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Essay

Low Patronage of Development Radio Programmes in Rural Nigeria: How to Get Beyond the Rhetoric of Participation

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Although the concept of participatory development communication is decades old, many years of autocratic military rule has robbed African scholars and media practitioners of the context needed to explore the full participatory potentials of the media. With eight years of democracy and heavy development burdens, Nigeria is ripe for assessment with regard to the role of its media in engendering participatory development. From a small-scale study, this paper discovers that while radio stations expend tremendous time and energy producing and airing development programmes, the listeners in the selected rural area mostly avoid such programmes and spend their time and batteries on a strange genre of programmes tagged 'bizarre-occurrence' programmes. This implies that the listeners are not properly taken into account, let alone involved in the production of these development programmes. This is clearly contrary to the tenets of participatory development communication and democracy. The paper suggests ways by which radio can become a more participatory medium with its mission, focus and products consistent with the democratic dispensation.

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Keywords: participatory development, radio programmes, development communication, rural Nigeria

Introduction

With the emergence of democracy in Africa starting from the final decade of the 20th century, African communication scholars face a fresh set of challenges: weaning the media and media scholarship from the role assumed during the period of autocracy and converting these to agents of democratic participation (Olorunnisola, 2006). In the turbulent processes that led to the emergence of democracy in many African nations, the media themselves have been sharply divided into two antagonistic camps: those in the trenches that fought the military and paid dearly for it, and those that were controlled by government and so lost much credibility and audience respect. Harnessing these two into agents of democracy and participation is the challenge to scholarship and professional bodies as well.

While the rest of the global south was exploring alternatives to the dominant development paradigms and top-down communication, mass media and media scholars in Africa could not make maximum use of the

discussion for the concepts being espoused were incongruous with the realities at home. Democratic participatory communication was as out of context to nations under autocracy as dominant development paradigm had been to the rest of the global south. All the discussion about participatory communication including the fits of contributions from Africa was, therefore, more or less mere rhetoric to Africans. With the coming of democracy however, and with the hope that democracy has come to stay, African scholars must not only hurry to catch up with the debate in the global south, but also assist in fast tracking the process by which institutions and agencies can become truly participatory and democratic.

This paper is a modest attempt in that direction. Building on the findings of a small-scale empirical study, the paper suggests how radio, a widely accessible medium can engender democratic participation in the development process. The paper begins with a rapid review of the developments leading to the participatory development paradigm, presents the development challenges Nigeria faces and her response to this challenge; summarises the small-scale study and goes on to present specific issues involved in getting beyond the rhetoric of participation into actual participation.

Development: From Dependency to Independence

In Africa, as well indeed as in most developing countries, development was subject to several assumptions which originate from the global West. For several decades, for instance, it was thought and taught that development was a matter of pure economic growth which could be precisely measured with quantitative economic indices, and should be marked with mass production, high technology, and infrastructural growth. Put simply, development was about becoming like Europe and America. Culture and tradition were seen as antithetical to the development process. The media were regarded as a means of bringing to the people information that would rapidly assist the economic growth, and they were considered capable of doing this with phenomenal success. The audience, it was assumed, would catch a glimpse of 'good life' from media content, desire it, and accept or work towards it. This mode of thinking about development was called dependency (Aina, 1993; Bourgault, 1995; Soola, 2003).

However, by the middle of the 1970s, it was clear that these assumptions were misguided. True, in her own case Nigeria witnessed economic growth resulting from the oil boom, but the nation did not develop. 'The majority of the people were not better off in the provision of and accessibility to the basic necessities of life including food, water, shelter and employment' (Filani, 1981: 283). By the end of the 1970s, 28% of the population could be classified as core poor (Federal Office of Statistics (FOS), 1999). Many radio and television stations were established by the government but that did not improve the lot of the majority. It was clear that the development goals were either wrong or were wrongly pursued. A third possibility, which has been largely ignored, is that the people's understanding of development and what they therefore aimed for, was diametrically different from the plans and purposes of the

government in which it was guided, directly or otherwise, by the West (Ojebode, 2002).

One of the causes of the foregoing is the Western definition of non-Western nations, or the Other. As Shi-xu (2005) observes, through the entire modern history, the West has not seen, spoken of or dealt with the non-Western Other as simply different; she is seen as inferior, deviant, and in need of help and control. She can and should be helped and controlled. This view is behind the paternalistic and benevolent gestures of many donors and global development agencies. Therefore, the model adopted for development planning by the colonial masters was one that did not include the active participation of the 'beneficiaries' – the Other. The same pattern of planning continues in Nigeria decades after independence.

