

Review

Mass media and the politics of underdevelopment in Africa: Nigeria in perspective

James Adebayo John¹ and Olasupo Olusola^{2*}

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Mass media have been an indispensable fulcrum of development, especially in the West from where they were imported to Africa. However, realities on the African continent have failed and weakened the potential of mass media as resources for development, as vast population of Africans live in the rural areas without access to mass media. Besides, those areas have poverty of electricity, good roads and other facilities, making the mass media dread to tread the terrains. Illiteracy, diseases and poverty define the rural areas of Africa, and a person needs a measure of education to understand the media messages. This has put the government and development agents at sixes and sevens with regard to disseminating or getting information across to this category of people. It is on this basis that this research work examines the mass media and the politics of underdevelopment in Africa: Nigeria in perspective. The study is driven by development media theory. The theory is relevant because it discusses how government can make use of the media to attain national goals. The mass media are as good as ineffective if the goals of the establishment are not attained. Since the mass media have not been able to deliver development-oriented messages in the areas, the people are deformed, disconnected, and alienated from national grid of information that leads to development. The study, however, suggests the establishment of rural community radio to enhance development in Africa.

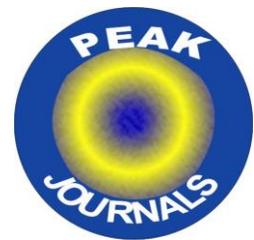
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INTRODUCTION

Information is life in Africa. Even after the death of African man, it is believed that he still communicates with his family members through dreams and necromancy. Africans had their means of mass communication before the arrival of modern media of mass communication such as radio, television, newspaper, magazine, billboard, Internet, book, films and sound recording. Market square, village square meeting, beating of metal gong, traditional festivals, blowing of flute and drumming serve as major means of mass communication in the rural areas of Africa from time immemorial. Studies have shown that seventy-percent of the African people live in the rural areas with no access to basic amenities enjoyed in the urban centres.

Every nation-state, regardless of whether it is

developed or developing, is usually divided into two: the rural and urban areas. Africa, as a continent, is not an exception. Africa, as a continent, therefore has urban cities (like, Lagos, Abuja, Pretoria, Cairo, Miami, Accra, and many others). The continent also has rural areas that are too many to mention. Development in any area of these divides (urban or rural areas) and does not directly translate to national development. The emphasis here therefore is to understand the meaning of urban, rural and national development beginning with urban development. A defined area can be considered urban if it undergoes continuous process of development. This is why urban area means "an area of continuous development". This perhaps explains why there is a heavy presence of basic necessities of life in Nigeria's



¹Department of Mass Communication, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

²Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Social and Management Science, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: olasupoolusola12@yahoo.com, tai4john@yahoo.com, Tel: +2348038079426

urban cities while the rural areas remain in a continuous state of lack. In Africa today, urban development has received and is still receiving a greater attention than rural development. This is true to the extent that rural development is merely enshrined in Africa's development plan while very minimal effort is usually made to extend indices of development to the rural areas. Basic amenities like functional social institutions, big businesses, government agencies and corporations; recreation facilities; and ICT resources have become common features of urban life in Africa. On the other hand, Nigeria's rural areas are afflicted with "poor and un-motorable roads, inadequately or non-existent potable water supply, poorly equipped and poorly staffed schools, low commercial activities and subsistent peasant agriculture that cannot produce enough food to feed itself, how much more producing raw material for the industry (Nkala, 1990)". Rural development therefore involves development action plan that seeks to provide meaningful transformation of rural people and their rural community. It entails physical, infrastructure and human development for the rural setting. Effective rural development should therefore aim at ensuring that indices of physical, human and material developments which have remained common features of Nigerian cities sufficiently trickles down to the rural communities. There is no reason Africa's rural communities should not enjoy constant and adequate power and water supply; good access roads; agriculture; functional and well staffed social institutions, and heavy investment on human capital development, to mention a few. From the above, it is clear that urban development is strictly concerned with development occurring in urban centres. It is also clear that rural development is concerned with the development of the rural communities. The question then is: what is national development? Luis Ramiro Beltran cited in Nwuneli (1985) broadly defined national development as:

...a directed and widely participatory process of deep and accelerated sociopolitical change geared towards producing substantial change in the economy; the technology, the ecology and the overall culture of a country, so that the moral and material advancement of the majority of its population can be obtained within conditions of generalized equality, dignity, justice and liberty.

