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News Analysis as a Media Content for Public Opinion Formation and Moulding

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Abstract

The mass media perform certain roles to the sustenance of the society. Crucial among these roles are surveillance and correlation. The former involves routine journalistic function of monitoring events and reporting such in news while the latter deals with interpreting issues in the news for the purpose of building knowledge and coordinating opinions. There is an overlap between the two roles as opinions cannot be formed without information. In fact, informed opinions are based on adequate, accurate and authoritative information. Thus, by disseminating news and further engaging in discussion and analysis of major issues in the news, the media shape or influence public opinion. This paper examines news analysis as a means of shaping public opinion. It establishes that the mass media engage in construction and reconstruction of public opinion through agenda setting and framing. It presents a model depicting a cyclical process by which the media set agenda, through selective news presentation and treatment; and frame issues, through discussions and analyses, thereby giving direction for public opinion. The opinion so formed could result into actions and events, which are further reported in the news, based on their news values.

Key words: news analysis, public opinion, agenda setting, framing.

Introduction

News analysis is a media product that stems from news. The issues that attract discussion and analyses in the media are those considered important in media's ranking. News as a basic journalistic genre has been defined from various perspectives. There is no generally acceptable definition of news the world over, perhaps due to differences in socio-cultural milieus which account for variations in what each society considers newsworthy. A perspective relevant to the Nigerian environment is that news is "the timely and factual account of an interesting event which the public must know because it is important, as it helps them to live their lives meaningfully" (Okoye, 2006 p.3). There is an understanding from this definition that for a report to qualify as news, it must be delivered as closely as possible to the time of the happening. Factuality is another requirement, which distinguishes news from other (opinionated) journalistic products, such as advertorials, opinion and column articles, and editorials. Also, the report should be significantly interesting to the audience within the context of journalists' consideration of the story's importance to everyday living. In addition to the requirements contained in the definition, scholars and media practitioners agree to the values to be considered in a story for it to be worthy of reporting. These news values include prominence, proximity, human interest, oddity, accuracy and consequence or impact. Issues treated in news analysis are important ones that stem from events and issues already reported in news. After the news break, reporters and presenters invite public commentators, professional analysts, notable public officials and politicians to discuss such issues of public importance. The directions of the discussions have implications to the shape and directions of public opinions because as Chong and Druckman (2007) observe, small changes in media presentation of issues or events can lead to large changes in public opinions about such issues and events.

The Changing Dimension of News

The development, growth and diversification of news have gone beyond the earlier held notions that it is a record of interesting and momentous happenings in the society and human angle stories about certain kinds of persons or events, which will be of interest to the man on the street. As a result of advancement in technologies, news creation and dissemination have become

a matter of convergence through the use of modern technologies to reach specific groups of audience members with specific interests in different areas of endeavour. Also, the audiences of the 21st century have become more sophisticated than ever, providing impetus for the changing demand in news requirements and consumption. As a result of the importance of news and its wide array of delivery channels, other organisations give either explicit or implied support to popular news organisations through various means of patronage. Governments, either in a democracy or other forms of governance, in realisation of the importance of news and its ability to influence or change public opinion, have devised direct or indirect means of media regulation. Besides the popularity of the news media, news by itself calls to itself the attention of the audience bearing in mind that it tells the day's stories to achieve various results.

The changing dimension of news in today's world is captured in recent views and studies of media scholars. For instance, Postman and Powers (2009) are of the opinion that what is considered an interesting news story, which is significant, is tied mainly to what the reporters and the editors say, as much as an audience member's realisation that the news as he/she sees it, is being watched or read by other members of the larger group. According to them, it is difficult to answer the question, 'What is news?' Answers to this question is to be found by knowing what individuals feel is significant, and how their senses of the significant conforms with or departs from that of others, including reporters, editors and media owners. Furthermore, Harrison (2010) observes that there are two related but distinct versions of the essence of news: news is either located in, and positively contributes to the world of informed public opinion; or it is located as part of a modern social imaginary dominated by homogeneity. In the former, the practice of journalism is as a result of civil participation, and the latter, informed by ideology and other kinds of distortions. As a result of informed public opinion and homogeneity, issues of gatekeeping and news selection arise, and these are determined by what producers of news think the public want to read, hear and see, and what the society in general assumes to be the news. Harrison (2010) further notes that, the content of news is approved or rejected according to its perceived ability to inform, or its perceived ability to make people conform.

