LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS A FACTOR IN PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION

By

Adeyanju, Akeem Mojisola
Department of Mass Communication, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
soladeya@yahoo.com

Abstract
Letters to the Editor have attracted substantial research attention from scholars who have studied the contents, motivation of their writers and their effects on readers. These, however, have been scholars from the Western world who have not paid enough attention to the role that Letters to the Editor play as feedback on government policies. This study, therefore, investigated the contents of Letters to the Editor and readers' opinions on their influence on government policies.The study was guided by the Agenda Setting Theory. It adopted survey and content analysis methods. Data were obtained through a questionnaire, an in-depth interview guide and content analysis. AIl Letters To The Editor in the selected newspapers and magazine's — Punch, Vanguard, Tell and Newswatch-were content-analyzed from 2000 to 2005. A 22-item questionnaire was administered on 489 readers of the newspapers and magazines in Lagos and Abuja. These were selected through purposive and multistage sampling techniques. Data from the newspapers and the questionnaire were analyzed using frequency count and percentages, while data from the interview were analyzed through the constant comparative technique. The findings showed that Letters to the Editor had limited influence on government policies and provided insight into the limits of the agenda-setting functions of the media. Therefore, government should verify the authenticity of the claims by the editors and the integrity of the opinions. It suggests why the overall input pf the citizenry to government policies may have been ineffective.

Keywords: Letters to the Editor, Public Opinion, Agenda Setting, Governing Policy

Introduction

A public generally means those who have a common interest or opinion on a particular issue, at a particular time. This means that an issue creates its public and that a public may not necessarily mean the whole population. It should be noted that the issue of public and its nature has generated arguments over the years. The basic point of convergence seems to be that there are many different publics that are significant and as such, a proper operational definition of public is indispensable.

A public does not necessarily mean the majority because in a situation where the majority and minority have different opinions and are persistent about them, then, there are two publics. Stressing the point further, one can say that public opinion is the collection and aggregation of individual opinions that must have two basic things; one being *a high degree of uniformity,* and the other, *an extent of diversity.* In other words, there must be certain factors or characteristics that will make those who belong to each public to be discernible from the others. They must share these characteristics to a large extent. While this may be in existence, there must also be some form of diversity. It is this diversity that may be expressed in different forms. It keeps

members of the same public opinion to be discussing and negotiating so as to fine-tune the opinion.

One important point to note is that while PO does build up from somewhere, often, the origin is lost on the researchers who mostly pay attention to issues after they had become public. Very often, people cannot pin point the originator of a particular perspective or opinion. Thus, there is always that "convincing" opinion of the better informed (opinion leaders), their prejudices and emotional responses to issues, injection of personal perspectives, into the interpretation of issues and subsequent formation of public opinion. Naegeli (2004) observes that, "when a large group of people shares the same belief on a political topic, it is called public opinion". This definition shows that public opinion is not just a matter of people having opinions, but also when that opinion is held by a large group of people. It is important to clarify this so that each time people talk about public opinion they are not referring to a monolithic public. Thus, there could be two or more public opinions on a particular topic. However, the one that people often refer to as public opinion is that held among the largest number of people. Public Opinion (PO) is so important to the effective running of the society that Miller (2004) notes that any attempt to get exceptions to where .public opinion is applicable can only lead to crisis, just as many unexplained government policies have faced serious opposition from the people, leading to the change of many of these policies.

Mass Media in Opinion Formation

There are different categories and classes of people in the society, however, it has been discovered that many of them rely on the mass media to get basic and additional information for decision-making. Though it has been argued that the majority of the people rarely take part at the initial stage of the formulation of public opinion, yet, they get involved when it enters the public domain. However, our attitudes and which side we belong in public opinion largely depends on what we know about the opinion of others. The world today, though heterogeneous, has been made into a global village where one person learns and knows a lot about what others are saying or doing through the promotion of the issues of public opinion by the nature and content of the mass media.

