

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY MEDIA IN BUILDING DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Democracy has always been a system of governance that is all embracing and acceptable all over the world. Key to this is an effective community communication system with people in remote areas having access to active participation in the political life of their country. However, it is sad that community media have not been accorded its rightful place in the democratic media system in Nigeria. This is a reflection of regrettable ignorance of the significant role which community media can play in the overall development of a country. This exploratory paper therefore highlights the key roles of community media and examines the possibilities of cultivating community media potentials in promoting democratic norms in Nigeria.

Keywords: Community Media, Democracy, Democratic Values, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The end of the colonial era has witnessed the rise of many independent countries and the spread of democratic principles, even if only at the level of lip service. Though often ignored in practice, democracy is honoured in theory. Democratic governance, in spite of its pitfalls, is widely preferred to its authoritarian alternative. The hallmark of good democratic governance to varying extent is its guarantee of citizen participation through politics of inclusiveness, freedom of association and freedom of expression. This is achieved through the rule of law, periodic, free and fair elections, transparency and accountability (Unegbu, 2003; Wantchekon 2003).

According to Media South Asia, all media, from a strict interpretation, can be argued as being community media because they address a particular, community at the exclusion of another. What distinguishes community media from the more commercial media outlets is the democratic and participatory it adheres to as an organizational framework.

Arguably, democracy and participation are the core of community media making. Community media can be owned and controlled by the local community they serve which in turn fosters participation, creativity, and diversity. The foregoing implies that ownership and control from a democratic perspective are more in line with community media if they are at the local and independent level. It is because of lack of accessibility and participation in the commercially

mediated landscape that community media in a developing country like Nigeria is a potential countervailing force which can serve the needs of various groups along a wide assortment of issues. According to the Rennie (2006:6), democracy implies the intention to rule in the interests of the people for the common good. As a communication platform key to the dissemination of social and political information, the media in a truly functioning democratic society should not veer from being the vanguard of participatory democracy that is entrenched in the people's political and cultural traditions that promote human rights in general and freedom of expression in particular. Before proceeding further a degree of clarity regarding community media should be provided.

Concept and Features of Community Media

The concept of community media admittedly is very broad. It refers, in the first place, to a diverse range of channels of communication.

Such media may involve:

- ❖ Mass Communication Channels, such as radio, television, newspaper and magazine
- ❖ Indigenous communication channels, such as town-crier/gong-man, music and songs, folk – tales, drama, poetry, festivals, village – square meetings, market - square meetings, town hall meeting, co operatives meetings and traditional courts (i.e. palaces)
- ❖ Various combinations of traditional and modern media which Nwabueze (2008) refers to as Tradotronic media (i.e. a multi – media mix).

Community media are in a broad sense as described by Rennie (2006:7), “Community Communication”. Thus, community media can be referred to as any form of media that are created and controlled by a community, either a geographic community or community of identity or interest. Community media are media designed, developed and operated to serve the needs of rural areas or of a particular locality/community within a rural, sub-urban, or urban setting (Folarin, 1997, cited in Lamidi, 2011).

Community media are different from commercial media, state run media or public broadcasting. The premise is that community media are facilitative tool for discussion and engagement of those groups that are categorically excluded and marginalized from the mainstream of media outlets. Hence, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), The World Bank and The European Commission recognize community media as a crucial element in a vibrant and a democratic media system.

Some of the general features over arching the earlier mentioned forms of community media, perhaps the most characteristics are the overall objectives of these media: to provide news and information relevant to the community members, to engage these members in public discussion and to contribute to their social and political “empowerment” (Jankowski, 2003). The ownership and control of community media is often shared by local residents, municipal government and community – based organizations. The content is locally oriented produced and tailored towards enhancing and accelerating development at the grassroots through:

- ❖ Public enlightenment by providing timely and relevant information about the socio – political environment and its sustaining cultural values;
- ❖ Teaching of basic skills that people need in order to ensure their economic well – being and improve their socio-economic status;
- ❖ Mobilization of the populace to support government and communal development projects.