It is observed from this definition that national development is deeper in meaning and large in scope than urban and or rural development. It is a development that embraces and encompasses the length and breadth of a nation. This means that developing the urban cities in isolation of the rural areas and vice versa can hardly pass for national development. National development therefore is more of a whole system with rural and urban development serving as the functional parts of the whole system. By implication, a nation is said to be on course for national development when both the rural and urban areas of the nation are undergoing continuous, and

sustained quantitative and qualitative positive human, material and environmental transformation. This is why Opubor (1985) argues that "any notion or definition of development in Africa that does not take into account fundamental change, for the better in the lifestyle of the peasant farmer, the fishermen, the petty trader, the herdsmen or the labourers are grossly inadequate". The emphasis here is on incorporating the urban areas and rural residents into the national development action plan. This is why Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) argues that "a conscious effort to positively transform few urban areas within a nation without transformation of numerous rural communities cannot be equated to national development. A true national development should as a matter of necessity involve the positive transformation of the overall nation's human capital, physical domain and material wellbeing". Hence, this study will concentrate mass media and politics of underdevelopment in Africa: Nigeria in perspective.

DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING NATIONS

We may not understand the differences between developing and developed nation without first understanding the whole idea of branding very few nations 'developed nations' and numerous others 'developing nations'. The implication is that of all the divides or contrasts that exist in the world, the one between developing and developed nations seem to be more pronounced. Today many nations of the world are described with terms like less developed countries (LDC), underdeveloped countries (UDC), third World Countries or developing nations. In the same contemporary times, you will still find few nations branded developed countries or advanced countries or even first world. The basis for this categorization lies on a number of factors which included but not limited to:

- i. The state of the nations' economy.
- ii. The level of per capital income.
- iii. The living standard.
- iv. The adequacy and level of functional institutions.
- v. The stability or otherwise of the political system.
- vi. The magnitude of physical development.
- vii. The number of highly skilled manpower.

Developed nations therefore refer to the "countries with a per capital annual income of more than \$2000 and consequent higher standard of living..." (The Webster's Dictionary; 1992). On the contrary, *The Webster Dictionary* describes developing nations as "countries with a commensurate poor standard of living among most of the population". Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) further submit that "some nations are considered or termed "developed" because the living standards in such nations

are quite high when compared to the living standards in developing nations". The developed nations witness high and fast economic development, while poor nations witness poor and slow economic growth; developed nations have high level of literate people, while developing nations have low level of literate people. Developed nations record high technological growth, while developing nations have low technological growth; developed nations of the world have a stable political system, while developing nations witness unstable and violent change of government.

FAILURES OF MASS MEDIA IN AFRICA

Development oriented-messages are largely elusive in the rural areas of Africa. Media, as a custodian of development, have done little or nothing in the dissemination of development messages in those areas. The fate of the rural African people in the face of urban-centric media practice and elusive development-oriented messages still hang in the balance with regard to information, mobilization and education.

MEDIA NEGLIGENCE OF NEWSWORTHY EVENTS IN RURAL AFRICA

Information is *sine qua non* to the development of any society. This is due to the fact that absence of information triggers off under-development. The modern means of mass communication have not lived up to the expectation of Africans in terms of adequate coverage of newsworthy events in the rural areas of Africa. Wilson (1999) notes that "seventy percent of African people live in the rural areas without access to modern media of communication". Power supply is largely lacking in those places, cum access road. Though, there has been a sustained advocacy from some interest groups for the establishment of community radio, the type of radio station that enjoys communal ownership, the Federal Government is visibly and considerably unwilling to grant the licenses. The only time the media, especially radio, cover the events in the rural areas is when a group of individuals decamp from an opposition party to a ruling party; pledge the loyalty to the ruling government or commend the ruling political party about fictitious projects it has been able to complete. This makes the rural Africans deformed, and gets disconnected from national grid of information.

MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA

Africans believe human rights are of relevance to and originate from the West. A host of human rights abuses is neglected by the media, which are supposed to serve as

the advocates against the evils. Of course, justice is absent in a clime where human rights abuses are the order of the day. Violence against women, in different forms and shades, is swept under the carpet even if the media know about them. The cultural beliefs, which labelled women as inferior to men, have blindfolded the media men and women from standing up against injustice. What about the police brutality of citizens? Nigeria is one of the countries where police victimization, brutalization, intimidation, and extra-judicial killings are prevalent. The media, as a societal watchdog, have ethical as well as social responsibilities to nail the menace in the bud. It is unfortunate; however, the media have shirked the ethical and social responsibilities in this regard.

