

Communicating masses and mass communication: Finding the voice of

African masses

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Abstract: This paper examines the new and emerging nature of communication which provides the new duality of the imperatives of communicating masses, away from the traditional nature of communication which provides for mass communication only. Rather than communicating to the masses, the new concept of modern communication stipulates a mass response/interactive model, instead of the traditional one-way linear mode of communication. Modern technology, especially the computer and digitization, has opened up lots of opportunities and empowerment to the mass of the citizenry. In the new communication era, this fundamental has become very important to democracy and good governance. The paper notes that, in Europe and America, technology is increasingly offering a platform for the masses to talk or initiate dialogue. There is also an increasing appreciation of local indigenous language productions to reach the mass of the people with amazing results. However, in Africa, the process is faced with several constraints, that of poverty, education, apathy and even laws and regulation. The paper believes that access and affordability of the new media by the majority of the African people is cardinal to the development of Africa.

Key words: mass communication; voice of African masses; democracy

1. Introduction

1.1 The mass media

Generally, mass communication media makes it possible to deliver messages to millions of people roughly at the same time. The source or creators of these messages are usually organizations and the audiences, and are composed of individuals. "Mass communication" is also the term used to describe the academic study of the various means by which individuals and entities relay information through mass media to large segments of the population at the same time. It is usually understood to relate to newspaper and magazine publishing, radio, television and film, as these are used both for disseminating news and for advertising.

There are many theories and principles of mass communication, the general definition of mass communication however is that it is the transmission and reception of messages on a large scale. Most mass communication is done on an interpersonal basis meaning that is done on a face-to-face basis, i.e., between the sender and the receiver. The received message can be responded to instantly meaning that there is feedback.

The study of mass communication is particularly concerned with how communication serves to create, animate and influence human societies. It is Wilbur Schramm who stated that communication is the tool that makes human societies possible; every human endeavor implies communication at some level. Societies can be animated by to positively react to media influence. Mass communication does this by raising issues that fuel

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aggravated the conflict, but it was the rhetoric of these spokesmen broadcast throughout the world that polarized the warring groups.

But Thompson (1995) believed that technology has altered the traditional nature of mass communication. He noted that with the advancement in media technology, people are no longer receiving gratification without questioning the grounds on which it is based. People are engaging themselves more with media products, such as computers, cell phones and Internet which offer great possibilities. People are beginning also to talk back, not in an interpersonal manner but also in a pluralistic response which I describe as communicating masses.

2. Communicating masses

There is an increasing reshaping of the nature of mass communication. Mass communication, naturally involves “information distribution” to many, is a “one to many” form of communication, whereby products are mass produced and disseminated to a great quantity of audiences.

It is now apparent that the systems of information, codification have shifted from analog to digital. This has indeed advanced the communication between individuals. With the existence of infrared, bluetooth and wi-fi, cell phones are no longer solely a tool for audio transmission. It is now possible to transfer photos, music documents or even games and e-mail at any time and anywhere. The development of media technology has indeed advanced the transmission rate and stability of information exchange. With the increased role of the Internet in delivering news and information, mass communication tends to focus on the convergence of publishing, broadcasting and digital communication.

With the complement of the cyberspace supported by the Internet, not only are recipients receivers they are now participating in a structured process of symbolic transmission. Constraints, such as time and space, are reordered and eliminated. Furthermore, it is known that recipients today do have some capacity to intervene in and contribute to the course and content of the communicative process.

Messages are now produced by one set of individuals and transmitted to others who are typically situated in settings that are spatially and temporally remote from the original context of production.

2.1 Functional mass communication

The principal function of mass communication arguably is for the promotion of the well being of the people for good governance. The proposition now is that participatory media is the one that can lead to functional development of society. The phrase “Participatory Media” was first used publicly by Greg Ruggiero and later popularized by blog researcher others, such as Furukawa. In April 2006, journalist and media researcher used the phrase “personal participatory media”, which may distinguish between objective social media (scientific, corporate, pure information) and subjective/personal social media (value-laden, opinion, religious).

“Participatory media” include (but are not limited to) community media blogs participatory video projects and video blogs. These distinctly different media share three common and interrelated characteristics, i.e., using participatory media and public voice to encourage civic engagement.

