Oracular Journalism: Assessment Of Predictive Reportage In The Mass Media

One of the developments in the social sciences is that social scientists like economists, political scientists, and psychologists do predict some phenomena. Some Nigerian journalists lay claim to predict events in their reportage. This study examines the mass media’s propensity for reportorial prediction of trends on certain issues of public interest. The study anchored on the agenda-setting theory of the press uses a qualitative research method with interpretative paradigm to investigate the idea of predictions (oracular journalism) in the mass media. The result of the investigation revealed that the media could make valid predictions on certain matters. The results depict that the western media predict certain events, also, the Nigerian media which reportedly lack hi-tech reportorial gadgets and skills make predictions in their reportage too. It was also revealed that the mass media arrive at their predictions through established scientific procedures. These findings portray the social scientific nature of journalism as a field of study against the notion that journalism belong to the arts as many institutions maintain in Nigeria. The researcher among others recommends that, contemporary journalists should engage in more social scientific enquiries to unravel and predict some developments that could be disastrous to their audience.

Keywords: Nigerian media, oracle, oracular journalism, prediction, reportage, trends

Introduction

Journalism from its genesis basically deals with the assemblage, processing and reporting of what has transpired that is relevant to the people. With the passage of time, journalists began to devise different techniques for media message gathering and delivery that reflect some existential trends of a certain epoch. That is evident in the origins and the existence of investigative journalism, yellow journalism, scientific journalism etc. In the contemporary era, there is journalists’ proclivity for reporting events that may happen as against what has transpired. Neiger (2007, p.309) refers to that emergent genre of journalism when he notes that, “contrary to the conventional perception of journalism, this type of journalism does not report what has already happened, but speculates on future events.”

Also, the vogue of reporting future matters in the mass media is a subject of scholarly discourse which many media scholars like (Edogor, 2018; Neiger, 2007; Jaworski, Fitzgerald and Morris, 2003a; Jaworski, Fitzgerald, Morris and Galinsky, 2003b; Jaworski, Fitzgerald and Morris, 2004) have studied. Edogor (2018) claims that journalists’ proclivity to make futuristic reportage is an approach to guide the audience to scale through the instabilities in various spheres of human endeavours nowadays.

In the context of this paper, that genre of journalism that concentrates on predictions or forecasts is considered as ‘oracular journalism.’ It is used to refer to
predictions and forecasts of future matters in media reports. In such reporting, there are deliberate attempts to predict some issues for the society. This informs why Jaworski, Fitzgerald and Morris (2003a); Jaworski, Fitzgerald, Morris and Galinsky (2003b) as well as Jaworski, Fitzgerald and Morris (2004) cited by Neiger (2007, p. 310) argue that, “a critical observer of the ins and outs of news in the media will perceive a striking phenomenon: many of the news items deal with questions such as ‘what will happen?’ or ‘what is likely to happen? Rather than ‘what happened?’” This notion of prediction through the media reportage is technically defined here, as a journalistic practice which applies scientific parameters to assemble and process mass media reportage purposely to forecast trends for the audience.

Social scientists are expected to be curious and think beyond today as regards the fortune and or the future of their societies as well as their people. Lasswell (1941) as cited in Neiger (2007, p.309) concurs to that view when he notes that, “when we actrationally, we consider alternative versions of the future that are so often buried in the realm of hunch. In the practice of social science, as of any skill in society, we are bound to be affected in some degree by our perceptions of future development.” There are claims that journalism seemingly gives attention to capturing certain future developments in human society.

There are both natural and human-made phenomena that feature in the news especially the negative or unexpected thing(s) that are sources of unease to people in this century. The Awake! Magazine (2017, p.4) says “if you are apprehensive or scared out-right by the barrage of bad news, you are not alone. In 2014, Barrack Obama, who was then president of the United States, suggested that because of all the bad things reported in the press, many conclude “that the world is spinning...fast and nobody is able to control it.”” When people are oblivious of any of such unexpected incidents, it would expose them to the negative consequences as they would lack the knowledge for precautionary measures to mitigate any adversity. However, having hindsight would keep people focused on steps to take for advancement. Thus, journalistic skills nowadays would arguably include the ability to dissect circumstances and forecast what may happen in future and why it may happen. The skills would also include the aptitude to give a convincing explanation to the audience, about what made it not to happen, if it failed to happen as foretold (Edogor, 2018).

