

## **Digital Broadcasting Network and the Emerging Democratic Culture in Nigeria: The 2021 Anambra Guber Debate Experience**

**Obiakor, Casmir Uchenna**

Department of Mass Communication Chukwuemeka  
Chukwuemeke Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam

**Adikuru, Chinonso C.**

Department of Mass Communication Chukwuemeka  
Chukwuemeke Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam

**Agbakaj, Blessing Chinenye**

Department of Mass Communication Chukwuemeka  
Chukwuemeke Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam

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**ABSTRACT:** *Series of election debates made available to the masses through the use of digital broadcast media technologies have been conducted in different places among different candidates running for different elective positions in different countries. As part of the political activities preceding the elections, the impact of these election debate aired through digital broadcasting technology on the voting decision of the citizens have not been examined Nigeria. Against this background, this study evaluated exposure to 2021 gubernatorial election debate and its influence on voting decision and choice of candidate among residents of Awka metropolis. The democratic participant theory was used while the survey research method was adopted in surveying 400 respondents sampled from Awka metropolis. Findings demonstrated that election debate influence voting decision and encourage candidate evaluation among the respondents. It was concluded that election debate is an important election activity that benefits both the electorate and the candidates. It was also found that the use of digital broadcast technology was applauded by the respondents for its capacity in strengthening democracy. It was recommended among others, that election debate should be made compulsory for all candidates running for all elective positions in Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** debate, election, democracy, digital-broadcasting, technology

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital media broadcasting technologically enabled debates have formed an integral part of election campaigns in many developed and developing countries of the world. The use of digital broadcasting technology is not only verse in coverage and reach compared to other televised campaign events, but they are often seen as being with the people always. This is because it can be replayed by the audience at wish, a quality that makes it the most important events in any election campaign (Goldberg and Ischen, 2020). Media debate is among the important electoral issues that inform the electorate's voting decision. Its displayable ability makes it easily accessible irrespective of the period when the debate was done (Wiegand and Wagner, 2016; Maier Faas and Maier 2014). According to McKinney and Carlin, (2004), televised election debates can thus be considered the "*focal point*" of election campaigns in democratic societies.

Relatively, Nigerian democracy is a brain child of media-oriented struggle from the beginning of the demand for independent to the present time. The center for the active participation of the mass media in the evolution and sustenance of Nigerian democracy did not start with the use of digital media networks. It had started with the first ever Nigerian newspaper called Iwe Irohin established by Rv. Townsend in 1859 (Santas, and Ogoshi, 2016). The existence of this newspaper gave birth to all other patriotic and nationalist newspapers that joined the demand for self-determination for Nigeria till the attainment of independent in 1960.

Significantly, the mass media did not cease to perform its functions in the sustenance of the country's democracy after independent. It could be recalled that the media landscape in the country was never favourable to media organizations and practicing journalists after independence following the level of oppression and repression against them by the government in power especially the military government that took over the country at different points in time. Responding to the doggedness of the media in intensifying effort to sustain democracy in Nigeria, Santas and Ogoshi, (2016) argue that despite the truncations of democracy by various military juntas, the mass media were not deterred in carrying out their responsibility of mobilizing the people to seek for the return of democracy in the country. It was the determination and resilience exhibited by the Nigerian mass media that eventually brought about the positive result in May 29th 1999 when the country again returned to democratic rule after a prolong period of military dictatorship.

From all indications, the power of the mass media in the achievement of self-government for Nigeria and the fight for the return to democracy shows the determination of the media to sustain democracy in the country. this has been intensified by the advent of the digital media technology which has liberated the media space around the world by given everybody the right to communicate to the masses at will. The digital media environment is dynamic and has continued to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated, ways that have serious consequences for democratic governance and politics (Owen, 2018). Significantly, digital media have radically altered the way

that government institutions operate, the way that political leaders communicate, the manner in which elections are contested, and citizen engagement. Unarguably, both the fight for independent and the return to democracy in 1999 were made possible through the use of the mass media. Currently, the digital media landscape has been a means of holding the government accountable to the masses by the masses themselves. Supporting the views expressed in Owen, (2018), Ikegbunam, (2022) argued that the digital media space has changed the ways and manners in which we communicate and disseminate both private and public needed information in virtually all aspect of human life.

More than a decade ago, the digital media landscape has dramatically changed the world. For instance, it has changed the interpersonal interaction, communication patterns, social and political discussions. A communication platform such as digital media landscape is persuasive, and often works towards changing or influencing opinions when it comes to political views because of the abundance of diverse ideas, thoughts, and opinions circulating through the digital media platform, since every user is a content creator (Stroud, 2011). To this effect, Media and communication scholars, have conducted hundreds of studies on various aspects of social media usage (Golan, Arceneaux and Soule, 2019). Considering the fact that the internet is playing significant roles in providing information to the public on all kinds of events in the society, engaging its users to get involved in offline political activities through digital broadcasting of political events can be very productive in enthroning a lasting democratic culture in the state.