In a study by Franklin, Lewis and Williams (2010), it was reported that the manufacture of news relies on inputs from individuals and organisations, called news sources, located outside the formal news organisation in which the production takes place. From their report, these individuals are not paid in the real sense of it and are not subject to managerial authority but they

are important to the news production process. As the authors observe, their participation in the processes of news gathering and reporting is the outcome of negotiations struck implicitly or explicitly between them and news personnel. From the ongoing, the various ways news is created reveal that it is influenced by forces beyond the newsroom. The society itself determines what should be the news. Other factors include the fact that what reporters and editors regard should determine public opinion push to the fore news stories and items with which the audience is fed on a daily basis. One of the ways through which such is achieved is through the news analysis. What then is news analysis?

A Discourse on News Analysis

The mass media use various means to generate public interest over a news situation, especially if the issue is of national or group interest. Most of these are derived from the issues that come from editorials, features, commentaries and opinion articles written by notable journalists, columnists or correspondents. One of the dominant means by which the news media generate public interest over a news situation is news analysis. Adeyanju (2012) emphasises that the complexity of the post-modern society and the rise/popularity of the mass media have led to people's dependence on the media, through which they gather information on public issues. The mass media in turn, give room for the vocal and vociferous opinion leaders to provide the means of information for the people. Hence, it is very common to have the media bring experts and opinion leaders on board at the outset of an issue as public analyst, activists, professionals and/or stakeholders, whose comments are sought for interpretations and insights whenever a news event breaks. Besides the news media which can carry out interpretations on a news story or event, other experts whose leanings and expertise tilt to the subject also contribute their voice to the news issue, thereby extending the scope of interpretations beyond those of the media house.

News analysis is an evaluation of a news report that goes beyond the represented facts and gives an interpretation of the events based on available data. Traditionally, news is supposed to relay the happening in an objective manner covering the 'what', 'who', 'when', 'where', 'why' and 'how'. A news analysis discusses the issue in the news from all angles, gives perspectives to it and addresses its consequences. It is generally done by an expert on the subject and is presented as a corollary to the reported news. A news analysis is generally based on the perspectives and opinions of the experts/commentators and can be different from the position of

the newspaper or the reporter. In line with this thought, Ganiyu (2004) noted that news analysis is “a commentary on an important and sometimes controversial news item or issue with the aim of clarifying the issue further and putting it in proper perspectives” (p.190). As a commentary, news analysis is usually opinionated and it is based on issues of public importance. Among the numerous issues reported in the news, only a few considered salient in media agenda are selected for analysis. According to Hartley (1995), a measure of the importance of an issue in the news is indeed the amount of attention and analysis it receives – the extent to which media people talk about it.

In another sense, the attention a news story generates in the media in terms of its discussion and analysis determines the ‘public sphere’. According to Harrison (2006), people derive much of their understanding of the world from the news media - broadcast news, current affairs programmes, political news in the press - and increasingly from news sites and social media on the internet. Beyond an audience’s reception of the news, attempts are made to generate better understanding through means such as news analysis, which is derived from the original news received. Through news analysis, the audience can get varying opinions about an issue. It could be by listening to a politician, for instance, making promises or reiterating or repudiating what comments an opponent may have made about him or her, which helps the audience to either strengthen or weaken their resolve on the issue at stake. By their understanding of what news analysis is and what it means to the audience, news organisations would therefore position themselves properly by using this means to increase the followership of the news organ. *Channels Television’s Sunrise Daily*, *Africa Independent Television’s Kakaaki* (both in Lagos) and *HOT FM Owerri’s Peoples Assembly* as examples, have been observed to attract such followership from their audience.

News analyses are deliberative in nature. This is bearing in mind the popularity of the news organ, the writer or presenter, and the dose of news items they analyse regularly. News analyses go beyond being informational to becoming means through which public agenda are set, issues are framed, and public opinions formed, or reinforced. To achieve this purpose, news organisations look for good quality information which are of interest to the audience to stimulate discussions. The introduction of interactive technologies such as web blogs and social media via the internet creates rooms for active participation and debates of issues on such programmes.

