

## **CARTOON AS A DEVICE FOR POLITICAL CRITIQUE IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study sets out to examine the use of cartoons by Nigerian newspapers to criticize perceived corrupt political leaders. The rationale behind the study is to find out the prospects and challenges of using cartoons to attack perceived bad or corrupt politicians in Nigeria. In general, cartooning or the use of caricature employs humor and satire in criticizing people, thus appearing harmless. The most crucial aspect of using cartoon to criticize corrupt political leaders is the independence of cartoonists irrespective of the ownership structure of the print media they work with. This enables them to be more objective in their work. However, there are certain problems associated with the use of cartoon as a device for political criticism in Nigeria, some of which are: communication related problems, message related problems, illiteracy, political system, circulation, lack of qualified personnel and readership pattern. The paper concludes that newspaper cartoons go a long way in criticizing poor leadership in Nigerian governance, but there are certain factors that hinder its effectiveness. As such, it therefore recommends, among others, that cartoonists should endeavour to cover all aspects of governance, leaving no stone unturned.*

**Keywords:** Cartoon, Politics, Political, Criticism

### **INTRODUCTION**

Newspaper cartoons throughout Nigerian history reveal that they have been serving as unique window useful in understanding local and national politics. Cartooning has been one of the most significant tools in propagating and promoting the cultural heritage in Nigeria. Using imagery, metaphor, symbolism and other rhetorical devices cartoonist defines political situations and attempts to interpret them visually in a way that is both amusing and thought provoking.

Cartoons are intended to transform otherwise complex and opaque social events and situations into quick and easily readable duplications that facilitate comprehension of the nature of social issues and events (Agberia, 2003:33). In doing so, they present the society with visually palpable and hyper ritualized depictions (selectively exaggerated portions of reality) that attempt to reveal the essence and meaning of social events.

While many studies use the terms “political cartoon” and “editorial cartoon” interchangeably, others differentiate between comic strips with political content, and single panel cartoons that make commentary on politics and policy. The exploit of AkinolaLasekan, with his editorial cartoons in *The West African Pilot* in the 1940s and 50s reflected colonial life and also depicted the struggle for nationhood which later culminated in Nigeria’s independence in 1960 (Olaniyan, 2002)

Also, cartoonists like Dele Jegede, JosyAjiboye, AliuEroje, BoyeGbenro,



AkinOmpede among others through their cartoons have decried the rapid deterioration of the Nigerian state, in the hand of corrupt political leaders. The metaphors and other figurative devices used in the visual language of editorial cartoons are often “powerful” and the key purpose is to reflect and maintain power relationships in a given political structure by functioning as a tool for political communication. The most important aspects of this, as noted by DeSousa and Medhurst (2002:75), is that newspaper cartoons serve as a unique record of the particular event, attitudes and narratives present during a moment in political history.

Newspaper cartoons featured prominently during military rule in Nigeria. The period (1983-1999) witnessed remarkable event in the democratization of the country. The military government was characterized by abusive use of power beginning with General Muhammadu Buhari's coup d'état on 31 December 1983. This was closely followed by the tenure of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) who was described as the “Maradona” of Nigerian politics due to his methods of politics visible in the annulment of the Presidential Election in 1993, and the eventual transmission to democratically elected president in 1999. Each of these developments elicited specific reactions from editorial cartoonists of the time who as “visual journalists” captured the sequence of the events in satirized- illustrations.

However caricature as a form of art had existed for a very long time in Nigeria before the advent of the colonial masters, contrary to the belief that this form of satirization in Nigeria is a colonial innovation (Onipede, 2007).

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The study is anchored on the social responsibility theory of the press. According to Kumar (2013) this theory is of the view that the media had certain obligations of society- to serve its needs, rather than that of the free market. The scholar went on to say that public interest was a greater value than unregulated freedom of expression.

However, Okoro and Agbo (2003) opined that this theory owes its growth to the realization that the much trumpeted free press did not exist anywhere. The principle enunciated in this theory is that the media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society. Also, these obligations are to be met by setting high or professional standard of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

The media owes the society the obligation to report the ills in their society and it is in doing this that the media become socially responsible. Arguably journalists should also expose political evil and corruption in government circles, as part of their social responsibility.

