

## IMPLICATIONS OF BILLBOARDS IN THE 2015 ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGN IN ENUGU METROPOLIS

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### Abstract

*Politicians in Enugu metropolis, and Nigeria at large, were known to have made increased use of billboards during the 2015 electioneering campaign in an attempt to win the attention and votes of the electorates. Billboards are channels of communication that are placed in strategic positions to make them not only visible but accessible to all classes of citizenry. This explains why many political parties employed this avenue to reach their audience during the 2015 elections. However, because of the increasing use of this communication tool, and the quantum of resources expended in the process, the need to study the implications of billboard use and audience perception of them, especially for electioneering campaigns have become apparent. Using the mere-exposure theory, the study adopted the survey design using interview and questionnaire as instruments. Excerpts from the interview revealed that millions of naira was spent for the procurement of billboards. It is recommended, among others, that political communication strategies should be critically analyzed not only to reduce cost, but also to suit the environment and nature of the target audience.*

**Keywords:** Billboards, Political Communication, Elections, Implications, Campaigns.

### Introduction

In a world of competition, persuasion is seen as the key to reaching the target audience. Campaigns allow for interaction among citizens and the citizens and politicians leading to more informed choices (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). Elections are viewed as marketing contests that promote parties and political candidates (Hoegg & Lewis, 2011; Homer & Batra, 1994; Klien & Ahluwali, 2005). Hence, the desire to dominate leadership results to constant use of monetary means, posters, door-to-door campaign and rallies. These communication strategies have often been argued to be overstretched, exaggerated and stimulated by the assumption that they play a huge role in influencing the electorates into making informed decisions. Historically, this assumption cuts across nations where democratic participation is high. Efforts to ensure that candidates' image rents space in the electorates' memory is a motivational factor that determine the spending nature of political parties. With every election, there is an unprecedented growth in cost expenses.

A few weeks before the election are a critical time for political parties. Political parties, therefore, constantly make efforts to dominate media outlets, flood the citizens with their political ideology and most times, go further to post advertisements on the internet, cars, traffic stands and invest heavily in monogramming. This exposure is associated with the popularity of the candidates. Patterson (1993) describes this as "horse race coverage". According to Schiller (1984), "the sums now spent on media advertising in elections begin to match the expenditure of the largest corporate advertisers for commercial products and services". Supporting this premise, former president of

Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in his address at the INEC-Civil Society Forum Seminar (2003) said

I have said that we prepare for elections as if we are going to war and I can state that without hesitation, drawing from my previous life, that the parties and candidates together spent during the elections, more than would have been needed to fight a successful war.

Although, 14 political parties had candidates vying for the presidential seat, the fierce competition remained between the All Progressives Congress Party (APC) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Between January 12 and February 9, 2015, PDP spent up to N861 million on full page advertisements on an average of N550,000 per page (Obi, 2015).

Unlike the common use of debate and accusatory speech, Enugu State gubernatorial candidates in the 2015 election managed to steer clear. They, rather, utilized effectively billboards, banners, posters and stand boards in strategic locations. These had far more reaching effect as they played up political party candidates in Enugu State than any other means of communication.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Electioneering campaigns have assumed the dimension of a compulsory political ritual that political parties and their candidates must fulfill as a deliberate sine qua non to achieve their political objectives. In the political environment, the popularity of the candidate largely revolves around the reach and response of the citizens. This reach is determined by the economic background of the political party and also propelled by the desire to dominate the public communication space. This situation played out during the 2015 general election in Enugu State, as in other parts of the country. The aggressive use of different political communication strategies such as posters, radio jingles, television commercials and billboards to instill a memory trace in the subconscious minds of the electorates became very prominent. In what Obi (2015) terms, "the most expensive and biggest advertising campaign in Nigeria", the implication of billboards in the electioneering campaign in Enugu State is largely unknown thereby making this study germane. The general objective of the study is to determine the implications, particularly the level of expenditure of billboards in Enugu metropolis. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Ascertain how much was spent on billboards in the 2015 electioneering campaign in Enugu State.
2. Determine audience impression of the expenses on billboards.
3. Examine the audience perception of billboard use in the 2015 electioneering campaign in Enugu metropolis.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Billboard as a form of political communication**

Political communication can be described as "purposeful communication about politics" or "the strategic use of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs, and action on political matters" (McNair, Swanson and Nimmo in Abubakar 2014). Therefore, communication about politics can mean "all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives" (Glaser, 2011). This form of communication does not cover

only verbal and written statements but also visual representations as observed in billboards (McNair in Abubakar 2014).

