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Nigerian press promotion of equal opportunity in reporting general elections: Evidence from *Punch* and *Vanguard* Newspapers' Coverage of 2019 presidential electioneering

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Abstract

This study investigated *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers' coverage of Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering. Among other objectives, the study investigated the prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers accorded to political activities of *APC* and *PDP* in comparison with other political parties that participated in the election. The quantitative study combined Social Responsibility and Agenda Setting as theoretical cornerstone. Quantitative research design was adopted as research design. A total of 90 (24%) issues of each of the newspapers were sampled using systematic sampling technique. Findings of the study showed that while 48% and 45% of the activities of *APC* and *PDP*, respectively were reported, only 7% of the activities of other political platforms were reported by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering. The study recommended, among other things, that *Punch*, *Vanguard* and other media stations in Nigeria should be guided by the principle of social responsibility.

Keywords: Mass media, Nigerian electorate, Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering, political activities, public interest

Introduction

Media coverage of political activities during a general election is an integral aspect of the democratic process. This is because the electorate need information on the activities of political parties and their candidates in order to make informed decisions on the parties and candidates to vote at the polls. Nobody votes for a political party or candidate whose ideology and identity are unknown. It goes to say that knowledge of party ideologies and manifestoes is crucial to the voter and that democracy can only thrive when the electorate are well informed.

As conveyors of publicly-oriented information and a critical stakeholder in the electoral process, the mass media owe the society the responsibility to monitor and to report the activities of political parties and their candidates in order to lead an enlightened electorate. The media also have the responsibility to interpret political ideologies in order to engender the democratic culture of voting and defending public interest. Serving as the watchdog of the society saddles the media with the responsibility to equip the electorate with useful information about political party activities to ensure that the electorate not only vote according to their conscience but also vote for the candidate and political party whose ideology aligns with public interest.

In a multi-party democracy, such as Nigeria, the challenge of covering the activities of different political parties is rife. This is not only due to the political leanings of media ownership but also due to the quest to maximise proceeds from political campaigns and party activities. This is the condition that underscores the principle of equal opportunity in media coverage of general elections. The principle of equal opportunity, which is considered as a global best practice in multi-party democracies, requires that the mass media provide equal opportunity to all political parties standing in a general election. The practice proposes a political atmosphere where the electoral fortunes of any political party is not undermined on account of inadequate media coverage. It also ensures that the electorate are sufficiently informed to make guided decisions at the polls.

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Nigeria's Electoral Act (2010) [7] recognises the importance of equal opportunity in media coverage of political activities during general elections. Section 103 of the Electoral Act (2010) [7], among other provisions, stipulates that the mass media shall not be exploited to the advantage or disadvantage of any political party or candidates standing in an election. It stipulates that media airtime and space should be equitably allocated to all political parties and candidates standing in a general election to enable the electorate to make informed voting decisions. The Electoral Act (2010) [7] considers the principle of equal opportunity vital in political activities, such as, party primaries, conventions, conferences, rallies and campaigns, as such activities enable the space for interactions between political parties, party flagbearers and the electorate. The coverage of these political activities also sets the agenda for public consideration and appreciation of party manifestoes and ideologies. Obot (2009) [21], in his investigation of effective media coverage of general elections, observes that democracy flourishes when the electorate are sufficiently informed about party ideologies and activities. He argues that the mass media must not only act as key avenues for political information, but should also determine what is available in the public domain in terms of equal coverage of political activities.

Thus, this study is motivated by the need to evaluate how the Nigerian media protected the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering. The study evaluated how *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers, as independent media stations committed to the principle of free enterprise, promoted equal opportunity for political parties that participated in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election in defence of national interest.

Statement of the Problem

A total of seventy-three political parties participated in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election (Akinkuolu, 2019; Opejobi, 2019; Sani, 2019) [1, 23, 27]. By implication, each of these political parties had their Presidential and Vice-Presidential standard bearers that vied for the office of the presidency. Apart from *All Progressives Congress* (APC), *People's Democratic Party* (PDP) and few other opposition parties, many of the political parties and candidates that participated in the 2019 presidential election were not known to the Nigerian electorate. As in previous elections, media coverage of 2019 presidential election seemingly favoured the ruling *All Progressives Congress* (APC) and few other political parties.

