

## MASS MEDIA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

<sup>1</sup>Kehinde kadijat Kadiri, <sup>2</sup>Yinusa A. Muhammed, and <sup>2</sup>Addullateef Raji, Abdul-Rasheed L. Sulaiman

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication, University of Ilorin, Ilorin

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

The role of mass media for sustainable democracy cannot be overemphasized. Although, the primary responsibilities of the media is to entertain without slander or libel, inform based on accurate facts and educate on current relevant issues. Apart from these roles, development scholars and professionals have widely recognized the utility of mass media in the sustenance of viable democracy. Democracy is the most popular form of government particularly because it guarantees popular participation. Though, it recognizes and guarantees individual participation, it also derives its synergy from other institutions like the mass media. The mass media are supplying the political information that voters base their decision on. They identify problems in the society and serve as a medium for deliberation. It is against this background that this paper addressed the factor of mass media for sustainable democracy in Nigeria and concluded that the mass media have significant role to play in establishing stability and security as necessary environment for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. The mass media can be effective in establishing a good atmosphere where growth and development can take place, particularly in the elimination of ignorance which often leads to conflicts, especially in politics.

**Keywords:** Communication, Government, Democracy, Information, Nigeria, Sustainable and Development

## INTRODUCTION

The mass media constitute the brain box of democracy. The media help in the supply of the required political information that electorates would base their decision. They are the watchdogs for uncovering errors and wrongdoing by those in power (Fog, 2004; Kellner 2004). To argue about the media today is almost inevitably to argue about democracy. Furthermore, conflicting views of the history of communications often reflect the disagreements about democracy and its possibilities. Much of the foundational thought about mass media from the writings of Walter Lipmann and John Dewey in the 1920s and '30s to the work of Jurgen Hebermas and others in recent decades has held wide intellectual interest because of its implications for democracy and good governance. Has the media's development advanced or devastated democratic aspiration? Or is the media a mere "phantom" in Lippmann's phrase, or can it be an outstanding force in popular self-government if it can furnish the necessary information and means of criticism and debate (Paul, 2006; Walter and Dewey, 1925 and 1927).

Therefore, there is a growing concern about the mass media that they are not fulfilling some functions properly to enhance democratic ideals. Some media critics have claimed that commercial mass media controlled by a few multinational conglomerates have become an antidemocratic force supporting elements of capitalism to further pauperize the masses (Kellner, 2004; Mcchesney, 1999). Even if they disseminate news, the news is more of entertainment than information and education; rather the mass media prefer to supply sensational news such as sex, violence, fashion etc. The political news they carry are more about personalities than about political ideologies. Therefore there is the absence of serious debate where voters are left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans making them disinterested and cynical about politics (Barnett, 2002).

Critics also have complained that media as the watchdogs are barking of the wrong things. The media hunt for scandals in the private lives of politicians and their families, but ignore much more serious consequences of their policies. They go after wounded politicians like sharks in a feeding frenzy, therefore making us afraid of the wrong things. Minor dangers are wittingly blown out of proportions while much more serious dangers go largely unnoticed. As a result, many fears are exaggerated which often lead to unnecessary measures and legislation which culminates in "gonzo justice" in the parlance of media (Althaide, 2002; Sabato, 1991; Fog, 2004). Furthermore, media critics have not only criticized the media of wrong doing in the democratic process but also in many other areas of social endeavour. For example, many media have suppressed information about the health hazards of smoking due to pressure from advertisers (Cirino, 1973). Even more alarming is the claim that certain mass media (especially women's magazines) are promoting worthless alternative health products, in the process conspiring with the industry to defraud consumers of billions of dollars every year. These and many other issues are against the mass media (Barrett and Javis, 1993).

Therefore, it is against this back drop that this issue attempts to examine the nexus between mass media and sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

## **BASIC ISSUES**

We shall now define the terms ‘democracy’ and “mass media” as a way of contextualizing the way we used them in this write up.