Guided by the liberation thoughts, especially of Paulo Friere, many scholars from the global south (including Inayatullah, Ake, Somavia, Narula, Mowlana, Freire, Chikulo, McAnany) began a critical assessment of the Western assumptions and dictations relating to development. The outcome of this was alternatives ranging from Marxism to mass participation in setting development goals and means (Aina, 1993). In most of the developing countries, the latter was widely received and welcomed among scholars and some policy makers. It was described in many terms: independence; participatory development communication; putting people in the centre; putting the people in the driver's seat; bottom-up development communication; leading others from behind. The old approach to development was given such unattractive terms as dependency; and classical materialistic approach (Beltran, 1974; Huesca, 1995; MacBride *et al.*, 1980; Moemeka, 2005).

The role of the media was also redefined. Rather than being agents of information and modernisation, they were to be channels of conscientisation – developing in people critical consciousness and empowering them to change their situation. Rather than dump information on people and assume all would be well, they were to empower people to be active agents in their own development. The media were to talk with and not to people (Soola, 2003).

The practice of participatory communication has proved to be more complicated than envisaged (Huesca, 1995) and even among democratic nations, there has been but perfect observance of the ideals of participation. Added to this was the fact that many West-backed agencies were, until recently, not favourably disposed to projects based on participatory tenets. Moemeka (2005) relates an event that illustrates this: in the 1980s two Nigerian professors got a contract from UNFPA to carry out a project on population control in Igbobo, Badagry, Nigeria. Being apostles of the participatory practice, they got the community fully involved, producing a play complete with local characters. The play was titled: *The Tree that Produced the Fruits that Killed it*. But the UN agency was unimpressed. 'For them the project was not scientific enough, by which they meant that, it had too much of local content. The contract was as a result terminated' (Moemeka, 2005: 3).

There have also been attempts to 'popularise' non-participatory practices. This approach, which is to many people ethically perturbing, involves adding elements of the participatory approach to a top-down practice and daubing that participation. For instance, many models of and approaches to change

communication (such as the Johns Hopkins University's *P-Process*; the multi-domain UNAIDS Communication Framework; UNICEF's ACADA model, among numerous others) seem to imply that once there is a strong pre-test element in message development, we can assume the message is participatory and will be acceptable to the target audience. Agencies decide what the people's needs are and how they should be met, sell the ideas to people and describe that as a participatory process. That is clearly contradictory to the ideals of the participatory approach.

In the case of Nigeria, whether perfect or imperfect, most attempts at promoting true participation were considered an affront by the military who were in power for about 29 of the 47 years since independence. Media and other organisations that attempted this were shut down. Very few exceptions that began to surface as the military regime drew to a close included the projects of the Communication for Change (CFC). In 1997, CFC trained people from six rural communities in radio programme production and led them to produce 78 half-hour magazine programmes in English, Pidgin, Hausa and Yoruba (Ojebode, 2006). Apart from these exceptions, other semblances of participation have been arm twisting – decide on a project, cajole or coerce people to accept it as theirs – or mere rhetoric, lip service to the participatory process.

Nigeria's Development Challenges and Government Response

It is not a doubt that Nigeria, like most other African countries, faces tremendous development challenges. Life expectancy in Nigeria was 43 years (DFID, 2005); from every 1000 children born, 200 will die before the age of five (Gureje, 2005); and one out of 20 people lives with HIV/AIDS (DFID, 2005). Gureje (2005) citing World Health Organisation's figures, stated that healthy Life Expectancy calculations show that a newborn in Nigeria can expect only about 41 years of healthy life, compared to 50 in Ghana, 50 in India and 60 in Brazil. In Nigeria, only 60% of pregnant women receive antenatal care whereas 73 and 83% do in Cameroon and Liberia, respectively (Gureje, 2005). Poverty rate is high and deep: 75 million, more than half of the population, live below the poverty line (DFID, 2005). Urbanisation rate is one of the fastest in the world (5.3% yearly) with attendant ecological, social and economic disequilibrium.

