



**COMMUNICATION, MEDIA
&
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
IN NIGERIA**

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CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNICATION THEORY AND RESEARCH: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Communication as a discipline, has borrowed from a great variety of disciplines and has embodied their suppositions as well.

For instance, Mass communication has drawn from psychology, sociology, political science, linguistics, anthropology, music, theatre arts and many others. Just as it has borrowed from these disciplines, they, in turn, have borrowed from it. Communication theories, though different from their counterparts in the natural sciences still remain the working tools of many researchers. The researcher uses these theories as a framework for his research. In the process, models are used to provide the theorist with a structure for assembling his findings which may subsequently be tested in the real world.

When we look back at the history of the development of theories dating back to Aristotle, we find in this the development of the history of ideas. Aristotle developed the rhetorical theory of communication. Aristotle was interested in discovering the most effective means of persuasion in speech. He observed that the factors that played a role in determining the persuasive effects of a speech were its **contents**, **arrangement** (i.e. organization and structure), and the **manner** of its delivery while not oblivious of the role of the **audience**. Later, he added other elements which he identified as bringing about

persuasions to include **character** (ethos) of the speaker and the **arguments** he made in the speech.

These notions captured the imagination of other famous rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian who also wrote on the importance of source ethos or credibility but differed somewhat in their definitions of that quality.

One of Aristotle's landmark explanations concerning people in social relationships was his suggestion that we choose people as friends who have come to regard the same things as good and the same thing as evil. (Quoted in R. MicKeon, 1947:103). This idea was the forerunner of the social categories and social relationships theory. But clearly Aristotle's view is captured in the English saying that "birds of the same feather flock together". If rhetorical theory was the root of communication theory then theorizing itself is the mother of communication research. For since theories have developed through man's efforts to explain or represent human experience of social phenomena, research has been largely triggered in many human disciplines by human theorizing.

From the array of human communication theories that we have in the discipline, one may be tempted to ask. Of what value are theories to researchers? Or put differently, what do we use theories for? While the scholar may assume that his single-minded concern or obsession with

theories could be easily understood by the outsider, it is equally easy to dismiss some of them as trite. But can we do so for all of them? As one who has worked very closely with theories especially in their application to human situations, it has been found that in spite of the shortcomings of some theories, generally they do provide a not-too-perfect guide to the researcher on his way to creating his own 'experimental' theory, perhaps soon to be questioned and discarded by his peers. So theories have uses. And we shall provide a shortlist of functions albeit not exhaustive of the possibilities which all theories have. Therefore, theories are used:

- (i) To explain social phenomena
- (ii) To analyze and reinforce what models graphically present
- (iii) To assist in the clarification of concepts
- (iv) To help create universal laws and rules of interpretations
- (vii) To guide researchers in what to look for in social practice what to make of it and whether to consider it significant
- (viii) To identify patterns of events in the environment so that we know what to expect.
- (ix) To draw our attention to important aspects of everyday life
- (x) To make us more competent, adaptive and able to predict what will happen next.

A look at some theories may be pertinent at this point. I may not choose those that some of us dote on. But in order to drive home my thesis that communication theories are but suppositions which serve as working tools for researchers, I shall choose

the pragmatic, the dubious and, the ghoulish. In each of the categories, I shall locate a theory even if they may all seem improperly classed or dislocated.

Let us first examine the pragmatic theory. One who has watched the movie. The Good the Bad and the Ugly of the 70's might espy my strained effort at parody at this point. I have chosen **Mediation Theory**. I have classified it as pragmatic (or good) because it unequivocally represents human behaviour and social phenomena.

Watson and Hill (2000: 188) explain the theory thus:

Between an event and the reporting or broadcasting of it to an audience, mediation occurs, that is, a process of interpretation, shaping, selecting, editing, emphasizing, de-emphasizing according to the perceptions, expectations and previous experience of those involved in the reporting of the event, and in accordance with the requirements and characteristics of the means of reporting.

