

## MEDIA CODES AND PROBLEMS OF APPLICATION: ASSESSMENT OF NEWSPAPERS' COMPLIANCE WITH THE NIGERIA MEDIA CODE OF ELECTION COVERAGE IN THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

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### **Abstract**

Journalists are obliged by media codes to be fair, honest and truthful. Media codes of ethics are designed to guide journalists in making morally sound decisions. However, the codes often have compliance issues. This study was carried out to investigate the level of newspapers' compliance with The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage in the 2019 Presidential Elections. The study assessed how newspapers granted equal access, published balanced news stories and quoted all sources in their own words rather than as interpreted by others. The research was anchored on the ethical theory of contractualism. It adopted quantitative content analysis as the research method. The content of five Nigerian newspapers, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, *The Punch*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust*, were analyzed. The results indicated low compliance with the code, especially regarding granting equal access to candidates and avoiding bias. However, there was a high level of compliance with the code in quoting news sources and writing balanced reports. The study concluded that Nigerian newspapers demonstrated a high sense of social responsibility by granting access to both candidates and citing sources in their own words during the 2019 Presidential Elections, but work needs to be done to be fair to all candidates. It was recommended, among other things, that before elections, adequate orientation should be given to editors and reporters on the tenets of The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage and the benefits of adhering to it during election coverage.

**Keywords:** **Media Codes, Ethics, Professionalism, Newspapers, Elections**

## Introduction

Codes of ethics exist virtually in all professions. In every society, there are sets of rules and regulations guiding the way and manner in which people do things, and the absence of these rules and regulations will lead to anarchy and lawlessness. Udeze (2012) defines ethics as a "branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to human conduct concerning rightness or wrongness of specific actions and to the goodness or badness of the motives and ends of such actions" (p. 57). Ethics has to do with what is good or bad. Ethics are not laws in application but are binding on all professional members once they have been officially adopted. A member may be disciplined or reprimanded for contravening the ethics of their profession. They may also be blacklisted or expelled from the profession. Amakiri (2010) explains further that to be ethical means to be particular about the standards of good and bad behaviour. Like any other profession, journalism has ethical codes that guide the professional conduct of members. Ward (2009) refers to journalism or media ethics as "the norms of responsible journalism" (p. 295). He adds that journalism ethics is a species of applied media ethics that investigates the 'micro' problems of what individual journalists should do in particular situations and the 'macro' problems of what news media should do, given their role in society (Ward, 2009).

These codes of ethics consist of moral principles, guidelines, and rules that guide the behaviour of journalists in the course of their practice as well as their relationship with the public. In either case, the commitment to serve as a detached watchdog of democracy is the main reason the Fourth Estate has a code of ethics mandating that reporting be accurate, fair, objective, and in the service of the public interest. Media ethics are the application of rational thoughts by journalism practitioners or professionals when deciding between two or more competing moral choices. It can also be seen as holding society or a profession together or providing stability and security to social or professional cohesion (Okunna, 1995; Tsegwu & Asemah, 2014). No universally accepted code of ethics exists for journalism practitioners; they vary proportionately with the culture and demands of society at a particular time. However, no matter the society, specific basic provisions are crucial to the practice of the profession. Pepple and Acholonu (2018) summarize media ethical codes as follows:

guidelines on editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, non-invasion of privacy, non-disclosure and decency. Other guidelines in a media code, according to the authors, include non-discrimination, refusal of reward and gratification and avoidance of Plagiarism. The major aim is to ensure that journalists perform their functions in society effectively and be as professional as possible.

There are numerous benefits of having codes of conduct for newspapers. Tilak (2020) believes that media codes of ethics help journalists avoid corruption, defamation, invasion of privacy, unfair coverage, and other unprofessional tendencies. Media codes of ethics serve as reference material to reporters and editors when decisions become difficult to make on what is right or wrong for public consumption. Journalism codes preserve editorial freedom, help minimise state interference, and promote media quality. A major criticism of media codes is the limited powers that most professional bodies have to enforce their codes, which throws into question the public benefits of having codes of conduct, at least of the non-statutory kind. In other words, journalism codes have a problem with application. If breaches go unpunished, if complaints produce no more than verbal criticisms from the body that deals with them, and these are ignored by those against whom they are made, then what protection will the public gain from the existence of the code? Many believe that codes may reinforce the behaviour of those who naturally would not adhere to high professional standards, but they will be ineffective in controlling mavericks (Nigel 1992, Pepple and Acholonu 2018). In any case, journalism codes enhance professionalism in the media profession.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Newspapers, like other mass media, are expected to comply with acceptable ethical codes that govern the conduct of elections. The role of newspapers in elections is to ensure voters get the correct information and education to help them make informed choices. Towards the 2019 general elections, representatives of Nigerian media organisations, institutions, professional bodies and support groups developed the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage to facilitate professional coverage of the elections. The Code's preamble admits the media's important role in informing and educating the masses during elections by observing

