ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Setting Political Agenda on Nairaland Nigeria Forum: Who Holds The Sway?

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Abstract

This study examined the mainstream media (online) and independent online blogs with the aim of ascertaining who is setting political agenda on Nairaland Forum through the identification of information source of political posts on the forum. It is a quantitative research which employed content analysis research design. Sixty political posts were selected through a systematic sampling technique of picking a post with the highest views on every sixtieth page of the 6308 pages of political posts on Nairaland Forum. Agenda setting theory and the mediamorphosis served as the theoretical pillars of this study. Frequency tables and simple percentages were used in analyzing and presenting the data. It was discovered that independent online blogs are the main sources from which Nairaland members get the political messages forming the substance of discussion on the forum. On recommendation, both the mainstream media and online news bloggers need to have robust online sites with all information well archived; online news bloggers should be more professional in their journalistic activities and credit their source of information, while the mainstream media should endeavour to do more on timely online reportage of news update and breaking news without waiting for traditional broadcast hour or publishing time.

Keywords: Mainstream Media, News Blogs, Agenda Setting, Politics, Source Identity

Introduction

When we generally think about the functional role of the mass media to the society, we are sometimes compelled to absolutely agree that we are in a mediated society. The functional roles of the media in our milieu have never been in doubt. The nub of this research paper is to examine who exert control and dominance between the traditional media and online news blogs on Nairaland Forum as it concerns political messages on the forum using information source identity as a yardstick to know from where the substance in discussion on the forum are sourced from. An appraisal of mediamorphosis theory and the agenda-setting theory of the mass media vis-a-vis the notion of the theory on the power of the media to influence what the public think about and in shaping policy formulation in a modern media world greatly altered by the advent of the information Communication technology (ICT) which occasioned the proliferation of social media and citizen journalism were done in this paper.

The basic claim of agenda-setting theory is that as the media devote more attention to an issue, the public perceives the issue as important. When the media select and devote coverage on a topical matter (economy, education, health, agriculture, politics, corruption, inflation, etcetera) they make the citizens think about it. The introduction of the theory in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their seminal study of the role of the media in the 1968 Presidential campaign in the USA has since been one of the most focal and most commonly used and now debated theory. With a holistic appraisal of the theory even in the midst of piles of criticisms against it especially in the face of current realities, one is compelled to ascertain whether the agenda setting role of the traditional media still has hold sway in modern communication cum social reality dominated by many independent bloggers and online social networks. The debate for and against it remains an open one and this paper is an addition to the volumes on it which queues behind the thought of the continued relevance of the theory in line with the basic assumptions of its postulation.

Studies have been conducted on the evaluation of mainstream media and news bloggers; traditional media and new media; traditional journalism and citizen journalism; with many more garmenture as it concerns source credibility, setting agenda, accessibility, affordability, and so on. This study is

focused on ascertaining who sets political agenda between the mainstream media and online news blogs on Nairaland.com – recognized as the largest discussion forum with focus on Nigerian issues.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are

i. To determine the frequency of political news tagged with information source on the selected online forum;
ii. To ascertain the frequency of the primary sources of the political news posted on the selected online forum.

Research Questions

i. What is frequency of tagging political news items posted on the selected online forum with information source?
ii. What is the frequency of the primary information sources of political news items posted on the forum?

Conceptual Review: Who Sets the Agenda in New Media Era?

An individual is free based on autonomy to choose what issues to consider and explore from the pool of issues determined by the media as stated by certain theories like the uses and gratification, selective retention, selective recall, etcetera. The media on the other hand, are most likely to select the salient issues to be processed and accepted as important. Hence, the more media coverage a topic receives the more salient it becomes and the more audience attention is funnelled towards it (Matei & McDonald, 2010). The evolvement of the agenda setting theory since Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw proposed it in its use in determining policy influence and formulation has been substantial. It has also found prominence in other areas of communication and social life.

However, the media landscape in our modern society is unlike the seventies. Information Communication Technology (ICT) has altered the traditional pattern of media practice. The media landscape is now populated by citizen journalists, bloggers, social network forums like Facebook, twitter, MySpace.com, Instagram to mention a few. In the light of this, the salient questions to ask is whether the development has changed the status quo of agenda-setting, that is, has there being a power shift from the traditional media maintaining the power to set the agenda by funnelling attention to their topic.

