**AGENDA SETTING ROLE OF TELEVISION IN THE COVERAGE OF 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN PLATEAU STATE: A STUDY OF NTA JOS**

**ABSTRACT**

This research work seeks to find out the agenda setting role of television in the coverage of 2015 General elections in Plateau State with NTA Jos in perspective. In the review of related literature, scholars in the area under review gave different views to agenda setting and General Elections. It was observed that agenda setting is a mass media theory which holds that; the media does not tell its audience what to think but what to think about and General Elections on other hand is simply a formal way of decision making, by which a population chooses an individual to hold a public office to represent them and this is typical of a democratic setting. To strengthen this research work, the study was anchored on agenda setting theory and the social responsibility theory. Survey research method was used in conducting this research work and copies of questionnaire were administered. One hundred and fifty (150) random selected respondents were drawn from Jos metropolis to represent the total number of eligible voters which makes the population of this study. The sample size of the study therefore is one hundred and fifty (150) drawn from Kufang, Rock Haven and Lamigo accordingly. In data presentations and analysis, the findings reveled that NTA Jos in its coverage of the 2015 General Elections did well enough by stimulating necessary debate on topical issues on public discourse in Plateau State by setting the pace for public debate on issue of elections in Nigeria and encouraging the public to participate in the election process. The study also revealed that NTA Jos’ programme eliminated political apathy among electorates. The study recommends that since the responsibilities of the mass media is a sacred one saddled on them by the constitution, they should endeavor not to be partisan but be responsible and pursue a free, fair and credible elections in Plateau State and Nigeria at large the media should consider political programmes and ensure social responsibility comes to play and most importantly, the media must ensure that the feedback from the electorates receive full attention via creating a platform for public discourse.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Television services were introduced in Nigeria on October 31st 1959 by the then Western Regional Government. Television is a mass communication medium used for transmitting sounds with moving images in monochrome (black and white), coloured, or in three dimensions. Television has always played an important role in the society especially in the 21st century. Television is most recommended for the dissemination of information because of its visual component. Television provides information, education and entertainment which are the major roles of any communication medium. Thus, television can be said to be the most relevant medium of communication.

The role of television therefore, cannot be under estimated in our society today, especially in deepening our democracy and shaping our social lives because of its pervasive nature. Akpabio (2011) stated that, “television has a role to play in securing the people’s mandate”. This statement basically explains that the television has a duty not only to defend our democracy but to deepen and sustain our democratic experience especially based on the dividends of democracy. This shows the power of television as a medium of communication which combines both sounds and visuals.

According to Akpabio, the power of television was seen in the killings at Dogo Nahawa in Plateau State, where people, most of whom were women and female children were killed. This incident was not perceived as grievous when it made pages in the newspaper and reported via other media of mass communication. But when the footage was flashed on television, people felt the impact and many, including I, wept uncontrollably at the sight of over five hundred women and girls who were maimed in cold blood. This clearly illustrate the power of television because when there is an information accompanied by images, people will not only ‘hear but see’ and this creates a better understanding as images enhance communication. “Television does not just move the world’s conscience but has become the conscience of the world”.

Asemah (2009) defines television a “an audio-visual device used for conveying messages from a source to a large heterogenous audience”. He further described television in a layman’s language as “I can hear and I can see”. Asemah went further to describe television as “the most efficient means of communication that brings pictures into billions of homes all over the world.

Encyclopedia America (1981) describes television as “a medium of communication which is primarily used for broadcasting visual impressions of reality through space and is the most effective medium of mass communication known to mankind. It also stated that after about eight years of development, television has made it possible for millions of people to share single experience”. An example is the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria.

Ebo (1996) stressed that “the general pattern in standard of living literacy and exposure is enhanced and affected by the media particularly, television and this effect can be positive or negative”.

McCombs (1997) et al has defined agenda setting as the process which involves the media telling us what to think about, based on their study of the media’s role in the 1968 presidential elections”. The notion of agenda setting can be traced to Walter Lippmann (1920) who pointed out that the media dominates over the creation of pictures in our minds, it is believed that the audience really do not react to actual events but to the pictures on our minds. This statement means that the media pre-determines what issues are regarded as important and at what time, in a given society.

Iyengar (1991) holds that “the mass media have a great influence on their audience because they choose what stories to consider news worthy and how much prominence and space given in respect to an event” The 2015 General Election was mostly viewed on NTA Jos station because its audience believed that the station will offer better update on the election. The mass media has a lot of avenues through which it can set agenda or give importance to an issue. The television as a medium usually gives a purposeful information to its viewers. This research work intends to concentrate on the Agenda setting role of the television with reference to NTA Jos coverage of 2015 General Elections.

