Electoral Mapping and the Mass Media: Can Nigeria Learn from USA?

Joseph C. Udoh

Department of Geography and Regional Planning,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
joseph_udoh@yahoo.com; +2348038673326

Abstract

The mass media generally constitutes a major source of political information for citizens of any nation. As an objective source of information, maps help pass across information about regions and places which otherwise could have remained vague in the imagination of the public. As important journalistic tools, maps enhance the communication of information. Apart from providing the geographical background for news items ,they also attract and hold readers attention, help interpret the meaning of an event, and increase message retention. Where poorly designed maps are used, or a low level of map use is noticed, it means that there is a low level of map awareness both in the media and the audience in that environment. It also suggests that the media is feeding the public with wrong and inadequate information since maps deal with factual and precise information. Events like wars, natural disasters, accidents and elections provide the opportunity for news organization to show case their best way of communicating such information that attract a wide range of readership. A high level of map use has long been associated with the media in North America. The 2008 USA presidential election provided an opportunity for researchers to monitor the application of maps in electoral reporting. Researchers have long recognized the contrast between map use in North America and in Nigeria. While there is a high level of map use in the media and the public in North America, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. This study analyses the use of maps by many organizations in their portrayal of that election and suggests ways Nigeria can benefit from their experiences. In Nigeria's quest for global political relevance, there is ineed for the country's media and the public to benefit from the lessons that can be learnt from the 2008 American elections.

Keywords: *Electoral maps, Mass media, Interactive maps, Cartography, GIS.*

1. Introduction

Maps and other forms of graphics are important journalistic tools that enhance the communication of information. Despite the much time and effort required to prepare maps and the fact they occupy valuable text spaces, their continuous popularity and usage in the media can be justified . Gilmartin (1985) asserts that maps give the geographical background for news items and help readers to locate and understand the geographical implications of a story. Also, maps and other forms of graphics attract and hold reader's attention, and also help them interpret the meaning of an event and increase message retention . The use of computer software and Geographical Information System (GIS) have greatly stimulated the increase of cartographic activities in recent years. This development has enhanced map design especially as there has been vast data availability. Despite the numerous advantages that automated cartography offers, Wellar (1985) decries the lack of awareness regarding its use to illustrate factual presentations in the mass media. This situation has been attributed to the absence of skilled personnel in most media houses (Gilmartin, 1985 and Wellar, 1985). Researchers in Nigeria have also agreed with this conclusion (Onyekwelu, 1990; Olomo,1988, and, Udoh,2010).

The internet has revolutionalised GIS which until recently was a specialized tool for scientists and related practitioners. The combination of GIS and the World Wide Web (WWW) have changed cartography making it possible for detailed maps to be generated from robust databases of spatial information that can be transmitted rapidly around the world (Harder,1998). One of the areas that has attracted interest in the Internet is application of GIS in mapping the electoral process. Mapping and spatial analysis improve the electoral process hence GIS is used to deliver critical information to stakeholders. Application areas include managing voter address data, locating polling stations and delivering election results . Some of the maps are not only conventional static maps used to display electoral information, they are also interactive hence attracting voter/ user participation. Ko (2010) analyzed the strength of interactive electoral maps and stressed that media websites including television and newspaper websites used them to display and tract the election results. Also, because of its dynamic nature they can equally be used for projecting outcomes based on displayed census figures.

2. Motivation and Aim of the Study

On November 4, 2008; the United States of America (USA) held a general election which saw Senator Barrack Obama, the Democratic candidate winning the Presidential election over Senator John McCain his Democratic counterpart. A noticeable aspect of this election, was the use of maps by media organizations in the whole electoral process. The real winners of the elections asserts an Internet media commentator (URL1) were the cartographers representing the various media organization in churning out various types of electoral maps. A casual search of the subject in the internet reveals this fact. In the first quarter of 2011, Nigeria conducted its own series of elections in which the President and our public office holders were elected. Over the years elections in Nigeria have often been contentious and controversial hence the current desire among Nigerian for the National Electoral Commission to conduct a free, fair and generally acceptable election this time around. The media were expected to play a major in the 2011 electoral dispensation. This study aimed at investigating the types and characteristics of maps by selected media websites in their coverage of the 2008 elections in USA. The paper then went on to highlight the lessons to be learnt, plus the steps to be taken by the Nigerian media in order to improve the state of electoral reporting in the country.

