

Development Communication and Governance in Nigeria: The Press for National Integration-A Functional Approach

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Abstract

In the light of the ever evolving instruments of Development Communication viz-a-viz the quest for national integration and democracy in subsaharan Africa, this paper examines the role of communication media and news sources towards sustainable governance in an emerging democracy such as Nigeria. The article however analyzes and discusses the relationship between the press and governance, and the contributions of the press that leads to governance, development and national integration in Nigeria. Agenda-setting theory guides the analysis of the relationship of the press with government as regards governance as well as the role of the press in national unity and development. The paper discusses the Nigerian media landscape in brief, looks at some news sources in Nigeria/tribal priorities, and analyzes the role of the press in Nigeria through the Agenda-setting role and development communication in the area of governance. The paper concludes that development initiatives in a pluralistic and culturally-diverse country should be holistic and realistic to facilitate the process of national integration in Nigeria.

Key words: Development communication; Functional approach; Governance; National integration; Press

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INTRODUCTION

The early phase of development communication was marked by Daniel Lerner's (1958) modernization paradigm. The basic idea is that mass media and mass communication stimulate and diffuse values and institutions that are favourable to achievement, mobility, innovation and consumption. According to modernization theory, the developed world played an important role in modernizing and facilitating economic development in the developing world. The mass media were seen as being instrumental in achieving this goal, as it was believed that media messages had a powerful impact in these underdeveloped societies. The media were seen as the mobility multipliers' (Schramm, 1964) or diffusers of innovations' (Rogers 1962, 1983, 2003). Servaes (1999) and (Melkote 1991) have noted that, this model was essentially elitist and a top-down process.

More than three decades ago, Omu (1978), emphasized that the press in Nigeria should be an effective and vibrant independent entity that could be instrumental to achieving sustainable development goals. Much of the 20th Century, news sources in Nigeria was involved in promoting political awareness, encouraging civic engagement, sensitizing citizens to national issues, and shaping public opinions on a variety of political issues. The media, nevertheless, was noted to play these roles under a controlled, confrontational, controversial atmosphere which compromised the effectiveness of news sources and made objectivity of the press difficult.

As Nigeria's development crisis continues to take a large dimension, recent studies had obviously reinforce the position of previous researchers that a robust and free press is capable of dismantling negative images and stereotypes which the country has faced over time, both at home and abroad (Bennert, 2003; McCombs and Reynolds, 2009).

The World Bank (2009) explained that early development efforts in Nigeria and other emerging

African Nation's were grossly unsuccessful and untamable largely, because of the inadequate role which the news sources were relegated to play, and which resulted in the widespread criticism of the national media as ineffective to gather and analyzed salient issues. Okoro (1993) stressed that, the establishment of government newspapers in the country, weakened the credibility and competitiveness of communication channels, demoralizing the citizens from depending on national news and information. He further noted that, government newspapers were better funded, strategically positioned, and adequately staffed to cover news and events. While in recent years, there has been a proliferation of news sources in the country which remains to be seen whether their journalistic political content, analysis of government programmes; political actions and policies will be objectively and critically explained to the citizens.

Similarly, development studies (Kothari and Cooke, 2001; Diamond, 2004) of recent years indicate that responsible and effective governance is a *sin qua non* for sustainable democracy and political stability in developing nations of Africa, especially in a country like Nigeria, where the citizens and other significant stakeholders have been clamoring for policy reforms, improved quality of life, and a more robust media presence. Entman (1989), Bennette (2003), and Gymai-Boadi (2004) explain that over the past two decades participatory democratic process has taken a dramatic turn in the emerging democracies in the wake of citizens' agitation for good governance, expanded, ethnic integration, independent and vibrant press, increased citizen participation, freedom of speech, and informed public debate.

Past and present leaders of Nigeria have consistently indicated a commitment to sustainable national and political development, and have introduced various measures to support their development objectives, social policies, and economic agenda. The World Bank (2009) report strongly indicated that the country has not been able to achieve its seemingly ambitious national development programmes because of misplaced focus on tribal and ethnic issues and politics, rather than focusing on an integrated national development that would unify the country towards a common national purpose.

