

An Assessment of the Role of Radio Rivers and the Tide Newspapers in the Electoral Process of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria

Obinna Nwodim Ph.D

Department of Political and Administrative Studies

Faculty of Social Science

University of Port Harcourt

obinnanwodim@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examined the electoral process that ushered in the present political dispensation in Nigeria, with a view to ascertaining the role of the mass media in enlightening the citizenry towards mass participation in the activities of government. This is against the background of long years of military rule and the noticeable discontent in the military leaders' lack of commitment to a successful transition programmes, using the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation and the Rivers State Newspaper Corporation as paradigm of analysis. The study analyzed back issues of The Tide and The Tide On Sunday, copies of news bulletin and The Global News read on Radio Rivers, during the period under review. The following research questions were asked: What role did the mass media play to enable the electorate make enlightened choice of candidates? Did the mass media analyze candidates and their parties adequately? Did the mass media provide information to the electorates on the current state of the electoral process? The study observed that politicians used the print media more to sell their ideas to the electorates, while for the electronic media; reportage about the transition programme was limited to official statements from government officials and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The paper recommended that the broadcast media management should advance its scope of coverage to cover political campaigns, initiate discussion programmes that would put the electorates in proper positions to assess the candidates as well as enlighten the citizenry on the electoral process.

Introduction

A major characteristic of democracy is the holding of a free and fair election which must frequent. Democracy involves the participation of all qualified citizens to vote and be voted for. It is the fundamental right of the citizens to participate in the electoral process. In some countries, it is a crime not to participate in elections. It is a civil duty of the citizens. In the Nigerian case, the period of governance has been shared between military and democratic rules. Prior to the advent of the current democratic dispensation, Nigeria had undergone several years of military rule. This brought about agitations by civil society and pro-democracy groups for the return to democracy. When in 1998, the then Head of State, General Abdulsallami Abubakar, announced that the government would commence a transition programme to a democratic rule, the news was received with mixed feeling, particularly as there had been failed promises in the past by the same crop of military rulers. As a matter of fact, the botched Third Republic which included the infamous annulment of the June 12, 1992 Presidential Elections, which was widely acclaimed as the freest and fairest elections ever held in Nigeria, still remained fresh in the memory of the citizens. It was not unexpected that the people would take the announcement with mixed feelings. However, politicians set out to commence preparations for elections that ushered in the present democratic dispensation.

The mass media is a major factor that enhances the electoral process. In this regard Mylton (1993:40) argued that the relationship between mass communication and the social and political structures is a close one. The mass media serves as a mediator between politicians and the electorate. It is a powerful medium that cannot be ignored. This position is supported by Mbajunwa (1998), when he quoted a one-time President of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson, as saying that, “it is better to have a mass media without government, than a government without a mass media.

This research examined two mass media organizations that were dominant at the period under analysis, the Rivers State Newspaper Corporation (RSNC) and the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC), with a view to ascertaining their roles in the enlightenment and mobilization of the electorates during the electoral process

Literature Review

In his study of contemporary democracies, Powell Jr. (1997) outlines a number of criteria for contemporary national democracies, amongst them is that most adults can participate in the electoral process, both as voters or as candidates for important political office, as well as citizens and leaders enjoy basic freedom of speech, press, assembly and organization. Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992) in their contribution to the discourse on democracy argue that, “Democracy as an ideology is the philosophy of governance which places a high premium on the basic freedom or fundamental human rights of the citizen, the rule of law, the right of property, the free flow of information and the right of choice between alternative positions. Pempel (1989), adducing a defining of democracy states that, “Democracy involves the right of citizens to determine their form of government and to choose those who will constitute the government. It also requires that government be responsive to the preferences of citizens. And finally, it requires that each citizen’s preferences be considered relatively equal.

From the foregoing, democracy involves the full participation of the citizens and so the process ought to be all-inclusive. In this regard, the electorates must be carried along through enlightenment, mobilization and sensitization, in every step of the process. This is what some scholars have referred to as public sphere. For Dean (2005), the public sphere thus presupposes freedom of speech and assembly, a free press and the right to freely participate in political debates and decision making. To enable this succeed, access to information is necessary. This is, perhaps, why the Centre for Democracy and Governance in its publication (1999) described access to information as essential to the health of democracy. According to the report:

First it ensures that citizens make responsible and informed choices, rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves a “checking function” by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oath of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them.

