

The Role of Editorials in Shaping Government Policies: A Study of Lagos State Government

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Abstract

This study was carried out to determine the influence of editorials on the of government policies in Lagos state, Nigeria. Qualitative research desingn was adopted, while in-depth interview was employed to elicit data for analysis. The study found out that many policies and decisions of government were arrived at with the help of some editorials. Though, the study also discovered that government officials select the type of editorials to believe particularly as they relate to the style and ownership of the medium which publishes them, such ‘unethical’ editorials are still being analysed for possibility of some data, facts and biases. The finding is such that the power of editorial to influence government policies is enormous and cannot be overemphasized as the in-depth interviews conducted to ascertain this confirmed that editorials are held in high esteem by the government. The study recommended that newspaper houses should endeavour to employ the best hands to write their editorials as such editorials could be the strength of the newspapers.

Key Words: Newspaper Content, Editorials, Influence, Government Policies, Policy Makers

Background to the Study

The editorial page has become a very fundamental feature of newspapers. Magazines seldom have editorial pages or use editorials. At times, newspaper’s opinion is expressed in the editorial pages and such opinions are called editorials. This opinion, as expressed, is neither the opinion of the publisher of the newspaper nor the editorial team but the opinion of the newspaper as a corporate body. The most important item in the editorial page is the editorial. However, the page often contains other items such as the editorial cartoons and the imprint. Editorials represent the voice of the newspaper, as such; it should not be confused with Op- Eds or columnists’ articles. Editorials do not carry a by-line. This gives editorials a sort of —Voice of God quality, which veils the level of investigation and politics that go into the writing of an editorial. Newspapers carry information on a broad spectrum of issues which include: news, advertisement, politics, education, science and technologic, religion, commerce etc. The average daily newspaper contains far more news than available in radio, television or any other medium (Alozie, 2009, p.3). Of all the print media, newspapers provide the most current information. Newspapers are published either daily or weekly.

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Emery (1962) posits that the obligations of any newspaper to its community are to strive for honest and comprehensive coverage of the news and courageous expression of editorial opinion in support of the basic principles of human liberty and social progress. Anim and Sunday (2011) opine that editorial is a critical element in positioning the newspaper as a mediator between the people and the many contending forces and contemporary society. They also stated that it was for this reason that newspapers set aside a clearly identified section called the Editorial Page or Opinion Pages for their opinion and editorial functions. Their study evaluated the perception of editors, selected from 15 national newspapers in Nigeria about the functions of editorials. It found out that editorial as sacrosanct newspaper content was still alive as an item that leads public opinion.

According to Duyile (2005, p. 63), “editorial or leader is the opinion of the newspaper simply written for the understanding of readers, leading them to take decisions on the issues being discussed.” Okoro and Agbo (2003, p. 125) consider editorial as “a critical evaluation, interpretation and presentation of significant, contemporary events in such a way as to inform, educate, entertain and influence the readers.”

The roles that editorials play in shaping the thinking of readers is under scrutiny in this study as the study tries to establish how important editorial can be to the newspaper, readers and even the government. Different levels of government do not want to be reported in bad light using any content in the mass media, not to talk of the editorial which is the direct position of the medium on issues. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to establish how numerous editorials presented in various newspapers daily, shape decisions of government.

Statement of the Problem

Often times, the media and governments are seen as rivals or opposition partners, more so, when the media pride themselves as the fourth estate of the realm. But a deeper analysis shows that there are areas where this seemingly frosty relationship between government and the media lead to positive things, and one of such is the issue of the media setting agenda for government. Having been referred to as the leader in newspapers and magazines, editorials are expected to live up to the name. An editorial is expected that go beyond the other contents in the newspapers and magazine by showing exemplary leadership traits. Considered as the voice of a newspaper or magazine on issues that are topical, issues that are inclined to safety of lives and property, health, food and above all, issues that are inclined to the welfare of the people, national integration and development, editorials are always analytically informative and educative but they are often times critical of government policies or programmes. It is believed by many scholars and analysts that editorials, in this regard, are capable of influencing government actions and policies for the welfare of the people and development of society. If actually editorials are capable of, and have been influencing the decisions and policies embarked upon by governments, is what this study investigates with focus on the Lagos State government.

Objectives of the Study

The study had the following objectives

1. To determine the pattern of readership of editorials by policy advisers/makers.
2. To determine whether newspaper editorials influence policy making by Lagos State government.
3. To examine to what extent editorials influence government policies.