With the increase in the number, size and influence of news blogs in the media terrain, and as the influence of the traditional media continues to decline, many of the mainstream media have also taken on the challenge to re-invent themselves. Matei and McDonald (2010) confirm that it may appear that social media is an egalitarian breakthrough, a platform for which the common people can determine issues of importance for public conversation. Yet many power players in traditional media continue to fight for market share, adopting more flexible business models, adapting to the changing media landscape, even leveraging some aspects of social media.

In the supremacy struggle between the traditional media and social media, there evolved the issues of power, fragmentation and cross-fertilizing effects of social media and traditional media. In a study on how traditional media and weblogs use each other as sources, Messner and Distaso (2008) establish that sources have the power to influence the new agenda of the media and that media can under certain circumstances act as sources for each other. Their study examines the use of weblogs as sources in the traditional media and the use of sources in weblogs in general. A Content Analysis of 2059 Articles Over a Six Year Period from the New York Times and Washington Post found that the newspapers increasingly legitimized weblogs content as 30 – 40% of the article studied cited a blog as a source. In a separate content analysis of 120 weblogs found, they over-whelmingly relied on the traditional media as sources as they sourced 70% of political posts from traditional media.

An observation could be drawn from the University of Lagos (UNILAG) lecturer rape saga to corroborate the result of the empirical study cited above. The story of the lecturer who raped an 18-

year-old girl seeking university admission was one of the major prominent coverage in the month of August 2015 by the Nigeria media both online and offline. The coverage generated a lot of reaction from the public and social institutions. The lecturer was charged to court, while Adeleke University, a private university in Osun State, South-West, Nigeria, gave the girl admission with a scholarship to study in the university; a case of social justice and responsibility. It is noteworthy to know that the traditional media blaze the trail on the coverage ahead of the social media as it is in many cases. The first reportage of the story originated from the traditional media while major news and entertainment blogs sourced it from them. BellaNaija.com with a headline "UNILAG Lecturer Allegedly Rapes 18-year-old Woman Seeking Admission" culled the story from *Daily Post Newspaper*. Lindaikeji.blogspot.com, Naija.com, and so on also quoted *The Punch* as their source. One of the most active Nigeria's online social forum - Nairaland Forum turned the rape saga into an open and active discussion after being posted on it by one of the forum user with a username Ishowdotgmail quoting *the Punch* as the source. It was indeed an issue which generated not only what people are thinking about but generated substantial debate as well, a case of mainstream media agenda-setting function. Moreover, the Bring Back Our Girls# which in a way revolutionized citizenship journalism in Nigeria in recent times was an issue the social media projected much more than the traditional media and took the campaign for the rescue of the kidnapped Chibok girls by the Boko Haram insurgents across boundaries.

Messner and Distaso (2008) in the submission of their study highlight that traditional media agenda-setting power is no longer universal or singular within citizen media outlets so much as the independent blog platform is redistributing power between traditional media and citizen media. Traditional media agenda-setting is now just one force among many competing influences.

However, Ayankojo (2014, p.295) who gave a picture of a belated traditional media was also quick to say that "granted mainstream media have slacked..., but blogs have not feared any better or done anything near what the few mainstream media that still engage in investigative journalism have accomplished". He also goes further to substantiate this position that previous conceptualizations of blog's capacity to foster egalitarianism needs reconsideration because most of them regurgitate what the commercial media create. He backs up the claim by citing the case of 365Naijanews adjudged to be the Best Nigerian news blog in 2012, (http://365Naijanews.com/) with the blog site aggregating most of its contents from the local news media, lacking in originality, and having many of its reports stale among others. In another Breath, Suraj (2014, p.342) say that while the Internet and surrounding digital technologies provide a public sphere, he avers that many scholars so far suggest that it does not directly in anyway led to increases in political participation, or greater civic engagement or trust in political process.

