

**Television Portrayal and Public Perception  
of Political Actors in Nigeria: Implications  
for National Development**

By

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**Introduction**

**M**any political actors in Nigeria and the world at large thrive on positive perception by the public, derived seemingly from their actions, inactions and utterances. Public perception arises from the opinion that the public holds of the political actor. From the position of governance, the political actor strives to earn a positive image, hence public approval, but achieves this through the media which Graber (1995) describes as non-institutional actors in the political process, because the media offer the political actor the most decisive platform to reach as many of his constituents as possible. Hence political actors actively seek ways to make the media portray them positively in the eyes of the public.

This article explores how television, by its portrayal of Nigerian political actors, shapes public perception, particularly when the portrayal of these political actors comes through the manipulation of, and by, the media. In this discourse, public actor, politician and political personality are used interchangeably to mean those who by election or appointment, occupy the position

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of governance or discharge governance role, just as the audience, viewers and public are synonymously used. National development, in the context of this essay, refers to all activities that are geared towards improving Nigeria's, "capacity to induce and manage change. That is, to predict, plan, understand and monitor change and reduce or eliminate unwanted change" (Udoakah, 1998, p.134).

### Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored on the Impression Management Theory introduced by Erving Goffman (1959). The theory argues that individuals actively engage in activities that are intended to convey a particular version of reality in a conscious attempt to establish or sustain a particular image. Expanding on this theory, Watson and Hill (2006, p.132) write:

*Because most social interaction requires instant judgments, alignments and behaviour, the individual must be able rapidly to convey impressions of him/herself to others, highlighting favourable aspects, concealing others... Impression management has the character of drama: all social ROLES... are, in a sense, performances in which it is important to set a scene and rehearse a role, and this means co-ordinating activities with others in the drama. Thus we put up a front, that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.*

By implication, the actions of Nigerian political actors are more or less drama pieces, consciously put together to highlight the positive and conceal the negative about them in order to portray a good image that would cause the public to have the desired perception about them. Oftentimes, these actions - rightly called roles - are rehearsed and fine-tuned by both the politicians and the media such that the final act is impressionistic to those who view it on television. In the end, what is shown on television about politicians is a performance carefully crafted to earn public approval.

The theory further holds that individuals operate in different situations, both public and private, which Goffman calls 'front and back regions' respectively. Hence, political actors in Nigeria would subscribe, sometimes perfunctorily, to formal rules and rituals in the front region in order to create the desired, or sustain an already established, impression, while acting differently behind the scene (in the back region).

### Process of Perception

Perception is a complex process. We perceive with our senses, but more importantly it is our interpretation of events which is based on our previous experience. Perception, according to Gamble and Gamble (2002, p.83), is "the process of selecting, organising, and subjectively interpreting sensory data in a way that enables us to make sense of our world". Watson and Hill (2006, p.212) corroborate Gamble and Gamble's definition: "The process of becoming aware and making sense of the stimuli received from our environment by the senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch."

The definitions above outline three important elements in perception: noticing, organising and interpreting. Thus members of the public have a perception of politicians by taking

cognizance of them and their activities (noticing), putting politicians and their activities into a coherent and meaningful pattern (organizing) and drawing conclusions from the data about the kind of person that the politician is (interpreting). In other words, members of the public engage in social perception which is an attempt to explain, understand, make judgments about and predict the behaviour of the political actor (Watson and Hill, 2006).

Perception is important to communication. Its understanding is crucial to appreciating why people may perceive differently. It influences our responses. The interpretation of the activities of the political actor reflects in the reactions (responses) to such situations or activities. Those interpretations guide subsequent public actions.

Perceptions are relative. Two persons may not perceive a political personality or situation the same way. Hence perception is dependent on who is engaging in perception, when it is done or where it occurs. In the long run, it is subjective, therefore relative.

Thirdly, perceptions regulate behaviour. Quite aware that behaviours are sometimes shaped by people's frames of reference, political actors seek to control the behaviour of the governed by first seeking to shape their perception in a certain manner, knowing that perception would affect the thoughts, feelings and actions of constituents in a predetermined manner.

