THE CHALLENGES OF REPORTING POLITICS IN A MULTI-PARTY STATE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A SURVEY OF PORT HARCOURT JOURNALISTS

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Abstract
Historical accounts show the Nigerian mass media to have significantly contributed to the attainment of independence in 1960. Ironically, mass-media portrayals were fingered for being responsible for the fall of the First Republic. Scholars have, however, observed that. Since the return of democracy in 1999, the relationship between the media and the political class has somewhat, been characterised by mutual suspicion, blackmail, intimidation, as well as other gory scenarios. With the merger of some political parties to form the All Progressive Congress (APC) ahead of the 2015 general elections, the political atmosphere in Nigeria is charged and journalist have incidentally saddled with the responsibility of reporting the unfolding intrigues. Drawing from the foregoing, this study sought to establish the challenges, if any, that reporters in Rivers State encounter in reporting political activities. The study utilised the survey design to draw a sample of 130 political reporters from the 400 registered NUJ members in Rivers State. Findings of the study are that journalist are often denied access to important information, at times threatened and barred from events. It was, therefore, recommended that the NUJ and its members should insist on their right to information as enshrined in the Freedom of Information Act. It was also recommended that journalists in collaboration with relevance agencies of government ensure the removal of all impediments to egalitarianism and professionalism with a view to according nobility to journalism.

Keywords: *Journalists, Reporting, Politics, Multi-party and State.*

Background to the Study
Nigeria like many African countries has a multi-party system. There are 26 registered political parties with two or three dominant ones that have had strong showings in elections. Since the

return of the country to democratic rule in 1999, the government at the centre has been controlled by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which also controls most of the states. The other major parties with electoral successes were the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP); Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); Congress for Progressive Change (CPC); Labour Party (LP); and All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). Some of these parties   ANPP, ACN, CPC and a faction of APGA   fused in 2013 to form what was referred to as a mega party, the All People's Congress (APC), ostensibly to wrest power from the PDP. With the formation of the APC by the four aforementioned parties, the political atmosphere in Nigeria became charged with thrilling events that somewhat jolted the country's political landscape. Capitalising on the internal dispute within the PDP, the APC wooed the seven aggrieved governors of the PDP who stormed out of the PDP Special Convention to form the New PDP with the former Vice President, Alhaji Atuku Abubakar and Alhaji Baraje as the arrowheads. The seven governors are Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, Rivers State; Babangida Muazu Aliyu, Niger State; Sule Lamido, Jigawa State; Murtala Nyako, Adamawa State; Abdufattah Ahmed, Kwara State; Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso, Kano State, and Aliyu Wamako, Sokoto State. All but two of the governors, Sule Lamido and Babangida Muazu Aliyu defected to the APC in November, 2013. Most of these governors decamped with their deputies and state assembly members. However, the Deputy Governors of Sokoto and Adamawa States refused to cross-carpet with their governors.

The aftermath of the governors' exit from the PDP, saw the defection of 37 members of the lower chamber of the National Assembly (House of Representatives) to the APC, a move that almost altered the leadership structure of the house. Interestingly, the alignment and realignment that followed the actions of the lawmakers ensured that the status quo remained. What followed the defection of the governors and the lawmakers were intense legal battles initiated by the PDP to declare the seats of the defecting elected officers vacant. In the Senate, the effort of six Senator led by Senator Bukola Saraki to join the APC was stalled by the invocation of certain sections of the Senate Standing Order. The outcome of the power play, scheming and manoeuvres that followed the defection of the governors was the impeachment of the Governor of Adamawa State, Murtala Nyako on July 15, 2014 after the resignation of the Deputy Governor, James Ngilari the day before. Indeed, there is uneasy calm in many of the states where the governors decamped.

