

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TRADITIONAL AND MODERN METHODS OF COMMUNICATION IN AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The complementary role of the different systems of communication, the traditional modes and the western media, in national development has never been in doubt. The traditional and indigenous channels, which include the oral and other symbolic non-verbal modes of communication, have served the people from time immemorial while the modern media, though relatively new, have extra-ordinary capacity to reach a wider and heterogeneous mass audience at the same time. Each mode has fulfilled the traditional functions of education, information and entertainment associated with communication in their respective societies of origin. But it has been discovered that the two systems can be uniquely effective when they are used together than when used separately.

No single system is perfect hence the need for an eclectic approach of incorporation and transcendence. In this paper, our aim is to highlight areas of relative strengths and observed weaknesses of each of the modes and advise that the two rather than being treated as if they are mutually exclusive, should be employed complementarily in our struggle for national development, bearing in mind that the final cause of any communication exercise, using the western or traditional tools, is to share ideas, feelings or messages with one another and make our messages common. For instance, the overemphasis in the use of the western media as if they are the only means of communication has led to the downfall of many national development programmes in Nigeria. The communication guru, late Professor Frank Okwu Ugbajah, lamented the failure of the Green Revolution Programme and similar others like the "Operation Feed the Nation" as well as other such national development efforts due to the undue emphasis on the western type media and a deliberate relegation of the traditional channels. According to him, "In a situation loaded with selective and non-credible information, Khomeini's 90,000 mosques under the guidance of 20,000 mullahs (priests) provided a solid infrastructure for a revolutionary communication network, a model that could have been adapted to a successful 'Green Revolution' in Nigeria" (Ugboajah 1985:172).

Recently, the *Newswatch* Magazine of March 21, 2005 reported that the campaign to eradicate Polio from Nigeria is still facing opposition among Moslem clerics in some Northern States, and seeing that relying on the mass media would not change such wrong traditionally held belief that Oral Polio Vaccines (OPV) contained substances likely to cause infertility in females, Nasir Junju, chairman of Birnin Kebbi Local Government Council decided to organize face-to-face campaign rallies to sensitise mothers, moslem clerics and opinion leaders to the importance of polio vaccines. As earlier observed by Mazrui (1982:21) "Newspapers and magazines can spread detailed and complicated information effectively only if they are accessible, physically and metaphorically to their audience. Radio, when properly used has been successful but its format tends to capsulize information and must be modified to serve developmental aims. Television has mainly concentrated on urban areas and has opposed development by teaching consumerism to its audience, thereby increasing dependence on the west." He added "Western media... have generally proven unsuccessful as tools for development," stressing that a new typology of development and communication should concentrate on the careful and sensitive adaptation of western tools to the cultural and economic necessities of Africa, the Commonwealth, and indeed, the rest of the Third World Nations. We advocate an eclectic mixture of techniques. We now turn to each of the system in greater detail.

Theoretical Overview

This study is anchored on two theoretical postulations namely: symbolic interaction theory and dependency theory. According to Baran (2002:389) Symbolic interaction posits "the idea that cultural symbols are learned through interaction and they mediate that interaction. In other words, people give things meaning and that meaning controls their behaviour" For instance, "The flag has meaning because we have given it meaning, and that meaning now governs certain behaviour towards the flag" (Ibid).

The traditional modes through which we communicate are made effective and credible by the symbolic institutions such as the town crier, the age grade, the traditional monarchs which the traditional folks have, since time immemorial created for themselves and which in turn elicit allegiance from them and govern their behaviour. Hence, a traditional native is most likely to accept information that comes from the traditional ruler than that from the radio unless that from the radio is authenticated

by the monarch. E. Uwakwe (2004:29) observed for instance that "Northerners with an established way of life are likely to listen to their religious leaders and traditional leaders..."

Conversely, Henderson (1975:22) observed that "A few farmers listen to radio but immediately ignore recommendations because they see the radio programme as being government or Geest propaganda and irrelevant to their need." Hence any development communicator on politics, agriculture, census etc who ignores the traditional channels will likely miss the mark.

But in these days of information and communication technology, in which the modern media have assumed an indispensable position in our daily existence, we cannot rely on the traditional modes alone to meet the exigencies and kaleidoscopic nature of events. Hence, the dependency theory developed by Melvin Defleur and Sandra BallRokeach becomes relevant. According to the duo, "in our complex and changing society, people become increasingly dependent on media and media content to understand what is going on around them, to learn how to behave meaningfully and for escape" (in Baran 2002:286).