the highest standards of professionalism and maximum compliance with regulatory frameworks. The revised edition of the Code was adopted on May 23 2018 by Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), Broadcast Organization of Nigeria (BON), Radio, Television and Theatre Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATTAWU), Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) Media Rights Agenda (MRA) and International Press Centre (IPC). Previous research has shown that Nigerian journalists hardly adhere to media ethics (Tsegwu & Asemah 2014; Angese et al. 2019; Onyebuchi et al. 2019, and Oyesomi et al. 2019), yet new media codes keep coming to add to existing ones. Accordingly, assessing how Nigerian journalists complied with The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage during the 2019 Presidential Elections is imperative.

### **Objectives of the study**

The broad objective of this research is to assess newspapers' compliance with The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage during the 2019 Presidential Elections while the specific objectives are;

- i. To assess the extent to which the selected newspapers provided equitable access to candidates of APC and PDP during the 2019 Presidential Elections.
- ii. To determine the level of professionalism shown by newspapers through balanced coverage of the 2019 Presidential Elections.
- iii. To find out the extent to which newspapers reported candidates' views directly and in their own words rather than as they were interpreted by others.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What was the extent to which the selected newspapers provided equitable access to candidates of APC and PDP during the 2019 Presidential Elections?
- ii. What was the level of professionalism shown by newspapers through balanced coverage of the 2019 Presidential Elections?
- iii. To what extent did newspapers report candidates' views directly and in their own words rather than as they were interpreted by others?

## Literature Review

### Ethical Issues for Journalists

Journalists worldwide, including those practising in Nigeria, face difficult and delicate ethical challenges. These challenges involve ethical decisions on what to publish and what not to publish. Akabogu (2005) opines that in the Nigerian situation, all sorts of ethical issues or problems abound. They include materialism, bribery, corruption, embezzlement, fraud, sycophancy, and indiscipline. The author further states that the journalist has many problems to grapple with, including pressure from within and outside his media organisation. There is a growing concern for non-adherence to the ethical codes, which many believe negates all fundamental principles of fairness, equity, and balance required in journalism practice. The commercialisation of news violates journalists' code of conduct, which forbids journalists from accepting any reward for publishing or suppressing news or comment. With the zeal to make more money, many news organizations have lost their focus on investigative journalism. This has led to the loss of variety in the news. Many have lost their mission, turning to praise singing and propaganda, which have dire consequences for Nigerian society (Ekwo, 1996; Lai, 2000 & Ogbuoshi, 2005). The person who pays the piper often calls the tune. Since the media would not like to lose a major customer, they will do everything within their reach to satisfy a client that pays them enough money to have their view projected. This is often flagrantly displayed during election times as contestants often buy over one media house or the other, which at every news hour seize the opportunity to praise the "client" and crush their opponents.

Udeze (2012) believes there is a close relationship between corruption and unethical practice. Quoting Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (2001), Udeze (2012, p.456) notes that being unethical means "the act of corrupting or state of being corrupt, moral perversion, depravity". According to the author, corruption among journalists means all those acts that media practitioners engage in that contravene the ethics of the media or journalistic profession, which centres on truth, fairness, and balance. Praise singing is one of the journalists' worst faults, particularly in Africa and with government-owned media houses. This kind of journalism eulogises people unnecessarily, even when they have failed in their responsibilities. It makes heroes out of villains and giants out of dwarfs (Udeze, 2012).

Fackler (2011, p.81) argues that “even a brief review of the development of mediated communication reveals constant threat to veracity, covalent concerns for truth tempered by commercial considerations, and obvious intrusion of political power in the production of messages”.

### **The Nigerian Newspaper and Election Reporting**

As key purveyors of information on the electoral process, Nigerian newspapers are always expected to embrace best professional practices. Olajide et al. (2012) state that professionalism is “the high standard which is expected of a person who is well trained in a professional job” (p 4). They add that sociologists hold that for a job to qualify as a profession, it must, among other things, place more emphasis on service than on private economic gains and must have a code of ethics that is largely accepted by all. Asemah (2011) states that ideal journalists should always present news fairly and impartially, placing value on significance and relevance. He says fairness means that “the journalist needs to treat the parties in a case equally”. Newspaper coverage of elections should not show favour to one side, party or tribe involved in an election. It is imperative to treat all sides according to rules and laws. Sambe and Ikon (2004) advise reporters to be fair, balanced and accurate in reporting public affairs.