Mass media industry has attained a significant growth in human communication. That height is envisaged to imbue the journalists and the mass media of this century with the capacity to analyse and predict trends for the audience. The MacBride Commission (1981, p.31) aptly captures that, when it avers that, “communication...is now sufficiently well advanced for it to be possible to forecast trends...as well as to identify likely risks and stumbling-blocks.” This view is evolving as an ideological principle in contemporary journalism. It is a perspective that emphasises a novel dimension of professionalism in Nigerian media practice. MacBride et al (1981, p.229) underscored that view as they opine that, “surely it is perfectly normal that professionalism should exist in communication no less than in any other domain.” The commission’s emphasis on
the need for trends and their likely consequences to be identified is a mandate which journalists have to embrace to alert their audience, about the possible effects of an imminent phenomenon.

Journalists are entrusted with the responsibility to access and assess places, people and what they do for common good in their respective positions. In Nigeria, that point could be seen in Chapter II, section 22, of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, which stipulates that, “the mass media shall at all times be free to...uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.” Nigerian Government’s passing of Freedom of Information Bill into law on May 28, 2011 is another factor that would further enhance journalists’ efforts, to probe public office holders’ actions and inactions which have futuristic implications. Perhaps, taking cognizance of the foregoing, Edogor (2018, p.4) argues that, “journalists ordinarily have to know that, behind every failed system or state, there was a frail or a failed journalism.” The researcher further advised that, that submission is a perception which journalists of these days should heap at their fingertips and avoid the temptation of engaging in armchair journalism, (Edogor, 2018).

The new media technologies provide the world with a plethora of lay reporters that update people with more of who did what, where, when and how? However, journalists as professional information purveyors, have the tentacles and the skills to not only report what has happened, which many might often see in them, ‘the danger of a single story,’ Adichie (2009) to reporting future conditions (prediction of trends).

Statement of the Problem

The increasing sly nature of contemporary human beings, the volatile dynamics of world politics, economy, defence and security menace as well as the present vagaries of climate, portray great uncertainty for the people which the media are expected to guide. Given that scenario, journalists are envisaged to go beyond the mere routine reportage of events in the regular straight news format.

The mass media of the developed countries have the technological and reportorial savvy to make forecasts. That is evident in weather forecasts, predictions of other matters such as election results (Bunton and Howard, 2002) and prediction of Supreme court judgements (Katz, Bommarito II and Blackman, 2017). The challenge is that, adequate scholarly attention has not been given to the issue of predictions in the mass media. Prediction is a subject common in the social science fields like psychology, economics and political science. This study examined the mass media’s penchant for prediction of trends in their reporting of some events.

Research Questions

This paper was guided by the following research questions: (1) To what extent, do the mass media make predictions in their reportage? (2) To what extent,
do the Nigerian mass media make predictions in their reportage? (3) What are the processes through which the mass media apply to arrive at their predictions in reportage?

Literature Review

Predictions in Social Sciences

The idea of predicting social phenomenon is like a common trend in the realm of social sciences. A political scientist, Friedman has written books which are premised on prediction of critical political matters. In one of his books, The next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century, he predicted the political, technological and social-economic phenomena that would shape the globe in a century period. Also, he chronicled the major countries their policies would significantly alter various developments of the world and the factors that would affect some extant strong nations. Friedman (2009, p.10) used applied ‘geopolitics,’ and according to him, “geopolitics is not simply a pretentious way of saying “international relations.” It is a method for thinking about the world and forecasting what will happen down the road.”

David Orrell is another scholar whose discourse focuses on prediction. His book, The Future of Everything, deals with predictions pertaining to different aspects of the intertwined human endeavours. Orrell gives a picture of how prediction was treated in his book as follows:

The Future of Everything is about scientific prediction in the areas of weather, health, and wealth—how we foresee storms or fair weather, sickness or health, booms or crashes. It might seem that forecasts of the atmosphere have little to do with prediction of diseases or the economy, but in fact these three areas are closely linked. For one thing, they often affect each other, so prediction is an intrinsically holistic business. As shown above, a storm’s impact depends on the conditions on the ground, and can have huge economic consequences. (Orrell, 2007, p.9)

Orrell revealed that prior to his discourse on predictions, there were other attempts on forecasts about human health, economy and climatic conditions. “Since Galton’s time, a huge scientific effort has been devoted to looking into our future weather, health and wealth, now using mathematical models,” (Orrell, 2007, p.10). Another social scientist, Dixon wrote a book that concentrates on predictions of social phenomena. The book entitled, The future of Almost Everything, has an essential discourse on the relevance of why people have to be more conscious of future and what it entails. The author’s effort is a point that gives the clue to the possibility of using journalism to give reports that would capture future matters.
Frances Cairncross, Senior Editor of The Economist magazine is a journalist whose book deals on prediction. In the book entitled, The Death of Distance, Cairncross made fascinating predictions about how the electronic communication gadgets would change the directions of economic activities in some parts of the world. According to Amazon.com Review (2001):