The centrality of the modern media of communication for attitude change and social progress in any society, developed or developing, is no longer in doubt. The use of the transistor radio, television, the computer and other aspects of information and communication technology has become a habit, a way of life and a means of mainstreaming of reality. It is for this reason that we advocate an eclectic approach in the use of the two types of media so that what we cannot find in the swing we get from the round about as the final cause of our effort is to communicate and mobilize the populace towards national development. For this approach we borrow a leaf from Einstein that "computers are incredibly fast, accurate and stupid. Humans are incredibly slow, inaccurate and brilliant. Together they are powerful beyond imagination." (Ezeah, 2005:76).

Methodology

The two research methods triangulated for data collection in this study were: observation and information from recorded materials. According to Chava (1996:206) "Social science research is rooted in observation. Political scientists observe, among other things, the behaviour of occupants of political roles; anthropologists observe rituals in simple societies; and social psychologists observe interactions in small groups. In a sense, all social science research begins and ends with empirical

observations." He stressed that "The main advantage of observation is its directness; it enables the researcher to study behaviour as it occurs. The researcher does not have to ask people about their own behaviour and actions of others. He or she can simply watch as individuals act and speak." (Ibid).

The scepticism with which the rural folk, which constitutes the majority of the African people view information from the modern mass media is not new. They see such communication as coming from political propagandists whose statements are to be taken with a pinch of salt, hence the saying that "when a politician greets you good morning, you better look at your watch."

In Nigeria, one can observe for instance, that once a new military regime came to power, they always reached out for the traditional rulers who are the symbols of traditional authority to secure legitimacy. Religious preachers who complement their radio programmes with house to-house evangelism know that one without the other has no enduring strength.

But Braimoh tells us that "Traditional methods of personal instruction alone cannot" suffice, [they] "could only complement the new methods." Hence the two, traditional and modern methods of communication, must be married for effective communication in Africa's quest for development. From our observation over time and information from secondary sources, we made our analysis and conclusion on this study.

Traditional African Media

African traditional communication consists of the verbal and non-verbal as well as a combination of the verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. In the words of Oreh, "Traditional modes of communication can be divided into several categories; interpersonal or face-to-face type of communication, a broader level intergroup communication, and communication at the mass level" (Oreh in Kalu, 1978:97). Akpabio (2003:3) observed that the major characteristics of the traditional communication are that:

- (1) It is part and parcel of the way of life of a people;
- (2) It utilizes symbolisms from the community and hence readily connects with the people; and that
- (3) Values of the community as well as age-old institutions come into play in the communication process.

In the socialization process, which involves education of the young ones and the transference of constructively shared cultural heritage from

one generation to another, the traditional media have an edge over the modern media whose perversive influence on young ones have been a subject of controversy. The undue emphasis on commercialism by the owners and operators of the western media rubs the western media of the moral expectations of the society. Klapper (1960:411) reports for instance an experience in Brooklyn, New York where a six-year-old son of a policeman asked his Father for real bullets because his little sister "doesn't die for real when I shoot her like they do when Hopalong Cassidy kills' em".

According to Cousins (1949) "terror comic scripts" and television were prime movers in juvenile misconduct and delinquency in our families and society today. The family is the bedrock of the society and as an Akan proverb aptly put it: "when the state begins to collapse, the cause can be found in the home" (Abraham 1966:65). The core of African cultural continuity is the family, not the nuclear family of the west, but extended kinship patterns that ensure that children are properly socialized. Proverbs lore throughout Africa stresses the educative importance of the family. "The African family" says Awa (1980:4), "may thus be viewed as a school, fostering social cohesion; apprentices to technical skills were treated as adopted children, and children learned how to fit into society through mimesis".

The African traditional modes employing essentially face-to-face communication are essentially part of the existence of the African people and stress such elementary values as: an extended family system that encompasses many degrees of relationships beyond the nuclear family and in which the training of the young ones are considered a collective responsibility; reverence for ancestors; loyalty to chiefship assumed to be possessed of spiritual and temporal power and a strong sense of communalism (Awa, 1980 :2). Through the use of verbal and non-verbal communication, young girls are taught the basic moral virtues such as knowing how to "sit down properly", how to cook the type of food common with their ethnic group, the virtues of greeting and above all, abstention from sexual immorality. The males are taught the virtues of hard work and oratory through effective use of proverbs, riddles, anecdotes etc which enable seasoned orators to negotiate difficult bends in communication exercises, and also necessary for community leadership. Achebe (1958:8) observed this point clearly. "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". For instance, a boy who associates with a bad company,

say, thieves for some evanescent gratifications may be warned that "Ebe nwata na ebute onu mmanu ka ona ebute kwa onu mme" that is from the very source a man gets oily mouth, he also gets bloody mouth or "Aka aja aja na eweta onu mmanu mmanu," meaning that for one to feed well one must first work hard.