For several reasons, Stovall (2002) states that accuracy is vital to media writers. First, people expect newspapers to be accurate in the information they present. Newspaper readers believe what they read from the papers. Another reason for accuracy is that people will stop reading newspapers they believe present inaccurate information. Stovall (2002) again adds that “writers for the mass media should pay attention to details of what and how they write” (p. 63). The journalist must be ready to handle information accurately. Newspaper stories should be free from errors as much as possible. There must be good spelling of words, names, persons, places, objects, etc. Thus, names, addresses, quotations, and general information must be carefully handled (Asemah, 2011). According to Stovall (2002), the concepts of balance and fairness sometimes come under the name of objectivity. Journalists should cover all sides of a story to be balanced in reporting electoral processes. All parties involved in a story must be allowed to tell their own story, and comprehensive coverage should be given to all parties without discrimination. Christians et al. (2009, p.119) emphasise that “professional

journalism should not be biased toward any point of view or interest group and should aim to represent the social world, as far as possible, as it is".

### **Review of Empirical Works**

Oyesomi et al. (2019) conducted a study on "Newspapers' compliance with the Code of Election Coverage of the 2015 elections and citizen's participation: Implication for journalism education and professionalism." Using the content analytical method, the study examined newspaper coverage of the 2015 presidential election and its compliance with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage using two newspapers in Nigeria, *The Punch and The Guardian*. Findings indicated high compliance with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage in accuracy and fairness. However, there was a low level of compliance in granting equal access for citizens to participate in the election using newspapers as a medium. Okwurumara (2013) studied "Public Perception of Newspaper Adherence to Ethical Principles in the Reportage of Electoral Processes in South East Nigeria". Employing the content analysis method, the findings indicated that the public expressed serious concern about press performance, particularly about accurate reporting, balance, editorial independence, and fairness.

In a similar study, Angese et al. (2019) examined the level of adherence to the journalism code of ethics by journalists in Bayelsa State and the factors that influence journalists in Bayelsa State to engage in unethical practices. The study adopted the survey research methodology. Findings revealed journalists in Bayelsa State have low knowledge of journalism's code of ethics. It was discovered that the degree to which journalists in Bayelsa State adhere to journalism code of ethics was low. In a related development, Udoakah et al. (2014) researched the "Influence of mass media law and ethics on journalism practice in Nigeria". Adopting the survey method, the study found that despite the importance of media laws and ethics to journalism practice, journalists' adherence to media laws and ethics was low. Other researchers like Ogbag & Olumoji (2022), Pepple and Acholonu (2020) and Bo (2012) also found that despite the importance of ethics to journalism practice, journalists' adherences to the ethical codes were low due to sycophancy, security reasons, desperation, greed, ethical dilemmas, and ignorance of the code of ethics.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the ethical theory of Contractualism.

### Contractualism

Contractualism is an ethical theory broadly used to indicate that morality is based on contract or agreement. Contractualism was made popular in the 1990s by the Harvard philosopher T. M. Scanlon, especially in his book *What we owe each other*. Scanlon (1998) introduces contractualism as a distinctive account of moral reasoning. Scanlon (1998) summarizes contractualism in two expressions thus:

An act is wrong if and only if any principle that permitted it would be one that could reasonably be rejected by people with the motivation just described. An action becomes right if its completion would provide a firm principle for general behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement (p.192).

Contractualism interprets morality as being about the principles no one can reasonably reject and takes our moral judgments to make claims about what individuals in other situations have reason to do (Timmerman, 2015). Conceived in this way, morality is thought of as a set of rules and principles that we need to agree upon if society functions properly (Etieyibo, 2018; Graham, 2004). As Darwall (2006) pointed out, contractualism describes three central elements. These are:

- (i) that “an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any system of rules for the general regulation of behaviour which no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement
- (ii) that morality is about the idea of [such a] general agreement
- (iii) that the fundamental moral motive is the desire to be able to justify oneself to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject” (p.203)

Contractualism is a relevant theory for this research because it encourages compliance with ethical codes generally acceptable for regulating media behaviour. Graham (2004, 163) says, “morality is to be thought of as the set of rules and principles that we need to agree upon if society is function properly. The theory encourages newspapers to make decisions based on morally acceptable principles and not prohibited by a set of

moral principles for the general regulation of social behaviour that no one could reasonably reject. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage is one such principle that has general rational acceptance across a wide spectrum of journalists, ethicists, civil society organisations, and members of the public.