Bringing Anambra state gubernatorial debate to the digital media exposed the people to the ambitions of the frontline contestants for an informed voting decision which is one of the basic determinants of democracy in every state. This was captured more succinctly in Center for Democracy and Governance (1999) where it was made clear that access to information remains essential to a healthy democracy for at least two reasons. First, access to information according to the source ensures that citizens make responsible and well-informed choices from all available options rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Secondly, access to information serves as a means of check and balances because it exposes the people directly to the views, aspirations and wills of the elected representatives which they are expected to uphold on their oaths of office in order to execute the wishes of those who elected them. The internet has become vital for political discussions and political participation.

Previously, the internet served as a one-way communication means through which political parties inform the public about their activities through their websites. Today, the application of digital broadcasting in the communication sector has encouraged a two-way communication and immediate feedback from the media audience. This is what the debate afforded the people of Anambra state. Feedback mechanism also is a means of understanding the audience of the media. Through the use of the digital media, audience who are not tuned to the debate were able to watch them through streaming and other peoples' post regarding the incidents. On the positive side, the digital media have vastly increased the potential for political information to reach even the most

disinterested citizens (Owen, 2018). Importantly, digital media broadcasting debate may exert a direct or indirect influence on the electorate. This can be possible only when the citizens are actually exposed to the debate. Moreover, elections debates conducted through the media can equally exert indirect influence insofar as citizens read or hear about them or watch them afterwards (Scheufele, Schünemann and Brosius, 2005).

Considering the function of the media in the fight for democracy and its sustenance in Nigeria over the years, it becomes pertinent to look at the contribution of the gubernatorial debate conducted through the digital media space on the audience understanding, acceptance of candidate and views about Anambra democracy. It could be recalled that several media scholars have at one point in time or the other conducted studies on the state of democracy and the media but little or nothing have been done in the area of the use of digital broadcasting network to advance the course of democracy in Anambra state. It was against this background that this study is set to examine the influence of the application of the digital media in the conduct of the 2021 Anambra gubernatorial debate in enhancing democracy in the state.

### **Statement of problem**

Relying on literature on the duties of the mass media in the sustenance of democracy, it has been found that democracy cannot be possible without active media participation in the activities of the political parties and their candidates. Media debates have been the base of American democracy since inception. It has its advantages of making the masses understand the views of the candidates for an informed voting decision among the electorate. The implication of this is that public election debate is necessary for democracy to thrive in a society. Usually, the mainstream media does not guarantee a replay of this debate to show what various candidates promised the citizens once the election is won and lost. This makes the digital media use for such ventures more productive. The use of digital broadcast media technology does not only make the people aware of the policies and manifestoes of the candidates but also serve as a means of reminding the candidates in future of their promises to the people. Digital broadcast media debate conducted in the 2021 election can be replayed by any electorate at any point in time after the election. This can enhance accountability given that replaying such contents will provide the people and the candidates with the clear picture of what were said and the mood and tone in which it they were said. Although previous studies have documented the role of the media in democratic consolidation and sustenance, little or nothing has been done on the influence of the use of digital broadcasting technology in deepening democracy through debate among the candidates. Significantly, what the audience think about the use of this digital broadcasting technology in the conduct of such an all-important debate among the candidates seeking to be elected into the leadership seat of the state have not been documented in terms of research. It was against this background that this study is set to examine the influence of digital technology in enhancing decent democratic culture in the political landscape of Anambra state.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions are posed to serve as a guide to the research objectives stated above.

1. What is the respondents' degree of exposure to the 2021 Anambra gubernatorial debate in state?
2. Does exposure to electoral debates change viewers' already-existing voting intention?
3. Does viewing of elections debates influence candidates' evaluation among viewers?
4. Does respondents' exposure to this debate influenced their choice of candidate in the election?
5. What is the respondents' perception of the use of digital broadcasting media in the conduct of the debate in the state ahead of the governorship election?

### **Significant of the study**

Media studies on the sustenance of democracy have been very rampant among researchers. This study serves as an addendum to the existing studies with special attention to the use of digital media in advancing democracy in Anambra state. The study will also encourage media practitioners to see the advantages of the use of digital broadcasting technology in advancing democratic culture from the reaction of the respondents to this survey. It encouraging understanding of the value of the use of the digital media in recalling the attention of elected representatives to the promises made to the teeming population of electorates whose exposure to the debate gave opportunity to make an informed decision on who to vote for. Whether the use of this technology in the dispensation is productive will serve as a means of advancing same in other states of the federation and possibly in the Nigeria political space at large. To the political parties this study this study will encourage their choice of candidate who can stand before the people to identify the problems of the state at a particular point in time and advance a means of solving the problem for the people. This study will expose readers to the views expressed by the respondents in respect to the target of the debate in the state.

