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Community Journalism and Sustenance of Democratic Ideals in Nigeria

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Abstract

In this paper, the importance of community journalism in the sustenance of democratic ideals in Nigeria is discussed. Using available literature and essay materials to prove that through community journalism, crime at the grassroots' level can be prevented while proper adoption of civic education, cross gender dialogue, cultural literacy among other things can be harnessed for developmental purposes. This paper holistically takes a look at community media and new media technology with particular emphasis on the effect of educating and mobilising cogent memoranda at the grassroots' level on issues of national importance. Using Democratic Participant and Development Media Theories to analyse the importance of community journalism in Nigeria, recommendations are made on how government and individuals can invest more on community media for betterment of the practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Accountability, community, democracy, education, journalism and media

Introductory Background

Hyden and Court (2002) distinctively state that the correlation between governance and development is clear. Governments are instituted to render developmental services to the people. Indeed, it is the basis of the social contract between leaders and the led. The performance of those in government is judged by the extent of services they render to the people/electorate. Hyden and Court (2002) further emphasise that, it is known that government hardly perform that role unless they are pressurised or prompted by agencies, groups or organisations. This is where communication and the mass media come in. As agents of social change and development, the media are at the forefront of constantly reminding the government to be up to its social responsibility to the masses. It is on this premise that the popular statement by Thomas Jefferson (1787), a one-time President of the United States of America that "a newspaper without government is preferable to a government without newspaper" is anchored. The mass media have ever retained potency and power as imperative agents of development and sustenance of any society, be it authoritarian, libertarian or democratic system. All over the world the media have consistently remained the life-wire of economic, social, cultural and political advancement to the extent that no society can effectively attain its optimum without the active participation of the press.

However, even with this realisation, the media industry is faced by yet another challenge – that of ownership interest. The industry is seen as a business in which profit motive is the priority (Makwana, 2006). The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), established by Decree No. 38 of 1992, processes and recommends for the granting of broadcasting licenses to private investors. This has facilitated the establishment of many private television stations in the country. As at 2011, there were 182 television stations in the country, broken down as follows: NTA federal stations, 47; other NTA stations, 50; state-owned stations, 32; privately-owned stations, 14; direct home TV, 2; direct satellite stations 2; and cable stations – 35 (Akinjogbin & Atofojomo, 2011). As a result, these media station owners prefer establishing their organs in urban areas with dense population where huge patronage would guarantee the maximisation of their profits. This policy is purely to the detriment of majority of the population who are already inundated by poverty, ignorance and diseases. It is, therefore, no wonder communication experts like Beckett and Kyrke-Smith have relentlessly urged for the change of the status-quo. Decentralising the location of the media directly means balancing the imbalance and creating a critical platform for the mass media to vigorously play role as true agents of national development. It means giving genuine role to community journalism, (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007).

Stressing the relevance of the media in the society, Aina (2003, p. 100) notes that "though the contributions of the mass media in many areas have been dysfunctional, it is difficult to imagine a society with

paralyzed mass media systems." According to him, in such a society, there will be arbitrary exercise of power by the ruling elite; mass detachment of the citizenry from the political process due to lack of enlightened information; low level of interactive discussion between the governors and the governed; restricted mass mobilization drive; lack of accountability or stewardship and more importantly, the denial of the beneficial role of the mass media in informing, educating and entertaining the masses.

The mass media are the ombudsmen, the watchdogs or the guards that direct the activities, policies and programmes of the not only the governments but also individuals, groups and organisation, including political parties and democratic institutions towards effective development and sustenance of social ideals. It is unimaginable for a business entity to survive without effective media touches or a political aspirant without vibrant and vocal media arrangement or electorate without means of gaining information needed to exercise their civic rights and responsibilities. This unspeakable government attitude with weak media team will be unable to broaden peoples' views, perception and understanding of its policies; resulting in futility. The media team will be expected to work in line with other institutions to promote participation, integration and above all, ensure equity, justice and fairness in the political process. In the areas of formation of political parties, their programmes, conduct of elections, assigning responsibilities to those holding political offices either elected or appointed, draft of rules and regulations, by-laws, constitutional amendments and the overall existence of corporate entity, the media provide roadmap to them all. Keghku (2003, p. 38) informs us that "for a virile political process and growth and sustenance of democracy, the citizenry must be effectively informed, sensitised and adequately mobilised through mass media channels".