On the other hand, Rushton (2014) goes ahead with a poser that the mainstream media cannot be trusted to tell the truth without bias or without hidden agenda, many therefore in this age stay informed through the use of social media and independent journalism. He affirms that "mainstream media, despite everything it has done, the corporate sponsors, the spin zones, the outright awkward political commentaries, from everything to pundits and attractive working people on the news media, the breaking news graphics to the outright lies told and misdirection thrown left and right. The mainstream media is a dinosaur and what killed it are technology and the human desire to the truth and to see through lies. According to him, it is no longer news that at least ninety percent of news outlets globally are controlled by five media entities popular called the big five – the Time Warner Inc., General Electric Co., News Corp., the Walt Disney Co., and Viacom Inc. (Rushton, 2014). This view aligns with that of Chomsky when he says that "it is a natural expectation on uncontroversial assumptions, that the major media and other ideological institutions will generally reflect the perspectives and interest of established power (Chomsky, 1999, p.21). This has rather pressured

many to seek new alternative to the news product from the traditional media as a result of the opportunity technological advancement provided in contemporary time.

Theoretical Review

Two theories were considered in this research paper namely: Agenda Setting Theory and Media-morphosis. The Agenda Setting theory serves as the main theory based on the nature of the subject under consideration.

A. Agenda Setting Assumptions

According to the agenda-setting theory, first developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their Chapel Hill study (1968), mass media sets the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues. Shaw and McCombs found that the main effect of the news media was to set an agenda, that is, to tell people not what to think, but what to think about as opposed to persuasion or attitude change. Agenda setting is usually referred to as a function of mass and not a theory. Arnold (2009), while relating John Kingdom's study of who sets the agenda for policy making, states that it was assumed that if it has been established that the mass media influence public opinion, there is need to also find studies that show whether public opinion influences policy making. The study of Page and Shapiro of 1983 which examined the effects of opinion on policy which focused on public opinion and policy data for the United States from 1935 to 1979 produced the conclusion that is considerable congruence between changes in the preferences and in policies, especially for large, stable opinion changes on salient issues. And they do find indeed that public opinion is more often approximate cause of policy than the other way round (Arnold, 2009).

In another report, Burstein (2003) affirms that public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the times when its impact is gauged. It is noted that the impact of opinion on policy remains substantial when the activities of interest organizations; political parties, and elites are taken into account. Arnold states that there is good reason to assume that media coverage has an indirect, but non-trivial effect on policy making; hence, the media should be considered a relevant player for policy and reform work through the channel of public opinion the media can help in shaping policies. Wilson (2011) corroborates Arnold's position when he amplifies among other works the model of John Kingdom in the development of his multiple streams framework. Wilson in his paper entitled "Examining the Relationship Between Media Coverage and Policy Outcome" cited Kingdom who said the media, one of the vehicles for policy change, are important because (a) they are communicators within policy community, (b) they can magnify movements that have already started elsewhere, (c) to the extent that public opinion affects some of the participants; they might have an indirect effect.

First of all it gives media power to establish what news we see or hear and what part of the news is important to see or hear. This concept of agenda setting in Littlejohn's book is explained as the idea of issue salience as a media effect is intriguing and important. Therefore agenda setting is used for many purposes to establish the media agenda and to retrieve the opinion of the public. Also agenda is very important in the political aspect because the agenda influences the policy agenda which means that the candidates will try to focus on issues that the public wants to hear about. In conclusion the agenda setting theory has many beneficial uses in our society and it is part of our communication (Sanchez, 2002).

B. Mediamorphosis Theory

Roger Fidler who postulated the mediamorphosis theory states that new media do not arise spontaneously and independently but the morph from something that is existing or emerge gradually from the metamorphosis while the older forms of media tend to adapt and evolve continuously rather than die. The theory is also known as the "digital metamorphosis" that explains and estimates the changes in the digital world and its culture; hence, new media is created to update and upgrade the old media where technology is constantly changing and evolving from time to time (Fidler, 1997; Huwebes, 2016).