Participatory media which strives to make the masses communicate and participate in government are also called the “many-to-many media communication media”. In many-to-many communication, it is now possible for every person connected to the network to broadcast and receive written language, text images, sound audio video software data, discussions transactions computations, tags, or hyperlink links to and from every other person. The asymmetry between broadcaster and audience that was dictated by the structure of pre-digital technologies

an under-defined concept because of deliberate structural pressures that prevent individuals from questioning the connection between the press and democracy.

The concept of “democratizing the media” may be said to have no real meaning within the terms of political discourse in western society. It is in fact stated that the phrase has a “paradoxical or even vaguely subversive ring to it”. Citizen participation would be considered an infringement on freedom of the press, a blow struck against the independence of the media that would distort the mission they have undertaken to inform the public without fear or favor. Some analysts believed that this is because the general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and frightened away from the arena of political debate and action, which is counter productive to development.

2.3 Target audiences

The debate over media influence has been raging at least from the time that Plato recommended exclusion of Homer’s epics from his ideal republic. Scholars may tug over attitude change, but there is little doubt that media do influence audiences. In Buffalo, New York, a 10-year-old boy tried the latest Kung Fu fighting technique from a movie on his 7-year-old brother to see if it works.

Some media are best fitted to audiences that consist of individuals, each of whom is more or less alone when the message arrives. Other media are better fitted to an audience that gathers in groups. Books, newspapers, magazines and direct mail are usually read by individuals. Film, on the other hand, is shown in theaters which gather audiences together in fairly large groups. Radio, television and recordings are often delivered in group settings, but these groups are usually smaller than those who attend the showing of a film, and the three are also often used by individuals.

In order to receive messages from a particular mass communication medium, an audience member must be able to “connect up” to the reception end of the channel. For example, television is not available to people who do not own television sets; CDs are useless to people who do not own CD players, and so on. The extent to which a potential audience is able to make use of a mass medium is called its availability.

Availability includes more than equipment. Language also plays a role, as does geographic location and economic class. A radio broadcast in Spanish, for example, is only available to those who speak Spanish. Similarly, printed media are only available to those who are able to read and cable television will not be available to those who cannot afford the monthly fee.

“Media access” refers to the ability of members of the society to make use of a particular medium to send messages of their own. Print media is relatively more accessible than broadcast media. For example, anyone who can write can, at relatively little expense, print up and distribute a flyer or newsletter. Access to television and radio broadcast channels, however, is tightly regulated by the government. Even when a channel is provided, as with public access cable television, it is much more difficult and expensive to produce video than to produce print.

Newspapers and magazines traditionally provide public access by means of “letters to the editor” or “editorial pages”. Television and radio news do not traditionally offer this kind of access. In recent times, however, radio and television shows featuring listener and viewer “call-ins” have become popular, and this provides access to a large number of people. Access and availability have become increasingly important with the advent of cable television and the new computer networked media. We might argue that Nigerian society’s decision to require all children to attend school and learn to read has the effect of making the important documents of Nigerian society available to *them*. Similarly, Nigerian society’s insistence that everyone learn to write and our belief in “freedom of the press” encourages citizens to access the print media.

As the electronic media have begun to appear to replace the print media in terms of circulation and access as the major channels for public information, critics have begun to question whether this societal availability and access will be continued and sustainable especially in Africa. Government's control of the broadcast channels seems to limit access to these media to rich individuals and large corporations, and cable television is available only to those who are able to afford the relatively high cost of connection.

2.4 The new mass media in Africa

Okpo (2002) noted that there is a strong belief in Africa even among some intellectuals that any attempt to adopt and strengthen traditional science and technology or science is backward and primitive. Media analysts according to Okpo, however, believe that improvements in technical capacity and capability can enhance a balanced two-way information channel, particularly for local activities, improvement of transportation and road network system in local arrears, building of information document centre at the state and local levels for instant reference, effective funding of government or private programmes for talented rural men and women and the establishment of information data bank on research activities or other vital information about people, places and economic activities.

He noted that for instance a situation where many rural dwellers in Africa do not possess radio and TV sets or those who possess such facilities cannot operate them because of absence of telecommunication system or lack of electric power supply or a situation where some rural dwellers with inventive talent cannot be utilized because of absence of information about them, does not augur well for a two-way informational channel. To him, the obvious consequence is that both government and the governed hardly forge ahead in nation-building in the real sense of the concept.

