Coverage of Nigeria’s 2019 Presidential Electioneering by Punch and Vanguard Newspapers

Media coverage of the activities of different political parties is an integral aspect of a country’s electoral process. The electorate need information on party ideologies and candidates in order to make informed decisions at the polls. This study investigated the coverage of the 2019 presidential electioneering in Nigeria by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers. Among other objectives, the study investigated the prominence Punch and Vanguard newspapers accorded the political activities of APC and PDP in comparison with other political parties that participated in the election. The study was anchored on the Agenda Setting and Social Responsibility theories. A total of 90 (24%) issues of each of the newspapers were sampled using the Systematic sampling technique. Findings of the study showed that the coverage of the 2019 electioneering significantly favoured APC and PDP. While 48% and 45% of the activities of the APC and PDP, respectively were reported, only 7% of the activities of the Other political platforms were reported by Punch and Vanguard newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering. The study recommended, among other things, that Punch, Vanguard and other media stations in Nigeria should be guided by the principle of social responsibility. It was also recommended that media regulatory authorities in Nigeria should ensure that all media stations in the country abide by the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in the country’s Electoral Act.

Keywords: Mass Media, Nigerian Electorate, Nigeria’s 2019 Presidential Electioneering, Political Activities, Public Interest

Introduction

The coverage and reportage of the activities of different political parties by the mass media is an integral aspect of a country’s electoral process. This is because the electorate need information on the activities of political parties and their candidates in order to make informed decisions on the parties and candidates to vote at the polls. Nobody votes for a political party or candidate whose ideology and identity are unknown. It goes to say that knowledge of party ideologies and the manifestoes of their candidates is crucial to the voter and that democracy can only thrive when the electorate are well informed.

As the conveyors of publicly-oriented information and a critical stakeholder in the electoral process, the mass media owe the society the responsibility to monitor and to report the activities of political parties and their candidates in order to lead an enlightened electorate. The media occupy the position to make interpretations on political ideologies in order to engender the democratic culture of voting and defending national interest. Serving as the watchdog of the society saddles the media with the power to equip the electorate with useful information about political party activities to ensure that
the electorate not only vote according to their conscience but also for the 
candidate whose interest aligns with public interest.

In a multi-party democracy, such as Nigeria, the challenge of covering the 
activities of different political parties is rife. This is not only due to the political 
leanings of media ownership but also due to the quest to maximise proceeds 
from political campaigns and party activities. This is the condition that 
accounts for the principle of equal opportunity with respect to the coverage of 
the activities of different political parties. This principle of equal opportunity, 
which is considered as a global best practice in multi-party democratic systems 
and recognised by the Nigerian electoral regulations, ensures that the mass 
media provide equal opportunity to all political parties standing in a general 
election. The practice not only ensures that the interest of some political parties 
are not undermined due to inadequate media coverage but also ensures that the 
electorate are sufficiently informed to make guided decisions at the polls.

The mass media inform and educate the electorate on party ideologies and 
candidates through news, features, interviews, editorials, discussions and the 
presentation of other reports about party campaigns and rallies. The effective 
coverage of other activities such as party primaries, conventions, conferences, 
etc also endear different parties and candidates to the electorate. The effective 
coverage and reportage of party activities also set agenda for public 
consideration of the ideologies of different candidates. The extent and nature of 
coverage of the political parties and candidates can affect the election fortunes 
of the candidates, especially since nobody votes for a political party or 
candidates they do not know.

Statement of the Problem

A total of seventy-three political parties participated in the 2019 
presidential election in Nigeria (Akinkuolu, 2019; Opejobi, 2019; Sani, 2019). 
By implication, each of these political parties had their Presidential and Vice 
Presidential standard bearers that vied for the office of the presidency. Apart 
from the All Progressives Congress (APC), the People’s Democratic Party 
(PDP) and few other opposition parties, many of the political parties and 
candidates that participated in the 2019 presidential election were not known to 
many Nigerian electorates. As in previous elections, the coverage of the 2019 
presidential election by the Nigerian media seemingly favoured the ruling All 
Progressives Congress APC and few opposition political parties.

