



Role of Media Audience Feedback Mechanism in the Sustenance of Democracy and Political Communication and Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the power of media audience feedback mechanism role in sustaining democracy and political communication development in Nigeria, with a view of measuring its overall holding politicians accountable in their public speeches. For democracy to thrive, survive and endure, political communication (speeches) by public offices holders, politicians must be monitored by media audience who must react and respond to those speeches via media feedback mechanism. Essay style method was used to enable the authors do very well in their narratives and explanations based on experiences. Discussions and experiences reveal that not much has been done to monitor political speeches and little or no feedback or respond to them by the media audience. In the light the above observation, the authors strongly condemned the attitude of docility shown by many Nigeria media audience towards responding to political speeches made by the politicians. The paper recommends serious attitudinal change orientation aimed at reinforcing the media audience to respond to public speeches as a sign to show politicians that people monitor what they say. Again the authors welcome social media with its great opportunity provided to users, that enable them to respond quickly and timely to public speeches made by politicians.

Introduction

The hall mark of every communication is to accomplish its journey from the sender to the receiver and cause reaction that often leads to feedback, a two-way communication process. Feedback is a response to the interpreted message received via verbal or non-verbal mode of communication is been received positively or negatively.

Feedback is the destination of every communication process. Any message from the sender which does not return response in a form words or action from the receiver has failed to accomplish its purpose. In fact, the import of feedback in communication scholars to remark that our interaction model of communication explains that our message is shaped by feedback we receive from others (receivers of our message). Public speakers are reminded that interaction involves two-way communication, and the listeners of the speaker's message can adopt plenty of feedback mechanisms to let the speakers know how their messages are being received. How media or message audiences received message and interprets receives is quite independent on the individual audience. Communication is highly personal and individualized process, therefore, the socio-emotional and psychological disposition of the audience determine to a very large extent his or her response mechanism.

In this process of feedback, meaning is a platform which measures good and evil values in today world; so media too is both instrument and standard that can equally provoke tension and problem among individuals. As a result of that, media operator (journalist) should be conscious of the message they give out to the audience, because the consequences of bad, incisive, hate and provocative message are grave and destructive. In a situation where everybody, both media audiences and other public speeches consumer is bombarded daily with political media message- news, commentaries, editorials, and political speeches - delivered at various political and office meetings, both the media and the speakers must note that the people watch, listen and hear them.

On this backdrop therefore, this paper is set to investigate whether media-audience communication feedback has been effective in our current democratic dispensation. Conceptually, the authors of this paper are of the view that without effective media-audience feedback mechanism in any democratic government, both democracy and political communication growth would be in mirage. In Nigeria today observation has shown that hate speech, gutter language and deceitful utterances occupy prominent position in our political speeches domain since democracy thrives in words and not In bullets, effort must be made by all, to monitor and reply our political and public office holders on their daily comments and statements. There is one basic way to promote democracy and strengthen political communication in Nigeria.

Political communication in Nigeria:

Political communication is a subfield of communication and political science that is concerned with how information spreads and influence politics and policy makers, the news media and citizens. Political communication is the only communication that drives politics and governance. It connects politics and so acts as the only interactive modes that bring the two seemingly different groups- politicians. Their pledges, promises and rhetoric's in news stories, columns and editorials contain much information upon which a voting decision has to be made. By extension, the politicians use media to serve as potent political instrument that is capable of creating, articulating and disseminating public opinion in matters of politics and government. According to many political watchers, they assert that the instrument is more necessary than associations for maintenance of democracy and liberty.

Political communication began with the earliest studies of democratic discourse by Aristotle. It is agreed that in discussing Aristotelians as a political communication construct, it has become important to bear in mind that Aristotle conceived the theory in the context of public speaking, the principal means of political communication. Politicians who are good public speakers are capable of delivering their campaign speeches in a manner that would

woo an audience to vote for them in an election. By implication, political communication is simply a rhetoric communication interwoven in persuasion and political rhetoric is the faculty of discovering in every case the available means of persuasion.