### **Scope of the study**

This study is designed to cover Anambra electorate from Awka metropolis who are exposed to the 2021 governorship debates featuring the major candidates of the main contending political parties in Anambra. The study covers online digital space explorers in the target population who must have been exposed to the debates most significantly at their leisure time. The study is based on the reactions of those who watched the debate and their perception of the debate and pattern of presentation of issues by the candidates. Respondents beyond Awka metropolis are not covered in this study and resident of the area who are not internet explorers are also not covered. Again, the study targets at respondents between 22 years to 48 years who watched the debate and as well casted their votes during the election. The choice of this population is based on the fact that these population forms the majority of the electorate in the state and are most likely to be ICT compliant and internet savvy enough to make use of the opportunity of digital broadcast media in seeking and making sense of political information.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Democratic participant theory**

This is one of the normative theories of the media effect. The theory came into existence as a result of the discontentment with the libertarian media theory or free press and the social responsibility theory. Such discontentment arose because of the failure of these two theories to achieve the required social benefit anticipated for them. According to Uzochukwu and Ekwugha, (2014) both the social responsibility and the libertarian theories have failed to stem the increasing tide of commercialization and monopolization of the mainstream media. In the event of mortgaged mainstream media which provides limited chances for the masses to share and receive information, democratic-participant theory encourages a radical effort to neutralize all sorts of monopoly in media gate-keeping by accommodating popular participation as represented by the diverse societal interests like students, labour, political parties, gender groups and religious bodies, among others through the advent of the new media (digital media).

The mainstay of this theory is that the decentralization and democratization of the press is to allow for easy access and popular participation (Nwabueze, 2014, p. 52). Uzochukwu and Ekwugha, (2014) see the theory as an alternative politico-media ideology that sets to democratize access to the media in challenge of the monopolistic tendencies of the powerful political and economic forces operating in the society. This means that with the theory, everybody has access to revisit what was done in the digital media space unlike what obtains in the mainstream media where the right to replay what was done in TV was exclusive preserve of the media gate keepers.

This theory, according to Bajracharya (2018) is believed to conserve and revive local cultures by promoting the right to global and local information dissemination among the people, right to express (feedback), right to use new technologies (digital technology) and freedom to local data, freedom to take part in social action, etc. In the process, it offers the idea of repeated display or replay of what has been aired at the convenient time of the digital media users. This theory makes interaction between the media and the audience possible because it has granted access to all at wish. One major aspect of the theory is that it also promotes equality and classless society.

The theory was considered more appropriate in this study because of its applicability to digital media. Democratic participant theory as the name implies looks at media use as a public activity that is never restricted to any set of people or time as the case may be. It has made the business of information dissemination extend from the big media houses to individual data and phone owner with the right to replay and display any content once the link is accessible. Significantly, this theory captures the power of the digital media to make participation possible for everyone in the society with the proliferation of the internet enabled gadgets for the peoples' use at all time. The sender and receivers of media messages are made equal partners in the communication process. Different communities, groups and organizations possessing their own media can access the debate conducted on the governorship and see what the candidates did and audience reactions to them.



### **Digital media debates and candidates' participation: Any positive reward?**

in the event that the important of campaign during elections have been acknowledged among several election communication scholars, researcher attention have been shifted to the significant of election debate in the electoral process and electoral outcome (Hillygus and Jackman, 2003). The views of the earlier media scholars (Blais and Boyer, 1996) which have concluded that broadcast election debates exert only limited influence on voters' choice of candidate have been reversed among recent researchers. In modern and emerging democracies, digital broadcasted election debates are seen as one of the most important and key components of electioneering campaigns. This was based not only on the broad viewership of such debates but also on its ability to provide the audience with information about the candidates and their positions (Benoit and Hansen, 2004).

Virtually, all media scholars are support of the view that the media and the digital media in particular, are often the main source of information for voters in this recent age of internet savvy generations (Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007; Goldberg and Ischen, 2020). In this regard, digital debates possess significant educational role of helping the citizens to make a more considered or potentially better-informed voting decision (Holbert, Benoit, Hansen and Wen, 2002; Benoit and Hansen, 2004) and at same time provide the candidates the opportunity to interact with the voters directly while presenting their manifestoes.

On the other hand, digital broadcasting election debates encourage the viewers to evaluate the candidates more or less simultaneously because such debates brought all the candidates for the elective position on a screen on the same topics and issues which touches the citizens of the country or state as the case may be. This enables the viewer to immediately compare opinion statements, and much more easily compared to other campaign events that focus on one party or candidate only (Benoit and Hansen, 2004; Goldberg and Ischen, 2020). While these debates are considered sensitively beneficial for voters to be exposed to candidates' direct responses to their needs, it also helps the voters to understand the temperament, knowledge, and disposition of the various candidates to challenges that the people need leadership solution to.

However, scholars like Hillygus and Jackman, (2003) had pointed out that election debate can exert negative influence on the masses. According the authors, while admitting that debates help the citizens when it comes to forming a voting intention. Counter-arguing which debates exposes the candidates to, makes digital broadcasting of electoral debates less influential since effects are equaled out. The authors in this research are set to found whether the above view expressed in Hillygus and Jackman, (2003) will surface in the peoples' perception of the debate using Anambra 2021 gubernatorial debate as a focus.

