THE EVOLUTION OF AN EGALITARIAN MASS MEDIA IN NIGERIA: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Mass media as a catalyst for development has always been a major research and analysis topic, essentially because scholars of various disciplines are in unison on the efficacy of the platforms it provides, as instruments of advocacy, information dissemination, accountability and defense of civil and human rights. This study examined the changing face of the mass media, its evolving rules of engagement and the strategic growth of the electronic media in urbanization, democratization and utilization in the electoral, environmental and healthcare modernization process. The rules and modus operandi in the last two decades tended to change with the deregulation of the broadcast media in Nigeria following in the footsteps of the print media which allowed private ownership since pre-colonial days. Sequel to these developments, the mass media as a tool for democratization, liberalization and electoral independence of the citizens, has resulted in more awareness, more access to information on voters' rights, healthcare and economic opportunities.

This paper examined the evolution of today's mass media, its regulatory options and influence on the power dynamics, electoral fortunes and the achievement of a higher gross national product. This paper determined that there has been a paradigm shift from the era of the top-down "silver bullet" theory to today's horizontal participatory platforms due to a conscious policy-driven effort to engage and empower the citizenry and less privileged to participate in governance.

Keywords: Mass Media, Deregulation, Democratization, Horizontal platforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Societies over centuries and indeed since the evolution of man have tended to grow from the state and condition they were into bigger, larger and sometimes more complex and more sophisticated communities. This development typifies what sociologists tend to categorize into several levels of civilization, modernization and industrialization, all indicators of development as defined within certain disciplines. Scholars still explore the discursive strands of this development within the context of whether development is purely related to the multiplication and generation of physical, social, infrastructure or whether it includes growth of the mind, thought processes and such intangible phenomena man engages himself with.

Irrespective of whatever leitmotifs run through the philosophies of development, it is invariably certain that development, modernization, urbanization, industrialization are heavily dependent on the discipline of communication as a catalyst and instrument. Every facet of society has essentially depended on the art and science of communication, whether it is the mass media, interpersonal or intra-personal media. Melkote (1991) argues that over the centuries and more recently development as a philosophy and dominant paradigm became central in "guiding intellectual thinking from the forties through the sixties and was influential in communication and development research and theory" Rogers (1976) shared this with further elucidation that:

> This concept of development grew out of certain historical events, such as the industrial revolution of Europe and the United States. In the dominant paradigm, industrialization was considered the main route to impressive economic growth. Third World Nations were encouraged to invest in a paradigm of industrialization such as hydroelectricity, steel and others manufacturing units (as cited Melkote, 1991:29).

This defining classification of development had become a tangential philosophy of the industrialized world and had further accelerated the platforms which created the utilization of the mass media starting with print press, radio, and then television over the 18th century and the subsequent centuries. The industrialization process created science and evolved a new medium of communication that overwhelmed the existing traditional oral media of poetry, songs, dances, theatre and other forms of indigenous communication. It also amplified the mass media audience as more effective than the interpersonal communication which centred around the individual as well as group communication channels that existed from creation. Predating the mass media channels of communication where science exploited the technology of the printing press, the electronic radio and television sets along with film, communication had solely been indigenous and oral until when the art of writing in Egypt started with hieroglyphics. For scholars like Cooley (1981):

> "Communication is a mechanism through which human relations exist and develop… and the symbols of the mind, together with means of conveying them through space and preserving them. (as cited in Akinfeleye 1989:9).

Broadly categorized into verbal and non-verbal communication, the component parts of this process range from the mass media to the indigenous traditional media which encompasses interpersonal and group communication outlets like meetings, rallies, theatre and festivals. Schranm (1964) describes a wider role ascribed to communication as "the process of creating shared meaning between the mass media and their mass audiences who unlike the interpersonal model are encoding and recording messages in their different ways"(pg.13).

The effects of the industrial revolution which created the instruments of mass communication therefore had become tools for transferring western philosophies and ideologies all over the world, especially the countries considered by the industrialized nations as developing countries or Third World. Likewise, the resultant economic effects of the 18th century

industrial renovation was the rise of capitalism, and as President Harry Truman of the United States reflected in his 1949 inaugural address cited in Melkote (1991).

> "More than half of the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant.

It was believed by scholars like Daniels (1951) and Lerner (1958) who also propounded that "developing countries needed improved economic activity to emancipate them from poverty" and therefore suggested that for "the expansion of economic activity to be equated with development are a set of modernizing variables which include urbanization, literacy, media use and democratic participation". Under this model, the mass media is solely responsible for creating widespread awareness and interest in society. According to Melkote (1991) citing Eisenstardt (1976) restates that "the old paradigm of development started to breakdown in the sixties and seventies. The development of the Third World simply did not fit the assumptions implicit in the paradigm which basically worked in Europe and North America because of incorrect indicators".

