

# Sources of Political Information in a Rural Nigerian Community

by Charles Okigbo\*

## Abstract

In any election year, the myriad of political communication messages that individual voters are daily exposed to provides a potentially bewildering competitive climate for opinion formation, attitude change and/or behaviour modification. Not only in news bulletins, but also through paid advertisements and interpersonal discussions, the individual voter seems to be drowning in a sea of political information, some of which must be structured in order to make sense of the usually highly inflationary election information. As Atwood and Sanders (1975:421) noted, 'If the individual is to avoid being overwhelmed, he must somehow organize these stimuli into broad classifications that can accommodate familiar and unfamiliar elements without undue efforts.'

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# Source d'information politique dans une communauté rurale au Nigéria

## Résumé

Dans toute période électorale, la myriade de messages de communication politiques aux quels les électeurs sont exposés crée un climat potentiellement déconcertant pour la formation d'opinion, le changement d'attitude et/ou le changement de comportement. L'électeur parait en effet se noyer dans une mer d'informations politiques, dont certaines doivent être structurées pour avoir un sens par rapport à information très habituelle inflationniste de la période électorale, non seulement pendant les bulletins d'informations mais aussi à travers les annonces publicitaires ainsi que les discussions interpersonnelles. Comme Atwood et Sanders (1975:421) ont noté, pour éviter d'être dépassé, l'individu doit d'une façon ou d'une autre classer ces stimuli en grandes catégories capables de tenir compte des éléments familiers et non-familiers avec un moindre effort.



## Introduction

Since the revolutionary study of voting behaviour by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944), political communication research has focused mostly on predicting voting outcomes, with little attention given to the sources of political information and the perceptual dimensions voters employ to make sense of the complex of political communications assailing them (Savage 1981; Jacobson and Kernell, 1982).

The importance of media political campaigning in the electoral process has been well documented by both researchers and politicians (Nimmo, 1970, and Patterson, 1980). In a review of mass media and political campaigns, Atkin (1981:18) noted that 'most mass communication researchers studying political campaigns recognize that media messages significantly influence voters.' In fact, the history of the American presidential race is a recounting of media use patterns by the major candidates. In *Six Crises*, Richard Nixon (1962) argues that campaigns contribute to the demise as well as the rise of a politician. Nimmo (1970), after noting the high expenses that go with political campaigns, aptly remarked that 'politicians are willing to spend these extravagant sums because of their strong belief that electoral campaigns can make or break political careers, parties and programmes' (p. 3).

The modern political campaign is a major media event, deliberately planned not only to attract the attention of voters, but also to get their ballots. Recently, the 'selling of the president' has been shown not to be significantly different from positioning a new product through media advertising. Consequently, both advertising people and pollsters have a field day in planning and covering the media campaign (See McGinniss 1969).

Because of the ubiquitous nature of modern mass media in the developed world, it is not surprising that a successful political campaign presupposes wide media coverage. In an election year, the traditional occasions for disseminating news and opinion are often increased by arranging public debates on issues among political contenders, and staging deliberately selected events for the purpose of getting attention and winning votes. Many of these events are as unnecessary as they are uninformative. In fact, most of them would qualify to be classified as 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1964). Whether they are pseudo or genuine events, it is a forgone conclusion that the media are important factors in the success or failure of any modern political campaign, especially in the developed world.

The situation in the developing countries, where high illiteracy militates against extensive media use, should definitely be different. Expectedly, the major sources of political information may not be the modern mass media, since these are limited. Some countries do not have

any newspapers and many have no television stations. The government owns radio broadcasting stations, which are often limited in number for financial and political reasons.

If this is the case then a modern political campaign in the developing world does not have to be premised on the modern mass media, since these are limited, rather, it should find its base on the other important sources of political information and influence. Because of the prevalence of interpersonal communication in developing societies, where the modern media are not plentiful, non-media sources of information should be more important in the dissemination of information and influence about political campaigns.