Although the coverage and reportage of the activities of a political party or 
candidate may not translate into the election victory of such a party or 
candidate, the fact remains that nobody votes for a political party or candidate 
whose identity and ideology are unknown. The central question of this study is: 
how did the Punch and Vanguard newspapers report the activities of the APC 
and PDP in comparison to other political parties that participated in the 2019 
presidential election in Nigeria?
Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent did Punch and Vanguard newspapers cover the activities of other political parties during the 2019 presidential electioneering in comparison with the coverage of the activities of APC and PDP?

2. What are the categories of reports published by Punch and Vanguard newspapers on the activities of other political parties in comparison with the APC and PDP during the 2019 presidential electioneering?

3. What is the level of prominence Punch and Vanguard newspapers assigned to the activities of other political parties in comparison with the APC and PDP during the 2019 presidential electioneering?

Scope of Study

The study examined the coverage of the activities of different political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers between August 1, 2018 and February 28, 2019. The time-frame was presumed to be the most appropriate, being the period different political parties had their primaries and involved in heightened campaigns and rallies. This timeframe was considered the period within which important newsworthy events about the activities of the different political parties with respect to the 2019 presidential election were covered by the Nigerian media.

Justification

The choice of the Punch and Vanguard newspapers was based on the fact they are national newspapers. The papers were also selected amongst other dailies since they do not have ownership affiliation with any political party or candidate that participated in the 2019 presidential election. Based on this, the papers were expected to be neutral in the presentation of the activities of different political parties and candidates.

Definition of Terms

All Progressive Congress (APC): This is one of Nigeria’s political parties. It is fondly regarded as the ruling APC because the candidate of the party currently occupies the presidency. Candidates of the party also occupy the headship of Nigeria’s National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives).

Electioneering: This is the period of heightened political activities leading to an election. It is the period that witnesses intense party activities, such as campaigns, rallies, primaries or conventions, etc. The period also witnesses
politico-judicial activities and pronouncements owing to permutations by politicians and parties to outsmart one another. These activities culminate in the deluge of reports and issues for coverage by the mass media. The coverage of party activities and candidates are expected to prepare the electorate to make informed decisions at the polls.

Other Political Parties: This term refers to other political parties other than the APC and PDP that participated in the 2019 presidential election. Between 1999 and 2015, PDP was Nigeria’s ruling party. Since the party lost the presidency in 2015, it is considered as the country’s foremost opposition party. It is second to the ruling APC, especially in terms of the number of governorship and parliamentary seats the party occupies at the Federal and State levels in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The study was anchored on the Agenda Setting and Social Responsibility theories. Some related concepts were also reviewed to highlight the focus of the study.

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 (Ndimele and Innocent, 2006). The theory conceptualises the role the mass media play in shaping and influencing the opinion of members of the public especially on issues of public interest. The condition that accounts for this situation is based on the fact that regardless of the extent of development or civilisation of a society, the fact remains that the mass media serve as people’s window to the world. Lipmann (1922), cited in DeFleur (2010) and Miller (2002), states that the media help to put pictures of the world in the minds of the audience. This explains the power of the mass media to set agenda and raise issues of public importance. Griffin (2000), citing McCombs and Shaw (1972), states that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agenda to the public agenda. He adds that journalists and the mass media in the free world have a deserved reputation for independence and fairness and that members of the mass media audience look to news professionals for cues on where to lend their attention and judge as important what the media judge as important.

The media provide information, entertainment, enlightenment as well as the safeguard of civil liberty. This creates the assumption in the audience that the issues upon which the mass media place emphasis must necessarily be important. George (2006), lending credence to this proposition, states that “the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance the public assigns to that issue” (p. 459). Ndimele and Innocent (2006) argue that since people rely on the media for information about events
in their society and the world at large, whatever the media accord attention would be considered important. What this means is that the level of attention accorded an issue or a cause by the mass media makes that issue to assume some degree of relevance in the conjecture of the audience (Heath, 2005).

