

The Influence of Masses' Opinion on Signing the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill into Law in Nigeria

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Abstract

The existence of the masses by no means brought about the putting together of an organized institution called government. Since a government, no matter what type, exists because of the people, it is expected that at least to a reasonable extent, policies, agenda, programmes, etc. are put in place to create peaceful and conducive environment for the governed. This study discusses the influence of masses' opinions on signing Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law vis-à-vis Government's agenda on same issue via media coverage. Thus, it investigates how strong, tenacious, and effective Nigeria masses' voices are in shaping government agenda on matters of public interest in the polity, using the signing of the FOI bill into law as a case. In carrying out this study, two research methods were adopted. First, survey research method was adopted under which, questionnaire and structured interview guide were instruments for data generation. On the other hand, content analysis research method was also adopted and the quantitative data obtained through the sampling of two Nigerian daily newspapers – the Punch and the Guardian contents. This complemented the qualitative data generated through the survey research method. These helped to generate adequate data that helped the researcher achieve the objective of this study. Findings from the data generated analyzed through the instruments adopted showed that to a great extent, Nigerian masses voices (opinions) influenced the signing of the FOI bill into law. Thus, Nigerians voices were not just tenacious but effective in making the Government sign the FOI bill into law.

Keywords: Freedom of Information (FOI) bill, Print Media, Masses Voices, Government's Decision Making, Political Agenda, Public Opinion, Influence.

Introduction

Communication occurs through transferring of information, ideas, views, impressions, facts, opinions, images, among others, in form of a message from one party (sender/encoder) to another (receiver/decoder) using a code, language or symbol, which is jointly understood by the parties (persons) involved in the communication encounter. It is usually with a view to achieving a desired feedback and cause a change. In other words, communication is an act of conveying information for the purpose of creating a shared understanding between the sender of the message and the receiver. Thus, communication is the process in which participant's create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding. According to Daramola (2001:4) "communication is the sending of a message through a medium to a receiver with conscious intent to affect the latter's behaviour." The essence of communication is the sharing of ideas between two or more persons, parties, or groups, which is, the source of the message and the receiver. Of note, both parties shift positions as the communication encounter continues. That is, at some point, a sender of a message turns to be the receiver and at another point, the receiver

turns to be the sender of a message. This cyclical interchange actually makes the communication encounter interesting and worthwhile.

With the importance of communication in mind, any government that wants to succeed must by compulsion depend on the effective communication encounter and mutual understanding between it and the people. Also, the opinions of the people must not be relegated to the background, rather due cognizance must be given to see how the voices/opinions sent through whichever medium, can help in taking progressive decisions that would be for the overall benefit of both the government and the governed.

In this paper, peoples' voices shall be interchangeably referred to as public opinion, that is, the expressed views and behaviour of the people towards an issue bothering or worrying them. The agitation for the call for the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill, among others, is a very good example.

In line with the above thoughts, public opinion is simply the various views that citizens hold regarding a wide variety of issues — national and/or international. Public opinion is the beliefs, values of the public (masses) as spoken out, written, via communication channels towards a particular development or innovation in the society especially to bring about change (Utulu, 2004). Ojo (1992:27) observes that: "Public opinion is the opinion held by groups of people on a particular public issue." According to Oyovbaire, Ogunna, Amucheazi, Coker and Oshuntuyi (1991:80), "public opinion is the end product of a process of public discussion leading to the formation of one or more widely shared opinion as to the advisability or desirability of a public policy or mode of action...." Thus, emphasis is placed on the collective contribution and agreement that must exist between the people involved if there must be any results after their discussions.

As mentioned earlier, public opinion brings change and most times oneness that is, when people come together to agree on a given cause until it is achieved. An example is the agitation for the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law as mentioned earlier. The tenacity of the voices of the Nigerian masses was obvious and never ceased until the aim was achieved. In the view of Machinnon cited in Yarherhe in Utulu (2004:34): "Public opinion may be that sentiment or any given subject which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, most moral persons in the society." As pointed out by Machinnon, these set of people are known as opinion leaders. The simple reason being that they would usually be at the top, they may or may not be close to the government but they also would usually have almost everything it takes to address the government on any issue of public interest especially as such issues affect the popular population in the polity.

Before the FOI bill was finally signed into law, organizations, interest groups, oppositions parties, Non-Governmental agencies, among others have been coming together to deliberate on the importance of the bill to Nigeria as a nation for years even before the country started practicing democracy. The upsurge of corrupt practices at every level of government in the country actually fuelled and provoked the masses' agitation for the call for the introduction of the bill and the agitation continued until the bill was eventually signed into law. Is this a sign of respect for the voices of the masses by government in Nigeria? Could this have happened under the military dispensation? Could it have been a showcase of the power of public opinion in influencing government agenda and decision making? Probably the attention given to the masses voices by the government of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, could be seen as a showcase of the beauty of democracy - government *of the people, by the people and for the people* in a given society across the globe.

There are people who are usually instrumental to the amplification of others' views and opinions. These are known as opinion leaders. There is no society where people do not come out at one time or the other to air their views. Among these people are others whose voices can be louder because of some added qualities they possess in the society. Thus, no one discusses public opinion independent of opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders are people who have an active voice in the community; they are individuals whose ideas and images serve as role models to others. They are known to communicate messages, and influence the attitudes and behaviour of their followers. Folarin (1998:61) puts it this way:

They tend to be more exposed to mass media channels and other channels of communication... probably attend conferences, seminars, workshops and even social functions. They tend to belong to several organizations. They tend to enjoy a higher socio-economic status. They tend to be more cosmopolitan in outlook than their (Opinion) followers.

