

THE MASS COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL IN A DEVELOPING ECONOMY: A FOCUS ON STRATEGIC ISSUES AND THE MASS MEDIA IN BAYELSA STATE

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Abstract

Mass communication constitutes the myriad of assorted qualities and values of issues about happenings in human societies all over the world and people read, listen or view happenings presented in the various forms of the mass media such as newspaper, magazine, radio, television, e-mail, internet and so forth. It is on this backdrop this paper has focused on the roles of the mass communication professional in a developing economy aimed at ascertaining whether information has economic value and ability to process and store certain types of data that provides technological and unilateral political advantages to a country over other countries. Succinctly, it was observed that the relevance of mass communication professional to modern society and mankind is demonstrated in its fulfillment of certain messages that propelled social and economic well being of people in majority of the developing countries.

Keywords: *Mass Media, Information Dissemination, Mass Communication
Professional, Developing Economy, Transformation and Strategy.*

Introduction

For many Nigerians, there exists the assertion that the mass media are mainly a source of amusement, aside performing the orthodox functions of informing, entertaining, transmitting cultural heritage and disseminating information to the largely dispatched heterogeneous society. Generally, those recreational users of the mass media do not worry much about the effects or contributions of mass communication professional to the social, political and economic development of a nation.

A good beginning point in trying to understand the nature of mass communication in a developing economy is assumed to a situation where newspapers, radio, television and other forms of information dissemination suddenly disappear from human society that could be incredible to human existence (Defleur 1994:3). The reason

is that we depend largely on the media for information. Moreso, the mass media are veritable tools and indispensable link towards the advancement of economic and industrial activities of our national development.

It is on this backdrop this paper extricates the professional roles of mass communication in a developing economy with particular reference to Bayelsa state in the Niger Delta Region.

Who is the Mass Communication Professional?

Generally and conventionally, the process of mass communication is characterized by certain fundamental elements such as the communication message, channel or medium, the audience otherwise known as the recipient of the message and the feedback loop. These processes are chiefly driven by the professional communicator. The professional

communicator is the initiator of the information and thus, articulates the various elements to ensure the dissemination of information to the heterogeneous society for use regarding the socio-political and economic development.

One major aspect of the professional in mass communication is infused in the areas of development communication. The development communication professional understands the social importance of his role in the society and also knows what to transmit as the message (Konkwo, 2003:33). He studies the varying interests and levels of understandings of different group of people which constitute the audience so as to structure information to meet material, intellectual, emotional and spiritual requirements, needs and interests of the audience.

One other fundamental requirement of the professional mass communicator is that he should be apt and wrapped in a deluge of understanding the dynamics of politics and policies affecting economic activities in a globalized setting, especially those issues on human capacity and infrastructural development needs in less developed countries such as Nigeria.

The communications specialist as a professional in a fast growing economy would according to Whitney (1975:69), perform the following functions:

- i. A bridge building through informing the executive, legislature and the judiciary. It does that by updating the various arms of government with necessary and adequate information needs to enhance the discharge of their responsibilities.
- ii. Educates, broadens and keeps one's perspectives.
- iii. Helps to mobilize and persuade in

setting agenda for the heterogeneous society, especially in areas regarding public opinion.

- iv. Transmission of cultural heritage to enhance national cultural synchronization

The Nature of Nigerian Economy As A Developing Nation

In order to justify the contributions of the mass communication professional in a developing economy requires an examination of the structure of the economy particularly, the scope of economic reforms and development in Nigeria. Without mincing words, the Nigerian economy is not yet a modernized or capitalized one, despite the orchestrated reform policies be quitted with epileptic implementation, due to corruption, lack of commitment and political will have combined to polarize the entire polity. In supporting this assertion an economist, late Professor Sam Aluko in presenting a paper titled, Reforming Nigeria: which model? at the 2nd Trust Annual Dialogue, expressed that Nigerian economy is yet to arrive the feet of modernity or capitalized economy, even though the on going reform programmes try to imbibe a capitalist economic system without capital (Aniche, 2005:1004).

