

THOUGHTS ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA



Edited by:
Ezekiel S. Asemah
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Thoughts on Political Communication in Nigeria



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CHAPTER TEN

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TRANSFORMATION IN NIGERIA AND CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

- Patrick Udende, PhD; Kaior Samuel Akpede, PhD & Aisha Imam Omoloso, PhD

Introduction

At different junctures of a nations' political history, political communication features a predominant form of media structure. How political communication is conducted is seemingly a reflection of the prevailing media systems. Pre-dating the mass media was the use of word-of-mouth or interpersonal communication which made possible for people canvassing for votes to visit households to 'sell' their political parties and candidates, sensitise people on election procedures. Village squares and market centres were also indispensable forums where political information was shared.

World democracies witnessed a landmark advancement in media use for political communication in the 19th century which ushered-in newspaper, magazine, radio, television, and cinema collectively referred to as mass media. These media systems expanded the frontiers of political media landscape thereby bolstering political communication. The emergence of internet and social media has further broadened media space basically due to access, speed and ease of use. Amplifying the import of social media and information and communication technologies for political communication generally, Dahl (1989), cited in Vedel (2003) argues that "the development of ICTs for political communication basically rests on the traditional argument that citizens in a democracy need full information and an enlightened understanding of situations to contribute to democratic deliberation and make good decisions" (p.42). In recognition of the role social media play in democracy, in the United States, Barack Obama's presidential campaign relied considerably upon the viral capabilities of social networking sites as a way of overcoming perceived mass-media obstacles. In Britain, Tom Watson, the Minister for Transformational Government, has stated that "the challenge is for elected representatives to follow their customers and electors into this brave new world...As well as blogs, there are many more MPs using Facebook and Yahoo Groups to communicate their ideas and listen to others" (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p.168). Perhaps, the effectiveness of new media inclined former Nigeria's President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to also declare his intention to run for the 2015 presidential election on Facebook.

Whether used independently or combined, these media aim at achieving common objectives which are to educate the citizenry about election processes, enlighten electorate about political parties and their respective candidates, persuade electorate to exercise their civic responsibility by actively participating in elections and galvanise electorate to vote their preferred candidates at elections. In the same manner, citizens register their feelings about socio-economic and political issues through the same platform. On the flipside, users of these media sometimes do not resist the temptation of abusing them in several ways. Politicians use their ready access to the media to offer substantive messages that have little

effect on voters who are guided in most instances by enduring party loyalties (Swanson, 2003). Consequently, rather than optimising the gains of political communication which the media are integral component, electorate are either under-informed, ill-informed or out rightly discouraged to exercise their franchise due to skewed and low quality of media content.

In Nigeria, which democratic experience is comparatively recent compared to established democratic economies like United States of America and the United Kingdom, the imprints of political communication remains indubitable. Nigerian politicians have also become aware of these altered media landscape and, ever sensitive to shifts in their audiences' media use, have adapted the channels of their message delivery to connect with media users wherever they may be. Premised on the foregoing, this chapter aims at exploring the trajectory of political communication in Nigeria beginning with the immediate pre-independence era that witnessed intense political communication that heralded Nigeria's enthroned democracy. High points of the chapter shall be conceptual clarifications, examination of key actors of political communication, changing terrain of media and political communication, value of political communication, challenges, and conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

One of the key concepts that merits clarification in this article is political communication which implies a process of interaction concerning the transmission of information among politicians, news media, and the public. According to Olabamiji (2014), political communication is simply defined as dissemination of information about how people and government relate to foster understanding and peace in a society. Building on this definition, Perloff (2018) provides a self-explanatory definition of political communication when he refers to it as a complex, communicative activity in which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media, citizens and citizen groups, exert a multitude of effects on individuals and society, as well as on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state or community. Asemah & Edegoh (2012) say political parties now package their political candidates and sell to the people, so as to draw their votes. Modern politics is, therefore, incomplete without political advertising or what is simply called political communication. Grishan (2012) provides an expanded definition of the concept as a system processing, producing, distributing, keeping and exchanging standardised information which can influence the realisation of the political authority. Even as this definition fails to mention those responsible for the management of the information as well as the mechanism of transmitting or sharing it, one could infer that political actors like politicians, civil society organisations and the mass media occupy enviable position in political communication architecture.