MEDIA INDIFERENCE TO REPORTING HEALTH CHALLENGES AND CORRUPT PRACTICES IN RURAL AFRICA

The rural areas of Africa are much ravaged by the incidence of epidemic without corresponding information from the media and the health workers about the diseases. The threat of polio infection is most conspicuous. It took somewhat longer for polio to be recognized as a major problem in developing countries. Lameness surveys during 1970s revealed that the disease was also prevalent in developing countries. As a result, during the 1970s, routine immunization was introduced worldwide as part of national immunization programmes, helping to control the disease in many developing countries. In 1998, when Global Polio Eradication Initiative began, polio paralyzed more than 1000 children worldwide every day. Since then, 2.5 billion children have been immunized against polio, thanks to the cooperation of more than 200 countries and 20 million volunteers, backed by an international investment of more than US\$ 8 billion. Today, polio has been eliminated from most parts of the world but still remain endemic in some countries like Nigeria, Afghanistan, etc.

One of the objectives of the Nigeria Millennium Development Goals number borders on reduction of child mortality; improve maternal health, and combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The fact that three out of the eight goals borders on health is indicative of the fact that health related issues are very serious development problems in Nigeria. Infants and under-five mortality rate which were respectively 91 per 1000 and 133 per live births in 1999 rose to 100 per 1000 and 201 per 1000 lives in 2003 (NMDG and NPC, 2004). This situation is similar in the case of maternal mortality and the contraction of HIV/AIDS and other related diseases. However, studies reveal that of all these health problems, attitudes to antenatal care, and the postnatal care and the quality of health delivery are factors that greatly affect maternal morbidity and mortality (NMDGS report, 2005).

The communication challenges here therefore has to do with how to generate enough media campaigns that can help to realistically address the knowledge gap, change or reinforce or modify attitudes and behaviour towards health practices.

Most of the health-programmes enacted on the media about polio immunization, family planning, tuberculosis, actions against female genital mutilations, HIV/AIDS are couched in the language of the elite-English. Therefore, rural dwellers in Africa are alienated from health information.

Corruption affects political and social development in a number of ways. Igwe (2012) notes that "in countries where corruption is systemic, political repression and suppression, particularly of political opposition and regime critics, becomes the most characteristic feature of political life, and domination and subordination of the main political relationship".

Corruption also affects political stability because it leads to military intervention in the political process, oftentimes resulting in the overthrow of not only authoritarian regimes but also democratically elected governments. It is on record that corruption is the most frequently cited reason for coup d'etat in Africa.

The impairment of political development and stability is directly related to socio-economic growth and development. National development is handicapped in an atmosphere of political instability and uncertainty, with the result that effective long-term planning is jeopardised (Hope, 2000 as cited by Igwe, 2012).

The social impact of corruption is the creation of an atmosphere of tension, dishonesty, and weak and/or selective law enforcement, which, in turn, breeds cynicism and erosion of faith in the political and administrative system. For example, the misallocation of resources rewards the indolent and those with the right connections, resulting in a disconnection between reward and effort (Ake, 1991 as cited by Igwe, 2012). But most importantly, in countries where corruption is pervasive, coupled with weak law enforcement or the absence of the rule of law, the corrupted value system engendered encourages the perception that corruption is not only normal but a survival strategy or the means to get ahead.

The roles of the mass media as the watchdog of the government have been defeated in the situation, as many top media men and women are selectively hired to turn blind eyes to the corrupt practices perpetrated in the corridors of power.

PHONEY PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF THE BROADCAST MEDIA IN AFRICA

The media, in Africa, have witnessed a transition from watchdog to lapdog, vibrant to the lulled and vociferous to quiet. The media, especially the electronic, have become government megaphones. They have become the willing

tools in the hands of the government of the day in Africa. They are used to defame and unfairly criticize the opposition of the ruling government. The media have substituted their watchdog roles with lapdog roles. Most state and federal governments-owned media engage in top-down information dissemination process. They have ceased to serve as the voice of the voiceless and the oppressed, but rather the voice of the ruling government. Events regarding the welfare of the citizenry are reported at periphery. Besides, top principal officials of the media organizations are card-carrying members of the ruling party. Informed and unbiased messages are not being disseminated to the people by the nominal public media. Rather, it is all government propaganda.