The term ‘democracy’ has a Greek origin and it is defined as “the dominance of the people” (the public). The most significant feature within a democratic constitution is that the majority rules, while the minority controls and imposes criticism on the majority. The majority protects the minority’s rights, whereas, the latter accepts the political system and functions within its limits (Kouskourelis, 1997; Athanasios, 2007). The first shape of democracy was in the Ancient Athens between 500-321 B.C in a particular country-state and took the pattern of direct democracy. However, this model has been replaced by representative democracy through the election of representatives.

The earliest model of democracy which used to be dominant in ancient Athens was featured by citizens’ direct participation in the legislative function that is known as the assemblies. This was the most powerful means of dominance during that time. Besides the assemblies, multiple elective methods were used for the public postulates, such as: instant election, voting, draw and selection (Heid, 2003).

However, in modern politics and governments today, direct democracy has been replaced by the representative democracy. In this system, decision making concerning the whole of the country is not reached by the public but by democratically elected representatives, who come from various parties via national elections normally held periodically. The present type of political parties is a product of the Great Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The existence and function of political securing the equity of opportunity is one of the most fundamental features of the pluralist democracy (Meny, 1995).

In today’s liberal-democratic system, the existence of more than one political party makes it distinctive. This is based on a historical tradition that is in favour of human rights, in favour of social welfare, of equity before the law and of the principle of national dominance. This type of democracy promotes exchange of views upon matters of policy which is the most fundamental principles of the function of democracy (Ball and Gry, 2001; Berstein, 2001; and Athanasios, 2007).

In general, democracy is a type of government that is responsive, responsible and a system that gives the citizens the inalienable rights or freedom of choice, freedom of association, right to shelter, freedom from discrimination, right to clothing and unlimited respect for the rule of law. In sum, it may be stated that democracy is a form of government that connotes collective participation and is an antithesis to despotism, tyranny and totalitarianism. This form of government hardly exists anywhere in the world but rather what we have is “ advanced democracies” where equality is subject to opportunities (Egbewole, 2002; Tobi, 1995; Egbewole, 2006).

### **The mass media**

According to the advanced learner’s dictionary (1983) mass media is defined as the sources of information in the various media vehicles such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television and so on, that reaches and influence large numbers of people from different heterogeneous background. Ojo (1999) explained that the mass media is grouped along the three other main estates viz: the executives, judiciary and the legislative while the agents of mass media are regarded as the fourth estate

of the realm in any nation. The mass media have been grouped into two classes: the print media such as newspaper, magazines, pamphlet, direct mail, circulars, bill boards, sky writing and technical device that carries a message to the masses by appealing to their sense of sight. The second category is the electronic media, under this we have radio, the television, motion pictures and video recording (that appeal to both the sense of sound and sense of vision); indeed mass media are said to be modern principle papers, magazines and the internet media (Uyo, 1987, Blank and Harolsen, 1975 cited in Ojo, 1999 and Ajibade, 2010).

As defined by C. Wright Mills in the power elite (1956) the mass media have two important sociological characteristics: first, very few people can communicate to a great number; and second, the audience has no effective way of answering back. Mass communication by definition a one-way process media organizations, are bureaucratic and (expert in societies where all media are state controlled) corporate in nature. Media output is regulated by governments every where, but the restrictions vary from very light advisory regulation (for example no cigarette advertising or nudity on TV) to the most comprehensive forms of censorship in totalitarian societies (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 2005).

## **THEORETICAL EXPLICATION**

There are many different theories about how mass media influence people's attitude, world opinion and social behaviour. But early experimental studies have failed to confirm the assumption that mass media have a strong power to change people's attitudes. However, efforts have been made to solve the discrepancy between experiments and real world observations by the introduction of cognitive processing such as agenda setting, framing and priming (McGuire, 1986, Lowery and Defleur, 1995).

