

**(In) validating Cohen's Assertion on Agenda-setting Theory using Media Coverage and
What People Think about Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Mantra**

By

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Abstract

Bernard Cohen made an assertion that media may not tell people what to think but do tell them what to think about. That through agenda-setting, media provides salience to certain issues at the expense of other seemingly prominent issues. On the basis of this, we carried out a study to ascertain the fact that the agenda media set is related to what people think about with close reference to Muhammadu Buhari's three point campaign promises during the 2015 presidential election. Population of study was Ilorin where a sample of 333 respondents was purposively drawn. Findings show that media emphasis on three major issues of President Muhammadu Buhari to curb corruption, eliminate insecurity and provide a platform for the unemployed to secure gainful employment correlate with what people thought were germane. The study recommends among other things that citizens should continue to rely on mass media messages on political developments to be better educated to be able to take informed decisions at elections.

Key words: Agenda-setting, media, media agenda, public agenda, presidential election.

Introduction

In 1963, Bernard Cohen made an assertion that the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about. McQuail (2010) reiterated this assertion that "the mass media force attention to certain issues, suggesting what individuals should think about, know about and have feelings about" (p.548). It is Cohen's belief that media make certain issues to be salient in public domain by prioritizing such issues while at the same time downplaying other issues. Shaw (1977) argued in this direction that people also tend to assign an importance to what they include that closely resembles the emphasis given to events, issues, and persons by the mass media. By implication, the agenda the media set is correlated to what people think about. In other words, media agenda is not independent but are related to what people consider to be important.

Thus, when Muhammadu Buhari emerged as the flag bearer of the All Progressives Congress in the 2015 presidential election, he made corruption, security and improvement in the economy the hallmark of his campaign promises. At every political platform, Buhari would not mince words on these tripartite promises. This was probably because Nigerians were inundated with the misfortune of being deprived of basic needs due to official corruption, recklessness in security mechanism to effectively combat security challenges as well as poor management of the economy with their attendant consequences.

In politics, political activities could be carried out in various forms such as direct face-to-face discussions, or it may be mediated through intermediaries like journalists. This is why media of communication channel the inputs, structure the outputs, and provide feedback from

political system to the environment. So, some media, which had over the years been relentless in raising concern on the issues of corruption, security and economic improvement among others in Nigeria reinforced Buhari's message at any given opportunity. After all, the vast multitude of interactions literally constructs man's political, economic, and social institutions (McNair, 2003). The fact is that one cannot separate the notion of politics from how and by what means it is communicated.

The ability of the media to influence people's decisions through agenda setting has therefore, been an important topic of discussion in the communication and political world. Several media scholars argue that the media influence their audiences with different patterns and results, which has led to various studies on media effect studies (Togunde, Ojebode & Vocke, 2010). The media play various roles in politics (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009); propaganda (Baran & Davis, 2012), information/knowledge gaining (Wang & Zhang, 2012), socialization (Servaes, 2008) and several other functions (Kononova, Alhabash & Cropp, 2011). This has resulted in the formation of several theories such as agenda setting theory (Griffin, 2012). Since what the media consider newsworthy is closely related to what people think about, this study seeks to discuss the relationship, if any, that exists between media agenda and what audiences considered important during Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 presidential election.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, the media have been the major instrument used as a mechanism of influencing the thoughts and directions of the people as such providing a platform on what basis people think. Prior to the 2015 presidential election, the media were intensively used to direct the thoughts of the people which arguably led to the victory of the flag bearer of the All Progressives Congress, APC, Muhammadu Buhari. But the extent to which the mass media influenced electorate during political campaigns that heralded the 2015 general election is not established. Similarly, it is uncertain whether the issues the media considered important were similar to what people also thought were important. Hence, the need to establish the relationship that existed between media agenda and public agenda concerning topical issues about Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 campaign promises.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study is to examine the role/s the media played in setting agenda for the Muhammadu Buhari election campaign promises and what issues people considered important during the period. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Identify the major issues people consider important during President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign promises as reported in the mass media.
- ii. Determine if there is correlation between media agenda on Buhari's 2015 tripartite political campaign promises and what people thought about the promises.

