

## **Influence Of the Mass Media on Opinion Formation Among Residents of Select Rural Areas of Delta State, Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study investigated the influence of the mass media on opinion formation among residents of select rural areas of Delta State, Nigeria. The survey research method was adopted in obtaining data for the study. Four hundred (400) respondents form the sample size which was drawn from Okwe (Oshimili South), Issele-Azagba (Aniocha North) and Ogbolu (Oshimili North), all in Delta state. The study was anchored on the Agenda setting theory of the mass media. Findings of the study showed that the mass media has influence on the formation of opinion among the residents of the three select rural communities, and that radio was the most pronounced media outlet that the residents were exposed to. Based on the findings and the conclusion reached, the study recommends among others, that the mass media should intensify its provision of timely information that would influence positively opinion formation on public issues.*

**Keywords:** *Influence, Mass Media, Opinion, Residents, Rural Areas*

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### **I. Introduction**

Unarguably, individuals and groups in every human society hold opinion which they use to interpret events happening in their environment. Wikipedia (n.d) asserts that "an opinion is a judgement, viewpoint, or statement that is not conclusive, rather than facts, which are true statements." An opinion, according to Young (2016) is a "belief somewhat stronger or more intense than a mere notion or impression but less stronger than positive knowledge based on complete or adequate proof. Opinions are really beliefs about a controversial topic." Generally, what passes on for opinion is one's impression, sentiment or prejudice. Opinion implies careful thought and consideration. It is founded on some kind of information or evidence. It is not necessary that opinion should always be correct, it may even be faulty (<https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com>).

An opinion therefore is a belief or attitude about something that is not necessarily based on fact. Everywhere, people have lots of different opinions and in many cases, people can have different opinions on the same issue. Attitude is an individual's overall evaluation of an object with some degree of favour or disfavour. Based on this viewpoint, Rosenberg (2001) avers that an attitude consists of three types of elements: cognitive (beliefs); affective (emotions or feelings); and behavioural (intent to act). These elements in real sense can affect one another. While they are usually consistent, they may not be. Attitudes are also related to one another.

Opinion formation involves a progressive evolution that, at the level of single individuals may persist indefinitely as personal opinions change under various effects. In the field of communication studies and political science, mass media is often seen as influential forces on opinion formation and public opinion. Additionally, political socialization and behavioural genetics sometimes explain public opinion.

Mass media is an ideal source of information relied upon by many in modern societies. It plays a critical role in opinion formation and public opinion since it disseminates information and facts concerning various topics that the people would have had wrong information regarding different issues in the society with wrong information, the people would end up making uninformed decisions. Mass media has influenced opinion formation and public opinion for centuries.

The information that empowers people to form their opinion on certain issues is disseminated through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, sound recordings and the internet. The advanced technology used in the various social media platforms such as facebook has made it easier for people to access information with ease. The media has also created various opinion leaders in different countries and communities of the world that people rely on to get their views or facts concerning various topics affecting the society at large such as politics.

Therefore, the media plays a significant role in influencing the people's decisions on different themes in the community. Most importantly, it should be one hundred percent accurate so as to disseminate the correct information to the public. Inaccurate information may have both negative and positive effects on opinion formation and of course public opinion.

The role of mass media in opinion formation and public opinion cannot be overstated. It plays significant role in shaping the minds of the people and the societal welfare by shaping and promoting a healthy democracy. The media is considered as the backbone of democracy in several countries around the globe. Media makes people aware of various political, social, environmental and political issues taking place worldwide (McCombs, 2011; Hasan, 2013)

As the mirror that reflects the truth and realities about life, the media has evolved over the years and is becoming more active each passing day. It reminds politicians about unfulfilled promises and enables the literate and illiterate members of the society to elect the right people into positions as permitted by the constitution. This is made possible through excessive coverage especially during elections period. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the influence of the mass media on opinion formation among residents of select rural areas of Delta state.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

In today's world, people rely on different media platforms for information. The platforms include the conventional media, and the social media as exemplified in the internet. There are some which have become more popular. For instance, the internet has become more popular in the 21st century compared to other media platforms (Sjoraida, Guna, Nungraha & Pasaribu, 2024). It influences how people view the world. As such it dictates how people perceive various forms and realities. The media (both conventional and social media) has become part and parcel of most people. It makes people view the world as a global village since they can get any information at the touch of a button. In this way, people will be motivated to make informed decisions on factors that affect their day to day activities.

