

RE-POSITIONING THE MASS MEDIA FOR EFFECTIVE NATIONAL ECONOMIC REHABILITATION AND RELIANCE: A PROPOSAL FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The paper heralds the urgent need to re-position the mass-media for the essential (ask bequeathed it to rehabilitate Nigeria's ailing economy, being an important instrument of growth, transformation, knowledge and control. It also examines the impact of the micro-economic variables of media imbalance on macro indices. It then analyzes the policy-thrust of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Specifically, it demonstrates that the effective use of the *Development Communication* model would "turn around" the economy and make the vision of *NEEDS* a reality; thereby, making it the leading economy in Africa and a key player in the world.

Introduction

The mass media are central to the way society functions. Their centrality in society has strategically positioned them as instruments of power, which have the ability to dictate, influence or shape social, political and economic realities. This is because communication is both a fundamental and indispensable tool to the growth, development, sustenance and continuous survival of any society (UNESCO, 1981:40). This thinking, perhaps, might have influenced Akpan's (1987:1) position that "society arises and exists through communication".

Aside from the political problems which are rooted in ethnicity, somehow all Nigeria's problems boil down to economics. Most people would not bother that somebody from the North, East or West has one position in government, if people had employment, job and good standard of living. When Nigeria is economically stable, it could become politically stable and "all the ethnic rivalries would subside and the country would be a more comfortable place. In fact, armed robbery and such other civil insurrections would diminish. Where people are employed and have a steady source of income, law is more obeyed than in more impoverished nations where people are desperate. Scholars have been unified in the opinion that Nigeria's economic problems stem from corruption, mismanagement, Sack of industrialization and research imperatives. Nigeria only exports oil. This could be why Nnaji (1993:3) writes that:

Nigeria derives over 95% of its export revenue from oil. Yet, it is a country that has a multiplicity of natural resources and abundantly talented people. It is a single product export economy.

This paper is of the treatise that the media as a powerful organ of communication needs to be re-positioned for the essential task of effective national economic rehabilitation and reliance. The media are crucial to the functioning of the economy because of their important role in the marketing of goods and services. However, a circumspective look at the media in contemporary Nigeria shows corruption, sensationalism, ethnicity, manipulation of public space, protocol journalism, as some of the forces undermining their practice.

It is against the backdrop of the media-effect model or the hypodermic theory that this paper crusades for a re-positioning of media practice. It is hoped that such re-positioning will keep the media focused and purpose driven to achieve the much desired economic rehabilitation and reliance of the country.

The Media in a Globalised Economy

The global communication network is characterized by a structural imbalance that is prejudicial to the micro-economic indices that promote international investment and trade. This imbalance makes it difficult for Nigeria's media and indeed those of the third world to be positioned to effect national economic rehabilitation and reliance.

The imbalance is first created by the disparity in the volume of news and information emanating from the developed world and intended for consumption of developing economies and vice versa. Almost 80

percent of world news emanate from the major transnational agencies, however, they devote only 20 to 30 percent of news coverage to the developing countries. This makes it impossible for the developing countries to compete with their developed counterparts, particularly as Max Weber (1976:98) has shown that "a sociological treatment of communication requires an understanding that, today, it is not only necessarily a capitalistic, private enterprise, but also occupies a completely unique position in contrast to any other business".

A second factor that accounts for the imbalance is manifested in the quality of news about Africa. They portray Nigeria and indeed the continent in the most unfavourable light, thereby scaring away investors. They stress crises, strikes, street demonstrations, putsches, etcetera, or even hold the country up for ridicule.

The present order of things enshrines a form of political, economic and cultural colonialism, which is reflected in the often tendentious interpretation of news concerning the developing countries. Ume-Nwagbo (1982:5) attributes it to the fact that:

Most of these states began their independent existence under some variant of the western-style representative system of government, but for various reasons, most of these governments have been replaced in the 30 year period ending in the last decade, and today the earlier systems of government have been swept away. What we have today is an extension of colonial rule.

Information are therefore instruments of cultural domination and acculturation, used to transmit to developing countries messages harmful to their cultures, contrary to their values, detrimental to their developmental aims and efforts, and unsafe for the consumption of their economic population.

African countries themselves have not helped matters in this regard. Apart from underreporting one another's events, they portray themselves in bad light, emphasizing the gory and the sensational. Information is distorted by reference to economic, moral, cultural and political values. The imbalance, therefore, has grievous consequences for the economies of African countries, especially Nigeria. If the mass media is not re-positioned immediately to redress it, then the gulf will continue to widen. This paper will then examine the will at the national level, with the new economic policy of Nigeria under the present regime of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and, finally, analyze the ways by which the proposal of the *Development Communication* model can provide the most practical and sustainable model for effective national economic rehabilitation and reliance.

National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy

The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (*NEEDS*) is the economic policy thrust of the current Chief Olusegun Obasanjo regime. Realizing that the economy is the pivot on which all other sectors of Nigeria's nationhood rests, the government launched the *NEEDS* which it defines as a process of development anchored on a clear vision, sound values and enduring principles.