Research Questions

- i. What were the major issues people consider important during President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign promises as reported in the mass media?
- ii. Is there any correlation between media agenda on Buhari's 2015 tripartite political campaign promises and what people thought about the promises?

Theoretical Framework

The agenda setting theory was used in this study. The theory is traced to 1922 writings of Walter Lipmann, who suggested that the media are responsible for the "pictures in our heads" (Nwafor & Orji-Egwu, 2015), popularised in 1963 by Bernard Cohen and empirically confirmed in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study of the media's role in the 1968 presidential campaign in USA (Adibe, 2013). The theory posits that though different people may feel differently about the issue at hand, most people feel the same issues are important. Therefore the salience of issues by the people is determined by the importance attached to the issue by the media through the way they position the issue in the mind of the people.

In her contribution to the theory, Nwaolikpe (2015) posited that, "the agenda-setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or on the page" (p. 211). The agenda setting function of the media is the "media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in public's mind" (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p.219). Therefore, the basic assumption of agenda setting theory is that when an issue is salient among the media, it influences the line of thoughts among the public. This implies the media play an important role of influencing what people think about, talk about, and sometimes act upon (Kozel, Hubbell, Dearing, Kane, Thompson, Pérez *et al*, 2006). This role of the media has led to public awareness of issues (Song, 2007).

When a particular issue is frequently discussed in the media, the tendency for that issue to become an agenda in the society is high. This is because people usually learn about things that they are unaware of through the media and most times get developing stories and updates (Wang & Zhang, 2012).

Based on the tenets of the theory, the media are not only concerned with which issues are taken into consideration but also how issues are reported by the media and perceived by the public (Hunter, Wassenhove & Besiou, 2009). This leads to the second level of agenda setting which emphasises how news framing of an issue can impact public agenda (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). Writing on agenda setting theory, Wu and Coleman (2009) explained that the attributes of second-level agenda setting are divided into two dimensions: substantive and affective. The substantive dimension is concerned with things such as personality, ideology, and fitness for office about a candidate, or inflation versus unemployment on the issue of the economy. The affective dimension focuses on the emotional qualities of those attributes-whether the tone of those substantive attributes is positive, negative, or neutral. Second-level agenda setting posits that the attributes of an object, such as the traits and characteristics of a political figure, are transferred from the media to the public in much the same way as the salience of issues. This explains the attributes the objects can take. Usually in elections, electorates look out for certain attributes that make a personality a better candidate rather than on the candidate himself. Even if he/she is the richest man in the society, the qualities and antecedent of such a person still needs to be assessed.

The Agenda Setting theory is applicable to this study because it makes people know the relative importance mass media attach to issues due to the treatment, the way issues are presented and amount of coverage devoted to such issues to enable people align such issues with their belief system.

Literature Review

Elections and political parties are platforms candidates emerge as political leaders. During elections various stakeholders invest in political advertising to sell their parties and flag bearers. The importance of good political campaigns has been emphasized by Shaw (1977; p.240), who stated that:

It is not merely to gain more information - to be instructed about names, dates, conditions, etc.: the hard news that forms the bulk of the first few pages of a daily newspaper. People turn to the

newspapers and the other media also to be reinforced, reassured, confirmed in their already held views and they seek out media messages that will serve this purpose. Not only hard news but, more especially, soft news - feature stories, even editorial comment (if we may extend the meaning of the journalistic term 'soft news') - could satisfy this need for reinforcement.

It could be observed that, these roles listed by Shaw, are what make the media important in a society. But what the media set agenda on is related to public agenda.