Media environment refers to the conditions under which a country's means of communication operates. Unlike media environment that could be hostile, another media environment could be conducive depending on the political system in place. Based on extant laws and regulations and disposition of official and commercial interest, media

environment could facilitate or mar the latitude of public discourse on daunting national issues of the moment. These regulatory instruments (like law of sedition, law of defamation, freedom of information act) normally exert considerable influence on how the media operate. Scholars (Juris, 2008; Mokros & Friedrich, 2009) posit that a resounding characteristic of media environment is the profound and ever evolving nature of the changes associated with it. This amplifies the assumption that media environment is not static. It keeps evolving in response to changes in technology as well as regulatory instruments so as to keep pace with current requirements.

The Trajectory

The quest to meet political information need that can influence people with the aim of realising the expectations of political authority on one hand and the electorate on the other spurs interest in political communication. Government, politicians and citizens make use of different media depending on availability and the capacity to influence citizens.

In pre-independence Nigeria when the mass media was at infantile stage, much of political campaigns were grossly interpersonal. Political communication at that time could at best be described as pre-modern campaign. At that stage of Nigeria's political history, campaign organisations were based primarily upon direct forms of interpersonal communications between candidates and citizens at constituency level. "In these campaigns, local party volunteers selected the candidates, rang the doorbells, posted the pamphlets, targeted the wards, planned the resources, and generally provided all the grassroots machinery linking voters and candidates, supplemented by some professional party agents working in particular constituencies" (Norris, 2000, p.3). Stretching platforms of interpersonal political communication, McNair (2003) stresses that the political discussions of people in public bars or at dinner parties, the behind closed-doors negotiations of governments, and the information gleaned by journalists from face-to-face meetings with high-level sources, are highly significant for the political process. The implication of this set-up was a comparatively limited reach of messages occasioned by the cumbersome nature and exclusivity in passing political information. But Olabamiji (2014) argues that traditional media have ever been in the vanguard of political communication, mediating even the interpersonal model. Given the centrality of media in political communication, as media evolved, politicians and other users adapted to new offerings.

One is tempted to point out that the introduction of print media that debuted with newspapers quickly followed by magazines provided ample opportunity for politicians to use them to their advantage. At the eve of independence, newspapers in particular became an indispensable medium for political messages. Pre-independence political communication was fashioned to not simply sensitise and educate Nigerians on election processes, but to essentially serve as a means of emboldening citizens to chase away the colonial overlords considered as a common enemy.

When radio came on board in 1932 and later, television in 1959, the quantum of political awareness increased. While radio provided audio appeal, television that married audio and video was obviously more impactful as the novel medium commanded believability. Politicians like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Tafawa

Balewa unreservedly found these media as viable organs to campaign about their political parties and manifestoes. Unfortunately, on attainment of independence, the broadcast media took regional colouration, just as their print media counterpart. Quality of political communication among politicians was tilted towards the three dominant regions of Northern Nigeria, Eastern Nigeria, and Western Nigeria. Nevertheless, it could be argued that in spite of the differences evident in media content, political communication in Nigeria had attained adulthood. It is useful to specifically give an overall assessment of the weight of television in political communication history which in the words of Mazzoleni (2003), is that limited-channel nationwide television became the dominant medium. Discernible minds may refute the notion that limited-channel nationwide television is no longer valid due to the preponderance of radio and television houses in Nigeria today. But the issue of unrestricted access continues to be wishful thinking.

It is not an overstatement that the presence of conventional media lacks the capacity to satisfy yearnings of stakeholders for elections purposes. Several factors are responsible for this. While private or government ownership and control of the mass media deny access to political adversaries, news commercialisation and media routines also inhibit the extent to which willing users could exploit the advantages offered by the mass media. Even where access to media is unrestricted, benefits of dividends of democracy that have continued to be elusive in Nigeria, coupled with election malpractices like ballot snatching and vote buying that characterise elections in Nigeria encourage political apathy among Nigeria electorate. Confronted with declining citizen interest and participation along with a burgeoning distrust of politicians, Poulakidakos & Venet (2016) observe that political parties in democracies have turned to the potentials of the new media in order to revive their relationship with citizens.