The Meaning and Nature of Public Opinion

Man as a rational being exhibits dispositions - favourable or unfavourable – to issues, events, people, places and situations. One of the manifestations of man's rationality and freedom to exhibit dispositions towards the environment is opinion formation. Beyond just forming opinions, man tends to rationalise his opinions, especially when faced with alternatives. What then is an opinion? McQuail (2005) defines an opinion as “a statement of preference from one side of an argument or choice presented” (p.515). The competitive nature of the human society (especially a democratic one) allows for trading of ideas in which information flow freely among humans. The ‘free market place of ideas’ principle of modern democratic societies suffices that good and bad ideas freely compete for people's acceptance, and that man's rationality would lead him to form opinions based on available information. Thus, where arguments are built about issues, the preference for a side of the argument stated by an individual is his /her opinion. The journalistic maxim that says ‘facts are sacred, opinions are free’ underscores individual freedom to freely choose any side of an argument as preference.

It should be noted that man is not an island: he exist in interdependent relations to other humans and everything in the environment. When mass media messages are transmitted, they reach groups of people who constitute heterogeneous audience, widely dispersed across different geographical locations. It should be noted that in the heterogeneous audience, their exist groups bound together by common interests, aspirations, as well as demographic characteristics. The opinions of individuals in each interest or demographic group, and among the groups of media audiences could aggregate into what scholars have termed public opinion. Oriola (2012) describes public opinion as the aggregated predominant statement of preference, leaning, or sum view of a population as a whole about an issue of public importance. It refers to the view of a given population, who share similar characteristics, about an issue, event, a place or situation. Worcester (2013) corroborates this idea by defining public opinion as “the collective view of a defined population” (p.1). His addition of ‘defined’ population implies that media audiences exist in demographic or interest groups, which provides a basis for targeting them, though they are heterogeneous. The predominant leaning among a defined group of people usually expressed as statements of preference for a side to an argument therefore represents public opinion.

Walter Lippmann's classic, ‘Public Opinion’ published in 1922 paved way for a modern direction to scientific investigations about public opinion, though philosophers such as Plato, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hume to mention a few, have earlier described it in their works

(Worcester, 2013). Lippmann's (1922) analysis of public opinion recognises the triangular relationship between the scene of an event, the human picture of the scene and the human response to the picture working itself out upon the scene of the event. Applied to news analysis, Lippmann's explanation translates into the relationship among an event that broke as reported in the news, the picture of the event presented to people in the discussions and analyses that follow and the response (in terms of statement of preference or opinion) to any of the sides/ angles from which the event was presented and analysed. By implication, public opinion is determined by the pictures in people's heads about issues, events, places and people; the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purpose and relationships. Lippmann observes that those pictures acted upon by people in the name of groups constitute public opinion.

Furthermore, McQuail (2005) examining the nature of (public) opinion, says opinions are cognitive and evaluative. They are cognitive because their formation involves mental processes in individuals. Before individuals can form opinions about issues, they must have got pictures of the issues and these pictures are shaped by information. Opinions are evaluative in that they involve individuals' assessment of available information about various sides to an argument from which choices are made. Opinions also have specific provisional character, which means they can change. People can hold different opinions about the same issue at different points in time. It is noteworthy that the strength of an opinion rests basically on the degree to which they are based on correct information. By implication, an opinion formed on wrong information may not stand the test of correct information if and when such is available. Informed opinions are formed based on adequate, accurate, credible and authoritative information, while uninformed opinions derive from inadequate and inaccurate information, otherwise called misinformation.

Essentially, information is the basic ingredient in the construction of public opinion. This fact underpins the power of the news media responsible for information dissemination, discussion and analysis to influence public opinion. In today's post-modern world, people rely heavily on the mass media for information about events from both their immediate environment and places beyond their personal contacts. Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987) provide five conditions under which public opinions are formed or changed. They argue that public opinions are formed or altered if information about an issue is actually received, understood, clearly relevant to evaluating policies or issues, discrepant with past beliefs/opinions, and credible.