**1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Every research work is based on a problem. The researcher intends to bring to fore the agenda setting role of NTA Jos in the coverage of 2015 general elections in Plateau State, and also to expatiate on how television as a visual and audio medium can be used to handle issues of paramount interest like the 2015 general elections. Therefore, this study intends to find out reasons for voters apathy during the election, particularly in relation to broadcast media sensitization of the 2015 General Elections. The researcher also intends to explain how influential television as a medium can be in information dissemination.

**1.3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The researcher aims;

1. To identify the agenda setting role of NTA Jos in the 2015 General Elections in Plateau State
2. To ascertain the level of coverage of the 2015 General Elections by NTA Jos, in Plateau State
3. To find out the efficiency of NTA Jos’ programme to the public in the coverage of 2015 General Elections in Plateau State

**1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In order to put this research work in perspective, the researcher will attempt to provide answers to the following questions;

1. What is the agenda setting role of NTA Jos in the 2015 General Elections in Plateau State?
2. What has NTA Jos been able to tell its viewers in its coverage of the 2015 General Elections in Plateau State?
3. How efficient was NTA Jos’ programme to the public during the 2015 General Elections in Plateau State??

**1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

On completion of this study, NTA Jos and other media outfits will benefit from this research work as measures on how best the media can set agenda for its audience will be suggested. The viewers will also benefit because the will be best on track as information will be relayed in its best form and there will be greater awareness and orientation on how to deepen our nascent democracy and how to go about the electioneering process.

The research upon completion shall identify the role of television in agenda setting not forgetting its academic importance because upcoming researchers and scholars will benefits from same. The research will serve as a relevant material to those who intend to carryout similar research. The research will serve as part of the campaign to emphasize the agenda setting role of television in the coverage of 2015 General Elections.

**1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

All events, circumstances and situations happen in an environment Owuamalam (2012) stated that “any area within which an event occurs is the scope of study”. He added that it delimits the area or subject from a vast area of consideration. Scope therefore makes the area of study manageable for effective research study. The researcher’s scope of study therefore, is NTA Jos.

**1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For better understanding of this research work, these theories will be used to give the research an intellectual backing. These theories are;

Agenda setting theory: This theory is concerned with the assumption that the mass media choose and emphasize selected items to which public attention is directed. The media place emphasis on news items by size and frequency of broadcasting story. The media also set agenda for political discussions and public opinions.

Agenda setting theory which was co-propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in (1972) posits that “the mass media determines the issues that are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. That means that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion: and though it may not be able to tell its readers what to think, it does tell them what to think about. In other words, our perception of the world is not only dependent on our personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for us by the media.

This theory is relevant to this research work because of the emphasis and de-emphasis potentials of the media on the issues of coverage and transmission o programme contents especially in the broadcast media. The media in this respect can choose to select such contents that strengthens democratic structures and electioneering.

Social responsibility theory: This theory was propounded by Dennis Mcquail in 1987. The theory states that the media can be used by anyone who has an idea to express but they are forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt social structure. It emphasizes the freedom of the press and places responsibility on the media practitioners to abide by certain social standard. It opposes media regulation but believes that the pas is automatically controlled by community opinion, consumer protest and professional ethics. The social responsibility theory calls on the media to be responsible for fostering productive and creative “great communities” (Baran and Davis 2003: 109), and that the media should do this by prioritizing cultural pluralism by becoming the voice all the people not just elite groups or groups that had dominated regional, national or Local culture in the past. It also points out that the media in carrying out their obligation, must adhere to the lightest ethnic standards.

This theory is relevant to this research work because, it emphasizes that the media should serve the political system by making information, discussions and consideration of public opinion generally accessible. It informs the public to enable it take self determined action and protect the rights of the individual acting as watchdog over the government.

The definition of Agenda-Setting Theory dates back to McCombs & Shaw (1972) primary article on the agenda setting function of the mass media in a Public Quarterly. In their research, they saw the media mainly the news media not able to always successful at telling the audience what to think but rather quite successful at telling them what to think about. In practical terms, agenda-setting theory deal with mass media’s ability to influence the perception of its audience and what they consider the most important issue of the day. This definition has led the format of other definitions by various communication and media scholars ; Walter Lippmann (1922), Theodore White (1972), Perloff (1998) whose views about agenda-setting likened it to power of the media to set the agenda of public discussion which determines what people will talk and think about.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) for their numerous contributions in agenda-setting research are widely viewed as the intellectual godfathers of the agenda-setting research approach. Their research has shown that the media force attention to certain issues. They also stated that by the impact the media has on its audience, they have the ability to build up public images of political figures and through their constant presentation of these people mostly during political campaigns suggest to its audience the importance of such candidates.