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The number of indigenous newspapers increased for various reasons associated with national development and intellectual sophistication, and the press has taken on an expanded role in the country's quest for advancement and democratization. Unlike the colonial era, political agitation and respect for the dignity of the citizens are no longer the primary foci of her news sources. As the Nigerian Yearbook (1979) declared, the primary problems facing the country since the dawn of independence are two-fold; first, how to forge a virile and united country out of

conglomeration of ethnic groups in Nigeria; the second is how to develop the country's economy rapidly in order to give the masses a decent standard of living and thus satisfy their legitimate expectation in the independent Nigeria.

The Nigerian Yearbook criticized governments' ownership of newspapers as a corrector-productive initiative and development since the departure of colonialism in the country. These government newspapers compete for readership with news sources established and published by private individuals and organizations, and a number of regulations and laws are usually in place to control their content and distribution. Thompson (1988) categorized newspapers in post-independence Africa in three distinct groups:

- a. Privately-owned press by indigenous Nigerians
- b. Press owned by Political Parties and Groups,
- c. Press established and sponsored by Federal and State Governments.

SOME NEWS SOURCES IN NIGERIA AND TRIBAL PRIORITIES

The dashing arguments about the role of the Nigerian Press toward political development in several studies such as (Opubor, 1974; Omu, 1978; Okigbo, 1992; Okoro, 1993) determined that the press in the country was disseminating information and news that oftentimes triggered or perpetuated tribalism, instead of national consciousness, and providing ethnic news that engendered distrust and divided loyalty among the citizens.

Since Nigeria's independence and subsequently Civil War, the negative impact of ethnicity and tribalism seems to be eroding the nation's solidarity and the coverage of national news sources have been blamed for much of this disunity. More than three decades ago, Obotette (1984, p.5) noted that "the gigantic economic and political programmes already designed to cement Nigerian national unity are debatable as to their scope and direction. What seems indisputable to help mobilize the nation's human resources and transform the old structures of Nigerian Society into a viable, strong nation? In a critical analysis of communication and Nigeria identity, Opubor (1974) emphasized that, the integration problem in the country would remain a serious issue as long as the press and other communication channels continue to place more emphasis on ethnic interests rather than on national development agenda. The paper maintained that, to achieve ethnic integration and sustainable political governance, Nigerian news sources must henceforth focus on collaborative, integrative; and strategic communication designed to provide constructive news and information that can shape citizens' attitudes and behaviors, cultivating a culture of enemies in an environment where all citizens are able to contribute their initiative, creativity, and intellectual know-how equally.

Nigeria's political independence was halted by a series of military interventions that spanned over two decades; the country has had to deal with two frequently alternating forms of governance and leadership – military and civilian in which news sources were either marginalized or disallowed from effective participation in national debates. The role of the press under these forms of governance was different and challenging, especially regarding objective news reporting and information dissemination affecting states and tribes in the country. The military regimes controlled political activities and other institutions associated with development in the country. A practical example was when the military overthrew the civilian government in 1966, the military redefined specific statutory provision in order to control and limit scope and functions of the press in the country. Nigeria's Federal Government Official Gazette (1964-1966) noted the following restrictive provision which Cooke enforced against the news sources in the country: Defamation Act of 1961, which forbid the publication of defamatory matter. The Official Secrets Act of 1962, which made it illegal to the publish classified national information; Newspaper Amendment Act of 1964, which criminalizes the dissemination of false editorial content; and the law of sedition, which prevented expressions or statements capable of promoting hostility or disintegration among Nigerian citizens. In addition, the military regime promulgated decrees that restrained the role of news sources, making it difficult for them to contribute constructively to political and development issues in the country.

THE PRESS IN NIGERIA: AGENDA-SETTING ROLE

The agenda-setting product of the press, which (McCombs, 1981, p. 7) described as a “by-product of social integrative process,” is crucial for the development of a society and for the stimulation of intellectual consciousness, particularly in Nigeria that desperately needs the unification of various ethnic communities to work together as citizens of one nation in order to support the struggle for democratic reforms and governance. Studies conducted at different times (Graf, 1988; Diamond, 2004) pointed out that in some developing nations of the world (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), where the level of illiteracy is relatively high, agenda-setting role is urgently needed because citizens depend on the established values of news sources and sophisticated analysis of issues to guide their prioritization and decision-making. Immensely influenced by the sizeable body of literature on the theoretical and empirical significance of agenda-setting, it was considered an appropriate paradigm for evaluating and analyzing the press, its role and contributions, and its relationships with various entities in an emerging democracy in Nigeria.