Sequel to the first ever televised election debate between Nixon and Kennedy, two US presidential candidate in 1960, research on TV electoral debates and their influence on voters' have predominantly been conducted in the United States (Klyukovski and Benoit, 2006; Pattie and

Johnston, 2011). Following the introduction of TV debates and their growing importance in other countries, today, a growing body of research also examines TV election debates outside the US (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, Nevitte, 2003; Scheufele *et al.*, 2005; Maier *et al.*, 2014; Van der Meer, Walter and Aelst, (2016). These studies pay attentions to various aspects of digital broadcast election debates that may matter for the voting-eligible citizens.

Significantly, the literature on election debate studies has shown that none was based in Nigeria at large and Anambra state in particular. The reason for this may not far from the fact that elections debates in Nigeria has not been seen among candidates and electorate as important part of the electoral processes. This accounts for why many candidates who abscond from such elections yet win elections in the country. in this regard, this study is very apt now in the state ahead of the presidential election in Nigeria.

#### **Examining the influence of Election debate on the electorate's choice of candidate**

According the previous studies (Sigelman and Sigelman, 1984; Katz and Feldman, 1962) conducted in US as cited in Goldberg and Ischen, 2020), watching election debates can influence vote preferences among voters. This finding could be different from the current study's own because of the age of the democracy in US and Nigeria and the economic disposition of the citizens the two countries. Earlier studies also confirmed that election debates have enormous power to influence the viewers but not to the extent of changing existing vote intentions or candidate acceptance (Sigelman and Sigelman, 1984; Katz and Feldman, 1962). According to Pattie and Johnston (2011), contrary to this long-prevailing view of limited effects of digital broadcasting election debates on voters' change of candidates, a growing number of studies found evidence for a significant influence of digital broadcasting campaign events such as election debate on voters. A typical digital broadcast election debates in the US, with its bipartisan system and respective presidential candidates, is highly focused on a debate winner and loser, possibly due to the easier identification of each with only two major candidates debating (Anstead, 2016). This is not same in Africa and Nigeria with her multiple political parties. German scholars have found that that broadcast media election debate participation can be beneficial for both the debaters and the citizens. Instead of a zero-sum game, as in US presidential elections, candidates can leave a positive impression irrespective of whether they are the overall winner of the debate (Bachl, 2013; Maier and Faas, 2003; Maier *et al.*, 2014; Maurer and Reinemann, 2003). In comparison, Maier and Faas (2011b) concluded that broadcast media debates in Germany are more persuasive than those in the US. The persuasiveness of debates conducted during election can best be understood from this study.

It is important here to state that debates work more on viewers with less attachment to a candidate or political party in an election. This was captured in the views of Maier and Faas, (2011b, p. 77) where it was argued that while the strongest influences can be identified for undecided voters or voters without party attachment, political party electoral debate hardly works among viewers who are closely attached to a party or its candidate.



Moreover, experimental and panel studies have demonstrated that about one third of debate viewers change their vote preferences in response to the debate (Maier, 2007; Maier and Faas, 2011a; Hofrichter, 2004; Maier *et al.*, 2014). The direct influence of watching an electoral debate can be seen from two perspectives. One is that given the fact that not all candidates invited in the debate participate in the exercise, an overwhelming majority of the spectators develop some kind of likeness on the ones that participated. Again, drawing from the fact that in Nigeria, not all the political party candidates are invited, the most popular parties and candidates in an election invited are mostly expected to participate. In this regard, refusal to participate in an electoral debate may have severe consequences on a candidate who decided not to participate. This was captured more succinctly in Blais *et al.* (2003) who argued that declining a debate can be seen among the electorate as avoiding one of the “most democratic exercise(s) in a campaign.

Drawing from the facts as established among scholars above, the first crucial factor for citizens’ voting decisions is a candidate’s presence in a debate, and even more so if the candidate has *not* refused to participate. Secondly, the candidate’s performance in the debate also is given attention to by the viewers. Scholars such as Maier *et al.* (2014) argue that it is not the sheer exposure to the debate, but the performance of the candidates and the viewers’ evaluation of it that mainly influence the voting decision at the poll. An example can be taken from the 2010 British election context where Pattie and Johnston (2011) found that debate performance influences citizens’ feelings and attitudes towards party leaders as well as towards the parties themselves, even when controlling for partisanship and pre-election vote intentions.

Despite the strong impact of pre-existing voting preferences, the authors further show that debate performance also has the potential to change voting intentions (Goldberg and Ischen, 2020). Relatedly, based on each candidate’s performance, debate viewers may also identify a winner or loser of the debate. Unfortunately, this cannot be easier in the Nigerian case because of the multiplicity of the candidates. Studies have shown that the perception that a candidate is a debate winner can directly increase the probability of voting for that candidate by up to 30 to 40 percentage points (Maier and Faas, 2011a; Maier *et al.*, 2014).