Also such proverbs, riddles, drama not only teach, they are more effective in mobilizing the populace towards government development programmes. Professor Ali Mazrui observed this point when he said "western mass media and even the change agent model" have generally proven unsuccessful as tools for development (1982:21). Ugboajah (1977:166) spoke in similar vein when he narrated an experience in Northern Nigeria where the use of drama, songs and proverbs in vernacular proved very effective in teaching villagers about farming, nutrition and animal husbandary, and lamented that oramedia model was not adopted in the "Green Revolution Programme" hence its failure.

Quoting Moore (1982) he noted that "in Africa, there is the usual interplay of custom and conflict, harmony and strife, fusion and fission, while interpersonal relations, social cohesion, social process and historical continuity are largely maintained through the symbolizing codes of oral tradition, which include mythology, oral literature (poetry, storry telling proverbs), masquerades, rites of passage and other rituals expressed through oracy, music, dance, drama, use of constume, social interplay and material symbols, which accompany people from womb to tomb and much beyond".

One of the most critical elements in any effective communication is the phenomenon of feedback. It is one important area in which the superiority of the traditional media in effective message delivery has been convincingly proven. The traditional channels, which involve face-to-face oral communication make the feedback process easier so that the communicator can assess the effectiveness of his message on the audience, watching their body reactions. In the words of Ali Mazrui (1982:3) "... feedback helps lessen the impact and the potential damage from such gaps in knowledge. Secondly, feedback registration... helps focus the target audiences of particular message, and it requires of planners a more sensitive and realistic approach".

In addition "The inadequacies of plans are spotlighted by the adaptive use of feedback; and in itself prevents plans from becoming articles of faith or monuments to national endeavour or to the major architect of a particular plan" (Mazrui, *Ibd*:20).

Highlighting this observed inherent disability of the western media in relation to feedback process, Ekwelie and Okonkwo (1983:59) observed for instance that "A newspaper editorial may elicit violent resentment from a reader but it will take another medium – and certainly time – for this reaction to be shared by others, who may have received the original information". This, they explained, is due to the amorphous and heterogeneous nature of the audience, loosely organized and scattered over a given environment so that concerted reaction takes quite a long time. Face-to-face communication is direct, persuasive and makes possible distortions and misunderstanding to be cleared on the spot.

Furthermore, the traditional mode of communication is more democratic and the tools are less capital-intensive. According to Ugboajah (1985:167) folk media "have been described as being simple in form and generally available to all at no material cost" Everybody understands and participates as the medium of exchange is understood by all. Language is not used as a tool for exclusion and the communication tools are readily available.

Conversely, for one to participate in the western type media of communication, one must be literate to be able to read newspapers and magazines and must be a man of means to be able to purchase radio or television, or computer hardware. Also, there must be steady power supply, hence, the western media are elitist and exclusionary.

Also, for purposes of attitude change, the face-to-face or traditional communication has proved to be more effective than the western media, which often run into brick walls especially on ego-involved attitudes. Such stiff opposition comes from what Klapper (1960:64) referred to as mediating factors such as primary groups and group norms, opinion leadership and personal influence. Speaking in the same vein, Akpabio (2003) agreed with Muoemeka (2000) that interpersonal channels, which are a legitimate part of traditional communication are crucial in overcoming selective exposure and perception and in ensuring feedback and change in attitude. According to Awa (1980:10) "Innovations at the village level can only be introduced with assurance of a fair hearing by consulting cultural constants. Such innovations may be rejected at the village level after discussion" He therefore concluded that undue reliance on western media with insufficient sensitivity to local cultural factors will aggravate the apparently intractable paradox facing rural Africa.

The influence of primary groups, and their norms always act as inhibitors to messages from the foreign western media. As explained by

Klapper (1960) quoting Katz and Lazarsfeld, many "ostensibly individual opinions and attitudes... [are] primarily social [in] character" ie they are the norms of groups to which the individual belongs or wishes to belong. According to Klapper, opinion leaders who serve as "gate keepers" for followers, otherwise inaccessible to the media, have been shown to exercise a selective control over what communication does or does not get through the gate, hence the earlier "hypodemic effect" theory has now yielded place to what he referred to as "phenomenistic approach" with regard to media effect.