Cairncross predicts that it won't be long before people organize globally on the basis of language and three basic time shifts--one for the Americas, one for Europe, and one for East Asia and Australia. Much work that can be done on a computer can be done from anywhere. Workers can code software in one part of the world and pass it to a company hundreds of miles away that will assemble the code for marketing. And with workers able to earn a living from anywhere, countries may find themselves competing for citizens as people relocate for reasons ranging from lower taxes to nicer weather. Cairncross discusses about 30 major changes likely to result from these trends, including greater self-policing of businesses, an unavoidable loss of personal privacy, and a diminishing need for countries to want emigration.

The journalist revealed the ability and how media professionals could use their expertise to predict on some likely developments. With the aforementioned works, it could be gleaned that the idea of prediction is common in social science fields. These disciplines like journalism deal with the mechanics of human behaviour.

As such, journalists could study a situation, an individual, or an event and make a projection on what may happen based on facts or previous matters. The evolving fad in journalism where the mass media predict trends, events, actions, inactions etc. further portray the scientific inclination of the profession. Folarin (2002, p.16) admits the scientific nuance of mass communication or journalism when he notes that, it has “taken a lot of its content and methods from the social sciences, especially social and behavioural psychology as well as sociology. It touches on anthropology at several of its edges, while even political science and economics are not completely alien to the mass communication fare.” Therefore, through the vogue of prediction, journalism exhibits a trait that is common to the social sciences.

Conceptualising ‘Oracular Journalism’

Nigerian journalists through their works hypothesize that the media can predict events. A media practitioner, Olaosebikan (2006, p.24) concurs to that hypothesis, as he argues that, “the media apart from their duty of educating, informing and entertaining the public, is capable of making accurate predictions.” Journalism with such posture is a by-product of meta-reportorial inclination of media practitioners’ advertent application of observation, surveillance, mental might, and science to diagnose facts and make projections in media reports. In his
view, a Nigerian communication philosopher, Kukah (2011, p.485) refers to it as “taking journalism beyond the boundaries of merely reporting [past] events.”

It is like a unique dimension that gradually evolves in journalism. This rising brand of journalism is a new facet that foretells trends. Babarinsa in Kukah (2011, p.492) notes that “it was not just reporting [past happenings], it was a calculative event [predicting events] in a way...” That brand of journalism practice is ‘oracular journalism,’ because the practice entails that journalists would say in their reportage that, “this is what will be happening and it happens that way,” (Osifo-Whiskey in Kukah, 2011, p.493). However, one of the results of Edogor’s doctoral thesis (2018) showed that some predictions of the Nigerian mass media did not come to reality exactly as predicted, while other predictions failed utterly. Thus, the thesis’ result debunked the idea that, ‘oracular journalism,’ is a practice that predicts what shall happen and it happens that way. Edogor explains that, ‘oracular journalism’ is a genre of “journalism that predicts future occurrence(s) using social scientific techniques,” (Edogor, 2018, p.252). The researcher posits that oracular journalism is brand of journalism that refers to impending occurrences or future events.

The above submission of Edogor (2018) concurs with the result of an empirical study entitled, ‘Media oracles: the cultural significance and political import of news referring to future events,’ conducted by Neiger (2007). The study revealed that, “out of the main headlines (N=240), over a period of 18 years (1985-2003) approximately 70 percent made a reference to the future,” (Neiger, 2007, 3112). The researcher submits further that, “interestingly enough... there was no variation over the years, and throughout the entire sub-headlines in the sample (N=1745) indicates that over the years there has been no change in the proportion of headlines relating to the future.”

Another empirical study revealed the possibility of mortals to make valid predictions. In a study entitled, ‘the oracle or the crowd? Experts versus the stock market in forecasting ceasefire success in the Levant,’ Schneider, Hadar and Bosler (2017) did a comparison of the predictions made by the press (Haaretz, Jerusalem Post and New York Times) with that of individual experts. The researchers submitted in part of their results that “the analysis shows that the financial industry performs better than the media industry in the comparative evaluation of ceasefire forecasts, but that neither source provides sufficiently accurate predictions.” Schneider, Hadar & Bosler (2017, p.231).

