

PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY MEDIA AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper takes a look at perspectives on community media and rural development in Nigeria. It espouses the view that community media are well appreciated by the people because they are well 'bonded' with them. Anchored on the agenda setting and agenda building theories, the paper articulates the view that community media are well suited to the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve, thereby promoting development in various aspects. In achieving their objectives, community media are constrained by financial inadequacy, political interference, illiteracy and low patronage, among others. In order to ameliorate some of the difficulties, it is recommended that prospective investors come together and invest in community media; community media should endeavour to effectively cover their areas while ensuring that they are run professionally. Government, it was also suggested, should intervene in the economic affairs of the rural dwellers so as to empower them for greater participation in the affairs of their environment.*

KEYWORDS: *Community Media, Development, Rural Development Communication.*

INTRODUCTION

For some time now there has been an upsurge in community media. This is partly due to the need for a more effective and widespread information of the relevant audiences. Again, this is understandable because democracy necessarily requires a measure of information on the part of the citizens in order to meaningfully participate in the process. It is thought that the burgeoning of community or local publications is a natural development in a democratic dispensation. On a general note, community media are crucial agents in development communication among the rural dwellers where majority of Nigerians reside.

Another perspective is that decades of brutal military rule in Nigeria had discouraged the springing up of newspapers and other publications because journalists were often harassed by the military authorities and in many cases media houses were shut down arbitrarily. For instance, in 1987, Newswatch, Nigeria's leading newsmagazine was proscribed for six months during the rule of General Ibrahim Babangida. Many other publications were shut down without even the bureaucratic procedure of a proscription order! During that era, government's tolerance of opposing views was practically nil. Even though there is no evidence that the current rulers are more tolerant of opposing views, the democratic government in place seems to be a moderating influence, knowing that the judiciary could intervene in some situations. In Delta State of

Nigeria, some notable community newspapers include *Ika Weekly*, *Anioma Voice*, *Urhobo Voice*, *Ndakwa Vanguard*, *Isoko Vanguard*, and a host of others. In the next segment, a definition of relevant terms is presented.

Definition of Terms

For a better understanding of this work, it is imperative to define some terms such as: community media, development, and development communication.

Community Media

In attempting a definition of community media, it is perhaps germane to briefly explain the mass media. According to Raufu (2003, p. 8) “mass media are the modern means of giving information to a large number of people”. The modern mass media include newspapers, magazine, radio, television, internet, etc. The concept of ‘community media’ might be clearer if the idea of community is first briefly explained. De-Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975), leaning on Ferdinand Tonnies, a German Scholar who used the term ‘gemeinschaft’ as cited by Ebagere and Anyanwu (2011, p.50) to describe community. From the above, community media would refer to publications or broadcast outfits which serve the needs of those who make up a community. It suggests that its area of geographical influence is probably limited but it covers it effectively and some might even say, passionately.

Development Communication

For any medium to influence the community it must pass across messages that have the potential to impact on community, hence the essence of development communication. But as Moemeke (1989) has rightly observed, development communication is not merely a matter of transmitting information about how things can be done better by using available facilities; it is much more than the exchange of problem-solving information; it is also the generation of psychic mobility or empathy, raising aspiration, teaching of new skills, and encouragement of local participation in development activities. On his part, Anaeto, (2008, p.7) sees development communication as “the planned and systematic application of communication resources, channels, approaches and strategies to support the goals of socio-economic, political and cultural development”. In the light of the foregoing, it might be practical to see development communication as the concerted and integrated efforts to convey to people information that would help them attain a better life in all ramifications.

Development

Development is the desire of the human race, including those from parts of the world often described as ‘developed’ to improve their conditions. Expectedly though, scholars perceive development from different perspectives. Amucheazi (1980,p.4) sees development as “a multi-dimensional process involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others”. The radical Guyanese Scholar, Rodney (1972, p. 9) sees development as “increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well being...” The multi dimensional approaches of these scholars should be a pointer to the fact that development must be seen from a wider perspective, working from the view point that development is people-centered and multi-perspectival. On the whole,

development has to do with efforts to improve individuals and their conditions generally. It suggests advancement and a higher level of sophistication in all ramifications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars have explored the role of the mass media in development. Theoretically, the agenda setting theory attempts an explanation on how the media influence the development agenda of any society. The theory refers to the media's capability, through repeated news coverage and editorial presentation, of establishing the importance of an issue in the public's mind. This is understandable as there is a general public perception that the agenda setting, "being a causal hypothesis, suggests that media content has an influence on public perception of the relative importance of issues" (Severin and Tankard Jr., 2001, p. 229). Folarin (2002 p.75) suggests that agenda setting implies that the mass media determine what issues are regarded as important at any given time in a given society. For him, the elements involved in agenda setting include: -

- The quantity and frequency of reporting
- Prominence given to the report through headline display, features and layout in newspapers, magazines, films graphics or timing on radio and television.
- The degree of conflict generated in the report
- Cumulative media specific effects over time.

