

RACING BEYOND RACE: WESTERN PRESS REPORTAGE OF 2008 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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Abstract

The 2008 American presidential campaign was a critical moment for determining the stance of Western Press in the coverage of a race-related political contest. The study content analysed The Economist, Time and Newsweek magazines to identify the genre, slant, source of news reports and prominence given to Barack Obama Campaign Issues relative to those of his opponents, John McCain and Hilary Clinton. Although there were a few elements of racial constructs, reportage was found to be fair, focusing more on Obama campaign issues (64.8 percent) than McCain (33.4 percent) and Clinton (1.8 percent) campaign issues. Reported mostly as Features, stories provided in-depth and holistic examination of Obama, guiding voter decision making. News coverage transcended racial sentiments and addressed socioeconomic and political matters that appealed to the American people. The paper points to the gatekeeping and agenda setting roles of Western Press and their implication for electioneering processes and outcomes.

Key words: News Reportage, Political Campaign, Press, Agenda Setting and Gatekeeping

Introduction

The media play a critical role in the American electioneering process. They expose political aspirants and their manifestoes to a global audience and contribute to the formation of public opinion. Election campaigns are paramount in human societies but Press reportage may make or mar election outcomes based on fair or biased coverage of political campaigns. Accordingly, there were concerns about the stance of Western media in the reportage of the

2008 American presidential campaign because of the racial composition of the contestants. The doubts emerged from the assumption that Western Journalists would present biased reports to influence electorate's perception, voting behaviour and electoral outcomes.

In modern times, candidates use diverse strategies to provide voters with political information. The media are "the most cost-effective" means of communicating with the electorate and persuading a plurality of voters in a presidential campaign (Stephen, 2000:29). Media remain powerful tools for guiding a campaign's agenda as they discover truths, sniff out falsehoods and function as watchdog in society (Graber, 1994). With hi-tech politics, campaigns have become more media oriented and politicians consider them crucial for electoral success (Walgrave & Aelst, 2004).

Political communication is vital, strategic and calculated at eliciting responses from voters who learn from the quantity of information provided during campaigns. Described as conversations among the political elite, media and citizens, campaigns raise public consciousness, awareness and support for the positions of a candidate (Sweeney, 1995). These conversations influence the public through the gatekeeping and agenda setting functions of journalists who determine the stories that eventually reach the audience in terms of news covered, quantity reported and the context of discussion. If the media set the right agenda, the public will be informed and actively participate in the electioneering process.

Accordingly, there is an association between media, public opinion and attitudes (Walgrave & Aelst, 2004; McCombs, 2004). While the press play a powerful role in the formation of public opinion about political candidates (Olayiwola, 1991), the media fuel the personalization of politics and contribute to a candidate-centred politics (Farrell 1996; Swanson & Mancini 1996; Mughan 2000). The impact of media messages on attitudes and voting behaviours are located within the first stages of persuasion, such as awareness of candidates and interpretation of campaign events (McCombs, 2004). Although candidates rely on the media to set their agenda, the effect varies according to electoral system, rules and regulations governing campaign coverage and the institutional characteristics of the political and media systems.

Most presidential campaigns in the United States are media oriented but Barack Obama received unprecedented coverage relative to his African-American counterparts. He was brought to international limelight despite the

racial contentions that surrounded his candidacy. His coverage was complex but violated Balkaran's (1999) assertions about the negative portrayal of African-Americans by the US media. This could be associated with the global nature of the campaign, the issues, audience composition and international presence.

Content analysing the 2008 American presidential campaign is important for assessing the stance of Western Press in the reportage of a race-related contest. Focusing on Western magazines is important as studies have depended on the coverage and agenda set by television and newspaper (Walgrave and Aelst, 2004). The paper examines the genre, prominence, slant and sources of campaign stories and discusses the degree to which the reportage was fair, balanced, biased or racial.

Theoretical framework

Mass Communication plays an important role in informing, persuading and influencing public decision making and the media shape audiences' opinions, attitudes and behaviours. Agenda setting and gatekeeping functions of the media influence electioneering process as they control people's access to news, information and entertainment (Wilson & Wilson, 2001; McCombs & Shaw, 1976).