This is evident in the media. In this context, the media (print and broadcast) decides what the readers or viewers should think about after reading and viewing the content. For instance, during campaign periods the print and broadcast media publish and air the profiles of the aspiring candidates. After reading and viewing such information, the electorate can form their opinion and be persuaded to change their opinions about the candidate whom they are supposed to elect to various elective positions

It is not immediately clear how the mass media has been able to influence opinion formation among residents of the select rural areas in Delta State, hence the need for this study.

## **III. Objective of the study**

The general objective of the study is to investigate the influence of the mass media on opinion formation among residents of select rural areas in Delta State. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To ascertain whether the residents of the select rural areas of Delta State are exposed to the mass media
2. To find out the type of mass media the residents of the select rural areas are exposed to
3. To determine whether the mass media influence opinion formation among residents of the select rural areas of Delta state.
4. To find out whether the opinions formed through the influence of the mass media have enhanced the residents' contribution to the development of the communities.

## **IV. Research Questions**

To guide the study, the following research questions were posed:

1. Are the residents of the select rural areas of Delta state exposed to the mass media?
2. Which type of mass media are the residents of the select rural areas exposed to?
3. Do the mass media influence opinion formation among residents of the select rural areas in Delta State?
4. Have the opinions formed through the influence of the mass media enhanced the residents' contribution to the development of the rural areas?

## **V. Theoretical underpinning**

Theories provide a framework for explaining phenomenon. The agenda setting Theory provides a strong basis on which the concept of opinion formation can be explained. The agenda setting theory provides a strong basis on which the concept of opinion formation can be better appreciated. The agenda setting theory is a pertinent frame for this study because it posits that there is a relationship between news coverage and public perception of the importance of issues which they use to form their opinions.

The theory, which was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972, shortly after they investigated the capacity of the media to set the agenda of topics deemed important during the 1968 American presidential election, is originally the idea of Bernard Cohen who in 1963 noted that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about (Ezumah, 2013). The theory is basically premised on two assumptions, which underlie most research on agenda setting. The first is that the press and the media do not reflect reality; rather they filter and

shape it while the second assumption is that the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.

Daramola (2012) observed that this is achieved through the reports they present to the readers or audiences. He submits that the fact which people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media presents to them. Daramola (2012) alludes to Cohen's earlier position that the significance ascribed to specific issues is also dependent on the degree of attention given to the same issue by the media. However, Folarin (2002) highlights the quality of frequency of reporting, prominence given to the report through headline display, pictures and layouts, the degree of conflict generated in the report and cumulative media specific effects overtime as the element involved in agenda-setting and in defining the relation between media coverage and individual and public thinking. For Folarin (2002) and Ukonu (2008), the agenda-setting theory entails the predetermination of the public issues that are significant and those that are insignificant in the society at a stipulated period of time through the selection of particular news stories and other kinds of information for dissemination as well as the ascribing of importance or emphasis to such stories and information.

The relevance of the agenda setting theory to the study is based on its stance that frequent selection and prominent display of stories on issues will provoke individual and public discussion on it and may invariably influence opinion formation on each issue.

## **VI. Concept of Mass Media**

The mass media is seen as an integral part of today's society. They play a central role in constructing discourses and communicating information to citizens. As purveyors of information, the media is expected to provide timely information to the populace, create awareness about an issue of importance, expose crime and wrong doing in society, and help individuals and groups to form opinion about certain issues. Without the mass media performing these functions punctually and efficiently, Hasan (2013) and Akinrinade (2003) note that it will be difficult for society to know exactly what is going on.

Vivian (2012, p.4) notes that, " mass media has become so integrated into people's lives that media multitasking is no chore. The Ball State researchers found that roughly one third of the time people spend with mass media involves simultaneous contact with two or more other media. This includes reading a newspaper with one ear tuned to a television program, listening to the radio with the other ear, and simultaneously surfing the internet."

