

THE MASS MEDIA AND THE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRATIC PROCESS: MOBILIZING NIGERIANS FOR ELECTIONS

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The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures - Article 21(3), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

INTRODUCTION

It has often been said by some critics that the civilian political class has never successfully conducted a crisis-free election. These critics often point to the 1964/65 and the 1983 elections.

Perhaps two unsuccessful tries, widely separated, may not be adequate to come to this judgement, but the sinews of electoral eruptions are already with us to create a sense of anticipated panic in the minds of the average citizen.

Equally, the conduct of two transition elections twenty years apart (1979, 1999) under regimented conditions is not enough to give Kudos to the military either, given the fact that the Babangida and Abacha gerrymandering and national deception equally proved unsuccessful.

Now, political soothsayers armed by the brand of electoral gimmicks and fraud witnessed at the political party primaries for local government elections, have been forced back to their doomsday predictions in respect of all elections coming up between now and May 2003.

It is this state of static evaluation that has

stimulated the concern of this writer for the future state of health of NIGERIA; and in particular, to examine the role of the mass media in the emerging participatory democratic process and to see how they can mobilize the masses for the 2003 elections.

In this paper, the mass media shall include all the media used in carrying out all the media functions outlined in this presentation. They included newspapers (of all shapes and types), magazines, books (paperbacks), radio, television, cinema, video CDs, billboard posters, popular music in cassettes and CDs, vehicular media as well as selected traditional modes of communication.

Participatory democracy is defined here as a democratic process in which all legal members of a community or nation freely participate collectively in the taking of major decisions which affect their lives as citizens and their country where they are political stakeholders.

A distinction is made between it and the Babangida - Abacha phenomenon called 'guided democracy' whereby the Nigerian Military, in league with opportunistic elements within the civilian political and economic class selected or favoured persons who were teleguided through an ill-defined and seemingly endless transitional process which ended as political mirage. Guided democracy was therefore employed to disguise the agenda of the then military leaders whose

agenda was to succeed themselves. That form of 'democracy' has been rightly labelled 'selectocracy'.

However, both processes have the organisation of elections as their veritable tools for determining successors on sustaining the rabid race of politicians. But the electoral process, to the informed mind, is the democratic electoral process in which losers at the actual voting go home and remain losers! It is not a process in which losers are declared winners as it was in the recent Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) local government primaries in Uyo where the outright winner had his victory stolen from him at Government House because he was not a favourite son of the party hierarchy. Certainly, this is not the kind of negative experience that promotes participatory democracy and peaceful elections.

Already there are media reports of large-scale defection from PDP to rival political parties. Even the other parties are not totally immune to these anti-democratic practices as some of them have already started to put in place their own rigging machinery on behalf of favourite candidates.

2. THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE MASS MEDIA IN ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGN

The mass media have very important roles to play in the democratic process. These roles and functions are in fact naturally cut out for them. In a dependent capitalist system such as Nigeria's, there are no serious alternatives to playing these roles.

Thus the media are seen as playing such roles as anticipatory socialization of the citizens in the culture of a new democracy.

Devito (1978:454 - 462) has outlined eleven

functions of mass communication to include entertainment, reinforcement, persuasion, education, socialization, status conferral, activation, attention focus, narcotization, creation of ties of union and ethnicization. UNESCO (1980), G. Bingham Powell Jr. (1992) and other scholars have added Integration, Advertising, Public Relations, Publicity, Music among others to the growing list of media functions.

These functions can be broadly grouped into six classes: Recreational, Pedagogic, Promotional, Acculturation and Mobilization.

Recreational functions include entertainment, music, political cartoons, international sports.

Pedagogic functions comprise education, persuasion, reinforcement while Acculturation functions are made up of integration ethnicization, creation of ties of union and socialization. Promotional functions include publicity advertising, public relations, status conferral and attention focus. Awareness functions comprise human rights awareness (HRA), democracy, information while Mobilization functions include activation and Narcotization.

Yet in the context of getting the people to be election ready, and to be fully versed in the minimal conditions for participatory democracy, not all these functions are relevant.

We have adopted the prescriptive approach in which we point to the things that the media should do rather than what people should use the media for. This prescriptive approach will enable us to free ourselves from the tyranny of traditions.