The role of the mass media in the process of opinion formation has attracted the attention of scholars over the years. While some believe that the mass media have little influence on the formation of public opinion, others are of the opinion that in the contemporary world, the mass media are central to PO formation. A point of convergence seems to be that while the media may not be the sole source of PO formation; they do give it direction and link people together in the belief that they are not alone in an opinion. Sometimes, the low level of knowledge about the issue at stake and the much respect people have for some opinion leaders and moulders may lead to a *bandwagon effect.*

The formation and use of public opinion in governance can broadly be categorized into two forms. First, is from the information supplied by the government to the people, in terms of policies, pronouncements, delivery, governance, accountability, and so on. Thus, governments want to do everything to create a favourable public opinion for all their activities. Second, is the opinion the public holds about their government and its activities based on the information available to them, which can determine the level of acceptance, support, and by implication, the

legitimacy and credibility they give to the government. In addition, the members of the public also hold opinions about themselves and the people around them and these largely determine how they relate with, and among themselves.

The role of the mass media in opinion formation is well documented. For instance, Borgman (1992) argues that talk-radio almost single handedly forced Zoe Baird, a nominee for US Attorney General, to withdraw from the confirmation process in 1992. There are other instances where public opinion has forced the government to change its policies or decision. In Nigeria, for instance, the Removal of Fuel Subsidy by the Jonathan administration at the beginning of year 2012 was vehemently protested by the populace. It was a clear case of media war for and against the decision. The government mounted a very assiduous campaign to gain public support for the decision while those opposed to it also mounted a lot of campaign.

The "war" was virtually fought through the media. In the end, the two publics had to reach an agreement which seemed like a middle course. Just as Rosseau (quoted in Hennessy 1981:2) observed, "all governments rest fundamentally on opinion rather than on law or coercion." In addition, the importance of public opinion to the support of government policies made the Nigerian Federal Government to call on the media to help in educating the people on its reform policies; hence, the often mouthed but hardly believed cliché of the *media being government's partner in progress.*

Some of the current studies have negated some of the cynicisms expressed by many scholars about the usefulness and importance of public opinion as built through the media. Schneider and Jacoby (2005) examined the public opinion of Americans towards the Welfare Spending policies on the military. They used the available data and content analysis of television and newspapers between 1990 and 2000. They found a correlation between the time when there was an increased negative coverage of news on welfare spending and the time when a sharp decrease in public support for the spending occurred.

Letters to the Editor and Public Opinion

The Nigerian situation is not different from what obtains in other parts of the world on the position of letters to the editor. All the Nigerian newspapers and magazines have pages for letters to the Editor; they all see it as an important aspect of their papers, and they encourage readers to write the letters as a way of expressing their opinions and expect government to respond to them. This column is so important to the papers that it is assumed as a necessary part of all newspapers. According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2001:303);

> The letters to the editor section of the newspaper is one of the few sites to have survived throughout a large period of the history of American mainstream mass media. The section has historically been seen as among the few outlets available to the public for voicing opinion.

The usefulness of Letters to the Editor is becoming so appreciated to the extent that today, some newspapers have appointed the ombudsman (a'go-between) who responds to complaints from the readers after investigating them. According to Biagi (2003:316), "about two dozen newspapers throughout the country, including the *Washington Post, The Kansas City Star,* and *The Louisville Courier Journal,* have tried the idea, but most newspapers still funnel complaints directly to the editor." In Nigeria, Aliagan (2005:62) also observed that, "letters are channels

through which members of the public communicate with either the newspaper or with their leaders, government officials and other people in the community."

However, not all scholars agree that letters are very important. For instance, Sigelman and Walkosz (1992:939), after looking at the studies that have been conducted on,; letters to the editor as a measurement of public opinion concluded that:

> In sum, letters to the editor are widely - but not invariably - considered as unreliable public opinion thermometer. The weight of existing evidence is clearly on the side of unreliability, but the reliability of this evidence is itself often the question, for much of it is dated and, more importantly, most of it is based on the characteristic of the letter writers rather than on the content of the letters they write.

It was Bakir (2006:69) who stated that the media have the power to "influence the transferral of items from media to policy agendas.". This, he asserts, they do through the provision of information, which tends to influence people's policy expectations, in turn influencing policy. Two, by publicizing and defining, the media can help construct their policy image for the public. Three, by generating media visibility, organized interests can channel their policy demand to wider constituencies, thus increasing public pressure on policy by driving public concerns.