Although media coverage and reportage of the activities of a political party or candidate may not translate into the election victory of such a party or candidate, it is unarguable, however, that nobody votes for a political party or candidate whose identity and ideology are unknown. The problem of this study is summarised in the following question: how did *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers report the activities of APC and PDP in comparison with other political parties that participated in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election?

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent did *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers adhere to principle of equal opportunity in reporting

Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering?

2. What were the categories of political reports of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers on the activities of other political parties in comparison with APC and PDP during Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering?
3. What was the level of prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers assigned to Nigerian political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering?

Scope of Study

This study investigated *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers' coverage of Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering between August 1, 2018 and February 28, 2019. The time-frame was presumed to be most appropriate, being the period different political parties had their primaries and involved in heightened campaigns and rallies. This time-frame was also considered the period within which important newsworthy events about the activities of the different political parties that participated in 2019 presidential election were reported by the Nigerian media.

Justification

The choice of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers was based on the fact they are national newspapers. The papers were also selected amongst other dailies since they do not have ownership affiliation with any political party or candidate that participated in the 2019 presidential election. Based on their principle of free enterprise, the papers were expected to be neutral in the coverage of the activities of different political parties and candidates in the 2019 presidential electioneering.

Definition of Terms

All Progressives Congress (APC): This is one of Nigeria's political parties. It is fondly regarded as the ruling APC because the candidate of the party currently occupies the presidency. Candidates of the party also occupy the headship of Nigeria's National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives).

Electioneering: This is the period of heightened political activities leading to an election. It is the period that witnesses intense party activities, such as campaigns, rallies, primaries or conventions. The period also witnesses politico-judicial activities and pronouncements owing to permutations by politicians and parties to outsmart one another. These activities culminate in the deluge of reports and issues for coverage by the mass media. The coverage of party activities and candidates are expected to prepare the electorate to make informed decisions at the polls.

Other Political Parties: This term refers to other political parties other than APC and PDP that participated in the 2019 presidential election. Other than APC and PDP, there were other seventy-one political parties that vied for Nigeria's presidential office in 2019.

Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP): The PDP is Nigeria's leading opposition party. Between 1999 and 2015, PDP was Nigeria's ruling party. Since the party lost the presidency in 2015, it is considered as the country's foremost opposition party. It is second to the ruling APC, especially in terms of the number of governorship and parliamentary seats the party occupies at the Federal and State levels in Nigeria.

Prominence: This term defines *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers' placement of the activities of Nigerian political parties in the pages of the newspapers during 2019 Presidential electioneering. In news reporting, the front-page, centre-spread and back-page are identified as locations for prominent matters. In this study, the placement of political matters in these pages was used to measure the prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers assigned to the activities of Nigerian political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering.

Literature Review

The study combined Social Responsibility and Agenda Setting theories as theoretical cornerstone. Some related concepts were also reviewed to highlight the focus of the study.

Social Responsibility Theory

The Social Responsibility theory stipulates that the press should portray social issues in the manner that promotes public interest. The foundation of social responsibility press philosophy was the Hutchin's Commission set up in 1942 to respond to alleged widespread sensational, commercial and monopolistic approach of the libertarian press era. The Commission was set up to critically examine areas and circumstances under which the press was succeeding or failing (Miller, 2002; McQuail, 2010; DeFleur, 2010)^[17, 16, 5]. The libertarian era afforded the press considerable freedom from undue government control. The result of this free marketplace of operation was yellow journalism, characterised by character assassination and sensationalism (Nwachukwu, Asak and Asadu, 2012)^[20]. It was the abuses associated with libertarianism that necessitated the establishment of the Hutchin's Commission to work out a more responsible press philosophy to meet the needs of the society.