Researchers have conducted studies on political communication and their findings are illuminating. For example, McCombs and Shaw (1972) cited in Nwaolikpe (2015) empirically conducted a study on the role of the mass media pertaining to the 1968 US presidential campaign. Their findings were that the media were instrumental in telling people what to think about. Kaid and Postelnicu (2005) conducted a research on the importance of political advertising and the results were that "exposure to political advertising, either on television or on the Internet, did not increase young voters' trust in their political knowledge, but participants exposed to Internet information admitted that they learned more about the campaign than the people exposed to the television format" (pp. 274-275). According to them, young people were paying less attention to the mainstream media in favour of alternative sources of information such as the Internet. However, the researchers warned that candidates are better off with television if they want viewers to perceive their advertisements as credible. This reinforces Rogers' (2000) assertion that media, especially the broadcast media, have the advantageous ability to reach audience members almost immediately who then diffuse news via interpersonal channels to other members of the public especially when there is perceived salience of the news event. Tedesco (2005, pp. 92-93) argued that:

The speed of modern political campaign forces journalists and political public relations strategists into a close, strategic relationship bond by mutual goals to gather and spread campaign information. The interdependence between candidates and media, coupled with the 24-hour media cycle in modern campaigns, augments the likelihood that information resources from campaigns will have a powerful influence on news agendas

The fact that the media are used to promote candidates makes it valuable to campaign strategists. In a research conducted by Kioussis and McCombs (2004), the results show that there is a strong correlation between the amount of attention that news media pay to political figures

and both the public salience and the strength of public attitudes toward these persons. They further stated that, the correlations are especially noteworthy because little empirical work has documented a link between media salience and either the salience of public figures (as opposed to the traditional object of public issues) or especially holding opinions about these objects.

Shaw (1977) noted that the media's influence is strongly felt as campaigns draw to an end. This is because people take active part in political discussions and decision-making which makes them more interested in using the media to know more about a candidate. This implies media's use of persuasive methods in focusing public attention on specific events, issues, and persons go a long way in determining the importance people attach to public matters. Despite the role the media play in creating awareness and informing the people about political situations, it still does not help determine the number of people that would actually come out to vote (Tedesco, McKinney & Kaid, 2007).

The perennial issues of corruption, insecurity, unemployment in Nigeria have been a major focus of the media in recent times. When Muhammadu Buhari used these as his campaign mantra, the media echoed these and citizens began to see the need for a change in government. Perhaps, this inclined Shaw (1979) to explain that, "People also tend to assign an importance to what they include that closely resembles the emphasis given to events, issues, and persons by the mass media" (p. 96). This explanation was reiterated by Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) that the media discuss which issues are discussed in the society, which issues are considered to be topical, and which problems need to be solved. In discussing such issues, the media decide what lingers on in the minds of the public. That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important.

The amount of attention the media devote to an issue and the framings used to make sense of the issue creates a perception in the minds of the audience (Song, 2007). The way in which the media frames a particular issue or candidate can affect the object. To further put this to perspective, Picone (2007, p.93-114) elaborated that:

The ability to give or withhold publicity or information of any kind in general to reach the audience brings us to another role of the press i.e. the one of gatekeeper, selecting which facts will be reported...The press is an important news provider, a window on the world for its readers... newspapers must apart from bringing the news, offer the readers the background information and other

informational means to fully understand and contextualize what happen.

By calling attention to some issues or accord them prominence in print and on the air, the news media subtly shape the public's perceptions about the most important issues facing its country (Hayes, 2008)).

Research Method

This research adopts survey under the quantitative method of analysis. The quantitative method allows “generalization of findings by including every component of the population in the study through a careful selection of a representative sample” (Abdulbaqi, 2012, p.126). The study population was 2500 corps members posted to Kwara State for the 2015 batch C NYSC programme (NYSC secretariat, Ilorin). Based on 95 per cent confidence level as computed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of 333 was drawn. Instrument of data collection was the questionnaire. Questions in the questionnaire were carefully framed to elicit responses that aided measurement of the relationship between the variables raised in the research questions. Responses to the research questions were close ended as they were presented in the five Likert type format rating scale. Data harvested was descriptively analysed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the 333 questionnaires administered to respondents, only 321 representing 96.3% were retrieved and presented as follow.