The responsibility of the media to unite and promote the well-being of the society, according to Siebert, et al. (1956, p. 101) came with the subsequent modification of the libertarian system through Social Responsibility theory which seeks to make the media socially responsible by serving the political system; providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs; enlighten the public to make it capable of self-government; safeguard individual rights by serving as government watchdog; serve the economic system by bringing together buyers and sellers of goods and services through advertising; provide entertainment and be relatively self-sufficient, to be free from the pressures of selfish interests.

The media can promote discussion among individuals and groups as in interpersonal and group communication, especially among people of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds like Nigeria. In essence, participatory or interactive media which community media provide act as the way forward to sustaining the ideals of our fledgling democracy through sustained support by virile and active media organs. Community journalism is people-oriented. It has the capacity to build rural communities and contribute to the growth of social, economic and political lives of the people. Community journalism is variously called alternative journalism, participatory, rural or community journalism. Oso (2003, p. 37) quotes AMARC (1991) as noting that "community or participatory broadcasting is initiated and controlled by members of a community of interest or a geographical community, to express their concerns, needs and aspirations without outside interference".

When members of a community take part in the production and distribution of media content, the audience, which is typically made up of members of the community tend to be more relaxed – they feel as if they are part of the media. Community journalism provides this kind of platform, where interactive communication takes place; it breaks the bureaucracy that dominates the mainstream media, and this in turn affects audience reaction to media messages. People are more likely to receive and possibly act upon information or media messages that are peculiar to them.

Objectives of the Study

Having carefully considered community journalism, and its potentials in bringing about development, this study agitates for the use of community media (decentralised media) to bring about positive change at the grassroots. More specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Underscore the role of community-oriented media in the sustenance of democratic ideologies.
2. Provide way forward for deepened democracy in Nigeria, and
3. Suggest ways through which media can enhance participation and involvement insocio-economic activities of their society.

Theoretical underpinnings

This paper is anchored on two theories of the press which emphasise using the press (mass media) to promote development of Africa and the Third World and ensuring individuals' participation in the production

of media contents. They are Democratic Participant Theory and the Development Media Theory. They were espoused by Paterson and Schramm in the 1950s.

The Democratic Participant Theory calls for easy access to the media by everyone. This implies that everybody should be allowed to contribute and participate in the media operations. Thus, calling for grassroots media… it advocates for greater attention to the needs, interests and aspirations of receivers; and horizontal structure of communication which precipitates immediate feedback rather than a top-down communication structure (Anaeto, 2008, p. 18). Citing McQuail (1987), Opubor (2002) observes the following principles of the Democratic Participant Theory:

i. Individual citizens and minority groups have the rights of access to media and right to be served by the media according to their own determination of need.
ii. The organisation and content of media should not be subjected to centralised political or state bureaucratic control.
iii. Media should exist primarily for the audiences and not for media organisations, professionals or clients of the media etc.

The implication of this is that mass media audience and users should be granted access to the media people at the grassroots. Different communities should be given opportunity to partake in the activities of the media –they should also be allowed to contribute to the development of media content. This is possible if media organisations break into smaller units/stations like the NTA, attempt to develop local contents, and attempt to employ indigenous staff in these stations, to encourage and improve audience participation.

Development Media theory on the other hand postulates that the media in developing countries should attend to their most pressing needs, which is development. The media are expected to go beyond their primary responsibilities of informing, educating and entertaining their audience, to promoting development. They are expected to partner with government and other relevant bodies toward achieving their development needs of the masses. Development media theory is of the view that the mass media have positive roles to play in stimulating development and economic change in emerging environments (Oso, 2002, p. 85). By facilitating the process of development, the mass media can positively affect the development process of development in particular communities, where such developments are needed.