Statement of the Problem

The arguments for or against the veracity of the Letters to the Editor (LEs) in the formation of PO demand that we understand which is a true reflection of reality; however, of all the means through which the basic process of communication is completed, "Letters to the Editor" as a feedback process seems to be the least focused on by researchers. Though its importance is recognized, at least by the fact that it is a constant column in many newspapers, it is an item that has not been extensively studied by many scholars. Also, its usefulness and role in public opinion formation has not been adequately measured in Nigeria. For instance, researches have been conducted on the role of Feature Articles on the definition of crime (Welch, Fenwick, and Roberts, 1997), dealing with Letter Planters (Frisinger and Traud, 2004), Letters and Politics (Buell, 2005), and the role of editorials in government policy formation (Omojuwa, 2005). However, researchers have not focused on the influence of letters to the editor on government policies. Thus, this study hopes to fill this gap in knowledge. It tries to examine the importance of letters to the editor to the letter writers, readers, editors and government officials.

The objectives of this study are to: establish whether the stakeholders attach any importance to letters to the editor; determine the quantity of letters published that are related to government policies, establish which policies were strong enough to warrant feedback and comments from the readers, and find out if the letters have any influence on government policies.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised for the study:

1. How relevant are Letters to the Editor as feedback on government policies through the Nigerian press?
2. What are the response rates of readers on matters of public opinion on government policies through letters to the editor?

Theoretical Framework: Agenda Setting and the Two-Step Flow theories.

Agenda Setting Theory: According to McQuail (1997), Agenda Setting, as described by Lazarsfeld et al (1944), refers to the powerto "structure issues." He also affirms that it was McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1993) that actually coined the term "Agenda Setting." As noted by Davison et al (1976:181), Cohen had earlier observed that, "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

McCombs and Shaw, quoted by Davison et al (1976: 182), after studying the correlation between voter emphasis on issues and the coverage of issues by newspapers, also concluded that, though there was an agreement between the issues covered by the newspapers and what voters considered as important, "...these correlations did not prove the agenda setting capability of the press - other explanations are possible - but that it seemed very likely that the voter's priorities had been influenced by the extent of media coverage."

In the words of Davison et al (1976: 183), agenda setting is "...the label often given to the ability of the mass media to direct attention to one subject rather than another." This definition gives the focus of the theory. However, the summary of the agenda-setting hypothesis given by McQuail (1997) shall be adopted here. According to him, these are that:

- Public debate is represented by salient issues (an agenda for action).
- The agenda derives from a combination of public opinion and political choice.
- Mass media news and information reflect the content and order of priority of issues.
- This representation of issues in the mass media exerts an independent effect on issue, content, and on their relative salience on public opinion.

This theory shall serve as our guide in the conduct of this research.

Two-Step Flow Theory: In addition to the theory above, we shall also depend on the Two-Step Flow theory for guidance. This will enable us to follow the process of public opinion formation and how this is affected by the mass media.

The propounders of the theory, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, made two basic conclusions about the theory. These are that:

- Much of the information disseminated by the mass media conies to the individuals' attention second hand from people who relay their interpretation to it.

The relayers of information from mass media can also influence the attitudes and decisions of the receivers.

The most re-iterated part of this theory is the concept of opinion leaders. These opinion leaders have access to the mass media and, therefore, get first-hand information. This information they relay to others with less or no access to firsthand information from the media. However, in relaying the information, they interpret along the line, and possibly add their own biases to the information.

This theory has been modified further to what is now called Multi-Step Flow theory. This, according to Folarin (1998:60), was because"... opinion leaders also have opinion leaders, and so on ad infinitum."

With the two theories above, we shall focus on the research and explain the process of public opinion formation by the print media. It will, as well, give us the opportunity to test these theories in a contemporary Nigerian situation.

Methodology

To gather data for this purpose, three main methods were applied.