Cherry and Rogers (2006) examined the use of information markets to predict the judgments of the Supreme Court of the United States of America; the researchers partly put the mission of their thesis as follows, “this article explores the power of the information market...to merge their collective knowledge to make predictions,” (Cherry and Rogers, 2006, p.1142). While accepting the possibility of making valid predictions using human institutions, Cherry and Rogers (2006, p.1192) state that “with regard to the number of predicted events, the IEM have shown their worth in predicting presidential elections.”

Moreover, the seminal works of McLuhan which focus on predictions, lay credence to the capabilities of humans to make predictions. For instance, McLuhan
variously made some revelations about the effects of the electronic media on
people and his forecasts eventually manifested. Logan (2011, p.34) explains it by
stating that, “so many of McLuhan’s pronouncements about the effects of
electronic media are prophetic because it seems as though he was aware of the
coming of the Net, the Web and other digital media. A simple example of
McLuhan’s prescience is that, through his writings he foreshadowed the Internet.”
Similarly, the same scholar predicted a phenomenon that is a reality today- the
‘global village concept’ engendered by the new communication technologies. This
was described by Logan (2011, p.45) who in explanation of the emergence of the
global village as enunciated by McLuhan notes that:

A key element in McLuhan’s historical overview of communications is that
electric information moving at the speed of light creates new patterns of
communication and social interactions. He describes this as ‘an instant
implosion’ that reverses the specialism of the print age and contracts the globe
to a village in which ‘everybody lives in the utmost proximity created by our
electric involvement in one another’s lives.’

The possibility of humans to foretell future events without wielding any
magical powers are seen in the McLuhan’s predictions. Logan (2011, p.35) citing
Marchan, the biographer of McLuhan, avers that McLuhan predicted the advent of
smart phones as in use today, the biographer states that, “he told an audience in
New York City shortly after the publication of Understanding Media that there
might come a day when we would all have portable computers, about the size of a
hearing aid, to help mesh our personal experiences with the experience of the great
wired brain of the outer world.” These forecasts of McLuhan emerged from the
premise that he saw the operations of the then main frame computers. He perhaps,
studied their characteristics and predicted what the computer would be with the
advancement in technologies.

**Journalism and Prediction: The Rationale**

The work of gathering and disseminating information and messages to the
public is a common phenomenon many individuals do with the ubiquitous new
communication technologies of this age. Loo (2013) provides support to this view
when, he states that, “journalists are competing in an environment where stories
are being filed on the fly, facilitated by online communication technology.”
Journalism as a career has great task of conveying information with direct bearing
on politics, banking, economy, weather, environment, sports, judiciary, etc. That
mission of journalism may no longer be fully appreciated in this epoch, if
journalists do not move beyond the ‘lay reporters’ superficial kind of reportage in
various online sites. Perhaps, that is why Ukonu (2007, p.29) observes that,
“human activities are complex and cannot be captured in straight, deadpan, out of
context as well as shallow reports, devoid of substantive evidence.”
In addition to the foregoing, Loo (2013) bemoans the paucity of professionalism creeping into journalism presently when he notes that, “cunning plagiarism and recycling of anecdotes particularly among column writers prevail in today’s journalism.” Suffice to add that, “now media audiences, expect to know the possible future actions which the past events or actions might be the precursor to them,” (Edogor, 2018, p.249). These submissions bring the need for journalists to apply better reportorial approaches which the ‘lay reporters’ may not know. Bunton and Howard (2002) state that journalism and social sciences now use exit polls as well as other social scientific techniques to explain and predict some phenomena. In the political sphere particularly, prediction of trends is not a new phenomenon, citing (Sherden 1997, Bueno de Mesquita 2009), Schneider, Hadar and Bosler (2017, p.1) support that opinion when they note that, “forecasting political trends continues to be a booming business.”

Melvin Mencher cited in Agbese (2008, p.13) observes that the contemporary audiences patronise mass media because, “they all want to know what is happening or likely to happen in their immediate environment, their countries and in other parts of the world.” Thus, it has been noted that the present media audience are more curious than ever before and they envisage the media to provide them (the audience) with information pertaining to “the future of the community: what will happen next? Where do we go from here, in the short, medium and long term? What are our hopes? What do we fear most?” (Neiger, 2007, p.309). Such expectation is akin to what the people in the traditional African setting anticipate from the ‘oracle.’

It is not the ethical responsibility of journalists to project into what may happen, but perhaps, with the vicissitudes of the time the media are looked up to perform the oracular role. As regards what the oracular tasks entail, Loo (2013) opines that, “fundamental to the ‘oracle’ concept of journalism is the synthesis of facts in context, transforming hard data into meaningful knowledge.”