In the developed world, the present period can be described as the era of new politics, following the discovery of the power of television. Commenting on the philosophy of new politics, Atwood and Sanders (1975:421) remarked that 'several factors contributed to the emphasis on television, not the least of which may be the perceived importance of the medium, based on household penetration ...' Television may have penetrated households in the developed world, but its effectiveness for political learning has not been unequivocally determined. For instance, some investigators have reported a general preference for print media news about public affairs, and that more people read newspapers than watch television, and most importantly, television is predominantly used for entertainment (Clarke and Ruggels, 1970; Troidahl, Van Dam and Robeck, 1965; Bogart, 1968; Robinson, 1971; Losciuto, 1972). This is not, however, to discount the importance of the 'wired tube' in political communication, especially in creating images and lasting impressions. Whatever role television plays in the modern political campaign should pale in importance to interpersonal communication among peoples of the developing countries.

Nimmo and Combs (1980) would argue that the power often attributed to the modern media (including television) is a myth. Although they agree that 'the news media are key channels of political information, opinions, and judgments for Americans', they argue that 'the press simply makes myths ... the news media are the griots of our civilization ... they make and transmit myths' (pp. 184-85).

While political communication scholarship in the developed world, especially America, is concerned with the power of television in the 'new politics' and the general impact of modern mass media, the concern in the developing countries is more on informal and non-institutional channels of communication. The equivalent of the 'new politics' in the developing regions would be the discovery of the power of primary groups as purveyors of political information and influence.

The dominant pattern of voting behaviour has been found to be based



on primary group membership and ethnic cleavages. In Nigeria, for instance, even the formation of political parties has been found to be largely on ethnic basis and geographical propinquity (Anyanwu, 1982; Nnoli, 1978; Oyediran, 1981).

This present study was undertaken, therefore, to determine the major sources of political information for rural people. Another objective was the determination of the relative importance of these sources as purveyors of political information and influence. Specifically, these three research questions guided the conduct of this study:

1. What are the major sources of political information and influence?
2. Which modern communication media do the rural people use most frequently? and
3. What is the perceived believability of the major sources of political information?

## Literature Review

The literature on political communication is plentiful and with increasing interest in political science and mass communication scholarships there is no doubt that academic and commercial interests in political campaigns and election communication will grow even further. Though many aspects of political campaigns and election communication have attracted much attention from researchers, the area dealing with sources of political information and influence has been unduly neglected. Most researchers have focused on the determination of election outcomes and the voting patterns among different voting blocs, to the neglect of sources of information for voters (Levy, 1983 and Hibbs, 1982).

In their study of political information use in Southern Illinois and parts of Missouri, Atwood and Sanders (1975) found that television was the chief medium and was also the most believable of all the sources. Three times as many people said they obtained most of their campaign information from television, compared with newspapers, and twice as many said they would believe television as would believe newspapers. This is not to discount the uses of the other sources of political information. As the researchers rightly noted, 'while people may say they get most of their political campaign information from television and they may say that television is the most believable, voters appear to receive substantial amounts of information and influence about politics from other sources, particularly the print media' (p. 428).

Based on an extensive content analysis of newscasts and commercials, in addition to interviews of 2,000 voters, Patterson and McClure (1976) reported that newspapers were far more effective for political campaign

education than television. They noted that 'newspapers were far more effective than television in making voters better informed on the issues. The minutes people spent reading their newspapers, unlike the minutes they gave to watching network news, clearly increased their issue awareness' (p. 61).

Latimer (1983) reported from an extensive study of media preferences among black American voters from 1956 to 1980 that it would be more appropriate to say the voters used both television and newspapers. She reported that 'black exposure to campaign information in the newspapers rose in the same time frame as black television exposure' (p. 20).