Literature Review

Third World communication scholars opposed to the gross marginalisation of developing nations by Western media system in the 1970s, and vehemently canvassed for a change. In their opinions, the Western media do not espouse the need and aspirations of developing nations (Marfleet, 1998). That campaign led to the formulation of two media concepts that aimed to address the shortfall of other existing media systems and to enable emerging nations and indeed African media use their channels to promote socio-political and economic development of the continent. The result was the emergence of Democratic Participant Theory and Development Media Theory of the press. These added to the other four: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and the soviet/communist media philosophies. These new methods were meant to promote development and other needs of the Third World countries which were misrepresented by the Western media.

The Democratic Participant and Development Media principles which emphasise the need for people to participate in media production rather than in the consumption of media products and enhance the advancement of African communities led credence, authenticity and authority to what is known today as "community journalism".

Community media are the indigenous people's media, very familiar to the people and their way of life. Any discussion of community media must be situated within a clear understanding of the concept of community. Opubor (2000, p. 12) writes that the "bottom line in discussing community media is an understanding of the nature of community which underlies media practice, access and ownership". Thus, to ensure clarity and comprehensive knowledge of the concept, attempt is made to explain what community is all about. A community is a group of people bound together by certain common ties; ranging from geography, culture, norm or tradition. Community can be used in two broad senses: geographical and social. In the first sense, community refers to a defined geographical territory under or within a political authority. This geographical or spatial conception is often interchanged with the expression of local. On the other hand, community could refer to a group of people sharing certain common interests, tastes and values. Such people identify themselves with common social, economic, cultural or political-ideological interests, views and

orientations. They may or may not all reside in a particular geographical area such as a city, a country or a district under a common political administrative jurisdiction. In this case, the members of the community so defined could be found in different spatial, location, contagious to each other or not, (Karikari, 2000).

They may even be tied together socio-psychologically. In this case, what affects one affects the other despite geographical location and distance, and with the world on super lane; there is what is now called global community. Oso (2003, p. 35) emphasises that in many urban centres, community associations of migrants living in different parts of the city (or even in state as the case in Nigeria) exist and flourish providing succour and social support for their members. Citing Opubor, (2000, p. 12) for instance, that "many Africans do not feel they live in their nations, they know they live in their communities… Where they seek to find work, to raise their families, to cure their sick, to grow old and die and be buried"

Journalism, on the other hand is the act of hunting and gathering and processing information for the mass media. Though a broad concept than mere news gathering and processing, journalism is concerned with information dissemination. Thus, community journalism is a type of journalism concerned with the report of rural community activities, life style, and those ideals that bound them together. It is a specialised type of journalism managed by the community employed in education, mobilising and galvanising the rural communities to participate actively in programmes and activities of government including political participation, health matters, among others. The South African National Community Media Forum describes community journalism as reportorial to counter state propaganda, inform, mobilise and educate the masses about their rights and to facilitate the building of strong community organisations (NCMF, 1996, p. 7). In the views of Ramirez (1989) in Oso (2003) community press serves as a window of the community to the outside world and it is the link with the mainstream of information and national life. Oso (2003, p. 22) collaborates the views of Ramirez in his submission that rural community newspapers are instruments of liberation, democracy, local self-assertion and self-determination.

Still talking about the nature of community journalism, Osunbiyi (2003, p. 172) states that a rural community newspaper is by name, definition, orientation, content and philosophy grass-root-based and must be rural and people oriented. Quoting UNESCO, he summed up the attributes of community newspaper thus:

> The style of writing, the content and the presentation are adapted to the skills of unpractised readers, hence simplicity and readability is stressed. Page and layout are designed to present only a few items on each page interspersed with illustrations and photographs. Each item is normally self-contained and printed in large type. Although news content varies, emphasis is placed on local news and problems affecting the community and its inhabitants.