The media as an institution have been identified with distinct nomenclature based on a function(s) they perform. For instance, the institution was christened ‘watchdog’ because they watch over the activities of the ruling class. “If the press sets itself up against political (and economic) leadership, it is being adversarial. If as part of its adversarial behaviour it maintains a steady watch on the leadership, it is being a watchdog,” (Ndolo, 2011, p.11) Similarly, in Nigeria, when the mass media fail to discharge their social responsibility duties, they are called lame dog, while they are referred to as mad dog, when they display rascality in their reportage.

In addition, with the mass media’s complimentary roles to the three arms of the government as well as their ability to galvanise and mould public opinion in a democracy, the “media are sometimes referred to as the fourth branch of government, complimenting the executive, judicial and legislative branches” (Baran, 2010, p.29). Through this placement of the media among the societal
In a likewise manner, social media have given the audience powers to participate in the roles reserved for journalists prior to now. Thus, social media users influence the media as well as the government and non-governmental bodies today, as such they are called ‘the fifth estate of the realm.’

When it was hypothesised that the mass media had overwhelming influence on the audience, Baran (2010, p.363) refers to the institution as “an efficacious drug or a killing force.” The underlying idea of that view later evolved into one of the media theories. In the view of Baran (2010, p.362-363) “the fundamental assumption of this thinking (that the media are inescapably influential) is sometimes expressed in the hypodermic needle theory or the magic bullet theory.” In addition, the media have been credited with the ability to programme matters of public interest. As a result of this, public analysts and scholars branded the institution as agenda-setters for the society, this idea led to the agenda-setting theory of the press.

According to Loo (2013) “to a limited extent, journalists were the traditional sources that readers consult for an explanation... and guidance on what will or can happen given the current checks on reality. Essentially, they were source of ‘wise’, authoritative accounts of the interplay between shifting social, economic and political forces.” This submission provides reason for the mass media to be considered as ‘the oracle’ owing to the expectation that they are the sources which the audience could consult for explanation and guidance on what may happen. Loo (2013) explains that mass media’s playing as the oracle has to do with the “calling of journalists to be their readers’ eyes and ears, to be ‘out there’ to Observe, Reflect and Report, Analyse, Contextualise, Learn, and ultimately, Enlighten their readers.” Thus, the notion of the mass media as ‘the oracle,’ implies that they become social and secular institution that could enlighten their audience about the future.

Theoretical Framework

The agenda-setting theory of the press was applied to this study. The theory summarily posits that the media possess the ability to influence an issue the audiences give attention and their magnitude of attention to it. The theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw. In reference to what constitutes parts of the tenets of it, Baran (2010, p.368) states that, agenda setting as a theory holds the idea that the “media may not tell us what to think, but media certainly tell us what to think about.” In a similar study to this paper, Neiger (2007) applied the same theory to meet the ends of the work.

Meanwhile, the decision to situate this study on agenda-setting theory partly stems from the views of Kunczick (1988, p.192) cited by Folarin (2002, p.75) as saying that, “the opportunity for agenda-setting by the mass media becomes enhanced when the value structure of a society is in a state of flux.” With the dimensions of instability and the radius which it has taken in all spheres of human life, it becomes imperative that the media have to wake up, to square up with the
enormous tasks. The technological growth of this century seems to go in
commensurable doses with complexity in human behaviour.

In the Nigerian clime where the hitherto paragon societal values are gradually
eroding, it is pertinent for media practice to be repositioned in a way to enable the
institution maintain setting agenda that is apt to the prevailing circumstances. With
the level of attention and imagery the mass media drum into the psyche of the
audience while predicting about an action, a person or an event; certain
perceptions could be instigated for or against the particular view. By this,
Lippmann, Cohen and Lang and Lang’s notions about the media with regards to
the theory need to be referred to here. Yoking together of the cited scholars’
submissions over agenda-setting better captures the relevance of it to this paper.
Citing the researchers, Wimmer and Dominick (2009, 17) state that:

Lippmann (1922), who suggested that the media were responsible for the
“pictures in our heads.” Forty years later, Cohen (1963) further articulated the
idea when he argued that the media may not always be successful in telling
people what to think, but they are usually successful in telling them what to
think about. Lang and Lang (1966, p. 468) reinforced this notion by observing
that, “the mass media force attention to certain issues... They are constantly
presenting objects, suggesting what individuals in the mass should think
about, know about, have feelings about.”