As part of its response to this, the federal government inaugurated the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) – a comprehensive development plan, with state governments inaugurating State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) while the local governments were expected to have Local Economic Empowerment Strategy (LEEDS). The Nigerian government also set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) one of which is to halve poverty by 2015. The government has also pursued the path of economic liberalisation as seen in the privatisation and commercialisation of several government firms and organisations such as the Nigerian Telecommunications (NITEL) and the Aluminium Smelting Company of Nigeria (ALSCON). The government continuously beckoned on

private organisations and agencies, including the private and government media organisations, to be active partners in the march towards the realisation of its development goals. On the part of government media organisations, this beckoning is really a directive.

The medium whose support is most often coveted is radio, apparently owing to its characteristics (Ojebode, 2002). Radio is battery-powered, which means the usual failure or lack of electric power supply is not an impediment to the listener. Radio is cheap and portable. It is found in the remotest parts of the world. This paper focused on radio as a result of these qualities. In the rural area where the study was based, radio was the most available electronic medium.

Radio has responded to government invitation and directive in two ways: one is intensive campaign for the support of government efforts. This is done mostly by government-owned radio stations. The other is intensified direct interventionist efforts include informing, educating and persuading listeners about health, education, economic and environmental practices that would reduce the level of under-development in Nigeria. This latter response is from both private (commercial) and government radio. Most radio stations in Nigeria parade numerous talks/interviews, jingles, panel discussions, magazines and issues analyses aimed at effecting change in people's knowledge, attitude and practice with regard to health, education, agriculture, the environment, the economy, human rights, democracy, diversity, peaceful co-existence and other development issues. (In this study, these are what we call development programmes, taking a cue from the all-embracing definitions of development by Goulet (1982), Iwayemi (2001) and Soola (2003).)

On the latter response, it could be seen that radio programme producers exercise a leap of faith assuming that listeners are listening, are able and willing to accept recommendations being made. Many studies, especially those conducted in developing countries, have suggested that radio is not as successful in bringing about change as it is mostly assumed to be. For instance, Kilvin *et al.* (1968) conducted an experimental study among six Indian villages to determine the relative effectiveness of radio and literacy classes in engendering adoption of innovations about health, agriculture and family planning. They discovered that radio was more effective in spreading information but that though knowledge of innovations increased among farmers, trial and adoption were very slow, if they existed at all. In addition, Herzog *et al.* (1968) worked among 1307 farmers in Minas Gerais, Brazil and discovered, among other things, that only 2% agreed that radio alone could influence their adoption and practice of agricultural innovations. Gilluly and Moore (1986) reported a survey in Bangladesh that showed that radio messages are least understood by rural dwellers and most understood by urban dwellers. Semi-urban residents are somewhere in-between. In Sierra Leone, it was found out that old people do not accept radio advice on family planning as readily as young people (Gilluly & Moore, 1986). The University of Chicago carried out an evaluation of a family planning radio programme in Egypt in 1993 which revealed that radio 'increased knowledge of family planning but did not necessarily increase use of contraception especially among the poor' (Gilluly & Moore, 1986). In Nigeria, Brieger (1990) found out

that people who had formal education listened more to radio than those without – the majority of the population had no formal education. Akinleye and Ojebode (2004) analysed 1650 radio and television news items and discovered that only 8% of the items focused on rural areas.

The Study

A small-scale study was designed to determine what programmes listeners in a particular rural area listened to. We took due cognisance of studies conducted earlier on related issues to avoid duplication. For instance, whereas Salawu (2006) argued convincingly about the capacity of the indigenous language media (including, notably radio) to promote indigenous language learning, Akinleye and Ojebode (2004) focused on news content, Brieger (1990) worked on frequency of listening to radio programmes in general, and Adekunle *et al.* (2004) focused on family planning radio programmes in an urban setting, this study is intended to examine the question many others took for granted: which programmes are rural people's choices? Specifically, we wanted to know if the development programmes paraded by radio were among listeners' preferred programmes, for this would give a clue as to how successful these programmes were, and justify 'the latter response from radio' which we discussed earlier.