RQ1: What were the major issues people consider important during President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign promises as reported in the mass media?

In answering this research question, respondents were required to rank what they considered most important issues during the 2015 presidential campaign season. Responses indicated that corruption was considered most important with 98 (31%) respondents closely followed by job creation with 86 (30%) respondents. Others were security which was ranked third with 61(19%) respondents; the fourth was economy with 46(14.3%) respondents and infrastructure 20(6.2%) respondents.

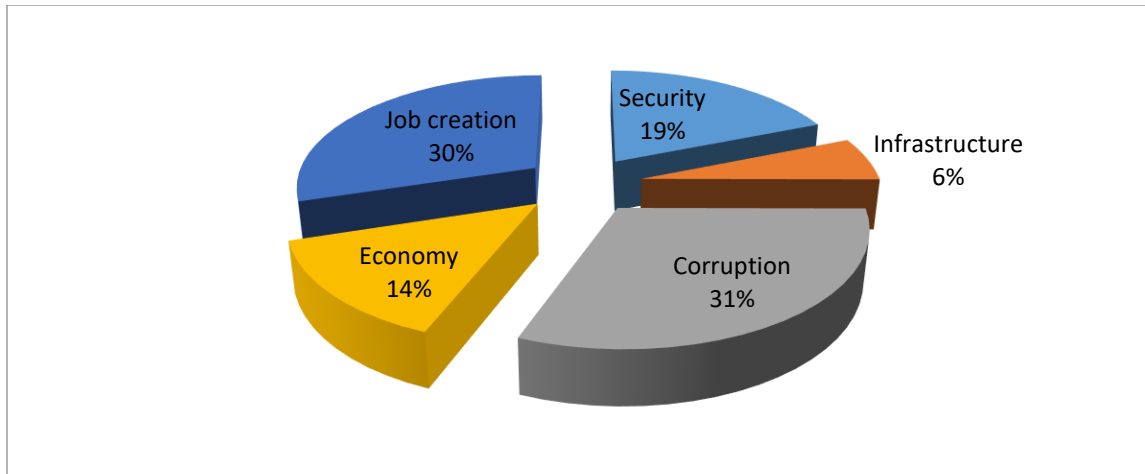


Figure 1: Issues respondents consider important.

RQ2: Is there any correlation between media agenda on Buhari's 2015 tripartite political campaign promises and what people thought about the promises?

Two items in the questionnaire were used to answer this research question. The first one dwelt on whether priority respondents gave to the dominant issues was a function of prominence such issues received from the mass media. Data show that 41(13%) respondents strongly disagree while 82(25%) agree. On the contrary, 151(47%) and 47(15%) respondents agree and strongly agree respectively that the issues they considered important was as a result of the prominence the issues received from the mass media.

