



## Newspaper Headlines as a Tool for Political Propaganda in Nigeria's 2015 General Elections: The Sun Newspaper in Focus

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### **Abstract**

In spite of the continuous blossoming on new media, the newspaper is still seen by most Nigerians as a credible and reliable means of disseminating information. Millions of Nigerians look forward to the print newspaper every morning to keep abreast of recent happenings in the country. However, many Nigerians do not, in fact, buy a paper; they merely scan through the headlines from which they guess the contents of the story and are fast in drawing conclusions on the issues in the news. Propaganda and negative stories about political opponents are staple features in electioneering campaigns. Nigerian newspaper readers have the characteristic of scanning newspaper headlines and politicians effectively have played into this tendency to brand opponents negatively, based on half-truths and inadequate information. This paper examined headlines in *The Sun* newspaper and their potential as a tool for political propaganda during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Data for this study were generated from *The Sun Newspaper* headlines published between December, 2014 and April, 2015. This content analysis was triangulated with a (limited) survey of readers in the greater Calabar area of Cross River State (comprising, Calabar South, Calabar Municipal and Akpabuyo Local Government Areas). Findings from the study revealed that propaganda those not have much effects on readers of newspaper as well as their choices as voters.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Newspapers, Headlines, Electioneering campaigns. Voter choices

## **Introduction**

Propaganda is an attempt to influence an audience through mass communication that usually involves total control of the transmission of information and that is often done without the audience knowing who is actually controlling the media message (Palvik & McIntosh 2013). Elections into any political office is always characterized by series of events from the time of the campaigns to when the elections are over, especially through the use of mass communication, one of such characteristic is the use of propaganda by the propagandist for his/her benefits to make any of them emerge as winners. Propaganda is one of the strategies used by political parties to convince voters to vote for their candidates. One of the characteristics of propaganda is the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses which is reflected in a democratic society. Jowett & O'Donnell (2012) define propaganda "as a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". The reason why most politicians use propaganda is for their own intent, to give information (most times negative) about their political opponents all to influence the voters and their choices when voting. This however, does not happen with one or two messages on the media; it involves the continuous use of various kinds of messages over several months in the course of a political campaign.

Newspaper is one of the fastest ways information is disseminated in Nigeria, as millions of Nigerians look forward to the papers every morning to see issues that are trending. *Sun* Newspaper is one of the leading newspapers in Nigeria as they distribute up to 130,000 copies daily and 135,000 weekend titles with an average of 80% sales. During the period of general elections in Nigeria, ardent readers and even passive readers flock to vendors to see (scan through or read) the latest stories on political Aspirants and their various political parties. Most Nigerians do not even have time to read this papers, all they do is scan to see what the headlines say and that is all the information they get concerning that particular story. Headlines have a lot to say

about the entire story, as many Nigerians reach conclusions by mere looking at the headlines.

Since millions of Nigerians see the newspapers at the dawn of each new day, propagandists use the newspaper as one of the fastest ways to reach their audience. Propaganda is widely believed as a deliberate spread of rumors, information and ideas to harm or demote a person and present the person in a negative light. Wilson (2002), projects one of the characteristics of propaganda as persuasion. He asserts that it is one of the form by which most political parties operate, Wilson further listed two more characteristics of propaganda as manipulative and controlling, this opinion is also shared by O'Sullivan *et. al* (1983) where it is seen as 'intentional control, manipulation' and by Watson and Hill (2000) who call propaganda a 'deliberate manipulation'. Politicians use these three characteristics mentioned above, to persuade their readers on why the other opponents is bad and theirs' is good, they also use propaganda to manipulate the minds (since propaganda is often associated with psychological mechanisms of influencing and altering the attitude of a population towards a specific cause) of their readers and thereby controlling their emotions and leading to their eventual choices. It is in view of all of this that this work will examine the use of propaganda by politician in the *Sun* Newspaper. Also, this paper sought to find out if this propaganda eventually influences voter's choices.

### **Statement of the problem**

Newspaper is one of the most reliable means of disseminating information in Nigeria, in spite of the continuous blossoming of new media. A lot of Nigerians look forward to the print newspaper every morning to keep abreast of recent happenings in the country. In most cases, many Nigerians do not, buy a paper; they merely scan the headlines from which they guess the contents of the story and are fast in drawing conclusions on the issues in the news.