Okpo (2002) stated that:

The best way to give mass media an African orientation is to focus them on African problems, aspirations and on the efforts being made to solve the problem and achieve the aspirations. They should be used to arouse group and national consciousness, to help people improve their social and economic conditions, to help in nation building and in the development of nationness (p. 16).

It is Wilson who stated that media and mass communication in Africa cannot be effective if it fails to take cognizance of the peculiar traditional and cultural accouterments of the people of Africa. Ugboajah (2000) noted that, "to those who have come to equate the word mass with such concepts as mass audience or the global village, the application may seem a bit misnomer given the image and picture of the large population of people that are involved in these mass concepts" (p. 13).

To Wilson (1997), the "mass" refers to the communities, clans, villages numbering a few thousands in scattered settlements whose desires for information are adequately met through the information machinery that exists with them. The "eyei", "nnukenin", "abodom", "ntakrok" and others, Ugboajah (1989) noted that language, indigenous language is so closely related to media that without it, we cannot guarantee any effectiveness to cultural communication. He believed that traditional media is naturally linked to belief systems should be found effective as tools in development programmes. He added that as entertainment they can attract and hold the interest of a large number of people. As oral media in local languages, they can involve the poorest groups and classes who are often left out of development activities because of illiteracy or lack of understanding of the Eurocentric English or French language.

Agun stated by Okpo (2002) stated that:

The best way to give mass radio and television an African orientation, is to focus them on African problem, aspirations and on the efforts being made to solve the problems and achieve the aspirations. They should be used to arouse group and national consciousness, to help people improve their social and economic conditions to help in nation building and in the development of nation ness. To achieve this, group and national as well as continental problems must be identified characterized, priorities must be established, objectives set and roles of mass media of communication in achieving these objectives clearly specified. Then, all possible efforts should be made to ensure wide coverage and production of effective programmes (p. 21).

It is Betiang (2008) who stated that the obvious constraints that face digitization in Nigeria, and by consequence the ability of communicating masses include those associated with cost of reception and those related to service providers. Many Nigerians are poor and live in rural areas where there is no media accessibility and affordability. Other constraints relate to filling the gaps in media literacy to be able to navigate and appreciate the new media, the systems capacities, upgrading of technologies and the required technical support. Other challenges include like high level of illiteracy, unreliable and erratic power supply due to mass corruption.

It is Okpo who stated former Information Minister Ikeobasi Mokuolu had stated that in 1998 that the way forward is that:

The broad ramification of this new information thrust is that henceforth, Nigeria, the largest black nation on our planet and therefore, the logical motive force for the positive image and civilization of the black personality, can no longer afford to be timid about her role. Nigeria will therefore, through NIT (New Information Thrust), adopt a positive and aggressive approach in standing up and proclaiming ourselves (p. 22).

He believed that the substance of the new information thrust as a function of information management and nation building will be manifestly made to bear immediately and most significantly on the areas of sensitization and mobilizing Nigerians, Africans and international community on the geniuses and efficacy of our development programmes. He concluded that with regard to the preceding the development signposts of Africa is full-scale utilization of culture and information in their denotative and connotative terminologies.

Therefore, Betiang (2008) argued that we need some kind of public policy at transnational level which can harmonize the peculiar needs of local cultures to cushion effect of the march towards technology. The people need empowerment in terms of technology, material wealth and education.

3. Conclusion

Although there are continued efforts to make modern internet technology accessible to Africans, the efforts the author must say are far fetched and only scratch the surface of the issue. Abiodun (2006) stated that "In the scruples of genuine fears for the extinction of many African Languages, there is yet cause for cheers in the fact that information Technologies are being adapted to fit into the world of some African languages" (p. 8). According to him, Lacey published in *New York Times* of November 12, 2004, that linguists are working with experts in information technology to make computers more accessible to Africans who happen to know English, French or other major languages that have been programmed into the worlds desktop. Question however is what about the bulk of Africans who do not know about and are not able to speak these languages. What then is their position in the global communication order and how can their voices be heard.

Salau again explains that economic reasons have been adduced for the inability of the internet to speak African languages, he however states that microsoft windows was in the process of producing programmes in Swahili, Hausa, Igbo, Zulu, Yoruba and other African languages. But UNESCO (United Nations Educational,