Apart from being more effective on attitude change, the traditional media have also been shown to be equally more effective in social mobilization. Politicians who seek elective offices as well as social development agents have since known this; so are also evangelists who go from house to house spreading their religious messages. Emphasizing this point Ugboajah (1979) noted that Ghandi and Mao had little access to the modern media in mobilizing the masses for their revolution in India and China. According him, they relied on credible secular symbols, on channels that were deeply integrated into the life of the masses and participatory exposure to their messages. He observed that Ayatolla Khomeini and his followers relied on indigenous network in mobilizing popular support, adding that traditional media, linked to the people's belief system have been effective as mobilizing tool for government development programmes. He noted, for example, the use of popular satire, folk songs etc in mobilizing the people in the Czech uprising of 1968; the Portuguese and the Nicaraguan revolutions of the 1970s; the Indonesian struggle against the Dutch in the 1960s; in the Polish protest movements and the more effectively in Africa's wind of change, adding that the communal component inside the context of belief systems adds to the effectiveness of the communication networks.

In addition, the information conductive symbols of Oramedia based on the people's belief system is more efficient in message delivery than the western media. For instance, the use of beads, feathers, "omu" (palm fronds) is common among the traditional folk and the messages those symbols send across when employed are unambiguous and unequivocal. A knot of 'omu' (palm frond) among the Ibo means that the bearer should not be talked to nor would he talk to another person; on a piece of land, the message is to the whole world that the land is in dispute and that all should steer clear of it, and on a vehicle it means that the vehicle is carrying a dead body hence, policemen on the high way do not hesitate to allow

such vehicles to pass immediately (Notwithstanding that smugglers in recent times have been reported to be abusing this time-honoured norm of the people). According to Oreh (1978:9) "If the messenger of an Arochukwu chief offers an 'omu', he has summoned the man to a meeting with the chief without fail".

We wish to state that the relegation of the traditional media since the advent of colonialism is not because they have nothing useful in them but rather it is due to the characterization of everything African as bad by the colonial hegemon for his own selfish interest and ego-mania. As observed by Akpabio (2003:4) "when the colonial overlords arrived, they had their own ideas about how society ought to run and they went ahead to implement these ideas. In the process, anything indigenous suffered neglect. Informal traditional education, literature and the indigenous means of communication, to mention a few, were subjugated." A prophet is not without honour except in his own country. This has unfortunately gone on for a long time to our peril, "for what we are looking for in Sokoto is also in the sokoto we are wearing."

We now turn to the western media to see their own areas of strengths and advantages.

Western/Modern Media: Strengths and Comparative Advantages

The Western media, to say the least, are a global revolution since they were invented. The history of world civilization has been monumentally transformed since Gutenberg invented his printing press. The common saying that "the pen is mightier than the sword" has been made more manifest and as Napoleon Bonaparte's more graphic observation put it "Three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets"

The modern media which include the press, radio, television, the cinema and books are at the very center of existence of any society, developing or developed. According to Okonkwo, "The existence of the media is imposed by sheer demands and need of the society in which they operate" (in Ogbu Kalu ed. 1978:159).

Since the origin of States and more particularly, the advent of colonialism in Africa and the concomitant configuration of power, the society has become more and more complex as the traditional society gave way to new methods and systems of governance. With this development, the traditional media can no longer cope. Oreh observed that much when he noted that traditional modes of communication are no longer able to

satisfy our present communication needs. Hence, Schramm (1948:19) for instance noted that "The job of watching the horizon is now largely assigned to the mass media of news, with all their reporters, news agencies, telecommunications, printing and broadcasting facilities" He added that "the task of socializing new members of society has now, in considerable part, been entrusted to the schools and to such teaching media as textbooks, educational radio and television, instructional films and encyclopedias.

The modern media have an edge over the traditional media in coping with the new explosion in population. According to Oreh "when one amalgamated diverse communities into nations, when one must speak to plural societies of heterogeneous peoples in a common 'world dialect'...when one must try, with hope, the laws of combined development; one needs a technical form of communication which permits rapid transmission of information publicly to large heterogeneous and impersonal audiences almost simultaneously." (Oreh op cit : 112).

Related to the above is also the greater effectiveness of the modern media in the management and economy of time. One of the modes of the traditional media is the face-to-face oral communication, which requires one to move from house to house. For instance, a housewife annoyed at the high cost of meat has to go from house to house talking to a half dozen neighbours about staging a boycott; but if the editor of that locality newspaper publishes a letter she writes, she communicates her idea to hundreds of people in a fraction of time it would take her to visit them individually.