### **Television and Skewed Portrayal of Reality**

Nigerians' exposure to television increases the proclivity to be influenced in their perceptions of political actors, events and issues. Television can thus limit or heighten public perception. Gamble and Gamble (2002, p.101) explain that, "television can limit the way we perceive and think about ourselves in relationship to others, and what's worse, can cause us to misperceive reality. Because the media perpetuate what is unreal

and untrue, they encourage us not to reach for what is possible."

Most successful political communications are not a product of happenstance. They are often worked for by the sender, either as media professionals or political actors. This sometimes renders the media's political reportage biased, hence flawed; subjective as opposed to objective; partisan rather than impartial. The process binds the television operative and the Nigerian politician in a relationship that subjects television to the whims of the politician. The connivance of the television operative enables the politician to achieve the manipulation of the audience. McNair (2002, p.32) underlines this relationship thus "the politician can shape and work the message but has relatively little control over the environment into which it is inserted and the uses to which it will be put. This is where the media come into be deployed in the service of the politician."

Politicians are ready to exploit the seemingly little but important aspects of television production, with the tacit support of television professionals. Citing Maurer and Kepplinger (2003), Elert (2008) says television's focus on the visual aspects of political communication, particularly during political talk shows, makes the medium give attention to the facial expressions of the speaker and non verbal reactions shots of the television host, etc. to illustrate emotions and interpretations. Editors and producers decide the shots to be shown. Sometimes, how politicians appear, what they wear or how they behave non verbally seems to be more important than what they talk about. These aspects play a major role in the public's perception of the political actor via television.

De Paulo and Friedman (1997) stress that audiences associate people's non verbal behaviour with their attitudes, and that media portrayals of politicians' non verbal communication correlate with the public perception of the politicians' character, traits and personalities. Hence, non verbal shots of political actors greatly affect the impressions about a politician and his image.

Political actors often demonstrate positive dimension by smiling or touching someone. They also use the responsive dimension that demonstrates the other's salience by nodding, or keeping an eye on the person. Politicians similarly use the non verbal behaviour of 'potency or status dimension' to demonstrate social control by expanding themselves and taking up a lot of space through gestures and body movements. To the unsuspecting, all this is accidental. However, it is part of a well thought out plan by political actors, aided by the active involvement of television operatives who ultimately decide the shots that would appear, to project them positively and subtly influence their constituents' perception.

Politicians do engage in subliminal persuasion which Wong (2009, p. 5) describes as a situation in which, "what is being said is not as important as how it is being said – from a visual perspective that is. A positive slant can be obtained from a neutral or mildly negative story if it is delivered with enthusiasm or positivity, without viewers even consciously comprehending the effects". Coleman and Banning (2006, p.313) corroborate this point: "In the era of television politics, there is a growing trend of style over substance, personality over issues and emotions over information". Those who manage political information believe that interpretations placed upon campaign events are frequently more important than the events themselves. In other words, the political content is shaped primarily by the perceptual environment within which campaigns take place.

Without doubt, politicians cannot have their way at all times without the complicity of the media, particularly television. Much as media professionals would love to demonstrate their independence, various aspects of production, however, make television vulnerable to political manipulation and therefore shaping the portrayal of political actors and the consequent perception of the politicians by the public.

Ekert (2008) identifies three elements of television news that are crucial in influencing the portrayal and perception of political actors. These are the selection of footage based on visual appeal, the use of the narrative format and the authoritative manner of presentation of television news.

#### D) Visual Appeal

Ekert (2008) notes that:

*Television is primarily a visual medium. This has meant that in order for networks to attract viewers, they must cater to television's visual imperative...The need for visuals leads television news to distort...by emphasising those aspects favourable to pictures and ignoring those that are not. It encourages the coverage of conflict and controversy while disregarding the comparatively routine functions of government. Actions like signing a bill or a presidential golf game receive more attention and have greater impact than processes like negotiations or the development of policy. Video tape is often edited to intensify the activity being reported, focusing on those sections with the most action.*

Pictures generally tend to oversimplify or exaggerate political events. The results are symbolic - black and white, good and evil depictions of complex phenomena. Politicians usually entice television with carefully orchestrated moments knowing that the power of the images would override the accompanying

narration, no matter how negative. Without the enormity of the visual impact over the verbal, no one appears to listen or give attention. In the contest between the ear and the eye, the eye always wins.