The production of the media content involves non-professionals and volunteers, and the audience of such media is majorly situated within a relatively small, clearly defined geographic region, although some community networks attract large and physically disperse audiences. Lastly, the financing of community media is essentially non-commercial, although according to Jankowski, (2003) the overall budget may involve corporate sponsorship, advertising and government subsidies.

It is imperative to state here that, community media defer in the degree they share each of these features of major importance; however, these media are “of, by and for” members of the community.

Democracy and Democratic Values

A better understanding of what democratic values entail can be achieved by explicating what democracy is all about. According to Nwankwo (1992:27), “democracy is a system which gives periodic opportunities for the masses, to choose their leaders”. He went further to add that, “democracy is a government elected by the majority of the electorates”. This means that a situation where rigging, killing and thuggery are used to impose somebody on the people is not democracy.

In essence, democracy requires designing a set of arrangements through which each person’s preferences will have equal weight in determining the ultimate decision. Otherwise we would have a system in which one person decides (dictatorship) or a minority decides (oligarchy).

So democracy represents a set of those otherwise decision-making institutions that embody respect for the equal worth of all citizens, and the fact that powerless and disadvantaged people can express their preferences through democratic means is a substantial form of potential influence for non-privileged groups.

From democratic theory perspective, a democratic value is the processes through which beliefs and preferences are formed. Democratic values entail civility justice, mutual respect, and open – mindedness, through which debate and critical examination of issues lead to a fuller understanding of issues and a more reflective set of references. This aspect of democracy is valuable because it corresponds to a society in which open and uncensored debate leads to the formation of individual and collective preferences and embodies the ideas of democratic equality among citizens. To this, Afamuefuna (2007) affirms that “if democratic spirit of fairness, justice and wisdom are not widely present among citizens, political institution of democracy is a sham”.

Community media in all their various forms are inseparably linked to the enhancement of a civil society and civic participation in democratic process through dissemination of social and political information. The fact that in the vast majority of instances community media in Nigeria find their expression in the grassroot especially among the skewed and disadvantaged communities is a commentary on the lack of democratic participation in the more mainstream media sources that are completely out of the sphere of the average citizen who are in majority. Community media, then, can be viewed as a tool readily available for the expression of a collective voice of disenfranchised who are cut off from the mainstream of socio-political and economic development activities.

Democratization and the Media in Nigeria

In 1991, media practitioners from across Africa met in Windhoek, Namibia, to discuss the changes toward democracy. They adopted what became known as the Windhoek Declaration, which supported an independent and pluralistic press in African countries. It stated that, consistent with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the fostering of an independent, pluralistic press in Africa was essential to the development of democracy (and its values) as well as economic development on the continent (Nkamba 1993). To this, development communication scholars argued that media influence could be a magic multiplier for development through dissemination of new development knowledge (Larner, 1958; Schramm, 1964; Rogers 1967). According to these scholars, the media enormous reach especially that of radio, would be used to spread information that could be used to achieve development. The state would, in turn, play an altruistic role, controlling the media for use in national priorities.

More than two decades after Windhoek Declaration, development projects failed throughout the continent, this scenario did not work out; instead the media, in the hands of the state, became a powerful instrument to disseminate political propaganda for the ruling elite (Ronning, 1994). News reporting in both the print and electronic media in Nigeria is Urban-centred, while rural reporting is tied to the presence of mainly political dignitaries.

Besides, the fact that every newspaper wants to be seen as “National” means that it has little or no time for community reporting. Similarly, giant radio and television stations and networks providing little autonomy for affiliate stations take the place of local community stations that the people can relate to.

Thus, the so called mass media which include newspapers, magazine, as well as radio and television could be described as urban media in terms of location, conception, content, expression as well as distribution/coverage. All these disabilities result in the alienation of the people from the mass media, making it difficult for the mass media to serve as effective agents of even mobilization, much less community development.

The community newspapers set up by some individuals were poorly executed, as they were in the words of Dare (1996) cited in Lamidi (2011), little more than “Zonal digests of the metropolitan newspaper”. To crown it all, a lot of the existing mass media lack credibility. It is certainly expecting too much to try to mobilize the populace through channels that have been utilized routinely over the years to deceive or mislead the people, falsify elections results and

make political promises that were not meant to be fulfilled. All the issues raised above support the contention that the media in Nigeria are constrained by structural, state and economic factor. As a result, the Media's ability to play a bigger role in the democratization process is limited.

