

Mass Communication and Mass Incommunication: A Revisit

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ABSTRACT

The need to revisit Adesanoye's view on the prevailing communication gap between the urban and the rural areas over twenty-five years ago which he termed "mass incommunication" was as a result of the fact that the situation, rather than improving is increasingly deteriorating. The authors in analyzing the situation discovered that even when and where concerted efforts are made by the media industry to involve the Nigerian populace in a participatory and interactive communication process, the success is always limited by factors such as poverty, illiteracy, infrastructure, ownership, legal constraints, technology and media commercialization. The writers suggested and agreed with other media scholars on the establishment of rural radio and community newspaper. The government must revive the Adult Literacy campaign to improve the literacy level among the populace. Finally, there should be a return to the era of public service broadcasting. In essence, government news media should be well funded so as to accommodate the interest of everybody in participatory and interactive process of communication.

Keywords: Mass Communication, Mass Incommunication

1. Introduction

This paper revisits Adesanoye's "On Mass Communication and Mass Incommunication in Nigeria" written in 1988. Adesanoye argued that despite the prevalence of mass media institutions and their paraphernalia in Nigeria, the Nigerian masses did not have adequate access to the much needed information through the conventional mass media. The main reason for the above was the structure of mass media ownership and distribution which reflected pro-urban concentration and bias.

Adesanoye (1988:60) further argued that since the Nigerian masses did not have access to information through the mass media, one could not:

legitimately and accurately talk of 'mass' communication in Nigeria since the media of mass communication were used mainly to talk *to* the masses rather than *with* the masses; neither were they used by the masses to talk with each other. He concluded by positing that there was a state of "mass incommunication" in Nigeria and there was urgent need for a change through democratization of the mass media.

The inadequacy of the country's mass media system featured prominently during the National Communication Policy Conference (February 2-7, 1987). The mass media elitist nature and its obvious lack of interest in the lives of the people were highlighted.

More than twenty-five years after Adesanoye wrote "On Mass Communication and Mass Incommunication", the issue remains relevant in contemporary times.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the mass media situation in Nigeria with a view to finding out if there has now been any major improvement in the media orientation in Nigeria, which would allow us to say that the mass media talk 'with' the masses, and the masses use the mass media to "talk with each other".

The need to revisit the issue is inspired by the position of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) (2011:1) which argues that:

Knowledge and information are essential for people to respond successfully to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic and technological changes, including those that help to improve agricultural productivity, food security and rural livelihoods.

Many communication scholars have also examined the imbalance in communication by the mass media between the elite, the well-informed few, who reside mostly in the urban centres and the uninformed poor, who are the majority of the population and live mostly in the rural areas. Moemeka (1981) advocates the use of mass media

to educate the rural people; he however doubts the capacity of the mass media to perform this role effectively because of the prevailing structure of the mass media in Nigeria. Moemeka (1981:23) posits that:

If the media are deficient in making available to the rural areas a constant flow of news and facts about events and activities – information – it is doubtful whether they can be used effectively in exchange of ideas – communication – which involves participation and access.

Succinctly, this paper will attempt to answer the following questions.

- (a) What are the obvious differences between the pre-1988 and post-1988 characteristics of the mass media in Nigeria?
- (b) What are the factors contributing to the success or failure of the Nigerian mass media to deliver effective communication to majority of Nigerians?

2. Conceptual Clarification

Communication: the exchange of information between people, for example, by means of speaking, writing, or using a common system of signs or behavior (Dictionary of media studies). Communication according to dictionary of mass communication is the process by which people share ideas, information, opinions, belief, attitudes, feelings, knowledge or experiences. The term, communication, is a derivative of two words “communicare” (a latin word) meaning “to share” and “communize”- French - meaning common. The basis of communication is the sharing of ideas between people to attain commonality.