The thrust of the Agenda setting philosophy is that although the position of the mass media regarding an issue might not change people’s view or opinion regarding that issue, it could change their perception towards the issue. Thus, Daramola (2005) argues that the mass media wield the “ability to mentally order or organise the world for the people” (p. 16). The implication is that issues and causes that are championed by the media could assume some relevance in the estimation of members of public. McCombs and Shaw (1976), cited in Ndimele and Innocent (2006), thus argue that “in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position... The mass media may well determine the important issues. That is, the media may set the agenda of the campaign” (p.176). The point is that whatever the media accord attention assumes some relevance in the estimation of the audience. This condition accounts for the importance of the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of political activities in a multi-party democracy.

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory evolved through the report of the Hutchin’s Commission set up in 1942 to respond to the widespread sensational, commercial and monopolistic approach of the libertarian press era. The Commission was saddled with the responsibility to critically examine areas and circumstances under which the press was succeeding or failing ((McQuail, 2009). The libertarian era afforded the press considerable freedom from undue government control. The result of this free marketplace of operation was yellow journalism, characterised by character assassination and sensationalism (Nwachukwu, Asak and Asadu, 2012). It was this irresponsible press operation that necessitated the establishment of the Hutchin’s Commission to work out a more responsible press philosophy to meet the needs of the society.

Findings of the Hutchin’s Commission indicted the press for not only being sensational but also for giving voice to only the privileged political and economic power holders. The Commission, according to McQuail (2009), argued that “a responsible press shall provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in the context which gives them meaning” (p. 170). It stated that freedom carries with it the responsibility to trade with caution and respect for the views and interests of the wider society.

The underlying premise of the social responsibility theory is that freedom is worthless except it is exercised with a reasonable degree of responsibility, which involves respect for institutions and service to the community (Jackson
and Jackson, 2003; Hoffman and Graham, 2009). What this means is that apart from the establishment or legislation of laws to regulate media operations, the mass media, just as individuals, owe the society the responsibility to carry out their activities responsibly. The media should accommodate all shades of opinion and not only that of the privileged few. The media should give voice to the voiceless.

McQuail (2010) summarises the central ideologies of the social responsibility theory as:

1. the media have obligation to society and media ownership is a public trust;
2. news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant;
3. the media should be free, but self-regulated;
4. the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct;
5. under some circumstance, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest (p. 171).

The foregoing submission by McQuail (2010) underscores the argument that community service is the hallmark of media operation. The media should provide supports for the weak and vulnerable. During general elections, the activities of evolving democratic platforms should be adequately sold to the electorate through effective coverage. Being self-regulated demands that the mass media be accorded the freedom to operate. This freedom ensures that the media are free from undue political and economic influences. It also means that the media should ensure balance between the maximisation of profits and the protection of public interest.

**Power of the Press in defence of Democracy**

According to Morgenthau and Thompson (2001), power is the ability to exercise some control over the minds and actions of other members of one’s community. It gives its possessor the control over the actions of other members of his group. The power of the press is recognised globally. It is the ability of the press to influence the opinion and actions of the members of the society (the audience). This accounts for why the mass media in many democracies are considered as a national resource and the conscience of the society (Baran 2012).

Dennis and Merrill (1991), cited in Gambo (2014), state that the press wields three forms of power: the power to provide information; the power such information exerts on the mind of the audience; and the influence of the press on the audience. Pate and Dauda (2013) corroborate the power the press wields to influence audience behaviour as they argue that the press goes beyond mere provision of information because, most times, people use the information provided by the press to form opinions on issues of individual and public
interest. They add that “even though they may not tell the people what to think, the media are found to always direct our minds on what to think about” (p. 2). The importance of the press to national life is explained by the fact that whether a country operates government exclusive ownership or allows private participation in mass communication, governments often beckon on the media to promote national interest. Even repressive governments beckon on the media to be sympathetic.