Masses' voices on the issue of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill that was passed was brought to the awareness of the public through the effective communication between the opinion leaders and their followers. Notwithstanding, the effective use of the mass media channels cannot be ruled out of the major reason(s) why they succeeded. Having constant access to the mass media is one of the advantages opinion leaders have over their followers. As part of their duties, opinion leaders frequently organize public enlightenment programmes through sponsorship of adverts, announcements, seminars, using the media. These media were avenues through which the masses were informed and educated, about the FOI bill and its importance. More so, some of these opinion leaders belong to different interest groups such as the Media Right Agenda (MRA), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), the Nigeria Union of Journalist (NUJ), to mention a few. Their aims are to champion the cause for the masses to claim and perform their fundamental human rights vis-a-vis achieving their aims of being 'players' in the formulation of political and/or socio-economic agenda and policies in the polity.

It would be interesting to note that before any form of government (no matter how powerful or influential) formulates any agenda and/or put forward any form of policy be it political, socio-economic, cultural, there usually would be the thought of the masses' views, understanding, reactions, and opinions about such agenda and/or policy. In other words, government would usually not form agenda/policy in isolation of the governed. Nonetheless, Nigerians have at several instances witnessed government(s) working contrary to the masses interests, opinion, aspirations, especially during the 'dark days' of military dispensations.

As mentioned earlier, countries are made up of people with different cultures, ideologies, norms, views, either as an individual or in groups, especially in a country like Nigeria with vast socio-cultural/ethnic settlements. For this reason, series of opinions are formed on a daily basis by the public and so such are also transmitted to others especially through mass media channels, among others. Sometimes, these opinions are usually a product of sentiments and selfish gains. Recently, there have been calls for the creation of more states by people from the Middle Belt region, the cry of marginalization in appointments by the South-western states, to mention but a few. Some time ago, the Senate president – Senator David Mark has been seen to be playing the role of the opinion leader as he has deliberately used the influence of his office as the Senate leader to push the middle belts agenda and views on state creation.

Nigeria has more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and languages, which means that the masses would definitely react to issues differently. For relative peace to reign in such a country as Nigeria, the government must always carry the people along and be sure of balance in the distribution of the nation's wealth, appointments, among others. Hence, the more reason why government at any level should pay keen attention to masses voices and reactions, and be sure that agenda, programmes and policies are carefully generated to cut across all the regions that make up the country.

Basically, the Freedom of Information bill (FOI), which is the main focus of this paper might have received a positive or a negative public opinions about its signing into law. During the cause of the clamour for the adoption and signing of the bill into law, there were whispers about the issue of the government tinkering with the original version of the bill. It was insinuated that the FOI bill that was finally signed into law by President Goodluck Azikiwe Ebele Jonathan in May 28, 2011 was the 'watered' version. Based on this, there were some reactions from the public (Ben Agande, 2011). Further, Ben Akande submits: "the lofty goals espoused in the original version of the bill were however, the direct opposite of the contents of the bill that was eventually signed by the President." He also posits that "though the law is not a true representation of what its initial proponents wanted it to be as it is cautious on the side of public servants." (Sunday Vanguard, June 5, 2011, pg. 35).

All the same, the FOI bill has been signed into law. Therefore, this paper is basically designed to investigate and reveal the effect of public opinions on government's agenda on the signing of the FOI bill into law. Thus, was government's signing of the bill into law as a result of the masses' outcry for it? Also, the extent to which Nigerians' voices influenced government decision making would be revealed and the direction of coverage given to the FOI bill issue by the mass media shall also be revealed.

Based on the above, some research questions were generated for this study. With a careful and accurate analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data that were generated for this study, the researchers were able to give adequate answers to the research questions.

Research Questions

For this study, the following research questions were raised. They are:

- i. How tenacious and effective was Nigerians' voices/opinions on calling for the signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into law?
- ii. Did their voices/opinions influence the signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into law?
- iii. What is the direction of the mass media (press)'s reportage of the FOI bill issue?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Multi-flow Theory

This study is anchored on the multi-step flow theory, also known as diffusion of innovations theory. Notably, the two-step flow theory gave way to the multi-step flow theory, when it was observed that the influence from the media can be multi directional and it is not necessarily downwards but can be upwards or even backwards to the media as well (Corner, 2013).

This study is concerned with masses' voices (opinions) and government decision making. As mentioned above there is usually the assistance of opinion leaders who most times are more informed because of their level of access to the mass media, compared to their followers (Utulu, 2012, Folarin, 2008). During debates, arguments, counter-arguments, when the FOI issue was on the front burner, the complex, multi-cultural, multi-directional and multi-dimensional features of

Nigerian masses were clearly noticed. These had significant effects on the ways they interpreted and reacted to the FOI issue messages received from the mass media and the opinion leaders.

The FOI issue information got to the masses through all available channels - mass media, opinion leaders, interpersonal (one-on-one) contacts, and so on. The new media played its role too. Presently the new media is seen as a media through which agenda is set without the input of the traditional media. Nigerian masses played active users' role by selecting various media channels that gave gratifications sought from the media about the FOI issue. The mass media was engaged in receiving information viz a viz reacting to the issues raised about the reason(s) why it is important for government to sign the FOI bill into law. This achievement can undoubtedly be linked to the role of the opinion leaders, who actually brought the debate, (counter) arguments, ideas, views, about the FOI issue to the 'round table' where it then became an issue to the public domain. Thus, possibly making the federal government to see the reason(s) why the bill must truly be signed into law, which was finally achieved.