The Social Responsibility theory stipulates that the press should portray social issues in the manner that protects and promotes public interest. The underlying premise of the theory is that freedom is worthless except it is exercised with the responsibility to constantly promote the well-being of the society and its people (McQuail, 2010)^[16]. What this means is that apart from the establishment of laws to regulate media operations, the mass media, just as individuals, owe the society a responsibility to carry out their activities in the manner that promotes social order and cohesion, by accommodating all shades of opinion and promoting causes that are relevant to the public. The media should serve to promote community spirit and to defend public interest.

McQuail (2010)^[16] summarises the central ideology of the social responsibility theory as:

1. the media have obligation to society and media ownership is a public trust;
2. news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant;
3. the media should be free, but self-regulated;
4. the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct;
5. under some circumstance, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest (p. 171).

The foregoing submission by McQuail (2010)^[16] underscores the argument that community service is the

hallmark of media operation. The media should provide supports for the weak and vulnerable. During general elections, the activities of evolving democratic platforms should be adequately sold to the electorate through equitable political reporting. Being self-regulated demands that the mass media be accorded the freedom to moderate social issues. This freedom ensures that the media are free from undue political and economic influences. It also means that the media should ensure balance between the maximisation of profits and the protection of public interest.

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 (Ndimele and Innocent, 2006)^[19]. The theory stipulates that the mass media can transfer the salience of issues in the news to assume the agenda of the public (Miller, 2002; DeFleur, 2010)^[17, 5]. Lipmann (1922), cited in Miller (2002)^[17] and DeFleur (2010)^[5], states that the media help to put pictures of the world in the minds of the audience. This explains the power of the mass media to set agenda and to raise issues of public importance. Griffin (2000)^[11], citing McCombs and Shaw (1972), states that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agenda to the public agenda. He adds that journalists and the mass media in the free world have a deserved reputation for independence and fairness and that members of the mass media audience look to news professionals for cues on where to lend their attention and judge as important what the media judge as important.

The media provide information, entertainment, enlightenment as well as the safeguard of civil liberties. This creates the assumption in the audience that the issues upon which the mass media place emphasis must necessarily be important. George (2006)^[10], lending credence to this proposition, states that "the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance the public assigns to that issue" (p. 459). Ndimele and Innocent (2006)^[19] argue that since people rely on the media for information and interpretation about events in their society and the world at large, whatever the media accord attention would be considered important. What this means is that the level of attention accorded an issue or a cause by the mass media makes that issue to assume some degree of relevance in the conjecture of the audience (Heath, 2005)^[12].

The thrust of the Agenda setting philosophy is that although the position of the mass media regarding an issue might not change people's opinion regarding such issue, it could change their perception towards it. Daramola (2005)^[4] argues that the mass media wield the "ability to mentally order or organise the world for the people" (p. 16). The implication is that issues and causes that are championed by the media could assume some relevance in the estimation of members of public. McCombs and Shaw (1976), cited in Ndimele and Innocent (2006)^[19], thus argue that "in choosing 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 of the campaign" (p.176). The point is that whatever the media accord attention assumes some relevance in the estimation of the audience. This

condition underscores the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of political activities in a multi-party democracy. Equal opportunity is critical since the political party whose agenda is not reflected or portrayed by the media may seem irrelevant in the estimation of the electorate. It is critical in general election in order to set equitable political agenda for all political parties standing in an election.

Power of the Press in Defence of Democracy

According to Morgenthau and Thompson (2001) ^[18], power is the ability to exercise some control over the minds and actions of other members of one's community. It gives its possessor the control over the actions of other members of his group. The power of the press lies in the ability to affect public opinion and actions of the members of the society through professional interpretation of social affairs. This accounts for why the mass media in many democracies are considered as a national resource and the conscience of the society (Redd, 2009; Baran, 2012) ^[2].

Dennis and Merrill (1991), cited in Gambo (2014) ^[9], state that the press wields three forms of power: the power to provide information; the power such information exerts on the mind of the audience; and the influence of the press on the audience. Pate and Dauda (2013) ^[25] corroborate the power of the press as they argue that the press goes beyond mere provision of information because, most times, people use the information provided by the press to form opinions on issues of individual and public interest. They add that even though the media may not tell the people what to think, they are found to always direct citizens' minds on social issues. The importance of the press to national life is explained by the fact that whether a country operates government exclusive ownership or allows private participation in mass communication, governments often beckon on the media to promote national interest. Even repressive governments beckon on the media to be sympathetic.