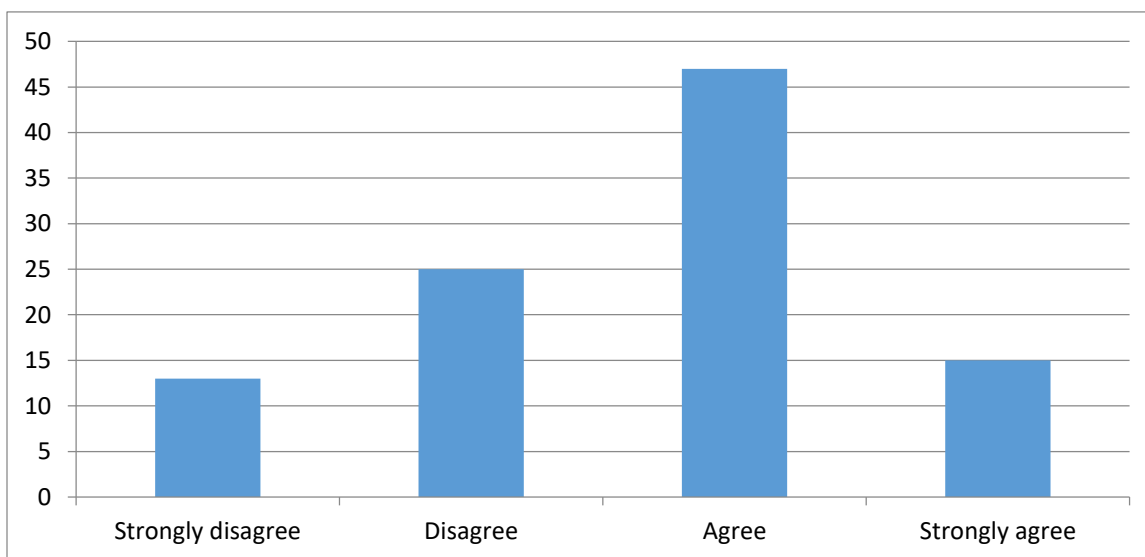


Figure 2: Priority respondents gave to the dominant issues was a function of prominence such issues received from the mass media.

When respondents were required to indicate whether the mass media were responsible for shaping the directions and areas of attention of the people to issues 41(13%) and 77(24%) respondents strongly disagree and disagree respectively. On the other hand, 138(43%) and 64(20%) respondents agree and strongly agree respectively that the media are instrumental in shaping the directions and areas of attention of people.

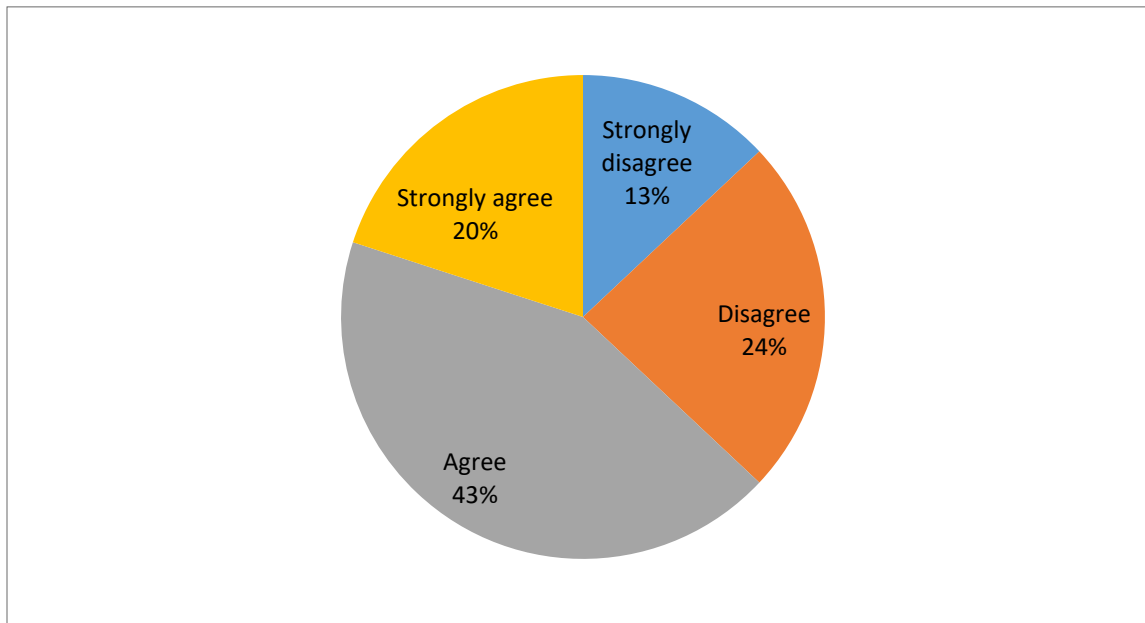


Figure 3: Influence of mass media in shaping direction and areas of attention.