Indirectly, the individuals in the voting process are controlled by their differences. According to contagion theories, individuals participate in various communication networks (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2016). As part of these networks, citizens experience election campaigns through interpersonal conversations as well as discussions in different media channels (Monge and Contractor, 2003; Van der Meer *et al.*, 2016). The debate’s impact can therefore be indirect, as individuals are influenced by what they hear in the media or from friends and acquaintances about it, and irrespective of whether they watched the debate (Blais and Boyer, 1996). This is where the use of digital technology in displaying the debate comes into play. Here, every individual who watched the debate life can share same and allow the people to comment. It is not news that comments about a candidate’s performance made by social media influencers make some impacts on the masses who are exposed to such comments. This was corroborated by Drew and Weaver (2006)

when they pointed out that besides attention to televised debates, attention to the news is an important correlate of voters learning about candidates' issue positions and voter interest in the campaign. In this current study, digital media use encourages the chances of repeated exposure to the debate since all interested viewers can stream direct and share after the debate making it available to all that can use the internet.

For the German case, several scholars show that debate effects strongly depend on contextual factors, among others on the follow-up media coverage (Maier, 2007; Maier *et al.*, 2014; Wiegand and Wagner, 2016). Maier *et al.* (2014) argue that besides the immediate direct perceptions of the candidates, the media interpretation, and first and foremost who is presented as the winner of the debate, can influence the citizens in the formation of their voting decision (Fridkin Kenney, Gershon, and Serignese Woodall 2008; Tsfati, 2003). Which candidate counts as 'the debate winner' is determined partly by the viewers' first-hand perceptions while watching the debate, and partly by the subsequent media coverage (Tsfati, 2003) mainly supported a repeated broadcast of the debate. Significantly, the interpretation of who is the wins or who loses in a debate naturally vary strongly between a viewer's subjective impression during the debate and the media interpretation afterwards the candidates (Goldberg and Ischen, 2020) the import of this is that election debate influences the viewers both directly and indirectly. While the direct effect is exerted during the first broadcast of the debate, the indirect effect of the debate occurs as a result of the rebroadcasting of the debate which are usually accompanied by media interpretation where the candidates' points and reactions to the issues under review are substantially explained.

Apart from these previous findings, research on the influence of digital media enhanced election debate is still relatively scarce in Nigeria. The impact of this is that what the debate do with the people of Nigeria is dependent upon the institutional background of the electoral system in the country. According to Anstead (2016, p. 520), televised debates "*reflect the institutional logic*" of a political system, meaning that environmental factors shape the development of TV debates in each respective country. The Nigerian context provides an interesting angle from which to re-examine the influence of digital broadcast televised electoral debates and its related media coverage on the viewers voting decision making using the 2021 Anambra state gubernatorial debate.

### **Empirical review**

In a study on the use of ICT enabled gadgets in the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria, Ikegbunam and Odishika, (2022), evaluated Voters' Perception of Smart-card technology use in 2019 General Election with the target of ascertaining if the application of the device in the election discouraged earlier challenges of multiple voting, over voting and made the election credible. The survey research method was used with a sample size of 400 respondents selected from two local government areas of Ayamelum and Dunukofia. The study was based on the uses and gratifications and technological acceptance theories of mass communication. Findings demonstrated that the smart-card reader technology is a total failure considering the fact that it could neither stop multiple

voting, over voting nor make the election credible in the views of the electorates. With this finding, there was total negative perception of the election among the electorates. The researchers therefore, recommended that INEC should affect the corrections on all errors observed to have marred the use the technology and religiously improve on it for better elections in future.

This study is related to the current one in the sense that both of them center on the application of internet enabled media in advancing democracy in Nigeria. Significantly, while this current study is more concerned with the advancement of democracy through the use of digital broadcasting technology, the previous one is focused on the use of ICT in controlling electoral malpractice.

While acknowledging the significant role of elections debate in the success of a political party and its candidates, Goldberg and Ischen, (2020) analyzed whether and to what extent a candidate's participation in a debate, their performance in the debate or the related media coverage influence the electorate when examined simultaneously. This study established that elections debates exert direct and indirect influence on voting behaviour of the citizens. The study which was premised on literature of previous studies pays attention to leading candidates' participation in election and the influence of such debates on viewers who are exposed to them directly and that of those who get the message from their peers or relatives. The implication of this study is that the researchers admitted that election debates influence voting behaviours of the people. The study finally concluded that declining to participate in an election debate decreases support base of a candidate and recommended that efforts should be made by parties and their candidates not to decline election debates when invited. The two studies are related in consideration of media effect using televised media debates in an election. However, the areas of study are not same and the media target. While the previous study is based on TV debates, the current study is considering the digital technology used in the debate that provides all citizens the opportunity to have direct exposure to the debate at wish. Similarly, while the previous study is based on literature, the current one is based on survey where the vies of the voters are being examined.

Santas and Ogoshi, (2016) examined the role of the media in the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria with special focus on the newspapers. Using the content analysis research method, the study acknowledged that agenda setting role of the press and its contribution to democracy through their critics of the military junta that took over for decades. The study however concluded that despite Nigerian media great performance in promoting democracy, they are faced with different challenges. It was recommended that for Nigerian media to serve as instrument for stabilizing democracy, they need to ensure that they live up to the ideals of the profession and deal with all cases of unethical practices among its members. Significantly, this study just like the current underscores the media and political development in Nigeria. While the previous study under review looked at the effort of the newspapers in the sustenance of democracy, the present study is interested in the use of the digital media in the education of the voters through election debate for a better-informed voter decision making.