According to the theory's assumption, the transformation of communication media is usually brought about by the complex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations (Fidler, 1997; Huwebes, 2016). Fiddler identifies six principles of mediamorphosis namely: coexistence and co-evolution of media forms, gradual metamorphosis of new media forms from old ones, propagation of dominant traits in media forms, survival of media forms and enterprises in changing environment, merits and needs for adopting new media and delays from proof of concept to widespread adoption of new media (Ckyle, 2016; Huwebes, 2016)

Rationale for Choosing Nairaland Forum

The study selected an online discussion forum to evaluate the source of political messages posted on it in order to use the source identity to ascertain who is setting political agenda on the forum. Nairaland Forum (www.nairaland.com) was selected for this study being the largest Nigeria online forum. It is the eighth (8th) on the list of top sites in Nigeria. It is a big discussion forum for Nigerians which covers dozens of topics including politics, romance, technology, career, business, entertainment, health, auto, and etcetera created by a Nigerian, Oluwaseun Osewa. As at 16th, January 2017, Nairaland Forum has 1,728,328 million members and 3,312,087 topics posted on the site as at the time of data gathering. Based on its strong membership list, it provides a rich discussion ground for a whole number of issues with politics as one of the main categories on the forum (Alexa, 2016; Nairaland, 2016; Nigerianinfopedia 2016).

Research Method and Data Analysis

This work is based on quantitative research outcome and used content analysis research method to purvey result on source information identity tagging of political posts (messages/information) on Nairaland online forum (www.nairaland.com). Coding sheet was used as the instrument for data generation. Systematic sampling method was adopted to select sixty (60) political posts on Nairaland online forum. As at the time of the content analysis, the political post section has a total of 6306 pages. Every sixtieth (60th) page was purposely picked and the political post with the highest views (read by forum members and guests) on the page picked until the sixty (60) posts making the sample size were completed.

The source of information tagged with the political posts were examined and used as the basis to determine who originates the substance of what formed the discussion and the widely held views on the issues being discussed by the forum members and visitor to the forum. Frequency tables and simple percentages (descriptive statistics) were used for the data analysis.

RQ 1: What is frequency of tagging political news items posted on the selected online forum with information source?

Table 1: Frequency for Tagging Political News with Information Source

S/N	Categories	Frequency	%
1.	Mainstream Media	11	18.3
2.	Online News Blog	23	38.3
3.	Social Network Sites	03	5
4.	Forum Members Original Posts	18	30
5.	Institutional/Company Websites	1	1.7
6	No Source Identity	04	6.7
	Total	60	100

Table one shows that Online News Blogs with a percentage of 38.3% (23/n = 60) is the most frequently tagged with political posts on Nairaland Forum. Forum Members Original Post is in second position with 30% (18/n= 60), while Mainstream Media is coming behind in third place with 18.3% (11/n= 60). Social Network Sites and Institutional/ Company Websites with percentage of 5% (3/n= 60) and 1.7% (1/n= 60) respectively following in fourth and fifth position. A frequency percentage of 6.7% (4/n= 60) of political posts were with no source identity. This outcome shows that Online News Blogs are the most frequently tagged when it comes to political news sources on Nairaland

followed by the forum members original posts while mainstream media were in distant third.

RQ 2: What is the frequency of the primary information sources of the political news items posted on the forum?

Table 2: Frequency of Primary Information Sources for Political News Items

S/N	Categories	Frequency	%
1.	Mainstream Media	06	10
2.	Online News Blog	18	30
3.	Social Network Sites	03	5
4.	Forum Members' Original Posts	18	30
5.	Institutional/Company Websites	1	1.7
6.	No Source Identity	04	6.7
7.	Not Found/Available	10	16.7
	Total	60	100

Table two shows the primary sources of information (posts) from where they were linked to Nairaland Forum. Mainstream Media has a frequency of 10% (6/n= 60), Online News Blogs with a percentage of 30% (18/n= 60); Forum Members' Original Post also with a percentage of 30% (18/n= 60); Social Network Sites is with a percentage of 5% (3/n= 60), while Institutional/Company Websites has a percentage of 1.7% (1/n= 60) as there was a record of No Source Identity of 6.7% (4/n= 60). It was however found out in this study that information source tags not found or available on the website/blog from where the messages were originally culled or linked from to Nairaland. From the table, it shows that Mainstream Media and Online News Blogs shared equally the "Not Found/Available" information source of 16.7% (10/n= 60) which were found missing as against the frequency on the links/source posted on the forum.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: Based on the research outcome, independent online blog with the highest frequency of source identity tagged with political posts on Nairaland forum proved to be the main source from which Nairalanders (the forums members) and guests get their political messages which also fuel their discussion of such political messages as against the few sourced from mainstream media. This may be attributed to some reasons put forward by Bruns and Highfield (2012) that:

- Firstly, the rise of the Internet as a popular medium has led to a substantial increase in available channels for information and entertainment; among other purposes. According to them, one of such purpose has fundamentally undermined the existing business model of conventional newspaper publishing with specialist websites and generalist search engines proving a more effective and easily searchable platform for job, real estate, car and other advertisements, with the subsequent shift of such advertising to new and independent online platform;
- Secondly, the proliferation of possible channels for news content and the increasing precariousness of their financial bases, have combined to make corporate pressures on fearless, independent journalism felt ever more immediately;
- Thirdly, partly because of a deep-set conservatism among journalistic staff and partly also because many possible new models of operation are inherently anathema to the long-established journalistic way of doing things as the journalism industry has been slow to embrace the potential offered by new, internet-based media form.

Research Question Two: This study shows that there is noticeable percentage of frequency for primary source identity not found or available on the site from where the political messages were being linked to the site from where they were posted onto Nairaland forum. Clicking on such links will either display not found on this site or might have been moved, and when it takes one to the site, there is display of other information aside the one that the link should bring out. In creating news blogs by individual bloggers and corporate sites by

mainstream media, there is need to build a strong website with large memory to accommodate all their messages and well organized archive of information and this is applicable to both media forms, the mainstream media and the online news blogs. Messages (news, opinions, articles, graphics, audio and visual) should be kept for record purpose like the physical library where publications are kept for future reference.

It was also discovered that many online news blogs are in the habit of not crediting the source of their information. Many of the political messages on their blogs are either directly culled or rewritten without recur to the primary source as if they originated them. This unprofessional and it also decreases the believability of such political messages by the readers. The consumers of such information for credibility purpose want to know the primary source of the information they consume.

Conclusion

To set the records straight on whether a power shift has taken place giving the online news blog power and control ahead of the mainstream media, one can say that the tug-of-war is still on and will be with us for a while. Empirical evidences by many scholars lend credence to the fact that the traditional media still has stronghold in setting agenda. McQuail (2010) also affirmed this when he submitted that "the evidence so far does not support the view that new media technology is having a strongly deterministic effect towards change in the short or even medium term; it is neither producing any very reliable explosion of freedom nor (as yet) seriously diminishing what freedom of communication exists already". Professionalism, ethics, credibility, structure and adaptation to current realities and development are also some of the ingredients that are favouring the mainstream media over online news blogs in the agenda-setting function of the media.

On the other hand, the outcome of this research shows that the largest online forum in Nigeria and targeted at Nigeria as a platform for discussion of varied social, political, economy, ethnic, religion, entertainment, and other vital issues has online news blogs supplying or being the source of political messages on it. Hence, the study has ascertained that news bloggers are setting political agenda on Nairaland forum. The new media has come to be accepted as a mass medium, but with the re-invention and adaptation of the traditional media with online presence, the battle of control between the two classes of media will continue for a while as earlier said just as the growing media study of the subject will become more overt than now like the case this research paper considered.

Recommendations

i. Both the mainstream media and online news bloggers should endeavour to have a high capacity based website/blog in terms of large memory to accommodate their political messages and other information which should be well archived on their site.
ii. Mainstream media should do more in the area of live streaming, breaking news reportage and news update on their site before the traditional transmission hour or time of publication as this the advantage online bloggers do take to blaze online information culled from elsewhere, especially from the traditional media.
iii. Online news bloggers for credibility purpose should endeavour to give credit to the source information they place on their site.
iv. Online news bloggers should venture more into investigative reporting rather than rushing to post rumour and unverified information on their blogs. It is obvious that online news bloggers need to be more professional like the mainstream media professionals in their journalistic activities.

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