Research questions

1. What is the pattern of readership of editorials by policy advisers/makers?
2. Do editorials in Nigerian newspapers have influence on government policies?
3. To what extent do editorials influence government policies?

Mass Media and Policy Making

Early discussions of the relationship between the mass media and public policy making centered on the idea that the mass media occupy a role of liaison between citizens and governments (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956). First, the media cover issues that are prioritized by governments and elites. Next, media representations of these issues stimulate public discussions that help to crystallize individual opinions on these matters. Finally, the media collect individual opinions to represent public opinion that policy makers rely on for feedback on their own performance while learning about issues that matter to the public. Later on, as research on the media-policy link became primarily the domain of agenda-setting research (Dearing and Rogers, 1996), researchers have come to realize a direct, symbiotic link between the media and policy agendas. That is, policy makers tend to infer the public's stand on issues from the media agenda (Linsky, 1986) and, at the same time, editorial is regarded as the heart of the newspaper.

Empirical Review

Ate (2006) in a study carried out on influence of newspaper contents on public opinion found out that editorials more than other contents in the newspaper influence policy formulation or decision making on certain issues. Editorials galvanize policy makers to set proactive agenda for good governance of the society. They endorse or support issues of public significance. Editorialists are not dogmatic set of barking and biting professionals, whose stock in trade is only attacking. Editorials can also support noble causes of public concern. For instance, any time policy formulators and executors are on the right track, some editorials acknowledge their efforts. In supporting or endorsing a policy, there might be some grey areas where the supportive editorials may call for fine-tuning. Nigerian government owned media establishments are fond of supporting the policies of their proprietors through their opinion columns for public acceptability.

Ate's study, however, found out that privately owned media outlets provided a quantum of agitation against the third term agenda. Finally, the mass media were a major factor in the race that birthed the fourth republic and in the quest to ensure the preservation of the democracy. The study concluded that the mass media, maintained an approach and strategy that were largely encapsulated in aggressive attack and criticism. This lends credence to the position that media contents are highly relevant in shaping the position of government and also public opinion. The National assembly was forced not to consider the passage of the tenure elongation as requested then by the president owing to the growing cries from the media.

Exploitative and autocratic government policies can be attacked by editorials. On the side of the governed, when a particular section of the society decides, for instance, to take laws into its hand, editorials are bound to criticize such an abnormality. It illuminates the day's intelligence. By throwing more light to complex issues of the day, editorials often try to look at the two sides of an issue. They highlight and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of public issues while proffering solutions to complex issues of public concern. It brings to fore, debatable issues and provides an intellectual compass for society to discuss and resolve burning issues. Editorials play significant roles in the society in line with its relationship with public opinion, social responsibility and agenda setting principles.

Editorials in modern newspapers and magazines, according to Ate (2006), criticize or attack socio-political, economic and moral dilemmas of the society. An editorialist sometimes performs the job of a human rights activist raising alarm on blatant abuse or annihilation of certain norms and acceptable social order in the society. Editorials also defend the underdogs in the society. When the rich for instance, tend to unjustifiably exploit and manipulate the poor, editorials rise up in defense of the latter. The relationship among different members of the society is often monitored by the media and an advocacy role played by editorials to defend the course of the wretched of the earth.

Yanovitzky's (2002) study supports the proposition that intensive periods of media attention to issues are instrumental in attracting policy attention to public problems that are low on policy-makers' agendas while creating a sense of urgency among policy makers to generate immediate, short-term solutions to public problems. The findings also suggest that this impact is likely to be contingent on several key factors. For one, the degree of the media-policy association seems to vary over the life course of the issue on the media agenda. The impact of media attention on policy making is strongest at the beginning of the media issue attention cycle. Once media attention decreases in intensity, related policy outputs decrease as well and gradually shift from ad hoc solutions to long-term solutions for the problem. Other key factors involve the specific characteristics of the issue at hand and particularly impinge on the likelihood that increased media attention to issues will actually result in policy actions rather than increased policy attention alone.

Linsky (1986) conducted a mail survey of Washington officials, interviewed three dozen senior officials and journalists in depth, and studied the role of the press in six significant federal policy decisions; he concluded that the press has a huge and identifiable impact on policies of government.