The conflict between the electronic and print media as major sources of political information and influence is inevitable, considering that modern politics is a mass media phenomenon. The resolution of the controversy over which medium is the dominant source has to be found in the structural characteristics of the particular community. In this regard, Olien, Donohew and Tichenor (1978) have proposed that community type and structure affect media choices, both in terms of media use and preferences as sources of information.

In the context of rural Nigeria, both television and newspapers should pale in importance, and the prime position should go to radio and interpersonal sources.

## Method

The data for this study came from a survey of selected voters in a rural town, Okpala, in Imo State of Nigeria. The case study method, whereby a sample of voters is taken from one community is not new in political communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944). Okpala was chosen because of its strategic geographical location between two cities, Owerri and Aba, but at the same time maintaining an authentic rural environment, without electricity and modern amenities. The people are politicized and concerned about current affairs, though they are not unduly political.

A 67-item questionnaire was adapted from the original instrument used by Atwood and Sanders (1975) in their study of political information sources in the United States. The adaptation was necessary to include traditional and local sources of information among rural dwellers. The questionnaire required respondents to indicate how much information they felt they were getting about the candidates and issues from these sources: television, newspapers, magazines, radio, telephone, political ads, candidates themselves, churches, traditional rulers,



relatives, and 'other'. The responses were on a five-point scale of: (a) a great deal, (b) quite a bit, (c) hard to say, (d) very little, and (e) none at all.

One question asked respondents how believable they felt the information from each of those sources was, while another required them to indicate how much they felt their opinions about the candidates and issues had been influenced by each of the sources of information. Another question asked: 'If you were going to vote tomorrow and wanted some more information about the candidates and issues, how helpful do you think each of these sources of information would be?' The other questions elicited biographic data from the respondents.

The population of Okpala is estimated at 10,000. From this, 375 people were chosen for the study. There are seven clans in Okpala and they each provided 45 respondents initially. Because four clans were more populous than the other three, they each provided 15 additional respondents. Because no list of any type existed in the village, and there were no streets, random sampling was impossible, and so available and willing adults were used, though with considerations to avoid over-sampling of sub-groups. Four trained assistants administered the questionnaires. Of the 375 questionnaires distributed, 300 were returned usable, yielding an 80 percent return rate.

## Results

There were 163 women (54.3%) and 137 men (45.7%) in the sample, while 110 people (36.7%) had some education, 190 (63.7%) could neither read nor write, though some of them could understand "pidgin English". The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 61, or above. Nearly a third, 89 people (29.7%) were in the 41-50 year bracket; this was followed by the 18-30 year bracket which accounted for 79 people (26.3%). The 61 and above group had only 23 people (7.6%) (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Age Distribution Respondents.**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-30 years	79	26.3
31-40 "	56	18.7
41-50 "	89	29.7
51-60 "	53	17.7
61 and above	23	7.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.0</b>

At the time this study was conducted, there were six registered political parties, of which three were the most popular. These were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which won the presidential election in 1979; the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) which won the governorship election in Imo State, where this study was conducted, and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which won the governorship seats in Lagos, Bendel and three Western states.

The pattern of responses reflecting respondents' sympathies for the political parties showed that NPP that controlled the state garnered 143 sympathisers (47.7%), NPN, that won the presidency got 72 sympathisers (24.0%) while UPN that was in power in distant states got only 16 sympathisers (5.3%). Fifty-nine people (19.7%) said they would not identify with any of the political parties (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Political Party Membership**

Party	Frequency	Percentage
NPP	143	47.7
NPN	72	24.0
UPN	16	5.3
GNPP	5	1.7
PRP	4	1.3
NAP	1	0.3
NEUTRAL	59	19.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The respondents were required to give the reasons why they gave their support to the political parties of their choice. About a third of the sample, 96 people (32.0%) said it was because of party programmes and activities, 59 people (19.7%) said it was party personalities, 52 people (17.3%) said it was ethnic affiliation while 40 people (13.4%) chose party ideology. Fifty-three respondents (17.6%) did not respond.