Thus we are saying in this paper that the mass media have a duty and responsibility to society and that these should be put in the front burner at

this critical moment of Nigeria's development. This call to duty certainly demands some restructuring of media operations in line with the demands of society.

In addition, the mass media also operate at various levels of efficiency depending on the type and content of the message. For example, some kinds of message are more effective through the printed media while others are more effective through the electronic media. Thus in the various functions listed above some have been better conveyed through specific channels and media than others.

Therefore, it would perhaps be said that of the six classes of roles and functions, perhaps, the most critical are the pedagogic, promotional, mobilisation and awareness functions which are critical to the participatory democratic process. And even among these, the three listed namely pedagogic, promotional and mobilisation are the most relevant in the context of our discussion and these will constitute the focus of this paper.

2.1 THE PEDAGOGIC FUNCTIONS

The three pedagogic functions of the media are persuasion, education and reinforcement. In persuasion, the mass media have responsibility to induce social change through their presentation. It is generally agreed that the mass media can, through their message, bring about minor behaviour changes even though weighed against other environmental factors, it is clear that on issues such as politics religious attitude and social commitments certain personality and demographic variables come into play. Our persuasibility can depend on a number of issues, which have been determined through acculturation. Some habits die-hard.

Therefore, to achieve a minimal change in behaviour regarding our disposition towards electoral fraud and violence concentrated and sustained propaganda should be carried out by all available media. Such ideological mobilization can only be partially successful if the message resembles the messenger. In other words, those who are in critical positions of governance must not only be heard to be supportive of the social re-orientation and engineering message but they must also be seen as acting to prevent the various negative actions often brazenly displayed through state terrorism.

One of the three main functions of communication is its role as the purveyor of knowledge. The Conveyor Belt theory was, it seems as product of the early thinking surrounding the S-R theorists' explanations of the communication process. The role of education in extending the frontiers of knowledge and information can be seen in its cultural transmission function.

Thus the mass media occupying a critical portion of the knowledge industry have made possible the learning of music, politics, sports, politics, science, economics and a host of other knowledge areas. They can do more, as in this instance, by focusing attention on 'teaching' the people the proper behaviour in our transitional political process. Even though the society is in the process of achieving democracy, it must be admitted that certain mistakes and sometimes misadventures may visit us on our journey. The mass media should be able to educate the people on this process and problems.

At the end of the day, we should see this transmission of knowledge as a process of fostering intellectual development, the formation of character, as well as the acquisition of skills

and capacities at all stages of our growth and development.

Reinforcement of beliefs, attitudes, values, opinions and human habits is achieved through the mass media working with other formal and non-formal channels. But it must be noted that in various human encounter receiver characteristics such as dogmatism, self-esteem, aggressive disposition, anxiety and prior attitudes coupled with selectivity options make reinforcement hard to achieve. So the mass media must be able to identify areas of social consensus and convergence and focus on them given the reality that human beings seek out information which tend to reinforce their long held notions.

2.2 THE PROMOTIONAL FUNCTIONS

The mass media perform these functions through publicity, advertising, public relations, status conferral and attention focus.

The media can use publicity organised through government agencies, NGS, and people with moral authority (rural, religious, political) to promote national ethics. Organisations like the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Akwa Ibom State's Ethical and Attitudinal Re-orientation Commission (EARCOM) can if they have the co-operation of the government and political leaders help to promote better public and private behaviours.

Through Advertising in the media certain ideal and messages could be kept at the focus of the public. Public relations can also be put at the service of the promotion of our national ethics.

There are also leaders and other persons who, by their actions, have ensured the promotion of

these ideals of society. By this, the media will confer status on them as they will pass as prime examples whose actions would be worthy of emulation. Such persons will in turn also promote the media that focus on them. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1951:95-118); had more than fifty years ago, made what has remained a truism when they asserted, 'if you really matter, you will be at the focus of mass attention and, if you are at the focus of mass attention, then surely you must really matter'?

In this case, media attention will be directed towards promoting ideals and also reinforcing those ideals.

Finally, the mass media focus attention on key issues in society. This is part of their agenda setting function. In the process of national preparation for elections, the media should focus their attention on those things that will promote the ideals of a stable democracy. This should be intensified because it is what the media focus on that the people also tend to focus attention on.

