

# THE PRESS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF PORT HARCOURT RESIDENTS

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## Abstracts

*This study was on audience perception of the press as an instrument of political development: a study of Port Harcourt residents. It was aimed at ascertaining whether the press plays any significant role in the political development of Port Harcourt and examining whether the press significantly influences the citizens' participation in the political process. The study was anchored on agenda setting theory. Survey research design was adopted for the study. A sample size of 400 was drawn from the population of the study which comprises 665,571 persons, using cluster sampling and systematic techniques. Data obtained were analyzed and presented in simple percentages and frequency tables and chi-square used to test the research hypotheses. The researcher found that the press played significant role in the political development. It was also, discovered that the press influenced Port Harcourt, residents' participation in the political process. This study, therefore, recommended that the press should be continuously used to create political awareness, educate, persuade and mobilize the citizenry towards their participation in political activities. It was also, recommended the need for the citizens to properly utilize press political messages in order to encourage them to freely exercise their mandate with ease.*

**Keywords:** Press, Politic, Perception, Audience and Political Development.

## Introduction

Over the years, Nigeria has been ruled mainly by the military with only a brief civilian hiatus during the second republic (1979-83). Although, throughout its turbulent political history, Nigerians have been strident in their call and commitment

to democracy as the ideal system of government for the country. This is evident, as nearly every military leader has always expressed the will to restore democracy (Konkwo, 2011). However, on May 29, 1999 Nigeria returned to democracy after many years of military rule with a renewed determination not only to deepen democracy, but to promote the culture of rule keeping, protection of the citizen rights in any part of the world, confront corruption and reform various state institutions for better performance and deliver the citizenry expectation of democracy (Madueke, 2008).

This current political dispensation is not only a challenge for the consolidation of democracy and democratic governance, but also a potential avenue for the country's economic revitalization. Hence, the need for the press to play a crucial role in achieving these objectives. Nimmo and Combs (as cited in Umaru & Abdullahi, 2012) opined that the "mass media were heralded as the ultimate instruments of democracy ....(they) were destined to unite, educate, and as a result, improve the actions and decisions of the polity" (p.34). According to Umaru and Abdullahi (2012, p.34) "political reporting is necessary for the sustance of democracy, where the system of checks and balance is required for good governance and democratic sustainability. It affords the media the opportunity to provide an open forum for legitimated interest groups to participate in public affairs". The media become an agency through which citizens reconstitute themselves to exercise informal supervision over the state.

The press plays an active role in society by relaying news of politics and political strife and stimulating discussions and thinking on a variety of matters of public and personal interest (Wenmouth, cited in Ochonogor & Omega, 2011). In corroborating to this, Uwakwe (2010) observed that the press in Nigeria have evolved many stages. In all the stages, they have performed different roles in the pre-independence era. For instance, the press were on the vanguard of the derive against colonialism. They have also contributed much in shaping up the fragile democracy in the 1960s. According to him, the same press also contributed to complicating the political scenario after independence by taking sides and sometimes playing the ostrich. Therefore, it is the desire of this study to ascertain if the press plays any roles in Nigeria's political development.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The press, like the other traditional media of mass communication, informs, educates and entertains. Beyond these functions, they also persuade and mobilize. They have the capacity to create awareness and knowledge about issues. The knowledge of this will help in attitudinal change of the audience. It is an acknowledged fact, that the press influences how people experience their political life. In spite of the press presence in Nigeria, the level of political awareness among the citizenry seems very

low. It appears that most of the citizens lack basic knowledge about the entire political process to take reasoned decisions on political matters. Against this established background, the study seeks to determine the roles of the press in creating political awareness among residents of Port Harcourt and the extent to which it has influence their participation in the political development of the city.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Ascertain whether the press plays any significant role in the political development of Port Harcourt.
2. Find out if the press broadens the knowledge base of residents of Port Harcourt on political development.
3. Examine whether the press significantly influences the citizen's participation in the political process.
4. Identify the extent to which resident of Port Harcourt embrace the press for political messages.

### **Research Questions**

1. Do the press has any role to play in political development of Port Harcourt?
2. Do the press broaden the knowledge base of Port Harcourt residents on political development?
3. Do the press influence Port Harcourt residents' participation in the political process?
4. To what extent do residents of Port Harcourt embrace political messages from the press?