The importance of the press in the advancement of democracy and promotions of egalitarianism is not foreign to Nigeria. In fact, a tale of the history of Nigeria’s democracy without a mention of the pivotal role of the country’s press will be incomplete. This is because the press occupied the front seat in the push for civil rule while Nigeria went through the murky waters of military dictatorship. Amidst repressive laws and threats on journalist and media stations, the Nigerian independent press maintained the revolutionary stance until the emergence of democracy in 1999 (Daramola, 2005). This nationalist press pre-occupation is required in the current democratic era not only to build strong democratic institutions but also to lead a conscientious electorate to the nation’s polls.

The Nigerian Press and the Coverage of the Electioneering Process

The importance of the press in a nation’s electoral process is explained by the need to adequately inform and educate the electorate on the activities of political parties and their candidates. This function is crucial to enable the electorate not only to vote for the candidate of their choice but also to defend public interest at the polls. The ability to make informed electoral decisions may not be possible except the electorate are sufficiently aware of the political ideologies of the different political parties and the antecedents of candidates participating in an election. Habermas (1989) thus describes the press as an organ of information whose complimentary role is crucial in guiding political debate and decisions among the electorate. Ochonogor and Fynface (2016) corroborate the importance of the press and other media of mass communication as they aver that the media are the agent of social and political change. The media stimulate change not only by disseminating new ideas freely but also by popularising such ideas and affecting the disposition of members of the public towards same.

The ability to affect the disposition and opinion of the audience is explained by the fact that the mass media serve as people’s window to the world (Ndimele and Innocent). This condition explains why societies that place value on public opinion exploit the mass media to champion issues of public and personal well-being. The media perform this function by examining social issues, including opportunities and threats. The interpretations assigned to different issues in the society enable citizens to make informed decisions as it affects their interest. Byrant and Thomas (2002), cited in Popoola (2008), outline the functions of the mass media in the democracy as:
1. surveillance of contemporary events that are likely to affect citizens positively or negatively;
2. identification of key social-political issues;
3. provision of platform for advocacy for causes and interest;
4. transmission of diverse contents across the various dimensions and factions of political discourse;
5. scrutiny of government officials, their institutions and other agencies.
6. giving incentives and information to allow citizens to become actively informed participants rather than spectators;
7. provision of principled resistance to external forces attempting to subvert media autonomy; and
8. respectful consideration of the audience as potentially concerned, sense-making efficacious citizens (pp. 91-92).

What this means is that the mass media are a critical stakeholder in the democratic process. It also means that the surveillance function of the mass media is crucial for leading an active citizenry.

The role of the mass media in equipping the citizenry, especially towards issues of national importance, underscores the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of electioneering processes. According Dominick (2002), the principle of equal opportunity stipulates that the mass media should accord equal coverage and presentation of the affairs of different political parties and candidates standing in an election. Gurevitch and Blunler (1997), cited in Obot (2009), state that the principle of equal opportunity enables the media to sufficiently present the political affairs of all political parties and their candidates to the audience (the electorate). This is to enable the electorate to choose for themselves the political party or candidate that suits their interest. Wilson 2003 observes that it is in the atmosphere of fairness and equal opportunity that the electorate can be properly guided to support the political ideology that identifies with their yearnings or aspirations.

Nigeria’s Electoral Act (2010) recognises the importance of the principle of equal opportunity in the coverage of political activities and electoral campaigns. Section 103 of the Act, among other provisions, stipulates that the mass media shall not be exploited to the advantage or disadvantage of any political party or candidates standing in an election. The Act states that media airtime and space should be allocated to all political parties and candidates. It stipulates that equal opportunity and conspicuity be granted to all political parties and candidates. This is to ensure the awareness of the activities of different political parties by the electorate. It is only when the electorate are sufficiently aware of the activities of different political groups that they can vote according to their conscience. It is also when the electorate are empowered to vote according to their conscience that democracy can thrive.