### ii) Narrative News (Entertainment Imperative)

Since television is more about entertainment, news itself competes on the entertainment level. This compels television offerings to jettison the traditional inverted pyramid form in favour of narration. The narrative form forces the news to “display (the) attributes of fiction and drama, to have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action; a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Epstein 1973, pp.41). The narrative format reinforces television reports as melodramas, the idea being to dramatise and personalise events to achieve a pre-determined portrayal of the political personalities involved.

Quite aware of this, political actors consciously engage in melodramas that portray them to be on top of the situation or that portray them as pro-active.

### iii) Authoritative News

Television with its advantage of sound and vision presents itself in an authoritative, unambiguous manner. In whatever it presents, television leaves no one in doubt that its version of reality is the truth, particularly because of its unique characteristics of sound and vision. The medium now becomes a stage, a platform on which political actors present their 'reality' for public acceptance. Elert (2008) observes that:

*There is hardly an aspect of the staging of television news programme that is not designed to convey an impression of authority and omniscience. The main studio is not unlike the cockpit of a 747 or*

*the control room of a nuclear power plant. The banks of television screens and the ever present world map give it the feel of a high tech command centre. The anchor ... is positively godlike: he summons forth men, events and images at will; he speaks in tones of utter certainty; he is the person with whom all things begin and end. He presents his interpretations with great confidence, almost as if he was part of the events themselves. His authoritative and detached style of the reporting and the finality of the sign-off leave the impression that the matters discussed are essentially closed.*

On the whole, the skewed portrayal of politicians and consequent perception by the public rests on the manipulation of information on which political behaviour is based. There could be concealment or suppression of inconvenient information by the political actors pursued through television and other media such that, “what the citizen receives as political information in the public sphere is often an incomplete and partial picture of reality” (McNair, 2002, p. 26).

For self-survival, politicians actively seek to conceal information, many a time for the vague reason of 'national security'. What is available as information to the public is a product of secrecy, deception and cover-up which, in the long run, define the public's perception of the political actor involved. And for the suspecting, gullible public, such information on television, with its authoritative nature, represents a believable version of reality.

### Implications for Nigeria's Development

Perception is critical to communication, and, by extension, national development. This is because public perception, to a great extent, determines how members of the public will react to issues concerning such political actors. The cumulative effect of perception, subjective and relative as it were, is that perception regulates the behaviours of the perceiver. Thus, those who perceive political actors as doing well are likely to overlook even their most grievous misdeeds. This has the tendency to give them wrong feedback which misleads them into actions that endanger the survival of the polity.

While conceding that favourable public perception may sometimes be a true reflection of the governed, it is, much of the time, a product of political manipulation effectively achieved through the mass media, particularly television. In the circumstances, manipulated perception weakens democracy. This is especially true of Nigeria's fledging democracy where political leaders at different levels of government, primarily at the federal and state levels, have veered the mass media under their control to permanently return a verdict of favourable public perception. Except in states of the federation where there are viable alternative media channels, democracy only exists in name, with no dissenting voice which would have strengthened the system. Democracy cannot be said to exist where there are no alternative opinions to an issue. A skewed portrayal does not only stifle the development of democracy, but takes the polity backward. The observation by McNair (2002, p. 26) is apt:

*If the information on which political behaviour is based is, or can be, manufactured artifice rather than objective truth, the integrity of the public sphere is inevitably diminished. To the extent that citizens are subject*

*to manipulation, rather than exposed to information, democracy loses its authenticity and becomes something rather more sinister.*

Inaccurate public perception of political actors creates despots and presumptuous rulers who bestride the country's political landscape as tin gods – all powerful and all knowing. Basking in the euphoria of a 'favourable' perception by the governed, as created by their mega-phone media, many Nigerian leaders, particularly state governors, have governed their states with blood and iron, tolerating no dissenting views, and going about with rude confidence. Some political actors hardly have time to critically reflect on issues which could improve on the living conditions of the governed.