The media exerting such tremendous influence over its audience members uses the opportunity to mold their minds and significantly influence the flow of news and information thereby directing their thinking. In so doing, the media creates awareness through their consistent dissemination of information and news which in turn stirs the attitudes of their audience and causes them to change their behavior. Looking at the political campaign in Nigeria prior to the April general election, the PDP presidential candidate, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan was presented as a more suitable candidate by the media. In so doing, the media was able to create a significant awareness of him to the Nigerian electorate by using all means of available information to stir the attitude of Nigerians towards him and his likable personality because of his humble beginning. This perceived attitude of presenting Jonathan as a favorable candidate by the media positively influenced the opinion of Nigerian electorate as a result of which he was overwhelmingly elected the president of the nation in the April 2011 general election.

The general understanding of agenda-setting by the audience is that the media has the ability to influence the important events or what McCombs and Shaw (1972) referred to as salience events in the public mind has become part of how political influences of the media are described. In his research “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”, Lippmann argued that the media has the power to create a certain picture which registers in the head of its audience. It is by the creation of this picture that the audience makes decision as to what candidate to vote for or what news item to place importance on.

Most recently, the audience view of media power gleans from the observation of Theodore White (1972), a presidential observer whose article titled “The Making of the President” reported thus:

“The power of the press in America is a primordial one which sets the agenda of public discussion….it determines what people will talk and think about…”

The idea of agenda-setting is that the priorities of the press to some degree become the priorities of the public. In keeping with this assertion, therefore, what the press upholds and put emphasizes on is in turn upheld privately and publicly by the audience members (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The power of the media to influence issues, shape and restructure societal values, define political objectives, construct knowledge, and create symbolic reality form what Okoro (2010) referred to as the emerging corpus of communication research which indicates that the press is an influential and a significant segment of the social and political process that creates issue.

Theoretically speaking, prior to 1968 Chapel Hill, North Carolina research by McCombs and Shaw, there has been other relevant and influential theories or perspectives that account for media impact and how such impact has shaped both political attitude and behavior. As it became very prevalent after the Chapel Hill undecided voting behavior as a result of the media influence, Lippmann (1922) had analyzed data to support media impact. Trent (2008), Perloff (1988) reported that the relationship between social and economic characteristics coupled with newspaper reading habits could subsequently influence voting behavior.

Klapper (1960) theoretical perspective may have countered the hypodermic needle effect theory of the media which argued that the media had unlimited power to persuade. The hypodermic needle effect perspective likened the media messages as literally being injected into the minds of the people. Klapper, rather, argued against and in his 1940’s study began to challenge the hypodermic needle theory. He rather conceptualized a new paradigm of media effects where he asserts that media could stimulate people’s interest during elections but the media message may not have been the reason why people may have voted for one candidate against the other. Klapper’s perspective looked at another option, the opinion Leaders in the community as contributing to the behavior change in voting than the direct media message.

Cohen (1963) before agenda-setting research became an accepted methodology for studying media effects had argued that “the press may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about. The control or power of the media offers several important possibilities which will stated thus: the media can attract and direct attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favor those with power and correlatively divert attention from rival individuals or groups; it can confer status and confirm legitimacy; always is a channel for persuasion and mobilization which can help top bring certain kinds of public s into being and maintain them (Grabber, 1990). The agenda-setting theory is good looking at from the individualistic perspective because it explains why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same issues. Although different people may feel differently about the issue, however, most people feel the same issues are important. In review of Media power in elections with evidence of the role agenda-setting plays in political communication in Nigeria, data collected for this study will be analyzed to infer as to how much power the media has in influencing electorates to participate during elections. (Adebayo, 2011).

The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972/1973. The major assumption of the theory is that the media set agenda for the public to follow. The theory holds that most of the pictures we store in our heads ,most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media. The media make us to think about certain issues, they make us to think or feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society. (White, 1972).

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) points out that the theory on agenda setting by the media proposes that the public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media publicize. This means that television news choose to give the most time and space to political issues; it will become the most important item on the audiences’ minds. The implication of the theory is that television can focus on the issue of elections in Nigeria, and the people will pay attention to it, since most of the things that members of the society worry about are the issues raised by the television. (Egbuna, 2011)

Robert Hutchins (the head of Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press) once said that “Freedom requires responsibility”. If the Press would be free to publish anything, it behooves on them to be willing to accept responsibility for whatever is published. In such a case, the best theory that would be appropriate is Social Responsibility Theory. The theory is an off-shot of Libertarian Theory and was propounded by F.S. Siebert, T.B. Peterson and W. Schramm in 1963.