Olaiya, Apeloko and Ayeni (2013) in a study on the botched third term aspiration of then Nigerian President, Gen Olusegun Obasanjo, found out that were it not for the voices from the press and ceaseless opinion articles that rented the white pages of our dailies, the ambition would have come to pass. The study noted that that the press lived up to its billing as the watchdog of government by revealing to Nigerians that the third term bid was unpopular and unsuccessful. Specifically, the study appreciated the efforts of the press which through its editorials was able to mobilize Nigerians against the third term agenda. The study, therefore, concluded that editorials are capable of influencing not only policy makers, but public.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratification Theory. Propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974), the theory belongs to the cluster of indirect effect theories. Anaeto, Solo-Anaeto and Tejumaiye (2007) posited that it is concerned with what people do with the mass media and their contents instead of what the mass media do to their audience. It is one of the earliest audience theories and was a shift from the all powerful media effect associated with the power of the media. The theory argues that people are not passive receivers who just receive messages but active consumers of the messages. This is because they selectively choose, attend to, perceive and retain the media messages on the basis of their needs, beliefs, etc. The theory takes a more humanistic approach in looking at media use. Blumler and Katz believe that there is not merely one way that the populace uses the media.

There are numerous uses the audience of media put media into to satisfy their needs. In this case however, government reads, interpret and analyse the content of newspapers especially editorials as they relate to this study, and sometimes outline its policies along the argument of the media content. Media consumers can choose the effect and influences the media and their content would have on them. The uses these contents are going to be put to are also the prerogative of the audience members. The media are merely viewed as means to an end.

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Baran and Davies (2009) posited that Herzog, a colleague of Lazarsfeld, is often credited as the originator of the uses and gratifications approach, although she most likely did not give it its label. Her 1944 article entitled *Motivations and Gratifications of Daily Serial Listeners* was the first published research to provide an in-depth examination of media gratifications. Wilbur Schramm (1954) expressed the gratification in a concept manner when he sought to answer the question: what determines which offerings of mass communication will be selected by a given individual? Uses and gratifications theory focuses attention on individuals in mass communication process. Blumler presented his ideas on how the uses and gratifications and effects theories could be harmonised. You will notice that this perspective still centres on responsibility for the control of effects with the consumer rather than the media.

Methodology

This study adopted in-depth interview as the research design. In-depth interview belongs to the qualitative research methodology as it attempted, in line with the position of Collis and Hussey (2003) to explain experiences and relationships between a newspaper content-editorial, and policies of the Lagos State Government. This methodology was also considered to be the most appropriate for this study because according to Adam, Khan, Raeside and Whit (2007), it aims at exploring the perception of social actors, which is what this study was designed to achieve- to examine the extent to which editorials in newspapers influence policies and decisions of government on issues.

Furthermore, in line with the qualitative methodological tradition, this study adopted the interpretative philosophical orientation to research. The aim of this approach, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2011), is to understand how people in everyday natural setting create meaning and interpret the events of their world. This study, therefore, adopted in-depth-interview as its method of collecting and analyzing data. Interview schedule was deployed for data collection because it is the instrument that complements the research method adopted in this study (i.e. in-depth interview).

The population of this study comprised all senior officials of the Lagos State Government in the cadre of not less than Assistant Director. Sample was drawn from the population and these included Commissioners, Permanent Secretaries, Directors, Deputy Directors, Assistant Directors, General Managers and Directors-General. The purposive/relevance non-probability sampling technique was considered most appropriate by the study because it allows the

researcher to use his judgment to select the variable that will make it possible to fulfill the stated research objectives and answer the research questions. Also, this technique of sampling is usually adopted when carrying out research on very small sample such as in case study research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009)

The statistical sampling theory approach was therefore used to determine the sample size for this study because according to Krippendorff (2013), that all the texts that make up the population of this study (i.e. All the top officers at the MDAs) are unequally informative in addressing the objective of this study, which focuses on the role and influence of editorial as newspaper content in policy making. Hence the four selected were considered to be directly involved in developing policies more often than many others in government circles and will give the research questions a better chance of being answered than the others in the sample space. Therefore, the sample size for the study is four top officers in the aforementioned ministries selected from the total of 47.

The study adopted narrative analysis as data presentation method. According to Easterby-Smith *et al* (2008), the narrative analysis is very valuable for analyzing data collected through interview which is the method used to collect data for this study. This method of analysis is also viewed as a means of exploring socially constructed details and relationships which usually comes in the form of storytelling (Saunders et al, 2009).

Research Findings

Research Question 1: What is the Pattern of Readership of Editorials by the Policy Advisers/Makers?