According to Oso, (2003, pp. 36 – 37); community journalism has the following objectives:

- Giving voice to the poor and powerless social groups
- Helping such group to identity their real problems and in the process facilitate and promote dialogue or exchange of information, idea and knowledge and group debate and create understanding needed to find solutions.
- Promoting popular participation and self-management within the communities as strategies for the identification, decision-making and execution of community projects;
- Providing information, idea and knowledge for the conscientisation of the communities so that they can challenge the existing structure of political and economic marginalisation, oppression and exploitation and thus, help in their liberation.

Stemming from this is the idea that community journalism is the agent of social change, the mouth piece and the eye of the people, purveyor of information, knowledge and ideas necessary for developing and sustaining trendy ideologies, such as best democratic practices, governance, agriculture, education, health, science and technology, economy among other changing issues across the world. In this era of political apathy among the rural community in Nigeria, community journalism is needed to re-order and re-orient the citizenry about the benefits of participating in the election for those who make decisions on their behalf. Governments at various times and different levels have utilised the inherent benefits of community journalism to educate the masses to obtain voters cards, how to cast votes – thumb print on ballot papers to avoid invalid votes and above all, encourage the people to be rational in their choice of those to vote into positions of authority.

Recent developments in Nigeria like electoral violence, assassination, kidnapping, ballot snatching have drastically waned people's confidence, where information can turn things around. For instance, the scenario in the 2015 general elections in which peoples' turnout was unprecedented, indicates that wide range of media campaign against political apathy can yield positive results.

Empirical Review

The mass media are integral parts of the political system. In other-words, there is no thorough democracy without the media which guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of expression and association. Nwosu (2003, p. 2) supports this view when he underscores that "…politics and the media are so intertwined that he sees them as special Siamese twins that no surgical operation can separate without one or both of them dying." Therefore, the mass media in democratic system can well be described as the river and the fish; wherein the fish can suffocate without the water; thus, if democracy is government of the people by the people and for the people as canvassed by Abraham Lincoln, then any mechanism that enhances mutual communication and generates feedback is by no means an intrinsic part and parcel of it. If democracy is a government by the consent of the governed as it entails communication through the media, then it is not only essential and imperative but also sin-qua-non to its existence, growth and survival.

If accountability and transparency are desirable elements of Nigeria's democracy, the mass media are then prerequisite for upholding those tenets. In tandem with this, Onyisi (1996, p. 137) observes that "in a democratic system… exercise of power or authoritative allocation of values is mainly through communication – through the mass media, political parties, manipulation of party symbols, political rallies etc." Akpan (1986, p. 252) puts this more succinctly in his submission that:

> In a free and democratic society, the press as a whole is the market place of political thought. The media exist to serve the information needs of the citizenry. Editors, commentators, anchor-men and newsmen as a whole work on the principle that the public is entitled to all the facts in political situations and that on the basis of these facts it can make its own decisions. The policies and aims of government are made known through the media and are examined exhaustively by opposition and the general public through the same media.

Democracy in Nigeria has severally been referred to as fledging and emerging; but Nigeria's 2015 general elections have set the pace for Africa in particular and the world in general. The media in their perceptible roles have been instrumental to the success story. Apart from serving the society by providing information, education and entertainment, the media undertake surveillance, correlation, mobilisation, social interactions and integration of the society. Perhaps, the surveillance role of the media in sustaining democracy in Nigeria has been tremendous and laudable. They have constituted a major court for addressing political party conflicts, their resolution and chatting the way forward for good governance.

However, the role of the media in sustaining democratic ideals in Nigeria is two pronged and creating awareness thereby enabling people to participate in elections and holding public office holders accountable to the people. It is still in recognition of the place of media in democratic sustenance in Nigeria that Section 22 of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended accords the media roles, which states "the press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy, and highlights the responsibility and accountability of government to the people" In line with this onerous responsibility, Nigeria media have made spirited, frantic and patriotic efforts at justifying this confidence reposed on them.