Furthermore, Lichtenberg (1990:1) had argued that the press has always played an important role in the political process. According to him:

This role is after all, a primary reason freedom of the press has been thought a necessary safeguard in a democratic society.

He also argues that:

The increased importance of the press in the political process brings out an ambiguity in the role..... The seeming undesirability of the idea that the media are agents in the political process and not simply observers of it provides one important reason for re-thinking of the traditional prerogatives and responsibilities of the press.

Writing on the influence and power of the television in the political process, Jibo (1992) observed that the 1992 American Presidential election was a case where television played a critical role. According to him, a Cable News Network (CNN) Public Opinion Poll relayed simultaneously as the presidential debate was taking place thus:

“In 1992, American Presidential election, this element came to play. Bill Clinton by reckoning of popular survey outplayed his rival, incumbent President George Bush. A significant number of Americans are convinced that an irrepressible television performance tipped the scale in favour of Bill Clinton, who subsequently decimated President Bush in the election.

The influence of the media in moulding public opinion cannot be overemphasized as history has shown that it has made significant impact in determining the outcome of an electoral process. In this regard, the role of the media in any electoral process is significant in its overall success.

Methodology

Two major media organizations operating in Rivers State were chosen. The media organizations chosen were the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC) which is an electronic medium and the Rivers State Newspaper Corporation (RSNC), which is a print medium. The choice of radio is informed by its wide reach. At the time it was the only radio station with a wide reach to the rural areas. The Rivers State Newspaper Corporation, a government owned media organization is the publisher of the oldest newspaper in the State and at some time the most influential newspaper in Rivers State.

Fifty seven (57) issues of “The Tide” and “The Tide On Sunday” were analyzed and Thirty-three (33) editions of the Major news bulletin was also analyzed. The period spanned between July 1998, when the political agenda for the Fourth Republic was unveiled by the then Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar to May 29, 1999, when the transition programme came to fruition, with the handover to a democratically elected President

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following data were obtained and analysed from the study

Table 1

Distribution of Political News in the “Tide” July 1998

	WK. 1	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	29.75cm	26cm	36cm	18cm	109.75cm
Features	X	X	X	X	X
Commentaries/Opinions	40cm	X	X	X	40cm
Editorials	42cm	X	X	X	42cm
Letters to the Editor	X	X	X	X	X

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 1 shows the distribution of publications in the month of July, 1998. A total of 109.75 centimetres column inches were devoted to news on the electoral process in the July 1998 issue. 46 centimetres column inches was allotted commentaries and opinion on the electoral process, while 42 centimetres column inches was given to an Editorial published in the Third week. There were no features articles and letters to the Editor published. In the month under survey,

the medium devoted more column inches to news and information which were intended to provide information and enlighten the citizenry on the state of the electoral process as well as enable the electorates make enlightened choice of candidates. Commentaries and opinions were published in the first week of July with an allotment of 42centimetre column inches were issues bothering on the transition programme.

Table 2
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in August 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	13cm	8.3cm	12cm	16cm	49cm
Features	X	X	X	X	X
Commentaries/Opinions	X	X	X	60cm	60cm
Editorial	X	48cm	X	X	48cm
Letter to the Editor	22cm	X	X	X	22cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 2 shows distribution of news in the month of August 1998. The Table indicates theta 49 centimetres column inches were allotted to news on the electoral process. 60 centimeters column inches for commentaries and opinion; an Editorial was published in the second week and letters to the Editor having 48 and 22 column inches centimetres, respectively. There seemed to be a reduction in the column inches allotted to news and information and a corresponding increase in commentaries/opinion. A letter to the Editor was also published which indicates that by this month, readers had started reacting to the transition programme by responding through letters to the Editor. An Editorial was published in the second week with increased column inches of 48 centimetres column inches.

Table 3
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in September 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	12cm	15cm	21.6cm	24.6cm	77.2cm
Features	X	X	66cm	X	66cm
Commentaries/Opinions	50cm	X	X	40cm	90cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	21.6cm	X	X	X	21.6cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 3 shows a study of September 1998 issues which reveals that 77.2 centimetres column inches were allotted news, features had 66 centimetres inches column, commentaries and opinion had a total of 90 centimetre column inches, with Editorial having 42, while letter to the Editor 21.6 centimetre column inches.