The new media contextually speaking refer to a wide range of technologies and communication that have emerged more recently, including the internet (Oladebo, 2012). Fagorusi (2013) simply construes the new media as the interactive form of communication that uses the Internet. The new media include podcasts, Rocs feeds, social networks, text messaging, blogs, websites, wikis, virtual worlds and other social forms. Commonly used social media platforms in Nigeria include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Telegram. The coming to scene of new media has liberalised and democratised media use. They constitute the fastest media channel adopted by individuals, organisations, national governments, political campaign organisations, political parties, and agencies to transmit political information to citizens. On account that Internet provides the links for the new media, Norris (2000) submits that use of the Internet has exploded so that by the end of the twentieth century numerous people were online and “the new forms of campaigning provide a wide range of alternative channels for parties to connect with the public, from traditional house-to-house canvassing, national press conferences and party political broadcasts, to intranet and internet web pages, email lists and ‘virtual’ conferences” (p.7). Characteristically, new media are on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere on any digital device. In addition, they are interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. Ezebuonyi,

Ezegwu & Onuigbo (2014) add another important premise of new media which is democratisation of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content, in addition to the real-time generation of new, unregulated content. In Nigeria today, politicians, government agencies, and civil societies rely heavily on the new media for political messages.

Generally speaking, the growing recognition and utilisation of social media and their application in the political process underscore the role the new media have assumed in the world today. In Nigeria, for instance, the wholesome reliance on godfatherism is gradually giving way to online tactical crafting and packaging of persuasive messages by campaign managers and political parties with an aim to consciously persuade Nigerian voters to vote in their candidates (Ezebuonyi & Ejezieh, 2012 cited in Ezebuonyi, Ezegwu & Onuigbo, 2014). This is a remarkable shift from the old order to a new order that has incidentally become part of our existence.

Technical Developments Heralded Change

The Internet and new media are undoubtedly among the most important technological inventions of recent times. Precursor to these inventions are traditional mass media. These are privately owned or those established and controlled by government at state and federal levels. Typical examples of privately owned media are *Nigerian Tribune*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* (for print), Channels, AIT, TVC News (in terms of broadcast). Few examples of government ownership include *New Nigerian Newspaper*, Radio Nigeria, Nigerian Television Authority with stations across all states of the federation. With the explosion of new technologies that transform the media industry, traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers have become more interactive, requesting their audience to text in their opinions and interests.

As media evolve, political communication is similarly being transformed by the diffusion of new media technologies. This opens a new chapter of series of general tendencies at the level of national politics. The new development alters the ways in which social actors and issues are represented in the mass media, the ways in which political actors attempt to communicate with one another as well as with potential supporters (Moog & Sluyter-Beltrao, 2001). Consequently, political actors such as political parties, interest groups and social movements, which have long shaped modern political processes are also transformed. With increasing knowledge of the computer and internet, and invention of many devices in Information Communication Technology (ICT), politicians as well as the electorate embrace the use of blogs, websites and other social media platforms for communicating political issues. The use of the Internet by politicians to communicate with their constituencies has further extended the concept of “mediatisation” of politics in Nigeria. Kent Asp (1986), a Swedish researcher first spoke on “mediatisation” of political life by which he meant a process whereby a political system to a high degree is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass media (Olatunji, 2014).