At individual level, if these conditions are sufficiently met, the information should lead to opinion formation (where none existed before) and opinion change if (one existed before). If the conditions are sufficiently met among many people within a defined population, public opinion may be formed or altered the same way. In Worcester (2013) an attempt is made to distinguish among opinions, attitudes and values as a way to argue for their existence in the public. Opinions are said to refer to “ripples on the surface of public consciousness, shallow and easily changes”; attitudes are “the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger”; values are “the deep tides of public mood, slow to changes, but powerful” (p.11). By nature, public opinion represents public consciousness about issues, often constructed through information dissemination, discussion and analysis in the media. As they are created through such avenues as news analysis, which provide perspectives and arguments to different sides of an issue, they are also reproduced through reporting public actions, events and opinion polls or survey by the media. There is thus a cyclical trend in the formation of public opinion, represented by models of media construction of public opinion discussed in the following section.

Models of Media Construction of Public Opinion

Scholarly concerns about public opinion have been concentrated on when and how the mass media lead, produce, construct or influence public opinion. This is because there are a number of empirical evidences about the existence of public opinions and/or their relationships with issues and policies. On the mode of constructing or influencing public opinion, Bovitz, Druckman and Lupia (2002) present a model based on four empirically verifiable premises.

1. The actions of individuals within the news organisations determine what is news: Media practitioners who have a say in the content of news - reporters, editors, publishers - make news selection judgments/decisions on daily basis. These decisions determine what is reported as news. The concept of gatekeeping provides that media ‘gatemen’ influence news contents as well as the relative treatment of certain stories to others.
2. Most news organisations, regardless of size, share similar organisational structure: The news production teams of media organisations are similar, just as the general organogram. Reporters cover news assignments and write reports. Editors decide what goes into the news package and the relative treatment of each story. Owners of news

organisation could exercise implicit/explicit influences on the news contents, based on their socio-political and economic interests.

3. Organisational structures can affect the incentives of those who make news reporting decisions: The economy of the media industry is influenced by factors internal and external to it. This can influence the incentives to the deciders of news. Commercialisation of news is a trend that underscores economic pursuit of the organisations and it determines what is reported. Poor incentives and workers' welfare encourage the 'brown envelop' syndrome which influences what is reported and how.
4. Media consumers are active participants in the process: They can consciously select certain content and neglect others based on their needs, interests and aspirations. Also, limitations of time, energy and resources account for why media audiences cannot attend to all available information. The uses and gratification theory provides an empirical basis for the incentives media audiences seek through media usage.

In the model, Bovitz *et al* (2002) present an interaction between a news organisation and news consumers as a game among four players: the reporters, editors, publishers/owners and the target audience. The game sequence is in five stages as represented in figure 1.

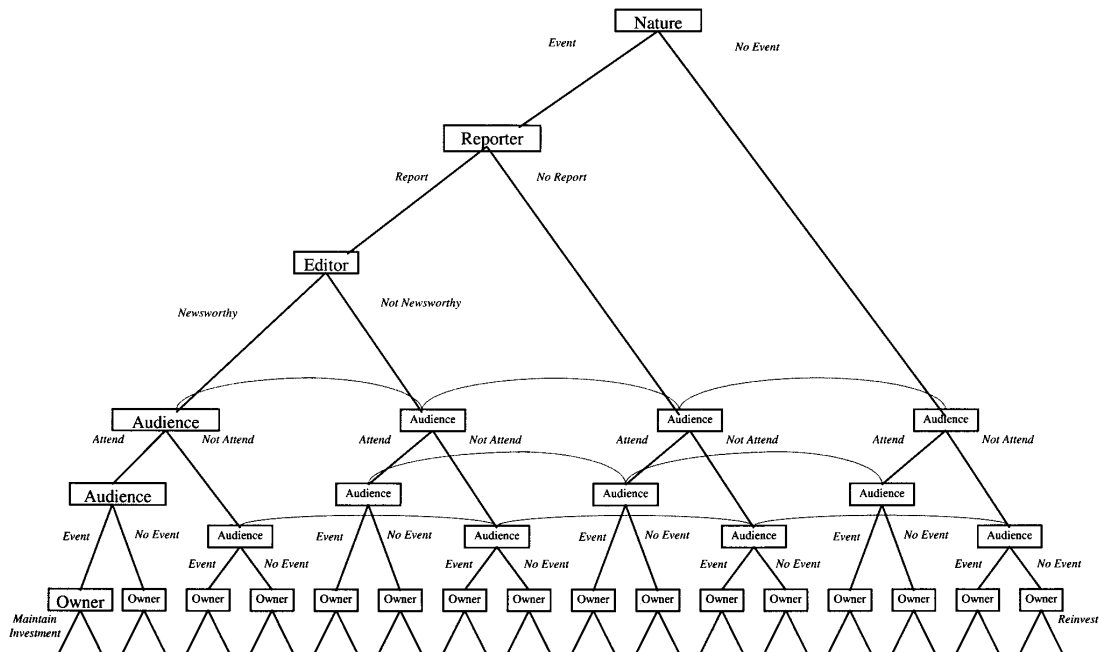


Figure 1: Model of media construction of public opinion

Source: Bovitz *et al* (2002, p. 133)