Public Opinion

Public opinion has been defined by many scholars in many ways to have different meanings to suit the different purposes for its definition. According to Ojo (1992:27) Public opinion "is the opinion held by groups of people on a particular issue." To Utulu (2004:37): "Public opinion is the belief(s), view(s) of the public (masses) in form of speeches, writings, using communication channels towards a particular development or innovation in the society especially toward causing a particular group (government, for instance) to change a decision and/or act in favour of their requests (opinions)." Thus, public opinion is the collections of individual views, opinions on an issue or topic that is raised and most times has the interest of the public at heart.

From the above definitions it would be observed that public opinion has been designed in such a way that it must connect to a large group of people if it must be recognized. The reason for this is because it is simply the collective attitude of citizens on a given issue and the collection of opinions from many different groups of people. For instance during debate on the FOI Bill issue, various groups' voices were heard.

In addition, Oyovbaire, Ogunna, Amucheazi, Coker, and Oshuntuyi (1991:80) see public opinion as "the end product of a process of public discussion leading to the formation of one or more widely shared opinion as to the advisability or desirability of a public policy or mode of action by government." In our societies, discussions take place over an issue and in due course opinions emerge. Obviously, in Nigeria, the FOI bill issue started within a small group before it was formed into public opinion (larger group) to demand for freedom and access information from government, government parastatals, public and private institutions, at whatever levels they operate if there is need for such information especially as such information will help leaders to be held responsible for their actions. The opinion became widely shared in the country and it finally generated into public opinion that practically led to government's signing of the bill into law. In addition, Machinnon cited in Yarherhe in Utulu (2009:34) says "public opinion may be that sentiment or any given subject, which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, most moral persons in the society." These set of well informed, intelligent people are what we call opinion leaders. Glen Broom (2005:2 17) opines "people always come together to elect one person that will represent them in expressing their opinions to the government or to the appropriate authorities, this person is known as the opinion leader."

During debates for the call on government to sign the FOI bill into law, various groups were formed with their opinions made known to the public and the government in particular. In line with the definitions given above, it would be agreed that public opinion actually would have

to involve group(s) of people coming together to champion and voice a course. In the cause of voicing their opinions, the groups engaged the mass media who in turn helped in amplifying their voices by disseminating the information gathered and packaged on the signing of the FOI bill.

Features of Public Opinion

The features of Public opinion are obvious because of the involvement of people with common voice. In formulating public opinion, it is important that those involved are abreast of the political environment and the operations of the news media. Whenever an opinion is formed, it is only through the news media that such opinion can be transformed into a widely discussed agenda in the polity. Hence, the agenda setting role of the mass media. In line with this, Visser, Holbrook and Krosnick (2007: 127) posit:

On closer inspection, however, this process is far from simple. It depends critically on a number of fairly demanding steps. It first requires that at least a substantial majority of citizens carefully attend to political events on the local, state, and national stages. Further, citizens must consolidate the constant stream of political information provided by the news media, advocacy groups, and other individuals within the social environment, and they must store this information in memory for later use.

In view of this, Ojo (1992:27) highlighted some of the features of public opinion, thus:

- It is a widely held opinion by most people;
- It is not mainly the opinion of a group but a general opinion;
- It is always stable and takes time before it is forgotten;
- It is an intensified opinion supported by many people and
- It is sometimes based on elite views since such views carry weight.

Nigerian masses' opinion during the call for the signing of the FOI bill into law had all the features listed above. The generality of these features and the persistence of their voices actually made the yearnings of Nigerians to be respected by the government. Though, as mentioned earlier, there have been conspiracies that the FOI bill signed into law by the government is not the original bill as proposed. Whichever is signed, the beauty of its signing shows that masses' opinions if adhered to by governments or leaders across the rank and file, could bring about masses having a sense of belonging to the day-to-day running of affairs within any given polity especially under a democracy.

The Importance of Public Opinion

Public opinion is an important aspect of modern day political process. It is an essential channel between rulers and the ruled. The importance of public opinion is not limited to the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. However, it can be said that it constitutes an effective way of strengthening or weakening societal institutions and practices.

Oyeleye, Anifowose, and Babafemi, (1991:19) posit: "for governments that do not want to rule by force, public opinion provides an avenue for finding out the desires of the ruled." A government that takes the views of the articulate populace into consideration can easily receive popular support from the people. They further posit that "public opinion provides an avenue for posing a tyrannical government; public demonstrations and even justified riots are expressions of repressed public opinion, which may undermine the legitimacy of a repressive government."

Araromi (2011:5) listed the importance of public opinion as follows:

- It helps the government to know the feelings of the people concerning its policies;
- Know the people's needs and desire and
- To formulate adequate policies that will meet the demands of the people.

Any government who takes these tasks as noted above to heart and operate in accordance with them is a government that has placed the masses needs as a priority over other things in the polity. It may not be out of place to conclude that successive Nigerian government have failed in this area, thus, they have failed to be responsible to the masses in various ways even the civilian government who were voted into power by the people. It could be said that Nigerian government's adherence to public opinion usually comes with the provision of 'make believe' rather than what the masses actually called for. An example among several others was when popular demand was for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) but a National Political Reforms Conference (NPRC) was convened in 2005 by the Olusegun Obasanjo' government of the People Democratic Party (PDP).