The government stresses that, her vision for Nigeria's development derives from the history, endowments, experiences and aspirations of the people. The vision underscores the necessity and urgency to build a modern Nigeria that maximizes the potentials of every citizen to become the largest and strongest African economy, and a force to be reckoned with in the world before the mid 21st century. The administration envisions a 21st century that is Africa's century, and with Nigeria among the leading nations.

The most recent articulation of this vision as embodied in the 2001 Kuru Declaration is:

To build a truly great African democratic country; politically united, integrated and stable, economically prosperous, socially organized, with equal opportunity for all, and responsibility for all, to become the catalyst of (African) Renaissance, and making adequate and all-embracing contributions, sub-regionally, regionally and globally (*NEEDS*, 2004:2).

The mission of President Obasanjo's Government is to use the instrumentality of the *NEEDS* as a nationally co-coordinated framework of action in close collaboration with the state governments and other

stakeholders to consolidate the achievements of the last four years (1999-2003) and build a solid foundation for the attainment of Nigeria's long-term vision. Over the medium term, the *NEEDS* will lay the foundation and achieve significant progress in the areas of wealth creation, employment generation, and poverty reduction.

Its core values are anchored on the imperative to restore the fundamental values of Nigeria through reformation, which have weakened over the years. The programme is targeted towards a complete reformation of Nigeria, as the president himself declares:

Our mission is the creation of a New Nigeria. I see new Nigeria ... our mission is the creation of a New Nigeria where all the negative values in our society are reversed and in their place are established enabling values of a caring, well governed society, where justice and equity reign (*NEEDS*, 2004:2-3).

More specifically, the strategy hopes to lay a solid foundation for a national self-discovery and strong values based upon:

- Enterprise, competition and efficiency at all levels.
- Equity and care for the weak and vulnerable.
- Moral rectitude, respect for traditional values, and extolling of our culture.
- A value system for public service that makes efficient and effective service delivery to the citizens.
- Discipline at all levels of leadership.

According to the 2001 Kuru Declaration as in *NEEDS* (2004:3), all public officials (elected and appointed) swear to abide by certain codes of values embodying the development objectives and human capital improvement needs of the country. *NEEDS* as a development strategy recognizes that these values cannot take root and be sustained unless conscious efforts are made to mobilize the people around them. Without paradigm shifts, fundamental changes in mind set and acceptance that it cannot be business as usual, especially by the elite, the change, which *NEEDS* seeks to bring about will be difficult to attain and sustain.

It is based on the constitutional principles of efficiency, effectiveness and equity in order to ensure a broad-based poverty-reducing growth and development strategy, the dividends of which will be distributed fairly among all classes. Its focus is wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction, corruption elimination and general value re-orientation.

Three other principles that underpin the *NEEDS* are:

- An incentive structure that rewards and celebrates private enterprise, entrepreneurial spirit and excellence; and
- New forms of partnership among all stakeholders in the economy to promote prosperity ... among all arms of government; federal-state-local; public-private; civil society and the International community; and indeed all stakeholders.
- A public service that delivers prompt and quality service to the people.

Nigeria's rich human and material resource endowments give it the potential to become Africa's largest economy and a major player in the global economy. But, it has been impossible to attain this feat because of the many problems inhibiting growth in the economy, such as macroeconomic policy inconsistency, instability and policy reversals, conflicts of macroeconomic policy goals, public sector dominance in production and consumption, pervasive rent seeking and corruption facilitated by government being the hub of economic activities. Others are infrastructure inadequacy and decay, high volatility of major macro-economic aggregates, weak institutional capacity for economic policy management and co-ordination, un-sustainability of public finance at all levels of government, lack of effective co-ordination among the tiers of government, and large debt overhang.

Given that a number of these problems are institutional and others the results of disharmony between goals and means, it may be difficult for the Obasanjo government to realize the vision of *NEEDS* within the time frame (of less than three years) it has to remain in power.

However, for *NEEDS* to effectively rehabilitate the Nigerian economy and make it the

strongest and most reliable in Africa and a key player in the world, it has to be based on the *Development Communication* model of the mass media. Its framework is analyzed in the next and last part of this paper.

Development Communication

Development Communication is a human-centred model that emerged in the 21st century to solve myriad economic problems of the 20th century. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has borrowed a leaf from the contents of the model with its concept of "sustainable human development". This new vision emphasizes a human centred approach, which is a widely participatory process of social change in which the people themselves have an opportunity to take part in making decisions that affect their lives.

The adults who occupy a place of importance in human centred development are the silent majority of hard-working people in the countryside and the cities who suffer because they are poor. No amount of investment will bring lasting succour to their living standards unless they themselves, first of all, change their attitudes and behaviour patterns. This is why Ekwo (1988:4) points out that "development stems from attitude change". It is the people themselves who bring about development and there can be no change for the better without their informed participation, without mobilizing their capacities and energies and without increasing their knowledge and skills.