Scholars have grouped the ownership of the mass media into two: public and private ownership. Studies have shown that nothing is public about the public ownership of the broadcast media. A public broadcast media is the type whose news reportage, analysis and events centre on the people. People are at the core of their activities, not the government. Therefore, most media of communication in Africa could best be described as government-media. The true public media which will put the people in the centre of their activities are yet to emerge in the continent. Therefore, instead of citizen-centric journalism, which, of course, propels development, the continent is witnessing government-centric journalism, information processing and dissemination.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

Africa witnesses retardation in physical development. James (2014) notes that "physical infrastructure is largely lacking in most rural areas of Africa". Public convenience is conspicuously absent. Many people defecate in the open, which, of course, can cause epidemic of diseases.

A heap of domestic waste welcomes visitors in most major cities of Africa, especially Nigeria. The government at all levels seem not have made any commitment to make the surroundings clean, and evacuate a heap of waste in different parts of their states. The unpleasant stench emanating from the waste constitutes a threat to the well-being of the people.

Access roads, potable water and stable power supply have been a mirage in most African countries. Unstable government also profoundly contributes to the stunted growth of Africa continent. The recent example is violence in Burundi, leading to the death of many innocent souls in the country.

All these developmental challenges demand a total attention from the media practitioners whose roles are to report environmental threats, development information, write editorials to bring the governments' attention to infrastructural and physical challenges in Africa, and help

orientate and mobilize citizens and government to support physical development in Africa.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A host of African scholars has written about the rural information systems and access of rural dwellers to the media. Although a fitting theory to explain the phenomena in African is still rare, however, this research work is hinged on development media theory as it is relevant to the study.

Development media theory

This theory seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the press in countries that are classified as “developing countries” or “third world countries”. This study employs development media theory because it has to do with how the government mobilizes the media to serve the national goals in economic and social development. Information as scarce natural resources must be carefully managed by the government to achieve national goals. Some of the goals include political integration, economic self-sufficiency and eradication of disease (Dominick, 2002; Tiamiyu, 2003; Folarin, 2005).

A major point of relevance of the theory to this study is the recognition of access to and use of media resources and its contribution to national integration and development tasks and issues. Moemeka (1985) explains that the theory stands for positive uses of the mass media in national development and for the autonomy and cultural identity of individual nations. It accepts economic development and nation building as overriding objectives. This is why it supports the subordination of certain freedom of media organizations and media personnel to their responsibility for helping in national development. It also upholds the right of the government of the day to call media personnel and institutions to order in the interest of national development.

Folarin (2002) citing Dennis McQuail outlines the basic principles of the theory:

- i) That media should accept to carry out positive development tasks in line with national established policy.
- ii) That freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
- iii) That media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
- iv) The media should give priority in the news and information to link with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or socially.
- v) The journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.

vi) That in the interest of development, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict media operation, end the devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified in the principle of this theory, it is important that Nigeria media should be in the forefront in promotion of environmental protection campaign and sustainable development.

Basically, the mass media are required to join the government in the efforts to develop the nation. The purpose of the media is not so much to provide information or to allow expression of opinions and views, but to coordinate information and communication efforts so that they are geared towards national development.

CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that mass media alone cannot ensure the needed development in Africa. It is, therefore, incumbent on not only the government in Africa, but also communication experts and scholars to work on the deficiency of mass media in Africa with a view to finding solutions to the weaknesses. Mass media have failed their traditional hallmark to disseminate information to nooks and crannies of society. The rural areas, the terrain, the mass media dread to tread, have been neglected by information such as on health, economy, justice, education, politics, agriculture, which can better the lives of rural citizens. However, there is a ray of hope in the establishment, control and ownership of community radio stations and viewing centres for the relevant information to be disseminated to rural sector of the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many interest groups have been in the forefront of the advocacy for the establishment of community radio; the type of radio that enjoys community ownership, management and control. However, most governments of African countries have not mandated the establishment of such radio stations through issuance of licenses. Rural community radio engages the rural dwellers as active participants in the media world, not as the passive, captive and the undefended. It puts the people at the driver's seat of the media workings and operations. Individuals, as a matter of right, should have access to media and the right to be served according to their own needs. Therefore, the site of rural community radio stations and even viewing centres in most rural areas for education, enlightenment, information become imperative.

African Heads of Government, through National Broadcasting Commission, should mandate all the media stations in the continent to have a local-language version

of all the English Language or French Language programmes.

Media organizations should exist primarily for the people, not for government alone. Media, especially radio, should give priority attention to national culture and language. It should give priority to news and information links with rural areas for balanced and unbiased news reportage and analyses.

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