The effectiveness of agenda-setting has been manifested in the ability of the press to interpret complex political and social issues, some of which are outside citizens' immediate intellectual environment or knowledge base (McCombs, 1981; McCombs and Shaw, 1984). Actually, development in Nigeria has been relatively slow and the political arena obviously overdue. The system requires a more robust involvement of news sources to provide the level of analysis and interpretation that will increase citizens' interest in electioneering campaigns, voting activities, and elections. News sources should provide voters with unbiased information about candidates and their academic and professional qualifications, campaign manifestoes, specific standing or positions on current issues and their voting records.

The World Bank Reports (1989 – 2009) pointed out that, a majority of the citizens in Sub-Sahara Africa, lack adequate knowledge to make informed decisions about political issues. In this regard, the press agenda-setting role would enhance people's knowledge and raise their level of awareness of issues associated with national and political development. The content of news sources in most African countries are based upon the ideological interest and orientation of the existing political system or the ruling elites. As a result, press agenda-setting in these developing countries is determined or set by the influential ruling class for the general public. Entman (1989) and McCombs and Reynolds (2009) concurred in their analysis that, the agenda-setting framework, underscores the significance of news sources to influence issues which audiences in media-saturated nations know about, talk about and act upon.

DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN THE FIELD OF GOVERNANCE

Communication provides the foundation for the facilitation of good governance, through promotion of effective government, accountability and the active engagement of participants in civil society. Norns and Zinnbauer (2002) argue that, independent journalism, as a potential check on the abuse of power, is a necessary but not sufficient means of strengthening good governance and promoting human development. They suggest that those goods are most effectively achieved under two conditions:

First, in societies where channels of mass communications are free and independent of established interests; and second, where there is widespread access to these media. Puddenphatt (2008, p.5) argues that the absence of state intervention on its own is no guarantee of a rich media environment on the country to promote a media environment characterized by pluralism and diversity, state intervention is necessary. To guarantee pluralism requires provision for public broadcasting, commercial broadcasting, print media and community based broadcasting. Davis (2006, pp.89-93) observes

that "it is presently difficult to measure and determine objectively media's influence within societies and specifically its relationship to governance and overall development, country to country: Davis proposes the development of the six dimensions of governance as defined by World Bank. Such an index would be capable of measuring negative as well as positive impacts of media activity, where behaviours is working against governance or even promoting conflict.

The role of the media is critical in promoting good governance through institutional monitoring. The media are critical elements on a country's institutional accountability and anticipation efforts. They have a dual role to play: the media raise public awareness about corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies; the media also investigate and report incidences of corruption. The effectiveness of the media, in turn, depends on access to information and freedom of expression (Barger and Matras, 2007).

The media prevent corruption via their monitoring activities. Investigative journalism may reveal inequities and violations by doing so reinforce social values. In an environment of free speech and free press, the media perform a watchdog function and expose social injustices wherever they occur. In an open pluralistic and developed society, the media are a particularly effective tool for exposing and preventing corruption.

CONCLUSION

This paper exposes the negative impact that ethnicity and tribalism have in the erosion of the nation's solidarity or unity and the coverage of the media have been partly blamed for the social dislocations that beset the country, Nigeria. The agenda-setting power of the press which is based on the "product of social interactive process" is crucial for the development of a society and for the stimulation of intellectual consciousness, especially in Nigeria that desperately needs the unification of various ethnic communities to work together as citizens of one nation order to support the struggle for democratic reforms and good governance.

The print media can play a special role in the society as they are sometimes more independent and pluralistic than radio and television. Nevertheless, all media need to be sensitized and become more participatory. The challenge faced in Nigeria is that, sometimes there is a gap between what the media report and the realities on ground. The media have to effectively play the role of the watchdog of the society, especially, the press in Nigeria in order to enhance national integration towards meaningful development.

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