### **Agenda-Setting**

The agenda setting theory was made popular by the quote of Bernard Cohen (1963), saying that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is successful in telling its readers what to think about". There is plenty of evidence that the media have a strong influence on people's perception of which issues are important and which problems they want their government to do something about. The influence of news mass media increases when the need for orientation among the viewers is much. The need for agenda setting in democratic issues is necessary here. On the other hand the agenda setting effect is lower for unpleasant issues that people can observe directly, as well as for other issues that the audience is well informed about. The media have little power to set the agenda when people have sufficient political knowledge to counter argue the claims made by the media. Therefore the agenda-setting effect is stronger for concrete issues that are easy to visualize than for abstract issues. Agenda setting for issues of democracy must be concrete and result oriented not issues that are products of sentiments otherwise the audience may be dissuaded from accepting the news (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002; Yagede and Dozier, 1990; Yengar et. al, 1982).

Greater effect of agenda-setting is generally accepted among media scholars, there is some uncertainty about who sets the agenda. It has been shown by some studies that politicians have a strong influence on the agenda of mass media, at least in areas such as economic policy. To solve this problem the media may put attention catching issues on the agenda for

economic reasons, especially when it involves sensational issues like danger, crime, sex, celebrity scandals and corruption (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1995; Zhu 1992).

### **Priming Theory**

Closely connected to the agenda setting is the priming strategy. This refers to the fact that one piece of media information affect how we react and interpret subsequent pieces of information by changing our perception. This therefore means that news media can influence the criteria by which political candidates are judge by calling attention to some issues and ignoring others before the speech of the candidate. For example, the support for Chief Olusegun Obasanjo dropped significantly in 2007 because of intense media campaign on the third term agenda, which made many Nigerians to shift from evaluating his performance in the past years while in office.

Schematic thinking forms the basis of priming. When evaluating new information or trying to make decision we normally tend to apply the information and schemata that are most reading accessible or available in memory at the moment rather than conduct a complete and comprehensive search and examination of information. Therefore, a schemata may be readily accessible to the individual either because it has recently been activated and remains in short-term memory, or because it is linked in memory to other constructs which have been activated (Pan and Kosicky, 1997; Hetherington, 1996; Goldel et.al, 1997; Domke et al, 1998 and Graber 1988). For good governance and democracy to be sustained priming by news of mass media should be an agenda setting for public opinion that will help the growth of democracy.

### **Framing**

Framing is another theory which explains the consequences of schematic thinking. Framing refers to the frame of reference within which an issue is explained, described and presented (Pan and Kosicki, 1993) for example, a news broadcast about the electronic voting system can variously be framed as a story about technological development. The way the story is framed can have a strong influence on people's attitude towards the issue. It is also assumed that framing is a kind of second level agenda because it makes certain aspects of an issue more salient in a way as to promote a particular problem.

However, in spite of its huge frame of agenda- setting, framing only influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient (Entman, 1993; McCombs et.al., 1997). The commercialization and trivialization of news media has a strong influence on how issues are framed and presented in the commercial news media. Framing news about democracy around the strategies of politicians rather than issues portrays the perceive motives of politicians as egoistic. The pervasive media focus on people rather than principles, events rather than themes, and simple rather than deep causes, is adversely affecting the problem-solving capabilities of democratic societies on a broad variety of issues, ranging from poverty to international conflicts (Fog, 2004, Iyengar and Reeves, 1997; Capella and Jamieson, 1997).

## **THE EMERGENCE OF MASS MEDIA IN NIGERIA**

According to Africa leadership forum (1991) efforts to disseminate ideas and information to exert influence in the African societies were perhaps as old as formal society. As noted by the farm housed dialogue 15 of the media in democracy (1991), the ancient Yoruba kingdoms had many rulers overthrown by the collective dictions of the people mobilized by drummers

and town criers. Similar events also took place in the northern parts of the country where Arabic writing had existed long before the British colonialists came. As a corollary, the first attempt recorded to formally use the mass media to influence society in the effort that eventually developed into the Nigeria was by one Rev. Henry Townsend in 1859 in his publication of the *Iwe Irohin*, the first news paper in Nigeria (Dialogue 15 of Farm House Dialogue 1991).