Propaganda and negative stories about political opponents are staple features in electioneering campaigns. Since politicians are aware of

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the scanning characteristics of most Nigerian readers, they use it to their own advantage to spread propaganda about their opponents. The above therefore, raised questions such as – to what extent do voters/readers of this news rely on the information they see on these headlines and if their voting choices were influenced by these headlines.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To find out how readers of Sun Newspaper perceived the headlines on the 2015 general elections in Nigeria
2. To determine the extent of the effect of propaganda on readers.
3. To know if this propaganda on headlines influenced choice in the 2015 general elections
4. What extent readers of Sun Newspaper rely on the information they get on Sun Newspaper concerning issues on the 2015 general elections
5. To find out if readers will read the entire story of a particular headline or base their judgement by mere looking at the headline.

### **Research questions**

1. How did readers on Sun Newspaper perceive headlines on news covering the 2015 general elections
2. To what extent are readers influenced by the propaganda headlines?
3. How did this propaganda on newspaper headline influence voter's choice?
4. How reliable is the coverage of Sun Newspaper on issues bothering on the election?
5. Will readers give judgment by mere looking at headlines?

### **Significance of the study**

This study is important because election has become a phenomenon in Nigeria as general elections are held once in four years and some other election sometimes every year at different levels. The use of propaganda has also become a phenomenon that is trending in our nation's politicking. The propagandist uses any medium of his/her choice to defame the other opponent, making him/her a bad person in the face of electorates. This work will reveal the use of propaganda by politicians in the 2015 general election. From the survey on readers of Sun Newspaper, it will also reveal the effect this propaganda has on voter's choice.

### **Literature Review**

At the beginning, propaganda was used by politicians during electioneering campaigns as a means of persuasion by political parties to canvass support from voters, however, in our society today, it often seems authorless and geared towards tarnishing the image of the opponent. According to Adidi, (2002) propaganda is the calculated dissemination of partisan ideas with the intent of influencing groups' attitudes and opinions, several researches on the use of propaganda by politicians have revealed the intentional use of propaganda to influence the voters. Wilson (2005, p.84-85) also asserts that to the politician, propaganda is a legitimate tool which may employed to advance his interest which he believes coincides with that of the ordinary people even when it is not so.

In an attempt to understand propaganda and how politicians use it to their advantage, many researchers and scholars have tied the concept as it is used negatively, Wilson (2005) points that propaganda has merits and demerits. Politicians, advertisers, organizations and even government use it to achieve their desirable end. In Nigeria, the negative aspects of propaganda tends to be more familiar with the media and the public.

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In a study on elections in Nigeria, Adebisi and Salaudeen (2016, p. 215-216) quoting (Newsome et al 2010, AbdKabir 2014 and Corson 2012) identified different techniques of propaganda to be:

1. **Name calling:** This is the strategy of giving an idea a bad label. It can be used positively or negatively, the sole aim is to make the audience reject and condemn the idea even without examining the evidence.
2. **Glittering generalities:** This strategy is used to give the false impression that something that is attractive is necessarily the best.
3. **Transfer:** This propaganda technique is used to substitute and associate certain qualities (positive or negative) with another person, group, event or thing to give it some credibility.
4. **Testimonial:** Usually used in advertising, here the propagandist employs the credibility of well-known and respectable persons to support his claim to acceptability.
5. **Plain folks:** Here the propagandist uses the down-to-earth appeal to convince a person or public that a candidate is one of the people. The plain folk devices portrays the politician as one who cares and feels for the people.
6. **Card stacking:** This technique is used when a propagandist draws attention to the positive qualities and deliberately stacking the other.
7. **Bandwagon:** This is used to convince and persuade the audience that since all members of a group which they belong to accept the propagandist programme, they must therefore follow the bandwagon. The trust here is that 'everyone is doing it...so join them'.
8. **Emotional stereotype:** This device is used when the propagandist withholds information that would correct false impression.
9. **Subversive rhetoric:** It is used to discredit a person's motivation in order to discredit the idea which may be good result.

Unarguably, the 2015 general election in Nigeria was characterized by the use of hate speeches and massive propaganda between the two

most prominent contenders – the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives congress (APC). They employed most of this strategies listed above and in different media during the period of the 2015 electioneering campaigns. The focus of this paper however, is the propaganda messages contained in the *Sun Newspaper*.

### **Role of the media in the 2015 general elections**

The role of the media during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised, as it played the role of sensitizing and mobilizing the people for election. The media over the years have played the functions of educating, informing, and entertaining the society. The mass media and new media were used by political parties to engage in campaigns to convince the citizens and give them reasons to elect them into representative offices (Okon and Okogbule 2016).

