



**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS  
COVERAGE AND SALIENCE OF 2011 NIGERIAN  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ISSUES AND  
CANDIDATES' ATTRIBUTES AMONG NIGERIAN  
STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates agenda-setting effects of online newspapers on perceptions of and attitudes towards issues and candidates' attributes among Nigerian students in Malaysia in the 2011 Nigerian presidential election. The study is based on the assumption that election times increase the public need for orientation and that online media provide abundant opportunity for foreign residents to stay connected with their nations' political development. Agenda-setting theory, which tests the relationship between mass media coverage and salience of issues and issue attributes among members of the public, has been tested using different media formats, and in many locales across the globe. However, the generalisability of findings remains disputable given the focus of the majority of the studies on established democracies, and the ever-changing media landscape. Amidst the extant gap, the migration of traditional media to the virtual realm and the seeming fragmentation consequences of online media environment open new debates about the viability of agenda-setting as a theory of media effects. By replicating agenda-setting findings in the traditional media on a new media platform, this study intends to fill the existing gap in the literature and introduce additional dimension to locales and contingencies in agenda-setting research. Content analysis of three Nigerian online newspapers which yielded 260 news articles on the 2011 presidential election was conducted to gather data on the media agenda of issues and candidates' attributes. A cross-sectional survey of 321 Nigerian students in Malaysian selected universities and colleges, using self-administered questionnaire, was also conducted to develop public agenda of issues and candidates' attributes. The two data sets were used to test the seven main hypotheses raised in tandem with agenda-setting theoretical postulations. Findings show that the majority of Nigerian students sampled in this study read online newspapers frequently and considered politics as the most important content. The results also suggest that issues and candidates' attributes emphasised in the online newspapers strongly correlate with substantive issues and attributes perceived by their readers. In addition, increased exposure to online newspapers, to some degree, correlates with increased consensus on candidates' issue emphases and attributes among different religious and geopolitical region subgroups. The results also demonstrate significant contributions of perceived issue emphases and candidates' attributes to the candidate preferred by Nigerians sampled in this study. On the theoretical plain, this study suggests the incorporation of diasporic community into the possible locales for testing agenda-setting theory and the use of responses from online media audience as opposed to machine-generated responses used in past studies. Practically, the study suggests that media organisations should be conscious of enlarged political public sphere offered by online news media and demonstrate social responsibility towards audience within and outside their countries of operations. Also suggested is the need for corporate communication professionals to continually explore the saliency of the objects of their message with a view to send the best message to their publics. A policy on the need to fast-track the actualization of Nigerian diasporas' voting rights is also suggested.

## ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث أثر نظرية وضع الأولويات (agenda-setting) للصحف عبر الإنترنت علي تصورات الطلبة النيجيريين في ماليزيا ومواقفهم تجاه القضايا السياسية وسمات المرشحين في الإنتخابات الرئاسية لعام ٢٠١١ م. وتستند هذه الدراسة على الافتراض أنه في فترات الانتخابات تزداد حاجة العامة للتوعية السياسية وأن وسائل الإعلام عبر الإنترنت تقدّم فرصة هائلة للمواطنين الساكنين في الخارج لمتابعة التطورات السياسية في بلدانهم الأم. هذا وقد تم في السابق اختبار هذه النظرية (agenda-setting theory) التي تدرس العلاقة بين تغطية وسائل الإعلام لبعض القضايا وأهمية تلك القضايا لدي الجمهور علي وسائل إعلام مختلفة في عدة مجتمعات في العالم. ومع ذلك، ظل تعميم نتائج تلك الدراسات مثار الجدل نظرا لتركيز معظم الأبحاث على الأنظمة الديمقراطية الراسخة والمشهد الإعلامي المتغير باستمرار. وإضافة إلي هذه الفجوة الموجودة، فإن انتقال وسائل الإعلام التقليدية إلى واقعها الجديد وظهور وسائل الإعلام عبر الإنترنت بيئتها الجديدة، قد فتح مناقشات جديدة حول قابلية نظرية وضع الأولويات (agenda setting theory) للتطبيق كنظرية التأثير الإعلامي. وتعتم هذه الدراسة ملء هذه الفجوة وإضافة أبعاد جديدة للنظرية وذلك بدراسة نتائج البحوث عن وسائل الإعلام التقليدية لتطبيقها علي وسائل الإعلام الجديدة. وقد تمّ تحليل مضمون ثلاث صحف نيجيرية عبر الإنترنت والتي تضمنت ٢٦٠ مقالة عن الإنتخابات الرئاسية لعام ٢٠١١ م وذلك لجمع المعلومات عن الأولويات الإعلامية للقضايا وسمات المرشحين، لمعرفة علاقتها بالأهمية التي يضيفها الجمهور علي هذه القضايا والمرشحين. وقد قام الباحث بمسح مستعرض ل ٣٢١ طالبا نيجيريا في جامعات وكليات ماليزية مختارة باستخدام الاستبيان الذاتي لاختبار سبع فرضيات وفقا لمزايم نظرية وضع الأولويات. وقد كشفت نتائج البحث أن غالبية الطلبة النيجيريين عينة الدراسة يقرؤون الصحف عبر الإنترنت باستمرار ويهتمون بالقضايا السياسية فيها. و تشير النتائج أيضا أن القضايا وسمات المرشحين التي تم التأكيد عليها في الصحف عبر الإنترنت ترتبط بقوة مع تصورات القراء لتلك القضايا والسمات. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن زيادة التعرض للصحف عبر الإنترنت ترتبط -إلى حد ما- مع زيادة التوافق في الآراء حول المسائل والمرشحين المفضلة بين مختلف المجموعات الدينية والجيوسياسية. ومن ناحية النظرية، فقد اقترحت هذه الدراسة ضرورة إدماج مجتمع المواطنين الساكنين خارج بلدانهم ضمن المجموعات المستخدمة في اختبار نظرية وضع الأولويات واعتبار ردود القراء عبر الإنترنت بدلا من الاستجابات المولدة آليا والمستخدم في الدراسات السابقة. وعلى الصعيد العملي، فقد اقترحت الدراسة ضرورة اعتبارالساحة السياسية الموسّعة التي تقدّمها وسائل الإعلام عبر الإنترنت وجمهورها العريض وضمان حق المشاركة الإنتخابية للمواطنين الساكنين خارج بلدانهم.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