Nigeria has in the last two decades experienced persistent crises of development. Political, social, and economic crises have to varying degrees and at various times constituted serious constraints to the development of the nation. Ethnic, religious and communal conflicts have dislocated the lives of many and created major disruptions of the social and economic life of the nation. The debate over the convocation of a sovereign national conference, a national dialogue, or a national political conference at this stage of our development reflects the instability of the Nigerian state as presently constituted. It is generally accepted that Nigeria must be

reformed. The contending forces in the country today agree that the Nigerian state as it stands, is not sustainable and needs to undergo a committed reform process at a macro level with a view to transforming the sub-sector. The economic crises which affected a large majority of developing countries in the 1980s resulted in the reappraisal of development strategies around the world. There is global consensus on the need to restructure most 'third world' economies to make them better aligned with the various structural, institutional, and behavioural changes which have taken place in the world economy.

Nigeria, with an economy heavily dependent on oil, suffered significantly from the crises of the 1980s. The decline in oil revenue resulted in the decline in government expenditure and near-collapse of the economy. By 1999 basic infrastructure had deteriorated, the educational system was in shambles, factories were closing down at record speed, and the country's production system was in very bad shape. Most of the countries caught up in the crises of the 1980's undertook reform programmes. While these countries did not initially recognize the cost of the reform, it soon became a major concern. The question therefore is not the need to reform the Nigeria economy, but the content of that reform and the conditions in which it has to be undertaken in relation to the external environment.

In the last five years Nigeria has witnessed a new dawn in policy making and economic management, spurred by the strong desire of the Obasanjo administration to radically transform the legacy of the past few decades. So also the Late Umaru Musa Yar'adua and now Dr. Goodluck Jonathan administration has committed itself to a paradigm shift aimed at reversing the declining fortunes of the Nigerian state. The shift is to be reflected in both the political and economic

spheres of national life. The search for improved domestic policies resulted in the articulation of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). The idea is to speed up progress in redirecting Nigeria by putting in place a development strategy that has a strong potential to transform the country.

The Nigerian economy itself needs to catch up with the more developed economies if it is to become an active participant in the global economy of which it so regularly claims to be part. A catch-up economy is an economy in a state of delayed development. It must address the problems of a catch-up economy, which arise when gaps exist in know-how and organizational capacities between it and the other economies with which it relates, as well as with other countries with unequal technological and organizational innovations. It is a less productive economy confronted by more productive economies, or a greatly indebted economy confronted with creditor economies that have a competence gap which increase as the exchange relationship proceeds. The more developed economies are better placed to sell the goods and services they produce with a proportional input-output advantage at both national and international markets. If no protective measures are taken by the less competent economy its debt will increase, its productivity will decrease, and its prosperity performance and innovation will decrease or even fizzle out completely. The more competent economies will use their superior advantage in every respect in the areas of production, distribution and exchange, as well as, in their capacity for continuous innovation to push aside the straggler economies by marginalizing them. The traditional lifestyle of the people in the poorer economy will disintegrate. They will suffer social and economic regression, in which case they are simply overwhelmed; or the economy

and its people become appendages or outposts of the more developed economies. In most cases the poorer economy is thus relegated to the production of only a few or mono-products, or to extractive and rural agricultural subsistence production. It becomes increasingly involved in the production of unprocessed raw materials and the import of finished technical and manufactured goods. That tends to throw the economy back into traditional subsistence mode unless a foresighted and efficient administration, including a strong government, attends to its development.

There is need for an administrative system able to plan with prudence and foresighted and highly differentiated educational system. The leading transformers of the economy must accept that development is not an automatic process guided by a 'hidden' invisible hand. State intervention at the appropriate time and with appropriate determination is an indispensable precondition for successful transformation and development. Only at large stage when technology and manufactured sectors might have made the poorer economy competitive, so that what was once an agrarian economy becomes an industrial society, were the economy adopts free trade economic policies. The Nigerian economy is in this state of a development gap needing a catch-up and should pretend that it has arrived on the world economic scene and is able to imitate and submit to the prescriptions of economies that took off three centuries ago.