They further observe that this phenomenon is inescapable because much of our knowledge of life and the world comes to us at second hand, through the mediation of press and TV" and that 'our perceptions of events are coloured by the perceptions, preoccupations, values, of the mediators'. This situation does not preclude interpersonal communication contexts. I see this theory as pragmatic because it explains lucidly the practical experience of newshounds, editors and message receivers in their relationship in mediasphere.

Another theory that I have chosen under my second category is **Lookism**. This rather commonsensical theory I consider to be dubious because of its sense of limited application in African society. One scholar who has written widely on it is the American psychologist, Nancy Etcoff. In her book *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, Etchoff advances the theory that the better looking you are the more successful you will be in life. She argues further that 'In an age of images, the image dominates our perceptions, our thoughts and our judgments.' Watson and Hill note that Ecoff argues that even mothers love their offspring just a little bit less if discomfoting because I cannot imagine this situation in a traditional African family where children are considered highly priced gifts from God. But I can imagine it happening to a troublesome child not to one less handsome.

Yet one cannot totally dismiss Etcoff's theory on the platform of racial differences. Truly the theory may apply in other situations where there is competition, rivalry or conflict.

Finally, I wish to take you to a seemingly ghoulish theory, **Narcotizing Dysfunction Theory**. This theory was first proposed in 1948 and revised in 1951 by Lazarsfeld and Marton. In the book, *The Communication of Ideas* edited by Lyman Bryson they discuss one of what they considered the chief social consequence of the mass media upon audiences. Again, Watson and Hill (2000: 201) describe this theory as:

This rather awful sounding application of being first subdued, or drugged, and then put out of action by

exposure to the media comes about... because audiences are to keep up with the by a heroic effort reduced to mass apathy by a heroic effort to keep up with the vast amount of information placed before them.

This frightening prospect does not seem to be the general rule but there is the possibility of it happening or afflicting us, slaves of the mass media. In fact, Lazarsfeld and Merton state rather cynically when they say:

Mass communications may be included among the most respectable and efficient of social narcotics... increasing dosage of inadvertently transforming the energies of men from active participation into passive knowledge.

This may be true but sounds too frightening true! As still so much to be done to make them close to theories in the natural sciences. Our efforts at creating universal laws may yet seem far-fetched. Nonetheless, theories remain our building blocks and signposts to the future through further theorizing.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

In ordinary everyday parlance the term research simple means search again. Therefore, research is a diligent search, investigation, or systematic enquiry leading towards increasing the knowledge of the researcher or the common fund of knowledge of the academic, controlled, empirical and critical inquiry into social phenomena especially of hypothetical propositions about human communication

habits, technology and the presumed relations among these phenomena.

Communication research is expensive and before communication scholars and practitioners can claim to have a fair knowledge of human communication problems they must engage in research. In Nigeria, there are no specialized communication research institutions like the Rand Corporation in California. It is true that today it is a little easier to conduct communication research but two main constraints remain the drawbacks namely, the cost of research and the lack of appropriate communication infrastructures.

Our universities are today compelling their students to engage in barren research with little or no knowledge of what is going on elsewhere. Even though the internet is, theoretically speaking, open to all those who are willing and ready to exploit its resources, it is sad that several project or research reports still carry predominantly out-dated sources. It is either that such research students do not have the resources to access available information or are too lazy or too scared of this burgeoning new technology. Again many of the so-called research studies do not address relevant social communication issues, while others are a recycling of outmoded studies and ideas. In a situation such as we have found ourselves, it is necessary that all communication training institutions pooled their resources together in order to build their website where abstracts of staff and students research reports are posted so that we can know what each of us is doing. It will also help to reduce plagiarism of the worst type where some students simply corner essays from other institutions and reproduce them as their own.