Williams (1995) likens the role of the media in democracies to that of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, when he notes that the press mainly in the Eighteen Century was concerned directly with supplying news relevant to the conduct of business. Later, it was realised that the three arms of government – executive, legislature and judiciary would plunder society because of their traditional links if there were nothing to check them. This led to the broadening of the role of the press to include that of a watchdog, thus, earning it a status of the Fourth Estate of the Realm". This implies that the media have been made the fourth tie of government responsible for checkmating the excesses of the other arms of government and the attendant frivolities of followership. Thus, the media have the role of directing the affairs of both the government and the governed. This status, further places on the Nigerian mass media the responsibility of mobilising the governed

to get involved in policy making, a function the media have performed satisfactorily. For instance, the 2015 general elections were adjudged free and fair because the media made it possible. The introduction of card reader machine which largely made the election free was greeted with fear and discontented, but the media took on the campaign of the machine and educated voters on its workability in the election. The result of the campaign was the smooth and successful change of government from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the then opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) for the first time in the history of our democratic dispensation in the country. The sustenance of the ideals of democracy and in consonance with the responsibility of the media to hold leadership of the country accountable for their action, Uzaka (2014) chronicles some scenarios which the media exposed corruption cases for public debate and action thus:

> The media indicted the then Deputy Senate President, Alhaji Ibrahim Mantu and the then Chairman, Senate Information Committee, Senator Zwingina for demanding a whooping sum of ₦54 million bribe from Mallam Nasir El-Rufai before he could be cleared for ministerial post. Another episode involved the erstwhile Minister of Education, Prof. Fabian Osuji, who offered ₦55 million to former Senate President, Chief Ado Wabara, and some members of the education committee in NASS to facilitate the passage of the budget proposal of his ministry in the 2005 Appropriation Bill.

Newswatch magazine of April 4, 2005 as reported by Uzaka (2014), as the anti-occupation war of Obasanjo claiming two major causalities. According to the magazine on page 17, the Senate President emphasised the need for the Ministry of Education to come forward with necessary PR or risk a cut in his budget. In the same publication, the Source magazine (2005, p. 17) gave details of the scam noting that the entire amount of ₦55 million delivered to Senator Chris Adighije in the presence of Senator A. Ibrahim, Hon. Matazia and Senator Mbata. Sequel to this development was the removal of Chief Ado Wabara as Senate President and Prof. Fabian Osuji as Minister of Education. In a related development, the media indicted the then police chief, Tafa Balogun, for embezzling and stashing away in foreign accounts, the scandalous sum of ₦13 billion. All these, go to say that the Nigeria media through investigative journalism have exhibited high level of social responsibility, patriotism and commitment to the policy and principle of transparency and accountability", and thus critically involved in the crusade against corruption in the country.

Yet, Uzaka, (2014) frantically observed that the media are unrelenting in other remarkable areas in respect of media exposure of cutting corners and sharp practices by politicians as is exemplified in the exposure of: Buharigate, Ettehgate, Faroukgate, Bankolegate and most recently the Oduahgate, Wikegate among numerous others. The Buharigate saga was made public by a popular magazine, The News in its 10 July, 1999 edition captioned "Face of a Liar" in which the magazine reported the certificate and age falsification scandal of the erstwhile Speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Salusi Buhari. Buhari inevitably resigned. On the part of Ettehgate, saga, the media directed the public agenda on the ₦640 million renovation of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers' residences. Popular opinions form media coverage of the issues mounted pressure on the two key members of the National Assembly. This led to their resignation of their positions. Also worthy of note is the patriotic role played by the media in exposing Farouk Lawan's affairs with Femi Odetola's Zenon Oil and Gas Limited with respect to oil subsidy probe of which Farouk was the Chairman of the House Committee's Probe Panel. The media disclosed that Lawan was offered $620,000 by Mr. Otedola to have his companies removed from the list of indicted companies in a sting operation from the State Security Service (SSS). Lawan who initially denied collecting money from Mr. Otedola could not withstand overwhelming evidence before the public and admitted guilty and was subsequently removed as the chairman of the probe panel, (Uzaka, 2014).

These, clearly indicate that the mass media in Nigeria have the capacity and potential to further strengthen our democracy given a fertile ground to operate. This would be broadened if greater percentage of Nigerians is afforded the opportunity of participating in the democratic process and governance through enhanced accessibility to the media as canvassed through community journalism.

