

The Imperatives of Mass Media in Achieving Social Change: The Nigeria Experience

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Abstract

The role of mass media in economic, political and social progress of a nation cannot be over emphasized. Recognizing the important role of media in bringing about desirable change in a society, this study analysed the expected roles and means by which media can contribute to social change in a developing economy like Nigeria. Available evidence points to the fact that media, if properly harnessed, is a veritable tool capable of bringing about governance impact through exposure of private and public sector corruption; economic impact through provision of useful information and monitoring of the economic policy development process; and social impact through dissemination of timely and relevant information to citizens and sensitizing them on their rights and obligations to the society.

Keywords: *Mass Media, Social Change, Effective Communication, Democracy, Strategies, Change Agent*

1.0 Introduction

The media plays a central role in social transformation of a society. This is usually carried out through its communication process which centers on enormous amounts of information that shapes new values, costumes and ideas of an emerging society. Media is also considered a powerful instrument that influences and often promotes new standards in society. As a vehicle for development communications, media has the potential to create awareness and motivation for social development and change by promoting both individual and communal interests in a society (Forsberg, 2006).

The various functions of media make it an indispensable source of social change. For example, media function as a source of power that influences, controls and promotes new orientation in society (Gisprud, 2002). It also functions as a moderator of public behaviours (Meyrowitz, 1985). Furthermore, media have its place in the interplay between the individual construction of identity and the general functions of society. Media also create sense of

togetherness and belonging as well as feelings of exclusion and isolation. Mass communications are impersonal. They are part of the institutions; they work for and should not be blamed personally for what comes from the institutions. The credibility for the message is not for the individual communicator, but for the institution or the organization that send it (Fiske, 1990).

In defining the central importance that media plays in societal change, a 2007 report highlighted how media information empowers people to determine their own change and development path. "At its heart, development - if it is to be sustainable - must be a process that allows people to be their own agents of change: to act individually and collectively, using their own ingenuity and accessing ideas, practices and knowledge in the search for ways to fulfill their potential." An independent media plays an essential role in delivering the information people need to participate in the debates and decisions that shape their lives.

Free and adequate information is thus not only a goal: it is almost a means of bringing about desired social change. Without adequate and effective communication, economic and social development will inevitably be retarded, and may be counterproductive (Servaes, 1989). With adequate and effective communication, the pathways to change can be made. An adequate flow of information in a developing country is necessarily more than a flow from the top of the political hierarchy to the bottom. It must carry the information which the people need to play their parts in a modern society. It must also provide channels by which these people may discuss with their fellow citizens and with other citizens what policies and practices they shall adopt; and it must provide channel by which the needs and wishes of the people may be carried up the hierarchy to form a part of higher-level decisions (Schramm, 1994).

Despite a general agreement on the importance of media in broader social, economic and political change, the international community-governments, development agencies, donors-largely views the development of an independent media sector as a secondary objective instead of a matter of critical importance. Consequently international donors allocate less than 1% of international aid budgets to media development.

The purpose of this study is to identify through synthesis of media literature the role of media in achieving desired social change.

2.0 Role and Function of Media as Agent of Change

The mass media is an important part of community life. The role of mass media includes expanding the horizons of thought of the citizens. The significance of communication for human life cannot be overestimated. This is true because beyond the physical requirement of food and shelter, man needs to communicate with his/her fellow human beings. The urge for communication is a primal one and in our contemporary civilization a necessity for survival. Without communication no society can exist, much less develop and survive. For the existence as well as the organization of every society, communication is a fundamental and vital process (Muhammed, 2013).

In line with the current realities in Nigeria, media can improve governance by monitoring the actions of those in power and alerting the public to corruption and abuse of trust. A strong, free, and independent media sector leads to lower corruption levels.

Corruption acts as a tax on productive activities in an economy, leading to the flow of resources to unproductive ones. An independent media that monitors those in power and delivers accurate information to citizens has been shown to be an effective check on corruption across multiple studies (Chowdhury and Shyamal, 2004). A 2004 study of 97 countries and covering the

time period from 1995 to 2002 found press freedom to have a significant impact on corruption. The study found that reducing free press restrictions by 1% leads to a 5.1% improvement in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). “The presence of free press brings public corruption cases to the voters while voters in a democracy in turn punish corrupt politicians by ousting them from public offices. Hence elected politicians react to the voters by reducing corruption.”

