

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC RECESSION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The argument has always been that a nation's political development is possible only if the system of communication is sophisticated enough to drive the process of its building. Much as this rests on the political and socio-economic condition that accentuates the forces of development for maintenance of democracy in the society, the fundamental morass such as the type of politics fraught with violence, electoral frauds, unfulfilled promises and negligence on the part of the political communicators themselves amongst others, seems to influence the political spheres. The situation where political communication and advocacy have already taken the back seat, is a rehearse for democratic recession and impending anarchy. 176 editions of four national dailies were sampled to examine the thoughts around the unsettling and worsening state of the nation's advocacy journalism and democratic experience in a raging post-COVID-19 pandemic era. It contends that for any meaningful political discourse outside the present recriminations and bitterness, there is need to re-negotiate the terms of the nation's co-existence, which is what Professor Udoakah has been saying... Using bibliographic survey approach and relying on the tenets of Agenda Setting Theory as theoretical framework, , this paper concludes that democracy should be looked at from a developmental point of view and not as a class struggle or a rat race.

Keywords: political communication, democracy, development, advocacy, recession,

Introduction

The sphere of political communication involves the intercession of two complex concepts - politics and democracy. Both of these concepts have been approached in a variety of ways, and so far, there is clearly no "right" way of defining either. While politics is often seen as a way people living in groups make certain decisions, or sometimes as a game of numbers or about agreements and so on, democracy from the unimaginable deftness of its tuft appear to be more intricate and less circumspect. Political communication, on the other hand, examines the patterns of political discourses in the media including citizens' talk about allocation of resources by decision makers as well as social meanings attached to democracy. The motley issues which the

media covers circumstantially unveil political moves in the democratic setting, including democratic values seen mostly in their breach and all these complicate the concepts (en.m.wikipedia.org).

Unarguably, democracy is one fanciful term that many people have come to accept as suggestive of good governance, the political process and elections, civil debates, opinion formations, popular participation or superior arguments, etc. On the other hand, when one considers how tedious it is getting the citizenry to imbibing the democratic culture, the saying in Igbo “*na o bu’ro ka aki si ada’ n’nti ko’si ato*”, meaning *it is not how the cocconut sounds, that it tastes*, becomes obvious. Thus, the relationship between politics and democratic advocacy in the life of a nation cannot be consciously ignored. Momoh, (2000) says that a nation’s democratic tenets can be measured by the degree of freedom the press enjoys, while the media are the trigger that sets off or fires debates. While supporting the above statement, Olukotun (2000) citing the comment of frontline nationalist and statesman, Anthony Enahoro: “I send my heartiest appreciation to the heroes of the media without which the battle could have been prolonged, perhaps lost. I thank them all, not only for their sacrifices but for keeping the fires of democracy and free speech burning, when it was so easy to have done otherwise”. This shows the extent of the relationship between political advocacy and democracy.

In retrospect, it is important to point to the fact that the type of press that existed during the colonial era is different from that which exist today in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, Enahoro and other notable freedom fighters must be turning in their graves to find that the tedious journey it took these heroes of the media was a fruitless exercise. Nigeria’s political actors’ emergence at the dawn of independence as sole custodians of capital, places them in control of everything as could be seen from the high premium placed on the machinery of the state, the army and police... This has also made the quest of state power a matter of life and death or a war of a sort, and a rat race for the political class.

Given the wearied federalism forced by the 1979 constitution, political advocacy has been in steady recession. The democratization of socio-cultural, economic and political institutions for enduring peace and national development has not been possible through political advocacy journalism due to centripetal and centrifugal forces in the polity and its continued perpetration of class conflicts. It is as if the vibrancy and resilience with which the same press fought the military to a standstill in the 1980s and 1990s to bring about the present civil rule is no longer there in confronting the present challenge of governance. It is the focus of this study to identify the fundamental issues with the press, especially as it appears that the discordant voices among their ranks are getting louder, much with the emergence of social media. It is also important to know the reason why there is disinterest in challenging such decadence as bitterness and violence, electoral frauds, political highhandedness and political assassinations; sponsorship of farmers-herdsmen attacks and so on, knowing that all these are antithetical to national survival as well as values of democracy.