3. Methodology and Data Presentation

Conventional to a study of this nature, the procedure used involved visiting the relevant internet websites containing maps of the subject under consideration (Uluocha, 2002). Data for this study were collected from the internet from June7, 2010 to September 30, 2010. Google was the search engine used. This period was chosen to enable one make a comparative analysis between the American and Nigerian media organization particularly as it marked the period was preparing for the 2011 general elections. Over 3.38 million web pages were located dealing with "electoral maps 2008". With these as the starting point , the main challenge at this stage was the methods of selecting and categorizing the maps. However various internet commentators (e.g. URL 1) made references to outstanding maps of the 2008 election and the media organizations involved. These include Cable News Network's Electronic Maps; Christian Science Monitor's Patchwork Nation; Google Maps; Washington Post maps; and, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the National Public Radio (NPR)/News Hour maps. The maps of only the last two organizations were selected and analyzed for the study as they met the set criteria. These include: easy accessibility to internet users; interactive (not static) display of the output; and the ability to reach audiences apart from the internet users through associated conventional mass media (Television, Radio, and Print). Below are the results of the analysis of the maps of the internet sites studied. During the period of the study the websites of Nigeria's major national newspapers (The Sun, ThisDay, The Guardian and the nation), were equally monitored.

4. Research Findings/Result

The research findings and results are presented in this section based on the news organizations investigated.

4.1 PBS News Hour (URL 2 and 3)

The lead story of the PBS News Hour 2008 Election website (URL 2) of 5th November 2008 carries a story of the electoral victory of Senator Obama. The page has a link (see Fig. 1) that enables a reader click open in order to see the electoral map displayed in Figs. 2- 7. The main map has a bar that helps one view results of the four electoral offices contested for : President, Senate, House; Governor. Fig. 2 shows the results of the Presidential race in the 51 States with the traditional Blue and Red for the two major political parties. The electoral votes are also shown using bars.

Fig 1: PBS Newshour Webpage with Electoral map link (shown with an arrow)

Source: URL 2

Fig 2: PBS Newshour US President Election Map

Source: URL3

Fig 3: PBS Newshour US President Election Map with Texas highlighted

Source: URL 3

All the maps are hot linked to a data base hence clicking any state opens a display of the detailed votes for the candidates. Fig. 3 shows the state of Texas having 56% for McCain and Obama with 44%. Fig. 4 shows the results for the Senate; Fig. 5 for the House; and Fig. 6 and 7 for the Governorship race.

Fig 4: PBS Newshour US Senate Election Map

Source: URL 3

Fig 5: PBS Newshour US House Election Map

Source: URL 3

Fig 6: PBS Newshour US Governorship Election Map

Source: URL 3

Fig 7: PBS Newshour US Governorship Election Map with Texas highlighted

Source: URL 3

4.2 Washington Post Election Contest Maps (URL 4)

For many months before the actual November 4, 2010 election day, the Washington Post website ran a competition that encouraged the public to predict the electoral outcome. This was done by having an interactive map (Fig. 8) to which the audience were invited to name the eventual winner. The result of the input from the public were used to produce an Election Contest map (Fig. 9) before the actual election. A comparison of the predicted and the actual outcome already analyzed (Fig.2) shows a very close similarity. The impact of this on the public confidence on the electoral process cannot be overemphasized.

Fig 8: Washington Post Election contest map

Source: URL 4

Fig 9: Washington Post Election contest final map

Source: URL 5

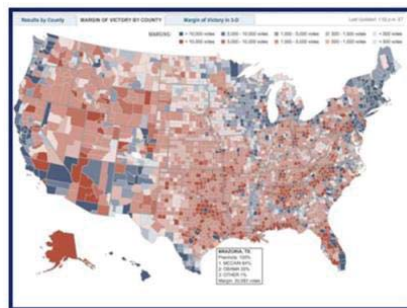**Fig 10:** Washington Post Election Result Map by County

Source: URL 5

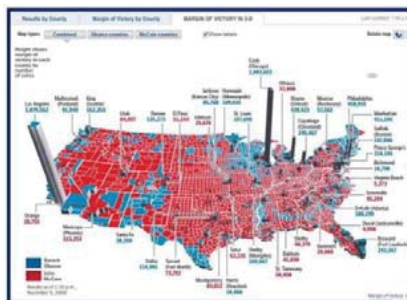*4.3 Washington Post results by counties (URL 6)*

Fig. 10 – 15 show the Presidential election results by Washington Post. As compared to Fig. 2 which was by States, Fig. 10 is displayed by Counties; the Nigerian equivalent of an electoral wards. This enables the maps to be displayed with greater details. There are 3,140 in USA hence the country has an average of 60 counties per state and an average county poplation of 100,000 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_(United_States)). Pointing a cursor over any county gives one details of the percentage distribution of the votes for the two candidates. Fig. 11 displays the margin of victory for each candidate by county. While Fig. 12 - 15 show the margin of victory in 3D. The 3D maps also allows for the rotation of the maps to a desired position. Geneally, all the maps allow one add or remove the labels.