## Methodology

The study adopted the content analysis research method to find answers to the research questions. The use of content analysis here is predicated on the research's aim of assessing the content of newspapers vis-à-vis their compliance with the Nigeria Media Code of Election Coverage during the 2019 presidential election. Krippendorff (2018, p.403) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their contexts". Content analysis can be done both quantitatively and qualitatively. The newspaper editions for the content analysis comprised 490 editions of *Leadership*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, *Daily Trust* and *The Sun* newspapers for a period of 98 days. Purposive sampling was used to select the study period from November 18, 2018, to February 23, 2019. This period was chosen because it covers the time that election campaigns officially commenced, which is November 18 2018, and ended on February 21 2019, while the presidential and national assembly election took place on February 23 2019. The selection of newspaper titles is based on geographical spread, and the dailies are widely considered the most credible newspapers with wide circulation in the country (hintng.com, 2021; MakeMoney.ng, 2022 and the Nigerian Infopedia, 2021).

The newspaper editions for the study were sampled systematically at fifth intervals from November 18 2018, to February 23 2019. In this manner, 20 issues of each of the five newspapers that formed the population of this study were analyzed. Thus, a total of 100 issues from the five newspapers were analyzed. The content categories that were used for a clear, distinct interpretation, forming the basis of analysis of these daily newspapers, were classified according to the following decisions:

1. Placement
2. Mentions
3. Direction

#### 4. quotations

The research instrument used to collect data for this research was a coding sheet. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and basic percentages.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1: Placement of stories by the newspapers on Atiku and Buhari.**

Newspaper	Buhari		Atiku		Total
	Front	Inside	Front	Inside	
<i>Vanguard</i>	18	44	17	38	117
<i>Leadership</i>	21	33	13	34	99
<i>Daily Trust</i>	18	20	16	23	77
<i>Daily Sun</i>	18	24	14	22	78
<i>The Nation</i>	24	48	18	40	130
Total	99	169	78	157	503

**Source: Field Survey 2023**

Table 1 above shows that Buhari had more stories on the front pages of *The Nation* (24), followed by 21 from *Leadership* and 18 each from the *Daily Sun*, *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, respectively. The PDP candidate, former vice president Atiku Abubakar, trailed Buhari on the number of stories on the front pages of the selected newspapers by 09 stories. Stories on Atiku appeared 18 times on the front page of *The Nation*, 17 times in the *Vanguard*, and 13 times in *Leadership*, while *Daily Trust* and *Daily Sun* published 14 stories each on their front pages. Buhari also had more stories on the inside pages than his rival, Atiku Abubakar. In summary, Buhari had more stories published about him and his presidential ambition than his rival, Atiku, both on the front pages of the newspapers and the inside pages.

**Table 2: Frequency of mentions of each candidate in the newspapers.**

Newspaper	Buhari	Atiku	Total
<i>Vanguard</i>	62	55	117
<i>Leadership</i>	66	37	101
<i>Daily Trust</i>	34	38	72

<i>Daily Sun</i>	42	40	82
<i>The Nation</i>	70	59	129
Total	274	229	503

**Source: Field Survey 2023**

Table 2 above shows the frequency of mentions of the two leading candidates by the selected newspapers during the 2019 presidential election. In the *Vanguard* newspaper, the presidential candidate of the APC, President Muhammadu Buhari, enjoyed 62 mentions, while Alhaji Atiku had 55 mentions. Again, Buhari had 66 mentions in *Leadership*, while Atiku had 37. The *Daily Trust* mentioned Buhari's name 34 times, while Atiku's name was mentioned 38 times. Meanwhile, the *Daily Sun* mentioned Buhari 42 times against Atiku's 40. Lastly, Buhari was mentioned 70 times in *The Nation*, while his opponent, Atiku, was mentioned 59 times. Buhari had more mentions in *Vanguard*, *Leadership* *Daily Sun* and *The Nation*, while Atiku was only mentioned more in *Daily Trust*. Overall, the APC candidate had more mentions in the selected papers, with more than half of the mentions (274), than the PDP candidate, Atiku, who came second with 229 mentions.