**Table 3. General Sources of Information\***

Sources	High	Average	Low	Total
Radio	94.7	0.3	5.0	100.0
Relatives	84.7	3.0	12.3	100.0
Political ads	74.3	8.0	18.7	100.0
Candidates themselves	72.7	6.7	20.6	100.0
Traditional rulers	46.2	11.0	42.8	100.0
Newspapers	28.1	5.7	66.2	100.0
Churches	16.7	9.3	74.0	100.0
Magazines	12.3	8.0	79.7	100.0
Television	8.1	5.4	86.5	100.0
Telephone	0.0	6.0	94.0	100.0

\*Respondents were asked how much information they felt they had been getting from each of the sources. The figures are in percentages.

### Sources of Information:

The instrument for this study was structured on a five-point rating scale of: great deal, quite a bit, hard to say, very little, and none at all. To make for parsimonious analyses and presentation, new categories of 'high', 'average', and 'low' were developed thus: 'High' comprised the sum of great deal and quite a bit; 'average' was 'hard to say', and 'low' comprised the sum of 'Very Little' and 'None at all'. The advantages of simplicity and clarity outweigh the finer graduations of differences lost in the combination of two sub-groups.

Table 3 shows the summary of the chief sources of political information to the rural community. The highest source was radio, followed in descending order by relatives, political ads, candidates themselves, traditional rulers and newspapers. Churches, magazines, television and telephones are of less importance for obvious reasons. The churches tried not to involve themselves in national politics. There were no political magazines published in the state; television was not a popular medium because the village lacked electricity, and of course, there were no telephones.

The two dominant sources are radio and relatives. The attraction radio has for rural dwellers is derived from its cheap price and cost of operation. Again, they are easily portable and can be used by both the educated and illiterate. At the state level, some radio stations broadcast more than 80 percent of their programmes in the vernacular languages. It is not surprising that 'people' constitute an important source of political information. The primary group has always been known to be an important source of information, especially among the rural peoples.

**Table 4. Perceived Influence of the Sources.**

Sources	Percentages			TOTAL
	High	Average	Low	
Radio news	90.7	2.3	7.0	100.0
Relatives	89.3	3.7	7.0	100.0
Friends	86.0	2.7	11.3	100.0
Campaign workers	78.6	6.7	14.7	100.0
Radio campaign ads	76.3	2.3	21.4	100.0
Candidates themselves	69.5	6.7	23.8	100.0
Social organizations/clubs	61.3	8.4	30.3	100.0
Political parties	58.9	5.1	36.0	100.0
Traditional rulers	56.2	13.8	30.0	100.0
Spouse	52.0	10.0	38.0	100.0
Public officials	36.8	15.7	47.5	100.0
Newspapers	32.0	23.3	44.7	100.0
Churches	20.3	14.7	65.0	100.0
TV news	17.3	38.3	44.2	100.0
Newsmagazines	16.0	20.0	64.0	100.0
TV campaign ads	14.8	36.0	49.2	100.0

Table 4 shows the summary for the perceived influence of the various sources of political information. The most important is radio news, followed sequentially by relatives, friends, campaign workers, radio ads and the candidates themselves. The less important sources from the point of view of influence were: social organizations, political parties, traditional rulers, spouse and public officials. The least important were: newspapers, churches, tv news, newsmagazines and tv campaign ads.

It is revealing that radio still maintained the lead it had over the other sources of information. The distinction has to be made between radio news, which the people probably perceived as more objective and radio campaign ads, which took the fifth place in the hierarchy of influential sources. Husband/wife took a curiously 10th place while relatives, friends, and campaign workers took the second, third and fourth positions, respectively. It is tempting to interpret this as evidence of failure in marital communication. A more plausible interpretation is that the couples shared identical political positions even before the campaigns began, and thus there was minimal influence from each other because of prevailing congruity of perspectives.