Through their predictions, the media could import the image of a futuristic
idea into the minds of their audiences, who might be propelled to ponder and
decide their actions towards the idea. For instance, if the media echo in their
reports that a certain presidential aspirant was a military dictator and backed it
with pictures of the candidate’s previous tyrannical deeds. The media could
succeed in selling to their audiences, the idea that once a tyrant remains a tyrant.
Based on that premise, the media could predict the failure of such a candidate,
having succeeded in using the person’s past actions to paint him/her black before
the masses. The implication is likely that, such negative portrayals of a candidate
as a tyrant could, dampen the spirit of the voters to espouse the person’s
candidature.

The foregoing supports the fact that the people do not easily deviate from the
direction the media drive their attention to. Agenda-setting for the people becomes
a reality when the audience yield to the voice of the media on a particular reported
issue, Delwiche (2005) concurs to that when he notes that, “the public agenda was
measured by aggregate opinion polls that presumably expressed issue salience
(McCombs and Shaw, 1972). If the two agendas (sic) could be significantly
correlated, researchers inferred the existence of agenda setting effects.”

In the opinion of Sheafer and Weimann (2005, 347), the whole root of the
agenda setting “approach can be found in Lippman’s (1922) argument that the
world around us is too complicated and out of reach, and that consequently we
must rely on the media to understand it.” This idea of the world being complicated
constitutes part of the reasons this paper explores how journalists study some
happenings and interpret their likely future implications. Through this, the media set agenda to guide their audiences in the complex situations necessitated by uncertainties in different human endeavours. The points we made so far portray the relevance of agenda-setting theory to this paper.

**Methodology**

Interpretative research paradigm approach was adopted in this article. Wimmer and Dominick’s explanation of the objective of the paradigm in a qualitative research justifies its adoption here. “The aim of the interpretative paradigm is to understand how people in everyday natural settings create meaning and interpret the events of their world,” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, 115). The researchers stated that, the paradigm was developed by Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey. The justification for adopting the paradigm is because the study examined journalists’ propensity to apply facts in interpretation of future phenomena for their audiences through media reportage. Interview survey method was used to gather the data used for the study. The researcher purposively selected and interviewed three Nigerian journalists who have been involved in some predictive reportage. They were represented as interviewees A, B, and C in this paper. Also, library or desk research method was used in the research. This method afforded the researcher the opportunity to use secondary data towards achieving part of the objectives of the study.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question One: To what extent, do the mass media make predictions in their reportage?**

To proffer answer to the above question, this study explored a previous study conducted by Neiger (2007). The study made some submissions indicating that the press could predict future events. According to the researcher, Neiger (2007, 309), “the research examined headlines in Israeli newspapers over a period of 18 years (1985-2003) and found that approximately 70 percent of the main headlines deal not only with past events but with future ones as well.” In addition, the potency of the mass media in predicting future events was made clearer by the scholar who argues that taking his data into consideration “and following Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004) it might be claimed that one of the main roles of journalism is to refer to [predict] future events.” The above finding is supported by Onanuga (2006, p.19) who affirms that “apart from what is referred to as reporting history in a hurry...the media...accurately predict events.”

In a country like the United States of America, some studies have shown how the media use opinion polls to predict presidential election results and other matters of public interest. Cherry and Rogers (2006, 1144) pointed out that “information markets {the media} allow thousands of people to join together to
predict events, such as the outcome of a presidential election.” Besides the traditional media’s prediction of election results through opinion polls, researchers have found that social media could be used for the same purpose.

Shi, Agarwal, Agrawal, Gargand and Spoelstra (nd), conducted a study which revealed that even the social media could be applied to predict election results in the United States. According to them “in this paper, we have revealed that it is feasible to predict American presidential elections by using social media data (tweets in our case),” (Shi, Agarwal, Agrawal, Gargand and Spoelstra, nd). Although, the methods of weather forecasts are not social scientific entirely, they are integral parts of the mass media routine news reporting today and they are evidence of the institution’s predictive prowess. Perhaps, that is why Neiger (2007) classified weather forecasts in his categories of predictions. There are scholarly efforts by media pundits to predict Supreme Court decisions in the United States of America. According to Katz, Bommarito II and Blackman (2017) “every year, newspapers, television and radio pundits... magazines, blogs, and tweets predict how the Court will rule in a particular case.”