The importance of the press in the advancement of democracy and promotions of egalitarianism is not foreign to Nigeria. In fact, a tale of the history of Nigeria's democracy without a mention of the pivotal role of the country's press will be incomplete. This is because the press occupied the front seat in the push for civil rule while Nigeria went through the murky waters of military dictatorship. Amidst repressive laws and threats on journalists and media stations, the Nigerian independent press maintained the revolutionary stance until the emergence of democracy in 1999 (Daramola, 2005) ^[4]. This nationalist press pre-occupation is required in the current democratic era not only to build strong democratic institutions but also to lead a conscientious electorate to the nation's polls.

Nigerian Press and Coverage of Electioneering Process

The importance of the press in a nation's electoral process is explained by the need to adequately introduce the electorate into the political process. This function is crucial to enable the electorate not only to vote for the candidate of their choice but also to defend public interest at the polls. The ability to make informed electoral decisions may not be possible except the electorate are sufficiently aware of the political ideologies of the different political parties and the antecedents of candidates participating in an election.

Habermas (1989) ^[8] thus describes the press as an organ of information whose complimentary role is crucial in guiding political debates and decisions among the electorate. Ochonogor and Fyeface (2016) ^[22] corroborate the importance of the press and other media of mass communication as they aver that the media are the agent of social and political change. The media stimulate change not only by disseminating new ideas freely but also by popularising such ideas and affecting the disposition of members of the public through professional interpretation of phenomena.

The ability to affect audience perception and disposition is explained by the fact that the mass media serve as people's window to the world (Ndimele and Innocent). This condition explains why societies that place value on public opinion exploit the mass media to champion issues of public and personal well-being. The media perform this function by examining social issues, including opportunities and threats and offering interpretations. The interpretations assigned to social issues enable citizens to make informed decisions as it affects their interest. Byrant and Thomas (2002), cited in Popoola (2008) ^[26], outline the functions of the mass media in the democracy as:

1. surveillance of contemporary events that are likely to affect citizens positively or negatively;
2. identification of key social-political issues;
3. provision of platform for advocacy for causes and interest;
4. transmission of diverse contents across the various dimensions and factions of political discourse;
5. scrutiny of government officials, their institutions and other agencies;
6. giving incentives and information to allow citizens to become actively informed participants rather than spectators;
7. provision of principled resistance to external forces attempting to subvert media autonomy; and
8. respectful consideration of the audience as potentially concerned, sense-making efficacious citizens (pp. 91-92).

What this means is that the mass media are a critical stakeholder in the democratic process. It also means that the surveillance function of the press is crucial for leading an active citizenry.

Imperativeness of Equal Opportunity in Media Coverage of General Elections

The role of the mass media in equipping the citizenry to defend national interest underscores the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of electioneering processes. According Dominick (2002) ^[6], the principle of equal opportunity requires the mass media to accord equal coverage and portrayal of the affairs of different political parties and candidates standing in an election. Gurevitch and Blunler (1997), cited in Obot (2009) ^[21], state that the principle of equal opportunity enables the media to sufficiently present the political affairs of all political parties and their candidates to the audience (the electorate). This is to enable the electorate to choose for themselves the political party or candidate that suits their interest. Wilson (2003) ^[29] observes that it is in the atmosphere of fairness and equal opportunity that the electorate can be properly guided to support the political ideology that identifies with

their yearnings or aspirations. Nigeria’s Electoral Act (2010) [7] recognises the importance of equal opportunity in the coverage of political activities and electoral campaigns. Section 103 of the Act, among other provisions, stipulates that the mass media shall not be exploited to the advantage or disadvantage of any political party or candidates standing in an election. The Act states that media airtime and space should be equitably allocated to all political parties and candidates. That is, equal opportunity and conspicuity be granted to all political parties and candidates. This is to ensure the awareness of the activities of different political parties by the electorate. It is only when the electorate are sufficiently aware of the activities of different political groups that they can vote according to their conscience. It is also when the electorate are empowered to vote according to their conscience that democracy can thrive.