1. The researcher content analyzed two national daily newspapers *(The Punch* and *Vanguard)* and two national weekly news magazines *(Tell* and *Newswatch)* for five years (i.e. June 2000 to May 2005). In all, the researcher got a total of 1820 and 1813 papers for *Punch* and *Vanguard* respectively; thus leaving us with five (0.27%) and 12 (0.66%) missing editions for the two papers respectively. Also, there were 263 and 258 editions of *Tell* and *Ne\v$watch* magazines respectively. This means that a total of 4154 editions were content analysed, while it is concluded that the missing editions are negligible and will have no impact on the results. The papers were content analysed to examine the frequency of coverage given to letters and the direction the letters to the editor take on government policies (i.e. whether they are in support, neutral or against the policies covered).
2. Also, interviews were conducted to get the opinions of the media people that are in charge of handling letters to the editors in the selected newspapers and magazines. This was to ascertain how people respond to issues relating to government policies through the volume and content of letters; and the impact they think the letters have or could have in influencing government policies. In addition, the interviews sought to know whether there is any significance attached to these letters by the editors and the level (if there is any). Thus, the four editors in charge of handling the Letters to the Editor in the newspapers and magazines chosen were interviewed.
3. In addition, a survey of readers in Lagos and Abuja was carried out. A total of 250 respondents were selected through multi-stage sampling methods from each location.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic Data for the Respondents Surveyed

The presentation and analysis of the data gathered was started by presenting the demographic data of the respondents surveyed for the study as follows:

Table 1: Location of Respondents

Location	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Abuja	240	49.1
Lagos	249	50.9
Total	**489**	**100**

Table 1 above indicates the return rate for the 250 copies of the questionnaire distributed in each of the two locations

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

		Frequency	**Percent**
Valid	No Response	5	.6
	Male	353	72.2
	Female	131	26.8
	Total	**489**	**100.0**

The percentage of male respondents was far more than that of the female. While the male percentage stands at 72.91%, the female is 26.79%.

Table 3: Occupational Distribution of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	No response	6	1.2
	Civil servant	129	26.4
	Business	85	17.4
	Student	130	26.6
	Unemployed	22	4.5
	Farming	2	.4
	Lawyer	10	2.0
	Doctor	12	2.5
	Others	93	19.0
	Total	**489**	**100.0**

The respondents at both locations were mainly civil servants, students and business people. These sets of people represent the actual movers of public opinion and those whose support or otherwise can reflect the position of the public.

Table 4: Age Distribution of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO RESPONSE	2	.4	.4	.4
	18-27YRS	173	35.4	35.4	35.8
	28-37YRS	170	34.8	34.8	70.6
	38-47YRS	99	20.2	20.2	90.8
	48-57YRS	33	6.7,	6.7	97.5
	58-67YRS	7	1.4	1.4	99.0
	ABOVE 67YRS	5	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	**489**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

It should be noted that the bulk of the respondents are young, energetic and active youths (with ages between 18 and 37). This becomes important when we consider the fact that the youth are expected to be the ones agitating for a change in the society and that they are these days well educated and vocal.

The above presentation was to enable the researchers know the respondents so that their opinions may be useful to us in the research, subsequently. The researchers now pose the research questions and provide answers to them through the analysis of the data gathered on the field.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What is the importance of Letters to the Editor as feedback on government policies through the Nigerian press?

This research sets out to determine whether Letters to the Editor, despite their inclusion in the content of all the newspapers and magazines, serve any important part in getting feedback from the people to the government on the policies being implemented. This was done by asking for the opinions of the respondents (audience), the editors, and the government through its media representative; as well as looking into the contents of the published papers.

In order to establish whether newspapers and newsmagazines serve as a means through which the respondents get information on government policies, we askedthem to evaluate their level of agreement with the newspapers and magazines being their sources of getting information to form their opinions on government policies. Their response is as given in the Chart below:

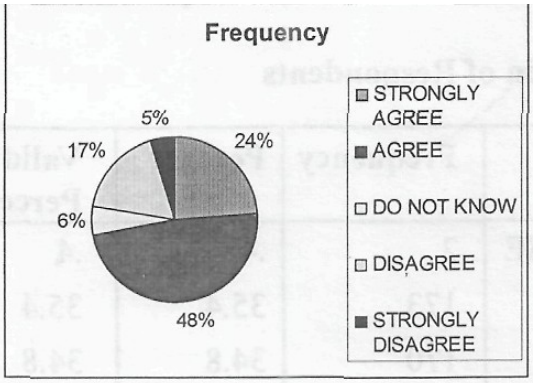


Chart 1: Showing level of respondents dependent on information from newspapers and magazines for opinion formation