The media do not have a magic wand to force the people to accept their offerings. However, through their consistent focus on certain issues, they are thought to be important.

Agenda Building

Closely associated with agenda building is the concept of agenda building, which has been described as a collective process in which media, government and the public influence what issues are considered to be important (Lang and Lang 1983) cited in Severin and Tankard Jr. (2001, pp 230-231). Agenda setting or its more modern, expanded version of agenda building has to do with the mass media's function of drawing attention to the crucial issues of the day. Some scholars have referred this to the "surveillance" function of the mass media.

Community Media in Rural Development

The need for rural development has been widely acknowledged, irrespective of the kind of government in place in any environment. It was in pursuance of this that the General Ibrahim Babangida government (1985-1993) in Nigeria set up the Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DIFRI) under the chairmanship of Larry Koinyan, a senior Air Force Officer at that time. With the death of that administration, the Directorate went into limbo.

With the world spending the first few years of the second decade of the 21st century, the challenges of national development, particularly rural development, have remained daunting. Rural dwellers still suffer acute infrastructural inadequacies. On the economic scene, where the problems seem most debilitating, access roads to evacuate farm produce to a hungry urban population, have in many cases, remained a poor. But how do community media feature in this equation?

Community media have the advantage of being intimate with the rural people to the extent that they feel the people's heart beat and therefore better placed to prescribe solutions. One of such activities is centered around political participation where the rural dwellers appear acutely disadvantaged. Community media have been in the forefront of mobilizing the rural populace for participation in the political process. This, they have done through presentation of candidates and exposing candidates of dubious antecedents. Okoye (2008, p. 267) alluded to this fact when he observed that Africa had been witnessing a steady decline in civil engagement and political participation by the educated groups. If the educated groups could be 'infected' by the 'virus' of decline in political participation, then, it must be worse with rural dwellers who are clearly at a disadvantage.

Besides, community media provide a measure of assurance and a feeling of being part of a huge, often impersonal, federation. Thus is achieved through the constant reflection of personalities from the locality and publication of stories and features from the environment. Moemeke (1981) was probably referring to this phenomenon with his observation that rural radio audience remained passive largely because of differences between the providing personnel from the receiving audience. Indeed, this is a major shortcoming when messages are beamed from 'outside' or when those running community media are removed from the people they are supposed to be serving. Essentially, the media must be perceived to be part and parcel of a community to enable the people to relate well with them and possibly benefit from them.

Security

In security matters, community media are often at the forefront of securing the immediate environment. Quite often the media practitioners have relevant information about crimes and their operators who are often members of the community. The fear of being unmasked by the media in some cases, discourages the perpetrators of evil to desist or move to places they are not easily identified. In a major security issue which occurred in Nigeria at the Ikeja, Lagos Cantonment on January, 27th 2002, thousands of persons died following a series of bomb explosions. Remarkably, the deaths were not as a result of the bomb explosions, per se but due to the stampede that followed. The explosions were so loud and devastating that many abandoned their homes and jumped into the Oke-Afa canal where they met their death.

Explaining the phenomenon, expectedly from an information management perspective, a professor of mass communication at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Ralph A. Akinfeleye told *Radio Nigeria* on the 10th anniversary of the disaster that there was poor information management hence the huge losses, especially at Oke-Afa canal. He insisted that community media, especially radio and television, would have helped disseminate timely and credible information as regards what was happening, who was where, and should have told people where they should be. Indeed, the major fact that agitated the minds of Lagos residents was the crucial question "What's happening"? Some thought that a coup d' etat had occurred while many thought Lagos had been invaded. However, those residing close to the location of the blasts apparently did not have enough time to think, and in the absence of credible and timely information, many jumped inside the canal to record one of the most monumental disasters of that decade.

Mobilization for Development

The need for development has been earlier stressed in this presentation. Part of the hindrance to development efforts is perhaps insufficient mobilization because when people do not know what is expected of them and what they are likely to benefit from an action, they tend to be alienated from it, with far-reaching consequences for development. Apparently in reference to this issue Amos Utuama, the Deputy Governor of Delta State, south-south Nigeria, urged the publishers of community papers in the state to use their media for community mobilization geared towards providing effective solutions to problems. According to him:

...By nature, community newspapers are close to the communities they live and as such should bring to the attention of its readers available opportunities in government at all times... the community newspapers should help build the communities and also free them from any form of oppression, they should rather make the plight of the people known to government without making such people be in opposition.

Indeed, the strength of the community media lies mainly in their ability to 'bond' with the people. Through their contents, the local media have the capability to be a source of psychological upliftment by emphasizing the strength of a community and encouraging members to attain their highest potential. Self confidence is needed for development in any aspect and the community media are eminently qualified to address such as issue. Similarly, community media are in a position to encourage productivity especially in agriculture by encouraging the community members to adopt modern methods of crop and animal farming as well as bringing to their notice improved seedlings that would lead to higher yields.

Constraints of Community Media

Community media are constrained in important ways to the extent that their impact is often vitiated. Some of the problems are addressed in this segment.