In Nigeria, the task of ensuring equality in the coverage of the affairs of different political parties during general elections has remained one of the challenges of the country’s electoral process. Many times, the interest of many political parties and candidates are greatly undermined on account of the promotion of the interest of few powerful political structures. This anomaly has left the country and its people bereft of the contributions of alternative political platforms and ideas. Agba (2007) states that the coverage of electioneering campaigns has become

part of the problems threatening national cohesion and integration in Nigeria. The point is that, since unequal coverage of political campaigns does not encourage diversity, it can only perpetuate the promotion of the political interest of few powerful political structures and the perpetual reign of the ruling political class, as it is the case in Nigeria since 1999.

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was quantitative content analysis. Each newspaper produced a total of 184 issues, making a grand total of 368 issues by the two newspapers, as the population of the study. A constructed calendar enabled the selection of sampled issues of the newspapers. The systematic sampling technique was adopted with a two-day skip interval between Mondays to Sundays. Thus, Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays became the constant (r). A total of 90 (24%) issues of each newspaper was sampled for the study. Data analysis was done in tables, using the following exploratory indicators: extent of coverage of 2019 presidential electioneering; categories of political reports; and prominence accorded to political activities of Nigerian political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers’ adherence to principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of Nigeria’s 2019 Presidential Electioneering

Newspaper	Total Number of Political Reports	Reports on APC	Reports on PDP	Reports on Other Political Parties
Punch	624	274 (26%)	258 (25%)	46 (4%)
Vanguard	620	222 (22%)	211 (20%)	33 (3%)
Total	1,044	496 (48%)	469 (45%)	79 (7%).

On promotion of equal opportunity in the coverage of Nigeria’s 2019 presidential electioneering, data presented in Table I indicated that *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers grossly under-reported the activities of Nigerian political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* during the 2019

electioneering. While 48% and 45% of the activities of *APC* and *PDP*, respectively were reported, only 7% of the activities of the other political platforms were reported by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during 2019 presidential electioneering.

Table 2: Categories of political reports on 2019 Presidential electioneering

Reports Parties	Newspaper	APC	PDP	Other Political
News	<i>Punch</i>	228 (22%)	221(21%)	31 (3%)
	<i>Vanguard</i>	203 (19%)	203 (19%)	24(2%)
Features	<i>Punch</i>	27 (3%)	18 (2%)	9 (1%)
	<i>Vanguard</i>	11 (1%)	12 (1%)	6 (0.5%)
Editorials	<i>Punch</i>	11 (1%)	6 (0.5%)	3 (0.2%)
	<i>Vanguard</i>	5 (0.4%)	3 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)
Opinions	<i>Punch</i>	3 (0.2%)	3 (0.2%)	1 (0.1%)
	<i>Vanguard</i>	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)
Letter to the Editor	<i>Punch</i>	0	0	0
	<i>Vanguard</i>	0	0	0
Interviews	<i>Punch</i>	2 (0.1%)	0	1 (0.1%)
	<i>Vanguard</i>	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.1%)	0
Photo News	<i>Punch</i>	1 (0.1%)	0	0
	<i>Vanguard</i>	2(0.2%)	0	0
	<i>Punch</i>	0	0	0

Cartoons				
	<i>Vanguard</i>	0	0	0
Total		496 (48%)	469 (45%)	79 (7%)

On categories of political reports by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during 2019 presidential electioneering, data presented in Table 2 indicated that the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* were substantially under-reported by the newspapers. While 48% and 45% of the

political reports of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers, respectively favoured *APC* and *PDP*, only 7% of the political activities of other parties that participated in the election was reported by the newspapers.

