

Impact of Community Radio on Public Awareness of Government Policy Agenda in Nigeria

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Abstract

Scholars have maintained that since the advent of alternative media, community-based media have ensured media pluralism, diversity of content and the representation of society's different groups and interests. The research examines the impact of community radio on public awareness of government policy agenda. It discusses the functions and convergence views on community radio and community journalism, and the argument on the need for community radio that would strictly be devoted to the coverage of issues and events in the rural and semi-urban communities where people still have limited access to media messages. The study further examines the functions of community radio, as well as the objectives of community journalism in national development. We adopted the Development Media theory as framework because community media create the atmosphere for audience participation in relation to issues of rural and national development.

Keywords: Community radio, media, public awareness, national development, policy agenda

1. INTRODUCTION

Community radio broadcasting is designed and structured by the local for the rural communities to meet its expression and enlightenment needs.

Konkwo, (2010) and Megwa (2011) add that community radio has demystified Radio as Community dwellers take pride in it and consider it as their own.

Alumuku (2006) contends that "community radio is emerging as one of the best forms of local community communication." Such a grassroots communication approach according to Traber (1986) can become an agent for change in religious, socio-economic development, and in the struggle for human rights.

Alumuku (2006) identifies two aspects of community radio. These are geographical community radio and community of interest radio. He argued that geographically defined communities are "those communities which exist in a specific locality and which construct meaning from a common language and symbols and therefore share an identity by virtue of these." Conversely, communities of interest as reasoned by him are not defined by where people live geographically but "rather by what they are interested in. Their interest could be music or local language or their involvement in adult education at various levels."

Community Broadcasting is community owned, peoples' oriented and less profit driven. It has the capacity to facilitate and smoothen effective communication in places where the presence of Mass Media is not well felt, thus fostering development in other media marginalized communities. Through Community Broadcasting, crimes at grassroots level can be prevented while civil education, cross-gender dialogue, cultural literacy among other things can be harnessed for development purposes. In view of its strength to mobilize people to participate in the art and science of governance at the grassroots level where majority of the people live especially in Africa, community broadcasting is endorsed by many as a tool for advocacy and development journalism.

Kurpius (1999) outlines some of the major benefits of community journalism. These are "increased diversity, greater depth and context of the news coverage, and a stronger understanding of the various communities that make a particular viewing area."

This paper holistically takes a look at community media with particular emphasis on Nigeria. The research will specifically pay particular attention on the impact of community radio on public awareness of Government policy agenda.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The argument on the need for community journalism hinges on the fact that established community media would strictly be devoted to the coverage of issues and events in the rural and semi-urban communities where people still have limited access to media messages. This study will henceforth examine the concept of public opinion, the functions of community radio, as well as the objectives of community journalism in national development.

2. COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

Community journalism or civic journalism is a new area of focus for mass communicators all over the world. Because of the strength of the rural press to mobilize people to participate in the art and science of governance at the grassroots level where majority of the people live especially in Africa, community journalism is endorsed by

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Moemeka (1981), Myers (2000), Kurpius (1999) and other experts highlighted the relevance of community media in different spheres of human endeavour. For example, community journalism according to experts encourages journalists and news managers to find ways to capture citizen priorities, concerns and perspectives on different issues of importance to many different communities. As part of the process of creating connections to citizens, news managers are now finding ways to hear and understand the greatest diversity of voices and communities in their viewing and listening areas. Practicing community journalism helps both news content and source diversity by encouraging a discussion of citizen views and issues using a wide range of community perspectives.

The best reason for practicing community journalism is to create a stronger community understanding by news organizations and the journalists who work in these newsrooms. Inherent in this increased understanding is an ongoing conversation between journalists, citizens and public officials on issues facing their communities. The result of this conversation is larger file of community sources for stories and an increase in story ideas from various communities. These connections and the resulting coverage can help strengthen the value of your news product for citizens in your market (Kurpius, 1999).

The experiment on community newspapering in the 70s and 80s in Nigeria gives a clear picture of the potentials of community press in changing the fortunes of rural dwellers. For instance, through the *Moribund Community Concord* then owned by Late Chief M.K.O Abiola, Nigerian rural dwellers were journalistically blessed in different spheres of life.

Historically, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe played crucial roles in the establishment of community newspapers in Nigeria. The duo established provincial newspapers which marked the beginning of the recognition of the role of community journalism and national development.