Financial Constraints: Generally speaking, financial resources are always in short supply, even for the seemingly rich. It is even worse for community media which have limited access to funds. Since their operations are limited, they tend to be financially handicapped as financial institutions do not seem to have much confidence in them with the result that credit is not easily made available to them. This situation is even exacerbated by the fact that joint businesses are not popular in Nigeria as a result of the rancour that often follows the sharing of proceeds from the endeavour. The result, sadly, is that community media are starved of funds as the opportunity to pull funds together is often not available.

Poor Management:

Closely associated with the above is the question of poor management of the meagre resources generated from the business. Some publishers simply assume that whatever income that accrues to the business is profit! Such publications, sooner than later, usually disappear from the news stands. This partly explains the high mortality rate of many newspapers and magazines, especially community publications in Nigeria.

Political Interference: Many media houses in Nigeria, and perhaps across the world, suffer different levels of political interference. In Nigeria, it is "a clear and present danger" because

political authorities always want to be perceived positively by the people, even when their actions and inactions do not justify such trust. Believing that the media would present a “*true but embarrassing*” reality, those in authority especially in the developing world, tend to feel uncomfortable with the media. This was similar to the dark days of the General Sani Abacha regime (1993-1998) during the military era in Nigeria. Clearly uncomfortable about the publications of many newspapers, the infantry officer simply clamped down on them. Many newspapers including the *National Concord*, *Punch*, *The Sketch* and the highly respected *The Guardian* were shut down by the military authorities. Not even a law was needed to legalize the clear illegality! Indeed, in a bid to stop ‘unfriendly’ stories, political authorities often threaten community media, either openly or in a subtle manner, to desist from a particular editorial direction which it has set for itself. In some other cases, inducements are offered to avoid unfavorable stories,

Unprofessionalism:

Community media in Nigeria are generally bedeviled by a high level of unprofessionalism. Many journalists (if they can be so called), are unqualified and generally unprepared for the demands of the job. Many professional journalists, in a bid to survive economically often prefer to work for the popular national newspapers and magazines and their electronic counterparts. This creates a gap which is often exploited by those who do not have the requisite training to exploit. As a result of the financial constraint earlier referred to, there is a tendency that many who have not seen the four walls of a journalism training school are recruited to carry out such serious editorial and sub editing functions of reporting, writing, editing, page planning and other similar functions. Naturally the output of such a bunch of staff is predictably poor.

Illiteracy and Low Patronage: Despite efforts made by the various governments in Nigeria, illiteracy remains a major challenge. This is even more worrisome given that a great majority of Nigerian’s live in the rural areas. Onabajo (2003) estimates that about 80% of Nigerians live in the rural areas and are actively engaged in subsistence agriculture. Large portions of this group are illiterates. Indeed, illiterates are handicapped in important ways as they are not in a position to consume media products. The problem of low patronage is worsened by poverty. Although it is difficult to estimate, but it is obvious that the ranks of the poor are increasing by the day in Nigeria. This has been exacerbated since the January 1st 2012 fuel price hike by government which has, expectedly, triggered spiral inflation. By implication also the human suffering index has increased tremendously in the country.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The need for a more effective and widespread information dissemination machinery among the rural dwellers in Nigeria has somewhat encouraged an upsurge in community media. This is understandable, given that the country has returned to democratic rule since 1999. Democracy theoretically encourages mass participation in the political process as against the alienation and emasculation of the people which military rule represented in Nigeria. This presentation finds anchor in is anchored on the agenda setting and the modified agenda building theories which emphasize the role of the mass media in concert with relevant institutions, in determining what the people should think about.

Essentially, the community media perform the roles of encouraging the rural dwellers to participate in the political process, give them security tips, help in their mobilization for development, among others. However, they are constrained by political interference, poor funding, illiteracy, low patronage, among others.

Despite the daunting challenges confronting community media, their importance to society is widely acknowledged, especially under the democratic dispensation which Nigeria has subscribed to since May 29, 1999.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the foregoing, it is germane to put forward the following recommendations with a view to strengthening community media in Nigeria.

- i) Given the perennial problem of scarcity of funds, it is suggested that prospective investors should put aside their ego problems and pull together funds to establish and sustain community newspapers, magazines, radio or even television stations. This can be successful if the investors have respect for one another and are patient during the gestation period of the business before they start reaping the fruits of their investments.
- ii) Community media should, like other media outlets, be run professionally. This means that qualified and competent hands should be engaged so as to produce market-friendly 'menu'.
- iii) Community media should endeavour to thoroughly cover the nooks and crannies of their area of interest. All festivals, celebrations, chieftaincy titles, etc and breaking news should be covered consistently so that the media would become a reference point for all the happenings in their area of interest.
- iv) Government of the day may wish to consider poverty alleviation programmes in the rural areas to lift the rural people out of the depth of poverty and want. Experience was shown that many poverty alleviation programmes put in place in Nigeria are inefficiently and corruptly run with predictably poor outcomes.
- v) The adult education programme should be intensified in the rural areas to liberate many from the pangs of illiteracy and poverty.

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