Skewed public perception makes the political actors engage in frivolities and regard them as the substance of governance. While it is rare to see Nigerian politicians engage in critical discussions of issues and problems which affect the wellbeing of the polity, it is common to see them on television attend child dedication services, child-naming ceremonies, birthday parties, turbaning and conferment of chieftaincy titles, weddings and other sundry events that would not subject the rulers to any exertion of the intellect on matters bordering on statehood.

Manipulated media portrayals generally make political actors play to the gallery. They would think they are actually doing well and would continue to engage in frivolities which the unsophisticated public readily and naively accepts as indices of good performance in office.

Since the opinion expressed by the media influences the opinion adopted by the public, political actors tend to pander to the needs of television news rather than development needs of the polity. Subtly, but sometimes brazenly, political actors impose

their agenda on television, particularly those stations that they control by reason of their positions in government. Besides, as Hallin and Mancini (1984) have noted: with its authoritative trappings, television news seems to be saying that ordinary people cannot manage politics and should not try. The insinuation is that politics belongs to the sphere that includes journalists and other political elites, but excludes the audience. In this respect television is profoundly undemocratic.

Television news, it seems, has replaced vital public issues of the day with the wallpaper of good visuals. As television is essentially an eye medium and very impressionistic, 'good visuals' – action visuals of the political actors (not minding the extent of frivolities) – are preferred to visuals that portray the sincere anxiety or frustration of the politician grappling with the problems of state.

With its active involvement in shaping public impressions, television unconsciously provides the frame through which the government and its officials are regarded. It may actually frame stories to enhance the overall tone toward government and politics. This often backfires, though, when framed stories on television do not match the realities on ground. Public apprehension and resentment towards government as an institution as well as its officials sets in, leading to apathy towards the processes that sustain democracy, for example, low voter turnout at election.

### **Towards a more Transparent Portrayal of Political Actors**

The discussion above leaves no one in doubt as to the crucial role of the television medium in shaping the way political personalities are portrayed and the consequent manner members of the public perceive them. Television operatives are in a dilemma, either to use the medium to its fullest potentials (which include being a definer of reality) or maintain a professional distance from politicians to effectively discharge the Fourth

Estate role. The burden is not made less by the culpability with which the media, generally, are treated alongside failed regimes.

Television faces acute competition from other media. Within the television industry itself, stations compete strongly against one another for audience attention. Therefore, the need for operatives to explore the potentials of the medium to contain or overcome competition is always present and cannot be overlooked. Yet within these circumstances which tend to circumscribe television's ability to be an effective watchdog, television professionals can and should demonstrate social responsibility because they are operating in the public sphere. While not overlooking the many interests which provide the frame of reference for a station, it is essential that because they operate in the public sphere, television operatives should regard the "audience as citizens, members of the communities and individuals rather than merely consumers" (Watson and Hill (2006, p. 235). When less emphasis is placed on the audience as mere consumers to be influenced in their perception, television operatives would handle portrayals of political actors in a less skewed manner. Information on which political behaviour is based would be less manufactured, while connivance with politicians to conceal information or give half-truths would be less attractive. Once the manipulation of information is reduced, portrayals of actors will be more transparent and objective, and the public would be less constrained to freely develop their opinion and attitude towards a political personality.

To assist the public achieve this, television operatives should constantly test the claims of the politicians by engaging in reality checks. Where, for example, a governor has claimed to execute some projects, journalists and civil society groups and other stakeholders should verify the claims with the realities on ground. The process may reveal interesting revelations critical to the direction of national development.

The sophistication of media portrayals in this age of

information and communication technology similarly demands sophisticated audience members whose interpretations of scenes on television should rise above naivety. Audience members should strive to crosscheck 'facts' on television from other information sources. This, ultimately, will enable the audience to draw a line of distinction between media portrayals and the realities on ground, a situation which could re-direct the development priorities of government.

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