Lambe Kayode Mustapha

Signature.....

Date.....

**INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

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*This dissertation is dedicated to  
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my late parents, Abdullahi Lambe and Hauwa Eyitayo, for giving me the love of life  
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and  
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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The capability of the news media to raise important issues in public minds during elections has been established over decades. Issues that get a lot of attention from the media become salient in the minds of the members of the public (Sparks, 2006). Beyond the transfer of salient issues, it has equally been discovered that attributes of issues, objects and political figures that are prominent in the media have become salient in public perceptions (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

The increasing migration of people across the globe and the availability of the online version of traditional news media have transformed the overall communication environment. This change allows for wider and extensive distribution of information, defying time and geographical boundaries. Online media enhance information dissemination capacity of a social and political system and take local happenings of a nation to her citizens residing in foreign nations. This novel development has been facilitating greater political involvement. Online newspapers stand out among online news media that connect citizens to their homeland (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Kperogi, 2008; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). By combining the features of their printed counterparts with other attractive benefits, online newspapers attract huge readership, particularly among members of diasporic communities (Alshehri & Gunter, 2002; Binaisa, 2006; Flavian&Gurrea, 2008; Hashim, Hasan & Sinnapan, 2007; Ihlstrom & Akesson, 2004; Louw & Volcic, 2010). Like many citizens of the world, Nigerians

living in foreign land benefit from this advancement in news dissemination (Kperogi, 2008).

With about 22 independent Internet newspapers that are online editions of print newspapers (KAS Democracy Report, 2008), Nigerian foreign residents, whose population has been contentiously fixed above twenty million across the world (Mberu, 2010) and about 20, 000 in Malaysia (Anegbeh, 2010) are thus potential consumers of homeland news from the online news media. The importance of online newspapers to this group becomes topical during political transition moments such as the presidential election in April, 2011. This study, therefore, examines the influence of online newspapers coverage on perceptions of issues as well as candidates' attributes in the 2011 presidential election among Nigerian students in Malaysia.

The three newspapers considered in this study are among the most popular and widely read within and outside Nigeria (BBC World Service Trust, 2007). These papers are the *Daily Trust*, the *Punch* and the *Vanguard*. They are all published in English language and run over 100, 000 prints daily. The papers have been leading crusaders of democratic consolidation in Nigeria through their news coverage, opinion and comments as well as in-house editorials. They are all privately-owned newspapers and publish both print and online versions daily.

The *Punch* newspaper was established in 1970 as a limited liability company (Punch Nigeria Limited). Its mission statement reads "to promote and defend the values of democracy and free enterprise and to foster the principle of equal opportunity for all" (*Punch*, 2010). With over 100, 000 copies a day and 73 million hits on its Web version; the *Punch* prides itself as Nigeria's most widely read newspaper (Mohammed, Hozaiife, Bagsaw, Obioma & Tongman, 2008; *Punch*, 2010). The *Punch* newspaper "provides Nigerians at home and abroad with regularly updated