It has been noted that many statutory bodies in Nigeria have been put in place to ensure that the media is socially responsible e.g. National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigeria Press Council (NPC), etc. The duty of these bodies is to ensure strict compliance to the social and ethical responsibility of the press. This theory however, has wide application in many societies of the world.

## **Understanding the Term “Cartoon”**

According to Edwards and Winkler (2007) cartoon is “a graphic presentation typically designed in a one-panel, non-continuing format to make an independent statement or

observation on political events or social policy”. Cartoon is generally understood as any drawing which through the use of humour, satire or caricature provokes a response in its audience. Cartoons, also known as editorial cartoons or political cartoons, are single panel graphic that comment on political event and policy, and serve to define the significant topics of political discourse and record them, thus creating a “snapshot” of the political climate in a given period, ( DeSousa and Medhurst, 2002)

However, cartoon can be defined as: “funny line drawings in newspapers mocking the political events and policy”. Cartoons usually employ humor or irony to point out shortcomings or hypocrisies within the political system. Cartoons are intended to transform otherwise complex and opaque social events and situation into quick and easily readable depictions that facilitate comprehension of the nature of social issues and events (Agberia, 2003).

Defining cartoons, according to Everette (2004:2) is trickier because there is not one widely accepted definition. In the light of the forgoing the scholar posits that cartoons are amalgams of images (the symbols), captions (the written words) and social commentary (the spoken an unspoken words). They combine all the information needed to understand their message into one simple visual form and present it in an easily accessible medium in books, newspaper or the web.

According to Ofor and Obiora (2014) “a cartoon is a communication technique conceived by an artist otherwise known as cartoonist to express a preconceived view or opinion. It is a form of opinionated idea or information presented in pictorial sketches which is created to cause amusement, sensitization or agitation to the audience on issues they find relevant.

Ukonu (2013) opines that a cartoon is a medium of expressing criticism without appearing harmful. The scholar further buttressed that an editorial cartoon is used on the editorial page of a newspaper. It may stand alone to give its own opinion on a public issue, or it may support the paper’s editorial comment set in a column or box under the paper logo. The common feature of cartoon according to Olaniyan (2000) is good grasp of current affairs clearly identifying political issues and problems that are local and international, deft craftsmanship and skills in snappy graphic language. Cartoons are satirical in nature and use humour to draw attention to the significant social-political issue is usually featured on the editorial page of newspapers.

However, Levin (2000) asserts that:

*An editorial cartoon uses a picture instead of words to get a point across. It may illustrate an editorial or stand alone. Because it’s an editorial, it expresses the opinion of the newspaper but unlike editorials, it is signed. Whereas many people won’t read an entire editorial, nearly all readers will read an editorial cartoon.*

Political cartoons expose bribery and corruption of public office holders in a very symbolic way. They are mostly captioned to drive the point home about what it exposes for comprehensive understanding of readers.

According to Becker (2009) political cartoons are an effective means for cartoonists to express their thoughts and ideas about the issues or events in a particular period in a playful manner. Basically the political cartoons genre has gained considerable research in

academics circle considering their potentials of expressing opinion succinctly in such a way that thousand words cannot provide at a moment providing specific knowledge on current events in society.

### **THE CONCEPT OF POLITICS**

According to Obasi (1999) politics is “striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state”. The scholar went further to cite Lasswell (1958) to have defined politics as the science and art of who gets what, when and how?”

The above assertion is supported by Nnoli (1986) when he posited that politics is “all those activities which are directly or indirectly associated with the seizure of the state power, the consolidation of state power and the use of state power”.

In a similar vein, Gerbner (1981) opines that politics is a “...word game.” He further added that “politicians” rise to power because they can talk persuasively to voters and political elites. Politics, according to Easton is “the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” On the other hand Umechukwu (2013) says the word “politics” in Nigerian context conjures up images of power domination and struggle to grab state apparatus. Politics therefore, exists in all human societies no matter how simple or primitive the society is. An analytical study of Nigeria political situation since independence paints a picture of political irony-crises of confidence.

### **Why the Need for Political Criticism**

When there is no checks and balances there will be absolute power, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is therefore imperative to checkmate the abuse of power or the use of power by politicians and/or among government officials or public office holders. By so doing it will check for excessive power. Newspaper as a medium of mass communication should play their watchdog role here as the fourth estate of the realm. The citizens deserve to know all the activities (especially the corrupt ones) going on within their environment. Therefore newspapers can present these humorously using cartoons.