Agenda setting theory

Agenda setting is a dynamic process whereby changes in media coverage lead to changes in problem awareness. Walter Lippmann first posed the idea that mass media shape public perception with images, maintaining that the media play an influential role on how issues gain public attention. The concept took its name from the idea that mass media have the ability of projecting and transferring news items to public agenda (Raiz, 2008). It describes the power of news media to influence the salience of topics on public agenda and their effect on the formation of attitudes (Littlejohn, 2002; McCombs, 2002; Raiz, 2008; Hastie & Park, 1986; McLeod *et al*, 1974). The theory emphasizes a strong correlation between mass media placement and the importance given to these issues by the audience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theoretical framework could be used to measure the impact of news media on the strength and direction of people's opinions and subsequent behaviour (McCombs, 2004).

Mass media constantly present objects, which suggest what individuals should think about, know about and have feelings about. According to Cohen (1963; 13), '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'. The mediafilter and shape reality by concentrating on a few subjects, while over 75 percent of potential news of the day is never transmitted due to limited publication space (McCombs 2002). Editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters shape political reality with their choices and display of priority news, which also become priority issues of the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The audience obtains salience of issues from the news media and incorporate similar sets of priorities into their own agenda. They learn how much importance to attach to a news item based on the emphasis the media place on it (McCombs & Shaw, 1976).

The Press present the journalistic salience of items through page placement, headline and length (Raiz, 2008). Placement of news is influenced by social institutions and forces, including economic and cultural factors (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Personal attitudes and orientations of media workers, professional routines, commercial policies, ownership patterns, economic policies, advertisers and governments also influence media content (Raiz, 2008; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977).

The media play different agenda setting roles depending on the origin of the issues (Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977). As key political actors, media drive political agenda campaigns, force attention to certain issues that build up public images of political figures and shape agenda in election campaigns (Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Semetko et al, 1991; Lang & Lang, 1981). While issues discussed have impact on public thinking and affect public and policy agenda, voters learn from the quantity of information made available during each campaign (Littlejohn, 2002; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda setting framework has been used to explain and predict public opinion about candidates running for offices. Reporters and news editors play vital roles in setting the American political agenda through news making, interpreting, socializing and persuading. Studies in the United States show a relationship between agenda setting and voters' inclinations. While the media exerted influence on what voters considered the major issues of the 1968 presidential campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), description of presidential candidates in the news attributed to voters' description of candidates (McCombs & Shaw, 1977). Furthermore, public opinions and attitudes about political candidates in the 1996 U.S Presidential election became stronger, polarized and less neutral as media attention on political figures intensified (McCombs, 2004). However, most agenda setting studies on US presidential or congressional agenda have relied on TV and newspaper data (Walgrave & Aelst, 2004) and Newspaper was

found to be superior agenda setters (Palmgreen and Clarke, 1977). An examination of magazine news reportage is an important step to a holistic understanding of the Press and agenda setting.

Although the debate on media's agenda setting power is unsettled, the theory is good because of its economical, explanatory, organizing and predictive powers (Chaffee & Berger, 1997). While agenda setting has many beneficial uses in society, the approach has contributed to a more advanced understanding of media's role in society. It has helped change the emphasis of mass communication research away from the study of short-term attitudinal effects to a more longitudinal analysis of social impact (Rogers *et al.*, 1993). The theory empowers the media in establishing what news is seen, read, heard and emphasised. It is used for the establishment of media agenda and public opinion.

Gatekeeping theory

Gatekeeping is central to media's role in modern public life. It occurs at all levels of the media structure, including reporters and editors' decisions on stories, media outlets and advertisers. The theory refers to the way information is filtered for publication and the process of discarding bits of information to the limited number of messages that eventually reach the audience. The term has been widely used to describe the processes involved in the selection of news reports that pass through the "gates" of a news medium (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Shoemaker *et al.*, 2001). This process determines which information is selected, the content and nature of messages (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). A gatekeeper thus decides which information enters the social system.