Communication and Public Opinion

Communication is a vital phenomenon in any given society. Its importance led to the promulgation of laws to allow citizens some level of freedom to associate and air their views concerning them, government and their immediate and external environment. Little wonder an adage puts it this way 'problem discussed/shared is problem half solved.' An African adage also states 'anyone who keeps mute will have his/her problems kept mute within him/her.' In other words, such problems will not be known by anyone or solved. It shows, that the importance of communication is obvious in humans' daily endeavour.

According to Daramola (2005:154) "Communication is the process of transferring meaning, ideas and information from a person (sender) to another (receiver)." For communication to take place effectively there must be a sender, a channel through which the message is passed such as television, radio, newspaper among others, a receiver and a feedback. Without all these in place, communication cannot take place. It may assumed that it has taken place but without a feedback, then it would be said that communication encounter is inconclusive. In the view of Otite and Ogionwo (1979), "It is only through communication that people develop consensus and it is only when a consensus exist that people are able to act together." For example, the Freedom of Information bill agitation started when the Media Rights Agenda, Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) and the Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) agreed to work together on a campaign for the enactment of the FOI Act. In short, communication can be used to pacify, build and destroy; it all bothers on how the communication encounter is managed.

The combination of communication and public opinion will to a large extent help people to achieve a solution to any persisting problem. Opinion communicated through the use of the mass media that is, radio, television, newspapers, etc. and presently the new media, are more likely to achieve their aims and objectives because of mass dissemination and reception of such opinion.

The fact remains that, until the opinion leaders and their groups communicated the FOI issue especially through the mass media much was not known about it. As soon as the pages of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television contents began to carry and discuss issues about the act/bill, then, masses' attention to the issue began to increase until it became public discussion. Hence, the agenda setting role of the mass media.

Freedom of Information Bill

According to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011, and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Act Amendment 2011,

Freedom of Information bill is a bill for an act to make public Records and Information freely available, provide for Public Access to Public records and Information, protect public records and Information to the extent consistent with the public interest and the protection of personal privacy, protects serving public officers from adverse consequences for disclosing certain official information and establish procedures for the achievement of those purposes and related purposes thereof 2011...

To Momoh (2010:18), “Freedom of Information has to do with access to Information. If there is no access to Information then the Freedom of Information bill is completely useless and baseless.”

Clause 2 of Freedom of Information Act 2011 gives further insight into the right of access to records thus:

Notwithstanding contained in any other Act, law or regulation, the right to any person to access or request information whether or not contained in any written form, which is in the custody or possession of any public official, agency or institution however described is hereby established. An applicant here in need not demonstrate any specific interest in the information being applied for. Any person entitled to the right to information under this bill, shall have the right to institute proceedings in a court to compel any public institution to comply with the provisions of this Act.

Clause 3 in the Freedom of Information Act 2011 again shed more light on the power of the FOI bill, thus: “A Public Institution shall ensure that it records and keep information about all its activities, operations and businesses. A Public Institution shall ensure the proper organization and maintenance of all information in its custody in a manner that facilitates public access to such information.”

Freedom of Information Bill is a very important access provider for all-those who wish to get information that government is holding or withholding, which may be of interest to the public because it deals with transparency and accountability. Hence, with the state of corruption in Nigeria, a full-fledged FOI act (without any alteration) could help put the country in a better shape through the media and masses check on government, government officials, public and private institutions, and NGOs activities.

The idea of a Freedom of Information law for Nigeria was conceived in 1993 by three different organizations working independently that is, Media Rights Agenda (MRA) Civil Liberties Organizations (CLO), and the Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ). These organizations subsequently agreed to work together on a campaign for the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act. The objective of the campaign was to lay down as a legal principle the right of access to documents and information in the custody of the government or its officials and agencies as a necessary corollary to guarantee Freedom of expression. It was also aimed at creating mechanisms for the effective exercise of this right.

Consequently, the Media Rights Agenda was designated the technical partner in the project under the arrangement agreed upon for taking the project forward. In keeping with this role. It was asked to produce a draft of freedom of information bill. With time, the Media Rights Agenda's Legal Directorate headed by Mr. Tunde Fagbohunlu of Aluko and Oyeboode law firm produced in 1994, a draft bill entitled "Draft Access to Public Record and Official Information Act." The content of the draft was drawn substantially from the experiences of other countries operating Freedom of Information laws. But it was also based on consultation among the three organizations and suggestions made by practicing Nigerian Journalists in the questionnaire administered by Media Rights Agenda.

The Draft Access to Public Records and Information Act produced by Media Rights Agenda in 1994 became the basis for further discussions and debates on the issue and was subsequently subjected to a series of review exercise involving various stakeholders. On March 10-11, 1995, a two day technical workshop chaired by Prince Tony Momoh was organized by the three partner organizations to examine and revise the draft, taking into consideration the views of other interest groups. Participants include Human Rights Workers, Journalists, Lawyers, University Lectures, Representatives of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Federal Ministry of Information. The main objective of the workshop was to achieve a consensus among the various interest groups that was affected by the availability or otherwise of a legally protected right of access to government and other institutions held information.