In order to win an election, minus other manipulating factors in the Nigeria political context, there must be what Aristotle termed “logical proof” or logos”. The logical proof in the candidate’s speech will help him or her convince the electorate that he or she has better things to offer them than his/her opponents. To achieve that a good political communication speaker should possess some salient qualities, among them, is that the speaker must be perceived by his/her audience as being intelligent, based on his or her own experience and evidence presented and supported with proofs. Again, the speaker should show a kind of virtuous character which enables his audience judge his or her integrity, apparent trustfulness of his or her speech. The speaker must be seen to be purposeful and well-intentioned to serve the people, if elected, as against what American Rhetoric school termed “drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred”. The Nigeria General elections campaign speeches since 2003 were full of “bitterness and hatred” as the major contending political parties bombarded the campaign arenas with messages of “devil terms”. A devil term speech is one full of bad, wrong and evil intents. Instead of discussing issues: personalities and ethos of politicians were mainly highlighted, thereby getting the audience confused.

Since 1999 to date, Nigerian political communication can simply be described as not pleasant. And this absurdity is powered by the media which according to Zanzibar school of thought have become in the hands of affluent politicians mere clowns or stooges. This is because instead of the media preventing such excessive absurdity, they promote and support it by supplying the symbolic, meditational and projective means for the substance of the status quo. Many of our journalists became boot-lickers and lapdogs of the political class. They practice what Akpan and Idiong call “begging-bowl journalism”. Such journalists in their write-ups conjure ridiculous superlatives to flatter politicians and presents rosy picture of the state of affairs, even

if the society is burning, people dying in their numbers as a result of bad government policies that bequeathed poverty and hardship on the citizenry.

The story has not changed in the Nigerian political sphere, as media still focus attention to certain issues not for the interest of the public. They build up images of political figures, and constantly present objects suggesting that all things are well. This media role in politics has not changed in the Nigeria political communication practice. We are still in search for what Aristotle called traditio typology of political communication that considers future policy dialogue and constructive debates between and among the politicians and the electorate, than merely war of words.

Mass Media and the Sustenance of Democracy: The Nigerian Experience:

Let us critically examine the role mass media played in Nigerian democratic attempts during the military regime brouhaha about transition from military to civilian, and they current of going journey onto true democracy since 1999. Mass media institutions are very important and centrally located in the lives of the of the people and democratic process. The fact that democracy can hardly work without vibrant media in the system is true. A responsible nationwide democratic system requires a media system which is coterminous and which can generate discussion of issues or public concern in a way that does not favour partisan interest; of particular political parties, the interest of media bosses or media professionals. According to McQuail, media have a complex relationship with sources of power and the political system, because politics and the media seek to promote the individual as well as the collective interest of the general society. Media should be independent at all time.

Over the years in Nigeria, the performance of mass media in the democratic process at various phases of her history has been well documented by communication scholars. And although Nigerian mass media has been severally criticized for complicities in truncating and subverting the democratic process during the transition period of military rulers, we cannot dismiss the fact that they played and will continue to perform critical role in

the promotion of a sustainable democratic system in the society. We can vividly recall that before 1999, the Nigeria mass media have shifted attention to electioneering process, monitoring government, reporting and interpreting the demoralization process.

All these efforts are seen to conform with the opinion that mass media have the responsibility to shape the public sphere, a major source of public opinion needed to legitimate authority in any functioning democracy. We recognize the importance of mass media in political life of any nation, and believe that mass media can be regarded as agents of changes and the major sources of social change and social information, therefore, their political information function has become an instrument of political transformation of the entire masses. On the same line of thought, people depend a lot on mass media for them to participate actively within the political and economic system.

But some scholars lament the unwholesome activities of some media that backed up some military rulers in their deceitful maradonic attempts to transit from military rule to civilian rule. We recall what one clergy termed “evil role” some Nigerian press played in championing the purported one million and two million matches for Generals Ibrahim Badamosi Babagida and Sani Abacha in 90s respectively. That man of God described the whole transition attempts as a “rape of democracy” Examining what some people call identity politics or group interest politics in Nigerian democracy, political watchers observed that identity has remained the worst dimensions in any democratic dispensation. Identity politics was introduced in Nigeria by the colonial masters for easy administrative purpose when they instituted separate programmes for different groups: North and South in Nigeria and that matured into what Jiga, former INEC boss called the “us” versus “them” syndrome.

This is a situation where some Nigerians see themselves as Muslims or Christian, Southerners or Northerners, Yorubas or Igbos or Hausa/Fulanis or Ijaws etc. In fact the continued interest of the media in championing and promoting the ugly divisive cankerworm in our political communication

practice is uncalled for. Instead, media should move to promoting “One Nigeria” slogan without emphasizing where one comes from. This unwholesome practice has remained the bane of our democratic development. Nigerian media should shift its reportage paradigm and start to champion and encourage “free citizenship” that can guarantee every Nigerian an opportunity to contest elective position in any part of Nigeria, where he or she lives and does his/her business, regardless of tribe or religion dominance in the area.