Table 4
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in October 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	X	X	25.6cm	3.4cm	29cm
Features	X	X	32cm	50cm	82cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	X	X	20cm	20cm
Editorial	X	X	X	43cm	43cm
Letter to the Editor	X	X	X	X	X

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

From the Table, records for the first two weeks were not available as copies of that particular edition of the paper was not readily available during the period of carrying out this study. The third and fourth weeks showed that 29 centimetres column inches were allotted to news, features 32.5 centimetres column inches, commentaries and opinions 20 and Editorial 43 centimetres column inches.

Issues on the electoral process were published in the Editorial to enable electorates make informed decision and analyze the way the programme was going. The analysis of candidates and party manifestos as contained in the features and commentaries/opinion were given 82 and 20 centimetres column inches respectively. No indication of feedback from the electorates as there was no Letter to the Editor regarding the electoral process.

Table 5
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in November 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	24cm	47.4cm	9cm	28cm	108.4cm
Features	X	140cm	X	X	140cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	X	X	X	X
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	16cm	X	X	X	16cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 5 indicates that 108.4 centimetres column inches was allotted to news in the month of November 1998, providing the electorate with information on the current state of the electoral process. The features which provided a medium for analyzing candidates' parties and political issues

Table 6
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in December 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	18cm	28cm	28cm	22cm	96cm
Features	X	54cm	X	X	54cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	175cm	X	56cm	231cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	X	X	X	X	X

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 6 shows that 96 centimetres column inches news was allotted to news; 54 centimetres column inches allotted to features; a total of 321 centimetres column inches for commentaries and opinions. No Editorials and Letters to the Editor were published. From this, much space was allotted to commentaries/opinions which analyzed candidates and their manifestos thereby making the electorates make informed decisions.

Table 7
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in January 1999

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	28.8cmC	34cm	140cm	NA	182.8cm
Features	12cm	140cm	X	NA	152cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	X	X	NA	X
Editorial	X	24cm	X	NA	24cm
Letter to the Editor	16cm	X	X	NA	16cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

A study of Table indicates that 184 centimetres column inches was allotted to news on the electioneering process, 152 centimetres column inches to features, 24 centimetres column inches devoted to Editorial and 16 centimetre column inches news holes for letters to the Editor. There was no commentary/opinion published. Records for the fourth week of the publication were not available. This month provided the electorate with information on news, keeping the electorates informed on the electioneering process. A total of 152 centimetres column inches analyzing candidates, parties and their manifestos and the electorate in form of feedback.

Table 8
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in February 1999

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	17.40cm	32cm	24cm	20cm	93.8cm
Features	60cm	140cm	70cm	80cm	350cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	X	60cm	X	60cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	X	X	26.2cm	32cm	58.2cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 8 shows distribution of publications of the political process that culminated into the emergent Fourth Republic in the month of February 1999 as 93.8 centimetres column inches was allotted to various news items, features a total of 350 centimetres column inches, commentaries, opinion 60 centimetres column inches and letters to the Editor, 58.2 column inches. We observed that features were given much space within the period to ventilate issues regarding the parties, candidates and their manifestos. This is indicative of the priority attached to the analysis of candidates and parties for the elections in order to enlighten choices. News had its traditional consistency of informing electorates of the current state of the programme

Table 9
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in March 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	24cm	30cm	40cm	42cm	136cm
Features	70cm	30cm	140cm	60cm	350cm
Commentaries/Opinions	X	40cm	40cm	38cm	118cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	X	X	X	X	X

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 9 showing distribution of political news on the transition programme for the month of March, 1999 indicates that news was allotted 136 centimetres column inches; features a total of 359 centimetres column inches; commentaries/ opinions were allotted 118 centimetres column inches; the Editorials and Letters to the Editor. Within this period, features continued to attract more space as electorates were treated to information on candidates, parties and their manifestoes. Reader's reactions were passed through commentaries/opinion indicating the level of enlightenment the electorate had on issues on the transition programme. Information dissemination on news had continued to be on the increase as more space was allotted to news.

Table 10
Distribution of Political News in the Tide in April 1998

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	12cm	34cm	20.4cm	24cm	90.4cm
Features	X	X	90cm	50cm	140cm
Commentaries/Opinions	65cm	70cm	50cm	60cm	245cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	X	X	X	X	X

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 10 showing the distribution of publications for the month of April 1999 with news occupying a total of 90.4 centimetres column inches; commentaries/opinions allotted a total of 245 centimetres column inches; commentaries/opinion allotted a total of 245 centimetres column inches. The month under focus had no publications on editorials and letter to the Editor. Readers reactions in the form of commentaries/opinions were allotted much more space as they were published in all the weeks surveyed. This is indicative that the level of information passed to the electorates and their feedback. Analysis of the political process in the form of features

had a total of 140 centimetres column inches and information dissemination as regular as it has been.