Discussion of Findings

The study seeks to affirm or debunk Bernard Cohen's hypothesis that mass media may not tell people what to think but what to think about. Findings of the study are illuminating. To establish the veracity or otherwise of Cohen's assertion, respondents were required in the first instance, to rank from selected issues which they consider important. Accordingly, corruption (31%) top the list followed by job creation (30%). This is not too surprising considering the kind of respondents (corps members), who are educated and seemingly being awaited with a bleak future occasioned by high level official corruption in the country. The issue of security (19%) concern which is ranked third could be due to respondents' considered opinion that security challenges experienced in the country is more or less a symptom of deprivation and unemployment rather than causative factor. This means funds allegedly misappropriated could have been invested in productive ventures to provide employment opportunities to mop the mounting unemployment in the country.

On correlation between priorities respondents give to certain issues and the prominence similar issues receive from the mass media, data show that majority (47%) of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This percentage of response is further reiterated by 15% respondents, who strongly agree that the importance they give to the issues are closely related to the prominence given by the mass media. This affirms what Kozel, Hubbell, Dearing, Kane, Thompson, Pérez, Suárez, et al. (2006) posited that important issue may receive frequent and/or expansive coverage by the media, and as such cause the audience members to think more about that issue than one that is not as prominent which might eventually lead to public opinion that would in turn cause policy changes. That is to say media agenda is related to public agenda as further reiterated by Tedesco (2005) that agenda setting is the process by which issues salient among the media influences issue salient among the public. In spite of this, 25% and 13% respondents strongly disagree and disagree respectively on the status quo.

The issue of agenda setting of media on key issues in relation to what people think about similar issues is further probed into. This way, responses elicited show that majority (43%) and few other (20%) respondents agree and strongly agree respectively that the mass media are instrumental in shaping the directions and areas of attention of the people. This conforms to Shaw's (1979) assertion that the media are said to have the "persuasive ability to focus public attention on specific events, issues and persons and in determining the importance people attach to public matters" (p. 96). By stretching how the mass media achieve this, McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar and Rey (1997) elucidated that through the second level of agenda setting, the mass media emphasise how news framing of an issue can impact public agenda. But a negligible number of respondents strongly disagree (13%) on this position.

Summary and conclusion

This study was undertaken to determine the relationship between mass media agenda and public agenda on issues that hallmarked Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 campaign promises. The aim is to test the hypothesis formulated by Cohen in 1963 pertaining to agenda-setting theory. To achieve this objective, two research questions were formulated namely;

- i. What were the major issues people consider important during President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign promises as reported in the mass media?
- ii. Is there any correlation between media agenda on Buhari's 2015 tripartite political campaign promises and what people thought about the promises?

Data collected from 321 respondents demonstrate that there is a relationship between the agenda of the media and certain issues particularly the three key issues of corruption, security and economic improvement that featured in Buhari's campaign. The study is also able to show that the media were able to set agenda for the campaign promises and the essence of tackling corruption, security challenges and job creation. These findings validate Bernard Cohen's assertion that, the mass media may not tell people what to think but can stunningly tell people what to think about.

The study concludes that the agenda setting role of the mass media on pressing national issues need not to be emphasised. This could be seen during the 2015 presidential campaign when the mass media played a significant role in ensuring visibility of Muhammadu Buhari's campaign promises which were also regarded as important issues by the people.

Recommendations

The mass media should ensure they continue to play their information roles in the society by setting agenda on salient issues with a view to keeping the citizenry informed on political developments in the country. Doing this would make politicians more responsible and responsive to the activities of governance and also in fulfilling their electoral promises when they finally emerge victorious at elections.

Politicians should be elaborate and precise in their manifestoes during electioneering campaigns so as to win people's confidence. This is against the backdrop of the fact that what people think about their party promises is related to what the media report about their flag bearers and election promises.

Given that the mass media are veritable sources of information, citizens should resist the temptation of relying solely on other information outlets. Their sustained dependence on the mass media for political news have unparalleled advantages they stand to enjoy.

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