At the end of the workshop, a communiqué was issued. It was stated that:

1. every person whether a citizen of Nigeria or not, should have a legally enforceable right to be given, on request access to any record under the control of any government or public institution.
2. the access of public Records and Information bill should be enacted into law to give effect to section 36 of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which guarantees every person the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.
3. the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Organs and Institutions should be subject to Freedom of Information Legislature.
4. through a Freedom of Information, culture which will engender openness, transparency and accountability in government, Nigerians can overcome the vicious circle of corruption, underdevelopment and political instability.
5. all laws inconsistent with the realization of the ideal of free flow of information such as the National Broadcasting Commission Decree, the Newspapers Decree, et cetera, should be reviewed.
6. the Draft of the Access to Public Records and Information Bill adopted by participants at the conference should be enacted into law without delay.
7. a monitoring and campaigns committee (MCC) Comprising the Civil Liberties Organization, Media Rights Agenda and the Nigeria Union of Journalist be set up to among other things...
8. the right to receive and impact Information and ideas is a fundamental constituent of the right to freedom of expression and as such Nigerian should imbibe the culture of protesting any time they are deprive of information through the closure or proscription of media institutions.
9. the duty to be fair and just is a corollary to a right to access to public records and information...

The bill was first tabled at the National Assembly in June 1999. The historical lead sponsors of the Bill when it was first introduced in the House of Representatives include late Tony Anyanwu, Nduka Irabor, Jerry Ugokwe. They were actively supported by Senator Victor Lar. Yet, the bill was not passed into law. Also, Honorable Abike Dabiri-Erewa, a former Journalist was one of the strongest supporters of the Bill in the House of Representatives of the 5th National Assembly. She was one of the sponsors of the bill with Ita Enang and Dino Melaye.

After a long debate for about 12 years, the Freedom of Information bill, became a reality in Nigeria. On May 23, 2011, the National Assembly passed the harmonized version while President Goodluck Jonathan signed the bill into law on May 28, 2011. The enactment of the law is, indeed a tribute to the vision and doggedness of the coalition of the 120 civil society groups, the Newspapers Proprietors' Association of Nigeria and the Mass Media who kept the debate on 'public right to know' on the front-burner.

Methodology (Research Design)

Two research methods that is, content analysis and survey research method were considered appropriate for this study. These selected methods were adopted because the study concerns Nigerian masses' thoughts, attitude, views, opinions, among others, which were also captured by the press, on the FOI bill issue. Survey (qualitative) research method was adopted because the method has been viewed by communication studies scholars as a research method that helps a researcher get some selected people to give their responses to questions asked with the aim of using the answers obtained to answer the questions raised in the research work. In other words, it is a research method employed especially when a researcher is interested in measuring attitude and the relationship of the attitude to the peoples and their environment at large (Kerlinger, 1973). Based on the foregoing, the researcher believed that respondents that would be engaged shall give responses that will help in giving adequate answers to the research questions raised in this study. Hence, the adoption of questionnaire and in-depth interview guide as instruments for data collection.

In addition to the survey method, content analysis was also considered because as mentioned earlier, this study looked at Nigerians' voices on the subject matter as captured by the press. More so, the method serves as a tool that helps researchers to examine the contents of the mass communication media. In line with these, McQuail, (2000:551) says: "Content analysis is a technique for the systematic, quantitative and objective description of media texts, that is useful for certain purposes of classifying output, looking for effects and making comparisons between media and over time between content and 'reality'. ...". On the other hand, Chanimuya (2004:18) posits: "Content Analysis is a systematic, objective and qualitative procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information, publications from the print media, newspapers, magazine, company publications, television and radio programmes."

In adopting these methods, appropriate quantitative and qualitative research instruments were adopted for data collection. Thus, in gathering data for this study through the content analysis approach, coding sheet was used as quantitative data collection instrument. It comprised three content analytical categories, which were constructed by the researcher. These are: Issues raised, Tone of stories, and Position of stories.

Under the survey research method, two (2) qualitative research instruments were used for data collection that is, questionnaire and in-depth interview guides. The instruments were structured in a manner that it easily helped to elicit information from respondents about the

subject matter. All data generated through the use of these research instruments were analyzed. Hence, providing answers to the research questions raised.

Population of the Study and Sample Size

The population of this study was drawn in Lagos and Ibadan. The reason for this selection is because of proximity factor and the geographical areas are known for their high density of Nigerians from other parts of the country. Therefore, it is believed that at least a reasonable representative percentage of Nigerians from other geo-political regions of the country live in these selected areas and would be reached by the researcher and the research assistants.

This study's population comprised respondents with at least secondary school education and above. These respondents were purposively selected among mass media users, media personnel (journalists), a mix of teachers/lecturers especially in the field of journalism, politicians, and government and non-governmental institutions. Respondents were categorized thus:

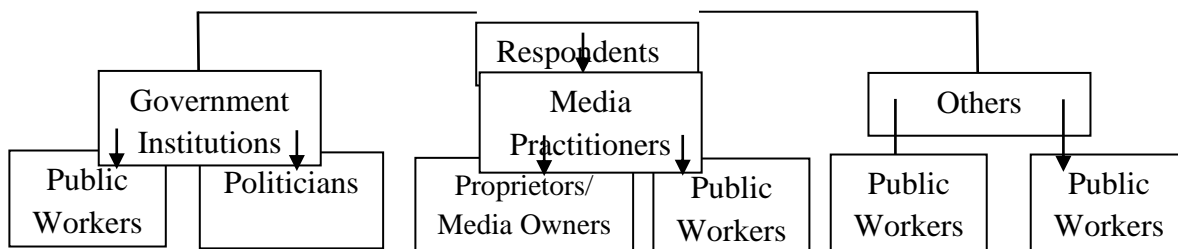


Fig. 1: Categories of Respondents

The above figure shows the categorization of respondents. Notwithstanding, the similarities in their characteristics that is, being mass media users, public workers and politicians were categorized under the same category that is, 'government institutions.' On the other hand, proprietors/media owners, editors and journalists were categorized under 'media practitioners', while teachers/lecturers and NGO owners/workers were categorized under 'others.' These categorization was done by the researchers, in order to, through their responses, establish if there will be differences or uniformity in their perceptions and interpretations of the FOI issue. However, responses obtained especially through the open-ended questionnaire items and the interview conducted revealed that they had closely similar understanding and interpretations given to the subject matter. They noted that it is a national issue that concerns every Nigerian notwithstanding their ethnic, socio-political, affiliations.