The myriads of political developments in the Nigerian polity provide fertile grounds for news-sourcing and reporting for journalists who have the responsibility of reporting the intrigues to the publics. Researchers have been investigating the effects of the media in influencing electoral participation, especially in voting behaviours. Contemporary research interest has shifted to another area of effects. This is the media's influence on the political information and the issues the public considers salient. In recent years the notion that the media have strong influence on public affairs has become common among media scholars, the political elites and media operators

themselves. Communication researchers have articulated the 'agenda-setting' function of the media in politics, especially in studies of the electorates. Political scientists are also discarding the minimal media effects tradition in favour of a view that attributes considerable influence to the media. A former Nigerian Minister of information and Culture in, Dr Walter Ofonagoro lent credence to the view when he said that:

At all times but particularly in election year, the press has the responsibility to give people the true and undoctored facts that will make them to make responsible choices about their nations, their states and their own nation. Without the press, it is impossible for the generality of the citizenry to discern facts from fiction, truth from falsehood in the multitude of promises that come cascading from the political soap box (Cited in Ochonogor, 2011). Ochonogor (2008) asserts that the responsibility of the mass media in a democracy, especially during elections is to help the public look closely to understand the political reality. He added that the journalists interpret events, issues, portray personalities, analyse trends, and public opinion. These activities also throw up certain challenges for reporters who cover the political beat. For one, the tilt of the news and prominence given to stories no matter how objective may be misconstrued and reporters portrayed as bias and partisan by parties not favoured by the report. Secondly, reporters are at a cross-road given the ownership structure of the mass media, especially the state-owned media where reporters are torn between objective reporting and pleasing the owners. Besides, many of the media organisations belong to politicians who would want their reporters to present reports that would support their political causes (Ochonogor, 2008). The situation is not different for the privately-owned as many of the proprietors are sympathetic to some political parties. Gambo (2014) captured the essence of the situation thus: The emergent situation polarised the media and thrown up a situation where some reporters, editors, producers and presenters openly align themselves with political parties or candidates and are ever willing to work for them at the expense of their professional calling; and those who choose to remain principled are either put aside or punished outright. Gambo further explained that: one of the major issues related to the media is the allegation that some journalists and media houses have, either deliberately or otherwise involve themselves beyond their professional calling or that by their reports, they had taken side with one of the parties involved (p,4).

Communication scholars are agreed that reporters have a very crucial role to play in engendering peace and cooperation a polity. It is in line with this that Batta (2009,) observed that it is everyone's stake, including media scholars and professionals to de-escalate conflict and promote peace in our nation" (p.172). It is, however, instructive to note that many journalists have had to contend with denial of access to information by the political class, especially in states controlled by the opposition. There were instances where some barred from covering events, even as some are declared personal-non-grata. It must also be noted that many journalists have not appropriated

the rights given to them by the Freedom of Information Bill which is meant to among others that: Make public record and information more freely available, provide for public access to public records and information, protect public records and information to the extent consistent with the public interest and the protection of personal privacy, protect public officers from adverse consequences for disclosing certain information without authorisation and establish procedures for the achievement of those purposes and related purposes thereof (Eme and Asadu, 2010, Pp. 15-16).

The reportorial process, especially covering and reporting the political news is an arduous task. The reporter's duty is that of determining what is newsworthy through the observation and collection of information from different sources and scrutinising the pieces of information gathered in order to write an accurate, concise, interesting and clear and comprehensible account of events. However, the rushed world of news reporting and the unpredictable nature of political developments has engendered a situation whereby reports are replete with omissions, misspellings and inaccuracies which has pit reporters with news sources leading to reprimands, corrigenda, mistrust and suspicion.

Statement of problem

Experts in media studies believe that modern politics is nearly impossible without adequate media coverage. Mass-media portrayals in reports, advocacies and commentaries help liven political campaign as they provide opportunities for candidates to reach and interact with voters more quickly and more directly at the lowest cost. The mass media are also depended upon the media to gauge and monitor public opinion. The mass media if effectively used can be tools achieving those objectives. However, the path of the political reporter is fraught with booby traps, occasioned by mistrust and suspicion that makes the reportorial assignment somewhat herculean. It is in the light of these that the sought to establish the challenges that reporters in Rivers State encounter in reporting political activities.

Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives which were to:

1   Establish the nature of challenges that reporters encounter in reporting political activities; examine reporters' challenging experiences in their reportorial assignment;
2   find out the coping strategies adopted by reporters in the face of the challenges;
3   Establish the precautionary measures adopted by reporters to ensure the authenticity of their reports in the face of the challenges. and
4   Find out the relationship between the reporters and the political class.

Research Questions

1   What is the nature of challenges that reporters encounter in reporting political activities?
2   What are reporter challenging experiences in their reportorial assignment?
3   In what ways the reporters cope in the face of the challenges of their duties?
4   What precautionary measures are adopted by reporters to ensure the authenticity of their reports
5   What relationships exist between reporters and the political class?

Theoretical foundation

This study as anchored on the social responsibility media theory which tenets is that the media are free to report and comment on events, but must be ready to accept responsibility for their actions. Omego and Ochonogor (2013). Invariably, the theory stipulates that publishers and reporters are free to carry out their roles without any form of restriction as enshrined in the libertarian theory, but should behave responsibly to avoid any thing that is capable of causing disaffection in the society. The social responsibility theory owes its origin to the fear expressed that the notion of a free market of ideas was being hampered by the restrictive ownership structure of newspapers that was concentrated in the hands of the rich and powerful corporations. Consequently, the Hutchins commission was instituted in America in 1947, on the free press (Ndolo, 2006).

The justification for the use of this theory is based on the fact that the mass media are obligated to report issues, especially political matters with a sense of responsibility while the government is expected to grant the media unfettered access to information and not to interfere in the works of the media. However, what is observed in Nigeria is the undue interference by the government, using various tactics to impede the activities of the media. In the same vein, reporters have been accused of using unethical means in their reportorial assignment to the detriment of the political advancement of the society. Flowing From a social responsibility perspective, journalists have the responsibility to cover politics, but with a sense of responsibility that enables dialogue and eventual peaceful resolution of conflicts

Literature Review

The Media and the Political Process

The relationship between the mass media and governments in many developing countries the world over, has been anything but cordial. From the periods immediately after the scramble for and partitioning of Africa among the European overlords in the 19th century, the press has been in the vanguard of the struggle to shake off colonial dominance. Nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Mohammed Dutse, Kwame Nkrumah, among other founded newspaper organisations that were used to expose the misdeeds of the colonial administrations in exercise of their watch dog roles, and to sensitise the natives to the need for self-rule. And for daring to criticise

the colonial regimes, the press was seen as antagonistic and regarded as enemies that should be tamed. Consequently, there was the enactment of ordinances to gag the press which signalled the birth of the adversarial relationship between the government and the press. In fact, the Nigerian media reports, advocacies and commentaries were credited for contributing significantly to the attainment of independence of the country from the British colonialist on October 1, 1960.

After the attainment of independence in Nigeria, the mass media continued to perform their watch dog role which was perceived to be antagonistic by the civilian government. It is instructive to mention that the post-colonial administration did not repeal most of the draconian laws, especially the Official Secret Ordinance of 1891, the Newspaper Ordinance of 1903 and the Seditious Offences Act of 1909, inherited from the colonial masters. The media too, did not shed themselves of the combative stance with which they fought colonialism. Udoudo, Ochonogor and Diriyai (2012) quoted Udoudo (2010) to have said that "one of the major issues about post-independence press in Nigeria was that before independence, the regional governments had established and owned newspapers just as the federal government had its own" (p.4). He stressed that the main interest of the newspapers was to attack the interests of the other ethnic groups and those of the federal government while preserving their individual regional interests. The media were accused of portraying the civilian administration as corrupt, inept and lacking in direction which the military capitalised to overthrow the government. This scenario translated to an atmosphere of mutual suspicion that set the stage for a battle of wit between the government and the media. So that the same mass media that was praised for helping to ease out colonial administration in Nigeria was also blamed for the fall of the first republic.