Billboard is a known form of political communication (Aduradola and Ojukwu 2013; Atkinson, Bartle and Mortimore 2013; Tekwani 2016). Jane (2014) notes that billboards are a form of outdoor communication medium that has the unprecedented ability to appeal to a wide group of target audiences. They are attention-grabbing and are effective in reaching out to audiences such as passing pedestrians and drivers. Billboards have been seen as not only strategic and prominent but also a viable tool for reaching the target audience.

Billboards, like posters, convey easy-to-process informational cues (Dumitrescu 2010). In creating an impression, Krass and Leewen (2006 in Dumitrescu, p.24) state that “(visual) communication requires that participants make their message maximally understandable in a particular context, (and) therefore, they choose forms of expression which they believe to be maximally transparent to other participants”. Their strong presence is supported by Belgian elites in an opinion poll carried out by Walgrave (2008). The poll revealed that these strategies create the impression that, “this person is somebody competent, who wants to be there, who is looking at us and who is listening to us”. This is characteristic of all print display advertisements. Dumitrescu (2010 p.3) further notes that, “given posters ability to act as a constant reminder of a political actor’s embeddness in a community’s shared space, they are primarily used to signal an actor’s electoral competitiveness in the district, while their role of transmitting ballot-related information (e.g name or party affiliation of a candidate) is only secondary”. Political communication strategies therefore, help register the presence of the candidates in the minds of the publics.

### **Political finance**

From the time of vote-buying in Greece, political financing has come to be seen as a medium of support for the expansion of political campaigns. Pinto- Duschinsky (2004) defines political finance as “money for electioneering”. According to him, a definition of political finance should include that:

- It is a feature for non-democratic as well as democratic regimes;
- Expenditure on elections and parties is only a part of a more far reaching issue;
- Political funding can be for activities ranging from lobbying, propaganda, support of interest groups to blatant bribery; and
- The regulation of political finance is hindered by a plurality of avenues of obtaining and using money for political ends.

To buttress this, CMD-Kenya refers to campaign financing as “the manner in which political parties and individual candidates who seek to get elected ... gather, utilize and recover funds for electoral candidates and in the case of political parties seek to maintain themselves in organizations” (CMD-Kenya, 2011 cited in Oji & Eme, 2014). Political campaigns play the role of creating awareness and informing voters on how to make informed choices especially on issues of dispute. During campaigns, candidates are promoted as products to voters (Okoro, 2013; David & Kavanagh, 2001). According to Sides (2011), this is necessary because:

1. Campaign advertisements matter more when the candidates are unfamiliar.
2. Campaign advertisements matter more when a candidate can outspend the opponent.
3. Campaign advertisements can matter but not for long.

Political finance is a vital issue for democracy, governance and development. It is described as the funds received and spent by political parties and candidates in election campaigns. Such campaign as envisaged in this definition includes the party and individual campaigns since both need resources. No matter how flawless the country's elections are, how active its civil society is, how competitive its political parties and how responsible its local authorities, the role of money in politics undeniably influences the quality of democracy and governance.

Heard (1960, in Ballester, R., Bartolazo, M., Calumpang, M., Genapin, B & Namingit, S., 2010) attributed the increasing amount of election spending to the following factors:

- The nature of the electorates, its social organization and the suffrage requirements;
- Characteristics of the election and party-system;
- Within the institutional setting fixed by these two sets of influences are situational factors peculiar to individual campaigns that lead to radical fluctuations in campaign outlays; and
- General societal characteristics including the state of prosperity and technology, which form the milieu of political campaigns and fix specific aspects of them.

More so, Davis (2006) states

There was so much display of affluence and use of money by the wealthy contractors and the mercantile class that those who emerged victorious in the conventions and the primaries of some of the political parties, notably the National People's Party (NPP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) belonged to the business-managerial group.