### **Review of Related Literature**

It is clear that the media play a very critical role in the life of all human societies. The media provide the conduit necessary for all kinds of communication that helps societies exist and function. Contemporary thinking is such that to live in harmony, societies need communication that is beneficial to its constituents. In modern democratic societies, which entail representative governments, the media play the very essential role of ensuring that information vital to the existence, survival and development of constituents of such societies is availed to them in a timely, equitable, fair and balance manner (<http://www.elections.org>). Wilcox, Ault and Agee (as cited in Udende, 2011) posited that:

*There has always been a need for political citizens of the services available and the manner in which they may be used. In a democracy, public information is crucial if citizens are to make intelligent judgment about policies and activities of their political parties. Through information it hoped that the people will have the necessary background to participate fully in the*

*activities and programmes of the party system (p.493).*

Nigerian newspapers according to, Wenmouth (cited in Ochonogor & Omega, 2011) played an active role in society, relaying news of politics and political strife and stimulating discussions and thinking on a variety of matters of public and personal interest.

Uwakwe (2013) noted that the press in Nigeria has evolved many stages. In all the stages, it has performed different roles in the pre-independence era instance, the press was on the vanguard of the drive against colonial. It also contributed much in shaping up the fragile democracy in the 1960's. In a way also, the same press also contributed to complicating the political scenario after independence by taking sides and sometime playing the ostrich. This calls for adequate political mobilization of the people to make them active participants in the political process. Political mobilization means the role played by the mass media in creating awareness, interpretation of issues, personalities, programmes and educating the people purposely to ginger, encourage and motivate them to exercise their political right and take informal political decisions such decision will basically include participating in elections (Umechukwu, cited in Ochonogor & Omega, 2011).

Although, Nigeria has returned to democracy in 1999, after many years of military rule with a renewed determination not only to deepen democracy, but to promote the culture of rule keeping, protection of the citizens rights in any part of the world, confront corruption and reform various state institutions for better performance, and deliver our expectation of democracy (Madueke, 2008, p.55). Dausadau (as cited in Nyewusira & Nweke, 2011, p.1) pointedly expressed the optimism that “democratic rule was expected to bring good governance as recompense for the bad governance or the other types of government the nation had seen”. The extension of democratic space to accommodate more active involvement of the rule in the dealings of the society. It is the process of empowerment of the citizens to be able to ensure good governance.

Ekeanyanwu and Olaniyan (2010) in a work titled newspaper coverage of people's perception of president Yar'Adua's pre-election campaigns, found that: there is a strong relationship between the media institution and the political institution of a country. The period of presidential primaries campaigns and the end of the general election is very important and sensitive one as it is the time in which electioneering campaigns begins in top gear and politicians begin to sell themselves vigorously. This study made use of content analysis and survey research methods. The content analysis used in this study was to extract data (using coding sheets) from the newspaper content concerning press pre-election coverage of President Yar'Adua. This was done by analyzing the frequency, prominence direction, story types and

sources of news articles written on President Musa Yar'Adua before the April 21, 2007 presidential elections. News stories, editorials, features, articles, special reports, interpretative analysis, opinion and news analysis formed the content categories. The population of this study is daily newspaper. The Guardian and the Punch newspapers published within December 17, 2006 and April 20, 2007 PDP's National Convention held on 17<sup>th</sup> of December, 2006 and the presidential Elections held on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 2007. A total of 248 editions formed the sample size for the content analysis while a sample size of 300 respondents was selected by the researcher for the survey.

Udoudo and Bassey (2011) in an earlier study found that: newspaper published more news stories on rally; carried more favourable news items on the rally; and gives prominence to political rally. The research method employed in this study was content analysis. The population of this study was 39 issues of both the Pioneer and the Sensor newspapers. The Pioneer and the Sensor produced 17 and 22 issues respectively. The Pioneer Newspaper publishes four editions each week and the Sensor Newspaper also publishes five times a week. So the publications of the two newspapers for the month of October 2010 were considered in the study to accommodate pre-and post-ACN rally analysis by the newspapers: coding sheet was used to select the content categories.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Agenda setting theory emerged from communications studies and focuses on mass media influence on setting political agenda, as presented in the seminar article by McCombs and Shaw (1972), which through content analysis of a local election documented a high correlation between media agenda and the public agenda. Their 1972 article coined the phrase “agenda setting (Ekeanyanwu, & Olaniyan, 2010, p.83). Baran and Davis (2006) cited in Orji-Egwu (2012, p.188), observed that in choosing and displaying news, editors and newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping of political reality”. They maintained that through the activities of the mass media, whether modern or traditional, people attach more importance to some issues than others. Ekeanyanwu and Olaniyan (2010,p.83), posits that agenda setting theory states that the mass media do not tell the voting populace who to vote for, but by the quality or frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports, the degree of conflict generated in the reports and cumulative media specific effects over time, they set the agenda for political campaigns. Much of what we know about politics and politicians stem from our exposure to the mass media of communication. Therefore, agenda setting theory can help to create awareness, educate, enlighten and mobilize the people to participate in the political process of the state, by the kind of coverage or report given to it by the media.