The number and percentage of respondents that agreed that they get more information from newspapers and magazines are quite high. When combined, those that agreed formed 414 (84.66%) of all the 489 respondents. In the same vein, 352 of the total respondents (representing 71.98%) said that the information they get from the newspapers and magazines forms part of the opinion they hold on government policies. In other words, their opinion formation and decision making are influenced by the content of the papers.

Respondents' Opinion on the Importance of Letters to the Editor on government policies

The result of the survey of readers points to the fact that letters are seen and used as an important part of the feedback mechanism on government policies by the readers. The table below presents their opinion on this.

Table 5: Response to whether they know public opinion through letters to the editor

		Frequency	**Percent**
Valid	No Response	13	2.7
	Yes	326	66.7
	No	60	12.3
	Do not know	87	17.8
Invalid	4	3	.6
	Total	**489**	**100.0**

This table shows that many of the respondents read and monitor letters to the editor as a way of knowing the opinions of other people. This may be a way of either reaffirming what they themselves think (since they may not be alone in holding that opinion), or in changing their opinion (if they realize that those holding the opinion are not many, or the public opinion is changing).

The Usefulness of Letters to the Respondents

The researcher also asked for the opinion of the respondents as it concerns the usefulness or otherwise of letters to the editor. Their opinions are as presented below:

Table 6: The Usefulness of Letters to the Respondents

	ABUJA		LAGOS		TOTAL
	Frequency	**Percent**	**Frequency**	**Percent**	
NO RESPONSE	46		42		88
USEFUL	86		115		201
FAIRLY USEFUL	16		16		32
SOMETIMES	35		12		47
DON'T KNOW	16		13		29
MAYBE	9		5		14
NOT USEFUL	32		46		78
Total	**240**		**249**		**489**

The opinion of the respondents, as shown in the table above, was also followed by suggestions from them on how the letters could be made more useful to them generally.

First on their suggestion list was to the editors. Respondents advised them to be very objective in their choice of letters. This they believe will help the column to reflect true public opinion on issues of national importance. It was also argued that once the published letters carried authoritative opinion of the public, government will be forced to listen to it and make use of it in their policy decisions.

Editors were also advised not to blow issues out of proportion so that enough attention will be paid to issues they cover and the government may take them seriously. They have also been told to publish letters from the readers even when they are against their proprietors and to do everything to convince the readers about the genuineness of the letters they publish.

Credibility and Believability of Letters

Respondents are divided as to the authenticity, genuineness and composition of the letters by the papers. For instance, 221 (45.2%) are of the opinion that whatever is published as letters to the editor was picked by the editors to suit them and serve their purpose. This, of course, may impact on the credibility and believability of the content of the papers. In contrast, 146 (29.8%) of the respondents do feel that the letters do not represent the intentions of the editors or papers but that they are true reflections of the people's opinions. They are convinced that the editors are

publishing what the people say and not what suits them. This makes it evident that the editors still have a lot of work to do in convincing the majority of the people on the genuineness of the sources of letters.

Question 2: What has been the response rate of readers on matters of public opinion on government policies through letters to the editor?

The research also asked the question that will lead to determining the level of interest shown by readers in responding to the policies issued by the government in form of letters to the editor. It is a means through which the research sought to measure how keen the readers are in giving a feedback to the government on what they have read. This we did by asking the readers and the editors about the rate of response they give and get respectively. The data is analyzed thus:

Response rate of readers on matters of public opinion on government policies through Letters to the Editor

This was taken from three perspectives; that of the readers, in terms of their attitude towards the reading of Letters to the Editor and disposition to writing it. Then, from that of editors; who were interviewed to determine the coverage of the response, in terms of knowing the quantity of letters received and the percentage published. The last perspective was, to ascertain the total volume of space allocated to letters, particularly the policy-related ones.