Development, according to Akin Mabogunje (cited in Adesanoye 1988:62), is a process of moving the whole social system upward so as to enhance the capacity of each member of society to realize his inherent potentials and to effectively cope with the changing circumstances of his life. John Merrill (cited in Adesanoye 1988:62) also asserts that communication is necessary, not only for all aspects of a person’s development, but also for all aspects of a nation’s development. Akinfeleye (2008:56) describes development as the massive transformation, political, social and economic mobilization of human resources towards the achievement of both vertical and horizontal integration. Sobowale (2008:82) defines national development as a functional and orderly transformation of a people’s way of life: a transformation that arises from a conscious and recognized need to change familiar beliefs, attitudes and old ways of attaining goals in favour of more dynamic and efficient methods.

The power inherent in using communication for national development is not in doubt, but communication will not achieve the desired result if it is not cautiously applied, because it has the potential of serving as a catalyst and sometimes acting as a drag in the wheel of development and progress. In fact, Far and Shah (1997) cited in Soola (2008:19) argue that:

The mass media, rather than being purveyors of progress and a means of overcoming underdevelopment, can in fact, just be one more cause of underdevelopment in that they may serve not only to reinforce but to perpetuate existing power relation and structures of inequality.

In the same vein, Moemeka (1981:23) stresses that the present structure of the media of mass communication in developing world (especially Nigeria) leaves one in no doubt about their dysfunctional impact. At whatever level mass communication is put to use, it must as a matter of fact bring positive change and positive development. In a situation where the mass media fails to motivate, persuade and bring about the expected positive change, then it cannot be referred to as mass communication but mass “dysfunctions” to borrow Moemeka’s word.

Although communication writers like Rogers (1973) emphasize that the relative power of the mass media is indirect and contributory, and its development impact is assumed rather than proven (Rogers, 1973 cited in Uche, 1999:12) yet, one can safely argue that without effective communication, a nation cannot function effectively.

2.1 Pre -1988 Period

Adesanoye (1988:62) citing Isiekwere (1986), states that in 1987, Nigeria boasted of 23 daily newspapers, 29 weeklies published in English, 9 vernacular weeklies, 54 magazines, 29 radio stations, 32 television stations and 25,000 hoardings (Momoh 1987). By 1988, Nigeria had met the UNESCO standard of 50 radio sets per 1,000 population and 20 television receivers per 1000 population. Despite the abundance of mass media in Nigeria, the media failed to support the developmental efforts of the country (Adesanoye, 1988). Also, citing Meril (1974), Adesanoye (1988:62) further states that should the mass media of a nation neglect to mobilize the citizens of that nation towards the attainment of upward mobility, then they (the media) have failed in their most important role. They may accordingly be considered to be guilty of social irresponsibility and criminal apathy. It is obvious from the above that the mass media scene in pre-1988 had not been too supportive of the developmental efforts of the country.

2.2 Post – 1988 Period

There are two major significant developments in the Nigeria media scene in post-1988 era. The first being the termination of government monopoly over the broadcast media through the promulgation of Decree 38 of 1992. By 1992, the federal government allowed for the ownership of private radio and television stations. The deregulation of the broadcast media has led to the multiplicity of media outfit in Nigeria. For instance, virtually all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja have their own radio and television stations existing along with private ones (BBC News, 2009).

The second development is the disappearance of most federal and state owned newspapers from the news-stand. Popular dailies like the Daily Times, New Nigerian (owned by the federal government), The Sketch (Oyo State), The Herald (Kwara State), The Observer (Edo State) et-cetera, disappeared from the print medium genre.

Presently, newspapers and magazines are concentrated fully in private hands while government still have an edge in radio and television ownership. The dynamism of the Nigeria media scene was further captured by BBC News (2009) where it reported that,

the Nigeria media scene is one of the most vibrant in Africa. Statements on radio and TV services reach virtually all parts of the country and operate at federal and regional levels. All the 36 states own their own radio stations and most of them operate TV services. There are more than 100 national and local newspapers and publications, and some of them are state owned.