The favourable support which identity politics has received from the Nigerian media over the year, has boosted and expanded the evil picture of ethnicity, religion, regional and communal groupings in our policy. Our politicians have often embark on political mobilization using their different identities as tools from getting political power, especially at the federal level. In fact, the resort to identity politics by Nigerian politicians since the return of democracy is because these identities have more enduring values with legitimate bases for political representation and bargaining than even constitutionally recognized states and local governments. Mass media have the power to change this age to long practice and pave the way for true democracy as obtained in the advanced democracies of the world like United States of America and Britain. In those countries, politics is played along the line of political party ideologies instead of ethnic, regional or sectional ideologies as obtained in Nigeria. We can hardly achieve sustenance of democracy as long as our mass media continue to play up in their news writing and reporting this identity slogan. A situation where what takes more pages in our newspapers or more airtime on broadcast media is where the politician comes from instead of whom the politician is and what he can offer, does not help matters in our political communication journalism.

Factors Inhibiting Political Communication Development in Nigeria

Earlier in this paper we described political communication as a special field in communication

family that is concerned with how information spreads and influences politics and policy makers. Since every human being is a politician either partisan or active, this field of communication takes the largest chunk of journalism practice, globally, looking at what it covers. In realization of this fact, media organizations often assign a large number of reporters to cover political events scattered across all levels of government and society. Because many reporters, some of them are not professionally grounded in the art of politics and governance, are set to cover political events their naïve reporting contribute in affecting the expected growth in our political communication journalism development.

Political communication or journalism starts and stretches from covering, writing and reporting the activities of traditional institution custodians. This group of people are not practicing politicians, but are “partisan active politicians” in the things of custom, tradition and culture of their people. At local, state and federal level, but political journalism beams its reportage torchlight only on practicing politicians canvassing and vying for both elective and appointive positions. By extension, public office holders who came in through constitutional elections or by political appointments are equally monitored by the media as their rhetorics in form of policy statements or policy actions count much.

Many of these active politicians do not know anything about public speaking etiquettes and so forget themselves on the podia when addressing their audience. They speak before thinking and immature journalists report them verbatim, believing they (reporters have hit the headlines for their papers. Such unprofessional reportage does not encourage the growth of political communication development. These reporters do not understand when metaphor is used in the speech, they quote them, without further breaking it down for their readers for better understanding. They fail to understand that metaphor in speech is a message that can be interpreted on a number of levels, because it helps the audience to see, hear or feel the experience and help them understand information quicker.

Since communication is highly personal and individualized process, the psychological predispositions of both the speaker and the listener have to play serious role in determining understanding. This I because each person is a unique organism who responds to unique stimuli in his or her unique environment, and so, people can create their barriers in the communication process. For communication to be effective, it must involve compromise of meaning between the speaker and the listener. Language is another factor that can inhibit effective communication process because it requires people to become familiar with a particular language used in communication before better understanding can be achieved. Even the application of the language used in communication can mar effective communication. Many of our modern politicians and their media operators lack the knowledge of objective truth or subjective truth, and so romance with lies and language abuse. They cannot differentiate between language objectivity and subjectivity because they lack the communication skills required to drive effective political communication.

The communicators’ personal dispositions, lack of understanding of the language and its proper application in communication, remain the inhibiting factors in our political communication development.

Feedback Mechanism in Communication Process: the important of audience analysis

Our interaction model of communication explains that our message are shaped by the feedback we receive from others, and by the context in which we are interacting. So speakers should pay attention to the audience’s feedback, and further communicate according to the dictate of the feedback. Public speaker should be reminded that interaction involves two-way communication, and the listeners of the speaker’s message can adopt plenty of feedback mechanisms to let the speakers know how their reaction of his audience and adjust his message accordingly. Still on the import of feedback in communication process, we recall that active listening and learning from the speech encourage feedback. Although the quality and quantity of feedback differ from culture to culture. Some cultures encourage expressiveness while

others discourage expressiveness in form of feedback. Nigerian political campaign culture does not encourage immediate feedback from the listeners, because of the event is never packaged to accommodate questions and answer section. The voter's responses to the speaker's message are delayed, or never remembered at all, again. Because of such denial, importance of feedback is forgotten. By blocking feedback in our public speeches at political rallies, communication process would not be completed. And without feedback, communication is useless.