Personnel in news organizations allow some stories to pass through the media system, limiting, controlling and shaping public knowledge (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2009). This supports Park's (1922:328) notion that "out of all of the events that happen and are recorded every day by correspondents, reporters, and the news agencies, the editor chooses certain items" regarded as being more important for publication. Gatekeepers make decisions concerning the particular news stories to be aired but they are expected to be fair because a biased gatekeeper can do great damage to the society.

The choices of gatekeepers are a complex web of influences, preferences, motives and values. The editor has reasons for retaining or discarding certain stories. While White (1950) noted that rejection of stories were either based on news worthiness or duplication of reports, Shoemaker *et al.* (2001) say that only newsworthiness had a significant effect on the amount of coverage.

The defining elements for gatekeeping are also driven by reporters' personal and professional news judgment, organizational news-gathering routines, economic gate and space (Bennett, 2003). Each of these factors is associated with the dominant journalist's role as watchdog, record-keeper, content provider and transmitter but the four key attributes that determine interaction with 'gate' are political power, information production ability, relationship with the gatekeeper and alternatives in the context of gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The structure of gatekeeping is changing. Traditional newspapers use online tools and the power of gatekeepers seems to diminish in modern information society (Singer, 2003, 2006). As such, the merging of communication, information science and management perspectives into a refined theory of gatekeeping is proposed (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Whether in traditional or contemporary society, gatekeepers are relevant and perform diverse functions, which colour mental pictures for people's understanding of issues. They control access and regulate the flow of information and political influence. Gatekeeping is vital in communication planning and can be useful when guided by some set of standard principles.

Methodology

The study adopted the content analytical approach to examine the 2008 American Presidential campaign in three International weekly news magazines – *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *Time*. These magazines are located and operated from the United States of America but with global systems of coverage and circulation, hence, international to the African continent. The period of analysis is from June (shortly after Obama formally became the Democratic Party candidate) to November (election), 2008. The sample size is 72 because all magazine issues within this period were content analysed.

The study was guided by these objectives: to examine the genre used in reporting campaign issues; to describe the prominence given to Obama Campaign Issues (OCIs) relative to McCain's and Clinton's stories and to identify the tone and sources of news in relation to fair and racial reportage. The content categories for prominence examined frequency and depth of stories while genre included features, editorials, news stories, pictures, cartoons, and interpretative reports. The non-probability sampling technique was adopted in the selection of magazines based on wide readership, circulation, availability, consistency and editorial independence.

Content Categories

Genre

This is the different formats in which the campaign stories were represented.

News Stories: These are straightforward reports that are usually brief, timely and present an overview of issues concerning the campaign.

Feature Stories: These are in-depth and detailed stories about the campaign. The stories are normally longer than news stories.

Editorials: These are opinion articles written by in-house staff to portray organizational viewpoint of campaign issues.

Pictures: These are images that are drawn or painted to inform readers about issues, activities and concepts about the campaign.

Cartoons: They are humorous drawings that tell a short story and comment on topical issues on the campaign trail.

Interpretative reports: These are reports that provide an explanation of the issues from columnist, journalist and experts with valued and newsworthy views.

Diagrams: They are explanatory drawing in charts, graphs, maps and tables, to reveal basic opinions about the presidential campaign. They are aspect of *Feature stories*.

Others: These are reports classified under interviews, viewpoints and opinions.

Slant of Reports

Campaign stories were analyzed according to the tone of reports and classified as favourable, unfavourable and neutral.

Favourable: These are stories that are void of racial undertones in language, voice or style but with positive impressions and admiration for Obama.

Unfavourable: Reports express disapproval or opposition to Obama campaign with racial undertones in language, style, and voice to pull down his candidacy.

Neutral: These are unbiased reports that take no sides with any candidate either in content, language and style of presentation. Reportage is balanced and impersonal.