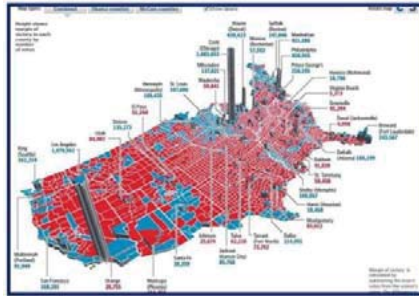**Fig 11:** Washington Post Margin of Victory by County Map

Source: URL 6

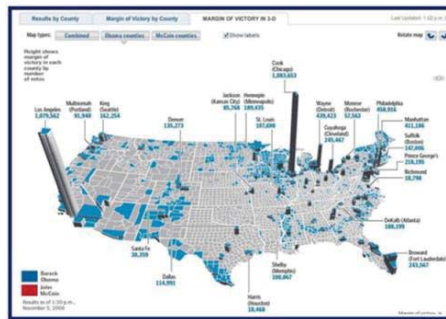**Fig 12:** Washington Post Margin of Victory Map in 3D

Source: URL 6

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Fig 13: Washington Post Margin of Victory Map in 3D (Rotated)
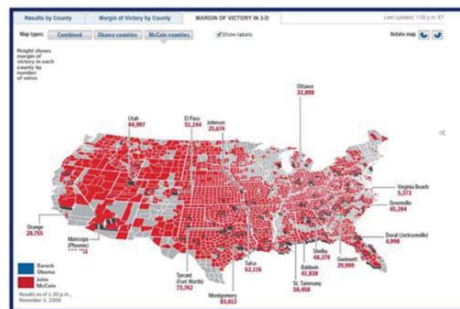

Source: URL 6

Fig 14: Washington Post Margin of Victory Map in 3D - Obama Counties

Source: URL 6

Fig 15: Washington Post Margin of Victory Map in 3D – McCain Counties

Source: URL 6

5. Lessons for the Nigerian Media

In the previous section the types and characteristics of maps used in displaying and predicting the 2008 USA electoral results in selected media organizations were presented. In this section, the vital lessons to be learnt by the Nigerian media are stressed. As noted earlier, a low level of map usage in the media and among the general population have long been recognized in Nigeria. This trend continued as at the period under review. Despite the fact that the country was preparing for a general election, non of the media houses monitored had interactive electoral maps on display. Indeed word search of "electoral maps Nigeria" registered no map hit among Nigerian media organizations. Despite the increasing presence of Nigerian media organizations in the internet, there has not been any noticeable change in the low

level of map usage observed over the years .

In the light of the above, there are vital lessons to be learnt from the American media from Nigerians. These center around three main issues:

- **Electoral Ward maps:** The success of electoral mapping in Nigeria will also depend on the availability of maps with the corresponding administrative boundaries properly delineated. As can be seen in the USA examples discussed in this paper (e.g. Fig. 10), the State and National election results can only be meaningful if they are based on ward level results. In Nigeria, Local Governments are subdivided into electoral wards for the purposes of election. However ward level maps are not available. It will greatly help if the government recognizes wards as an important administrative unit and maps made available. As of now, emphasis is given to the local government as an administrative unit next to the states. Stakeholders including the media must identify with the need for the provision of important datasets including boundary files in the country as an important component of socio economic transformation of the country. Although the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has a document titled detailing all the electoral wards in the country, however the wards need to be linked to their appropriate boundary files to make them useful for interactive electoral mapping. Commercial softwares exist that can easily handle this task.
- **Cartography Personnel:** The poor state of cartographic personnel in the Nigerian media organizations must be addressed to enable them meet the needs of the internet audience. Information on Washington Post website that displayed the electoral maps analyzed (URL 5) were designed by combined efforts of cartographers, multimedia and 3D experts. For the Nigerian media to compete in the information age, the right mapping personnel must be recruited and retained. With the right personel, the appropriate software and hardware configuration can easily be assembled delivered the right electoral maps.
- **Creation of Digital Data bases.** Interactive maps used for electoral mapping can only be possible if digital databases are created to link maps with their attributes. Static maps and tables showing electoral results and other attribute data as seen in the Nigerian media must be converted into a digital format so that they can be interactively linked. For an example, This Day online (http://www.thisdayonline.com/)published a map (14/9/2010) to show "how PDP delegates may vote during presidential primaries' as shown in Fig.16. This map was accompanied by a table showing the state by state likely performance of the four presidential candidates in the party's national convention. Digitizing the map would have made it possible to type in accompanying data and reflecting the same on the map without having to reproduce the whole table.

Fig. 16: This Day map

Source: URL 7

6. Conclusion

As a major source of political information, it is important that the mass media utilizes diverse methods including maps for effective communication. As shown in this paper, media organizations in Nigeria must following the global trends in employing cartographers and related personnel so as to improve their converge of political and other events.

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