Contextually speaking, mediatisation emphasises not simply that media come between politicians and citizens, but how media have transformed the structural relations of politics in society. While mediating, new media, which are not neutral tools,

inadvertently tinker with messages or media content. Having weighed the nature of new media, Aronson (2012) is convinced that the very nature of social media with its speed, inclusiveness, and ease of access makes it logical that it is a tool capable of revolutionising the electoral process. These qualities make easier for the average citizen to participate politically whether in terms of having political discussions online, volunteering online, donating to campaigns through their website, or even impacting the national news cycle by posting a video of a candidate speaking at a campaign event on YouTube for the whole world to see. Media content could be posters, pictures, broadcast commercials and print advertisements. In some cases, countless political issues provide talk show programmes with more than enough material for daily exploration of their implications and the manoeuvres of all concerned actors. During the contentious electoral campaigns, political talk shows emerged as one of television's prime-time outlets feeding viewers' political enthusiasm.

Political communication is the domain of words and symbols, with leaders using "language to move people to think and act in ways that they might not otherwise think and act" (Ball, 2011, p. 42). Leaders harness language to arouse the imagination of citizens, using speech to captivate, symbols to mobilise or galvanise support for their policies. As a form of political communication, Nimmo & Combs (1990), cited in Olabamiji (2014) note that candidates for political offices routinely creatively employ a variety of spot advertising, mini documentaries, lengthy biographical sketches, televised town meetings, call-in radio and television shows, pops-up in brochure, newspaper advertising, billboard, yard signs, lapel and buttoner. Some political communication messages are crafted in form of metaphors including sports, family and machine metaphors. Sports metaphor like the pejorative "winning team" are often used by Nigerian politicians to bring people together. Family metaphors like "Peoples Democratic Party is one big family," is used to demonstrate that members of the political party are a "family" and are bound to one another. Machine metaphors describe a political party as a "moving train" that can crush any political rival or "bulldozer" with capability of leveling anything with potentials of road-blocking aspirations of a political party.

Another way political candidates in Nigeria are projected in the media is through labeling. Media label candidates as fresh and innovative through appropriate labeling like, "progressives," "new democrat," "new era," "new dawn," "change" (which was a leading label of the All Progressives Congress), "transformation," "soft-talking technocrat" (linked with former Anambra State Governor and 2023 Presidential flag bearer of Labour Party, Peter Obi), "ideologist," "man without a shoe" (used by erstwhile Nigerian President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan), "charismatic leader," "unbeatable enigma," and "Mr. Integrity" (associated with Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari). Sharing perspective on political labeling, Kenneth Burke asserts that while the protagonist glamourises the candidate as a hero, wise man, and statesman, the antagonist demonises him as a villain, old, analogue, unelectable, foolish and unpatriotic (Olabamiji, 2014). Political communication, thus, becomes a creative and imaginative enterprise that sizes up situation, names their structure, and names them in a way that contains an attitude towards them.

Actors in Political Communication

Whichever way one looks at it, there are essentially three actors in political communication that interact in complex ways, each trying to influence the other. As the traditional transmitters of political communication in a triangular system, these actors include political leaders/parties and influence agents, mass media which act as intermediaries between the parties and their message on the one hand, and the electorate or citizens as the recipients on the other hand (Perloff, 2018).

Political leaders are often identical with the state and the administration, which controls journalists. They are custodians of laws, policies and programmes that shape the direction of a country's political life. They include elected officials (President, Governors and Chairmen), as well as opinion leaders comprising other executive members (like government appointees i.e. Ministers and Commissioners), members of the legislature as well as the judiciary. In addition, government agencies like the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC also play vital role in political communication to influence citizens. The media are made up of traditional media which are subdivided into print (newspaper and magazine), electronic media (radio television, and new media), and outdoor media (billboard). The media role is to serve as vent through which political messages are sent and received. In democratic political systems the media function both as transmitters of political communication which originates outside the media organisation itself, and as senders of political messages constructed by journalists. As Strömbäck & Kaïd (2008) assert, the mass media mediate between citizens on the one hand and the institutions of government on the other. McNair (2011) explains that not only do the media report politics; they are a crucial part of the environment in which politics is pursued. They contribute to policy discussion and resolution, not only in so far as they set public agendas or provide platforms for politicians to make their views known to the public, but also in judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation.