Similarly, Benoit, Hansen, and Verser, (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of cumulative effect of US presidential debate on the audience. The study intends to understand the perception of the candidates after the debate and the audience voting decision after their exposure to the debate. The study which was anchored on media effect theories and based on survey of the audience revealed that election campaign debates increase issue knowledge and issue salience, educate the audience about the candidates and finally enhance change preference for candidates based on their knowledge of issues rising from the debate. It was concluded therefore that election debate has an agenda-setting influence on those watching it in modern democracies and that election debates can alter perceptions of the candidates' personality which can induce voting action depending on the direction of the perception. Considering the important of debate to both the candidate in an election and the voters in the state as found in the study, the researchers recommended election debate should be made a sine-qua-non in every democracy. This study is closely related to this current one in the sense that they are concerned with the influence of election debates. Moreover, while the previous study was premised on foreign nations, this current study is concerned with Anambra state of Nigeria which is a different democratic setting with a different economic mindset.

In another study responding to a call on election debate among nations, McKinney and Warner, (2013) explores the trans-campaign effects of election debates on the electorate's voting behavior, image formation, and attitude change. The literature study which was based on experiences from election debate effects from 2000 to 2012 provides a number of important insights into how presidential campaign debates function in different campaign contexts. To achieve the research objectives, the researchers examined election debate effects across multiple campaign periods, while analyzing observed effects of the presidential election cycles and debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. To provide for a none behaviour induced decision, the researchers paid rapt attention to 2004 and 2012 where incumbents are seeking reelection as well as "open" races with no incumbent presidential candidate engaged in general election debates. The analysis allows for comparative assessments of both Democrat and Republican primary and general election debates, as well as vice presidential debates. The study found that debate increases a candidate's chance of success in an election. This study is related to the current one pointing out that election debate is an integral part of the election. Whether election debate is valued among Nigerians and whether it has influence on the voting decision of the voters is yet to be ascertained in Anambra state of Nigeria. Drawing from the above study, it is imperative to examine the influence of the 2021 election debate on the electorates in the state.

Moreover, Marcus, (2012) examined if campaign events can encourage positive candidate preferences or candidate knowledge and acceptance in among voters. Using survey research method, the researcher found that respondents do not accurately report their exposure to even the most salient campaign events. It was concluded that without valid measures of who was exposed to a campaign event, research cannot establish the causal impact of the event. It recommended that independent technical method which track respondents' exposure automatically to any debate of

interest should be devised to encourage debate effect researches. While acknowledging the fact that this study is related to the current one, it is important to state that they are not moving towards toward the same direction. While this study is centered on the influence of the debates on viewer, the previous one is interested on the means of getting those who are actually exposed to the target debate to encourage research in the influence of debate.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The method adopted in this study was survey. The researcher deemed fit in examining the influence of digital broadcasting election debate on audience voting behaviour in the 2021 Anambra election. The choice of this method was informed by the fact that it makes the researchers contact the audience and obtain their views on the subject matter of enquiry. The population of the target area of study which is Awka metropolis is 361,657 (Nigeria Population Commission, 2006). This population was projected to 2022 using the projected population index formular to 512,106. A sample of 400 respondents were selected from the above population figure using the Taro Yarmani's sample determination formular. The data were collected using a questionnaire designed and distributed to the respondents by the researcher. The reliability and validity of the instrument were assured through test re-test method and data were analysed using the frequency tables and simple percentages.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 400 copies of the research questionnaire were distributed among 400 respondents sampled for this study. At the collection time, a total of 327 copies representing 81.75% were returned and found valid for the study whereas the remaining 73 copies representing 18.25% were not recovered from the respondents. This means that the analysis was based on this 327 (82%).

**Table 1: Respondents' degree of exposure to the 2021 Anambra gubernatorial debate in state**

<b>Response category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Fully exposed	111	33.9%
Moderately exposed	96	29.3%
Partially exposed	68	20.7%
Narrowly exposed	52	15.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>100</b>

Drawing from the information displayed in the table, an overwhelming majority of the respondents admitted that they are just *fully exposed* to the debate. This means that the joined the debate before the debate started while those saying moderately joined the debate when it has started but has not gone too deep to the extent that they cannot understand the presentation again. Those who admitted that they are fully exposed to the debate are those who watched the debate and have access to it again over and over again. These are the people who watched it from the beginning to the end. Those who accepted being partially exposed saw the debate but have lost some of the presentations because of late connection to the link. Finally, those partially exposed met the debate but have lost



a reasonable time in the presentation that they may not make meaning in the contest. The implication of this is that not all the viewers who watched the debate joined the debate at the same time. Possibly, the influence that the debate has can possibly be measured by the number of hours or minutes that the debate lasted in the views of the onlookers and presentations seen by the various set of viewers. This means that political awareness and participation is gradually rising among the people of Anambra state. It also showcases the important of the debate and the popularity it commands among the respondents.