**Table 3a: Story direction in the newspapers**

Newspapers	BUHARI			ATIKU		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral
<i>Vanguard</i>	20	13	37	16	12	18
<i>Leadership</i>	21	09	23	13	03	23
<i>Daily Trust</i>	14	04	15	12	03	28
<i>Daily Sun</i>	13	17	12	23	06	11
<i>The Nation</i>	51	05	14	12	34	12
Total	119	48	101	76	70	89

**Source: Field survey 2023**

Table 3 above shows the directionality of stories favouring Buhari and Atiku. The result indicates that Buhari had 119 positive stories published in his favour across the five selected newspapers. The papers only published 48 negative stories about Buhari, while 101 stories that mentioned him were neutral. On the other hand, Atiku had 76 positive stories across the five selected newspapers. The papers published as high as 70 negative stories against him,

while 89 stories were neutral. The directionality of these stories favoured Muhammadu Buhari more than Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, as shown in the examples below.

**Table 3b: Directionality of stories in favour of Buhari and Atiku**

STORIES IN FAVOUR OF BUHARI		IN FAVOUR OF ATIKU	
<i>Vanguard</i> 28/11/2018	“PDP, Atiku dancing on graves of soldiers-APC” Page 8	<i>Vanguard</i> 23/11/2018	“ Atiku presidency will unite Nigerians-AFBN” Page 12
<i>Daily Sun</i> 18/11/2018	“Buhari unveils ‘Next Level’ campaign.” Front page	<i>Daily Sun</i> 18/12/2018	“Atiku/Obi presidency will end poverty, says Igbo Assembly” page 2
<i>Daily Trust</i> 28/11/2018	“ No alternative to Buhari – MBC coordinator” Page 14	<i>Vanguard</i> 11/2/2019	“ Why we dumped Buhari for Atiku- Northern Stakeholders Forum” page 13
<i>Daily Trust</i> 28/12/2018	“Nigeria needs Buhari more than ever in 2019- Masari” page 13	<i>Daily Trust</i> 1/2/2019	“Cabal, not Buhari in charge of affairs- Secondus” Page 13
<i>Daily Trust</i> 1/2/2019	“APC to Atiku Nigerians will never return to Egypt” page 13	<i>Daily Trust</i> 18/12/2018	“No single economist in Buhari’s cabinet- Atiku.” Page 6
<i>The Nation</i> 1/2/2019	“Atiku under fire for promising amnesty for looters” page 8	<i>Daily Trust</i> 18/12/2018	“Atiku/Obi presidency will end poverty, create jobs- Igbo Assembly.” Page 8
<i>The Nation</i> 11/2/2019	“Report: Buhari’ll win 60%.” Front page	<i>Leadership</i> 17/1/2019	“Mrs. Abubakar task Women to save Nigeria’s democracy” page 4
<i>The Nation</i> 7/1/2019	“Osinbajo: Buhari needs new term to consolidate	<i>Leadership</i> 17/1/2019	“Igbo group endorses Atiku Obi.” Page 10

	his feats.” Front page		
<i>Leadership</i> 12/1/2019	“Buhari’s achievements rattling Atiku, PDP- La Mohammed	<i>Leadership</i> 22/1/2019	“APC leaders are liars, says Atiku” Page 7

**Source: Field Survey 2023**

**Table 4: Quotation of story source**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Buhari</b>		<b>Atiku</b>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Source Quoted	231	89.9	226	92.6
No Source quoted	26	10.1	18	7.4

**Source: Field Survey 2023**

The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage requires that sources of political news should be quoted and the candidates or political party leaders should be reported in their own words. Table 4 shows the percentage of stories that quoted sources in their own words. Across the five newspapers, there were 257 news stories about Muhammadu Buhari and 89.9% of the sources of these stories were quoted directly. In only 10.1% of the stories about Buhari, the sources were not quoted directly. On the other hand, news stories about Alhaji Atiku Abubakar also had a high percentage of quoted sources, 226 (92.6%) of which all quoted their sources. Only about 7.4% of the stories concerning Atiku did not have sources quoted. For example, *The Nation* of Friday, February 1, 2019, had a story on Buhari with this headline: “Buhari in Kano: I’ll continue to fulfil my promises.” In the story, Buhari was quoted directly as saying:

I will continue to fulfil the promises I made in 2015 which bothered on corruption, security and the economy. We have promised Nigerians three major issues concerning our survival as a nation. They are fight against corruption, security and economic revitalisation. In these areas I will like to boldly say that we have delivered on our promised to the electorates.