With these, the politicians are aware that the newspapers have beamed their search light with their eagle’s eyes on them, they would be mindful of their actions, in that way the excesses are being controlled. Although there exists no state or nation without corruption or corrupt people, but the presence of the mass media in the country helps watch over some of their fraudulent acts. Corrupt leaders are usually uncomfortable with newspaper cartoons that are directly attacking them. Political criticism by newspapers is part of their social responsibility. In criticizing political leaders who are corrupt, the media (newspaper) become socially responsible to the society where they exist.

### **The Use of Newspaper Cartoons for Political Criticism**

Newspaper cartoon has a long-standing history of merging social satire with political commentary in a society. It has in several situations, been the most direct medium for criticizing bad practice and maladministration of government (Agberia, 2003). Since the return of civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999, it is hard to find a single newspaper publication without a cartoon communicating humorously messages of national importance.

Journalists may write stories about public policies and then draw editorial cartoons in the hope of engendering a massive public reaction that will lead to widespread demands for political remedies. However, it has been observed that the mass media (especially newspaper) do not only survey the political event of the day and make them the focus of public and private attention; they also interpret their meaning, put them into context and speculate about their consequence in the society using cartoon in a humorous way.

Apart from writing stories, newspapers may draw and publish political cartoons to arouse public office holders into positive action having criticized their negative actions already.

The mass media (newspapers) have the responsibility to present a picture of event to the extent that they are made clearer, simple and easier to understanding using cartoons. According to Schramm (1971) forming an opinion becomes more difficult when a person does not have access to adequate information. It is this information that will help the individual to form an opinion.

Newspaper cartoons can be used in giving further interpretation to news stories, features or editorials. The messages of cartoons are short and simple, but are very clear. Some stories which could not make it as news stories or features or editorials because they lack enough depth or significance per se could find themselves as cartoons. Cartoonists can use one box, two boxes or three boxes for their cartoons. Sometime the cartoons are found on the editorial page, hence the name editorial cartoon; sometimes they are found on a different page.

Some newspapers use more than one cartoon for each publication. Sometimes news stories without pictures are accompanied by cartoons. However, sometimes the cartoons can appear on the front or back page of the newspaper depending on the house style.

### **The Role of Cartoons in Newspapers**

1. Cartoon serves as a form of entertainment to newspaper readers.
2. Cartoon provides comic relief to readers who are stressed up.
3. Cartoons inform readers of the social ills going on within their environment.
4. Cartoon complements the editorial for easier and better understanding especially to impatient readers who don't like reading lengthy write-ups.
5. Cartoonists use cartoons to express what cannot otherwise be expressed in news/features/editorials.
6. Cartoon provides readers with the platform of the formation of public opinion.
7. Newspapers use cartoons to attack or criticize corrupt public office holders in an unharmed manner.

### **Problems Associated with Using Cartoons to Criticize Nigerian Politicians**

One of the most interesting and intriguing paradoxes of media-government relations in Nigeria according to Nwosu (2013) is that, it is expected to help build the education, entertainment and the desired public opinion that will help to mobilize the citizenry, but is so feared and untrusted by the government, and so is not given adequate freedom and support to carry out these functions. The scholar went further to assert that the media is at the same time loved and hated by our government.

However, there are so many factors that hinder political criticism in Nigeria. Among these problems are:

1. **Ownership Problem:** One of the major problems affecting the use of newspaper cartoons to criticize or attack bad or corrupt political leaders in countries like Nigeria is ownership structure. Most of the newspaper houses in Nigeria are owned by individuals who are politicians or in one way or the other, directly or indirectly, involved in politics or affiliated to a particular political party in the country. With this, the popular saying “he who pays the piper dictates the tune” plays a very important role here. Newspaper houses owned by corrupt political leaders in Nigeria will be mindful of how they expose the ill-action of their bosses. This could lead to them not coming up with cartoon that attack or criticize their corrupt practices rather they will choose to focus on issues involving other politicians who are not their employers.
2. **Communication Related Problems:** The role of the communicator in communication process cannot be over emphasized. Here, the communicator is the cartoonist. If the cartoonist is weak or bad in the process of communication, the entire communication process will be negatively affected.
3. **Message Related Problems:** The message in a cartoon is the drawing and spoken words in the cartoon. The message therefore, contains the feelings, notions, ideas etc., which the cartoonist want to pass across to the readers. The cartoonist should ensure the right language is used, and also the environments should very much resemble to that of the real environment. However, the spoken words should be able to amuse the readers. The drawing should be able to make a caricature of the real life situation in a humorous way. Readers should not find it difficult grabbing the message being passed by the cartoonist. According to Asemah et al (2013) any message that does not contain any substance will not be effective, even if it is well written, spoken or presented.
4. **Illiteracy:** Many Nigerians still cannot read and write, mostly those without formal education. Illiteracy can pose a very big hindrance to political criticism. Such people do not grab information from the cartoonist because of their inability to read the write ups that accompany the drawing which aids fast and clear understanding.
5. **Lack of Qualified Personnel:** One of the problems facing the use of newspaper cartoons to criticize corrupt politicians and public office holders in Nigerian is the lack of qualified personnel. Some newspaper houses in Nigeria are in the habit of recruiting unqualified cartoonists, making it difficult for such newspapers to use cartoon to communicate effectively.
6. **Circulation:** Some newspapers in Nigeria still do not circulate their publications nationwide, thereby limiting the audience. People living in areas where the newspapers do not circulate will not be exposed to the criticism by the newspaper.
7. **Readership Pattern:** Some people are in the habit of reading a particular newspaper. Those who read a particular newspaper, especially the one owned by a corrupt political leader, are very likely not to be exposed to the criticism of corrupt politicians and public office holders by other Nigerian newspapers.
8. **Political System:** From 1983 to 1999, the country had been experiencing military politics. Remarkably, in between this period, several attempts were made to overthrow the incumbent military governments by power-hungry military officers. In 1993 an

attempt was made to return the country to democracy, but all the efforts channeled towards that were aborted by the then military Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida. But as luck would have it today, we are witnessing the highest level of democracy in the country since that period when former President GoodluckEbele Jonathan conceded defeat and peacefully handed over to General Muhammadu Buhari in 2015.

9. **Independence of Cartoonists:** Newspaper managers are not getting the best out of cartoonists because there is disequilibrium between what they feel that cartoonists should be. They feel the cartoonist should be an illustrator rendering what they cannot draw themselves, some perceive the cartoonist as a kind of medieval court tool, to be tolerated but taken seriously.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the analysis, it is obvious that newspaper cartoons have a lot of influence on politics through presentation of politically crucial information to huge, heterogeneous, transitory and anonymous audience. These include political elites and decision makers as well as large number of audience shaped by information from the mass media.

However, it is worthy to note that newspaper cartoons go a long way in criticizing poor leadership in Nigerian governance. It also serves as a device in stabilizing the political system in Nigeria as well as forming public opinion on social and political issues among readers. Editorial cartoons reflect socio-political realities in the Nigerian society. Cartoons inform the electorate of their rights as well as informing the readers of the ills going on among the top government officials.

Cartoons also inform readers of the need to be transparent and not equivocal in the policy and also the importance of democratically elected government. Cartoons have brought out the shortcomings of the government to the public assessment in humorous ways. Hardly will you now see a Nigerian newspaper publication without a cartoon, and almost 90 percent of them focus on politics and social ills.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having said that cartoon is an effective device that can be used to criticize political leaders in Nigeria, hence the paper recommends that:

1. Newspaper outlets in Nigeria should be more objective in their cartoon section as it is an effective means of redressing the maladministration in government.
2. Cartoonists should endeavour to cover all aspects of government leaving no stone unturned.
3. Cartoonists should as well be sensitive while designing their cartoons.
4. Government should pay more attention to political message cartoons portray.
5. Cartoons and cartooning should be properly handled with urgent recognition as a medium of effective journalism.
6. Cartoonists should have an association like Nigerian Union of Journalists. This will develop the spirit of cartooning in national dailies.
7. Cartoonists should be given the recognition they deserve by newspaper owners because this situation calls for concern.

8. Cartoonists that have served for a long period of time and are mature enough should be allowed to occupy seats on the editorial board of media organizations.





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