Prominence

This category was assessed using frequency of coverage and depth of stories. In determining frequency, the coverage given to Barack Obama stories was compared with those of John McCain and Hilary Clinton. Because any news story about a candidate may mention the challenger as well, a more careful distinction of frequency was based on stories in which a particular candidate

constituted the main focus of the report as well as appeared in the headline or first paragraph of the report. Frequency of reports was categorised as:
Obama Campaign Issues (OCIs): Stories that primarily focused on Obama campaign issues.

McCain Campaign Issues (MCIs): Stories that solely reflected McCain campaign issues.

Clinton Campaign Issues (CCIs): Stories that highlighted Hilary Clinton campaign issues.

Prominence was further determined by the depth of reports, measuring the number of columns and classified as:

Very important: Stories that had 10 columns and above.

Less important: Stories written with less than 10 columns.

Source of reports:

This constitutes people that provided information or reports published in the selected magazines. They are grouped as:

In-house sources: These refer to news sourced by employees of the media organization, including journalists and other internal staff.

Outside sources: These are external sources that are not direct employees of the media organization.

Unidentified sources: This refers to sources that are not clearly stated in the reports.

Data analysis and presentation

Statistical analysis of data obtained from the news magazines were analysed using the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS). Results are presented in prose, complemented with tables and charts and answered the research questions which are the basis of discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

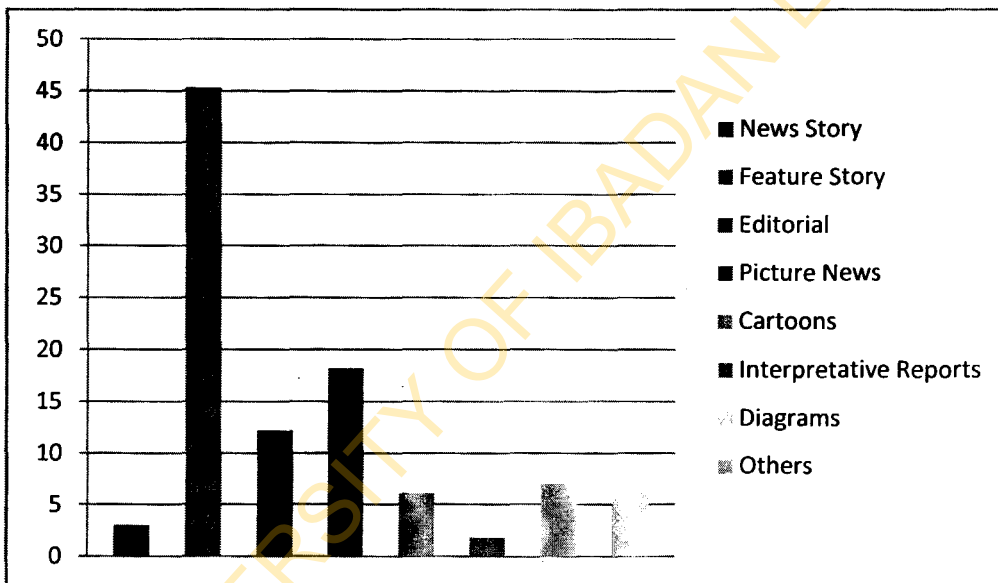
Result

The analysis examined the story type, prominence, slant and sources of Western magazines reportage of 2008 American presidential campaign to determine their stance. From the 72 issues studied, 329 campaign stories were identified and analysed from *The Economist* (140), *Time* (129) and *Newsweek* (60). This indicates enthusiasm and non-complacency of the Press in the coverage of the historic race to the White House. The level of media participation is however varied as 43 percent of the reports emerged from *The Economist*.

Genre, Prominence, Slant and Source of reportage

A combination of prose, pictures, graphs and tables were used for reporting. The style is complementary as it facilitates assessment and comprehension of campaign issues as well as empowers the electorate in making informed voting decisions. The diversification is shown in Figure 1, where *Features* is the most utilised genre (45.3 percent), followed by *Picture News* (18.2 percent) and *Editorials* (12.2 percent). Contrary to expectation, *News Stories* (3.0 percent) were the second least utilised genre after *Interpretive reports* (1.8 percent).

