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# **ONLINE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF THE 8TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

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CHAPTER  
EIGHT

**ONLINE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE AND  
AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF THE  
8TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

*Khadijat Adedeji Olona & Agboola Lateef Odesanya*

**Introduction**

By providing the platform for keeping in touch with the realities of our lives and existence, the media are crucial to societal communicative activities at both micro and macro levels (Ekeanyanwu, 2007). Aside from performing information, education and entertainment roles, the media shape the society's socio-political direction through prioritisation of issues for public discourse and action (Embu & Nwadiigwe, 2009). During elections and political campaigns, for instance, the media influence the salience of issues in the public sphere. A plethora of empirical evidences supports the influence of media on public opinion and voting behaviour (McNair, 2000).

Since the first research on agenda setting by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968, mass media have been found to be very effective in shaping the behaviour of the electorate (McCombs, 2003). Underscoring the importance of the reality-defining role of the media in a democratic political system, Sampson (1996, cited in McNair (2000)), posits that a mature democracy depends on having an educated electorate, informed and connected through parliament. The media, McNair (2000) asserts, help in informing the electorate and as noted by Greene (1964, cited in Aliagan 2006), unless the people are assured of news that they can trust, a democratic government cannot successfully be administered.

With its potential to break away from the 'top down' flow of information characteristic of traditional mass media, (Fulya, 2012), the advent of the new media has no doubt changed extant perspectives on mass communication. Online newspapers, as an important part of the new media, provide means for the establishment of almost unlimited access to different voices and feedback between leaders and followers. They also allow for dialogue between politicians and active citizens thus providing an arena for public discourse and the formation of public opinion (McQuail, 2005).

### **Problem Statement**

Questions concerning the impact of the mass media on society are as old as the media themselves. Opposing views and conflicting research results have led to different conclusions ranging from minimal effects to powerful effects. A careful observer cannot but notice the gulf between the Nigerian legislators and the public. This poses a great threat to the country's growing democracy. And since the media mediate between the parliament and the public, the need to study the public perception of the parliament based on their online newspapers exposure becomes important in feeding back the parliament with what the public perceives of it. Therefore, this study attempted to determine the level of correlation between what online newspapers report about the 8<sup>th</sup> Nigerian National Assembly and what the people think of it.

### **Research Objectives / Questions**

The overall goal of this study was to compare online reportage of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly with its perception among tertiary institutions' students. It specifically sought to:

- Determine the prominent issues raised in the selected online newspapers about the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.
- Find out the issues considered important to the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly by students of tertiary institutions.
- Examine the relationship between parliamentary reports in online newspapers (media agenda) and issues awareness of Nigerian tertiary institutions' students (public agenda) about the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

To achieve these broad objectives, the study has answered the following questions:

1. What are the prominent issues raised in selected online newspapers about the 8<sup>th</sup> national assembly?
2. What are the issues considered important to the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly by students of tertiary institutions in Osun State?
3. What is the relationship between parliamentary reports in online newspapers (Media Agenda) and issues awareness of Nigerian tertiary institutions' students (public agenda) about the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly?

## **Research Hypothesis**

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive correlation between media agenda and public agenda of the Nigerian National Assembly.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The following, which constitute the focal concepts for this study, are highlighted below:

### **Media Agenda**

Media Agenda is used to refer to the prioritization of issues in the media, usually achieved through repeated news coverage and measured by prominence and length of stories. The Media Agenda, according to Miller (2005), is the set of topics addressed by media sources. Putting this in the correct perspective, Paletz and Entman (1983), cited in Darah (2010:5), observe thus:

Much of what most adults learn about government its institutions and members, their activities, decisions, defects, strengths, capabilities stems from the mass media. The self-same media have the power to decide which issues will be brought before the public... by dint of the subjects they cover (and do not cover) and the ways they structure them, the mass media tell Americans what to think about, how to think about it, sometimes even what to think...

By the way and manner the media report events and activities within the society, they set the agenda for people to think about. The media have the sole prerogative to decide what should be brought into limelight and what not to and so, what we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us. More specifically, the result of this mediated view of the world is that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public (McCombs, 2004). The media serve as models from which members of the public take cues for meaning-making of a myriad of events occurring on a daily basis.

The Chapel Hill study readily comes to mind here. In it, McCombs and Shaw measured the media agenda by establishing position and length of story as the two main criteria of prominence (Griffin, 2009: 360)

With respect to the study at hand, the media agenda of the selected online newspapers is found in their respective patterns of coverage of the National Assembly between the periods of *June 9 when the assembly was inaugurated and August 10, 2015*. Over this period of time, the reports about the National Assembly, depending on their placements/positioning in selected online newspapers, received varying degrees of emphases/prominence.