This research question sought to find out the reading pattern of policy makers as regards the intensity and time devoted to reading the editorials. This usually exposes the concentration and seriousness of the readers on a particular subject matter. To provide answer to this research question all the respondents were interviewed on this. Though they responded similarly by claiming that editorials that are related to their job are more keenly read than those that are at variance with their departments.

The first respondent noted that editorials reading pattern by her department could be said to be heavy readership pattern. She claimed that the government is keen on any editorials, particularly those that talk about the state government, hence her extremely keen interest in editorials in newspapers. In her words:

We at the ministry of information and Strategy and particularly at Strategy Department, monitor media contents daily and analyse the contents that are related to the state government. This analysis is collated and we call it “Lagos today in the eye of the press” as a feedback tool to the state government, editorial is key as it represents the view of the medium- the organisation as it is held accountable for the editorials it publishes. It is more important in participatory democracy as practised in Lagos State.

The second respondent was particularly emphatic that only education related editorials usually catch her fancy while others are mainly ignored or at best scan-read. She claimed that it was deliberate as she had little time to go through everything in the newspapers and as such only got herself involved in reading education related contents apart from the main news items in the newspapers.

The third respondent claimed to read the editorials in any newspaper that he reads. He maintained that editorials are very important element for him to be read in so far he picks up the newspaper to read. As quoted in research question 1, Bakare claimed to devote good time to reading editorials.

The fourth respondent however admitted not to have a clear cut pattern of readership of editorials as his personal assistants used to do that and report to him. He added that as the Clerk of Lagos House of Assembly, he records proceedings and prepares meeting reports. He however was indifferent on the issue of how often he reads editorials.

Research Question 2: Do Editorials in Nigerian Newspapers have Influence on Policies of Lagos State Government?

In the course of conducting in-depth interview to seek answer to this research question, there was consensus of opinion among the interviewees that editorials in newspapers are strong materials governments look forward to, to appreciate what public concerns are and design their policies in line with what the public wants. All the respondents, without reservations, argued that constructively crafted and well researched editorials are catalysts for government policies.

The first respondent was very emphatic in agreeing that editorials have influence on government policies. She opined that due to the serious nature of editorials and the caliber of people saddled with the responsibility of preparing them, it is a weighty content that must be valued for its values. She submitted:

...every 100 days, the governor gives his account of stewardship to carry Lagosians along and the Ministry of Information is key to the publicity of these achievements and milestones and as such we take to serious account media contents, even letters to the editor, so as to evaluate and get feedback from the public and interestingly through editorials, that of the press.

The second respondent noted that many a time it is what a newspaper position is that will galvanise decisions of government. She has very few but strong words on this. On his part, The third respondent posited that it is only logical that newspaper editorials have influence on a people oriented government since it is expected to be a critical perspective on issues and also a vehicle for newspaper to convey its position to its audience. According to him, any reasonable government should consider opinions in newspapers and more importantly, the opinions of the newspaper itself in formulating policies or even retracing its steps on topical issues where necessary.

The fourth respondent also agreed that editorials play a very important role in policy making. He expressed his admiration for the way they are written and packaged and felt it is supposed to be the most important feature in the newspaper. He also added that as newspaper organisations put a lot of effort into the preparation of editorials to have desired effects on the public, government too places so much interest in them to serve as a guide towards policy formulation and at times; reversal. He however expressed reservations that only few and well packaged editorials enjoy this attribute.

Research question 3: to What Extent do Editorials Influence Government Policies?

While many social science researchers hold the view that the media is very strong in shaping the society, some argue that the power of the media is undeniable but limited. However, one thing is agreed to by these researchers, that the media is powerful. The major disagreement among them is the extent to which the power of the media can go. The extent to which editorial affect government policies is, hereby, examined.

Seeking to answer the research question, the in-depth interview conducted on the four respondents yielded similar answers but with some minor submissions. Like the first and other respondents, who believe that the extent is conditional, the third respondent argued that all editorials are given importance because no matter what, there would be element of knowledge in them. The third respondent posited that even watery and sentimental editorials are also given a look, to see if the government could learn a lesson from it. The case of an editorial piece in the Punch and Guardian calling on authorities and government to look into the inhuman torture of some women in Ikotun area of Lagos was mentioned as a good example of the extent to which government reacts to issues in the editorials.