The Adversarial naturalist press begins in Nigeria after the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates in 1914 when colonial governance of Nigeria was affected from Sierra-Leon. The Anti-colonial crusading Sierra Leoneans, such as Richard Blaise came into Nigeria with the mindset of how to use the newspaper to mobilize the population against colonial rule.

The first truly Nigerian popular newspaper called the *Daily News* was founded by Herbert Macaulay. *The Daily News* articulated clear Nigerian position on many issues and was read by the literate minority of the elite in Lagos and its environs. The paper naturally became a major tool in the nationalist crusade.

The *West African Pilot* founded in 1937 was the first mass circulated newspaper devoted to promoting serious broad-based anti-colonial crusade in Nigeria. Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe started and founded the popular indigenous newspaper with readership of a national scope. The *West African Pilot* founded in 1937 was later to serve as the mouth piece of the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC).

*The Nigerian Tribune* was founded in Ibadan in 1949 to champion the cause of the Egbe-Omo Oduduwa and the Action Group, and the welfaristic doctrine of its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. *The Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo* had been set up in Zaria in the 1930s by the Colonial Development Corporation as a “Vernacular” newspaper to serve the needs of the Hausa-speaking groups in Northern Nigeria. The Nigerian citizen came into bear by the 1940s while the *New Nigerian* emerged in Kaduna in 1966 as a newspaper owned by the Northern Nigerian government with a clear mandate to promote “northern” interest. The *West African pilot* began the promotion of “Eastern” Nigerian interest when Zik emerged in the 1950 as the premier of the Eastern Region. Since then ownership became a crucial factor in determining the nationalist outlook of most newspapers.

The 1980’s set the down of other kinds of print media, especially the private newspaper with no clear political leaning. The emergence of the *Punch* newspaper in the 70’s helped to fine tune the destabilizing role of the adversarial newspapers either affiliated to political parties or owned by government. The news magazines, and the soft-sell magazines, regarded by some people as the “Junk” press impacted a lot in the evolution of the mass media in Nigeria. The news magazines were more analytical and they relied on researches that promoted investigative journalism. Examples of these news magazines were: the *Afriscope*, *Newbreed*, and *Newswatch* etc. They were able to cover a wide range of issues than mere reportorial (Farm House Dialogue 15, 1991).

On the aspect of the electronic media, it was clear from onset that government, colonial or post colonial saw the electronic media essentially as a propaganda instrument. The evolution of the electronic media took off on an entirely different direction, first from the late 1940’s when Redifussion services were first introduced especially on television. The ownership

and control of these media was by government, this is because the government saw the electronic media with potentially wider reach, their ability to transcend the barriers of literacy and education and their importance to national stability.

The News Agency as the network for the dissemination of news to other media houses came in to being in the 1940s as “African News Agency by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe to service his chain of newspapers across the country but was limited in scope. The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) which in the true sense was meant to service the country emerged after the Nigerian civil war with the motive of collecting and spreading information within and outside the country to enhance national stability. The NAN therefore has widened the horizon of the Nigeria press with its widely dispersed network of correspondents than any other medium. It has enhanced the reporting of world events to Nigeria and consequently reporting the developments of Nigeria to the world as well (Farm House Dialogue 15, 1991).

### **MASS MEDIA AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

More than ever before, the mass media have become more important to sustainable democracy because of their increasing power of reaching as well as the dependence on them for the needed information and guidance (Saliu, 2006). The media, in the New World order have emerged as a crucial part of the machinery for vetting and legitimizing elections. The mass media provide information to the voters about the candidates, the electoral process, actual voting dates and the rules of the game (Olukotun and Dele, 2001).