Theoretical Framework

The need for normative theories from which this paper derives its theoretical underpinning is the concern for the "niceties of accuracy, objectivity, and public sensitivities (Baran and Davis, 2003:93), as well, indeed, as the search for professionalism in the conduct of media affairs. To be precise, this paper is guided by four normative theories- authoritarian, social responsibility, democratic – participant theories of the media, and the Integrated Model of Social Change (IMCSC). They are highlighted below:

Authoritarian Theory

This theory is rooted in the notion of a press that is subordinated to state power and the interest of ruling elites. This concept set the original pattern for most of the national press system of the world, and still persists. (Folarin, 1998). The instruments of authoritarian control of the media are many and varied. They include censorship, repressive legislation and suspension of publication. Colonial governments and modern-day military as well as dictatorial civilian authorities and their apologist subscribe to the tenets of this theory.

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory grew out of the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission on the Freedom of the Press. The commission was set up in the United States of America to re-examine the concept of press freedom as enunciated in the Libertarian or Free Press Theory. The major premise of the social responsibility theory is that freedom carried concomitant obligations, and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to society for performing certain essential functions of media of mass communication. (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). The media, according to the commission, should both serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas for the common good and present a representative picture of the constituent groups of the society. Applied within the content of this paper, social responsibility theory seeks to enlist the media in the struggle to consolidate our nascent democratic environment and prevent its being hijacked by undemocratic elements.

Democratic – Participant Theory

This theory emerged in response to the elitist nature of the press, its responsiveness to political and economical pressures and the professional hegemony in the media system. It also came up in response to the need to redress the deficiencies of the libertarian theory and the social responsibility theory. This was because of its perceived failure to achieve the social benefits expected of them. The theory seeks to truly democratic communication through dismantling of the over-centralized, big, commercial media in a favour of a horizontal, a time rural-based communication that can be directly controlled by community members. (Folarin, 1998). This is to guarantee easier media access to all potential users and consumers.

The thrust of the democratic participant theory lies in its insistence that the mass media have become too socially important to be left in the hands of owners and operators, the fear being that such a monopoly may serve to marginalize a critical part of the populace. The theory argues that citizens have a right to relevant local information, a right to answer back and a right to use the means of communication for interaction and social action in small – scale settings (Paterman, 1979). Therefore, the theory may be likened to what Folarin (1998) called “grassroots democracy” media.

Within the specific context of this paper, the theory favours grassroots media that expresses the needs of citizens in place of top-down approach. The democratic – participant theory also places emphasis on community media as it incorporates varied practical media such as community radio stations, micro-media in rural setting, newspapers, media for women and ethnic minorities etc to stimulate and empower the citizens for a strong and healthy, pluralistic political discourse and ultimately informed choice of political leaders.

Communication Model Building and Community Media

Given the history of Nigerian media and the fact that Nigerian democracy was inspired by economic and political concerns, it follows that a suitable communications model must be located at the intersection of media development and democracy. According to Mwangi (2010) it must be a model that is capable of capturing and articulating aspirations and expectation at the grassroots level and that serves as a public sphere for public deliberation. Based on this, this paper adopts a Social-Democratic Communication Model (SDCM) propounded by Mwangi in 2010. This model synthesizes the social responsibility theory, democratic participant theory and Integrated Model of Communication for Social change (IMCSC). The latter was developed in 1997 by a group of leading communication scholars, professionals, community organizers, and social change activists at the behest of the Rockefeller Foundation. IMCSC describes social change as a dynamic, interactive process that starts with a catalyst or stimulus that can be either external or internal to the community. This catalyst leads to a dialogue within the community, which is then likely to lead to collective action and resolution of a common social or political problem.