2.3 MOBILIZATION FUNCTIONS

The Nigerian society is even ready to be motivated and mobilized in order to participate in good causes. The society, though not stable, is conscious of those things that it can do to strengthen the social cultural, economic and political structures but it has laid in wait for a committed leader (political messiah) for more than forty years now, yet there is no hope in sight.

It seems quite obvious that if a leader or a leadership emerges which, in the public view is seen to be committed to the people's development it would be quite easy for such leadership to mobilize the people for whatever

cause it deems to be in their interest.

Under this function, what seems important is to activate or move people into action. History is replete with examples of leaders under whose influence the people were moved into action - for evil or for good. Hitler, the German rabble rouser was notorious for his demagoguery; Odumegwu Ojukwu, held the Igbo captive during the civil war not just because they had been victims during the genocide in the North but largely on account of the fact that at that historical moment he held out hopes for the race.

Maitatsine, the fanatical Islamic cleric used religion in the 1980s to mobilize ignorant young people to create mayhem in some Northern Nigerian cities. Therefore, in situations where the leaders have been faithful to the people, where the people have been schooled in nobler ideals, it would be quite easier to move them into action. The action required in this instance would be to get them to obey the laws of the land with respect to the electoral process. The media electronic, print and traditional - can be put to effective use in such a circumstance.

However, what is paramount here is that all these functions must be ruled by fairness or equal opportunity, right of access and reply so that contending contrary positions can be heard. This is the task before the print and electronic media.

3. POLITICAL EDUCATION AND MOBILIZATION

The mass media have the responsibility of educating the masses on social and political issues. Thus in news and current affairs, documentaries and features, journalists and other writers can provide a forum for educating the people on the electoral law and process. They can employ

persuasion, appeals and the communicator's credibility in their efforts to effect attitude change. Such therapeutic interventions should highlight issues such as:

- ❖ The dangers of electoral violence
- ❖ Electoral breaches which instigate violence
- ❖ The negative and biased reporting of some media
- ❖ The refusal of media houses to give equal access to all political parties on issues.
- ❖ Manipulation of results by the electoral umpires
- ❖ Misuse of law enforcement officers
- ❖ The unfair regulations and laws intended to give government parties advantage
- ❖ Ethical/ideological imperialism violence
- ❖ Sensationalism and incitement to violence by the mass media

All these and many more are some of the breaches, which contribute to instability and electoral violence in Nigeria.

The media should focus on these issues and re-educate the people, most especially the youths whose state of helplessness and joblessness always exposes them to the political and economic manipulations of terror merchants.

The media can do this by employing the technique of sympathetic introspection which involves "putting oneself in the position of others and trying to explain their behaviour by reflecting on how it might feel to be in that situation" (Hale, 1990:580). Of course, in the long run, the primary motive is for the people to reach some broad understanding of shared values by way of normative consensus.

Therefore, the mass media must be at the

vanguard to eliminate electoral vices which have turned political office seeking into some kind of demonic pursuit in which Barabas mortgages his soul for earthly riches but loses it in the end when Mephistopheles comes calling! The media must therefore help to establish an enduring democracy and exorcise demonocracy from our society. They must through their presentations stir the 'conscience collective' of the society, which Durkheim identified as the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average citizens of the same society. The collective conscience or consciousness can only be developed if we have an integrated society with a common vision.

Yet the media must purge themselves of their unseemly character so that they can act as true and faithful mobilizers. They need to have credibility - initial, derived and terminal.

CONCLUSION

The forthcoming elections may prove to be the needed breakthrough Nigerians have been waiting for. All segments of the society seem already overwhelmed with pre-election anxiety and trepidation over what might happen if the present trend in the political parties selection process is not stemmed. The greater fear lies even with the group of 'decampees' who may become deadly desperate in their quest for power while their opponents, also desirous to prove a point, could throw our towns and cities into mortal battlefields. Still the expected may not happen if there is a balance of terror or if Nigerians are persuaded that violence and electoral fraud are unacceptable.

Yet there is hope. This hope does not lie on the media alone but on the collective efforts of the people to bid farewell to their degenerate past and to imbibe a new culture of political tolerance

and decency. This new culture will divest Nigerian politics of the image of a con game for men and women without honour.

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