Policemen tortured some women with pepper inserted into their private parts and government was swift in reacting. The government swung into action and one of the issues raised in the editorials was that government should take a firm action on violence against women by making a law to that effect. The Lagos State Government then had to educate the public that there was already a law as requested by the editorials with even more than requested and then had to now popularise the law for the benefit of the citizenry. The Lekki toll collection was also mentioned as a case that editorials in newspaper drove. The Lagos State Government, as a responsible and responsive government, according to the respondents, had to address the Lekki toll collection issue.

In giving credence to his position on the extent to which editorials influence decisions of government, the third respondent gave a the case of Lagos Coroner Law of 2012 in which his ministry had to advice government on an issue when newspapers were churning out editorials on the issue. In giving credence to his position on the extent to which editorials influence decisions of government, Barrister Akinjide gave a the case of Lagos Coroner Law of 2012 in which his ministry had to advice government on an issue when newspapers were churning out editorials on

the issue. Of particular mention were The Punch and The Guardian. He claimed that government grew uncomfortable as it felt the editorials were deliberately published to encourage mass revolt against the state government. Bakare admitted that the heat of the editorials was so much that government had to suspend the strict implementation of the law. Another instance where the power of influence of editorials was evident was the Law on the Ban on Okada activities in many roads in Lagos by the state government. Barrister Bakare affirmed that various newspaper editorials were daily calling on government to address the menace of the commercial motorcycle operations in the state. The editorials were mentioning the figures of victims of the menace then at the National Orthopaedic Hospital in Yaba and those who have lost valuables or even robbed at home by armed robbers on Okada. At that point, the state government had to respond to these calls and that was why the ban was part of the traffic laws amendment that was sent to the state house of assembly for passage.

Furthermore, Barr. Bakare also mentioned the call in Punch editorials in 2012 on the increasing aggressiveness of the Lagos State Traffic Maintenance Authority (LASTMA) officials on motorists and other road users. This call, according to Bakare, made the state governor to personally summon the Director-General of the agency and subsequently hold a press briefing to warn the errant officials not to go beyond the mandate given to them by the LASTMA Law.

Discussion of Findings

As this study discovered that newspaper editorials play significant roles in decision making activities of Lagos State Government, it runs in tandem with the findings of Ate (2006). His study, carried out on influences of newspaper contents on public opinion found out that editorials more than other contents in the newspaper influence policy formulation or decision making on certain issues. Editorials galvanize policy makers to set proactive agenda for good governance of the society. They endorse or support an issue of public significance. Ate (2006) found out that editorials are well respected by policy making officers of the government and so also opinion leaders who use the direction of favourable editorials to shape the thinking of their group members.

The findings of Linsky (1986) also confirmed the findings of this study that contents in the media have direct influence on policy formulation of government. Linsky conducted a mail survey of Washington officials, interviewed three dozen senior officials and journalists in depth, and studied the role of the press in six significant federal policy decisions; he concluded that the press has a huge and identifiable impact on policies of government. Officials believe that the media do a lot to set the policy agenda and to influence how an issue is understood by policymakers, interest groups, and the public and that the media agenda seems to have direct, sometimes strong influence upon the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some cases, policy implementation (Graber 1994, 91-92).

Olaiya et al (2013) submitted that media contents, including editorials, go a long way in shaping the policies of government. In their study, which looked at the role of the contents of privately owned media in shaping public opinion, particularly on the botched third term bid of erstwhile president, Olusegun Obasanjo, it was found out that privately owned media outlets provided a quantum of agitation against the third term agenda. Finally, the mass media were major factors in the race that birthed the fourth republic and in the quest to ensure the preservation of the democracy. This led to the lawmakers' refusal to pass the bill that would have created a third term position in the constitution of the federal republic. The study concluded that the mass media, maintained an approach and strategy that were largely encapsulated in aggressive attack and criticism. This lends credence to the position that media contents are highly relevant in shaping the position of government and also public opinion.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it can therefore be concluded that editorial holds a special position in the minds of the readers particularly policy makers. Government appears not to be comfortable when a highly critical editorial has been written to analyse its policies and on the other hand, gives itself a pat on the back when a praise editorial is published to support its policies. Based on the findings of this study, it is therefore recommended that:

1. There is need to develop a department saddled with the responsibility of writing the editorials as editorials are seen in government circles as the opinion of newspapers and as such should be sacrosanct in its preparation.
2. Editorial boards may consider the membership of senior public officials on their boards to provide wider and realistic political perspectives to the activity of editorial writing as this study showed that many senior officials of government are so enlightened that they look forward to some features in the editorials to be considered as useful for government.

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