News media's choice of issues and the way they frame the news, can influence leaders and the public. Admitting the hypothesis that politics is almost exclusively a mediated experience, Iyengar (2004) notes that the role of the citizen has evolved from occasional foot soldier and activist to spectator. This underscores the notion of passivity of citizens in taking political decisions on their own as they depend on the media. Citizens are key actors in the political communication process, without which no political message can have any relevance. They consist of both educated and ignorant. Citizens are naturally diverse demographically and psychologically. Whatever the size and nature of the citizens, however, all political communication is intended to achieve an effect on them, who are receivers of the message (McNair, 2003). They constitute into members of political parties which Nigeria prides of over 70 political parties with All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as the two dominant ones. Other embodiments of citizenry are pressure groups or civil society organisations like Yiaga Africa known for playing advocacy role. Others are religious bodies, and investors. As critical actors of political communication, citizens determine leadership at elections. This is enough justification why Hurley and Hill (2010) conclude that in their quest to get elected and

reelected, leaders have to be responsive to their constituents, implementing policies that the average voter supports.

Value of Political Communication

The value of political communication in Nigeria can be seen in different ways. It provides sufficient and illuminating political information. Such information revolves around existing political parties and their respective candidates, election schedules, method of registration, and voting procedure. As political communication illuminates political information, it also educates citizens about election processes. This is profound considering the heightened level of illiteracy and ignorance among Nigerians. Even those that are literate suffer from lack of forgetfulness and it is political communication that constantly reminds them about election procedures. This enables citizens make informed voting decisions.

Political communication promotes establishment of norms that govern political activities and political behaviour. This is achieved through amplification of beliefs, morale, socialisation and promotion of reproduction of the political system by means of maintenance of various patterns (Grishin, 2012). By so doing, political communication regulates political consciousness and activities. Regulatory function implies influence on formation of public consciousness, public opinion by means of social norms thereby realising social control.

Issues with Political Communication

Abuse of the new media due to unfettered access and absence of editorial influence. Media have moved away from where quality of report was gate-kept to a free-for-all practice. Most messages which constitute an integral part of the political process, ironically contribute to depoliticisation. Shift of focus of political discourse from issues to personalities is by now quite obvious (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Consequently, the educational value of election campaigns, which was once regarded as a key benefit of televised politics, has diminished by focus on spectacle rather than ideas.

While governments now deliver numerous services online and provide a wide variety of local, national, and supranational information portals, they tend to offer few interactive features for citizens wanting to provide feedback (Dunleavy *et al* 2007). In the interactive era, government has not proved to be a particularly good conversationalist. Politicians speak with increasing frequency about the need for government to listen to and converse with the public, but there are very few examples of good practice; many politicians lack confidence in entering into public discussion beyond the protective walls of the internet and new media. It has never been easy for citizens to become informed and make their voices heard. While the Internet and new media offer an unprecedented opportunity for people to access useful information and engage in civic activities, clear evidence shows that the new media environment is blighted by problems of information overload, and uncertainty about what to trust.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn from this discourse is that political communication is an essential activity of human existence. The idea that media environment is increasingly evolving is no longer contentious. As new media are gradually supplanting or reinforcing traditional media, they tend to influence political communication in diverse ways. The debate here, however, is not which takes pre-eminence. However, what appears obvious is that evolution of political communication is dependent on changes in the media space in response to technological advancement. As both political communication and media environment alter, such alterations go with corresponding effect on citizens. This is evident in the value and issues in political communication that have been discussed.

In view of this, it is suggested that politicians should eschew from using language capable of diminishing citizens' interest in politics even as they enjoy liberal and democratic nature of new media. Politicians can achieve this by resisting the temptation of using abusive language that unfortunately characterise their campaign messages. Media should adequately interpret messages for clarity. As media evolve and users try to circumvent message checks mechanism, new media operators and citizens should similarly update search engines, recommender systems and wikis to find, filter, and scrutinise the abundant stores of online information that are now available some of which discourage healthy co-existence. Political leaders should expand and increase interactive features for citizens wanting to provide feedback. Beyond speaking confidently in the shield of social media, both politicians and citizens should prove to be good speakers by learning to speak with more confidence in physical space as well.

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