institution which would avoid causing offence or encouraging crime, violence or disorder". Buttressing this position further, Daramola (2005) avers that the media must be responsible enough to maintain the stability of the society; to him, the main theme of the message embedded in social responsibility theory is "in public interest". Therefore, the main principles of the theory according to Daramola (2005) are:

1. The media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society;
2. The obligations are mainly to be met by setting high professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance;
3. In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of the laws of the land;
4. The media must avoid whatever could lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offence to minority groups;
5. The media should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of society, giving access to various points of view and right of reply;
6. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to the society as a whole.

Puddephatt (2006) did not mince words to assert that the power of the media coverage (and the concern it aroused in public opinion) proved stronger than the will of governments. In other words, the media affect public thinking by setting an agenda of discussion as well as what to think about as expressed by Cohen (1963). Therefore, the idea of responsibility is that the media should be self-regulatory in the course of carrying out their normative functions. The media have a herculean task in providing an accurate account of an event as it unfolds in the society and according to Puddephatt (2006, p.23) "there will inevitably be commercial pressure to focus on the immediate, most violent or dramatic incidents, at the expense of explaining the background and issues that may underpin the conflict". In this case, objective, balanced, truthful account of event should be the basis of media reportage.

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), Kunczick (1988), McQuail (2005) and Folarin (2006) cited in Popoola (2015) added to these facts that the chief duty of the socially-responsible media is to raise conflict to the plane of discussion with proposals for resolution to bring about development, realizing that societal peace is a strong condition for development. Social responsibility of the media assumes that the media of communication should be responsible to the public and at all times serve the interest of its audience, without allowing the ruling party to exploit the media as a tool to destabilize opposition parties.

Conclusion

Based on the preceding analysis, opposition parties face systematic bias in mainstream media coverage. This has profound implications for Nigeria's democratic stability, as an

undermined opposition weakens political competition and reduces accountability. Negative framing of opposition parties can indeed have a detrimental impact, similar to socio-economic and political factors previous researchers have highlighted to be causes of prevalent political defections among Nigerian politicians. In summary, media's framing of opposition parties during crises, driven by ownership interests, government influence, and sensationalism, negatively impacts their social identity. This, in turn, undermines members' drive for positive change, as politicians often associate themselves with a party that has momentum.

Recommendations

Therefore, to improve the role of the media in reporting political opposition, the following recommendations are made:

The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and other regulatory bodies should operate independently, avoiding politically motivated sanctions. A transparent and non-partisan media regulation mechanism should be established to ensure balanced coverage. Therefore, stakeholders, including journalists, academic experts, and policymakers, should advocate for a comprehensive national communication policy to serve as a guide and operational framework for media operations.

Media should also monetize their online platforms to generate more revenues, and become self-reliant to avoid overreliance on advertisers and politicians who may influence their reportage.

Legal frameworks should be reinforced to protect journalists from political intimidation and ensure press freedom. Journalists must also display professionalism by making sure they do not allow the sentiments of political affiliations, political and economic factors to determine the direction of their reports. They must be guided with the tenets of conflict sensitive, responsible and peace journalism which demands balanced, fair and factual reports. This will help create proper understanding of the issues at stake in order to facilitate early resolution of conflict.

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