### **Methodology**

This study adopted the survey design using the questionnaire approach due to the nature of the problem investigated. Hence survey allows “the use of particular sampling technique to select samples from the whole unit of the population, study the sample and extension, use of outcome of the sample to generalize on the entire population” (Nwodu, 2006).

Port Harcourt is Local Government Area is made up of 541,115 persons going by the 2006 census population (NPC), although, the population has grown since the last census. In such a situation the researcher is expected to use the United Nations projected index of 2.28% to extrapolate and predict the new population from the last known figure. It shows that 124456 persons would be added to the actual population (541,115) to obtain projected population of 665571; which is an estimated population. It is from this population that the sample and sample size can be drawn and calculated. The sample size for this is 400. This was statistically determined using the Taro Yamane's formula.

The cluster sampling technique was used in the study. Port Harcourt Local Government Area was divided into 20 wards. This means that there were 20 of such clusters. Five of these wards were picked from the 20 wards based on the selection process below. The systematic sampling method was used to select the four wards to be sampled.

Step 1: Numbering the wards up to 20

Step 2: Finding the sampling interval

This is the standard distance between the selected elements. This meant that every 4<sup>th</sup> ward from the first one was picked until the desired five wards were completed. The picked wards were Port Harcourt ward 1, Port Harcourt ward VI, Port Harcourt ward XI, Port Harcourt ward XVI and Port Harcourt ward XX. Quota sampling technique was used to allocate 73 copies to each of the selected wards.

The structured questionnaire was used to elicit data from various respondents. The close-ended questions contained in the questionnaire provided answer options which made response time shorter for respondents and improved the rate of return for completion of each copy of the questionnaire.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Out of the 399 copies of the distributed questionnaire, 21 were invalid since 9 were not returned, 8 were partially completed and 4 had mutilated answers. It meant that 5% of the produced copies of the questionnaire were invalid for this study. It was the used 95% or 378 valid copies that presented the 100% used in this study. The return rate is higher than the mortality rate of 5% which does affect not the study, because it

is in significant compared to the returned rate of 95%. Thus, the copies were considered adequate enough to represent the population.

### **Demographic Data**

**Table 1: Age of Respondents in the Sample**

<b>Age of respondents</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
18-28	87	23%
29-39	101	27%
40-50	90	24%
51 and above	100	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

The result above shows that the older person read newspaper political messages more than the younger ones. For instance, more people in the age bracket of 29 years and above read newspaper at a total of 77% while youths between the ages of 18 and 28 years constituted 23% only.

**Table 2: Sex of the Respondents**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	198	52%
Female	180	48%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

The result shows that 52% of the respondents were males whereas 48% were females. It means there were more males in the sample than females by a marginal positive difference of 4%.

**Table 3: Academic qualification of respondents**

<b>Academic qualification</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Primary six/equivalent	51	13%
WASE/Equivalent	89	24%
NCE/Diploma	96	25%
Graduate/Equivalent	142	38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

Result from the table above shows that only 13% held qualification at the level of

primary six, while 87% held qualifications above the primary school certificate. It implies that more than four-fifths or 87% were capable of understanding and reading press political messages.

**Table 4: Newspaper Readership among Port Harcourt Presidents**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	205	54%
No	99	26%
Can't say	74	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

The above shows that out of the 378 respondent in the valid sample, 205 representing 54% read newspapers, 99 representing 26% do not read while 74 representing 20% could not say if they read or not.

**Table 5: Readers of the Nation Newspaper**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	198	52%
No	79	19%
Can't say	108	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the above table, 198 representing 52% read the Nation Newspaper, 19% do not read and 29% held no specific opinion.

**Table 6: Roles of the Press in Political Development**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	216	57%
No	65	17%
Can't say	97	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>100%</b>

The above table indicates that 216 respondents representing 57% agreed that the press



help in creating political awareness and mobilizes residents in their political participation, 65 representing 17% disagreed. Whereas 97 respondents' held no definite opinion.

**Table 7: How the Press Broaden Residents Knowledge**

Response	Frequency	Residents knowledge
Yes	199	53%
No	87	23%
Can't say	92	24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the above table 199 representing 52% believed that aimed to change residents' beliefs and wrong motive and to participate in the political process, 87 respondents, representing 25% believed not while 92 representing 24% held no definite opinion.

**Table 8: Coverage of Political Activities by the Press**

Respo nse	Frequency	Residents knowledge
Yes	215	56%
No	89	23%
Can't say	75	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the above table, 214 respondents representing 56% believed that the press report about political activities, 89 respondents, 23% believed not while 75 respondents, representing 20% held 20 definite view.

**Table 9: Contribution of the Press towards Residents Participation in Politics.**

Response	Frequency	Residents knowledge
Yes	200	53%
No	66	17^
Can't say	112	305
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

The obtained data, showed that 200 respondents, representing 53% believed that the press contribute tremendously in shaping the thoughts of the residents in their participation in politics, 66 representing 17% did not believed while 112 representing 30% could not say anything.