At stage 1 an event either happens or it does not happen. It is assumed that the target audience may not know whether the event occurred or not. If the event occurred, the reporter decides at stage 2 whether to report it or not, based on his news value judgment. At stage 3, the editors decide whether or not the report would appear in news. The reporters and editors' decisions combined determine whether or not to include certain details depending on what would attract the audience's attention to the news. These include headlines, photographs and other illustrations which may trigger the audience's interest in the news. The audience then decides whether or not to attend to the news. At the fourth stage, if the audience attends to it, he gets information, which leads him to form or change his opinion based on possibly updated beliefs about the event. He may also act based on his opinion, which maximises his utility. At the final stage, the owner/publisher decides whether to maintain his investment in the news organisation or to discontinue. The utility of the owner is represented by advertising patronage, triggered by audience's attention to news. It can also be public opinion formed in line with the owner's vision, interest or aspiration economically, socially or politically. The utility of the target audience reflects in the opinion formed base on the information received. This may lead to attitudes or actions to issues. "Then, the players receive utility and the game ends" (Bovitz *et al*, 2002 p.134).

The focus of Bovitz *et al* (2002) model is on news. Today, due to the sophistication of media audiences and the resultant high demand in terms of the need for detailed analytical account of daily events, reporters don't just report the stories any longer. They go a step further to analyse the issues of the day based on their perceived salience in order to satisfy the yearning of news consumers and perform the agenda setting role. It is thus important to develop another model, which this paper hereby presents, in order to aid our understanding of how the media construct and reconstruct public opinion through news analysis. This model that represents a cyclical movement (from left to right) of how opinions are constructed or shaped and reconstructed through news analysis is presented in figure 2.