Ramnarine (2011) points out that it is partly due to the mass media that awareness of many issues and problems is spreading in the society. Because of the many challenges confronting society, the tasks and duties of the mass media are increasing day by day and there is a lot to be done for society to improve.

As information sources, Roessler and Schenk (2000, p. 9) postulate that the mass media has the power to influence agenda-setting and opinion formation in every society. The mass media do this by deciding which topics and issues are covered and how they are reported. These decisions are not primarily determined by journalistic criteria, but by several other factors.

## **VII. Mass Media and Public Opinion**

Mass media is a tremendous source of information for individuals as well as society (Mehraj, Bhat & Mehraj, 2014, p. 56). Mass media has a prominent role to play in modern states. It can bring about radical changes and improve social situation as it influence our social, civil, cultural, political, economic and aesthetic outlook (Paul, Singh & John, 2013, p. 34).

The influence of mass media on society has been fast growing. Consciously or unconsciously, people care often influenced by mass media, such as persuading them to use a particular product or to support a particular ideology or political party. Lewis (2001) notes that the influence of media on public opinion cannot be disputed. A free and independent media according to Martin (2002), cited in Ngoa (2012) has always influenced public opinion in several ways. Media's ability to do this depends on the effectiveness of journalists in selecting the right methods and tools to use. The media is considered as the backbone of public opinion in any democratic country. The media has helped to solve various controversial issues in the society. It ensures that such information is transparent and well refined. Therefore, it influences how the readers view the topic or the story.

The power of the news media to set agenda for a community or country, to focus public attention on key public issues is well documented. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. Newspapers provide a host of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news - lead story on page one, other front page display, large headlines, etc. Television news also offers numerous cues about salience - the opening story on the newscast, length of time devoted to the story, etc. These cues repeated day after day effectively communicate the importance of each topic. In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public's attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms (Ngoa, 2012; McCombs, 2011).

The principal outlines of this influence were sketched by Walter Lippman in his 1992 classic, *Public Opinion*, which began with a chapter titled "The World Outside and the Picture in Our Heads." As he noted, the news media is a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind". What we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us. More specifically, the result of this mediated view of the world is that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public. Elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind (Dearing & Rogers 1992, McCombs 2011).

Social scientists examining this agenda-setting influence of the news media on the public usually have focused on public issues. The agenda of a news organization is found in its pattern of coverage on public issues over some period of time, a week, a month, an entire year. Over this period of time, whatever it might be, a few issues are emphasized, some receive light coverage, and many are seldom or never mentioned. It should be noted that the use of the term "agenda" here is purely descriptive. There is no pejorative implication that a news organization "has an agenda" that it relentlessly pursues as a premeditated goal. The media agenda presented to the public results from countless day-to-day decisions by many different journalists and their supervisors about the news of the moment (Ngoa, 2006, Price, 1992, McCombs, 2011).

### **VIII. Method and Materials**

The study adopted the survey method with questionnaire as its main instrument. The population of three select communities used for the study is 20,530. This comprised Okwe (8200), Issele - Azagba (6230) and Ogbolu (6,100). Four hundred respondents form the sample size for the study. The sample was derived from the population using the Taro Yamane formula. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for the study. 400 copies of questionnaire were administered to the respondents using the direct delivery technique (DDT).

### **IX. Results and Discussion**

Analysis of data was based on the 350 copies of questionnaire returned. This yielded a return rate of 87.5 percent. The high response rate was as a result of the direct delivery technique (DDT) employed by the researcher and his assistants in administering the questionnaire on the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Sex		
Male	205	58.6%
Female	145	41.4%
Age		
20-25	70	20%
26-30	80	22.8%
31-35	100	28.6%
36-40	50	14.3%
41 and above	50	14.3%
Education		
Secondary	260	74.3%
Tertiary	90	25.7%
Total	350	100%

Source: Field work (2025)

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents as they relate to sex, age and education. Distribution of sex group shows that 58.62 (205) of the respondents were male while 41.4% (145) were female. The age grouping shows that 20% (70) of the respondents were between 20 and 25 years, 22.8% (80) were between 26 and 30 years; 28.6% (100) were between 31 and 35 years, 14.3% (50) were between 36 and 40 years; while 14.3% (50) of the respondents were 41 years and above. Respondents' level of education indicates that 74.3%(260) had secondary school education while 25.7% (90) respondents possess tertiary education qualification.