Administration of Instruments

Table 1: Administration of Questionnaire on Respondents in the Selected Areas

Selected Areas	No. of Questionnaire Administered (%)	No. of Questionnaire Retrieved (%)	Overall Percentage (%)
Lagos	150	136 (45.3%)	92.6
Ibadan	150	142 (47.3%)	
Total	300 (100%)	278 (92.6%)	(100.0)

Source: Field Survey 2014

Table 1 above shows the distribution of the total number of questionnaire produced, administered and finally retrieved for this study. It clearly shows that three hundred (300 100%) questionnaire was produced and administered; one hundred and fifty (150) for each of the selected areas. However, from the two selected areas (Lagos and Ibadan), for this study, two hundred and seventy-eight (278 - 92.6%) questionnaire were retrieved from respondents. Ibadan recorded the highest number of questionnaire retrieved, scoring 47.3% while Lagos scored

45.3%. Eight (8) persons -two journalists, two academics, two politicians, one public worker and one private worker were purposively selected and interviewed.

On the other hand, for the content analysis approach, the contents of the two Nigerian daily newspapers selected for this study that is *The Punch* and *The Guardian* were content analyzed. Every edition that published report(s) on the subject matter identified for the purpose of this study, within the study period, was picked as sample for analysis. The content analysis samples were purposively picked. It was discovered that since all the editions within the study period did not have reported the issues. This is because the researcher does not want to risk the chances of missing out any of the editions with stories on the issues during the selection of samples. This may happen if other techniques are adopted. Thus, the researcher's main focus was on the editions that reported the issues using the research's content categories. Table 2 below shows the distributions.

Table 2: Selected Newspapers' Samples Drawn within the Selected Months (April -June, 2011)

Months (2011)	No of Publications/Month	Newspaper Sampled		Total
		Punch	Guardian	
April	30	1	Nil	1
May	31	11	3	14
June	30	17	12	29
Total	91 (100%)	29 (0.66%)	15 (0.34%)	44 (48.4%)

Source: Field Survey 2014

Table 2 above clearly shows that ninety-one (91) newspaper publications were available for sampling in the selected months (April, May and June, 2011). However, in April, the *Punch* newspaper carried the FOI story once, while the *Guardian* newspapers did not carry the story at all. In May, the *Punch* still performed better with eleven (11) stories while the *Guardian* had just three (3) stories. Finally, in June, the *Punch* newspaper still performed better with seventeen (17) stories while the *Guardian* had twelve (12) stories published.

In all of the ninety-one (91) representing 100% selected newspaper publications sampled in the selected months, the *Punch* had twenty-nine (29) publications with the FOI stories, scoring 0.66% while the *Guardian* had only fifteen (15) publications of same story, scoring 0.34%. Both newspapers had forty-four (44) publications representing (48.4%) as against a total of ninety-one publications sampled.

Unit of Analysis

For this study, the unit of analysis shall be the essential units of texts that have been classified by the researchers for this study. This is in line with Wimmer and Dominick's submission thus, the unit of analysis is the basic unit of text to be classified during content analysis. In written content, the unit of analysis might be a single word or symbol, a theme (a single assertion about one subject), or an entire programme (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000, 2006). Therefore, the unit of analysis for this study shall include every news story, letters to the editor, editorials, features and opinions on the issue under study in the pages of the selected Nigerian daily newspapers.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

For this study, three research questions were raised that is, how tenacious and effective was Nigerians' voices/opinions on calling for the signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into law? Did their voices/opinions influence the signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into law? What is the direction of the mass media (press)'s reportage of the FOI bill issue?

Data gathered through the chosen instruments was used to give answers to the research questions. The first research question - How tenacious and effective was Nigerians' voices/opinions on calling for the signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into law, was answered using data generated from the questionnaire administered and retrieved.

Table 3: Tenaciousness and Effectiveness of Nigerians' Voices/Opinions on Calling for the Signing of the Freedom of Information Bill into Law.

Responses	Frequency (Tenacious)	Percentage (%)	Responses	Frequency (Effectiveness)	Percentage (%)
Very Great Extent	80	85	Very Effective	88	94
Great Extent	12	13	Effective	3	3
Little Extent	1	1	Not too Effective	3	3
Very Little Extent	1	1	Not Effective	0	0
No Extent	-	-	Indifferent	-	-
Total	94	100	Total	94	100

Source: Field Survey 2014

The above table presents a breakdown of respondents' responses on the level of tenaciousness and effectiveness of Nigerian's voices in the call for the signing of the FOI bill into law. With reference to the data presented on the table (3), it is obvious that the Nigerians' voices were highly tenacious and very effective. Responses got revealed that their voices were tenacious to a very great extent with 85% of the respondents that is eighty (80) in agreement. On the other hand, 13% that is, twelve (12) respondents said it was to a great extent. Both categories of responses fell under the positive response to the research question.