The quote continued and most of Buhari’s speech at the Kano rally were reported in his exact words. In another story on Atiku, the source was well quoted and reported in his words in

the *Daily Trust* newspaper of December 18 2018, page 6, with the following headline “No single economist in Buhari’s cabinet- Atiku.” This headline itself was a direct quote from Atiku and the story contained the following quote:

Do you know that in this government there is no single economist? So they don’t even know how to manage our economy and our lives, whether youths, the old, women or men depend on economy. If the economy is good we will prosper individually and collectively, if the economy is bad, we will perish and they are asking you to return them to power... I’m not here to tackle individuals but we have a professor of law as Vice President. A professor of law is not a businessman, he is not an economist and the job of the vice president in our own type of government is to help you manage the economy.

As can be seen, the PDP candidate was quoted in his own words.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Newspapers are ethically under a social contract to comply with ethical codes, including the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage. Contractualism supports compliance with ethical codes. Explaining contractualism, Scanlon (1998, p104) describes the subject matter of judgement of right and wrong by saying, “They are judgements about what would be permitted by principles that could not reasonably be rejected, by people who were moved to find principles for the general regulation of behaviour that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject.” The theory encourages newspapers to make decisions based on morally acceptable principles and not prohibited by a set of moral principles for the general regulation of social behaviour that no one could reasonably reject. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage is one such principle that has general rational acceptance across a broad spectrum of journalists, ethicists, civil society organisations, and members of the public. Newspapers are obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication.

The study found that the newspapers gave more access to the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress, Muhammadu Buhari, than the presidential candidate of the People’s Democratic Party, Atiku Abubakar. This finding implies that newspapers failed to comply with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage provision on equitable access

because, from the analyzed content, more access was provided to Buhari than to Atiku. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage section 1 (1.1.2) states that “a media organisation shall regularly apply the principle of equity in the coverage and reportage of campaigns and other activities of parties and candidates contesting elections.” This finding supports other studies like Oyesomi et al. (2019), who found low compliance with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage in granting equal access to all stakeholders during elections. Okwurumara (2013) also found that newspapers find it difficult to adhere to ethical codes. The study also found that the newspapers showed bias toward the APC candidate, Buhari. The directionality of stories in favour of Buhari and Atiku showed that Buhari had more positive stories published in his favour across the five selected newspapers. The papers published a few negative stories about Buhari. On the other hand, Atiku had fewer positive stories across the five selected newspapers. The papers published many negative stories against him. The directionality of these stories was marginally in favour of the then President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC rather than Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Section 2 (2.1.2) of the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage states, "a journalist shall report election in a fair and balanced manner." It can also be observed that most of these positive stories about Buhari appeared on the newspaper's front pages. This cannot be a coincidence but a deliberate attempt to market a candidate. Onwude et al. (2017) observe that newspaper ownership is vital in how stories are written for or against a candidate or political party.

This study, however, found that newspapers were fair to all candidates and their parties in terms of reporting what they said in their own words by verifying allegations against opponents before publishing and by always reporting both sides of the story. The study showed that many stories quoted sources in their own words. Across the five newspapers, there were 257 news stories about Muhammadu Buhari, and 89.9% of the sources quoted directly. On the other hand, news stories about the PDP presidential candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, also had a high percentage of cited sources (92.6%). We can safely say that these newspapers quoted their sources when covering the 2019 presidential election. This finding agrees with Oyesomi et al. (2019), who found that the newspapers were fair and balanced in the reportage of PDP and APC. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage in Section 2

(2.1.5) implores journalists to “report the views of candidates and political parties directly and in their own words, … rather than others interpret them.”

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were made. Newspapers failed to apply the principle of equity in the coverage and reportage of campaigns and other activities of parties and candidates contesting the presidential election. The newspapers granted more quality access to the All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate, His Excellency Muhammadu Buhari. The newspapers were, however, balanced in reporting campaign stories. Candidates were also reported in their own words rather than as others interpreted them. This showed they complied with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage.

## 5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study recommends the following:

- i. Before elections, newspapers should give adequate orientation to editors, reporters and correspondents on the tenets of The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage and the benefits of complying with its provisions.
- ii. Newspapers should try as much as possible to give equitable access to parties and candidates contesting the election.
- iii. Media regulatory bodies like the Nigeria Union of Journalists and the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria should sanction newspapers and journalists that fail to comply with the code.
- iv. Universities and other institutions where journalism practitioners are trained should include The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage in their Curriculum content and ensure that it is compulsory for every would-be journalist.

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