This shows the important role of the mass media in the development process. Through the mass media, people get informed and mobilized to initiate development programmes by themselves, for themselves and which they can sustain. For this reason, Nigeria has a compelling reason to want access to the mass media. In the past decade, there were efforts to harness the power of the mass media for education and social change in the form of programmes to upgrade the quality of in-school instruction to reach pre-school and out-of-school children, and to teach basic literacy, numeracy and survival skills in health, nutrition and agriculture to adults.

The success rates of these applications have been uneven, but there is a growing recognition that the multiplier effect of the media combines with techniques to tailor programming to target population through localized production or personal contact with tutors and extension workers, may be the only feasible way to extend access to basic education and training to disadvantaged rural masses. The television holds allure and grandeur, and the ubiquity of the transistor radio, holds them out as potent media of communicating to rural people.

Alexis de Toqueville stated very many years ago that newspapers had the power to put a single idea into 10000 minds simultaneously. In the 21st century, however, electronic communication media are capable of introducing a single idea into hundred million or several billion minds simultaneously (Osuala, 1995:20). Hudson (1975:184) goes as far as to state that the television is "the most powerful instrument available for influencing masses of people to either consume or conserve". In developed countries, the power of the television is so strong that Osuala (1995:21) stresses that "an issue which does not appear on television is believed not to exist in mass consciousness".

Some impediments to *development communication* in developing countries include irregular power, high costs, inefficient distribution (with regard to newspaper) and one way transmission. They make the mass media less reliable as modes of delivering development messages to people. Even when they are used for national development campaigns, the local development specialist seldom has input into the content of the message and virtually no control over the time or languages of transmission.

The development communication model calls for increased technical assistance to developing nations. This is necessary to redress the already existing information technology imbalance. It is also important because of the present limited economic resources and lack of trained personnel to plan, implement, operate and maintain communication systems. Hudson (1979:186) argues further that the basic need underlying this call is for:

— Affordable and reliable communications technology, particularly for domestic consumption. This requirement should be a prime concern of international development organizations which recognize the role such technology could play.

The model recognizes that donating technology and sending "experts" to implement them does not solve the problem of Africa's quest for information technology. For Nigeria to reap the greatest benefits of the model, communication systems to be donated should be planned mutually between it and the donor country to serve a variety of development goals for its people using relevant technology.

This kind of planning requires an integration of communication infrastructure requirements into national development plans based on an understanding of how they function to support development activities. Planners must be familiar with the range of technologies available so that they can select the most appropriate based on anticipated requirement. For example, for portable two-way systems to be used by nomadic families, formal telephone equipment rugged enough to withstand desert sandstorms or tropical dampness for basic two-way voice communications and radio broadcasting, to which television transmission can be added, is recommended.

Developed nations can assist Nigeria build such a model by, first of all, sponsoring a series of illustrative pilot projects before the final product. This will include not only planning and installation, but also demonstration of applications to the technology, in form of in-service training of teachers, extension workers and consultative support for government field staff. Training will include application skills such as software production and narrow-band utilization techniques. *The development communication* model also permits alternate development strategy, provided it is human development centred. That is why the model emphasizes communication satellites and large-integration networks to install relatively low unit cost communication capacity in remote areas that will benefit rural people in advance of transportation and electrification. An important characteristic of satellites is their cost-insensitivity to distance. The satellites, according to Mutai (2000:4);

permit the spanning of geographical barriers and distances without roads in between. The low power requirements of modern electronics permit reliable installation and operation with power from solar or wind power. Use of such facilities to provide information and management co-ordination support for local workers and relatively untrained development agents may permit the mobilization of local labour to build roads, install clean water supplies or provide facilities needed by rural families.

Availing themselves of this model, the African Telecommunications Union have launched "the African connection project". When fully operational, it will create a platform for delivering universal service obligation on self-sustainable basis and license cross-border telecommunication operators to provide direct regional connectivity that will be greatly beneficial to the Nigeria media. There is a compelling need for commitment by Nigerian policy makers to innovative and quantifiable goals in support of the African renaissance vision for the mass media.

When mass media infrastructure, programming and production are based on the *Development Communication* model, it will be repositioned for the *reforms* that are necessary for Nigeria's economic rehabilitation and reliance at the three tiers of government.

Conclusion

The paper identifies ailing economy as the catalyst to Nigeria's problems. It also analyses the unfortunate position of Nigeria, and indeed that of Africa, in the global media structure. It then argues that faulty institutional framework, as well as, goals conflict, among many other negative forces, inhibit national economic growth and development. Finally, it posits a strong recommendation for the *Development Communication* model, against the backdrop of the **NEEDS**, as the most appropriate mass-media re-positioning strategy by which the much sought-after rehabilitation of Nigeria's economy can be attained, and which will ultimately place it as Africa's clear leader and a strategic player in the world.

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