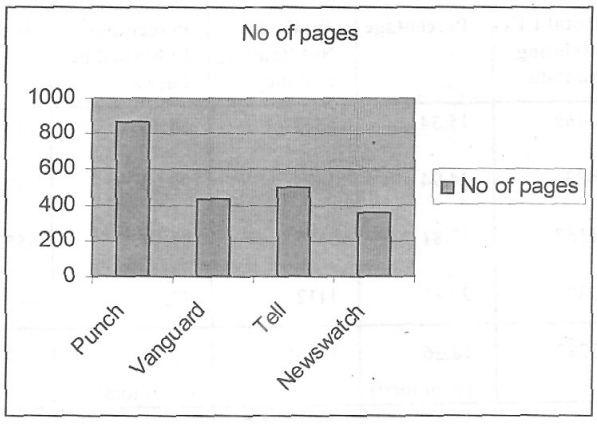
Content Analysis Perspective

Total Pages Allocated to Letters to the Editor

First, is the content analysis of the papers to determine the total number of pages allocated to Letters during the period of coverage (i.e. 2000 - 2005).

The total pages amounted to 2,161.06. Of this, the order of allocation was in line with the total number of letters published. That is, Punch allocated 871.81 pages, representing 40.34% of the total. That *of Tell* stood at 495.66 (22.94%), *Vanguardhad* 435.34 pages to get 20.14% and, as usual, *Newwatch* allocated 358.25 totalling 16.58%.

Chart 2: Pages allocated to letters by the papers.



In terms of the letters relating to government policies, the figures for each organ were as follows: *Tell* (1167) and *Punch* (1163) almost tallied on top of the table; each with 35.55% of the total

number of letters published. Vanguard followed with a distant 623 (18.98%) with *Newswatch* coming last with 330 (10.05%).

Total Letters Published on the Pages

In sum, the letters to the editor published by the 4154 editions of all the publications content analyzed were 17,978. Out of this, the letters that are related to one government policy or another amounted to 3,283. This represents 18,.26% of all the letters.

This, when distributed by paper showed that *The Punch* had a total of 7,486 (41.65%) letters, compared to that of *Vanguard* which was 2,498 (13.89%), while *Tell* magazine published a total of 6,552 (36.44%), compared to that *of Newswatch* which was 1,442 (8.02%). Thus, we can say that in terms of dailies, *The Punch* published more letters and also more relating to government policies than *Vanguard.* That of magazine (weekly) revealed that *Tell* led with 6,552, thereby overwhelming the 1,442 published by *Newswatch.*

Total Letters Relating to Government Policies

Of the total number of letters published, as shown in the table above, we analyzed the quantity of letters relating to government policies, as published within the time frame of this study. The result is presented thus:

Table 7: Frequency of publication of Letters to the Editor by the selected papers

Paper	Total LEs Relating to Policy	Percentage	Total LEs Not Relating to Policy	Percentage Published per Paper	Total LEs
Punch	1163	15.54	6323	84.46	7486(100%)
Vanguard	623	24.94	1875	75.06	2498(100%)
Tell	1167	17.81	5385	82.19	6552(100%)
Newswatch	330	22.88	1112	77.12	1442(100%)
Total	3283	18.26 (% of total)	14695	81.74 (% of total)	17978 (100%)

This finding revealed that *Tell* which is a weekly published more letters than *Vanguard* a daily, and also more than *Newswatch.* For instance, while *Vanguard* published a total of 1813 editions and 2,498 letters, *Tell* with just 263 editions still published more letters (6552) than *Vanguard.*

In terms of letters relating to government policies, proportionally, *Vanguard* performed better than the others, with 24.94% of the total letters it published relating to government policies. This is when compared with *Newswatch* that closely followed with 22.88%. *Tell,* comes next with 17.81% and *Punch* trails the list with 15.54% (despite having the highest number of letters published).

Thus, one can say that while Punch and *Tell* published more letters in total and in relation to government policies, on the whole, *Vanguard* and *Newswatch* actually published more letters relating to government policies than the others in proportion to the letters they each published.