Experts in media studies believe that modern politics is nearly impossible without adequate media coverage. Mass-media portrayals in reports, advocacies and commentaries help liven political campaign as they provide opportunities for candidates to reach and interact with voters more quickly and more directly and depend heavily upon the media to monitor public opinion and transmit their remarks to the public; as it is impossible to personally contact every voter in the society. Since the cooperation of the people is imperative for the success of the political process, therefore, there is the need to mobilise the people to increase political awareness, focus attention and rally support for political parties and politicians. The mass media if effectively used can be tools to those ends.

The role of the mass media in the political development of the society was put in perspective by Nwosu (1990), when he observed that the media: Help people to find new norms and harmony in periods of transition, change the power structure in the society by giving knowledge to the masses, create sense of nationness, lead to increased political activity or participation…, and make political development a self-perpetuating process (Nwachukwu, 2010, Pp.92-93) It is believed

that mass participation in a democratic system can rarely occur if the people have limited access to information and discussion. There is no way that people can be motivated to join in the decision process if they are kept in the dark about what is happening. The need for popular participation in the political process, invariably, involves deploying the media to sensitise the members of society to what is happening in their immediate environment. Beyond providing enlightenment about new ideas, the mass media function as checks and balances on the government for the interest of the subjects as well as mobilise for good courses.

Gambo (2014) Drawing from the All-powerful Model, Agenda Setting and the identified media ubiquity models postulated by Noelle-Neumann, McCombs and Shaw (1972), and Dennis and Merrill (1991) respectively, conceptualized three forms of media: The power to provide information; setting the public agenda; and affecting the thoughts, opinions and attitudes These powers are exercised by journalists who work in the media to inform the electorates about the persons that are vying for political positions and expose the people to the key issues bothering the society. The information and commentaries provided by the media enable people take informed decisions on whom among the list of capable hands to vote for. It is through the mass media that the electorates know the thoughts, pedigree, antecedents and characters of the candidates and also narrow down the voters' range of options before elections.

However,some reporters by their activities have shown a tendency towards using the powers of the media for negative ends capable of bringing the ethics of their profession into disrepute. Many have slide into ethical vices such as blackmail, bribery (gratification), axe-grinding, inducement, sycophancy, distortion, among others. The norms of journalism have become the survival of the fittest as reporters now engage in battle of wits for favourable attention from their employers and the political class, without recourse to the ethics of the profession (karikari, 1997).

A study by Ochonogor and Igani (2013) to find out what constitutes stress factors to print media journalist in Port Harcourt in the discharge of their day-to-day duties found that Journalists suffer stress especially, through news-sourcing, processing and presenting which is always hurried and deadline-bound; that stress is a factor in the reportorial process makes journalist to commit errors of facts and grammar and that that the stress factors can be minimized.

Methodology
The study utilised the survey design to study the 400 Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) members Rivers State Chapters who constituted the population of the investigation. However, a total of 130 reporters were purposely selected for the study as only reporters who cover the political beat were considered for the study. The instrument for data collection was a set of 12-item questionnaire that was administered on the respondents by the researchers and three research

assistants. The data obtained from the respondents were presented in tables of frequency distribution and percentages.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Out of the 130 copies of the questionnaire administered, 123 correctly completed and returned. This represented a 95% return rate. The responses show that 42 (34%) of the respondents work for print media organisations while the majority, 81 (66%) are broadcast journalists. All respondents reside in the city of Port Harcourt where all the media houses in Rivers state are located. The data also show that while 23% of the respondents have been on the job for only one year, nine per cent have been engaged for between two to five years. A total of 85 representing (68%) of the subjects have practiced journalism for between sis and ten years. On the reporters' challenging experiences during their reportorial duties, the majority of the respondent, 58% confirmed that the issue of delays in handing out information, given the deadline-driven nature of news had been a major problem. For the remaining 42%, the major problem they encountered was that of confirming information from reliable sources. Since news need attribution to make it believable and authentic, it becomes expedient that any information obtained should be confirmed by a reputable. The difficulty in confirming information can delay the publication of stories which are time-bound, and this can lead to speculative reporting.