Research reports are supposed to be useful to us and society. If the outcome of a

study has been cooked up, such a report has no value. Communication research is scientific because it is so ordered that other investigators/researchers working in the same field can have critical confidence in its outcome. That is why communication research must be taken more seriously than we have hitherto done. Those at the commanding heights of our institutions must scrutinize their students and colleagues a little more critically. A student easily distinguishes the unserious academic from the serious even when the former extends pastoral sentiments to his assessment of a purely academic matter. The serious student will always seek out the serious researcher-teacher because he knows that by the latter's more stringent grilling he would be a better finished 'product' ready to make his contributions to our world of work and scholarship.

Therefore, communication research must be made relevant to our communities. We as communicators have failed if we cannot provide a blueprint for the training and orientation of our political, religious, traditional and other levels of leadership. Because so much of politics is played out in the public sphere, the president or governor who does not possess the proper communication skill, panache and charisma is a pitiable figure and inescapably, makes himself a laughing-stock of the people. We must conduct studies not only on the contents of these public speeches but also on the manner of their delivery. Such studies would be useful resource to the subject as well as future presidents, governors, legislators and other politicians. What I call a barren research is that which deals with subject matters that have been examined a thousand times over and annually by students and other researchers not because they wish to contribute new ideas but

because they want to register their names on the register of 'have-also-duplicated'. These are "white collar" research studies. So must we continue in our present mode or seeming academic levity? I think if communication scholars wish to make any impact on our society, they must eschew the tendency to ape the harebrained research pursuits of some researchers in the developed world and make themselves developmentally relevant in our society.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

I shall now turn attention to the thorny issue of national development. I shall examine this within the context of low communication theory and research impact on national development. As I have already observed, communication theory provides the building blocks for communication research. In like manner, communication research must provide the nation with the basic rudiments and theoretical basis for development. As it is the situation in the developed world, institutions set up research and development departments (R & D) as part of their integrated infrastructure.

Unfortunately, our greatest problem today still is to clearly define what development is and to place this within a rational context. Ironically, Nigeria and other African nations, have hosted several national development conferences, workshops and seminars. These have remained essentially talk shops where the bureaucrats and technocrats arrange comfort funds for some of their friends with no intention of doing anything about their proposals. The truth is that insofar as we have persons who are either unwilling to change or are incapable of effecting any change on behalf of others so long will development propositions remain

unfulfilled. But it has been long suggested that scientific and technical information (ST) is 'a vital economic resource which ought to be more generously and widely shared because it is a product of the efforts and thinking of men and women in many countries. Again, it is considered 'the key to all Independent National development. (UNESCO, 1981:25).

National development is therefore the social, economic, political and cultural context in society which has helped to support the progressive and positive advancement of the average citizen. This also brings about a change from the latent to the potential, and from a less developed state to a more advanced or highly organized one.

I cannot offer a better definition because several scholars have attempted to define this concept over and over from professional to ideological perspectives. But the point that must be noted is that communication is a major vehicle for achieving the development objectives of any nation. And as UNESCO noted more than twenty years ago, it is 'a vehicle to ensure real defining policy options, and an instrument for creating awareness of national priorities, (UNESCO, 1981:258). The notion of development has been so bastardized by many governments since independence that the whole network of bureaucracies around the country seems to have been inflicted by a collective amnesia. Nobody seems to remember where we were even just a few years back. Our leaders also seem to embrace the viewpoint that once they have been placed in positions of authority, then they can say goodbye to poverty only as far as they and their family members are concerned.

Therefore, what emerges is a state of pseudo-development - a condition or

process of socio-cultural, economic and political delusion which gives observers, participants as well as policy makers and implementers the false impression that a society has made positive strides or advancement in real terms. It is accompanied by an equally illusory self-perception which distorts vision. And as adjunct to this conceptual mirage it is the failed effort at ensuring that communication messages, especially development messages, reach those they are meant to reach. This is miscommunication. Miscommunication is a falsely packaged communication programme of action, which does not achieve the communicator's expectations. In it, the communicator and the audience do not have a common referential frame derivable from the message.