## **Public Agenda**

By the way they perceive issues, the public also has a list of issues that vary in ranking on their minds. This is called the public issues agenda. The public agenda is used to refer to the focus of public attention. It generally refers to the issues' ranking by members of the public, the most important public issues as measured by opinion surveys (Griffin, 2009: 361). According to Miller (2005: 270), the Public Agenda is the set of topics that members of the public believe is important. More often than not, the Public Issues Agenda is usually got from the Media Agenda, hence, the similarity in both. The media have a substantial influence on the content of the public agenda. Therefore, issues are perceived to be important by members of the public, only to the extent that the media confer importance on them through persistence emphasis. The media thus have the ability to transfer the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda (Griffin, 2009).

## **The Nigerian 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly**

Nigeria's present-day National Assembly / Legislature, which is the apex law-making body in the country has its origin in the colonial era, especially when the powers of the executive councils of the then Lagos colony were reduced to the status of a Legislature that can only make laws without implementation (Fagbohun, 2010: 50).

The Nigerian Parliament is statutorily known as the National Assembly; it is one of the three arms of government the Executive and Judiciary are two others. The Assembly reflects bicameralism, which simply means that there are two legislative houses a Senate and a House of Representatives respectively obviously modeled after the American legislative structure. The Senate comprises one hundred and nine (109) members (3 from each of the 36 states of the federation and 1 from Abuja), while there are three hundred and sixty (360) members in the House of Representatives. The term of the National Assembly is four years from the date of its first sitting after the general elections. The current Assembly, which was inaugurated on 9th June, 2015, is the eight in the country's post-independence legislative history. The Senate is chaired by the President of the Nigerian Senate while The House of Representatives is led by the Speaker.

The statutory duties and functions of the Nigerian Parliament derive from the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which makes it the only organ able to legislate for the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and in which the nation's legislative sovereignty resides. The Nigerian Constitution, in Section 4 (subsections 1, 2, 3 & 4), which is in its Part II, states thus:

The legislative powers of the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be vested in a National Assembly for the Federation, which shall consist of a Senate and a House of Representatives. The National Assembly shall have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Federation or any part

thereof with respect to any matter included in the Exclusive Legislative List set out in Part I of the Second Schedule to this Constitution. The power of the National Assembly to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Federation with respect to any matter included in the Exclusive Legislative List shall, save as otherwise provided in this Constitution, be to the exclusion of the Houses of Assembly of States.

Specifically, the provisions of Section 4 of the Nigerian Constitution give to the Assembly distinct legislative powers separating it from those exercisable by the States' Houses of Assembly, whose powers cover only matters in the Concurrent Legislative List, and thus, can only make laws for their respective states, which by the provision in Section 4 (5) of the Constitution, must be consistent with, and are subject to, those made by the National Assembly.

The activities of both chambers of the National Assembly have however been characterized by leadership controversies triggered off at its inauguration and extended to its early days.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is explicated within the frameworks of two theories: the Agenda-Setting Theory, because of the need to establish the relationship between the media agenda and public agenda of the legislative arm of the Nigerian government; and the Issue-Attention Cycle Theory, which Peterson (2009: 2) believes has the potential to contribute to understanding of the relationship between the public and policymakers over critical issues.

### **Agenda Setting**

The idea that people respond to “pictures” in their heads rather than dealing directly with their environment, according to Bostick (2005) was first introduced by Walter Lippmann (1922). These pictures are on many occasions offered to the public by the media (Sparks, 2006). The symbolic description of real world and mediated world by the phrases 'the world outside' and 'the pictures in our heads' became the philosophical foundation of agenda-setting theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In reference to this, Cohen (1963) states thus: The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think* but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about* (cited in Sparks, 2006: 176).

Agenda Setting, according to Zhu and Blood (1997), is a process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues (Miller, 2005; 271). The agenda setting function of the media is the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind (Severin & Tankard, 2010; 219). In the Agenda Setting process, the priority of issues to be discussed in the media (the media agenda) is determined; the media agenda in some way affects what policy makers consider important (policy agenda) (Littlejohn, 2002:320). In other words, the

media agenda affects the public agenda and the public agenda in turn affects the policy agenda. In other words, Agenda Setting studies like this, as noted by McCombs (2004), investigate the transfer of salience from the media to the public (Griffin, 2009: 359).