Figure 1: Distribution of Obama campaign reports according to story category



Percentage

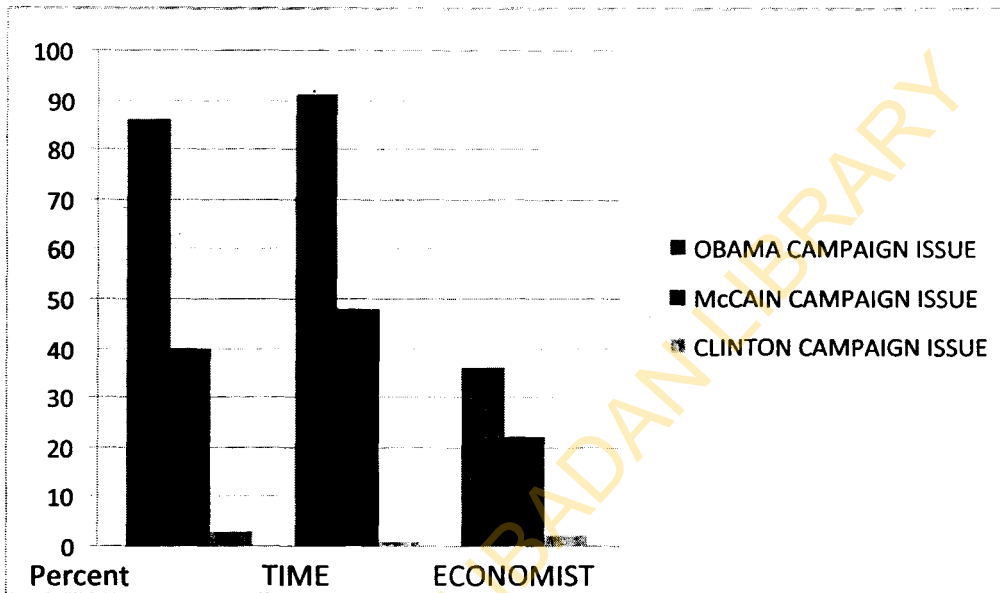
Story type

The wide gap between *Features* and the other story types suggests the importance Western Press placed on the campaign by majorly utilising writing styles that will engage readers and provide them with detailed and holistic information about the contestants, campaign issues and the electioneering process. Through this in-depth presentation style, *Features* provided the audience with background reviews of the candidates as well as examined Obama's personality, religion, beliefs, policies,

relationships, competences and political manifesto to allay voters' fears, doubts and suspicions about his candidacy.

Editorial, the third most used genre, further elaborates the importance Western Press placed on the campaign. It portrayed organizational viewpoints and draws attention to the deep involvement of media corporations expressed in the high number of editorials in such a limited time frame. The collaboration of *Features* and *Editorials* indicates the high value western media placed on the campaign, invariably guiding voting behaviour. *Picture* stories, on the other hand, attract readers' attention; enhance clarity and comprehension of messages and increase knowledge and understanding of campaign issues in limited time. This story type is useful to media organizations as they strategically and productively utilise the limited publication space. The exploitation of diverse genres thus ensures that all categories of the public are easily reached with information and are connected to political campaign events.

To unravel the prominence given to the presidential candidates, Obama Campaign Issues (OCIs), McCain Campaign Issues (MCIs) and Clinton Campaign Issue (CCIs) were compared. Figure 2 reveals that the three magazines were consistently high in reporting OCIs (64.8 percent) relative to MCIs (33.4 percent) and CCIs (1.8 percent). Obama was given more prominence to unravel issues of race, tax policy, healthcare, security, energy, unemployment, immigration, among other issues that were at the heartbeat of the American people.

Figure 2: Coverage of campaign according to presidential candidates

The consensus among the news media is significant as they focused more on Obama, reflecting media evaluations of what is important and what the audience should think about. This is in line with agenda setting and gatekeeping theories, which hypothesize that issues prominently displayed and frequently emphasized will be regarded as important by media consumers. Placing more emphasis on Obama campaign issues was necessary as his candidacy was shrouded with racial sentiments and contradictions.