Elements of Nigeria's Current Reform Programmes

Nigeria embarked on its economic reform in September 1986 under the structural adjustment programme (SAP). The ongoing reform agenda of the present administration could be regarded as the continuation of the

structural adjustment programme. Its main planks are categorized hereunder:

- (I) Growth-oriented policies:
- (a) Exchange rate policies: the standardization of the naira-dollar/foreign currencies exchange rates through the devaluation of the external currencies. In a summary of the behavior of the naira in the foreign exchange market since 1970, particularly since 1986, and the consequent development of a black market exchange rate regime since 1986. The naira to the US dollar in 2003, and to 145 naira to the US dollar in the black market.
- (b) Energy policies: involve the recurrent increase in the market prices of fuel and other public utilities such as petroleum products, electricity, gas, postal and other social services, including educational fees, in order to reduce the financial burden on government and release funds for public saving and investment.
- (c) Deregulation of prices and the economy: as a way of reducing subsidies, encouraging private initiative, and reducing government intervention in the economy. Government intervention in the economy is regarded not only as inefficient, but also as unnecessary. The slogan is that government has no business in business. The private sector is thus regarded as providing the engine of growth of the economy. The upstream and the downstream sectors of the

petroleum industry, the main providers of government revenue and foreign exchange, are thus being deregulated.

- (d) Abolition of government interference in agricultural production: through the abolition of marketing boards for cocoa, cotton, groundnut, palm produce, etc since 1986. The governments are now reconsidering the policy in view of the drastic fall in the quality and quantity of the agricultural commodities, foreign exchange earnings, and local food self sufficiency. The reduction and eventual abolition of agricultural subsidies is also a plank in this programme. The removal of subsidies on pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers and animal feed comes into focus even though the programme is currently under review.
- (e) Foreign trade policies: include the gradual removal of quotes and restrictions on imports, semi-manufactured goods, spare parts, vehicles, and other World Trade Organization (WTO) provisions in order to free trade and globalized the economy. Reduction of import duties through a revised tariff structure is in the making and includes the dismantling of many of the measures that tended to protect our infant industries in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's.
- (f) Reform of public sector enterprises: through privatization, commercialization, and leasing. It implies the abandonment of medium term and long term multiyear development plans in favour of reliance on the market and free enterprise, as well as the abandonment of the role of government in the control of the 'commanding heights' of the economy. The reform now regards the private sector as the engine of growth of the Nigerian economy and regards government as a nuisance in direct production. The public service is thus being down-sized (right-sized). Retirement, retrenchment, and reduction in the size of the civil service and the corporations have become the main planks in the reform agenda aimed at providing the private sector with greater scope and opportunity to perform and revolutionize the economy by reducing the public sector.
- (g) Incentives for investment and exports: through the removal of investment controls in the private sector. They include the establishment of financial institutions that seek to extend loans and other facilities to the private sector through the Agricultural and Cooperative Development Bank and other institutions. The elimination of export controls and strengthening of export promotion schemes such as cassava project, NEPAD (the New Partnership for African Development) at the international level, and the struggle to open up the American market through the