Theory Anchoring Study

This study is anchored on the Agenda Setting theory. Agenda setting is traced to Lippmann (1922), whose position that the “media were responsible to the ‘pictures’ in our heads”, became widespread some years later. Gohen, cited in Baron and Davis (1995), further advanced the idea forty years later when he argued that “the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but they are usually successful in telling them what to think about”. In the same

vein, Lang and Lang in Wimmer and Dominick (2000) in further strengthening this notion, say that the mass media force attention to certain issues. They are constantly presenting objects, suggesting what some individuals in the society should think about...

Agenda setting theory is about “the public agenda or what the people should worry about or ultimately press or legislate on”. What this means is that if the press decides to give more time and space to press freedom or coverage of rural news by the media, audiences will rate any of the items with more attention as first and second most important issue to them. Folarin, (2004), also says that if the media repeatedly emphasizes a particular issue that will instantly be the focus. A recent example is the attackers known as unknown gunmen who have shifted the attention from Boko Haram and herdsmen especially in the south-eastern part of the country. Agenda setting as a theory has been used in quite a good number of studies especially in the area of communication and media arts. It is good at explaining what is of importance on the scales of events. The issue has to do with the power of the media to change the direction of thought about the event and with the advantage of technological advances, media support could engender development.

Methods/Procedure

The study applied bibliometric analysis, drawing largely from newspapers published between May, 29, 2019 and May 29, 2023. Four national dailies were selected for this study based on geographical spread and leaning of the newspapers: The Guardian, Sun, Punch and Vanguard. Issues bordering on advocacy were separated as Political Communication, while other political stories were termed Non- Political communication. Since the object was to determine whether or not there was a decline in Political Communication or recession, editions of the said dailies was studied. Using the calendar date for the period, a total of 1,029 days or editions plus one (1) for 2020 being a leap year, makes it 1,030 editions and were selected. The next step was removing all the weekend editions (Fridays to Sundays), totalling 596 editions since they consist mainly of lifestyles, to bring the editions to 434. Wimmer and Dominicks’ (1987) 45% benchmark sample size was adopted, considering that the number was still cumbersome, and pose serious challenge to its reading. The researcher, then applied a two-stage cluster sampling to disaggregate the newspapers into four clusters and thereafter used stratified sampling technique to select the 44 editions per month each, using the calendar dates as guide in the selection.

Literature

Imperatives of Political Communication and Advocacy Journalism

Under a democracy, political communication has to do with free and open reporting of news to enlighten and inform the electorates on public concerns. For the media to play these roles of serving as a watchdog over government activities and decisions there has to be freedom of expression. The political process must encourage robust debates to create better understanding of issues facing the nation. Since democracy involves the participation of an informed and rational citizenry by making informed decision, there is need for a vibrant and effective media to provide the required information. For this to happen, it requires strict adherence to the core values and principles of journalism. Socially responsible media should represent the public and speak in public interest in order to hold government accountable and to uplift institutions of power that could be weakened by political pressure (Igwebuikwe, 2019, p.152).

What is the concern of the field of political communication? Seynour-Ure(1974), sees political communication as all the avenues and processes of information gathering (including facts, opinions, beliefs, etc, and exchange in the course of exposing political activities. It is an intricate

aspect of advocacy journalism that has to do with getting rid of social vices, educating people, criticizing government policies and exposing wrong doings in the society. Since it concerns politics and political decisions, political advisers, parties, candidates and all manners of persons in the corridor of power often try to influence it. While the pattern and trends of political communication is well documented, its complexities remain intriguing and breathtaking. Suffice it to say that the law of sedition is a violation of expression as guaranteed by section 39 of the 1999 constitution. The argument hedged on the existence of the law still has bearing on contemporary journalism, as opposition criticism which was meant to create some disaffection so that the electorate can have a reason to change the government in the prescribed democratic manner is seen as abnormal, inconsistent and an affront on the leadership (Isika, 2018, p.154).