Table One: Problems respondent encounter during the news - gathering process

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Delays in handing out information	72	58
2	Confirming information from reliable sources	51	42
TOTAL		123	100

For the types of challenges that inhibit the news-sourcing responsibility of reporters, a total of 21 (17%) had to contend with harassment by government officials and personal aides of politicians and elected officers, who appear unfriendly and hostile to journalist. The number of reporters who were harassed by security agents attached to politicians was 70 (57%) while 32 (26%) of the respondents were harassed by bodyguards and thugs who prevent reporters from having access to politicians.

Table Two: Respondents' experiences from aides to politician during news - sourcing

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Harassment by government officials and personal aides	21	17
2	Harassment by security agents	70	57
3	Harassment by bodyguards and thugs	32	26
TOTAL		123	100

The most challenging experience, for 43 (35%) respondents is that they are usually torn between that quest for balance and objectivity and pressure put on the reporters to slant the report to suit the whims of politicians. The number of respondents who had to deal with unsubstantiated facts, unwillingness of sources to divulge information and accusations is 33 (27%) while 47 (28%) were physically assaulted and their equipment either vandalised or confiscated.

Table Three: Respondents' most challenging experience

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Pressure on reporters to slant stories to favour some persons	43	35
2	Unwillingness of sources to divulge information	33	27
3	Vandalisation/ confiscat ion of equipment	47	28
TOTAL		123	100

On the accusations they have received from politicians for their reports, 43 (36%) said that they have been accused of biased reporting, 20 (16%) were branded as partisan while an insignificant 10 (8%) where accused of favouritism. However, the majority, 50 (40%) respondents had all the aforementioned tags placed on them by politicians.

Table Four: Accusations received by respondents for reports not favourable to politicians

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Bias	43	36
2	Partisan	20	16
3	Favouritism	10	8
4	All of the above	50	40
TOTAL		123	100

Similarly, in the respondent's' responses the nature of reactions they have received from the political class if the reports did not favour them or their causes, a total of 30 (24%) said that they have been reprimanded by the perceived aggrieved persons, while 22 (19%) have been physically abused. The number of those who have suffered rebuttal of information from sources was 31 (25%) while 40 (32 %) respondents have been asked to retract the published stories or face the legal process.

Table Five: Nature of reactions of the political class to respondent's' reports

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Reprimanded from politicians	30	24
2	Physical abuse	22	19
3	Rebuttal by information sources	31	25
	Retraction the published stories	40	32
TOTAL		123	100

On the precautionary measures the respondents have adopted to ensure that they obtained credible information that would turn out reliable stories, 33 (27%) respondent have resorted to self-censorship whereas, 40 (32%) have relied on the ethical codes of conducts for journalists. A total of 28 (22%) respondents have had to do check and rechecks to authenticate their facts before reporting while for 22 (19%) the respect for objectivity was their guiding principle.

Table Six: Precautionary measures by respondents to ensure credible of reports

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Self -censorship	33	27
2	Reliance on the ethical codes of conducts	40	32
3	Adopts check and rechecks	28	22
4	Respect for objectivity	22	19
TOTAL		123	100

Asked to indicate what they usually do when under pressure to submit reports in the face of challenges they were faced with, only 21 (17%) resorted to inducements, through bribery to gather news. Those who used name dropping as tactics to generate information for their reports were 32 (26%). None of the respondents accepted that the used blackmail or pilfering of documents to get information. Meanwhile, the majority of the respondents, 57% did not engage in any of the aforementioned tactics.

Table Seven: Coping strategies adopted by reporters

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Perseverance and persistence visits	37	30
2	Seek alternative sources	32	26
	Remained undaunted, friendly and focused	30	24
3	Resort to speculations.	24	20
TOTAL		123	100

On the measures adopted by reporter to cope with the challenges posed by their duties of reporting the political arena, especially occasioned by the refusal of the political class to give timely information, 37 (30%) respondents said they have had to rely on their ability to persevere and persist in visits. The number of respondents who claimed that they sought for alternative sources of information was 32 (26%) while 30 (24%) said that they remained undaunted, friendly and focused. A total of 24 (20%) claimed to have resorted to speculations based on information available to them.