Real national development reflects the states of advancement from an earlier state of relative disadvantage or impoverishment to that of enhanced social, political and economic growth. As it has been fairly well documented, the following indices are necessary for national development.

- **The provision of basic infrastructure and social amenities** such as potable water, motorable roads, electricity, educational facilities.
- **Communication infrastructures** such as telephones, postal service transport services
- **Medical facilities** such as hospitals (cottage, health centers). Pharmacy, regulated modern and traditional medical practice.
- **Good housing** (public and private).
- **Markets** (traditional and modern) insurance companies

- **Security services** such as police stations and police posts, community-based and recognized vigilant groups to check on security of persons and facilities.
- **Recreational facilities** such as parks, hospitality institutions game reserves.

So, if real development is to take place we must be thinking in terms of ensuring or providing all of the following opportunities for members of the larger segment of the Nigerian society:

- rural/community development
- individual empowerment and growth
- economic self-reliance
- free and fair political participation in the decision-making process through the electoral process
- establishment of partnership in Rural Economic Development (RED)
- use of communication media, traditional and modern, in the propagation of rural economic development message
- human resources development and capacity building through
- training and other forms of educational development
- job creation
- self-employment
- self-actualization within a social context.

CONCLUSION

Finally, let me observe that while much of what I have said here has been said by many others before me, it seems the message has always been relayed to the wrong audience. It is the responsibility of communicators theoretician and development scholars to find a means

whereby they can get the message directly to chief executives like President, Ministers, National Assembly Members, Governors, Commissioners and other Leaders at segmented for a. it seems that we need to produce a development blueprint as well as development communication manual for the public service so that we may always have a relevant audience to speak rather than engage in the present past times of talking to ourselves. Current viewpoints on development embrace this approach.

My view therefore is that we must adopt the following perspectives and incorporate them into our national development blueprint to promote national economic empowerment and development strategy as well as its equivalent at state and local governments.

1. The recipients or participants in social development programmes should be involved at the ideation and planning stage.
2. A multimedia, multi-channel approach as in a trade-modern communication strategy should be used in disseminating development messages.
3. Policy makers and implements should decentralize projects and programmes in order to avoid congestion in some areas and the neglect of others.
4. There should be mass participation of citizens in change-inducing programmes so that segments of society can be engaged and involved.
5. There should be need assessment by the initiators of programmes and a like should be established between media and need.
6. The media should be used mainly as change, or an end in itself.
7. Much use should be made of agricultural extension officers and

services in agricultural campaigns.

8. A lot could be achieved when educational and entertainment themes are used in development programmes.
9. Folk and community theatres like the Community Theatre for Education and Development (CTED) used at Njala University, Sierra Leone should be used to induce development.
10. There is need to use indigenous language and idioms in message dissemination.
11. Participants in real development projects and programmes should remain focused on issues and should target media messages to specific audiences.

These and many more should be our focus. I believe that if we in Nigeria take development more seriously we shall find in existing theories a platform for launching ourselves into a fruitful future.

The whole body of knowledge available to us in Nigeria is adequate for us to get to higher heights if only those who have always snatched the opportunity to govern us had adopted them. Again a lot of critical ideas, propositions and practical suggestions lie waste in blueprints sponsored sometimes by governments.

The state of our universities, research institutes and other tertiary institutions leaves much to be desired. Quality left our universities since the middle 70's when Obasanjo was military head of state. It has not returned ever since. National development can only be truly achieved if the dedicated and patriotic citizens who know where it hurts are involved along with other citizens in its planning and execution.

Real national development will take place if resources are appropriately allocated and utilized leaving out the

present buccaneering tendencies and kleptomania of our politicians. When we are able to renew ourselves morally and see Nigeria as an enterprise worth fighting and living for that will be the day.

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