The Agenda Setting Theory is appropriate for this study because of the need to establish the relationship between the media agenda and public agenda of the legislative arm of the Nigerian government.

### **The Issue-Attention Cycle Theory**

The level of attention that members of any public accords an issue hardly remains as strong as it usually is initially it fades with time. In other words, the public's focus of attention is much like a cycle, which has different points, bends and turns. Hardly exhaustive are studies on the rate at which the public's interest in and attention to certain issues may fade just after their expression of concerns about given issues in society. Contextually couched in the public opinion research tradition, Anthony Down's theory assumes that public attention to an issue follows an issue-attention cycle through which members of the public become aware of issues, with this interest petering out eventually. According to Down (1972), public attention rarely remain sharply focused on any single domestic issue for a long period, no matter how crucial, significant or relevant the matter may seem to society. Down adds that the public may stop paying significant level attention even if it involves a continuing issue of crucial importance to society: it simply fades off public attention.

What works on the consciousness of the public regarding issues, according to Down (1972: 2), lies in what he called an 'issues-attention cycle', with which he offers insight into how long public attention is likely to remain sufficiently focused on any given issue until it generates enough pressure to cause actions aimed at effectively changing the status quo. As Down notes, the cycle functions in five stages that may vary in duration depending on the particular issue involved. The stages occur in the following sequence:

Pre-problem stage: This is the point of what Down calls 'highly undesirable social conditions' (p. 2) in society, but where much public attention to the situation has not yet arisen. However, certain interest groups or experts are already aware of the condition/situation. Down opines that the objective conditions of the developing social problem are usually worse at this stage than they are by the time the social problem gains public interest or attention. In the opinion of Soroka (1999: 2) Down's theory deals almost exclusively with trends in public opinion, although he (Down) suggests that policy makers are affected by the public and believes that the mass media have a potential leading role in ensuring that issue salience in the mass media should lead to issue salience for policy makers (such as the Nigerian National Assembly).

Stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm: Down calls this the stage where a series of dramatic events (such as widespread violence) forces the public into sudden awareness and alarm regarding the social problem. This alarmed discovery is invariably accompanied by euphoric enthusiasm about society's ability to solve the problem (Down, 1972: 2).

Stage of realising the cost of significant progress: Having been alarmed to the problem, gradually a realisation spreads concerning the huge financial and personal costs to be borne in 'solving' it. Thus, the public begin to believe that part of the problem stems from the way the society is currently arranged to benefit some large number while leaving out others, and so will need to be re-arranged so that certain benefits can go round the society. For example, reducing traffic congestion and smog will mean reduction in the number of vehicles on the road, a decision that has implications for citizens' whose movements rely on such vehicles (Down, 1972: 3).

Stage of gradual decline of intense public interest: Resulting from the third stage of cost of solving the problem, the fourth stage ushers in a gradual decline in the levels of interest and attention that the public now accord the problem. Besides, as more people realise how personally difficult and costly that solving the problem will be, three reactions surge from them: discouragement, feeling positively threatened by thinking about the problem, and boredom with the issue/problem. And these reactions finally 'push' the problem off public interest as new issues emerge.

The post-problem stage: At this final stage in the cycle, a problem, which already has been replaced by newer ones, enters into 'limbo' (p.3), the realm of lesser attention and interest from the public. However, the 'limboed' problem now has a different relation to public attention than it did at the first stage, the pre-problem stage (Down, 1972: 3).

The issue-attention cycle is relevant to this study because, as Peterson (2009: 2) believes, it has the potential to contribute to understanding of the relationship between the public and policymakers over critical issues.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

The first studies in agenda setting revolved around the relationship between the mass media and the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study of the U.S. presidential election empirically tested the hypothesis of transfer of issue salience from media to public opinion. Two sets of data were compared, a description of the public agenda through the ordered set of issues of the greatest concern, and a description of issue agenda in nine major news sources (involving a combination of newspapers, television networks, and magazines). The researchers found a nearly perfect correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda on five issues: Foreign policy, law and order, economic, public



welfare, and civil rights (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This study sprouted a number of other empirical investigations testing the phenomenon. For instance, in their Danish study of influence of political broadcast on the electorate cited in Littlejohn, (2002: 320), Siune and Borre recorded and analysed the whole of political broadcast, including debates made within three weeks prior to the election and in addition interviewed about 1,300 voters at various points in the campaign to establish public agenda. The study found much persistence in the public agenda, but there was also some persuasion in the sense that the broadcasts somewhat seemed to affect the public agenda. It found out that there was a fair agenda setting from the reporters and from the politicians themselves (Littlejohn, 2002:320). The Danish study evokes another question about agenda setting as to who actually sets the agenda.