This pattern questions the capacity of the media and endangers the course of national development and prosperity. It emasculates political communication so much so that it now overlooks leadership excesses and malfeasances. Many journalists have either been harassed or incarcerated by government for reporting negative stories. Newspapers and newsmagazines were proscribed at various times especially during the military era. Under the last administration, twitter was banned. Despite entreaties by well meaning individuals, the primordial and rent-seeking tendencies of the political class - what Dike (2001, p.27) calls “the gross banality of the capitalistic society” would not allow journalism to thrive, let alone transcend beyond the bounds of the Nigerian state. Why has advocacy journalism or political communication become much imperative now, as in the era of the gallant early press? Misky,(1994) puts it in an Irish proverb “you got to do your own growing no matter how tall your grandfather was”.

In McQuail’s (1995), reference to Burke, he equated the press as being equal to that of three estates of the realm, Lords, Common and the Clergy. Although it confers on the media the power to report and watchdog the government, it clearly suggests also that the media should be also part of the day to day running of the country. Through this agenda-setting, programmes and policies that will take into consideration the plight and views of the government and the governed, it will ventilate public opinion for the general good. Since the programme or policy generated through this method will, of course, serve the interest of all the parties, this will resonate in the media seeing things from the perspective of the government and the citizenry, of course, supporting same.

The worry is that many journalists are under the pay roll of politicians. This is to the extent that issues are seen from the politician-friend point of view. According to Sobowale (2013), many editors and politicians find it difficult to hide their friendship with those in government and it makes it impossible to absolve them from the charge of partisanship and maximum efficiency has not been the case.

Politics and Democracy in Contemporary Nigeria

Although in the preceding pages democracy is loosely referred to as a complex phenomenon, it is not so much if we take a detour to the original principles of democracy incorporating the recognition of the individual and equal participation by the people. Liberty is fundamental to the practice of democracy. Harold Laski classifies the makeup of individual liberty under private liberty, political liberty and economic liberty. Private liberty is the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice on areas of personal security. Political liberty is the right to take part in the affairs of the state, through the right to stand as candidate for election; freedom of speech, press and meeting, while economic liberty is the security and opportunity to find reasonable means of

livelihood and sustenance under a true democracy.

From the foregoing, it is clear that democracy is about individual rights to be part of the political process that is free from prejudices of political nature. The thrust of democracy, therefore, is the participation of the citizenry especially in a pluralistic society in the process of determining the governance of the country. This presupposes that the dominance of any one group over the other will obviously lead to rancho, which will ultimately have a discordant and destabilizing effect on the polity. The nature of politics and democratization in Nigeria from inception did not allow the stimulation of national consciousness, which is a necessary prerequisite that would uphold the nation's basic rules and procedures. This has also contributed to inequitable distribution of the nation's wealth as well as social justice system in the country. Weldon,(1966) cited by Dike (2001) notes that:

For the nation to move forward, it is the conviction of many that the feeling of regional injustice should be addressed, given the fact that politically assertive ethnic groups now and in future will cause instability. In order words, the nation's survival hinges on how effective ethnic conflict resolution is handled.

Thus, politics in its ordinary meaning is the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups or in other forms of power relations between individuals in furtherance of democratic objectives. It is also a political system whereby the citizens determine their future through their choice of leaders in elections. Unfortunately, due to the failure of electoral process, Nigerians have been unable to get it right. The set of committed people needed to serve the nation hardly make it due to the trouble with Nigeria. Whilst political communication has been in the forefront of charting the course of politics and democracy, politicians only deploy political communication to shape the perception of their audience and to sway public opinion. Some of the factors affecting politics in Nigeria can be listed:

- a) Post-colonial ideologies- many Nigerians went abroad to acquire education mainly to occupy the commanding heights of public service and to replace the colonialists by inheriting the structures they left behind (Achebe, 1983, p.11). The paradox of this ideology is that it is self-enforcing, much as it is self-defeating.
- b) Religion-, Islam and Christianity have not proven to be powerful influence on morality; there is also mutual suspicion between the two religions. Its exaltation of peace and humility, do not appeal to the temperament of the citizens, especially the youths (Booth, 1981, Lim, 2005, Lugard, 1922).
- c) Leadership - money driven and egocentric posturing, no national identity but regional and ethnic biased (Achebe, 1983).
- d) Tribalism- zoning of offices, lopsided recruitments into civil service and public corporations including law enforcements that undermines merits
- e) Weak structures- socio-economic institutions smeared by blazing corrupt practices, etc.

The Media and Political Institutions

We have said earlier that the media are often intertwined with political institutions because of both intrinsic and extrinsic influence. However, the main political function of the media is to provide information to the society by analysing political trends which often influence political decisions. Much as the connection between voters and politicians often divorces at the point where results of elections are made public, where the press should normally come in is to ensure

that the electorate gets something out of the bargain. The media must shake the table for political institutions such as the executive, legislature, judiciary as well as other stakeholders, to do something. Through its agenda-setting and status-conferral functions, legitimacy is given to persons and institutions. Agenda-setting, which depends on the scale of importance and magnitude of debate on controversial issues affecting the society, appears to be in limbo. It is true that political institutions, by and large, are challenged because of several interests, but they have the responsibility to exercise control of political power and ensure good governance, by providing enabling environment for effective participation through policy management. No matter how much pressure is exerted on the economy of the state, the public should not be left to bear the entire brunt through taxation or direct exploitation as is now the case. Good governance demands that poverty alleviation, especially for the most vulnerable should be initiated to save the downtrodden through job creation and basic services. This is why the media must be encouraged by their advocacy to give direction to governance in order to also give vision some level of harmony. Aboyade, (2000, p.12), citing (United Nations, 1999), says it all that:

the citizens clamour for good governance, implying that governance can be good or bad depending on Government seeking to ensure a growing and peaceful polity in which everyone participates effectively; shares equality in the responsibilities and benefits of social peace, growth and development; the media also making sure all stakeholders play by the rules: political parties, businesses, including other countries respect the laws of the land in trade and every other aspect of cultural life. If these goals are not set, the clamour can only be wishful thinking.

There is no telling that the media can judge, approve and criticise; it can make or mar political carriers' even parties or social groups that comes under its focus. Political communication is about social control, (from people to public sphere), that people have access and can impact on their political situations. But a situation where illegality is swept under the carpet by the powers that be undermines the rights of the individual, much as it debases or reduces political institutions. Fortune Ogun in *The Guardian* of Tuesday, January, 26, 2021, commented on the Vacation Order handed by Ondo State Governor Rotimi Akeredolu, SAN following incessant marauding by Fulani herdsmen on farmlands in Ondo State. Citing Section 45 of the 1999 Constitution, as amended, the columnist referred to the Court of Appeal case in KALU & federal REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA & ORS (2012) LIELR5287 (CA), where it was decided that; "the right to personal liberty and freedom of movement guaranteed severally by Sections 35 and 41 of the 1999 constitution, is not absolute under a law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society". This goes to show the essence of advocacy especially in a clime in which public freedom, morality, or public safety has no place or where it is trampled upon with blazing effrontery. Where critical issues such as is the case are ignored or underreported, it means a lot to the possible attainment of democratic objectives (Ogun, 2021, p.34).