In his proposition, Mwangi (2010) anchors the development of a Social-Democratic Communication Model on the synthesizing of some elements from the foregoing theories and a communication model and some elements from the prevailing situation in Africa. The workability of the Social Democratic Communication Model, according to Mwangi (2010), however depends on:

- ❖ The model must treat information not as a commodity, but as a social product generated in a deliberative public sphere. Thus, information will not be just a product for sale, but one generated by the public and for the public good.
- ❖ Second, while Habermas’s theory dwells on the media as a public sphere, the model suggests that the media are only one part-albeit a central part-of such a sphere. In other words, the model must take into account the other spheres where public discussion takes

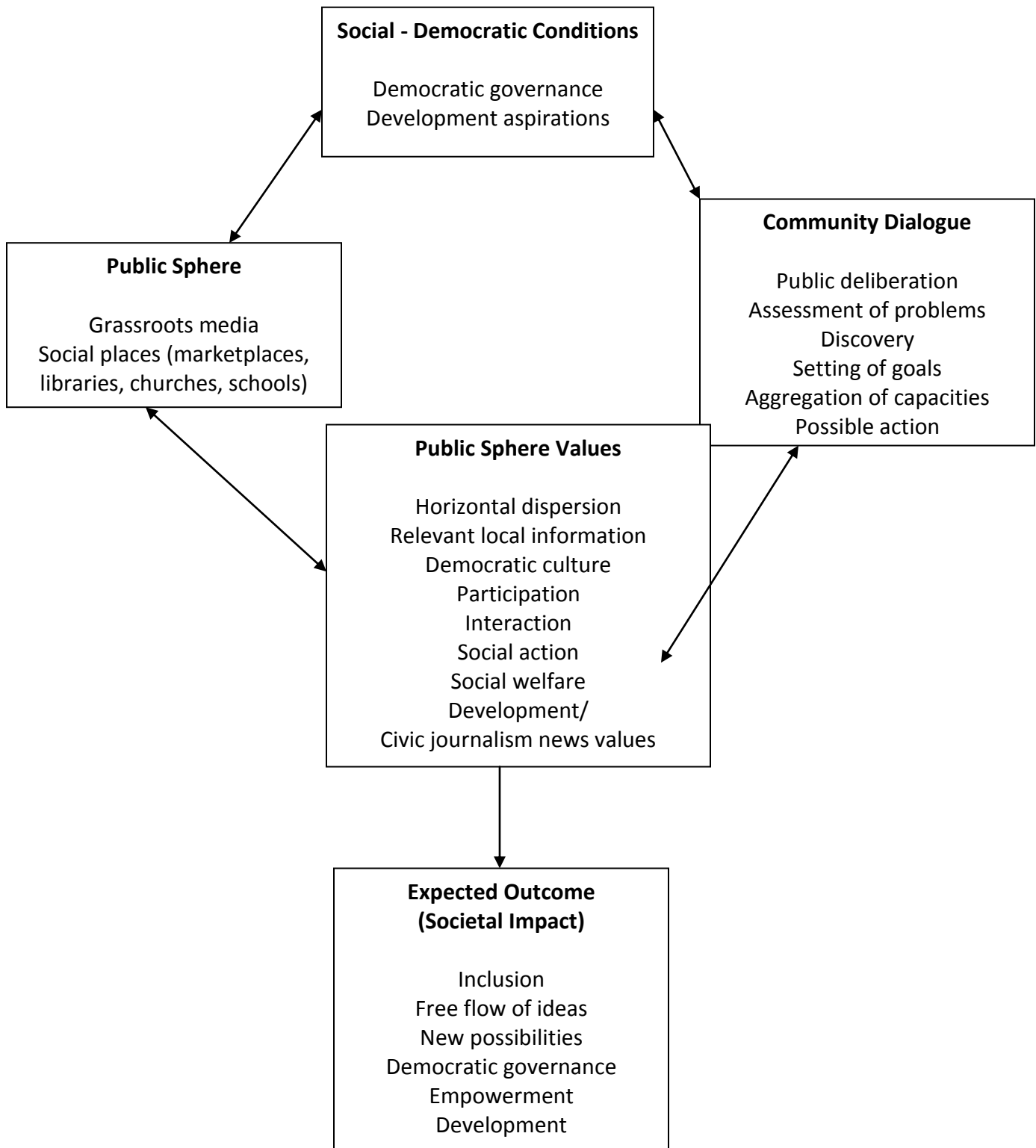
place in Nigeria, such as churches, market places, village square meetings, town hall meetings and shopping centres .The model suggest that inventory of places like these would provide the media with a better idea of where to go to capture voices.