- Growth and Opportunity Act (GOA) are aspects of the reform.
- (II) Stabilization Policies:
- (a) The introduction of incomes policies: The monetization of benefits in the public service, as well as the introduction of new pensions and national health insurance policies is the main plank. Another goal of the reform is the manipulation of the exchange rate through the continuous devaluation of naira to provide funds for budget stabilization and reduce budget deficits.
- (b) Tax reform: as a means of reducing inflation and increasing government revenue.
- (c) CBN's monetary and credit policy: To ensure that growth in money supply does not exceed, uncontrollably, the increase in the gross domestic product. The reorganization of the financial institutions, especially the bank, through an increase in their capitalization from N2 billion to N25 billion to make the banking system better able to mobilize domestic saving and assist investment in the real and other sectors of the economy.
- (d) Cuts in government expenditure: Through reduction in the privileges and fringe benefits of public officers, the reduction of expenditure on non-essential and running costs, and the maintenance of a balance between the annual budget and the gross domestic product by trying to reduce deficits to around 3% of the GDP.
- (e) Achievement of budget surplus: Through an increase in the external currency reserves of the governments and the central bank's manipulation of interest rates to eradicate negative real interest rates and reduce 'rent earnings'.
- (f) The establishment of 'due process' in the management and control of public revenue and expenditure: Thereby reducing waste in public expenditure and corruption in the budgetary process.
- (III) Social Policies: Provision for the needy: Through the establishment of programmes for poverty alleviation and assistance to target groups through the establishment and maintenance of a social security system. The liberalization of education through the encouragement of privately-established primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions is a further fillip to the government policy of education deregulation, liberalization, privatization, and combating corruption and waste in the reforms process.
- The Professional Mass Communicator in a Developing Economy:
Economic development entrants a variety of fundamental activities of human resources cumulatively harnessed in a given segment of the society. It is the pivot of

economic development that leads to industrialization and social integration towards a noxious of developments in the areas of infrastructural, technological social and political stability. It is the backdrop of marketing and productive base that sustains the livelihood of a nation. It salient to note that economic development can never outwit the contributions of the mass media which orthodox implicit functions are coordinated by the professional communicator. The mass media serves as a veritable means through which strategic information can be sourced with regard to the needs and wants of a developing economy. Thus, the professional mass communicators' role is characterized by the following critical factors:

Building Meaningful Relationship:

Communication can help us establish meaningful relationship. Through communication, we come to know others' want and needs and help them meet such needs and wants. According to Gamble and Gamble (2002:17), it is through effective interpersonal, small-group, public, media and computer – assisted communication contacts that our basic physical and social needs are met. According to psychologists we need other people the way we need water, food and shelter. And when we are cut off from human contact, we become disoriented and maladjusted, and our life itself may be jeopardized. People who are isolated from others, people who lack satisfying social relationships they say are more likely to experience health problems and to die early than people who have an abundance of satisfying relationship.

It is also through communication that we understand people from different cultural background. It is through communication that we discover what is important to them and what they stand for, and they at the same time,

come to understand us, what is important to us and what we stand for through communication. In order words, communication helps us to interact with people from different cultures in today's world where such contacts remain almost inevitable. According to Gamble and Gamble (2002:18) insensitivity to another's needs and preferred ways of interacting can hamper our ability to relate effectively.

Influence and Persuasion:

Different communication situations offer us the opportunities to influence each other subtly or overtly. Most of the time we try to make others see things from our own world view. In doing this sometimes, the aim is to realize our own goals or objectives. Sometimes we succeed, while at other time we do not, this may be as a result of the other party's communication power and influence.

Integration:

Communication provides to all persons, groups and nations access to the variety of messages which they need in order to know and understand each other and to appreciate other's living conditions, viewpoints and aspirations.

It is the responsibility of any society/community to plan and develop its developmental activities with everybody involved in all ramifications. To make this possible the people must avoid acts that will hinder their development programmes, which might be perceived as harmful. Although it is true that all religions believe that man does not, and cannot stand alone that he is virtually related with and even dependent on powers in nature and society external to himself. Clearly or dimly he knows that he is not an independent centre of force capable of standing apart from the world (J.B. Noss, 1990).

Mobilization:

The core function of development communication is to ensure people understand and participate in a given development effort. A development-oriented idea cannot enjoy the people's support without a proper understanding of the issue. It therefore ensures that, the people are involved in the conceptualization designing and implementation of development programmes.