**Table 2: Exposure to electoral debates change viewers' already-existing voting intention**

Variables	SA	A	UN	DA	SD	Total	X	Rmks
Some viewers' voting decision changed after watching this debate	125	103	70	8	21	327	3.9	Accepted
	625	412	210	16	21	1284		
All the viewers' voting decision remains as it was before even after watching the debate	67	56	100	23	81	966	2.9	Rejected
	335	224	300	26	81			
Exposure to this debate partially shifted viewers' earlier voting decision taken before the election	38	87	125	34	43	1016	3.1	Accepted
	190	348	375	68	43			
Exposure to elections debates encourages candidates' evaluation among viewers/electorates	118	92	54	42	21	1225	3.7	Accepted
	590	368	162	84	21			

The five-point Likert scale above revealed the respondents' response to the three hypothetical statements posed to draw the respondents views on the debate under study. Drawing from the information displayed in the table, the hypothetical statement that '*Some viewers' voting decision changed after watching this debate*' and '*Exposure to this debate partially shifted viewers' earlier voting decision taken before the election*' were accepted at the mean score of 3.9 and 3.1 respectively while the second hypothetical statement that '*All the viewers' voting decision remains as it was before, even after watching the debate*' was rejected at a mean score of 2.9. The last hypothetical statement that '*Exposure elections debates encourages candidates' evaluation among viewers/electorates*' was equally accepted at 3.7 mean score. Based on the above data, digital broadcasting technology is gradually reshaping the Nigerian political terrain through permeating the public and rendering some shocking services that encourages democratic development of the society. The implication of this is that the election debate is worth watching for the electorates and worth participating to the candidates. The above conclusion was drawn from the fact that is important to both the voters and the candidates.



**Table 3: Viewing of elections debates encourages candidates' evaluation among viewers**

<b>Response category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	184	56.2%
No	87	26.6%
Undecided	56	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

Drawing from the information displayed in the table, an overwhelming majority of the respondents admitted that viewing election debate encouraged electorate's evaluation of the candidates running elections. This data revealed that irrespective of the time the viewer joined the debate, the exercise is an avenue for the voters to evaluate and know the views of the candidates about the issues on ground affecting the lives of the citizens in the state. This data supported the response obtained in the fourth hypothetical statement presented above where it was accepted that '*Exposure to elections debates encourages candidates' evaluation among viewers/electorates*' at 3.7 mean score. The implication of this is that a candidate in an election debate should be prepared and careful in presentation of his facts because supporters are gained and lost during the exercise since any result of the electorates' evaluation can alter previous voting decision as could be seen in the data in the Likert scale table.

**Table 4: Whether respondents' exposure to this debate influenced their choice of candidate in the election.**

<b>Response category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Greatly influenced choice of candidate	107	32.7%
Partially influenced choice of candidate	113	34.5%
Never influenced choice of any candidate	107	32.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

The information displayed in the table shows that an overwhelming majority of the respondents admitted that the election debate has power to influence choice of candidates among the citizens. The implication of this data is that some people are bought and lost as a result of exposure to broadcast media election debate.

**Table 5: Respondents' perception of the use of digital broadcasting media in the conduct of the debate in the state ahead of the governorship election**

<b>Response category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very informative and interactive	85	25.9%
Not important to the success of a candidate	65	19.8%
Very necessary to help the people vote properly	115	35.1%
Debate or no debate, party is supreme among its members	56	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

The information above demonstrated that the election debate of the 20201 Anambra gubernatorial election massively enjoyed positive perception among the respondents. Although about 37% of the respondents shared rather negative view of the impact of the debate on the success of the candidates, majority of the respondents believed that the election debate is very important especially to the electorates whose mistake in vote casting can be made to regret for years. The implication of this is that the election debate is important to the people and the contestants who values the people and their challenges.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

On the first research question trying to ascertain the level of exposure to the debate, it was discovered that the respondents have different degrees of exposure to the debate. While some are fully exposed, others are partially exposed. Significantly, the majority of the respondents are fully and moderately exposed to the debate. The above finding demonstrated the popularity of the debate on one side and the important the respondents attached to it on the other. Importantly, this data revealed the level of growth of political awareness among the citizens of the state. The rate of exposure recorded in the data above is a demonstration of the universality of the internet and its permeation ability. This is in line with the position of the proponents of democratic participant theory of the media which in the words of earlier media scholars like Nwabueze, (2014, p. 52). Uzochukwu and Ekwugha, (2014) had encouraged the decentralization of the media that brought about democratization to the access to media and its contents around the world through the internet.

Data on the second research question posed to ascertain whether exposure to debate influence respondents voting decision revealed that election debate influence the minds of the people helping them to make a change based on the presentation of the participants in the debate. This finding agrees with previous studies such as Sigelman and Sigelman, (1984); Katz and Feldman, (1962) which have concluded that watching election debates can influence vote preferences among voters. Generally, while listening to the contestants on the screen, people can make decisions following some presentation of ideas and facts that are coming out of the candidates on the challenges of the people which their various governments are likely to tackle head on once elected. This finding corroborated that of Goldberg and Ischen, (2020) who concluded that debates exert direct and indirect influence on voting behaviour of the citizens. The above finding is not far from the fact

that politics is based on rhetoric where the candidate with the rhetorical ability secures the peoples support. The finding is in tandem with that of McKinney and Warner (2013) where the researchers found that election debates increase a candidate's chance of success in an election.