Table 5 shows the summary for the perceived believability of the sources. Radio came first as the most credible source, followed, in order, by relatives, traditional rulers, candidates themselves and political ads.



**Table 5. Perceived Believability of the Sources.**

Sources	Believability Percentages			TOTAL
	High	Average	Low	
Radio	89.0	3.3	7.0	100.0
Relatives	87.3	4.0	8.7	100.0
Candidates themselves	66.3	12.0	21.7	100.0
Traditional rulers	62.7	18.7	18.6	100.0
Political ads	49.5	11.7	38.8	100.0
Newspapers	28.3	35.0	16.7	100.0
Television	17.1	55.4	27.5	100.0
Magazines	17.1	46.3	36.6	100.0
Telephone	1.0	76.2	22.8	100.0

The least credible sources were newspapers, television, magazines and telephone.

Radio has consistently maintained the prime position for general source, perceived influence and believability. It is revealing to note that the three other media of mass communication — newspapers, television and magazines — were perceived to be less believable than radio and the personal sources. This is probably a reflection of the use pattern rather than an indication of any intrinsic credibility characteristics of the sources.

**Table 6. Sources for Additional Information.**

Sources	Percentages			TOTAL
	High	Average	Low	
Friends	93.3	3.0	3.7	100.0
Relatives	93.0	1.3	5.7	100.0
Candidates themselves	83.9	5.4	10.7	100.0
Campaign workers	81.2	7.0	11.8	100.0
Average of personal sources	87.9	4.2	7.9	100.0
Radio	89.0	3.7	7.3	100.0
Newspapers	42.0	21.0	36.0	100.0
Magazines	23.4	22.0	54.4	100.0
Television	19.2	23.9	56.9	100.0
Average of mediated sources	43.4	17.8	38.8	100.0

Table 6 shows the summary of the responses for sources perceived to be more helpful for additional information on the candidates and issues. For lucidity, the four mass media sources are compared with four common personal sources in order to highlight source differences.

For the mass media, radio again took the first position, followed by newspapers, newsmagazines and television. For the personal sources, friends and relatives nearly tie for the first position, followed by candidates themselves and campaign workers. The average of the percentages for the media and personal sources shows that the latter outperformed the former as sources for additional information on candidates and issues. While the average for the media was 43.4 percent for the high source category, the equivalent average for the personal sources was 87.9 percent. These figures fit the expected pattern of sources for additional information in a political campaign. It is easier for people to seek additional information from their friends, relatives, campaign workers or even the candidates themselves than to go to radio or television stations, newspapers or magazines. Consistent with other results reported in Tables 3, 4 and 5, Table 6 shows that friends and relatives are the best personal sources for additional information, while radio is the most popular media source.

## Discussion

The results presented above show that radio and relatives are the dominant sources of information on candidates and issues. These are followed by the political ads and the candidates. Since the newspapers, magazines and television are not dominant sources, the political ads must come from the radio. Since media use does not necessarily equate with media effect, respondents were asked to indicate their perceived influence of the information source. Radio news, relatives and friends were reportedly the most influential, followed by campaign workers and radio campaign ads. As in the general source, newspapers, magazines and television were not perceived to be important.

But how believable did the respondents perceive the common sources of information? As in the other responses, radio and relatives were reported as the most believable, followed by traditional rulers and the candidates themselves. As usual, newspapers, television and magazines did not get commendable ratings. For additional information on candidates and issues, the respondents reported they would ask their friends and relatives, and then use the radio, or ask candidates themselves or campaign workers, in that order. On the average, personal sources would be preferred to media outlets.

The dominant picture that emerges is one that shows radio as the most important channel for disseminating political information to influence



rural voters in a developing country. Friends and relatives are also important, as are traditional rulers. The point to note is that radio was perceived as more important than primary group members who were seen as more important than newspapers, magazines and television.

If the 'new politics' in the United States is based on the utilization of the power of television, the Nigerian equivalent will be based on the power of radio.

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