In any political dispensation the media have an enormous task to do because they have to work both with the political parties and electorates by educating the electorates on party manifestoes and ideologies. They also help by making electorates to appreciate issues about candidates and political parties. To buttress this view, Graham Hilton quoted from the work of Wilber (1964) by saying that it is impossible to think of politics or democracy in isolation from media communication simply because the media oversee and monitor, analyse party candidates from the beginning of the election to the end (Graham 1980; Saliu, 2006).

Appreciating further the role of the media in the sustainable of democracy the Farm House Dialogue 15 of 1991 stated that the role of the mass media in a democracy must include the following:

- i. To convey information to the people with a view to let them know how the mandate they gave their representatives is being discharged.
- ii. To provide a forum through which the governed could then react to government policies and activities.
- iii. To provide such analysis as would enable the people to secure an adequate understanding and background to event;
- iv. To assist in the articulation and pursuit of the national interest;
- v. To help strengthen the economic, social and political fabric of the nation;
- vi. To provide informed criticism and viable alternatives to public policies;
- vii. To monitor the performance of government with a view to preventing their deviation from clearly stated objectives
- viii. To provide the medium for transmitting knowledge and for educating the populace;

- ix. To function as an agent of modernization; and

To assist in setting an agenda of priorities in the social, cultural, political and economic development of the nation. According to the house dialogue, for the media to achieve these objectives the media must be seen, and must perform as an agent of development and nation building if possible must be supported through subsidies or left free to pursue their goals through exploring and exploiting appropriate opportunities.

Furthermore, for the media to be used to sustain democracy people must understand the characteristics and potential utilization pattern with the target audience, people must understand what activities it can best be used for, at what level of democracy or what part of the population will benefit immensely from it. Three assumption are important as drivers for sustainable democracy. The first one is all aspect of communication rather than mass media are important agents in the process of sustainable democracy. Secondly, the choice of medium or media or form of communication to be adopted should depend on the political issue in question. What this means is that some media may be more important than others at a time, though many may still be used. For example, the radio as a form of media is very important in the rural areas of Nigeria. Thirdly, the media will have to work with other agents of the society for a sustainable result (Oyugi, 2001; Obaitan, 2008).

The role of mass media in the sustenance of democracy can never be quantified. The media play important role especially in regime change or transition. This position is particularly evident during the transition from one form of government to another. The media started playing this role even during the colonial era; media were the vanguard of change in that era. The role played by papers like *The West African Pilot*, *The comet*, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* and others in the quest for independence in Nigeria was powerful. The struggle by the press culminated into independence. This same spirit by the press has continued to fire the wind of progress even in the present dispensation. The press have also enlighten members of the public on the type of political system and the need for change if need be. The media have always being there to update the public at various stages of crossing over from one form of government to the other. The press played crucial role in the migration Nigeria had from the parliamentary system of government to presidential. (Saliu, 2006).

Another problem area of politics which the press is trying to address is ignorance. In today's world, democracy is a slogan for sustainable development; because it is a system that allows for growth through participatory development but unfortunately the whole idea of the concept is alien to majority of the African people in general and Nigeria in particular (Hamalink, 2003). As a result, the elite of the society do capitalize on this docility to corrupt it to their benefit. This prevents the people from reaping maximum benefit from the whole exercise. Therefore, for democracy to strive and for it to be fully sustainable, the process must offer opportunities to the different classes in the society particularly the common man on the street (Katz, 1987). To achieve these results, mass media must be seen to perform as a vehicle for sustainable democracy. The media where needed must be supported through subsidies available to social services or be left free to pursue its goals through other enviable endeavours

For there to be sustainable democracy, Article 22 of the constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria states the obligations of the mass media: "The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and highlights the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people" while all this



confers on the media the need for ensuring sustainable democracy especially by making government accountable to the people, neither the media nor government need to unwittingly be adversarial to each other (Tunji, 1991; Africa leadership forum farm house dialogue 15, 1991).