The newspaper established by these leading nationalists, sociologically brought into limelight the cultural artifacts of rural people in print journalism. They painted the sorry picture of abject poverty and backwardness in rural areas and that drew the attention of the government to the plight of rural dwellers. These papers informed the rural dwellers of great things or issues within their domains and those in cities. Through vernacular newspapers, village dwellers were wooed and mobilized to participate in developmental programmes of their communities, thus engendering social change. (Ate, 2008).

The establishment of the rural newspapers fine-tuned the world view of the down trodden and brought them closer to decision making process at the central level. The community newspapers established at the time in questions serve as a springboard for the establishment of radio and television stations in the 60s and 70s. It is important to point out that the localization of radio and TV in Nigeria took a cue from community newspapers. Today, both TV and radio do broadcast to the people in their predominant local dialects. (Duyile, 2005).

Some decades ago, some few newspapers were packaged for exclusive audience. There were *Udoka* (Ibo), *Amama* (Hausa) and *Isokan* (Yoruba). The mass media are potent tools for social change and community journalism if well harnessed and husbanded by the appropriate stakeholders. Community media has the powers to evolve social change that could lead to rural transformation in different areas. Even though there are some few of community newspapers in Nigeria today, these papers are too insignificant to take care of the large and heterogeneous audience at the grassroots level.

In terms of broadcast media, though most state-owned radio and television stations in the country do broadcast in local languages, the establishment of full blown community broadcasting in Nigeria is still a matter of debate. A veteran broadcaster and one of the leading apostles of community broadcasting in Nigeria, Chief Taiwo Alimi at a workshop on “Curriculum Guidelines for Improved Journalism Education in Nigeria” organized by the Nigerian Press Council in October, 2007 argued that the country will not make any meaningful progress without community broadcasting. The time to embark on comprehensive community journalism according to him is now.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is built on Development Media theory on the grounds that community media, if well positioned, could facilitate remarkable development in the society.

Development media theory was put forward as a means of paying for the imbalance in development and information flow of the third world countries and a solution to the technological problems facing them. The third world countries are beset by problems that make development of mass communication system difficult (Daramola, 2003).

In order to deal with peculiar developmental challenges facing third world countries, this theory was put in place with emphasis on the right to communicate and the need to use communication to galvanize social

change. The tenets of Development Media Theory as enunciated by McQuail (2000) are:

- i. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with naturally established policy.
- ii. Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
- iii. Media should give priority in the content to the national culture and language.
- iv. Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
- v. In the interest of development, the state has a right to intervene or restrict media operation.

Folarin (1998) argues that development media theory seeks “to explain the normative behavior of the press in countries that are conventionally classified as “developing countries” or “third world countries”. He pontificates that there were (and are still) peculiar circumstances or characteristics of developing countries that make the application of other normative theories difficult. These according to him include:

1. Absence or inadequate supply of requisite communication infrastructure;
2. Relative limited supply of requisite professional skills;
3. Relative lack of cultural production resources;
4. Relatively limited availability of media-literate audience;
5. Dependence on the development world for technology, skills and cultural products.

The underlying fact behind the genesis of this theory was that there can be no development without communication. Under the four classical theories, capitalism was legitimized, but under the Development communication theory, or Development Support Communication as it is otherwise called, the media undertook the role of carrying out positive developmental programmes, accepting restrictions and instructions from the State. The media subordinated themselves to political, economic, social and cultural needs hence, the stress on "development communication" and "development journalism". There was tacit support from UNESCO for this theory. The weakness of this theory is that "development" is often equated with government propaganda.

4. CONCLUSION

This discourse establishes the fact that community media, especially community radio, has become a child of necessity for rural and community development in Nigeria.

The research find out that community radio provides a platform for the people of the community who are mainly grassroots oriented to participate and make contributions on ways by which the government can go about achieving its target and policy direction.

In view of this immense contribution of community radio, the government is urged to ensure that more community radio stations are given licenses to operate and the political will to educate and enlighten the public on government policy direction. It is also hoped that through this, the masses will be able to hold the government accountable for whatever decisions and steps taken that may not favour the generality of the people.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Having found that community broadcasting is beneficial for both community and national development; we make the following recommendations:

- (1) Nigerian government should establish a committee to ascertain the approaches to community broadcasting in nations where the practices are successful.
- (2) The regulatory body should make frantic efforts to start licensing community radio and television stations.
- (3) There should be a new regime of regulation in relation the licence fees and other charges. This will in turn create opportunity for different categories of communities to partake in the process.
- (4) The citizenry should be sensitized about community broadcasting so that they internalize their responsibilities in relation to content creation and contribution to national development.
- (5) Community broadcast stations must continue to propagate the policy agenda of the federal government and also carry the people along in their day to day activities.

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