The governorship form for the PDP was put at N10 million with an expression of interest form at N1 million while the APC was N5.5 million for first timers and N10.5million for incumbent governors. Studies show that donors are happy to spend when there is a sure winner (Green &Krasno, 1988; Grier, 1991; Ansolabehere & Synder, 1996).

Attempts have been made to regulate the extent to which finance is spent. The regulation of financing is low despite Section 91 of the Electoral Act which puts the spending limit of presidential campaign to one billion naira (₦1,000,000,000) and governorship to two hundred million naira (₦200,000,000). Heavy spending is a sign of electoral weakness (Jacobson, n.d, p. 204). This weakness is due to the fact that it is difficult to obtain information because political parties do not have records of all contributions to their campaign in spite of Section 93 (4) which states that "a political party sponsoring the election of a candidate shall within three months after the announcement of the results of the election, fill a report of the contributions made by individuals and entities to the commission". According to Omojuwa (2015), there is no limit to the donations by individuals and corporate bodies. President Goodluck Jonathan, of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, speaking at the occasion of the National Stakeholders' Forum on Electoral Reform in 2015, argued that:

the electoral laws on campaign finance regulations, need to be properly focused. I am a realist... the laws must not be designed in such a way that it will pretend...in some countries, if you are getting funds from the government, then you must set restriction but if you are generating your own funds, then you have no restrictions. For you to say a governor must not spend a certain amount of money when campaigning, how do you monitor? And sometimes, the figures

you put are too unrealistic because if you must campaign, the media is expensive.

On the contrary, Obasanjo (in INEC 2003) is of the view that:

The will of the people cannot find expression and flourish in the face of so much money directed solely at achieving victory. Elective offices become mere commodities to be purchased by the highest bidder and those who literally invest merely see it as an avenue to recoup and make profits. Politics becomes business and the business of politics becomes merely to divert public funds from the crying needs of our people for real development in their lives.

Political finance is a major issue in the study area. Some people who sought for political positions were specially requested to prevent umbrellas, book, shirts and “their share”. Their share is an informal word for vote-buying. Davis (2006, p. 5) refers to it as stomach infrastructure or money politics. The researcher also observed that postering was an inevitable neighbour during the campaign period. In areas such as New Haven, billboards and stand boards were situated such that the people had no choice than to look if they must stare. It was not possible to calculate the number of billboards in each area because a good the number of billboards sprang up almost every day due to the nature of the competition. However, an estimated three billboards were placed in each bus stop and at most, one electronic billboard. However, a printer in an outdoor advertising agency put the price at 3 million naira for a uni-pole, 4×8 backlit at about 750,000 naira. Before such payment is made, the owner of the land where the board will be placed will be paid about 50,000 naira or more. This is not inclusive of the local government price. Billboard having pictures of Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi (Gburugburu), the governorship candidate for PDP, was the most prominent. Most of these billboards were sponsored by individuals or corporations. Going by the billboards and posters, a visitor would imagine that Enugu is a one-party state. According to an advertiser in a leading outdoor advertising agency, an electoral billboard can be rented at ₦1.5 million per annum while the non-electronic prices range from N350,000 to N750,000. These prices are dependent on the location and the size of billboard. This study therefore challenges the issue of billboard spending.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the mere-exposure theory. The theory posits that people are influenced by constant exposure. It is also known as the “familiarity principle”. This theory was developed by Robert Zajonc, a social psychologist, in 1876. It is applied to advertising and is responsible for peoples’ attitudes towards candidates. It is particularly helpful in the promotion of unfamiliar or new products or candidates. Its simple repetition makes a ‘memory trace’ in the peoples’ mind and is guided by a two-factor theory which posits that repeated exposure increases perceptual fluency which in turn, increases positive effect. Its application, in the 2015 election is encapsulated in the words of Adisa in Daniel (2015) that “they (politicians) want people to have a recall by seeing the same adverts, the same face and the same messages over and over”.

## Methodology

Survey research method was adopted as the appropriate method for this study. The study population comprised habitants of Enugu Metropolitan Area. The 2006 National Population Census puts the population of those living within Enugu Metropolitan Area at 722,664. As stated by www.ebeano.org, the three LGAs that make up the Enugu Metropolitan Area include: Enugu East, Enugu North and Enugu South. In order to choose zones to represent the Metropolis, the simple random sampling technique was used. As a result, Abakpa, Emene, Independence Layout, New Haven and Uwani were chosen. The researchers therefore visited these areas to study the billboards located there.