We selected Ipapo, a rural town in Oyo State, south west Nigeria. The actual population of Ipapo was 5962 as on 1991. The projected population for 1996 was 6882 (National Population Commission, 1994). The literacy rate is put at about 40%. Most inhabitants are farmers, artisans and petty traders. They receive radio broadcasts mostly from three radio stations: the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS); the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and Radio Kwara – all owned by governments and located in state capitals. Ipapo is quite representative of most Nigeria rural areas. Poor infrastructure, if any; agrarianism; strong tradition; very remote government presence; yet a great sense of community among the inhabitants are the defining traits of rural Nigeria which were pronounced in Ipapo as well.

Combining convenience with stratified sampling, we selected 306 people who responded to our questionnaire. Of these, 101 (33%) had not received any formal education, and could neither read nor write in English or in Yoruba, the native language. These we described as *Not Formally Educated* (NFE). Of the literate group, 96 (31%) had received 6–12 years of formal education and could read and write in either or both English and Yoruba – these we described as *Fairly Formally Educated* (FFE). There were 109 (36%) who had received higher (post secondary) education – these we described as *Very Formally Educated* (VFE) and could read in English and Yoruba. This last category were a minority in the study area; their proportion was high in the sample because, being very literate, they were the most able and willing to respond to the questionnaire. We attempt a very brief summary of our findings here.

Across the three literacy categories, the majority listened to radio often: 51% among NFE; 47% among FFE and 61% among VFE. Calculating the listening mean score for each group showed that NFE had 3.3; FFE had 3.3 while VFE had 3.4. An ANOVA test showed the difference among these was not

statistically significant: the calculated *F*-ratio (0.49) was less than the critical value (2.23).

About 65% listened to radio for news, 20% for entertainment and 15% for educational and development programmes. This finding is consistent with the assertions of Baran (2002) and Bogue (1979) that many listeners listen to radio for news and entertainment and only few do for educational and development programmes. In addition, Yahaya (2003), reporting the findings from the Basic Village Education Project in Guatemala, states that only 35% of radio listeners preferred educational programmes.

The breakdown, however, shows some disparities. Among those who listened to radio for information, the majority (46.9%) were NFE; 34.5% were FFE while the 18.6% were VFE. Among those using the radio for development, only 8.6% were NFE; 19% were FFE while 72.4% were VFE. The use of radio for development was lowest among the NFE; followed by FFE and was highest among VFE. It is instructive that most VFE people patronised radio for development. However, in a setting where the general literacy rate is put at about 40%, the VFE (note their profile as described above) were a minority, and 72% of them amounts to less than a quarter of the total population which we consider still very low given that radio is taken to be a popular medium.

Compared with news, entertainment and development programmes, by far the most patronised programme genre is what we describe as bizarre-occurrence programmes. This genre, made popular in South Western Nigeria by Mr Kolawole Olawuyi, is a talk show with call-in segments reporting spectacular and supernatural events which took place somewhere. It mostly reports diabolical and extraordinary activities of devilish people and spirits including vivid and fear-inspiring accounts of how they torment innocent people from the spirit realm which torment manifests in physical, real-life injuries, illness and death of the victim. Among all the three groups, this genre was the most patronised; it was the first choice programme among 89% of NFE; 49% of FFE and 36% of VFE.

Respondents believed the content of this genre of programmes and cited as reason for patronising the programmes as its 'wisdom value'. It made them conscious of the evil around and more careful in taking precautions. One of our respondents wrote: 'the programme deals with issues that are most important'. Apparently, these bizarre-occurrence programmes meet some of the needs of the rural people as defined by the people themselves. What then can the producers of such programmes that address the development needs of the people – health, agriculture, education, to name a few – learn from this?

Our conclusion was that development radio programmes were least patronised because they did not and could not address the issues that were of utmost importance to these rural dwellers: protection from the demonic and diabolical attack.

Getting Beyond the Rhetoric of Participation

The challenge posed by the findings of this small-scale study presents us with three options. First and easiest is to continue development communication the way we are practising it: maintain the existing and create new radio

programmes and jingles on health, education, agriculture, the economy, the environment and so on hoping that people will adopt practices that will reduce the incidence of infant mortality and diseases like polio. We can douse our troubling conscience by claiming we have done our best even when the majority ignore our programmes.

The second and the one which raises as much ethical dust as the first is to begin to sow snappy development messages such as spot announcements, jingles and testimonials into more widely accepted radio programmes (especially bizarre-occurrence programmes) hoping to get the message to the audience by some trickery. This is the philosophy behind 'edu-tainment' or 'entertainment-education' formats (Yahaya, 2003), and has been strongly suggested by many researchers (Adekunle *et al.*, 2004; Gilluly & Moore, 1986). Of course that will create incongruity: a family planning jingle may just pop up while the bizarre account of a witch who sucked her children's blood is being related.