Table Seven: Other Measures adopted by reporters in generating reports in the face of challenges

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Blackmails	21	17
2	Name dropping	32	26
3	Inducements/bribery	0	0
4	Pilfering of documents	0	0
5	None of the above	70	57

The response to the item that sought to know the nature of relationship existing between reporters and the political class indicate that only 11 (9%) of the respondents agreed that their relationship is characterised by trust and respect. The greater percentage, 57% (70 respondents) affirmed that their relationship with politicians is based on mutual suspicion, while 42 (34%) said their relationship is that openness and fairness. Table one below present's graphic details.

Table Eight: Relationship between the reporters and politicians

S/N	Response	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Trust and respect	11	9
2	Openness and trust	42	34
3	Mutual suspicion	70	57
TOTAL		123	100

Findings

We note from the data generated and presented that the challenges of reporting politics as indicated by the subjects of this study emanate from delays in providing information as well as confirming information received by journalists. Given the deadline-driven nature of news, reporters on the political beat are supposed to be given access to timely information to enable them complete their assignments. However, when the issuance and confirmation of information is delayed or denied, it lead to speculative reporting which does not serve the best interest of the society. According to the data, among the most challenging news-sourcing experiences of reporters in Rivers State is the constant harassment of journalists by security agents, bodyguards,

government officials and personal aides of politicians and elected officers. The unfriendly disposition of these aides prevent reporters from having access to politicians to gather information, and perhaps responsible for the unwholesome relationship between reporters and the political class.

Related to the above is the fact that journalist usually deal with unsubstantiated facts from politicians who often mount pressures on the reporters to publish reports to suit them. This has torn reporters between that quest for balance and objectivity and pressure put on the reporters to slant the report to suit the whims of politicians. When such happens, the reporters are accused of bias, partisanship and at times physically assaulted, resulting to bodily harm and damage to equipment. Aside these challenges, the respondents affirmed that politicians have often offered rebuttal of information given to journalist and have forced reporters to retract published news stories or face the legal actions. The data also show that journalist have adopted some strategies to cope with challenges posed by their new gathering relationship with politicians, especially those occasioned by the refusal of the political class to give timely information reporters have had to rely on their virtue of perseverance or sought for alternative sources for information-gathering while maintaining a friendly disposition. Only a few have resorted to speculations based on information available to them.

Flowing from the data is that fact that reporters when faced with challenges in their news-sourcing responsibilities, exercised restraints through self-censorship, checks and recheck to authenticate their facts before reporting. For some, the code of professional conduct for journalist was their guiding light while others put objectivity first. The result of the difficulties and in their quest to generate information from politicians, only an insignificant number of reporters resorted to inducements, through bribery or name dropping to gather news. Interestingly, the majority of the journalist did not employ blackmail or pilfering of information as a means of generating information. In the final analysis, the relationship between reporters who cover the political arena have been somewhat characterised by mutual suspicion

Conclusion
Based on the data analysed for the study, we draw the following conclusions That the challenges of reporting politic emanate from the delay by politicians in volunteering information or confirming information available to reporters; and the penchant by politicians to often mount pressures on the reporters to publish reports to suit their whims and whenever such reports do not favour them, forced reporters to retract published stories that in coping with the challenges posed by the delays and refusal to give information, reporters have had to persevere or seek alternative sources of information-gathering while also remaining undaunted, friendly and focussed. that journalists have practised self-censorship, checks and recheck and adhered to the ethical codes of conduct for

journalist as guide to enable them cope with the challenges posed by their duties, and that the relationship between reporters who cover the political arena and the politicians have been characterised by mutual suspicion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

1   The NUJ and its members should insist on their right to information as enshrined in the Freedom of Information Act.
2   Journalists should in collaboration with relevance agencies of government ensure the removal of all impediments to egalitarianism and professionalism with a view to according nobility to journalism.
3   The political class should be enlightened on the need to grant journalist access to information and to respect their rights to freedom and human dignity.
4   Media proprietors, editors and reporters are encouraged to broaden their views on sensitive national issues such politics in order to appreciate the importance of objectivity to reduce sensational reportage that help to heat up the policy.

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