The primary data generated for this study corroborated the above secondary data which portray mass media’s ability to predict. This is evident in the agreement of the nine interviewees who are journalists with not less than twenty years working experience in Nigeria. One of them, Interviewee A (2015), very briefly stated that “the media can predict events.” Another journalist, Interviewee B (2014) corroborated that view of interviewee A by asserting that “the media could anticipate some reactions and predict the result of an event or policy of a government or an individual through the analyses of experts working in the media houses who have known the nature of some personalities and characteristics of a government as well as their major stakeholders.” In his opinion, another journalist, interviewee C (2015) expressed similar notion noting that “the mass media can analyze events and issues, and based on the facts available to them they can make predictions.”

Research Question Two: To what extent do the Nigerian mass media make predictions in their reportage?

In answer to research question one, the media were found to make predictions in their reporting of certain issues. This research question two is narrowed down to Nigerian media institutions which their media reportorial skills and technical savvy are reportedly not commensurate with their counterparts in the developed countries. That was found in the allegation of Folarin (2002) who allegedly inferred that Nigerian journalists were yet to operate in consonance with certain scientific principles like their western counterparts. “To the critical observer, the separation of personalities and events from issues and causes would appear to be one mental “feat” which the quintessential Nigerian journalist is yet to prove himself capable of achieving” (Folarin, 2002, p.42).

Against that backdrop, this research question sought to find the ability of the Nigerian mass media vis-à-vis prediction of trends like the media of the developed
One of the cases where the Nigerian media predicted in their reportage was *The News* magazine’s prediction that General Ibrahim Babangida would fail in his attempt to be elected as Nigerian president in 2007. Given the leverage of the retired Army General and the magnitude of his desperation to contest the election, anyone who is not a novice in Nigerian politics took the magazine’s predictions with a grain of salt.

Olaosebikan (2006, p.24) captures the determination of the retired army general pointing out that, “with the pigheadedness of an armoured tank driver, Babangida picked up his presidential nomination form on 8 November, 2006.” Babangida’s utter desperation was also seen when he boasted that when he got into the electoral contest, he would confront all the machines that would impede his movement.

Adegbamigbe and Agbo (2006, p.20) summarily capture Babangida’s nature as well as the manner he pursued the 2007 presidential ambition in the following words:

> When Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida joined the Nigerian Army in 1962, it was not clear why, later in his career, he fell in love with the armoured Corps. What was certain was that he imbibed the pig-headed psychology of an armoured vehicle driver in his public life. Like a leviathan from the pit of hell, an armoured tank is no respecter of obstacles. It clanks its way among rocks, shrubs, creepers and trees with rugged, single-minded zeal, aware that enemy darts or bullets would bounce off its thick armour.

However, regardless of *The News* magazine’s knowledge of the personality of Babangida and his mileage, the magazine predicted that he would fail in his bid to rule Nigeria as civilian president. In one of the magazine’s editorial note, the then editor-in-chief, avows that, “in a year in which we hit the bull’s eye now and again, we wrote some cover stories, spanning a period of eight months, foretelling that General Ibrahim Babangida would fail in his desperate bid to become Nigeria’s elected president come 2007,” (Onanuga, 2006, p.19). Olaosebikan (2006, p.24) also explains that, “*The News*...published stories predicting that however hard he tried, General Ibrahim Babangida’s presidential ambition would hit a dead end.” In the contents of eight different editions of *The News* examined, the magazine x-rayed why Babangida would not be elected. The magazine’s prediction came to reality when on December 9, 2006, General Babangida voluntarily withdrew from the presidential race.

Another case depicting the ability of Nigerian media to foretell the future events was *Vanguard* newspaper’s prediction of the candidates that would be elected governors in Nigeria during the 2007 elections. In the news story following the paper’s April 14 edition front page headline which reads: ‘Today’s polls: how the governors will emerge,’ it predicted those that would win the elections in some states of the federation.

The *Vanguard* newspaper’s predictive reportage revealed that out of the 19 states of Nigeria where the paper predicted the outcome of gubernatorial polls, a
total of 16 predictions came to reality, while 2 predicted cases failed. In the remaining 17 states of the country the newspaper did not make any prediction on the election results as the reporters deemed the factors to the advantage and or disadvantage of different candidates of the various parties very close. For instance, in the case of Osun State, the reporters observed that the two major contenders have equal “areas of strengths and weaknesses,” (Omonijo & Gabriel, 2007, p.13). Thus, the reporters concluded that the result of the poll there “is too close to call.”

In another case (prediction of Oyo State governorship result), the reporters revealed that the direction the election would go was not clear.