Ogwezzy- Ndisika (2014) Olokutun (2014), buttressing the role of the media during elections echoed that the role of the media during election is immense and indispensable. They provide the electorates with unbiased information as it pertains to political parties, candidates, the voting process and other elections-related matters. The media was used not only to provide information, mobilize, educate the voters about the electoral process but for propaganda and propagate hatred against their opponents. Since the patronage of the media is usually high during the elections periods, the two powerful contenders - PDP and APC used the media to their advantage to send out messages, in an attempt to sway the minds of the electorates from their opponents’ side to theirs. Since its inception in 1859, the Nigerian press has been responsible for setting the agenda for the issues to be discussed during elections. The newspapers have helped to empower Nigerians to make intelligent decisions on the candidates to vote for.

## **Theoretical framework**

Two theories are relevant to this study – one of them is the Magic Bullets Theory and the second is Selectivity Theory. Some of the earliest media effects research was conducted in order to better understand how people were persuaded by mass communication. The magic bullet theory is known by different names by different authors, Schramm 1971 describes it as the “hypodermic-needle theory” while Berlo 1960 calls it “stimulus-response”. This theory states that every member of the audience receives media messages in a uniform way and that immediate and direct responses are triggered by such stimuli (Daramola 2003). This theory further explains how the audience react automatically to media messages they receive and how vulnerable they are to the messages. This theory is relevant to this study because readers/voters receive all kinds of messages on the print media bothering on the 2015 general election and react to the messages almost immediately by their further actions.

According to Folarin (2015), the theory of selectivity explains selective exposure, perception and retention. People deliberately expose themselves to messages which they have interest in while those that are against their beliefs are not sought after. After the messages might have been seen, heard or read, the individuals perceive the messages in the light of their individual idiosyncrasies. Selective retention upholds the fact that an individual remembers messages that are favourable to his beliefs and norms than those that are unfavourable. This theory is also applicable to this work since the readers/voters have their choice of candidates which will determine their selective exposure, perception and retention of the various propaganda messages as seen in the Sun Newspaper.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted using two methods: survey research method and content analysis. Wimmer and Dominic (2006) assert that professional pollsters use survey research method regularly to survey the electorate and learn their opinions on candidates or issues. Survey



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design help in investigating problems in a realistic way. Questionnaire copies were designed to elicit information from respondents, a total of 100 copies were distributed – 50 were taken to two different newspaper Vendors one in Calabar South (Atu by Goldie newspaper Vendor) and the other in Calabar Municipality (Atekong junction), this two Vendors stand were selected because at every time of the day, especially the morning hours you will find a number of persons there either reading or scanning through different newspapers. The remaining copies were distributed to Lecturers and Post Graduate students in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Calabar, who are mostly exposed to Sun Newspaper, as daily the department gets supply of the paper from one of her generous students who works with Sun Newspaper. Ninety questionnaire copies were retrieved from respondents and are used for the analysis using simple percentages.

**DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS Table 1: DECEMBER 2014**

| <b>S/NO</b> | <b>Headlines</b>                                 | <b>VOL</b> | <b>NO</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| 1.          | Presidency: Southeast plans third forces         | 10         | 3026      |
| 2.          | Eze, Peterside, Umana, Emerhor pick APC tickets  | 10         | 3028      |
| 3.          | 2015 Senate race: Bigwigs crash out              | 10         | 3029      |
| 4.          | PDP guber: Ugwuanyi, Ihedioha ,Idike, Ayade wins | 10         | 3030      |
| 5.          | Obasanjo on rampage                              | 10         | 3031      |
| 6.          | APC Governor give it to Buhari- Atiku fights on  | 10         | 3032      |
| 7.          | APC Ticket –why Buhari got it                    | 10         | 3033      |
| 8.          | Detention Rocks PDP members in Bayelsa ,Enugu.   | 10         | 3034      |
| 9.          | Buhari: How we will pick running mate – APC      | 10         | 3034      |
| 10.         | Ebonyi boils: Thugs attack Deputy Speaker<br>174 | 10         | 3055      |
| 11.         | Why I picked Osubanjo as running mate- APC       | 10         | Online    |
| 12.         | Buhari opens up on Obasanjo                      | 10         | 3037      |

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|      |                                                                                                |  |     |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|-----|
| 13.  | 2015: Can Jonathan do another term?<br>Jonathan<br>Jonathan will defeat Buhari 2015-<br>Mimiko |  | Net |
| 14.  | PDP moves for reconciliation in Imo                                                            |  | Net |
| 15.. | Court stops INEC                                                                               |  |     |

**TABLE 1 SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES**

This Table is a display of political news headlines for the month of December, 2014 only, column A. Headline news items, column B- volumes and number of the newspaper editions. The table shows that, of the one hundred and fifty-one (151) total headlines, fifteen (15) of these, which is 9.93% were political news items.