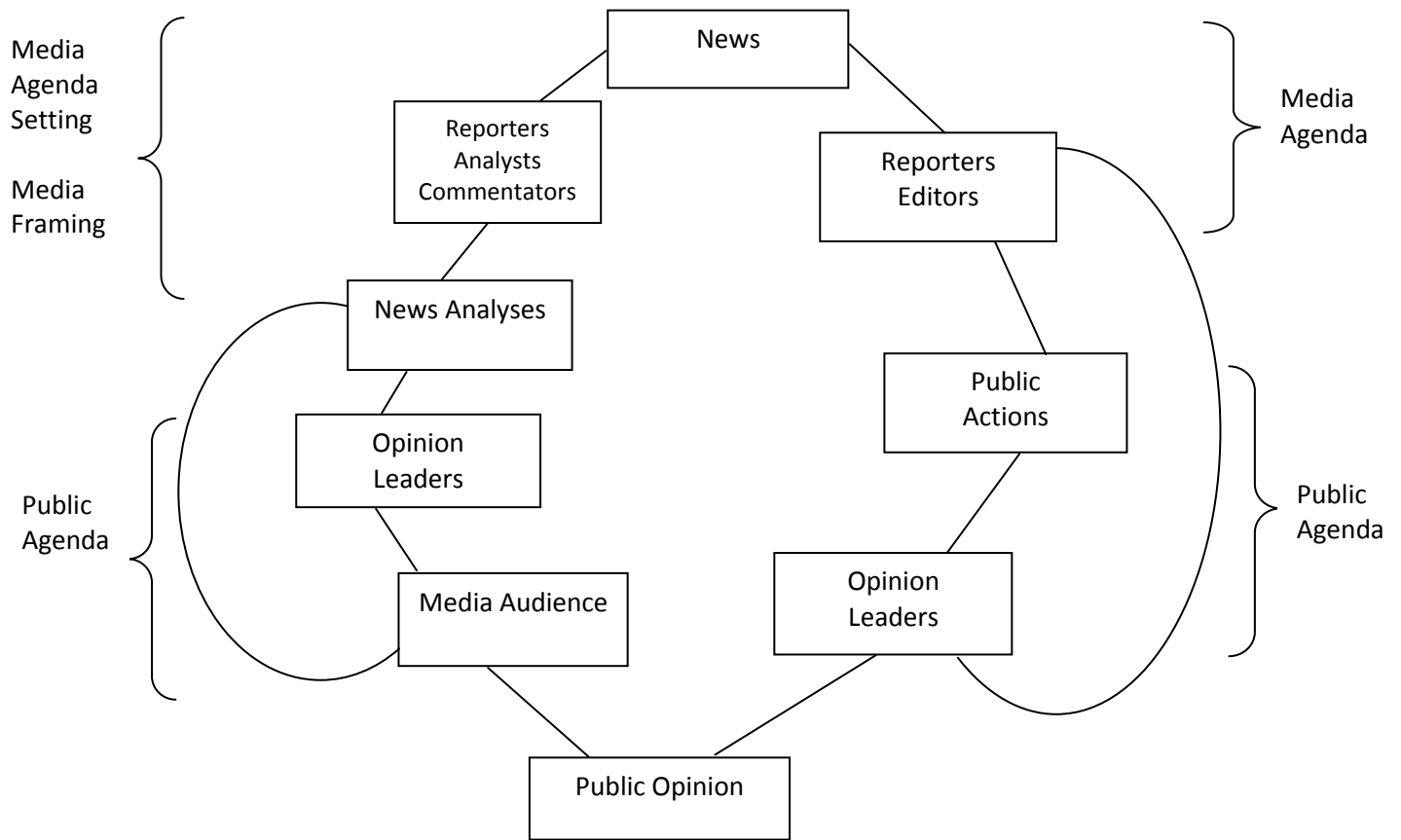


Figure 2: The cyclical model of media construction and re-construction of public opinions through news analysis
 (Source: Researchers, 2016).

The model explains that after a news event has been reported in the news media, reporters and presenters go a step further by either analysing the issue in the news by themselves, or engaging or guiding discussions of analysts and commentators. These media personalities are invited for interviews and discussions of issues considered to be salient in the media's judgment. Here, a conscious move is made by the media to set agenda for discussion by ensuring only issues of high salience are selected for discussion and analysis. The outcome of this exercise is news analysis, which is tailored to produce media agenda. Media agenda refers to the pattern of news coverage across major news media determined by the emphasis placed on news stories (Griffin, 2012). By setting agenda for public discussion and giving direction to such discussions in analyses of issues, the media therefore construct or shape public opinion.

The other outcome of the ensuing process is framing - the way a communication source presents and defines an issue. In de Vreese (2005) a frame is described as a persistent pattern of

cognition, interpretation, selecting, emphasis and exclusion by which symbols handlers (such as the reporters, presenters, producers, and their analysts and commentators) present issues. Newsmen and their analysts engage in selective interpretation and emphasis of issues, through the use of framing devices – words, sentences, pictures - which influence the cognition of the audience. It should be noted that public opinion depends largely on understanding based on available information and their direction of interpretation. News analysis, being an interpretative form of journalistic production, is capable of selecting and presenting frames to the public, which potentially have individual and society level consequences, one of which is opinions moulding.

Information about the analysed issues get to the media audience directly or through opinion leaders in an information diffusion (two-step) process. Either way, if the information presented in the news analysis get to the audience and are well understood, public opinions are then formed based on public agenda. Public agenda refer to “the most important public issues as measured by public opinion surveys” (Griffin, 2012 p.380). Public opinion poll or survey is thus a measuring tool for public agenda and scholars (such as Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; Knudsen, 2014) have established a correlation between media agenda and public agenda in agenda setting studies.

Based on the dominant public opinion, opinion leaders (such as labour leaders, rights activists, social crusaders and prominent politicians) may stage public actions or events as responses to issues reported in news. These responses depend on opinion leaders’ perceived salience attached to the issues. From these staged events, reporters pick news events to report based on their newsworthiness. The agenda in the public then determines what the media report, from which media agenda are further set. In a cyclical manner (from left to right), the media use news analysis to construct public opinion, which determines public actions and some of the actions are further reported in news, from which issues are selected for analysis. Two key theoretical approaches to these construction and re-construction are agenda setting and framing.