Some news stories were also published in greater length to further elaborate the importance given to the campaign. About 42 percent of the stories are considered very important because they occupied a spread of 10 columns and above. This finding is instructive because despite the limited news space for general global discourse, the Press still accommodated and prominently displayed campaign stories within choice columns. Some stories were also made available and accessible in online magazine platforms for prominence. Hence, when the media set the right agenda for a presidential race, the society is informed and would enthusiastically participate in the campaign process.

presence. Being a historic event, Obama’s newsworthiness was exploited to respectively meet the economic and information needs of media institutions and the electorate, corroborating some gatekeeping and agenda setting assertions (Raiz, 2008; Bennett, 2003; Shoemaker *et al*, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; White, 1950). The magazines provided detailed accounts of the campaign events to shape public opinion; hence, Western Press set the political agenda that contributed to Obama’s rise to power.

The tone of the reports was more favourable (48.3 percent) than unfavourable (11.9 percent), indicating that most stories had positive impressions, approval and admiration for Obama (Table 1). Reports that contained expressions of disapproval or opposition to Obama were few and some of the ‘racial’ reports were represented to approve rather than harm political ambition. The agenda set by the news magazines was fair, balanced and less racial as 40 percent of the reports were expressed in neutral tone.

Table 1: Distribution of campaign issues according to slant

Slant/Tone	Frequency	Percentage
Favourable	159	48.3
Unfavourable	39	11.9
Neutral	131	39.8
Total	329	100.0

The slant suggests that 88.1 percent of stories were not racial but positively inclined toward Obama. The findings generally support the journalistic principles of fairness and balanced reportage. A few of the positive comments on Obama are highlighted below:

The Economist wrote:

The rise of the Obamacons. A Striking number of Conservatives are planning to vote for Obama.

Explaining the Riddle. The man who has called himself a ‘blank screen’ is about to take centre stage.

A Lucky man. Barack Obama’s trip abroad has been going better than he could have dared.

Time magazine wrote:

Barack Obama, Don't Go. John McCain wants Obama to join him on a visit to Baghdad. But the trip is a trap...

Obama's Overseas Test. His trips to Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East were designed to prove that he could be Commander-in-Chief...

Barack Obama calm under pressure...

Newsweek:

On his Own, Cerebral and Cool Obama is also steely and his strength comes from the absence of a father. The making of a self reliant man.

The Change we need is coming... Barack Obama in Denver.

Most of the campaign stories are sourced in-house. Table 2 reveals that 50 percent of the reports are written by organizational staff and this finding provides a clearer picture about the person behind the favourable slant and prominence of Obama campaign reports. The press stories are related to the activities, choices and presentations of Western media workforce. Accordingly, issues of fairness and balanced reportage are attributed to them, reflecting Western magazine stance on the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. The journalists gate kept and set the agenda that made racial contentions not to becloud the vision, views, judgement, attitude and behaviour of the electorate towards Obama.

Table 2: Sources of campaign reports

Sources	Frequency	Percentage
In-house Staff	163	49.5
Outside Sources	17	5.2
Unidentified Sources	149	45.3
Total	329	100.0

The publication of many unidentified sourced reports further elaborate the power of editors in choosing and publishing news they consider important. This news selection enabled the elimination of stories that did not suit in-house vision at that particular time but projected views that they needed to reach their audiences. Such gatekeeping and agenda setting activities reveal

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the interplay among media and story selection, audience reception, perception, voting behaviour and electoral outcome. Western press combined organisation-based professionals with external sources to provide fair and balanced news coverage that politically projected Barack Obama.