Table 11
-Distribution of Political News in the Tide in May 1999

	WK. I	WK. II	WK. III	WK. IV	TOTAL
News	12cm	17.2cm	22.2cm	24cm	75.9cm
Features	70cm	X	140cm	60cm	270cm
Commentaries/Opinions	50cm	52cm	X	X	102cm
Editorial	X	X	X	X	X
Letter to the Editor	X	X	28cm	X	28cm

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSNC Library 2000

Table 11 shows a final analysis on the transition programme which ended on May 29, 1999. It indicates that 75.9 centimetres column inches were allotted to news items; features were given 270 centimetres column inches, Commentaries/opinion, 102 column centimetres inches. There were also no publications of Editorials, during the period under survey.

Most publications in this period were based on reader's reactions to the conclusion of the electoral process and the analysis of the candidates and parties task ahead. Expectations of the electorates were also published in commentaries/opinions and letters to the Editor.

The data presented indicated that News was promptly reported during the political process. As a round of election approached features articles on the transition programme were given attention. Tables 5, 7, 8, and 9 indicated this. Letters to the Editor were seldom published as result readers reactions were not effectively entertained.

Table 12
Air-Time Alloted Topolitical Events in the Transition Programme by Radio Rivers between July 1998 and May 1999

	1st Broadcast	2nd Broadcast	TOTAL
July 1998	53.3"	60"	1.53.3"
August 1998	47"	60"	1.47"
September	58"	66"	2.04"
October 1998	57"	55"	1.52"
November 1996	NA	48.7"	48.7"
December 1998	NA	NA	NA
January 1999	59"	62"	2.01"
February 1999	60"	63"	2.03"
March 1999	NA	NA	NA
April 1999	NA	NA	NA
May 1999	NA	NA	NA

SOURCE: Data obtained from RSBC Library 2000

Table 12 shows the air-time allotted to news information relating to the political process. Available records indicate that in the month of July 1998, a time of in minutes 53.3 seconds were allotted to political news in the Global News bulletin. The month of August had a total of One minute, 47 seconds allotted to news on political programme. September, 1999, a total of 2 minutes 4 seconds were allotted, while one minute, 52 seconds were given to political news

in October, 1998. The Table also shows that records of political news related stories in Radio Rivers were not available in the month of December 1998, March April and May, 1999. From the available records, an average of one minute, 25 seconds were allotted for political news relating to the electoral process.

Summary/Conclusions/Recommendation

In the light of the findings from the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The broadcast media should be given more freedom to initiate programmes that would expose the voters and keep them informed of the happenings on the political scene. The broadcast media have the advantage of wider reach and the ability to overcome the barrier created by illiteracy.
2. It is also recommended that the storage system of messages in the electronic media should be improved upon.
3. It is also recommended that during electioneering process, a political desk should be established to take charge of political programmes, such as interviews, coverage of party rally and campaigns, in the electronic media.

References

- Adesina, Foluke (1997) *Persuading the Masses: The Media and The Electoral Process in Ogunba* (Ed) Governance and The Electoral Process, University of Lagos Press.
- Bernard, B (1960) *Communication and Public Opinion in Welbur Schramm* (ed) Mass Communication, University of Illinois Press
- Dean, J. (2005), *Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere in Media and Global Change- Rethinking Communication for Development*, Buenos Aires, CLASCO
- Lichtenberg, J. (1990) *Democracy and the Mass Media- A Collection of Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Mvendaga, J. (1996) *Politics, Mass Media and National Development*, Lagos, Malthouse Press.
- Phillip, Lee (1995) *Introduction: The Illusion of Democracy*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press
- Mylton, G. (1983) *Mass Communication In Africa*, London Edward Arnold Press
- Obasanjo, O & Mabogunje A (1992) *Elements of Democracy*, Abeokuta, ALF Publications
- Pempel, T.J. (1989) *Pre-requisites for Democracy in Political and Social Institution*, in *Democracy in Japan*, Ishida, Takeshi and Ellis S. Krauss Eds. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press
- Powell, Bingham G. Jr (1992) *Contemporary Democracies, Participation, Stability and Violence*, Port Harcourt, Sunray Publications.
- (1999) *The Role of the Media in Democracy: Strategic Approach*, Washington DC, Centre for Democracy and Governance.