**Table 10: Influence of the Press Political Messages Resident Participation in the Political Process**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	218	58%
No	95	25%
Can't say	65	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

The above table shows that 58% of the respondents agreed that the press political messages influences how they people respond to politics. While 25% held a contrary opinion and 16% held no definite opinion.

**Table 11: Extent of Embracing the Press by the Residents**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Large extent	169	45%
Moderate	45	12%
Low	118	31%
No response	416	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the above table, out 378 respondents in the valid sample, 169 representing 45% said that they embrace the press political messages to a large extent, 45 or 12% said moderate 118 or 31% said low, and 46 or 12% could not say if they did. However, none of the respondents' said not at all.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Do the press play any roles in political development of Port Harcourt?**

In responding to the above stated research question, table 5, 6, and 7 were relied upon. The result shows that 57% at table 7 believed, residents, of Port Harcourt towards political development process. This finding is further justified when it is realized that the press cover political activities in their day to day reportage as shown at table 6 where 57% agreed that the Nation newspaper covers political activities. Again, 54% or majority of the respondents, read newspapers like the Nation for political messages.

The finding showed that the press readership of political messages by the residents of Port Harcourt play a significant role in creating political awareness and mobilization. This finding is in line with theoretical framework of this study. Ekeanyanwu and Olaniyan (2010, p.83), posits that agenda setting theory states that the mass media do not tell the voting populace who to vote for, but by the quality or frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports, the degree of conflict generated in the reports and cumulative media specific effects over time, they set the agenda for political campaigns. Much of what we know about politics and politicians stem from our exposure to the mass media of communication.

**Do the press broaden the knowledge base of Port Harcourt residents on political development?**

In answering this, table 8 and 9 were used. The finding shows that 53% or majority of the respondent at table 8 believed that press political messages were aimed to change residents beliefs and wrong motive and to participate in the political process. Again, 53% or majority of the respondents at table 9 believed that the press contribute tremendously in shaping the thoughts of Port Harcourt residents towards their participation in politics. It means that the press broaden the knowledge base of Port Harcourt residents on political development. The finding is supported by the agenda setting theory. Political mobilization means the role played by the mass media in creating awareness, interpretation of issues, personalities, programmes and educating the people purposely to ginger, encourage and motivate them to exercise their political right and take informal political decisions such decision will basically include participating in elections (Umechukwu, cited in Ochonogor & Omega, 2011, ).

**Do the press influence Port Harcourt residents participation in the political process?**

In responding to this research question, table 10 was relied upon. According to table 10, 58% or majority of the respondents agreed that press political messages influence how they respond to political process. The finding indicates participation in the political process. The findings indicate that exposure to press political messages influence Port Harcourt residents participation in the political process. According to, Wenmouth (cited in Ochonogor & Omega, 2011) played an active role in society, relaying news of politics and political strife and stimulating discussions and thinking on a variety of matters of public and personal interest. Similiarly, Wilcox, Ault and Agee (as cited in Udende, 2011) posited that:

*There has always been a need for political citizens of the services available and the manner in which they may be used. In a democracy, public information is crucial if citizens are to make intelligent judgment about policies and activities of their political parties. Through information it hoped that the people will have the necessary background to participate fully in the activities and programmes of the party system (p.493).*

**To what extent do resident of Port Harcourt embrace political messages from the press**

In answering this, table 11 was relied upon. The finding shows that 45% or majority of the respondents embrace press political messages to a large extent. This means that the press have proved to be the most effective media to reach the people on political process of the city.

### **Summary of Findings**

The obtained results were summarized as follows.

1. Press political messages play a significant role in political development process of Port Harcourt. The respondents were of the view that the press help in creating awareness and mobilize them into participating in their political development processes.
2. The press broadened the knowledge base of Port Harcourt residents on political messages shape their thought about political messages shape their thought about political development.
3. Press political messages influenced Port Harcourt residents' participation in the political process. This is because there is a relationship between press political management residents process.
4. Residents of Port Harcourt embraced press political messages to a large extent.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made:

1. There should be a continuous use of the press as a media of mass communication to create political awareness, educate, persuade and mobilize the citizenry towards participating in politics activities.
2. To broaden the knowledge base of the public about political development in their state, the press should be employed as agent of social change, in order to mould and shape their thought on the importance of political participation.
3. There is need for proper utilization of ,press political messages about the democratic process in the country., this will spur the citizenry to be greatly acquainted with all the requirements and process available in the political development process. It is believed that ones the citizens are empowered information wise, they freely exercise their mandate with utmost ease,
4. The citizenry as a matter of necessity should embrace press political messages fully, so as to be stabilize, the country's nascent democracy.

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