In Nigeria the task of ensuring equality in the coverage of the affairs of different political parties during general elections has remained one of the challenges of the country’s electoral process. Many times, the interest of many
political parties and candidates are greatly undermined on account of the promotion of the interest of few powerful political structures. This anomaly has left the country and its people bereft of the contributions of alternative political platforms and ideas. Agba (2007) states that the coverage of electioneering campaigns has become part of the problems threatening national cohesion and integration. The point is that, since irresponsible coverage of political campaigns does not encourage diversity, it can only perpetuate the promotion of the political interest of few powerful political structures and the perpetual reign of the ruling political class, as it is the case in Nigeria since 1999.

**Methodology**

The research design adopted for the study was content analysis. Each newspaper produced a total of 184 issues, making a grand total of 368 issues by the two newspapers, as the population of the study. A constructed calendar enabled the selection of sampled issues of the newspapers. The systematic sampling of technique was adopted with a two-day skip interval between Mondays to Sundays. Thus, Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays became the constant (r). A total of 90 (24%) issues of each newspaper were sampled for the study. Data analysis was done in tables, using these indicators: extent of coverage; category of reports; and prominence accorded the political activities of the APC and PDP in comparison with other political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Total Number of Political Reports</th>
<th>Reports on APC</th>
<th>Reports on PDP</th>
<th>Reports on Other Political Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PUNCH</strong></td>
<td>624</td>
<td>274 (26%)</td>
<td>258 (25%)</td>
<td>46 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VANGUARD</strong></td>
<td>620</td>
<td>222 (22%)</td>
<td>211 (20%)</td>
<td>33 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,044</td>
<td>496 (48%)</td>
<td>469 (45%)</td>
<td>79 (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the coverage of the activities of the different political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election, data presented in Table I indicate that the activities of other political parties, outside the APC and PDP were grossly under-reported by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers. While 48% and 45% of the activities of the APC and PDP, respectively were reported, only 7% of the activities of the Other political platforms were reported by the *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reports</th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>APC</th>
<th>PDP</th>
<th>Other Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>228(22%)</td>
<td>221(21%)</td>
<td>31(3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>203(19%)</td>
<td>203(19%)</td>
<td>24(2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>27(3%)</td>
<td>18(2%)</td>
<td>9(1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>11(1%)</td>
<td>12(1%)</td>
<td>6(0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorials</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>11(1%)</td>
<td>6(0.5%)</td>
<td>3(0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>5(0.4%)</td>
<td>3(0.2%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinions</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>3(0.2%)</td>
<td>3(0.2%)</td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to the Editor</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>2(0.1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo News</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons</td>
<td><strong>Punch</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vanguard</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>496(48%)</td>
<td>469(45%)</td>
<td>79(7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the category of political reports by the *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering, data presented in Table 2 indicate that the activities of the Other political parties that participated in the election were substantially under-reported in comparison with the activities of the ruling (APC) and the leading opposition party, the (PDP). While 48% and 45% of the political reports of the *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers, respectively favoured the APC and PDP, only 7% of the political activities of the Other parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election was reported by the newspapers (*Punch* and *Vanguard*).

*Table 3.* Prominence *Punch* and *Vanguard* Newspapers assigned to APC and PDP in comparison with Other Political Parties during 2019 Presidential Electioneering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prominence</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>APC</th>
<th>PDP</th>
<th>Other Parties</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Punch</em></td>
<td>82(8%)</td>
<td>87(8%)</td>
<td>5(0.5%)</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Vanguard</em></td>
<td>77(75)</td>
<td>84(8%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Page</td>
<td><em>Punch</em></td>
<td>188(18%)</td>
<td>176(17%)</td>
<td>38(4%)</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Vanguard</em></td>
<td>139(13%)</td>
<td>115(11%)</td>
<td>29(3%)</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Page</td>
<td><em>Punch</em></td>
<td>3(0.3%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>4(0.4%)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Vanguard</em></td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>2(0.2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Spread</td>
<td><em>Punch</em></td>
<td>5(5%)</td>
<td>3(3%)</td>
<td>1(0.1%)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back Page</td>
<td><em>Vanguard</em></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>486(48%)</td>
<td>469(45%)</td>
<td>79(7%)</td>
<td>1044(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data presented in Table 3 indicate that the activities of APC and PDP were accorded more prominence by *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspaper over the political activities of Other political parties during the 2019 presidential electioneering. For instance, while 8% apiece of the political activities of APC
and PDP political activities of the APC and PDP made front pages of Punch and 7% and 8% a piece of the activities of the same parties (APC and PDP) made front pages of the Vanguard, a paltry 0.5% and 0.2%, respectively of the activities of Other political parties were placed on the front pages of the newspapers (Punch and Vanguard) newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion was based on the research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1. To what extent did the Punch and Vanguard newspapers cover the activities of Other political parties during the 2019 Presidential electioneering in comparison with the activities of APC and PDP?