Infact, Oso (2012) quoting Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) data, put the figure of radio and television ownership in Nigeria as follows:

- (a) Radio: Federal government 43, State government 54 and Private 24
- (b) Television: Federal government 41, State government 29 and Private 12

In addition, FAO (2004:2), cited by Adesanoye (1988), in its report on the Nigerian Adult Literacy rate states that in 2002, the literacy level for female was 55% and for male, 74%. The improvement in literacy level should enhance exchange of ideas through communication and eventually improve the standard of living in the country. Also the combination of media vibrancy and the improved literacy level should have positive impact on the socio-economic growth and well-being of Nigerians.

However, the opposite of the above seems to be the case, particularly when the 2007/2008 report of UN Human Development is considered. According to the UN Human Development report, the national poverty level is estimated at 43% with over 70.2% of Nigerians earning less than US \$1 a day.

Though it could be argued that communication cannot be the major cause of the nation's developmental woes, nevertheless, in view of UNESCO's (1988), cited by Adesanoye (1988), observation on the correlation between communication and national productivity (already noted; see above), it is obvious that the Nigerian mass media contribute a lot to the developmental problems being faced by the country.

Based on the above, one can affirm that Adesanoye's assertion regarding the media situation in Nigeria before 1988 is still valid today: the Nigerian mass media have neglected to mobilize the citizens of the nation towards the attainment of upward mobility, and have therefore failed in their most important role. They (the media) may accordingly be said to be guilty of social irresponsibility and criminal apathy.

In what could be regarded as an admission of the Nigerian mass media's failure to assist in lifting majority of Nigerians above poverty line, the Nigerian Guild of Editors in its letter of invitation to Professor Akin I. Mabogunje to deliver a lecture to the Working Committee of the Guild on Friday, December 12, 2008, states inter alia that "too often, our leaders and the media have focused on oil, urban life and the elites to the neglect of the majority who live in our rural areas". The Nigerian mass media have arguably 'left behind' the majority of Nigerians in the 'national train' of development.

3. Factors Affecting Mass Communication In Nigeria

Evidence provided by Adesanoye more than twenty-five years ago on the situation of the Nigerian mass media has not changed. The mass media, especially newspapers, remain pro-urban, and are concentrated in the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja, Port-Harcourt while radio and television stations are present in virtually all the state capitals of the federation.

A critical examination of the situation shows that even if concerted efforts are made by the communication industry to involve the Nigerian populace in a participatory and interactive communication process, the success will be limited by certain factors. These factors include, among others, poverty, illiteracy, infrastructure, ownership, legal constraints, technology and commercialization. A close look at these factors and how they affect each medium of communication will shed more light on the inability of the Nigerian media to communicate effectively with the masses.

3.1 *Poverty*

In view of the fact that over 70.2% of the population earn less than \$1 a day (UN Human Development Report, 2007/2008), it is obvious that over 70% of Nigerians cannot afford to buy a newspaper that costs between 100–200 naira, or a magazine that costs an average of N500 per copy. The poverty level, according to Umechukwu (2001) cited in Ijeh (2008:317), manifests itself in the inability of many to afford newspapers or magazines on a regular basis. The situation has given rise to a “free reading” culture in the urban centres as evident at newspaper stands all over the country where vendors permit limited reading of newspapers and magazines for free or for a fee far lower than their costs. The poverty level greatly affects the purchasing power of a household in buying latest electronic gadgets like a television set. A television set that costs about N15,000 is beyond the reach of an average Nigerian.

3.2 *Infrastructure*

The decay in infrastructural facilities in the country is another factor affecting effective communication system. The most critical of the problems has to do with power supply which affects both production and reception of information. In production, most news media (newspapers, radio and television) rely heavily on power generating sets, a factor that increases their running cost. The attending high cost of fuelling and maintenance ultimately find its way to the consumers of the mass media – advertisers and audience. Thus, advertisement rates are increased from time to time to cover running cost while cover prices are reviewed regularly upward (Ijeh, 2008:317). In the same vein, households cannot watch their television sets regularly as a result of irregular power supply.

In addition, the issue of bad road networks has limited the circulation of most newspapers and magazines to urban centres. Also, most national dailies are read in some parts of Nigeria late in the evening or the second day due to bad roads. Bad roads have also prevented most reporters of radio and television stations from featuring news stories from rural areas since most rural communities are not accessible by road.