Similarly, the politician running for the senate or any other political post will spend much of his campaign time visiting communities and towns shaking hands with the citizens in the hope of sweeping the pools. But he knows that this method will only assure him a negligible percentage of the voters. He hires an airtime on television and radio to deliver his message to thousands of voters simultaneously.

Also in terms of information storage and retrieval, the western media are better equipped. For instance, speeches made by politicians on the occasion of the Nigerian independence anniversary and even the news paper such as the West African Pilot involved in the nationalist activities are all preserved in tapes and microchips for future use by posterity. With the oral traditional media, such speeches would have been lost due to memory decay or, if remembered, some vital points are likely to be omitted and some irrelevant points added for as the saying goes, a story retold is a story altered.

Among the Africans, the saying that one does not stand in one vantage position to watch a performing masquerade implies that one must necessarily be at the venue of the event. Also, the *Ikoro* used to be the fastest means of transmitting messages of community-wide importance; the town-crier needs to move from one part of the town to the other to announce the decision or policy made by the council of elders.

But for the modern media, all you need is the instrumental gadget such as radio, television or telephone and in the innermost part of your room you can pick any announcement from different parts of the world, watch a world cup football match between Holland and Argentina in far away Buenos Aires. The traditional media are strongly limited in terms of time and space, but the western media are ageless and a global affair hence, McLuhan had to observe that the Mass Media technology has turned the world into a global village.

In addition, without the swift and extensive system of mass communication, the economic life of a major industrial country cannot function properly. Through their global capacity, the modern media advertise and inform their audience about new products from different parts of the globe. This helps merchants, businessmen and governments to know where particular goods and services are better produced. Also the weather forecasts from different parts of the world inform the audience of the weather and climatic conditions of such places so that travellers and investors can make an informed choice regarding trade and investment. Through international communications, travellers are informed about the security situations and social life of the peoples of the world. All these are above the capacity of the traditional media.

The military tactics of soldiers as well as changes and sudden adjustments are faster communicated using modern telegraphic equipment than the talking drum. For instance, Akinyeye (1986:34) reported how the tactics of one of the Ibadan commanders during the *Ikirun* campaign of 1878 changed suddenly but could not be communicated to his men, and worse still, the war drum signals of one of his subordinate commanders were imitated by his enemy with disastrous consequences for the Ibandans. It is on account of the complexity and sophistication of the modern media *visa-vis* the limited capacity of the traditional media that Schramm (1978) noted that spoken language is meaningful away from the place where an event occurs, but the message can only be heard as far as the voice can carry.

Section 22 of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria provides that "The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all

times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives... and accountability of the Government to the people". Similarly, the United States in their ever first amendment of their constitution in 1791 saw the need and the power of the mass media to ensure good governance and directed that "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom ... of the press. The modern media are a specialized daily affair unlike the traditional channels that have occasional character. Through their correlational activities, the modern media provide room for political participation of all in the process of governance. The modern media have in fact revolutionised the world as the news of an event that would have taken months for one in another part of the world to hear gets to one as the event occurs.

Otherwise, how could one in Nigeria know instantly that Pope John Paul II is dead in far away Vatican City? Hence, Schramm (1973:263) observed that "it is no accident that the word, 'revolution' is used in talking about these interactions of mass communication with society – the intellectual revolution, political revolution, industrial revolution and revolution in values."

Talking about values, it is proper that a caveat emptor be provided, that is, that the traditional media are more concerned with the moral regeneration of the society than the modern media that have contributed much to the wrecking of the society, hence the saying that there is no rose without thorns! In a similar vein, Lazarsfeld and Merton (in Agee et al, 1982:15) observed that the modern media have a negative effect referred to as "narcotizing dysfunction" – they absorb the audiences' time without energizing them."

Conclusion

In the foregoing, we have carefully observed the distinct inherent advantages and disadvantages of the traditional media in relation to the Western/modern media. This, it is hoped, will enable those in authority and other development communication agents to know when to marry the two and when to isolate them depending on the circumstance, so as to be able to achieve result. Schramm (1984:263) echoed the above observation when he said "Mass media can be effective, and interpersonal communication can be effective but... the two together can sometime be uniquely effective". It is therefore, not proper to relegate the traditional media to an inferior position of neglect as this will stultify our effort towards national development.

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