Similarly, while focusing on the Spanish 1996 regional and municipal elections, McCombs et al (2000), cited in Roessler (2010), found that newspapers, TV news, and political advertising greatly influenced the voters' image of parliamentary candidates. In the study, media coverage was compared with voters' descriptions of political candidates for substantive attributes (e.g. issue position, integrity, personality). A media correlation of 0.72 was found between the two.

However, it has been observed that setting the media agenda takes a lot of time. In other words, the media are only able to transfer the salience of issues to the public mind by repeated coverage. For instance, Lang and Lang (1983), cited in Bostick (2005), found that Watergate required months of coverage before it became part of public agenda, and finally government action, and then policy formation.

## **Method**

This study is a quantitative research, which emphasizes measurement and allows observations to be subjected to statistical analysis. The Survey and Content Analysis Methods were adopted for this study. The two methods were combined in order to give room for correlating the content of selected online newspapers and the views of selected tertiary institutions' students about the National Assembly.

For the first population, that is online newspapers in Nigeria, two (2) online newspapers, *The Punch* and *The Sun online newspapers* were purposively selected for content analysis using such criteria as rate of readership, ideology and interest represented as well their coverage of both National and international issues. Fifty editions (twenty-five editions each) of these newspapers, systematically drawn from the 71 editions *published between June 9 and August 10, 2015* were selected for analysis, the unit of analysis being news stories, news analyses and feature articles bordering on the activities of both chambers of the National Assembly and their members. Also, structured questionnaires were administered on a total of 200 tertiary institution students randomly selected from Osun State.

## Analysis

One important aspect of this study relates to the importance attached to parliamentary issues in selected online newspapers as presented in the table below:

*Table 1: Content Variables of National Assembly articles posted in the selected editions of The Punch and The Sun online newspapers between November, June 1st and August 10th, 2015.*

Online Newspapers	Story Varieties			Total	Story Placement			Total
	News Story	News Analysis	Features		HP (Major)	HP (Minor)	Others	
The Punch	12 (52%)	8 (35%)	3 (13%)	23 (100%)	12 (52%)	9 (39%)	2 (9%)	23 (100%)
The Sun	18 (62%)	9 (31%)	2 (7%)	29 (100%)	15 (52%)	9 (31%)	5 (17.2%)	29 (100%)
Total	30 (57.6%)	17 (33%)	5 (9.6%)	n =52 (100%)	26 (50%)	17 (33%)	7 (13%)	n=52 (100%)

The table above shows that most of the parliamentary issues posted in the selected online newspapers within the period under study were news stories while a few were feature articles; most of them are posted on the Home Page Major articles of the websites.

To achieve the set objectives for this study, both the Content analysis and Survey data were subjected to statistical analysis with the use of percentage, charts and tables while the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was deployed to test the hypothesis set for this study.

RQ1: What are the prominent issues raised in selected online newspapers about the 8th national assembly?

*Table 2: Categories of parliamentary issues raised in The Punch and The Sun within the period under study*

<b>News-papers</b>	<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Politics</b>	<b>Members Allowance</b>	<b>Bill Pass-age/ constitution</b>	<b>Finance and Economy</b>	<b>Defence and security</b>	<b>Social welfare and protection</b>	<b>Foreign and International affairs</b>	<b>Total</b>
The Punch	8 (34.7%)	5 (21.7%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (4.3%)	5 (21.7%)	3 (13%)	1 (4.3%)	-	23 (100%)
The Sun	12 (41.3%)	13 (44.8%)	2 (6.9%)	-	1 (3.4%)	1 (3.4%)	-	1 (3.4%)	29 (100%)
Total	20 (38.5%)	18 (34.6%)	3 (3.84%)	1 (1.9%)	6 (11.5%)	4 (7.7%)	1 (1.9%)	1 (1.9%)	52 (100%)

From the table above, it can be deduced that the issue of leadership tussle (1) topped the list of media agenda of parliamentary issues of the 8th National Assembly followed by Politics (2), Finance and Economy (3), Defence and Security (4), and Members allowance (5) in that order while issues relating to Bill Passage and Constitutional Amendment, Social welfare and protection and Foreign and International Affairs fall on the same level. This indicates that since the inception of the 8th National Assembly, the body has concerned itself mainly with leadership and political issues while issues such as Bill Passage and constitutional amendment, social welfare and protection, as well as foreign and international affairs, which ordinarily, are core legislative issues, have received little attention from the parliamentarians.