Indeed Foucault (1982) espouses that "any strategy that disregards the structure of power dynamics and its domineering effect on both groups and individuals in knowledge relationships is self defeating". This set the template for the utilization of the power structure of the colonial governments in Africa to bring in the mass media in post World War I era to counter the rising influence of print newspapers started in 1861 in Abeokuta by a British clergyman Rev. Henry Townsend who also was part of the colonial visitors but had planted the seed for the evolution of print newspapers to be later exploited by nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Ernest Okoli, Increase Coker and later Nnamdi Azikiwe. As the returnees from World War I got back to Nigeria, coupled with the students who had been educated in foreign countries, came a realization that self determination was not only desirable but expedient and inevitable. Therefore, the mass media became a variable tool for the anti-colonial struggle rather than for development as prescribed by Lerner (1958). While the British colonial masters started radio broadcasting with reinfusion of British Broadcasting Corporation signals from England, the print newspapers like *Daily Times* and the *West African Pilot* used the print as tools for nationalist struggles. Subsequent years scan the rise of more print newspapers in the country in the 40s and 50s as well as the setting up of radio stations in 1956 and television station in 1959 by the regional government. Desirous of countering the effect of the private print media by nationalists, the colonial government ensured that they set up newspapers and bequeath same to the regional governments namely the *Daily Sketch* in the Western Region, *New Nigeria Newspapers* in the North and *Statesman* in the Eastern region. They encouraged the Regional Governments at independence to enact laws that restricted ownership of the broadcast media to government at the Federal and State Levels.

The causal relationships between communication and development as postulated in the works of Lerner and Schramm rested on the hypothesis that individual behaviour changes brought about through messages by opinion leaders would produce political actors within such societies. The government was aware of this very effectiveness of the media therefore kept constant checks on them. This efficacy was reasonably espoused by Merrill when he

postulated that mass media can contribute to the people awareness of potentialities, disaffections and desire to change (positively or negatively) either stability or disruption of the society, either instilling in the people realistic goals or extravagant exceptions. Akinfeleye (1989) situated the role and efficacy of the mass media in Nigeria. Simply put, government is saying that it is the duty of the Nigerian Press to monitor governance and make the public officers accountable to the people at all times.

Over the post independence era, such newspapers such as the *Guardian*, the *Punch* and the *Tribune* (which predated independence) all emerged as strong voices of the people, as they were and are still privately owned. Sequel to political developments in the country bordering on allegations of corruption during the early independence era, the Nigerian Military seized power from the civilian regime of President Nnamdi Azikiwe and Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa in 1966. The military realized the potency, efficacy and credibility of the free press, therefore, over the periods of it rule from 1966 till 1999 when it finally handed over power it decimated the print media, emasculated the government radio and television. However, out of very frontal activism by pro-democracy stalwarts, academics, intellectuals and civil society it succumbed and deregulated ownership of the electronic broadcast media in 1992 by promulgating Decree no. 38 establishing a regulatory body called the National Broadcasting Commission. This move signaled the advent of private ownership of the broadcast media outfits in line with the private ownerships of print media outfits. This was deemed to be in line with the advocacy embarked upon by the populace for democratization, equality and egalitarianism.

2. MEDIA STATUS TODAY

The broadcast media today consists of about 100 State radio and television stations, over 120 federal television outfits and radio stations, as well as 3 privately owned national television networks, 2 satellite platforms, and about 70 private and publicly owned FM stations all over the country. Couple this with the 100 privately owned newspapers and now an endless access of more than 49 million Nigerians to the social media and the result is democratization of the air space and voice for the voiceless.

According to scholars Osso and Bello (2013) our national development is dependent on many factors among which are the media (old and new), media freedom, freedom of speech, a visionary political leadership and such freedom as well as access that will enable civil society, young people, and social groups to be involved in massive social and political transformation.

Re-emphasizing the importance of an egalitarian press in Nigeria, they espouse that "we must note that the philosophical ideas underpinning the operation of the media and the architecture of the institution of press freedom, public service broadcasting, objectivity, are all born out of the struggle for democracy. Central to this equality, objectivity and access to media platforms is the philosophy of the public sphere where access is unlimited and ownership is equated with the overriding principles of equity between the state and the society groups in the power dynamics, and domains of social life in which public opinion is formed and nurtured. The functions of the mass media makes it "a priority tool for development, modernization and education as these are embedded in its functions of gate-keeping, surveillance, interpretation of policy, retransmission of culture, propaganda, commercial and entertainment" (Yahaya, 2008:49). Exploring the Uses and Gratification theory, it can be posited that the citizenry use the media for their needs rather than the mass media using the people as tools, as against the