### **OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE MEDIA ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY**

The socio-political problems of the media in Nigeria are enormous. The state of the economy at any point in time must have influence on media performance for sustainable democracy. In a way to perform their duties, the media institutions have to be maintained and the cost of maintaining such media institutions are enormous. Defective communication system cannot possibly sustain democracy. This is because sustainability demands that media institutions should acquire all the necessary gadgets and equipment to facilitate their work. But rather what you find with many media houses are instrument that are old and unserviceable. The eventual outcome of this is that many media stations may not be able to transmit developmental news to sustain democracy (Obaitan, 2008; Sherem, 1989).

The impact of foreign media on news gathering in Nigeria can also be a stumbling block to sustainable democracy. The activities of most foreign media in this direction most times is compounded by what is described as “satellite tyranny” this involved the direct broadcast through satellit television programmms to homes across the world specifically been championed by the CNN of the united states. Most times the news they desseminate about Nigeria may be different from the reality, just because of the disdain they have for African countries (Tunji, 1991).

The critical role, for good and ill which media ownership had played in the evolution of the press in Nigeria must be a factor to behold. Ownership of media had exacerbated the sectional, divisive and heterogeneous political entity of Nigeria. The pervasive impact of the mass media and their ability to influence the minds of the people demands that the society, and not just the state should take special interest in their communication role, for and must be seen and accepted as a public trust if democracy is to be sustained.

Another problem area for the media in sustainable democracy is the avalanche of laws restricting press freedom. Though the Freedom of Information Bill has been passed into law, media organizations must not relent in their opposition to all activities that may presently exist to hinder the growth of democracy.

Internal standard and training of personnel is still a problem for press performance especially in a democratic environment. Monitoring and enforcement of standards must be internally carried out within the journalism profession itself (Dialogue 15 of Farm house, 1991).

With the background of the problems highlighted, Tunji (1991) raised the following posers for sustainable democracy in Nigeria:

- i. Press and Government: what relationship?
- ii. Press and National Development: how can the media accelerate desirable change?
- iii. National or sectional interest: what focus for the media?
- iv. Proliferation of magazine: desirable for Democracy?

- v. Media responsibility and privacy: what stops where?
- vi. Privatization, commercialization and public service: where is the line?
- vii. Journalists' welfare: emergency solution or deliberate programme.
- viii. Impact of foreign media fare: what lessons for Nigeria?

## **RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION**

The impact of mass media in sustainable democracy in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, mass media must look for avenues to improve on the quality of information they disseminate in order to sustain Nigeria's flagging democracy.

Since democracy is about popular government and participation, the media institutions must play the role of providing strong link between those in government and the electorates by inculcating, articulating and constructively criticizing the policies and goals of the former and communicating the views and opinion of the latter.

Media houses in Nigeria must assist in building and maintaining an environment conducive to democracy in the country. Media must promote free choice of leadership, especially through the ballot box; respect for the rule of law by both the rulers and the ruled; social justice and equity as well as respect for human right.

To sustain democracy, the media must maintain its independence while still being responsible, the media must operate an effective system of self-monitoring and self-supervision.

Since the freedom of information bill has been passed, public officials must grant the media access to public information as a constitutional matter.

Journalist should be well trained so that they can function positively in promoting development within the culture of democracy.

Our media in Nigeria have an important role to play in this present democratic dispensation by allowing for orderly succession of civilian to civilian administration. It is by so doing that democracy can fully be sustained and beyond (Dialogue 15, 1991).

Finally, the media institutions have a lot role to play in ensuring stability and sustainable democracy in Nigeria. This problem has impeded development in Nigeria. The media can be alive to their responsibilities by effectively establishing an enabling environment where democracy can strive particularly in the eradication of ignorance which often leads to conflict especially in our electioneering process.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

KADIRI, Kehinde kadijat (Mrs); lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

MUHAMMED, A. Yinusa (Ph.D); lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

RAJI Addullateef; lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

SULAIMAN, L. Abdul-Rasheed is a Postgraduate student in the Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.