Source: 2023 Study Samples

Visible Threats to Political Communication

As clearly stated above, political communication has been seriously under threat. Oso, (1996) equally writing on the problems of reporting political news realized that journalists have always been in-between two horizons; that of building bridges of unity and also dismantling same in some sense. He says that in the course of their reporting news, they encounter all sorts of monsters - the ones contributing to public good pales into insignificance when compared to others in the opposing camp and wishing to be allowed to be what they are. While some investigative journalists, the likes of Dele Giwa, Ubani and other martyrs reminds one of their selfless sacrifice to humanity, the situation report has become even more terrifying with the lawlessness that pervades the entire landscape. Udoakah,(1988,P.72), expresses his worries thus:

...the political atmosphere polluted by partisan politics, and the politicians expecting the newspapers to toe this partisan line becomes a problem. I believe it is still a problem with that organization, in spite of the national image that the paper acquired; the pressure from the politicians is quite enormous. It is possible for an editor or journalist who does not have a lot of courage to buckle under these pressures.

Aside from controlling the market space for journalists, he contends that the government is still the life wire of the Media in terms of revenue. Neither the print nor broadcast can survive without advertisements unless they are funded by the public. Seymour-Ure, also shines some light that unless their readers are willing to top the cover price of these newspapers up to thrice their cost, the papers may die a natural death. The above underscores the importance of advertising, which takes care of the bulk of the cost of publication. Other than this, there are other threats such as government appointing directors to the media, talking down on journalists, as well as media ownership, etc.

The Future of Democracy and Political Communication

If the operative word here 'recession' is taken further or amplified, it could mean an obvious decline manifests, given life and orchestrated by political influences real or assumed. Being that a society can cause a decline in her fortunes through intolerance to arrive at the oxymoron

'recession' referred, which depicts a self-contradiction based on lack of energy or power to act positively. Lack of mutual respect among political actors and support by a section of the media known to be responsible for this concerning situation.

Not minding that critics of African development (AD) have always ascribed to these tendencies as "the tragedy of underdevelopment", the goings on in the Sahel Region recently, typifying it. Nigeria seems to be under a spell and until there is a compelling redeeming force, the nation's democratic journey could be very bleak. Paul, (1986) has some consolatory words;

advocacy journalism, which is embodied in the passionate drive for sympathetically listening to opposing points of view, compelling drive to seek out evidence and intense aversion to contradiction, sloppy thinking, inconsistent application of standards and rationality are necessary for a nation's democracy to thrive.

In order to strike a happy medium for the future, Afilaka (2008, p.36) adds to the above list suggesting the need for electoral education at both basic and tertiary levels, including increasing the sphere of free debate, credible opposition, and political communication or advocacy journalism.



Source: 2023 Study Samples

It has not been totally a tale of woes; some of Nigeria's up-coming broadcast journalists, Seun Akinbaloye of *Channels Television* and Useni Rufai of *Arise TV*, to mention a few, have been speaking- Akinbaloye recently pleaded millions of our people in these words: "the nation is choking... it needs a breath of fresh air...." Another citizen, 77 years old Sen. Florence Ita Giwa, Ex-wife of the slain Dele Giwa of *Newswatch* fame, publicly wept over the fate of the nation due to absence of genuine advocacy, in her native Efik language in Calabar. "Mbon mbre ukara (politicians) ebiat Obio nyin Nigeria kpukpru (have destroyed our country) mfiok nte ikidade idisim idaha mbukpo ebiet eni(I can't imagine how we got to his level of rot.

Presentation of Data

Out of a total of 176 editions selected as detailed in the procedure above, the researchers pored through the newspapers and found a total of 922 political communication and non-political

items. They were further analyzed as shown in the tables below:

Table 1: Distribution of Pol. Communication items and Non-Pol. Communication Items

Newspapers	Items analyzed		
	All	Political comm.	Non-pol comm.
The guardian	301	71	230
Punch	200	22	178
Vanguard	251	44	207
Sun	170	21	149
Total	922	158	764
%	100		79.4

Table shows that out of 922 items, only 158(20.6%) were political communication oriented, while the rest 764(79.4%) are non-political communication items.

Table 2: Placement of Political Communication items According to Journalistic Genre.