- ❖ Third, this model further proposes that the media must re-orient themselves to be able to tap into this flow of public deliberation which the media overlook, and bring it into the mainstream through news sources. This model suggests that the civic journalism theories offer a perfect framework for the media in Africa to tap into the ongoing public talk that has, abinitio, tended to pay little or no attention to.
- ❖ Fourth, the media's entry into this arena must serve the dual purpose of socializing the population to a democratic cultural values and promoting public deliberations on issues of public concern, but the public sphere must be evenly dispersed and accessible to the people. This means that the Nigeria media must find ways of penetrating rural areas, even when market forces dictate otherwise.

More importantly, the model proposes a new way of training journalists covering public forums and public deliberations which according to the proponent requires specialized listening and reporting skills – skills different from those needed to cover a political rally. For instance, journalists training must be structured to include training on democratic theory and practices to help journalists acquire a better understanding of the democratic process and their role in it. The model suggest that such training should place emphasis on developing stories in four proposed areas: developing enterprises stories to focus attention on community problems; providing information on alternative solutions; participating in on going public forums to discover key issues; and polling the public, both to capture their voices, and to determine which are the most pressing issue. Clearly, such training will assist the media industry to not only recognize their social responsibility to the skewed and disadvantaged communities, but to share in the vision of a different way of executing their job.

Applied within the context of this paper, the model seeks to allow citizens to name and frame issues in their own terms. This model advocates for adequate representation of all the voices, including ordinary voices that are rarely heard in the media. The implication of this is that the model recognizes the need for a virile community communication with people in the remoter areas and their active –participation in the socio – political life of their country.

**Figure 1: The Sam Chege Mwangi Social – Democratic Communications Model
(For Community Media)**



How the Community Media Can Aid the Building of Democratic Values

It is the way a message is communicated that determines to a great extent the degree or appropriateness of the response and by implication, the success of the communication activity. One of the most successful ways the media can stimulate and gear the people is the creation of norms. It has been admitted that the media should exist and function as one corporate component of the societal instrument for norm creation. (Adeniran 1980:17). The community media which are closer to the grassroots should therefore be closely associated with the promotion of norms that promote democratic ideals in the community. Lending his voice to the foregoing, Ward (1972:2) submits that democracy is a habit of mind and unless the citizens have good virtues, their state cannot. However, to create norms without integrative aims would be tantamount to creating divisions and engendering the further fragmentation of the community as a social system. It is in view of this that the media should create these norms with a view to bringing together every class in the community and in a way acceptable to all. Such community communication that promotes democratic spirit of fairness and justice may help to mobilize support, create awareness, encourage behavioral change and even influence policy makers on political issues.

Communicating for development engages processes of mediated as well as interpersonal communication to broaden the base of political discourse. In other words, there is need to complement these mediated channels with interpersonal communication noted for its interaction, immediate feedback through self disclosure, clues and relatively simple styles of expression, qualities which makes it especially suitable for communication with rural folks in the area of entrenching democratic values among them. A more integrated liberalized and accessible media will give room for more diversified view point (including that of the rural voice), which will nonetheless provide a richer media culture for media and promote democratic cultural values in Nigeria. In short this participatory approach is in line with the demand of the Democratic-Participant Theory and Social- Democratic Communication Model.

CONCLUSION

The task of building an enduring democratic environment is not an individual task. It is a collective one involving the government, public organization and non governmental organizations as well as individual in the society. Therefore, all the above propositions presuppose the necessary political-will on the part of the government and the people which will make them provide the necessary setting to make community media work. The main theme of community media in whatever form it is created is access and participation. Policy can be written in ways that are conducive to the strengthening of these democratic principles while also, conversely, be enacted as barriers to the enhancement of democratic society as it pertains to the media.

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