In the more recent time, the 2015 presidential election prediction case buttresses Nigerian journalists' propensity for predictions in their reportage. One of the cases included Dele Momodu and Simon Kolawole's prediction in the 2015 presidential general election. In 2014 as Nigerians prepare for the 2015 presidential elections, a Nigerian columnist Dele Momodu predicted that General Muhammadu Buhari would win the then President Goodluck Jonathan. According to Olowosagba (2014), Momodu noted in his prediction that, “those who think an incumbent President cannot be defeated should wake up from their self-induced coma. The mood of the Nigerian nation is very similar to that which swept Obama into power.” Momodu claimed that he made his prediction about the victory of President Buhari in the 2015 general election, after he had psychologically read the spirit of the nation and ascertained that a new thing would happen.

On the other hand, another Nigerian columnist Simon Kolawole made another stunning forecast about what would happen in the 2015 presidential election. Kolawole predicted that a presidential candidate that would lose in the 2015 election would congratulate the would-be winner. Kolawole (2015) argues that it was ‘unNigerian,’ that is, it is hard for a Nigerian to concede to a defeat in an election. That notwithstanding, Kolawole still stuck to his guns that it shall happen in 2015. Kolawole (2015) observes that, “nonetheless, it is very rare for a Nigerian to accept defeat. But...I see Jonathan — if he loses — picking up the phone and congratulating Buhari. “Congratulations, General, for a well-deserved victory.” This later happened!

Research Question Three: What are the processes which the mass media apply to arrive at their predictions in reportage?

The thrust of this research question three was to ascertain the processes which the media apply towards arriving at their predictions. African society has numerous persons who lay claims of wielding the ability to foretell the future. The processes through which those seers arrive at their forecasts are buried in obscurity, as their activities are founded on myths. As a secular institution, the media are not expected to toe the same line in their predictions.

A Nigerian journalist provides explanations of the processes through which the mass media predict events. “The media...accurately predict events. This, however, has nothing to do with psychic power, but the ability to investigate and use current happenings as premises for certain conclusions,” Onanuga (2006,
Another Nigerian journalist argues that, “to foretell the future in area of politics, one does not need to be a peripatetic gypsy, a star gazer or a necromancer. The power of prophecy [prediction], on many occasions, depends on the ability to use the past to judge the present and say accurately what would happen in the future.” Adegbamigbe (2007, p.22).

The above opinions were corroborated by one of our interviewees, interviewee B (2014) who concurs that the media “follow systematic investigation processes in making their predictions.” Another interviewee A (2015) shares similar opinion noting that, “no magical power is involved in predictions made by the mass media. The predictions can only be on the basis of empirical evidence.” He further argued that the predictions are made through the deep professional insights and observations of the experts in certain fields of life, but work in the media houses directly or indirectly. “Media predictions are summarily products of serious and thorough investigations” (interviewee A, 2015).

The views of the journalists we interviewed as well as the existing documents we surveyed show that the media’s predictive reporting are arrived at through scientific processes. That is evident as knowledge of past events, thorough observations and investigations were recognised as the means through which the media use to arrive at their predictions.

Discussion of Findings

This paper investigated predictions in the mass media, which is becoming a routine characteristic of the media contents. In the African traditional cosmology, prediction is construed as a prerogative of the gods wielding unfounded powers. This study has revealed that the media predict future issues using scientific measures. The literature explored and the journalists interviewed showed cases where the mass media made forecasts in their reportage. The import is that, media practitioners now examine the likely reasons that could lead to a scenario where a man would bite a dog, and extrapolate that in their reportage. This implies that journalists have transmuted their reportorial pattern to project and pontificate on future events like ‘the oracles.’

The study also revealed that the Nigerian mass media particularly make predictions in their reportage. So, as the mass media of the developed countries predict with their hi-tech savvy and exceptional reportorial skills, the Nigerian media exercise similar prowess in their reportage. The data presented showed cases where Nigerian media predicted some events and the results of some human actions. Many of their predictions came to reality, this confirms the view of Osuala (1993, p.3) who avows that, “in time it will be possible to predict human behaviour.”

Moreover, this study revealed that predictions in the mass media were arrived at through scientific processes. Predictive reportage in the mass media is hinged on the tripod of investigations, retrospection and critical analysis. Through these steps the media predict, as Ukonu (2007, p.33-4) admonished that a journalist “must
systematize his descriptions and explanations, forming a springboard for prediction.”

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the mass media could not only report past events, but can predict future trends. This adds to the well-known functions which mass media scholars’ hitherto ascribe to the institution. The regular pedagogical guide prior to date in the discipline has it that the main traditional functions of the mass media are to educate, entertain and inform their audiences. Meanwhile, some findings of this study have provided reasons to also add that the mass media, educate the audience, entertain them, inform them and predict trends for them.

References