Some Nigerian News Media Organisations and their Notable News Analysis Contents

Channels Television: Sunrise Daily

Sunrise Daily is a news and current affairs programme that airs every weekday at 7:00am (Nigerian time) on *Channels TV* and is available on DSTV, GOTV, Startimes television platforms. It reviews major newspapers headlines and creates discussions around topical issue(s) in Nigeria. *Sunrise daily* is produced live in the studios of the Lagos-based TV station. (Channels, 2016).

Africa Independent Television: Kakaaki

Kakaaki is a programme that discusses current matters that are considered important to the nation. It is a three-hour news and current affairs magazine programme aired every weekday from 6:00am–9:00am, local time, to terrestrial and international audiences. This major breakfast show is really a potpourri of news, sports, entertainment, business, health and information technology. There is the interview segment, special features, documentaries, diary of events from Nigeria's seat of government, voices from the streets on people's parliament, weather and a lot of other varieties. The interview segment treats a broad spectrum of issues relating to current happenings in Nigeria, the African continent and other parts of the world. (AIT, 2016)

Metro FM: AM Lagos Live

This is a radio news analyses programme that airs on every weekday from 6:00am – 7:00am. This programme reviews major headlines making the news in the country as well as discusses the major ones. (Metro FM, 2016).

Radio Continental 102.3: Paper This Morning

This is a one hour radio news analysis programme that reviews news stories making headline in the dailies. *Paper This Morning* airs on every weekday from 7:00am – 8:00am (Radio Continental, 2015).

The Guardian

The Guardian is an independent daily newspaper published in Lagos, Nigeria. It has been described as Nigeria's most respected newspaper. It was a pioneer in introduction of high quality

journalism to Nigeria with thoughtful editorial content. This makes the paper to be the elites' choice in the country. Most times apart from news from general sources, it generates news by setting agenda through the paper's editorial and opinion articles. The paper, using a broadsheet format, enriches the audience on general news, business news, politics, health, job alert, technology among others (The Guardian, 2014).

The Punch Newspaper

The Punch newspaper is considered the most widely read daily in Nigeria. *The Punch* basically centers its news on political development in the local and international scenes and with about 80,000 daily circulation which is the widest circulation rate in Nigeria. The newspaper, through its broadsheet format gives information on daily news for Nigeria on world, weathers, entertainment, politics, health, among others. It gives room for features, commentaries and opinions on issue of national interest with feedback mechanism generating more news and opinion through public opinions and other news sources. This may be considered as one of the major reasons it enjoys wide circulation. (The Punch Newspaper, 2016).

Tell Magazine

Tell magazine is a weekly magazine published in Nigeria which produces in-depth, investigative and interpretative feature stories. This borders on news stories on politics, economy, health, technology, entertainment and so on. Tell magazine enjoys its nature of production, which is weekly production, to gather rich information in producing detailed quality feature stories about events reported in bits in the news media during the preceding week. This has made it possible for the news organisation to manage large audience with appetite for detailed and analytical news stories. Moreover, the introduction of the online news page creates rooms for feedback and makes the magazine keep up with the audience on the go (Tell Magazine, 2016).

Conclusion

The mass media constantly engage in the construction and re-construction of public opinion. An effective means of performing this strategic function is news analysis. Issues are selected from the reported events of the day for discussions and analyses. However, the selection

of the issues into media agenda is usually based on media's ranking of their importance, which confers salience on certain issues over others. The agenda so set in the media then determine public agenda, measured by the direction of public opinion. Through agenda setting, the media utilise news analysis for the purpose of opinion moulding. Also, as issues are discussed by journalists and analysts, verbal and non-verbal cues are used to interpret them from which the audiences derive meanings. The meanings so derived shape public opinion and consequently public action, which is further reported based on newsmen's consideration of the news values of such actions and events. Thus, through framing of issues in news analyses, the mass media shape public opinion. These theoretical bases therefore lend credence to the characteristic construction and reconstruction of public opinion through news analysis. It should however be noted that media audiences are active players in the process of construction of public opinion. They consciously select the media to use and the content to attend to based on their requirements, needs, interests and aspirations (uses and gratification). They also ascribe meanings to issues differently based on variations in personal characteristics (individual differences) and needs/interests of groups to which they belong (group dynamics).

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