Historically, Social Responsibility Theory owes its origin to the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, set up in the United States of America in 1947 to re-examine the concept of Press Freedom. The Commission worked hard at developing what has become known as the Social Responsibility Theory. (Perloff, 1998). The press should service the political system, enlighten the public, safeguard the liberties of the individual, service the economic system, entertain the public (provided that the entertainment is “good”), and maintain its own financial self-sufficiency. (Graber, 1990). The Commission saw the Social Responsibility Theory as being a “safeguard against totalitarianism.” Hutchins’ main goal was to make the owners of the press responsible and still maintain freedom of the press.

This theory is relevant to the work because it focuses on the media to be careful while exercising their freedom yet remain socially responsible to members of the public as they inform, educate, entertain and persuade the audience on political and electoral issues of representation and contestation in government activities. (Okoro, 2010). The Nigerian media need to know the assumptions of the Social Responsibility Media Theory before jumping to make use of the Freedom of Information Act. McQuail, (1987) cited in Anaeto, Onabanjo, Osifeso (2008) gives the assumptions of the theory as follows: (a) That media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society. (b) That, through professional standards of information truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met. (c) That media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities. (d) That whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder, or offence to minority groups, should be avoided by the media.

According to Aghamelu (2015) the result of the traditional role of the television with respect to disseminating information, educating and entertaining its audience, the institution is the primary organ through which the politicians shall attempt to reach the optimal number of their supporters, which could also be the critically significant number required to win many an election. (Oyebade, 2003). The connection between the politician and television should therefore be contextualized from the perspective of the politician who wants to win an election, whether by hook or by crook. (Olukotun, 2003). “In the process, they would work hard to capture the attention and interest of the audience that the mass media controls”. (Aro, 2011). Somehow, this logic may have to be extended to the interest of the mass media institution, particularly the owner, as well: the primary interest of mass media, especially the more commercially oriented ones, is to remain in business and make good money; mass media business is not a charitable organization by any stretch of the imagination. (Iruonagbe, 2013).The only caveat one would however have to enter into here is that as an organization that has financial interest, it must at the same time be conscious and appreciative of the morals of the society in which it operates and, to that extent, should be able to reflect those morals as and when it enters into the symbiotic (business) relationship with the politicians. The same admonition, naturally, should apply to the (Nigerian) politicians, as well. In other words, the politician must also realize that there is always the highest value of societal solidarity, which makes it imperative that the contest for power against other political opponents should not be a license for mischief, national destabilization and anarchy. (Nnoli, 2011).

Thus, in examining the role of the television during 2015 general elections, Aghamelu (2011) asserts that what comes out clearly is the utter neglect of not only the cardinal principle of journalistic practice (see below) by all the stakeholders – the politicians and mass media institutions and their owners – but also there was a palpable assault on the above-mentioned homilies about societal solidarity and harmony. For example, brazen lies were issued out by the organizations, as much as the politicians so long it was assumed that they would score a huge political point. Before we list the glaring negativities that characterized the political campaigns and electoral processes, it is pertinent to note that the ultimate essence for the acquisition of political power is not for its own sake, but for the higher and nobler objective of rendering services, adding value to the existential conditions of the people that may have given the mandate to the political leadership. Simply put, acquisition of power is for national development. (Nnoli, 2011)

The 2015 General Elections could easily be described as the most rancorous, most threatening to Nigeria’s territorial integrity, and the most empty of ideological content, but full of personal abuses as well as the potentials for personal vendetta. This scenario was particularly between the presidential candidates of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). The two candidates were obviously the leading candidates during the elections and it was estimated that, if the pendulum would swing, it was going to be between the two of them and this was eventually confirmed by the results of the elections, at the end of the day, the APC candidate won the election. (Aghamelu, 2015).

**1.8 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

**Agenda Setting**: This is mass media theory which was co-pounded by Dr. Max McCombs and Dr Donald Shaw in 1968. The theory is of the assumption that the mass media does not just tell its audience what to think, but what ethnic to think about. This, the mass media achieve by placing emphasis on a particular news story or event.

**Coverage**: This is a situation where a media outfit, whether radio, television, newspaper, magazine; e.t.c follows a particular event and talks about it.

**General Election**: This is simply the formal way of decision making, by which a population chooses an individual to hold a public office to represent them and this is typical of a democratic setting.

**Audience:** These are the people who the media targets at the audience are people who view and listen to the media content.

**Television**: This is an electronic medium of communication that combines both audio and visual techniques.

**Electronic media**: These are broadcast or storage media that take advantage of electronic technology and they include Radio, television, internet, fax, CD-ROMS, DVD and any other medium that requires electricity or digital encoding of information.

**NTA**: This is the acronym for Nigerian Television Authority. It is broadcast media outfit that has only the television arm and is located in Plateau State and neighbouring stales of Kaduna, Bauchi, Nassarawa, Taraba e.t.c.