The mass media can be a bridge between transitions from traditional society to a modern society. Second, the mass media should be able to decide exactly what information or rubric that will be delivered because the media can influence public mindset and raise people’s aspirations. The mass media as a supporter of social changes serve as a giver of information (Tharpe, 1992).

Furthermore, the mass media plays a supporting role which requires decision taking on the attitudes, beliefs and social norms of the masses. Third, the media serve as educators. In this case, the media can increase the level of public knowledge on contemporary issues that can transform social orientation. Through this process, the mass media gradually brings in a community into new cultural patterns and begin to determine the cultural mindset and people’s behaviour. Existence of mass media in presenting these pieces of information tends to trigger the desired change in a developing nation (Trimarsanto, 1993).

Access to information helps citizens hold their governments accountable. By providing easy access to information to users of public services, the media empowers citizens to demand quality and accountability from their governments. A 2004 study by the World Bank examined a Ugandan newspaper’s campaign to inform teachers about education grant funds and the impact the campaign had on improving the education system by reducing regulatory capture. The hypothesis was that more informed teachers would hold officials accountable for the proper use of the funds. The study used distance to then earnest newspaper outlet as an instrument for wider exposure to the campaign (via parents, for example) and found a strong relationship between proximity to a newspaper outlet and lower captures(Reinikka and Svensson,2004).

Media also improves government responsiveness by giving a voice to the vulnerable. There is a robust link between media development and government responsiveness, especially to the poor, who have numerical strength in a democracy but are often ignored by politicians. A media sector that reaches and gives voice to the vulnerable can create informed citizens that can better monitor the actions of incumbent politicians and use this information in their voting decisions (Jary and Jary, 1995).

Evidence also exist that media improves the efficiency of the economy by providing better information to economic actors with which to make decisions and improving stability. Media enhances political coordination in the development of sound economic policy. Christopher and Leeson (2002) provide clarity on the role of the media in economic development by analyzing the role of media as a coordination-enhancing mechanism in policy development (Coyne, ChristopherandLeeson, 2004). In addition, the development of mass media can be enjoyed easily and cause people tend to think practically (Amini, 1993).The above review highlights the role of mass media sector as a modern institution with means to deliver information from a source of information (communicator) to the recipient information (communicants). The information received from the media affecting the social and cultural life of a society both in the perception of his attitude and behavior. The influence of media on society has been growing mostly due to increasing need for new orientation in the community. Media influence is related to other aspects such as the nature of a communicator, the content/ information from the media itself, as well as responses from the society. Consciously or unconsciously, people are often influenced by mass media, such as persuading the media to use a

particular product or indirectly persuaded to support a particular political ideology or political party (Jafarcahjava, 2011).

It could be seen from the foregoing functions that the mass media provide information and education, personal identity, entertainment and most importantly integration and social interaction by giving insight into the circumstances of others as well as by helping with the development of social empathy.

As noted by Medubi (n.d) the media can help to supplement the educational system available in the country. This can be done through designing programmes around the curricula of schools to enhance understanding. Such efforts are known to complement the classroom teacher's efforts. Mass literacy and adult education efforts of the government are also known to benefit from the advantages offered by media segments such as television, radio and the cinema. Other aspects of the media like billboards, campaign units, gazettes and pamphlets are rather useful in social and political campaigns.

Another important function of mass media is service function. This is an essential function of the media, which embraces the employment of the media to sensitize the public to internal and external dangers. Such dangers can come in form of diseases and wars, government policies that would not favour the people, civic duties of the citizens. In addition, goods and services available to all are advertised through the media. However, these services can only reach a limited number of people since they are often packaged in English. The targeted consumer can neither avail himself of these goods nor react appropriately to the perceived danger both from within and without. This accounts for why most governments get away with just about anything as the bloc of people who should have constituted the opposition lives in blissful ignorance (Medubi, n.d).

Naturally, the economy is the direct victim of this situation in many ways. First is that the people are not mobilized to contribute maximally to the development of their motherland since resources available to them are highly inefficient. The larger part of the nation's resources is thus being siphoned into private pockets by a small section of the country's elite class. Secondly, manufacturers' goods are not reaching the maximum sales' figures. This, in turn, affects the production level of the industries, thus further aggravating the labour market, as fewer hands are engaged required to meet the few consumer needs.