On the contrary, only one (1) respondent for each of the other responses fell under negative responses that is, 'little extent' and 'very little extent' respectively. Therefore, to give answer to research questions one, it will be clearly stated that Nigerians' voices were tenacious and effective enough during the clamour for the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law in Nigeria.

In conclusion, aside the tenaciousness and effectiveness of the Nigerian masses' voices, data presented on the table 3 above, show that Nigerians were positively (favourably) disposed toward the fight for their fundamental human rights, one of which is the freedom/access to information. This feat can be accorded to the level of mass media use by the opinion leaders in intensifying the yearnings of Nigerians.

The second research question that is, did the Nigerian masses voices/opinions influenced the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law was answered using the data presented in table 4 below.

Table 4: Influence and Extent of Influence of Public Voices on the Signing the FOI Bill into Law.

INFLUENCE			EXTENT OF INFLUENCE		
Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	65	69.0	Great Extent	61	66
No	17	18.0	Little Extent	22	23
Indifferent	10	11.0	No Extent	4	4
No Response	2	2.0	Don't know	6	6
			No Response	1	1
Total	94	100.0	Total	94	100

Source: Field Survey 2014

The above table presents a breakdown of respondents' responses on the influence of Nigerians voices on the signing of the FOI bill into law and the extent to which their voices influenced the signing of the FOI bill into law.

With a clear view at the figures on the table, it is very obvious that Nigerian masses voices actually influenced the signing of the FOI bill into law. Respondents who agreed by saying 'yes' were sixty-five (65) scoring 69.0%, a score above average. Those who ticked 'no' were just seventeen (17) scoring 18.0%, while only ten (10) neither said 'yes' nor no.' both scored 11.0% and 2.0% respectively.

During the interview, some of the interviewees' responses obtained revealed that non-governmental organizations, which they termed the 'mouth' of the public really influenced the signing of the FOI bill through creating awareness to the general public about what the citizens of Nigeria stand to gain if eventually the bill was signed into law. One of the interviewees stressed thus: (sic) "our leaders in this country need forceful hands. Imagine since 1993 that the Nigeria Union of Journalist (NUJ) Media Rights Organization (MRO) and the Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) had been working round the clock to make sure that the bill was signed into law, they had no choice than to sign it even though it was not the original version that was signed, but at the end, the bill was passed." Generally, they noted that one of the reasons why the government signed the bill into law was because at a point, they could no longer stand the weight of masses voices orchestrated through the mass media on daily basis. Therefore, they then had to sign the bill into law. More so, it was submitted that the government of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan signed the bill to show Nigerians of his governments' interest in keeping to all that he promised Nigerians as highlighted in the party's manifesto before election.

In addition, the data presented above portrays the extent of the influence that public opinion had on the signing process of the FOI bill into law. On the other side of the divide on the table (extent of influence), it can be seen that respondents' perceptions on whether the FOI bill was influenced by Nigerian masses' voices/opinion is to a 'great extent.' Thus, on the table sixty-one (61) respondents representing 66% believed that the signing of the FOI bill was influenced by Nigerian masses' voices/opinions to a great extent, while twenty-four (24) respondents representing 23% say it was to a 'little extent.' On the other hand, eleven (11) respondents do not think so. Four (4) of them ticked 'no extent', 6 ticked 'don't know', while only one (1) did not respond to the item. This implies that majority of the respondents are of the opinion that the signing of the FOI bill in law in Nigeria, was influenced by public opinion that is Nigerian masses outcry, to a great extent. Hence, the beauty of 'masses' interests' inclined democratic government.

To complement these views obtained from the qualitative data gathered, the quantitative data gathered revealed that within the months of April to June 2011, both selected Nigerian daily newspapers covered the stories of the FOI bill, beaming their light on both the government and the governed angles respectively. Nevertheless, it was discovered that the *Punch* Newspaper covered the Freedom of Information bill stories more than the *Guardian*. The table below shows the distributions. Worthy of note, this study objectives did not include establishing how the selected newspapers performed based on ownership and/or location among others criteria. Its main crux was to establish the extent to which any of the well patronized Nigerian daily newspapers performed in their reportage of the FOI bill issue. Hence, the choice of the *Punch* and the *Guardian*, among others. Both newspapers selected have wide readership.

Table 5 (a): Number of times/Placement of FOI Stories Published in the Newspapers (April June, 2011)

Months (2011)	Pages	Newspapers Sampled		Total	Percentage (%)
		The Punch	The Guardian		
April	Front	0	0	0	0%
	Inside	1	0	1	2.3%
	Back	0	0	0	0%
May	Front	4	1	5	11.4%
	Inside	6	2	8	18.2%
	Back	1	0	1	2.3%
June	Front	2	4	6	13.6%
	Inside	14	8	22	50%
	Back	1	0	1	2.3%
Total		29 = 65.9%	15 = 34.1%	44	100%

Source: Field Survey 2014

Table 5 (b): Units of Data Analysis

Units of Analysis	The Punch		The Guardian		Total	
Issues	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
News stories	16	55	11	73	27	61
Letter to the Editor	7	24	3	20	10	23
Articles	2	7	-	-	2	5
Features	4	14	1	7	5	11
Total	29	100	15	100	44	100

Source: Field Survey 2014

In all, forty-four (44) editions of both newspapers were picked for this study. The editions were only those that carried the FOI stories. the *Punch* newspaper published the FOI stories twenty-nine (29) times within the selected months representing 65.9% while the *Guardian* newspaper had fifteen (15) stories representing 34.1%. Although this number fell below half of the overall publications for the three months selected, notwithstanding, the coverage given by no means got the masses informed especially as complimented by other media. These would have led to the' robust discussions, arguments and counter arguments witnessed in the polity until the bill was signed into law.