Using the Australian Calculator as provided by the National Statistical Service, the researchers arrived at a sample size of 100 through the following procedure:

CONFIDENCE LEVEL	95%
POPULATION SIZE	722,664
CONFIDENCE INTERVAL	0.09800
UPPER	0.59800
LOWER	0.40200
STANDARD ERROR	0.05
RELATIVE STANDARD ERROR	10.00

In order to apply the principle of Equal Probability of Selection Method (EPSEM), the researchers took a sample of 20 respondents from each zone. Data for the study were generated through interview and questionnaire.

## Data Presentation

This section presents data collected on expenses on billboards in 2015 electioneering campaign, the impression of audience on such expenses and the overall perception of billboards use. The results of the findings are presented in the table below.

Variables	Impression on expenses	Perception of billboards
	n (%)	n(%)
Positive	23(23%)	35(35%)
Negative	63(63%)	55(55%)
Neutral	14(14%)	20(20%)
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Interview results revealed that mainly two types of billboards were used during the process. The first is the uni-pole which cost N3m each while the second is backlit estimated to cost N750 000 each. Although the interviewees refused to reveal the exact amount spent by PDP for procurement of billboards, it is estimated that a minimum of N60million was used on this communication platform in each zone.

The table revealed that majority of the respondents (63%) have negative impression of the expenditure made on billboards. Some noted that it was unnecessary waste of money and that the

party took advantage of the money that would have been expended in other useful items to procure billboards. However, 23% of the respondents feel that the promotion of the candidates through billboards reflects how seriously PDP took the electioneering campaign, while 14% were neutral, arguing that as long as it helped in the promotion of their candidates and their campaign, they did not see anything wrong with such an expenditure.

In all, the perception of the respondents (55%) about the use of billboards in election was majorly negative. This was closely followed by those (35%) who believed that it was useful (positive), while the remaining 20% were indifferent

### **Discussion**

In an attempt to examine the implication of billboards on electioneering campaigns, this study sought to know the level of expenditure on billboards in the 2015 electioneering campaign in Enugu metropolis, ascertained public impression of billboards as a political communication strategy and examined the audience perception of billboard use in the campaign.

Interview result revealed that the expenses on billboards were high. The impression of respondents on the expenses were more on the negative than the positive side. Many reasoned that the expenditure was high and went to the extent of describing it as an unnecessary waste of public funds. These funds they said could have been channeled to other more useful purposes. This view lends credence to Goldman's (2015) opinion that the amount, if put together with other campaign paraphernalia and other mass media advertisements, can be "enough to sustain a huge array of contractors and political jobbers". This corroborates Obasanjo's (in INEC 2003) view that political parties and candidates in Nigeria plan and spend more money during elections than what would have been needed to fight a successful war.

The third question reveals that billboards, rather than add aesthetic value, were seen as a repulsive medium because of their frequency and unguarded placements. The old saying, that too much of everything is bad appears handy in this regard. Some of those who responded in the negative were of the opinion that they constituted a nuisance, and thus created an impression of "look at me by force". This opinion correlates with Udeze's (2005) postulation that they can make "our cities wear a mad look". However, the statement goes contrary to Walgrave (2008) findings concerning images on billboards that, "this person is somebody competent, who wants to be there, who is looking at us and who is listening to us". In other words, regular exposure of messages on billboards can bring about increased audience attention and appeal. Consequently, this is in line with mere-exposure theory which sees constant exposure as an influential communication strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Funding of communication strategies is inevitably a vital issue and therefore central to the success of a political campaign. However, misuse of these political communications can have a rebounding negative effect on voters and the economy. Consequently, political communication strategies should be carefully analyzed so as to reduce excessive spending on print display advertisements, which in themselves might not be the best appeal to a public who is more concerned about the development of their economy. INEC and the government have a part to play in this regard. They should discourage excessive spending by enacting laws that determine the upper limits of such expenses while setting up machineries to strictly enforce them.

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