The third and most difficult option is to take specific steps to promote participation beyond the rhetoric of it. This recommendation is not new at all: it is our attempt at bringing practical and domestic specificity to the thoughts of participatory development hatched over two decades ago and described earlier.

The starting place is with a new definition of the Other. Decades of democratic practice may not ebb away our jaundiced view of the Other which we inherited from the West and perfected under the military. It has eaten its way into the thought, diction and practice of the elite in most developing countries. The result is a government or an agency which decides what the citizens want and goes ahead to do just that, the way it understands it, using the means it is pleased with. Trained in institutions with predominantly Western curricula, and being themselves elite, the media practitioners also follow suit: assuming what the audience wants and how it wants it. The outcome is a radio or television station that speaks mostly to itself, and speaks about and to a small fraction of the population: the elite, urban-based minority and government officials. The listener is still often seen as the person out there whose life would be improved by the message the media practitioner has to offer. He is ignorant, so he must be taught; he is poor, so he must be enriched; he is resistant, so he must be persuaded; he is deviant, so he must be controlled. But we know that in many cases, it is the media practitioner or the development agent who does not possess enough humility to learn from the people or enough intelligence to understand them. Radio programmes producers and development practitioners must redefine the people – the Other – as those who have requisite intellect, will and emotions and possess within their immediate indigenous precincts some of what is needed to complement development efforts. A change in the way the audience is perceived should lead to a more participatory approach to programme making. For instance, we must begin by asking what the audience wants, needs and can do for themselves.

We need a new attitude to change. The epithet that has accompanied recent political speeches and treatises on change most often is the military metaphor 'imperative'. But in a participatory, democratic dispensation, must change be

imperative? Is it in all situations that change is needed? Must it be the duty of the development agency or media practitioner to seek to change the people? And must change be always one way – that the people are the ones to change, not the practitioner or government? Even among agencies that have adopted participatory approach to development communication, the ultimate aim is always to change people; to make them adopt our own ways. Twisting people to own our views and ways – what we think is best for them – is not participation.

The foregoing suggestions call for clear pedagogical adjustments. The curricula of schools and colleges must embrace a reorientation that fosters a new understanding of diversity and the Other. In the case of Nigeria, the National Universities Commission and Senates of various universities should advocate curriculum reviews to cater for these elements. Journalism curriculum should also include topics of civic/public journalism. This form of journalism does not speak to people, or just speak with them. Rather, it takes sides with people, provides them with the means of expression and facilitates their self-organisation to tackle community problems (Rosen, 1996). Government and agencies must begin their development efforts with people. The first question should be ‘what is your need?’ – no matter how obvious they may appear. Huesca (1995: 114) says ‘simple reflection of living conditions of others is antithetical to the participatory project, as local issues and needs must be expressed in the voices that live them’. The current democratic dispensation should enlarge the space of citizen participation to that extent.

A non-negotiable ingredient for participation is access to the media by the people. By access, we do not mean access to media as passive recipients but as active message makers. This is possible only where there are community radio stations. In spite of close to 10 years of relentless advocacy for community radio by the Nigerian Community Radio Coalition, Nigeria remains the only West African country without a community radio station: Republic of Benin has 22; Ghana has eight but Nigeria has none. A community radio is best positioned to articulate the views of the rural people and engender active participation among them.

Finally, participatory development should be community based. In Africa, individual efforts and initiatives are not discouraged but much of living and learning is done in community. In fact, ‘the locus of individual identity depends upon important attachments to the group’ and personal needs must necessarily be negotiated into the framework of the community (Bourgault, 1995: 5). The community is the concrete intermediate between the individual and the nation. And ‘many Africans do not feel they live in their nation, they know they live in their communities’ (Opubor, 2000: 12). Many development projects and programmes have failed because, among other reasons, they were based on West-tested theories and models (Diffusion of Innovations, Health Belief Models, Social Marketing, etc.) that emphasise individual knowledge, attitude, practice and behaviour (Airhihenbuwa & Obregon, 2000). Any intervention that ignores the staunch bond that weaves people into their small communities especially in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean will be ignoring a major factor in its success.

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