**Table 2 : JANUARY 2015**

| S/N | Headlines                                 | NO | VOL NO |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|----|--------|
| 1.  | Seven shot as Buhari flags off campaign   | 10 | 3051   |
| 2.  | Men plot to kill me – Jonathan            | 10 | 3053   |
| 3.  | Buhari exposed his education career       | 11 | 3069   |
| 4.  | Apc alleges postpone elections.           | 10 | 3054   |
| 5.  | PRESIDENCY: Candidate I will vote for IBB | 10 | 3055   |
| 6.  | Jonathan, Buhari sign peace pact          | 10 | 3057   |
| 7.  | CAMPAIGN FIREWORKS                        | 10 | 3058   |
| 8.  | PDP Governors panic over Buhari           | 10 | 614    |
| 9.  | PDP,APC fights dirty                      | 10 | 3068   |
| 10. | 8 PDP Governors, APC in secret pact       | 12 | 630    |

**TABLE 2 SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES**

Table 2 indicate that of the 151 total items, 10 of these were political news headlines, representing 6.62% of the headlines in this table, for the month of January, 2015, were more of campaigns and election related issues.

**Table 3: FEBUARY 2015**

| S/N | HEADLINES | NO | VOL NO |
|-----|-----------|----|--------|
|-----|-----------|----|--------|

|     |                                                                  |    |      |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| 1.  | We are ready for elections – INEC                                | 10 | 3073 |
| 2.  | I see Bloodshed – Cardinal Okojie                                | 10 | 631  |
| 3.  | Why we shifted polls – JEGA                                      | 10 | 616  |
| 4.  | Buhari blasts PDP, INEC                                          | 10 | 3074 |
| 5.  | Jonathan plots to extend tenure                                  | 10 | 617  |
| 6.  | Obasanjo under fire                                              | 10 | 3079 |
| 7.  | Obasanjo: I quit!                                                | 10 | 3080 |
| 8.  | Bullets scatter APC campaign                                     | 10 | 3081 |
| 9.  | Breaking News: AKS, Labour party in crisis                       | 10 | 3082 |
| 10. | No election until Jega quits- Ezeije                             | 10 | 618  |
| 11. | 78% and counting: percentage of registered voters with PVC- INEC | 10 | 3089 |

**TABLE 3 SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES**

This Table displays political headlines for the month of February. It shows that, of the 151 total headline news items, 11 were purely political, representing 7.28% of the periods under consideration. Items in this table, for the month, were more of election violence and political opposition i.e. election related issues.

**TABLE 4: MARCH 2015**

| S/N | HEADLINES                                                  | NO | VOL NO |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------|----|--------|
| 1.  | Lagos PDP cautions Jonathan on Obanikoro’s appointment     | 10 | 3091   |
| 2.  | Jega dares protesters                                      | 10 | 3100   |
| 3.  | Jonathan push ahead of Buhari 7-0                          | 10 | 3105   |
| 4.  | APC demands cancelation of elections in Enugu and Akwaibom | 10 | 623    |

**TABLE 4 SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES**

Four (4) news headlines, of the 151 total headlines for period were strictly political in the month of March as shown in Table 5. This represented 2.64% of the total items of the periods under consideration.

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**Table 5:APRIL 2015**

| <b>S/N</b> | <b>TABLE SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES</b>                         | <b>NO</b> | <b>VOL NO</b> |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 1.         | I won't witch-hunt Jonathan                                      | 10        | 3112          |
| 2.         | Wind of change sweeps Onoji, Dr. Oyigeya into APC.               | 10        | 3115          |
| 3.         | INEC declares Taraba election Inconclusive                       | 10        | 3120          |
| 4.         | AKWA-NASS caucus seek fresh polls                                | 12        | 641           |
| 5.         | Ghana President canvasses use of card readers in other countries | 10        | 3128          |
| 6.         | Reschedule elections, be sure of level playing field (IGP)       | 12        | 642           |

### **TABLE 5 SHOWING POLITICAL HEADLINES**

Of the 151 total headlines news for the periods considered, this table shows that only six (6) news items representing 3.97% were political. The items in this table were more of informative and awareness creation.

An agreeable of the news items, political news only shows that, of the 151 total news headlines, a total of forty-six were purely political, representing 30.46% for the periods of December, 2014 to April, 2015. What this means is that, the other fraction is shared by other news items, leaving approximately 30% of it to political related.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

From the 100 questionnaire copies distributed to the respondents, 90 questionnaire copies which represents 90% were returned and all were duly completed.