Discussion

Mass communication technologies have improved sourcing, transmission and retrieval of information around the world. Presidential campaigns provide opportunities for candidates to present themselves and their manifestoes to the public, with the intention of persuading a plurality of voters for elections. Through stump speeches, press releases, news conferences, advertisements and written materials, candidates reveal their political agenda to prospective voters. Contestants quite often have a lot of information to disseminate but what eventually reaches the audience is determined by the news media through gatekeeping and agenda setting. The media present different sides of social reality and remain discrete gates through which political information is processed, presented and assessed. However, different socioeconomic pressures contribute in shaping media decisions on stories selected, followed up, emphasized, interpreted and displayed. The prominence given to Barack Obama is related to his newsworthiness and the economic viability of his stories because media attention is drawn by what attract the audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Raiz, 2008; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; White, 1950).

Although new media environment provides unlimited access to political information, Western media favourably projected Obama through the interaction with online information, air space and audience. The flow of information thus emerged from a spiral interaction among political candidates, media platforms and the public. Mass media thus remain intermediaries between contestants and the electorate and perform roles that could make or mar a political candidate and electoral outcome.

Hinged upon diverse issues, including the economy, healthcare, energy, technology, security, immigration, trade and foreign policy, the media projected Barack Obama as an agent of socioeconomic change, a biracial and

and appealed for a new generation campaign, reportage and leadership to move America beyond "racial stalemate" to addressing social problems ((Green, 2008; Obama, 2008; Pickler & Apuzzo, 2008). The Press projected Obama as "a great communicator", warm, reassuring and likable personality and gave him full, fair and favourable coverage that informed voting decisions because heavier flow of national political issues has ramifications for media related learning (Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977). While the media set Obama's agenda, American audience consistently changed their attitude toward him (Reiz, 2008). His political message of change and oratory skills attracted various groups - youths, women, middle class, and non-whites - who constituted the bulk of his voters. His positions changed the mood, tone, perception and voting behaviour of most Americans and the media brought him to international limelight.

Agenda setting and gatekeeping played a critical role in the election. The importance readers attached to campaign stories was based on the amount of information they were exposed to and story placement (Reiz, 2008). Initial tensions that accompanied Obama's candidacy were thus deflated through in-depth analysis of the candidate by western Press. This became possible because mass media set the agenda for each political campaign and influenced the salience of attitudes toward political issues (Cohen, 1963). The media influenced American voters because they encourage public learning and participation in the political process (Norris, 2000).

Although Williams and Carpini (2000) have postulated the collapse of gatekeeping in new media environment, Livingston & Bennett (2003) observe that technology trends in gatekeeping vary from one industrial sector to another. Rather than discredit the role of traditional media in gatekeeping and agenda setting, new media are additional sources and outlets of information for journalists, political actors and voters, promoting discourse in a complex news landscape. Multiple information avenues provide new opportunities that shape political discourse. Since news business is changing, it is important to understand gatekeeping processes across time and news sectors (Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Political gatekeeping and agenda setting in the new media environment increase the volume and speed of information.

about the social and political stance of the candidates, constructing fair and unbiased campaign processes.

The function of the Press in modern society is partly shaped by the spiral relationship between political actors and major news outlets. Although news media gatekeep and set political agenda, the degree to which public opinion is shaped is determined by the level of received information to enable political participation and decision making. This does not mean that the audience is passive but rather make decisions based on exposure to holistic information. Accordingly, mainstream political communication researchers assert that the media, acting as gatekeepers, exercise significant influence on public opinion (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1994; Page & Shapiro, 1992). It therefore behoves journalists to provide ethically balanced information, which would enable voters to actively participate in the electioneering processes and electoral outcomes.

Conclusion

The media play a critical role in the American electioneering process. They expose political aspirants and their manifestoes to a global audience and contribute to the formation of public opinion. Western Press reportage of 2008 presidential campaign was fair. It transcended racial prejudices and gave more prominence to Obama campaign stories than those of McCain and Clinton. Most reports provided detailed information on Obama, using a favourable tone.

The analysis indicates that Western media upheld the cardinal journalistic principles of fairness and balanced reportage. Their gatekeeping and agenda setting processes represent the interaction among the media, political elite and the public and contribute to Obama's success to the White House. Practitioners should therefore provide holistic information that would aid social, economic and political development. Fair reportage by Western Press should not be limited to American electioneering processes but extend to global issues to bring about human growth and development, especially among developing nations.

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