Readers' Perspective
Response Rate of Respondents to Government Policies through Letters to the Editor
Reading Pattern: The researcher asked for the page that respondents first turn to when they are reading papers to ascertain the page that is paramount to them and to estimate the importance they attach to the Letters to the Editor column. Their responses are presented below:

Table 8: Newspaper page that respondents read first

	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Valid	NO RESPONSE	8	1.6
	NEWS	260	53.2
	FEATURE/ARTICLES	51	10.4
	EDITORIAL	21	4.3
	SPORTS	66	13.5
	OTHERS	38	7.8
	LETTERS	5	1.0
	INTERVIEWS	13	2.7
	OPINION	21	4.3
	CARTOON	6	1.2
	Total	**489**	**100.0**

About half of the respondents claimed they read newspapers every day while others read less often. News topped the list of stories the respondents read first when they pick a newspaper or magazine, while letters (our subject of discussion) was the least priority. Over 260 said they would read news first and only 5 selected letters as what they read first in a paper. It is not surprising that Sports was next to news in terms of readers' preference, considering the widely held belief that many Nigerians love sports.

Editors' Perspective
The third perspective was to determine the Editors' responses to the coverage of government policies through the letters.

Frequency of Publishing Letters Received
All the editors interviewed agreed that they received quite a high number of letters from time-to-time. The factors influencing'this were given as; the nature of story being responded to, that is, how does it affect the people and how strongly do they feel about the story. One point to note is that the multiplicity of the channels through which letters could be received has led to a phenomenal increase in the volume of LEs coming in. For instance, on a weekly basis, *Newswatch* received an average of 20-25 letters, while that of *Tell* was put at about 100. The figures for *Punch* and *Vanguard* were difficult to tell because of the combination of postal system and text messages through GSM and electronic mail-system (e-mail). On the average, *Vanguard* received 30-40 letters daily.

The question then is: what percentage of this volume got published, knowing that the print media are always constrained by space available for publication and the competition by different materials for it. The *Vanguard agreed* that fewer than 10% of the letters received were published and this was obviously low. Conversely, the other papers published a high percentage of the letters received. According to the *Newswatch* Production Editor, the person in charge of letters to the editor, *Newswatch* published between 75 - 80% of the total letters received. Similarly, *Tell* magazine puts the magazine's publication rate also at 75 - 80%. The *Punch* newspaper puts the percentage of letters published at 50%. In all, on the average, the rate of letters published by the papers out of the total received from the writers could be put at 50%. This was half of the letters and this may be considered a fair representation of the quantity received. As noted above, about 18% of the letters are on government policies, the rest are on issues concerning individuals and other matters.

Criteria for Choosing the Letters Published

The researcher sought to know the criteria used by the editors in determining what letters got published in their papers. The following were their responses. The most prominent of the criteria used in the selection of the letters, as identified by the interviewees were the quality and length of the letters. The quality, as expressed by the editor in *Tell* magazine, is determined by the relevance of the content of the letters and sometimes the person writing. In addition, allocation of spaces to letters is influenced by the volume/number of letters received and the order of importance of the letters as determined by the issues of the day. The choice of the letters was, however, subjected to the editorial decisions. Other reasons given were; the quantity of materials received and the order of priority given to them by the editorial board from time to time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the data presented above, one can safely reach some conclusions thus:

1. Letters to the Editor through the mass media is a very veritable means of building public opinion because they give the platform for expression. However, the public opinion expressed and aggregated through them may not be a total reflection of the opinion of the generality of the populace; considering the fact that many do not express their opinion.
2. Taken from another perspective, we may conclude that the "silent majority" in their spiral of silence may be affected or influenced by the vocal minority who may metamorphose into opinion leaders, thereby forcing the majority into becoming recipients in the "many steps flow" of information. This is more so when we consider the fact that many do not express their feelings through letters to the editor but read what others have written. This is not to in any way suggest that the readers are passive, but to align with Cohen's assertion that, "while the press may not be successful in telling the people what to think, it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about." Thus, public opinion on government policies may be influenced through the media which brings out what people should think about and, by implication, set public agenda.
3. For more interest to be shown and more people engaged in writing letters to the editor, the credibility and believability of the tetters must be increased; editors must be seen to be publishing letters that truly reflect the opinions of the people; the letters covering government policies is still low and needs to be increased for more participation in government decisions and governance.

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