The effective coverage of the activities of different political parties in a multi-party democracy by the mass media is an integral aspect of a nation’s democratic process. A total of 73 political parties participated in the 2019 presidential election. Research question one investigated the extent of coverage of the activities of these political parties by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers. Data obtained with respect to this research question indicated that the activities of Other political parties other than APC and PDP were substantially under-reported by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers. This is based on the fact while 48% and 45%, respectively of the political reports of the newspapers within the period under review favoured APC and PDP, only 7% of the activities of the Other political parties were reported by the newspapers during the 2019 electioneering.

In a multi-party democracy, the mass media occupy an integral position in ensuring a flourishing democracy. This is due to the importance of the mass media to monitor and report the activities of different political parties and their candidates in order to lead an enlightened electorate. Obot (2009) states that democracy flourishes when citizens (the electorate) are sufficiently informed about party ideologies and activities. He adds that “the mass media are not only key avenues for providing the required information, they also determine what is available in the public domain” (p. 57). What this means is that the coverage of the activities of different political parties standing in an election is critical for the electorate to make informed decisions at the polls. Habermas (1989) states that the press is an organ of information whose complimentary role is crucial in guiding debates among the electorate. As agents of political change, the mass media are crucial in ensuring that the electorate deliver only national interest at the polls. This is rather impracticable without the effective coverage of the activities of different political parties participating in an election. Since nobody votes for a candidates or political party whose identity and character are unknown, the effective coverage of the political activities of parties and candidates becomes a fundamental aspect of the democratic process.
Research Question 2: What were the categories of reports published by Punch and Vanguard newspapers on the activities of Other political parties in comparison with the APC and PDP during the 2019 presidential electioneering?

Research question two centered on the content category of the Punch and Vanguard newspapers on the activities of APC and PDP in comparison with Other political parties during the 2019 presidential electioneering. Data obtained regarding this research question indicated that the activities of Other political parties other than APC and PDP were substantially under-reported by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering. This report is evident from the fact that while 22%, 21% of the news contents of the Punch and 19% apiece of the news contents of the Vanguard favoured APC and PDP, respectively, only 3% of the news contents of the Punch and 2% of the news contents of the Vanguard carried news stories about the activities of Other political parties during the 2019 electioneering. The analysis of other editorial contents: features, editorials, opinions, interviews and photo news of the two newspapers indicated that the activities of Other political parties were substantially neglected by the Punch and Vanguard newspapers during the 2019 presidential electioneering (Table 2).

The seeming neglect of the activities of Other political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election by Punch and Vanguard due to over concentration on the political activities of the ruling APC and the main opposition party, the PDP negates the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in Nigeria’s Electoral Act (2006). Section 103 of the Act stipulates that the mass media shall not be exploited to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of other political parties or candidates standing in an election. The seeming neglect of the activities of Other political parties in the 2019 presidential elections by Punch and Vanguard newspapers also undermines the principle of fairness, the thesis of the Social Responsibility theory (McQuail, 2010). Wilson (2003) argues that it is only in an atmosphere of fairness and equal opportunity that the electorate can be properly guided to support the political ideology that is consistent with the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