3.3 *Commercialization*

This is a concept that has to do with putting economic/market considerations before public interest. The media have dual characteristics of being a commercial endeavour on one part and cultural/ideological framing on the other part. Commercialization involves attaching financial value not only to media products but also by selling the audience to the advertisers while deemphasizing the need to inform.

Bettig and Hall (2003:5) explain the relationship between the mass media and advertisement in their writing that “the history of mass media is intimately bound up with the history of advertising”. Both broadcast and the print media depend heavily on advertisement for revenue and continued survival. It is an acceptable fact that “news sell the paper, advertisement sustain it”.

Commercialization became a major phenomenon in the Nigerian media operations in the 80’s as a result of President Ibrahim Babangida’s Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The main thrust of the programme was for the government owned media houses that depended solely on government funding to generate their own funds through commercials and thus become financially self-sustaining.

For instance, in print what one would consider abnormal pagination is now accepted where both the front and back covers of newspapers are used for advert (see, for example, **The Nation**, Monday Feb. 2, 2009). This phenomenon is called wrap-around. There is also a subtle control of news media by advertisers and political office holders through various supplements, sponsorships, et-cetera. These supplements and sponsorships weaken the effectiveness of the newspapers as agent of development. The broadcast media are not free from commercialization influence. Television and radio often times surrender their prime time to sponsored programmes at the expense of the public (Ajijola and Ige, 2012).

3.4 *Illiteracy*

Although there has been a significant improvement in the literacy level of Nigerians, according to UN Human Development Report, 2007/2008, the level of literacy as regards English as a second language is not encouraging. Newspapers written in any language need a certain level of literacy for comprehension. Nwosu (1990) cited in Ijeh (2008:317) describes the situation of illiteracy in Nigeria thus:

Majority of Nigerians are illiterates and live in the rural areas where they are cut off from the flow of mass media messages. By extension, these illiterate Nigerians cannot be reached with newspapers or magazines because they cannot read the English Language and many cannot read the local language in print. It is thought that radio and television have solved the problem of reading but this is only minimally.

Nwosu (1990) asserts that researches have shown that there are by far more English language programmes in Nigeria radio and television than local ones. In essence, most of the content of radio and television are not understood by illiterate Nigerians.

3.5 *Ownership*

The problem of ownership greatly affects the objectivity and effectiveness of mass media in Nigeria. The overbearing influence of ownership on the media is well documented in literature. Anaeto, Solo-Anaeto and Tejumaiye (2009: 78) posits that ownership is an important issue in media organization because ownership determines the nature of the media, the funding pattern, the performance of the media and the degree of control by the owner.

Before the deregulation of broadcast media in 1992, radio and television were owned by the government and by extension, mere government propaganda machinery in both presentation and content. The newspapers do not fare better. They usually soften their criticism of government as a way of attracting advertisement placement.

The battle for survival by privately-owned media for advertiser's account is quite understandable since they must make profit on investment. It is amazing to find a government-owned media competing fiercely with the private owners for advertiser account at the expense of informing the people about government activities.

Sobowale (2008:87) captures this scenario when he posits that:

...no serious efforts have been made to date to appreciate the economics of the media industry, hence the mix-up of roles of and expectations for the media. A more profitable arrangement would ensure that while the private media cater to the entertainment, information and cultural needs of the [urban] elite, the government sponsored media should, in addition to these, be devoted to mobilizing the rural population, raising the level of their consciousness, teaching basic skills, encouraging greater participation in the production success, ensuring the success of rural integration and extolling values that are necessary for national development. To expect the private media to perform these functions or share them to the same degree with government media amount to an abdication of responsibility by a government that ought to be more consigned with the development of all sections of society.

The advent of private ownership of the broadcast media has not changed the above scenario significantly. Many of them, except few ones, for fear of losing government patronage, are usually pro-government in their contents and presentation.