#### ***RQ 1: How did readers on Sun Newspaper perceive headlines on news covering the 2015 general elections?***

This question was asked to find out how readers of Sun Newspaper perceive all the headlines bothering on election issues. Question 4 of the questionnaire is used to answer RQ1. The readers responses show that Sun Newspaper headlines are very convincing and influential, 32

(35.5%) agree while 17 (18.8%), disagrees, while only 4 (4.4%) strongly agree that the headlines are convincing and influential. This is line with one of the characteristics of propaganda: propaganda are originally intended to convince the readers of what the propagandist have in mind. However, 25 of the 90 (27.7%) remained neutral and would not say anything. Although, 35.5% agree to the influential quality of newspaper headlines, their position is not totally firm, it could waiver.

***RQ 2: To what extent are readers influenced by the propaganda headlines?***

Question 6 of the questionnaire answers the request question 2. From the results, 34 representing 37.7% strongly agree, 40 of 90 (44.4%), 7 of 90 (7.77%) disagree while 3 of 90 (3.33%) strongly disagree with the notion that propaganda have an effect on readers. From the above, it could be deduced that the people expose themselves to certain media messages that are of interest to them. After they must have read these messages, the individual perceives the message and are eventually influenced by them. This is in collaboration with the position of Wilson (2002) as he points out that one of the elements of propaganda is its' manipulative nature. One of the reasons why politicians use propaganda is to manipulate the minds of their readers towards achieving their own goal.

***RQ 3: How did this propaganda on newspaper headline influence voter's choice?***

Question 8 of the questionnaire is used together with RQ 3 to investigate how propaganda in news headlines influence voter's choice. From the results, 12 of 90(13.3%) said their choices were often controlled by newspaper headlines covering election issues, 36 of 90 (40%) said the headlines they saw totally influence their choices during the voting process, 28 of 90 (31.1%) said they voted for the candidates of their choice not because of what they saw on the newspaper headlines. i.e. they were not persuaded in any way by newspaper headlines., while 14 of 90 respondents (15.5%) were neutral. By these figures, it means that only 40% of the respondents are convinced by the newspaper headlines and this conviction was

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with some level of reservation. The percentage of the voters that were influenced by the headlines was relatively small, even though it cannot be ignored.

The results of this research shows that political propaganda had very little significance in the elections, as voters went out to vote on personal conviction. This means that no matter the kind of media messages readers are exposed to, they only retain that which appeals to their idiosyncrasies and thereafter, act on it.

### ***RQ 4: How reliable is the coverage of sun newspaper on issues bothering on the election?***

Question 9 borders on the truth or false values of newspaper headlines Respondent differ on the question whether all the headline concerning candidate vied for elective offices were true. In summary, 8 of 90 (8.88%) strongly agreed, 23 of 90(25.5%) agreed, 16 of 90(17.7) refused to take side i.e. did not agreed nor disagreed. Thirty-five (35 Of 90) representing 38.8% disagreed with the statement, while 8 of 90 (8.88%) strongly disagreed with the statement. However, 38.8% of respondents feel that newspaper headlines on election issues are not reliable, and as such, might not have been taken seriously.

### ***RQ 5: Will readers give judgement by mere looking at headlines?***

Questions 10 &11 together with RQ5 are used to ascertain if readers give judgement by just looking at newspaper headlines. The Table shows that, in answer to question 10, 9 of 90 (10%) strongly agree that they make judgements upon looking at the headlines, 45 of 90 (50%) agree that they look at the headlines and pass judgement without having a firm decision about it, 12 of 90 (13.3%) of respondents remained neutral about it, 20 of 90 (22.22%), 4 of 90 (4.44%). From the figures, more persons agree that they make instant judgement on seeing headlines, especially shouting headlines like the Sun newspaper. Politicians use propaganda in newspaper because they are aware of the nature of most Nigerians who read the papers – they are aware that most Nigerians do have time to read entire stories of some headlines, so they use the headlines to grab and send a

message into the minds of readers about the negative qualities of their opponents. They are also aware that newspaper headlines make up to 80% of newspaper discussions of the day, so the best way to spread negative rumours about their opponent is by using propaganda on headlines.

### **Conclusion**

Political propaganda is a tool politicians use during election period in Nigeria, but its application does not solely depend on the number of media messages sent and the kind of media used but on some other factors. Propagandist should be aware of the fact that negative propaganda messages will not change popular opinions as most Nigerians are conscious of the fact that it is merely propaganda. The results of this research show that propaganda does not have much effect on voter's choices, as most Nigerians see voting as a way to exercise their civil responsibility by voting for the candidates of their choice with or without propaganda.

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