RQ 2: What are the issues considered important to the 8th National Assembly by students of tertiary institutions?

Table 3: Respondents' rating of parliamentary issues in order of importance

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Not important (1 3)</b>	<b>Important (4 6)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Leadership	0 (0%)	200 (100%)	200 (100%)
Politics	21 (10.5%)	179 (89.5%)	200 (100%)
Members' Allowance	149 (74.5%)	51 (25.5%)	200 (100%)
Bill Passage / Constitutional Amendment	169 (84.5%)	31 (15.5%)	200 (100%)
Finance and Economy	53 (26.5%)	147 (73.5%)	200 (100%)
Defence and Security	98 (49%)	102 (51%)	200 (100%)
Social Welfare and protection	165 (82.5%)	35(17.5%)	200 (100%)
Foreign and International affairs	182 (91%)	18 (9%)	200 (100%)

It can be deduced from the table above that issues relating to leadership (1) topped the list of what the respondents consider important to the 8th National Assembly followed by Politics (2), Finance and Economy (3), Defence and Security (4), Members' allowance (5), Social welfare and security (6) and Foreign and International Affairs (7) in that order. This indicates that the respondents consider leadership and political issues as important to the 8th National Assembly whereas they consider issues such as Bill Passage and constitutional amendment, social welfare and protection as well as foreign and international affairs, as not important to the parliamentarians.

RQ3: What is the relationship between parliamentary reports in online newspapers (Media Agenda) and issues awareness of Nigerian tertiary institutions' students (public agenda) about the 8th National Assembly?

Table 4: Parliamentary Media Agenda versus Parliamentary Public Agenda

Parliamentary Issues	Media Agenda	Public Agenda
Leadership	20 (38.5%)	200 (100%)
Politics	18(34.6)	179 (89.5%)
Members' Allowance	3 (3.84%)	51 (25.5%)
Bill Passage / Constitutional Amendment	1 (1.9%)	31 (15.5%)
Finance and Economy	4 (7.7)	147 (73.5%)
Defence and Security	6(11.5)	102 (51%)
Social Welfare and protection	1 (1.9%)	35(17.5%)
Foreign and International affairs	1 (1.9%)	18 (9%)
Total	52 (100%)	200 (100%)

The table above show the relationship between parliamentary issues on the media agenda and those on the agenda of the public, indicating that the issue of leadership and politics topped both media agenda and public agenda within the period under study. This indicates a positive relationship between Parliamentary Media Agenda and Parliamentary Public Agenda

### Hypothesis Testing

Table 5: Correlations between Media Agenda and Public Agenda of the National Assembly

	MA	PA
MA Pearson Correlation	1	.893(**)
Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
N	8	8
PA Pearson Correlation	.893(**)	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
N	8	8

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table above shows the correlation between media agenda (list of important issues) and public agenda of the National Assembly.

The result shows that correlation ( $r$ ) of both variables = .804, degree of freedom ( $df$ ) = 8 while the (probability value) = .003. Since .003 is less than .005 which is the critical region, there exists a significant relationship between media agenda and public agenda.

The hypothesis is therefore accepted.

That there is a significant positive relationship between media agenda and public agenda of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, as shown in this study is in tune with the findings of studies earlier reviewed for this study especially those of McCombs and Shaw (1972); Siune and Borre as cited in Littlejohn, (2002); and McCombs et al (2000) as cited in Roessler (2010).

### **Conclusion**

This research work set out to find out the relationship between the Nigerian National Assembly, the media and the public by basically comparing media coverage of National Assembly issues with public awareness and perception of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

The findings generated from both methods revealed a positive relationship between media agenda and public agenda of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. **The study concludes** that online newspapers' reports about the National Assembly strongly influence the students' awareness and perception of it.

In the light of the findings, the study therefore recommends that as the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly settles for core legislative duties, parliamentary deliberations should be more people-centred and in public interest. Both the media and the lawmakers need to work out a harmonized relationship between both of them in order to guard the public interest, which they are both meant to protect.

Moreover, there is the need for Mass Communication and Journalism training institutions to incorporate into their curriculum, courses in parliamentary reporting with a view to bringing about a high level of specialization on the part of journalists covering those beats.

Future researches should seek to find out other factors (variables) that can equally influence the public perception of the National Assembly. Attempts should also be made at discovering who actually set parliamentary agenda, the media; the parliament itself or other agencies.

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