Table 3: Prominence assigned to Nigerian political parties by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during 2019 Presidential electioneering

Prominence	Newspaper	APC	PDP	Other Parties	Total
Front Page	<i>Punch</i>	82 (8%)	87 (8%)	5 (0.5%)	174
	<i>Vanguard</i>	77 (7%)	84 (8%)	2 (0.2%)	163
Inside Page	<i>Punch</i>	188 (18%)	176 (17%)	38 (4%)	402
	<i>Vanguard</i>	139 (13%)	115 (11%)	29 (3%)	283
Centre Spread	<i>Punch</i>	3 (0.3%)	2 (0.2%)	4 (0.4%)	9
	<i>Vanguard</i>	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)	0	4
Back Page	<i>Punch</i>	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	1 (0.1%)	9
	<i>Vanguard</i>	0	0	0	0
Total		486 (48%)	469 (45%)	79 (7%)	1044 (100%)

Data presented in Table 3 indicated that the activities of *APC* and *PDP* were accorded more prominence by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspaper over the activities of other political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering. For instance, while 8% apiece of the political activities of *APC* and *PDP* made front pages of *Punch* and 7% and 8% apiece of the activities of the same parties (*APC* and *PDP*) made front pages in the *Vanguard* newspaper, only a paltry 0.5% and 0.2%, respectively of the activities of other political parties were placed on the front pages of the newspapers during 2019 presidential electioneering.

Results and Discussions

The discussion was based on the research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: To what extent did *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers adhere to the principle of equal opportunity in reporting Nigeria’s 2019 presidential electioneering?

The effective coverage of the activities of different political parties in a multi-party democracy by the mass media is an integral aspect of a nations democratic process. A total of 73 political parties participated in Nigeria’s 2019 presidential election. Research question one investigated the extent of coverage of the activities of these political parties by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers. Data obtained with respect to this research question indicated non-adherence to the principle of equal opportunity by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers. Data presented in Table 1 showed that the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* were substantially under-reported by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers. While 48% and 45%, respectively of the political reports of the newspapers within the period under review favoured *APC* and *PDP*, only 7% of the activities of other political parties were reported by the newspapers during 2019 electioneering (Table 1).

In a multi-party democracy, the mass media occupy an

integral position in ensuring a flourishing democracy. This is due to the importance of the mass media to monitor and to report the activities of different political parties and their candidates in order to lead an enlightened electorate. Obot (2009) [21] states that democracy flourishes when the electorate are sufficiently informed about party ideologies and activities. He adds that “the mass media are not only key avenues for providing the required information, they also determine what is available in the public domain” (p. 57). What this means is that the coverage of the activities of political parties standing in an election is critical for the electorate to make informed decisions at the polls. Habermas (1989) [8] states that the press is an organ of information whose complimentary role is crucial in guiding debates among the electorate. As agents of political change, the mass media are crucial in ensuring that the electorate deliver only national interest at the polls. This is rather impracticable without equitable coverage of the activities of political parties participating in an election. Since nobody votes for a candidates or political party whose identity and character are unknown, the equitable coverage of the political activities of parties and candidates becomes a fundamental aspect of the democratic process.

Research Question 2: What were the categories of political reports of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers on the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* during the 2019 presidential electioneering?

Research question two centered on the political content categories of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers on the activities of *APC* and *PDP* in comparison with other political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering. Data obtained regarding this research question indicated that the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* were substantially under-reported by the newspapers during 2019 presidential electioneering. While 22%, 21% of the news contents of *Punch* and 19% apiece of the news contents of *Vanguard* favoured *APC* and *PDP*, respectively,

only 3% of the news contents of *Punch* and 2% of the news contents of *Vanguard* carried news stories about the activities of other political parties during 2019 electioneering. The analysis of other editorial contents: features, editorials, opinions, interviews and photo news of the two newspapers indicated that the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* were substantially neglected by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during 2019 presidential electioneering (Table 2).