The role of communication in rural development is therefore mainly that of mobilizing the people for purposes of active participation in their own affairs. It is acknowledged that not all communication contributes positively to development some form of communication can be disruptive, destroying instead of building. But for communication to benefit the people it has to be patterned after their experience and interests. Though, the benefits of rural development are self-evident, it nevertheless requires that the people be informed, educated and directed towards the set objectives of rural development. DeFleur and Dennis (1994) agree with this when they stated that the mass media should act as the means through which group norms are expressed, social controls are exerted, roles are allocated and above all the entire social process is carried out. In this context, it is pertinent to note that parts of the Local Government Area in Bayelsa State have very little or no access to most mass communication media due to illiteracy, ignorance or non-availability of these media in the rural areas. Many people are of the view that illiteracy constitutes, generates or builds impenetrable barriers to rural development.

Economic Reformation

The professional communicator has the objective of reaching out to people with the aim of helping them to change their

existing attitude and behavioral patterns to the one required or expected to make a positive transformation of the economy.

Research Development:

For an economy to grow the professional communication specialist contribute significantly to the dynamics of the economic research development. Development communication cannot take place effectively without adequate research. In development, communication consciousness effort is made to understand the target audience, who they are, what they do, where they stay, their sources of information, what they need, how to reach them among other important information about the audience.

The Media and Its Role In Nation-Building In Bayelsa State

What society has not convincingly accepted is the impact the mass media has made between 1999 when the first civilian administration under the leadership of Chief Diepreye Solomon Peter Alamiyeseigha, with now President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, who was then Deputy Governor, to 2007 on the constructive building of the state.

The media not being a state government apparatus are ideally placed as watchdogs to not only the government but also to the private sector by digging up information about the political process and alerting the public. In so doing, the media pushes the government towards the path of accountability. This was asserted by the Director-General, People Democratic Institute (PDI), Anthony Ubani in his series titled, 'media, politics and governance.

Although most of the media in the developing democracies are owned and controlled by government, Bayelsa State can boast of over 40 private print media houses that monitor and uproot the dirty deals of

public office holders and those in the private sector who use their offices as cover-up to defraud the state of its funds.

Anthony Smith was never wrong when in his essay, 'the long road to objectivity and back again: the kind of journalism we get in truth', when he said 'the media is the oldest institution that has built society through its public and private sector.' Edmund Burke captured the media as the 'fourth estate of the realm', an estate which most politicians and scholars have come to see as the most powerful'.

In Bayelsa state, it has before now been a legalized phenomenon for public office holders to jettison their duty posts and only resurface on pay days until the media which vibrantly reported the activities of those who speak in the name of the state, stick out its neck to criticize the bad policies and programmes of government while suggesting alternative course of action. At least, a sitting governor was arrested, tried and convicted, just as some members of State House of Assembly were arrested by the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) based partly on publications by the media on the stealing spree of public office holders and also, the immediate past Governor of the state Chief Timipre Sylva's forty eight properties in Abuja was seized by EFCC at Abuja.

Also, the mass media in Bayelsa State contributed considerably in creating awareness for programmes of the government, like Hands of Hope, and other calls by government to shun violence and embrace dialogue, even in the area of sensitizing the people to discharge their civic duties of voting and presenting themselves for the 2006 National Census.

The media in developing democracies sadly seem to be concentrated around the city centers, thus blacking out the rural areas. In so doing, a wide information gap

is created within the same country. However in Bayelsa State, some private media houses have positioned their reporters in these rural communities. This has made it possible for the government at the centre to be informed of the needs of the rural people and have variously taken proactive measures to build these communities. The media is the basis on which development of any given nation hangs, as it provides not only communication, but effective communication that will set the agenda which directs the public at arriving at a mutual understanding.

Concluding Remarks:

Effective communication enhances social, economic and political growth in a free enterprise. The evidence of development cannot be misplaced on the pendulum of human activities between the advanced and less developed economies and the success story is attributed to strategic roles of the communication professional in areas of information sourcing, gathering, packaging and dissemination in the society. In that regards permit me without hesitation to conclude by describing the communication professional as the loudspeaker, reformer, organizer, equalizer, enricher, accelerator, legitimizer, research advancer, mobilizer and informer, and at best an educator.

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