3.6 *Technology*

Technology according to Sobowale (2008:89) is a key factor in modern communication strategies. Our low level of technological development does not encourage the production of media production component; hence, we rely heavily on the importation of media components. The importation of media components and their maintenance problem most times affect the quality and quantity of media products. For instance, Minaj television station in Nigeria was sometimes ago closed down for more than two months as a result of transmission equipment breakdown. In many of such cases, experts have to be flown in from abroad to rectify the problem or a new set of component purchased at exorbitant cost.

3.7 *Legal Constraints*

The legal environment as regards dissemination of media products will greatly affects their performance. A restrictive legal environment definitely will not enhance communication for development. Although there is nowhere in the world where there is absolute freedom of the press and where there is great autonomy for the press, an attached responsibility accompanied it.

Sobowale (2008:90) captures the effects of legal constraints as communication effectiveness when he stated that:

An unnecessarily restrictive legal system is likely to inhibit the mass media in several ways. For instance, it is likely to foster formal and informal censorship which may result in the encouragement of or connivance at inefficiency, indiscipline, corruption and maladministration in high places – factors which are inimical to national growth and development.

Nigeria as at today still retained in her statute book such laws as the sedition law, the Newspaper registration laws, the Newspaper Amendment Act of 1964, the defamation laws et-cetera. All these laws restrict the mass media from communicating effectively well with the masses.

4. **Suggested Way Forward**

The factors affecting mass media contribution to national development can be improved if all stake holders - government (Federal, State and Local) - and media professionals are committed to mobilizing communication media for national development.

Media scholars in development communication have suggested the way forward in using communication as a tool for national development. Moemeka (1981), Adesanoye (1988) and Sobowale (2008),

all agree that to move the rural populace forward and integrate them into the national discourse, rural press and rural radio must be established.

The established rural press should be in local language for effectiveness. News and focus must be on the rural people and language of presentation should take into cognizance their literacy level. The experience of the past, according to Moemeka (1981:31), should be avoided where “Gbohun gbohun” - a Yoruba newspaper - for instance, was circulated more in the cities of Western Nigeria than in rural areas. In addition to the establishment of rural press, government should also embark on rural radio ‘by the people and for the people’. In essence, the rural people should be involved in the formulation and execution of programmes.

Establishment of the rural press and rural radio should be the priority of the Federal, State and Local government. In fact, Sobowale (2008:87) argues that “given the prevailing situation in Nigeria, it is as unrealistic to expect private newspapers – which must return profit on investment – to focus on the coverage of the rural areas as it is for government newspapers to seek with their private counterparts for profit”.

The rural press should be participatory as described by Kasoma (1991) cited in Soola (2002:169) “... It should be compiled, printed and published ... by the rural people themselves and it should be published in a language spoken by the majority of the people for whom it is published”.

Establishment of rural press and rural radio will not achieve the desired result if efforts are not made to improve the infrastructural level in the country. The infrastructural improvement should cover provision of stable power supply and good road networks among others. Provision of social amenities in the rural areas will also reduce migration of people from rural areas to the cities.

For mass media to excel in any given society, the populace must be educated. Education however is not confined to classrooms alone. Efforts must be made by government through educational agencies to revive the Adult Literacy campaign targeted at the rural populace. Mass media can assist in educating the rural people through reinforcement of acquired knowledge.

Furthermore, there should be a return to the era of public service broadcasting. In essence, government news media should be well funded so as to accommodate the interest of everybody in participatory and interactive process of communication.

5. Conclusion

The state of the mass media in Nigeria is still as it was more than twenty-five years ago when Adesanoye highlighted the issue. In a situation where the media’s intention is positive towards effective communication, some factors will always affect their good intention. Such factors include poverty, illiteracy, infrastructures, legal constraints, ownership, technology and commercialization. The paper agrees with the suggestion of media scholars in the establishment of community radio and community press as a panacea for the neglect of the rural populace. In addition, government media should be well-funded to accommodate the views and aspirations of majority of Nigerians in an interactive communication process. Finally, there is a need for all stakeholders to join hands in addressing factors that affect the mass media from contributing effectively to national development.

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