The seeming neglect of the activities of other political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election by *Punch* and *Vanguard* due to over concentration on the political activities of the ruling *APC* and the main opposition *PDP* negates the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in Nigeria's Electoral Act (2010) [7]. Section 103 of the Act stipulates that the mass media shall not be exploited to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of other political parties or candidates standing in an election. The seeming neglect of the activities of political parties other than *APC* and *PDP* in the 2019 presidential elections by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers also undermines the principle of fairness, the thesis of the Social Responsibility theory (McQuail, 2010) [16]. Wilson (2003) [29] argues that it is only in an atmosphere of fairness and equal opportunity that the electorate can be properly guided to support the political ideology that is consistent with the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

Despite having over ninety registered political parties, seventy-three of which actively participated in the 2019 presidential election by fielding candidates for the election, Nigeria wears a political outlook of being a two-party democracy. The contribution of the mass media to this misleading political outlook is not surprising. This is not only due to the role of the media in the construction and displacement of social reality, but also the role of the media at the public sphere (Thusu, 2002). The mass media affect social change and lead the public sphere through gate keeping, agenda setting and the popularisation of phenomena. Since they serve as people's window to the world, the political leaning of a nation's media can affect its political process and sometimes the outcome of an election. The implication is that the lopsided coverage of a nation's political process could simply undermine the electoral fortunes of political parties and candidates whose activities are not sufficiently projected to the electorate. Imbalance in the coverage of a nation's political process could leave the nation and its people bereft of fresh political ideas and people-oriented leadership.

Research Question 3: What was the level of prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers assigned to Nigerian political parties during 2019 presidential electioneering?

On the prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers assigned to the activities of political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election, data obtained with respect to research question 3 indicated that the activities of *APC* and *PDP* were accorded prominence over those of other political parties. For instance, while 8% apiece of the activities of *APC* and *PDP* appeared on the front pages of *Punch* newspaper, only 0.5% of the activities of the other whopping 71 political parties appeared on the front pages of the newspaper. Also, while 7% and 8% of the activities of *APC* and *PDP*, respectively appeared on front pages of the *Vanguard* newspaper, only 0.2% of the activities of the

other 71 political parties appeared on the front pages of the newspapers (Table 3).

The level of prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers accorded the activities of other political parties in comparison with *APC* and *PDP* from the presentation in Table 3 can only be regarded as insignificant. The gap only represents a sheer negation of the principle of fairness and equal opportunity by the newspapers. This imbalance also represents the situation where the voices of weak political structures cannot be heard; a situation that is entropic to the growth of democracy. Balance in political reporting is rather required for the sustenance of democracy and good governance since it encourages a system of checks and balances and the consideration of contrary views (Pate, 2003; Wilson, 2003) [29]. This is the foundation of the principle of equal opportunity and the Social Responsibility theory which propose the demonstration of fairness by the mass media in the coverage of general elections. The conscientious commitment to these principles and ethical foundations encourages the growth of a healthy democracy that entrenches diversity and pluralism.

Conclusion

The principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of general elections was significantly undermined by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers in the coverage of Nigeria's 2019 presidential electioneering. The political activities of *APC* and *PDP* were accorded undue prominence over other political parties that participated in the election. The result of this imbalance was the substantial representation of the 2019 presidential race as a contest between *APC* and *PDP*. This reportorial imbalance is capable of endangering Nigeria's evolving democracy. It is inimical to healthy political competition and development, as it clears the path for the interests of political super powers to perpetually thrive and being a potential catalyst for defective leadership.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may be helpful for equitable coverage of general elections by Nigerian press:

1. *Punch*, *Vanguard* and other Nigerian media stations should be guided by the principle of social responsibility which propagates fairness and balance in the coverage of political and other social affairs to lead an informed citizenry. This public-oriented media approach will ensure that the electorate vote in defence of public interest.
2. Nigerian media regulatory authorities should ensure that all media stations in the country abide by the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in the country's Electoral Act. Adherence to the principle of equal opportunity will ensure that the political ideologies of all political parties standing in an election are equitably presented to the electorate.
3. Since the placement of news stories in the newspaper grades news reports and personalities in the news, *Punch*, *Vanguard* and other newspapers in Nigeria should accord equal treatment or prominence to all political parties standing in an election. The electoral fortunes of emerging political parties should not be sacrificed on technical decisions.

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