Apart of immediate feedback mechanism that is open for political campaign speeches, audience, still have ample opportunity to respond to such speeches using from mass media. Mass media audiences are selective group from the audience of campaign rallies. Once selective principle plays up, preferences surface. Which medium of communication can be used to reply to speeches made by politicians at a particular political rally. No matter the medium-print or broadcast-media audience members and media communicators are linked in a network of mutually shared experiences especially in political communication process. Bravo to social media that have expanded the chance and opportunity space in quick feedback mechanism. The linkage exists in the area of system integration which breeds two-groups of media owners and audiences. The groups are the confusionist media and their audiences, and the concerned media and their audiences.

The confusionist media are established by the opposition political parties group, who themselves are media operators that write and broadcast confusing or sensational news stories. The group also includes social media operators. This group writes to further confuse their already biased followers many of them low-minded and unenlightened members in the society. On the other hand, concerned group owes the concerned media and have the concerned audience. These are both print and broadcast established or inherited by the ruling political party as government media, and their allies government officers, workers, agents or others who benefit from government of the ruling party as party members, or friends.

Based on this observation, it becomes apparently difficult to determine genuine political communication media audiences, from within these two groups. It is only outside the groups can we see pure media audience free from contamination of unbiased mind. Such neutral audiences are the elite audience. They will be the first to understand and use media because they were small and represent the most educated and refined group in the society. Whether the media messages are prepared and produced to meet their taste or not, they are the only group that can drive acceptable mass media of communication feedback mechanism. Other lesser educated audience always wants to read their comments, opinion and reactions of these unbiased elite-media audience on any political or economic issue of the time. But in a situation where government-owned media in a bid to conceal and cover government misgivings, propagate half-truth or confusion in their news items, it portends danger in our march towards better political communication and feedback mechanism. An attempt by this paper to critically analyse the Nigerian political communication audiences throws up a lot of questions and assumptions.

First the question of where the audience belongs in the scheme of things in the country? Is the audience a politician-with the ruling party or opposition party that romances with the government? Or out rightly in the opposition group? No matter how the media, political events or government policies and programmes are, audience perception of such messages is heavily depended on the position of the political sphere. Those who identify with the ruling party and government will never see anything two wrong with whatever the media report about the government. Even if they spot out sycophancy and propaganda on such reportage, they cannot criticise openly, rather they cynically speak or write their feedback at the background. Individual perception of an event or information is influenced by his or her exiting attitude, mindset mannerism disposition and likes. Therefore, perception of political message on the media is according to the aforementioned factors. Individuals, especially media audience must apply the process of selective perception, on the volumes of media messages carrying political news and comments. Thorough

knowledge of the media audience will equip any researcher to affirm or doubt what an audience can get expose to and respond to from the media.

Conclusion

This paper obviously observe that nothing much has changed in our political communication pattern as politicians still keep on repeating themselves overtime in speeches and actions. Also, media role in politics still wears also the same face as our media institution still maintain its systematic links and interactions with and among media organization, political institutions, media audiences and political cultures. The paper affirmed this observation because even today Nigeria mass media institution, including social media, go on to deliver large and diverse audiences to political institution thereby commanding credibility and trust for them even where they do not exist, in perception of the audience.

The paper further discovered that there are some inhibiting factors to smooth and effective political communication development, because our mass media audiences are often confused with the purported source and channel credibility. Conflict of news items and analysis from ruling party's media and opposition party's media houses are still abound.

Till today, this conflicting information still create serious doubts in the minds of the audience, as we continue to ask which media is authentic and reliable to give us genuine political information. Any news item not in favour of the government is tagged "fake news" or branded "Hate speech". All these, badly affect effective feedback mechanism in our collective struggle to improve the country's political communication development.

Recommendations

The paper made some far reaching recommendations based on the importance of the topic in saving our fragile democracy almost heading for annihilation. Our democracy is muzzled currently by the passing of vital opposition parties using judiciary to accomplish the ploy. No more visible and practicable separation of powers, as the executive swallows other arms of government in order to have smooth ride in its policy directions.

Therefore, the paper recommends, outright revive of some legal frameworks that gag press freedom to perform its constitutional duties, even the purported operations of freedom of information act. The authors welcome social media with their quick feedback mechanism, that have become serious check on politicians and other public office holders, who collaborate with the executive arm of government to cause infraction in our democracy. Again, the paper advocates strong application of investigative journalism practice, that have bold face to confront government and speak to the power.

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