Exposure of Respondents to Mass Media

Residents of the select rural areas (Okwe, Issele- Azagba and Ogbolu) were asked to indicate whether they are exposed to the mass media. Their views were collated and presented in table 2.

Table 2: Respondents Exposure to Mass Media

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	350	100%
No	-	-
Total	350	100%

Source: Field work (2025)

Table 2 indicates that all the respondents were exposed to the mass media. This table was used to answer research question one.

Types of Mass Media Respondents are exposed to

Responses on the specific type of mass media the residents of the select rural communities are exposed to were as presented in table 3.

Table 3: Types of Mass Media Respondents are exposed to

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Radio	201	57.4%
Television	84	24%
Newspaper	60	17.1%
Magazine	5	1.5%
Total	350	100%

Source: Field work (2025)

Table 3 shows the type of mass media respondents are exposed to. Of the four types of mass media identified by them, radio had the highest number and percentage (57.4 percent), followed by television (24 percent) and newspaper (17.1 percent). Magazine had the least frequency (1.5 percent). This table was used to answer research question two.

Mass media influence on opinion formation.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether the mass media have influence on opinion formation. Their views were collated and presented in table 4.

Table 4: Mass media influence on opinion

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
It influences opinion formation	325	92.8%
It does not influence opinion formation	15	4.3%
I don't know whether it influences or not	10	2.9%
Total	350	100%

Source: Field work (2025)

Results in table 4 show that majority of the respondents (92.8percent) are of the view that mass media influences opinion formation among them. A paltry 4.3 percent said it does not influence opinion formation, while 2.9 percent said they don't know whether it influences opinion formation or not. This table was used to answer question three.

Opinion Formation and Contribution to Development

Respondents were asked to indicate whether opinions formed through information provided by the mass media have aided the development of their communities. Their views were collated and presented in table 5.

Table 5: Opinion Formation and Contribution to Development,

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Opinion formation contributes to the development of our communities	280	80%
Opinion formation does not contribute to the development of our communities	30	8.6%
I don't know whether it contributes to the development of our communities or not	40	11.4%
Total	350	100%

Source: Field work (2025)

Results from table 5 show that 80 percent of the respondents agreed that opinions formed through information provided by the mass media have aided their contributions to the development of their respective communities. 8.6 percent disagreed, while 11.4 percent said they don't know whether it has enhanced their contribution to the development of their communities or not. This table was used to answer research question four.

The respondents are exposed to the mass media and findings relating to research question two resonate with Asemah, Anum & Edegoh (2013) submission that radio contributes to the development of information society, and that widespread access to radio set and radio programs have endeared many to the use of radio. Findings with regard to research question three was corroborated by Xiong & Liu (2014). They asserted that the media has become one of the most important ways to obtain information which citizens use to make informed decisions concerning the environment in which they live. Rosenberg (2001) adds that the formation of public opinion is a process that revolves around individual which begins with their exposure to politically relevant experiences and information. Findings from research question four synchronizes with Rosenberg (2001) submission that "each individual processes this information (received from the media), thereby coming to a judgement that yields an attitude (positive or negative). The positive attitude often reflects in their quick and positive response to issues of development.

## **X. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of the study have shown that the mass media has influenced opinion formation among residents of the select rural areas in Delta state, Nigeria. Radio was the most pronounced outlet that the residents are exposed to. And the opinion formed through the information provided by the mass media has aided the residents in making meaningful contributions to the development of their respective communities.

Based on the findings and the conclusion reached, the following recommendations are made:

The media has a great influence on people as it plays an important role in shaping their opinions and positions. Therefore the media should continue to provide information on public issues to enable the residents make informed decisions on issues affecting their lives.

The media should intensify the provision of timely information that would influence their opinion formation positively. The media should continue to raise consciousness and awareness about public issues to enable the residents form their opinion about such issues. The residents are enjoined to continue to consume mass media messages so as to shape their opinion on public issues.

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