The entertainment function is by far the most popular and well-recognized function of the media. It is often packaged in the form of humorous columns and cartoons, romance and general interest magazines in the print media, radio plays, music and films in the broadcast media. The main advantage of these entertainment pieces in the media is the therapeutic effect it is supposed to have on the people through relieving him of stress and tension. This relief comes as a by-product of the laughter-generating elements in some of these segments and the relaxation it provides through others. More-importantly, entertainment pieces are supposed to educate the consumer on local, national and even universal themes. Issues are often better assimilated when explicated in cartoons, humorous write-ups, films and comic strips. Through such treatments, thoughts and opinion can more easily be guided on the several issues raised in the pieces (Downing, Mohammadi, and Sreberny, 1995).

3.0 Theoretical framework of social change and media role

Several theories have been propounded to highlight the interrelationship between social change and media role. Some of these theories include individual difference theory, social influence

theories and participatory theory among others. Social influence theorists consider mass media as a significant social power that is able to shape and legitimize norms and personal beliefs (Scheepers and Goldstein, 2003).

3.1 Individual differences theory

Individual differences theory posits that the big difference in mindset and motivation of societal members lies in the experience of learning. The theory places emphasis on role of environment as crucial factor in understanding differences between media communication and social change. Individual differences due to environmental differences results in different views in the face of things. Environment will influence the attitudes, values and beliefs that underlie the personalities of individuals that want to respond to incoming information. Thus the influence of media on individuals will vary from one person to another (Waisbord, 2001).

3.2 Social categorization theory

Social categorization theory stipulates that people who have certain traits such as sex, income level, and social class tend to form the same attitudes in the face of certain stimuli. This equation affects their responses to receive the messages conveyed in the mass media. In this case, inter-personal relationships have a strong influence on the delivery of information by the media (Jafarcahjawa, 2011).

4.0 Strategies and approaches to effective utilization of mass media

One of the required approaches to effective utilization of mass media for social transformation is social media advocacy. Media advocacy is the use of mass media to advance social or public policy initiatives. It seeks to stimulate debate and promote responsible representation and coverage of social issues. Advocacy requires the mobilization of resources and groups in support for specific issues and policies to change public opinion and political decisions through various interpersonal and media channels. Media advocacy argues for the capacity of the media to transmit information that can result in changes. It is not information-centered but aims to incorporate social themes in entertainment formats in order to influence public agenda. This approach hence promotes social, rather than individual changes in regards to for example, economic issues, domestic violence, democratic elections, land reform and human rights. Thus, media advocacy approaches problems not as personal issues but as a matter of social justice (Westley and MacLean, 1992). Media advocacy does not minimize the importance of individual changes but, instead, strongly argues that the latter require changes in social conditions. Media advocacy also adopts a participatory approach that emphasizes the need of communities to gain control and power to transform their environments. It assigns the media a pivotal role in raising issues that need to be discussed and putting pressure on decision makers (Windahl, Signitzer, and Olson 1992).

Media advocacy consists of large information activities, such as lobbying with decision makers through personal contacts and direct mail; holding seminars, rallies and news making events; production of regular newspaper, magazine, television and radio coverage and obtaining endorsements from contacts. In the context of development programmes, media advocacy can be achieved by important people in international agencies and can be gradually taken over by people in national and local leadership positions (Waisbord, 2001).

Conclusion

This study presents evidence to suggest that independent media play a critical role in improving governance and reducing corruption, increasing economic efficiency and stability, and creating positive social and environmental change. The media provide information to actors throughout society allowing them to participate in the decisions and debates that shape their lives. The media also play an important monitoring role in a democracy that enables citizens to hold their governments and elected officials accountable-leading to better policies and service implementation. Based on these, media development should be viewed as a desirable development outcome that underpins all others. Effect of media on social change and transformation differs. This is because of differences in thought patterns, differences in the nature of that impact on decision attitudes, everyday social relations, and cultural differences. Social change in the community-oriented efforts to leave the elements that must be abandoned, oriented to the formation of a new element, and oriented to values that are already on past mass. The impact of mass media includes the occurrence of deviant behaviour from social norms and cultural values which requires social change. To this end, the desired change can only be brought about if mass media is effectively utilized to change orientation of individuals, communities and groups and by extension various ethnic and political groups with a view to attaining peaceful and prosperous status as citizen of the country.

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