Implications of Sustaining Democratic Ideals in Nigeria: The Way Forward

The principles and ideals of democracy and its practice have been highly esteemed as the best form of governance globally. This has led to mass exodus of countries from autocratic, totalitarian, fascist and other forms of draconian government to democracy. In fact, countries yet to embarrass democratic governance are

believed to be enslaving and laying siege to the fundamental and natural rights of their citizenry. Perhaps, democratic governance is synonymous to freedom. It guarantees discussions, cross fertilization of ideas and public opinions necessary for any society to grow not only politically, but socially, culturally and economically. Democracy is tantamount to human and infrastructural development, because it encourages individuals, groups, and governments to work in team spirit to harness and organise human and material resources for needed development; hence its sustenance is not an option but a necessity for Nigeria.

To ensure continuity, Nigeria should relentlessly make concerted and pragmatic efforts to sustain her democratic ideals as evident in constitutional provisions for the press and the Freedom of Information Act which has powered media responsible operations without undue government interference. This has necessitated Nigeria been recently ranked among free press societies in the world.

To consolidate on sustainable democracy in Nigeria, issues need to be examined such as national interest, freedom of information law, democracy education among others. Uzaka (2014) observes that "sustainable democracy can only be actualised in Nigeria when media houses truly embrace and consciously practice the principle of national interest. This principle de-emphasises the overbearing influence of proprietor on the media contents on one hand and corrupt tendencies of the media on the other hand." He further posits that the interest of the country and its citizens should supersede the primordial and sectional interest of the individuals and ethnic groups. This will in turn strengthen democratic structures and as well as deepen the democratic process.

The Freedom of Information Act (2011) believably will not only strengthen democracy, but will as well help in fighting the current surge of corruption in Nigeria, raise the level of people's participation in governance, build confidence and promote transparency. It will consolidate Nigeria's democratic by enforcing the inherent democratic principles as identified by Wilson (2005, p. 18) to include:

- Guarantee the right of access to information
- Guarantee the right to know
- Ensure the right to express oneself within the law
- Promote the right to receive information;
- Protect whistle blowers; protects democracy and its institution, helps in fighting against corruption etc.

Besides all these, democracy education should be aimed at political enlightenment to teach the masses the tenets of democracy which should emphasise that democracy is not about ballot snatching, conflict, thuggery, assassination, arson and rigging, but rather is about compromise and achievement of collective goals and objectives. Political parties and the electoral umpire should in like manner be made to be accountable to the people in all their actions; this way, the media will instil attitudinal and behavioural change to our democracy.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Democracy and its sustained ideals will make magnificent difference in Nigeria's journalism practice, yet the media seem not to be better positioned to perform these onerous task. The media have various challenges which attempt to truncate their functions. Most perceptible among these, include pressure from political parties and politicians, thus reducing some sections of the media to mere toothless bulldogs and division of the media along ethnic, political and religious lines. Nigerian mass media, more than ever need vibrancy and vigour with which the first generation media in this country fought colonialism and other vices.

The numerous gains recorded in all sectors as a result of the media contributions would be a tip of an iceberg if they are strengthened, united and committed to the Nigeria project. These phenomenal changes within the mass media allay the initial fear and convince Nigerians to embrace electoral voting system, which eventually worked in the last general elections, and in assisting the country to attain other greater heights. Beyond championing free, fair transparent and credible electoral process, the media are instrumental to the attainment of the level of good governance, rule of law, equity, human development and above all, a renewed hope for sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Therefore, it is the advocacy of this paper that if greater presence of the mass media is felt in every community, through systemised and programmed community journalism, more room would have been created for deepening our political system. By so doing, majority of Nigerians would have been guaranteed, enhanced participation in the democratic process, given greater sense of belonging and made to appreciate the unique place of democracy as the surest means of sustained capacity building and overall national development. The

media industry should be decentralised – media organisations should be encouraged to create local stations, with local content to allow for wider participation.

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