Despite having over ninety registered political parties, seventy-three of which actively participated in the 2019 presidential election by fielding candidates for the election, Nigeria wears a political outlook of being a two-party democracy. The contribution of the mass media to this misleading political outlook is not surprising. This is not only due to the role of the media in the construction and displacement of social reality, but also the role of the media at the public sphere (Thusu, 2002). The mass media affect social change and lead the public sphere through gate keeping, agenda setting and the popularisation of innovations. Since they serve as people’s window to the world, the political leaning of a nation’s media can somewhat affect its political process and sometimes the outcome of an election. The implication is that the lopsided coverage of a nation’s political process could simply
undermine the electoral fortunes of political parties and candidates whose activities are not sufficiently projected to the electorate. Imbalance in the coverage of a nation’s political process could leave the nation and its people bereft or fresh political ideas and people-oriented leadership.

**Research Question 3:** What is the level of prominence Punch and Vanguard newspapers accorded the activities of the Other political parties in comparison with PDP and APC during the 2019 presidential electioneering?

On the prominence Punch and Vanguard newspapers assigned to the activities of the political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election, data obtained with respect to research question 3 indicated that the activities of APC and PDP were accorded prominence over those of Other political parties. For instance, while 8% apiece of the activities of APC and PDP appeared on the front-pages of the Punch newspaper, only 0.5% of the activities of the other whopping 71 political parties appeared on the front pages of the Punch. Also, while 7% and 8% of the activities of the APC and PDP, respectively appeared on the front pages of the Vanguard newspaper, only 0.2% of the activities of the other 71 political parties appeared on the front pages of the newspapers (Table 3).

The level of prominence Punch and Vanguard newspapers accorded the activities of Other political parties in comparison with the APC and PDP from the presentation in Table 3 can only be regarded insignificant. The gap only represents a sheer negation of the principle of fairness and equal opportunity by the newspapers. This imbalance also represents the situation where the voices of contending contrary opinions cannot be heard; a situation that is entropic to egalitarianism. Balance in political reporting is rather required for the sustenance of democracy and good governance since it encourages a system of checks and balances and the consideration of contrary views (Pate, 2003; Wilson, 2003). This is the foundation of the principle of equal opportunity and the Social Responsibility theory which propose the demonstration of fairness by the mass media in the coverage of reports and presentation of issues. The conscientious commitment to these principles and ethical foundations encourages the growth of a healthy democracy that entrenches diversity and pluralism.

**Conclusion**

The principle of equal opportunity in the presentation of news and other media products was significantly undermined by Punch and Vanguard newspapers in the coverage of the 2019 presidential electioneering. The political activities of APC and PDP were accorded undue prominence over the activities of Other political parties that participated in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. The result of this imbalance was the representation of the 2019 presidential race as a contest essentially between APC and PDP. This reportorial imbalance is capable of endangering Nigeria’s evolving democracy.
It is imimical to healthy political competition and development, as it clears the path for the interests of the political super powers to perpetually thrive and being a potential catalyst for defective leadership.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations may be helpful for effective coverage and regulation of Nigeria’s electoral process by *Punch, Vanguard*, other media stations and media regulatory bodies in Nigeria:

1. *Punch, Vanguard* and other media stations in Nigeria should be guided by the principle of social responsibility which propagates fairness and balance in the coverage of political and other social affairs to lead an informed citizenry. This public-oriented media approach will ensure that the electorate vote in defence of the interest and yearnings of the masses.

2. Media regulatory authorities in Nigeria should ensure that all media stations in the country abide by the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in the country’s Electoral Act. Adherence to the principle of equal opportunity will ensure that the political ideologies of all political parties standing in an election are effectively presented to the electorate.

3. Since the placement of news stories in the newspaper grades news reports, issues and personalities in the news, *Punch, Vanguard* and other newspapers in Nigeria should accord equal treatment or prominence to all political parties standing in an election. The electoral fortunes of the emerging political parties should not be sacrificed on technical decisions.

**References**