Newspapers	News	Feature	Opinion article	Editorial	Picture	Cartoon	Letters to the editor
Guardian	23	15	14	5	9	4	1
Punch	9	4	3	2	3	1	-
Vanguard	20	5	7	4	8	-	-
Sun	7	4	4	3	2	1	-
Total	59	28	28	14	22	6	1
%	37.3	17.7	17.7	8.8	13.9	3.3	0.6

Table indicates that the bulk of the stories- 59(37%) were news, while opinion articles and features 28(17.7%); and pictures 21(14%) were found.

Table 3: Prominence Accorded to P.C items by Newspapers

Categories	Items Analyzed				
	Guardian	Punch	Vanguard	Sun	Total
Opinion	14	3	7	4	28
Editorial	5	2	4	3	14
Feature	15	4	5	4	28
Pictures	9	3	8	1	22
News	23	9	20	7	59
Letters to the Editor	1	-	-	-	1
Total	67	21	43	28	
%	42	13	27	17	

On this table, *The Guardian* gave more attention, as can be seen, compared to the rest of the newspapers

Table 4: Fractions of Dominant PC items, According to Tone in Percentages

Categories	Items Analyzed						
	News (%)	Opinion (%)	Editorial (%)	Feature (%)	Pictures (%)	Cartoon (%)	Letters to the
							to the

						editor	
						(%)	
Positive	—	13(46.4%)	9(64.4%)	13(46.4%)	15(68.2%)	1	52
Negative	—	3(10.7)	1(7.1%)	1(3.5%)	—	—	5
Neutral	—	8(28.5)	1(7.1%)	10(35.7)	7(31.8)	—	26
Appeal	—	4(14.6%)	3(24%)	4(14.2%)	—	—	11
Total (%)	—	28	14	28	22	1	94

Table 4 shows the fraction of tone from the genre: Editorials 64% positive, while neutral was 28.5%.

Result

The significant receding democratic values obtained from data presented above, evidently confirms the position thus; (i) only (21%) of PC was carried over the period,(ii)News items covered(37.3%) and much of them as information-(see Table 2), (iii)*The Guardian* was dominant with 42%coverage, followed by *Vanguard*, 27%, *Sun* 17% and *Punch* 13%. (iv) Tone was 55%, which is just above average. (v) *Guardian* is more nationalistic in outlook, *Vanguard*, leaned more to its South-South base, *Sun*, to South-East, while *Punch*, points to being Western. (vi) Sectionalism influence, undermined both advocacy and tone of the newspapers.



Source:2023 Study Samples

(vii) Being that proprietors of the newspapers are big-time politicians did not help matters. (viii)Political motives also played more role than national interest.(ix)Political communication decline was gradual and steady,(x) Contributions from nationalists, public spirited persons, religious leaders etc, were few and far-between (xi) It might get to a point where advocacy for review of terms of co-existence would become necessary, and finally, (xii) The sketchy number of editorials found is quite convincing of a declining political advocacy, being that it was mainly caustic editorials that fight for our independence and some was sparingly found in this review.

Conclusion

The authors have touched very critical aspects of political communication or advocacy in Nigeria. It was concerning that the #EndSARS protest which shook the nation's midrib did not

send sufficient signals to the authorities regarding the cracks that needed to be amended, especially in observing democratic norms in their breach. They were strong opinions from reports that bothered on high level corruption and nepotism. These complaints, from the study, mounted so much pressure on the press at the time.

. This seems to also suggest that the press might be glossing over a lot. Again, the nation's proverbial coffin, might be nailed with INEC, the electoral umpire contradicting its rules in a manner akin to a referee in a football match kicking the ball into the net of a preferred side and scoring a winning goal, to the utter amazement of spectators. The several shades of slant in reportage of this election might be suggestive of the loss of its fragile hold on advocacy.

This calls for re-negotiating the terms of co-existence among the diverse people of Nigeria, to avert a descent into anarchy. The paper suggests that the principles of Federal Character or Quota System embedded in the Constitution, which only serves the whims and caprices of those in power should be jettisoned, among other anti-people's policies and encourages the media to soldier on, and press for the birth of a new democratic order.

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