In support of the fact that government decision was influenced by the masses' voices, comprehensively, it will be noted that both newspapers reported the FOI issues as 'news story' (most of which were of the masses point of view), twenty-seven (27) times representing 61%, 'letters to the editor' scored ten (10) representing 23%, 'articles' scores two (2), while 'features' scored five (5), representing 11%. As mentioned earlier, mass media's agenda setting role play out within the sampled period would have got the masses informed, leading to more people lending their voices and opinions to the issue. Hence, government's decision to sign the FOI bill into law. Therefore, in answering question two, based on data collected and analyzed, it is obvious that the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law was greatly influenced by Nigerian publics' voices. Thus, their outcries caused the PDP government led by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to sign the FOI bill into law. A feat that other successive governments (military/civilian) were unable to achieve in respect to Nigerian masses wishes and aspirations.

What is the direction of the mass media’s reportage of the FOI bill issue is the third research question generated for this study. This question was answered using the data presented in table 6 below. The researchers generated this research question for the sole aim of establishing if the mass media was favourably disposed to the masses’ interest or to the government’s. To this end, the newspapers’ contents were categorized into: positive, neutral and negative. These categories were measured by the tone, angle or language in which the stories were reported. Thus, for the purpose of this study, positive stories were all forms reports in which the reporters reported the FOI issue in favour of the masses views. Neutral stories were all stories on the FOI issue that did not fall into positive or negative categories (reports that are neither ‘for’ nor ‘against’ the masses and/or the government), while negative stories were all forms of reports on the FOI issue in which the reports were not in support of the masses’ views.

Table 6: Direction of FOI Stories Published by the Newspapers (April-June, 2011)

ISSUES	PUNCH		GUARDIAN		TOTAL	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Positive	24	83.0	12	80.0	36	81.8
Negative	2	7.0	-	0.0	2	4.5
Neutral	3	10.0	3	20.0	6	13.7
Total	29	100.0	15	100.0	44	100.0

Source: Field Survey 2014

Table 6 above shows the data generated to help answer research question three. The table revealed that in all of the forty-four 44 newspapers finally picked and sampled, thirty- six (36) of the reports were positive scoring 81.8%. Commonly in this study, the *Punch* newspaper still carried more stories about the FOI issue compared to the *Guardian* newspaper. Basically, data presented showed that more positive stories that is, newspapers’ contents that were in favour of the masses voices were published compared to other categories of stories published about the FOI bill issue. In other words, the stories published had favourable tones and were tilted toward the masses believes, hopes and aspirations. Few examples include titles like: *Why Government must Sign the FOI bill, It is the Right of Nigerians to Know, among others.*

Contrariwise, only two (2) stories were negative scoring 4.5%, while six (6) stories scoring 13.7%. The probable reason for this may not be far from the fact that the mass media tried to work toward balancing their reports as regards the issue to showcase the element of objectivity in their roles during debates, arguments and or counter-arguments as the case maybe. More so, talks about the issue have been lingering in the polity for a long time; everything needed to be done to put an end to the issues.

Therefore, based on samples drawn and analyzed, and the data presented, it will be concluded that the direction of the mass media’s reportage of the FOI bill issue within the period selected for this study was favourable because more stories in favour of the masses yearnings about the FOI issue were published by the mass media using the selected Nigerian daily newspapers - the *Punch* and the *Guardian*.

Conclusion

This study looked at the influence of masses’ opinion on signing the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law in Nigeria. Its core aims include: to reveal how tenacious their voices were during the course of calling for the signing of the FOI bill into law, if the signing of the bill into

law was as a result of the masses voices (requests/opinions) since it is generally believed that Nigerian governments are usually not always sensitive to masses' voices/opinions.

The study discovered that Nigerian masses orchestrated voices were instrumental to the signing of the FOI bill into law. This was established through the qualitative and quantitative data collected and analyzed. It was also noted that the roles of the opinion leaders during the cause of calling on government to sign the bill into law was obvious.

Recommendations

Therefore, this study recommends thus:

- i. it is recommended that Nigerians should continue to get themselves involved in the formulation of socio-political, economic, programmes and agenda of the government as it would always foster government implementation of programmes of popular interest;
- ii. government should always create enabling environment and encourage the people to always air their views and opinions on national issues, policies and agenda, and
- iii. the culture of opinion polling should also be imbibed in Nigeria as witnessed in most of the developed countries. Infact, this simple process (culture) of opinion polling will enable democratic governments at all levels to maintain stability and legitimacy as noted by Visser Holbrook and Krosnick, 2007.

Suggestion for Further Studies

It is however, suggested that further studies related to this study should go beyond revealing how public opinion led to the signing of the FOI bill into law, rather the aspect of the effectiveness of the use of bill by government and especially the governed should be investigated. Thus, further studies should probe into establishing if since the FOI bill was signed into law, has been effectively and efficiently utilized for the purpose for which it was signed into law. It is hope that results got will help both parties – government and the governed (all other stakeholders) to know how each has fared in the application of the bill to the good of government and the people in general. Lastly, the aspect of the use of the social media during times of debates on popular demand(s) can also be investigated.

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