contrasting theories of "silver bullet" or "hypodermic needle". Indeed this theory is concerned with the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the roles and capacity of the mass media. For the proponents of the "Silver bullet" theory, the mass media remain a tool for the power brokers, while the "Uses and gratification" theory postulates that indeed it is the viewers and listeners that exploit the mass media for their own electoral, environmental, social information needs and requirements. This raises the barometer for the social conflict that emanates therefore from the contest over control of the mind as the owners of the media (either government or private) seek to control or influence the mind of the audience who also strategies to use the media for personal interest. Whichever way one looks at the issue, the accessibility and equality of everyone in society to the mass media is a major plus and product of the egalitarianism policy of government in reaching the people it governs especially the less privileged. Today in Nigeria, the regulatory body National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) puts the estimate of television sets at 30million with an approximation of 3 viewers to a TV set making viewership about 90 million persons. Likewise, radio listenership is about 100 million persons. Each radio listener and television viewer has access and opportunity to initiate feedback to the stations on their content output through phone-in telephone calls.

This forms a major plank of the democratization and horizontal communication process needed for development and pluralism. Over years too, programme content on radio and television have moved from foreign programme saturation to new afro-centric and Nigerian content ranging from drama, movies, news and documentaries situating the local communities as the centerpiece. This was through a deliberate policy of producing and transmitting 80% local Nigerian content of television programming, while 10% of Satellite Direct-to-Home and Direct Terrestrial television must be 90%. These policies boost equality and egalitarianism by providing participation for local and community culture icons and the masses as a whole.

However, despite the noble claims of objectivity and access by the mass media, the public space herein seen as the fulcrum for public opinion formation is vulnerable to corruption and what scholars like Corran (2002) referred to as media "refuedalization".
According to Osso and Bello (2013), modern mass media has fallen under the sway of public relations, advertising and big business. The media according to them have become instruments of elite control to manufacture consent. Dahlgren (1991) also posited that commercialization, technological innovation, privatization, high cost of operation and unbridled competition have "amplified and broadened the mercantile logic of media operations".

This challenge might be more evident in western industrialized countries but the enforcement templates and regulatory measures in those countries ensure that sanity and media hygiene subsists. In Nigeria, because of our low level of law enforcement and adherence to broadcast regulation, even hard news in sometimes commercialized and payment demanded and enforced by private and public radio and television stations. These have happened in several situations of coverage of political party campaign rallies, announcement of voter education processes and other such public service information by INEC which ideally should fall under the social responsibility platform. Another challenge emerged from the access provided by

the radio and television stations for horizontal communication where every listener or viewer can make phone calls, emails, texts, or chats in reaction to a live or recorded programmer. This accessibility has turned out to be an effective tool for opposing political activities to hold sitting governments accountable and even influence the general electioneering process and campaigns.

Osso and Bello (2013) referred to the disillusionment of the powers of the mass media by stating that "in response to the disablement of the mass media as an institution of the public sphere, many scholars have turned to the new media as alternatives for the realization of the potential and promises of democratic communication and in reinvigorating democracy".

McQuail (2005) also reinforces the social media challenge as "transgresses the limits of the print and broadcasting models, enables many to many conversations, simultaneous reception by providing global immediate contact and network". Equally important is the fact that there is no ownership control over content as it is in the mass media, although internet are now known to be shutdown periodically in countries like Iran, China, etc. Social media as a major challenge to the old broadcast media is that it is also cheaper to acquire and does not require huge infrastructure or flat screen television sets. Equally significant is the fact that technology has enhanced convergence which has provided for a symbiotic integration of both platforms. McQuail (2005) also highlights the benefits of social media for democratic politics, and equality of voters as interactivity as against one-way flow of vertical communication platforms. This social media nexus with the mass media engenders further horizontal communication thereby promoting equality, disintermediation as well as absence of boundaries and low cost of acquisition.

While these are challenges to the old mass media formats, they also are new opportunities and platforms for integrated media use and utilization for advocacy, social mobilization, public awareness enhancement, as well as improved reach, as in the case of Nigeria where 49 million internet users can be reached and become available for messages and mobilization in the development process or democratization agenda, such as electoral reforms or safe environment campaigns.

3. CONCLUSION

Without doubt, the evolution of the mass media has been a major catalyst for development on the African continent in general and in Nigeria specifically. However, because of its inadequacies, which its pluralization and access could not overcome, new appendages in the form of internet connectivity and social media platforms have re-evaluated and re-possessed the democratization and egalitarian function of the mass media. This is not essentially a minus for the mass media, rather the new philosophies of convergence allow the social media to cohabitate with and enhance the functions of the mass media. In truth, both have an improved and realistically bright future in the public sphere and media as well as political space in Nigeria.

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