On the third research question posed to ascertain whether exposure to election debate encourage evaluation of the electoral candidates, the data from the fourth hypothetical statement in the Likert table and the table below revealed that election debate is an ample opportunity for the electorates to examine the candidates and know their level of understanding of the political environment and the challenge facing the people in the state. The electorates evaluate the candidates. It is important because the candidates' demonstration of knowledge of the peoples' challenges is the basic means of gaining or losing their support. Studies like Goldberg and Ischen, (2020) had concluded that declining to participate in an election debate decreases support base of a candidate standing to be elected into a public office. Therefore, it implies that participating in an election debate online makes a candidate more endearing to the masses who have the power to decide who represents them.

Considering the fourth research question set to ascertain whether, it was found that exposure to election debate among the electorates influences the exposure to election debate on digital broadcast media influence choice of candidates among the respondent, it was found that majority of the responses shows that election debate influence candidate choice among the respondents in the election. According to the data in the table, 107 respondents admitted that the 2021 election debate in Anambra '*Greatly influenced choice of candidate*' while another 107 respondents said that exposure to digital broadcasting election debate *never* influenced their choice of candidate in the just concluded Anambra state election. 34.5 percent of the respondents accounting for 113 respondents admitted that the election debate partially influenced candidates' choice among respondents. The response above is a pure reflection of true realities in political debates. While it works on some, it is bound to fail on others especially those who are deeply attached to their party or candidates but that is not enough to rule out the fact that election debate doesn't influence voting decisions of the electorates. It is important here to state that debates work more on viewers with less attachment and commitment to a candidate or political party in an election. This was captured in the views of Maier and Faas, (2011b, p. 77) where it was argued that while the strongest influences can be recorded among undecided voters or voters without party attachment, political party electoral debate hardly works among viewers who are closely attached to a party or its candidate.

This finding aligns itself with that of Benoit, Hansen, and Verser, (2014) who found that election debates enhance change preference for candidates based on their knowledge of issues rising from the debate. This simply means that the candidates' demonstration of knowledge and understanding of the issues in a country goes a long way in changing support for his camp either for or against depending on the swing of the display shown in the debate.

The research finding from the fifth research question demonstrated that the election debate of the 2021 gubernatorial election in Anambra is positively perceived by majority of the respondents as an important part of the electioneering activities in a democracy. As recorded in the table, 115 respondents accounting for 35.1 percent perceived the election debate as very necessary to help the voters in selection of candidate. This figure was followed by another 25.9% of the population who admitted that the debate is very informative and interactive. This is a total of 61% of the population. 17.1% agreed that everything is all about the political party of the candidate and nothing more while the remaining 19.8% were of the opinion that the 2021 election debate was never important for the success of the candidate. Unlike what was obtained in Ikegbunam and Odishika, (2022) where the public share negative perception of the smart card technology in the conduct of the 2019 general election in Nigeria, the respondents in this study have positive perception of the use of digital broadcasting technology in the conduct of the 2021 Anambra gubernatorial debate which makes it go viral among the people. The implication of the positive perception above is that more of what happened in Anambra should be done in other states of the federation and even the Presidential election to fix the country's political challenge once and for all.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the data generated in the study, the researcher concluded that the use of digital broadcasting technology in the conduct of the debate has encouraged the sustenance of democracy in the state. The debate has also been found to exert significant influence on the voting decision of the respondents and the evaluation of the candidates. As required provided by the democratic participant theory of the press, the study demonstrated that the use of digital broadcast technology in the dissemination of the debate has shown a gross development in political participation and democratic engagement of the citizens. It has shown the level of important attached to the election among the citizens. The findings from the study revealed that while digital broadcast media use for election debate is important to the electorates for informed voting decision making, it is also important to the candidates and the political parties as a means of gaining and losing supports. The debate which was massively viewed among the respondents influenced the peoples' voting decision and changed the choice of candidates among some of the respondents. In this regard, it was concluded that election debate is an important political activity that is capable of strengthening the country's democracy and good governance as it enables the electorate to evaluate the candidates and helps them to as well put up an electronic check on them even after winning the election.

## Recommendations

According to the research findings, this study has established that election debate is a powerful instrument of gaining and losing electorates in an election. Drawing from this premise, the study recommended that:

1. The use of digital broadcast media in the conduct of Election debates should be made mandatory at all elections in Nigeria. The reason for this is to help the electorates know the candidates' ability to tackle their challenges in the society and the possible plan to handle such challenge.
2. Having been confirmed as an avenue to gain and loss electorates, candidates running election are advised to always attend political election debates since that have been confirmed as an opportunity for the people to assess and evaluate them.
3. Political debate on digital technology have been confirmed a means of remaining in the mind of the people because of its ability to play and replay over and over again. In this regard, election debate should be encouraged to help tame political apathy and strengthen our democracy.
4. Using this feature will be encouraged as it will always help the media and the electorate replay the promises made during the debate to the winners of the election should they start deviate from the previous promises that earned them the support of the masses.

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