

MASS MEDIA, PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Democracy cannot thrive where there is a dearth of public opinion. At election, the people give their mandate to some persons to conduct the business of government and make decisions that would control their lives. But it would be self-deception to expect such public officials not to resort to arbitrary use of such powers. The absence of public opinion would simply mean entrenchment of dictatorship. The influence of public opinion which set them up for election in the first place is always necessary to restrain the public official; and the furnace of public opinion is primarily the mass media. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to bring to the fore the role of the mass media in building up, and or, amplifying public opinion in a democratic environment so that public officials would not derail from the goals upon which they were given mandates. The paper also x-rays the challenges facing mass media today, especially in Africa, and pinpoints some ways through which the mass media can continue to hold the ace in defending and deepening democracy to enhance the needed development. Interdisciplinary method was adopted for the study. The findings have shown that there can never be democracy without public opinion; and opinions can only be weighty and termed "public" when it is channeled through the mass media. Thus, stakeholders in the mass media should hold their heads high so as to avoid "strange influences" if democracy in Africa is to thrive, and development, in the true sense of the word, is to be witnessed.

Introduction

The role of the mass media in building the political fabric of democracy cannot be underestimated. The news media are the widely and readily available channels through which leaders express their views and seek to sell them to the public. But where a public official creates a credibility gap, he undermines his power. The news media also serve to bring to the officials the thoughts and desires of the people and the viewpoints of the political opponents, a two-way transmission of political policy and reaction. An especially effective technique is to submit a public official to intensive and sometimes unfriendly and aggressive questioning by a panel of journalist.

The political education role in the news media cannot be downplayed insofar as they are always there to publicize new plans. The publicity process is of immeasurable importance to public officials who exploit it to win elections in the first place. It is unfortunate, however, that some public officials try to control the opinions of the citizenry by manipulating and restricting the release of information thereby distorting the public image of a problem, making it seem real, and the political solutions they proffer more desirable. This is the problem with the political system.

The mass media also plays a crucial role in forming and reflecting public opinion. According to Hasan (2013), “It communicates the world to individuals, and it produces modern society’s self-image”. Public opinion, however, is waxed albeit, indirectly by the mass media. That is to say, the mass media collate information from diverse sources on issues of state and make them weighty and intimidating by amplifying them. Thus, the moment the mass media take up opinion of the people on a particular issue and trumpet them professionally, those opinions become public opinions, and have the propensity to influence government officials.

Without the public there can never be mass media, and mass media is about the public, their opinions and their interests. Take away the mass media, democracy becomes wobbled, and authoritarianism or tyranny would set in.

Thus, this paper examines the role of the mass media in building up public opinion for the survival of democracy in Africa. However, the challenges facing mass media in Africa today are also x-rayed, and possible solutions are also proffered.

Conceptual Review

Mass media:

Mass media is generally considered to be a pattern of communication reaching a large audience almost instantaneously and or simultaneously irrespective of their location and or spread. In the words of Hasan (2013) when the members of the general public referred to “the media” they are usually referring to the mass media, or to the news media which is a section of the mass media.

The mass media comprises of television, radio, newspaper, magazine and the internet. It is sub-divided into three groups *viz*: the electronic, the print and the traditional media. But of late the mass media is driven by technology that allow massive duplication of materials, and turning the world into a global village. Hasan (2013: 651) sees mass media as those type of media that are designed to reach large numbers of people. The mass media is an important aspect of a society that plays the crucial role of relating the government and the governed to the state in all matter of policies, decision and actions as they affect the state.

Public opinion:

Public opinion refers to the collective stance of legitimate but credible adult population of the society on issues of state. Public opinion develops as a concept with the rise of a “public” in the 18th century. Hasan (2013: 126) defines the concept as the engine that keeps the wheels of a democracy turning. She however, asserts that public opinion is that

opinion that is of large public interest and is held by a heterogeneous group of people who have some common interests.

There are many factors that induce public opinion. First when a government's policy is obnoxious and seem to be far apart from the yearnings of the people, the people must react and they divergent views held will coalesce and become the collective stance of the governed on such issues of policies.

Democracy:

The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary defines democracy as “a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively, and is administered by them or by officers appointed by them”. It goes further to describe it as a state or society characterized by recognition of equality of rights and privileges, be it political, social or legal. The core of democracy is participation by the people in the affairs of their state or society. Without participation, democracy loses meaning and relevance.

Another very important element in a democracy is the issue of accountability. According to Akpanobong (2003), it is not enough to talk about participation of the citizens by exercising electoral rights to vote for the person of their choice, such an elected person has a duty to be accountable to the people and it is only through the media that the people can call their officials to order, and cause them to render account of the stewardship.

Democracy in Africa: A Historical Overview

The term “democracy” originated from the Greek city state of Athens with two hundred and fifty thousand people in 6th century B.C (Thompson and Umoh, 2001). The “demos” – the people – of Athens were the peasants, craftsmen, sailors and day labourers, and had no voting rights, because the “Kratis” monopolized power (Tilly, 2007). Upon noticing an imminent confrontation on a major scale between the “Kratis” and “demos” with a propensity to spark off a revolution that could cost the state, a leader then called ‘solon’ introduced reforms that expanded space for participation by the “demos”.

The Athenian experiment became known as democracy or power of the “demos”. That Athenian model informed the struggle for self-determination and freedom in Europe for centuries. The model had, however, undergone modifications and redefinition which called for representation as against “participation by all free citizens” that was the case in Athen (Thompson and Umoh, 2001).

Democracy in the Euro-America are fashioned from the Athenian Greek model, though with some modifications. What is currently practiced in almost all African countries

were introduced by the Western powers which colonized Africans. However, democracy is not so strange a concept to some Africans, but the manner in which it is practiced in contemporary times in the continent is foreign, brought into being by the Western colonialists. Democracies in pre-colonial African polities were “villagetic” in nature, where every elder and adult citizens participated in decision-making and decision taking in village squares. It is proper for us to term this kind of democracy “Villagetism” or “Village Square democracy”. This form of democracy was in vogue in “acephalous” communities in Africa, which Thomson (2010) in his “An Introduction to African Politics” posits that “at its most efficient, it will involve the whole community meeting regularly to make decisions”.

It is pertinent to state that colonialism had replaced “villagetism” or “village square democracy” with the Western - styled democracy; or at most, the former has been pushed to interior villages in Africa, and the western styled is now the in-thing across the continent, even though African leaders have so abused it because of ineffective media and morbid citizenry.

In Nigeria, modern democracy or the Western styled democracy began officially in 1922 with the introduction of Clifford Constitution. Sir Hugh Clifford who succeeded Lord Laggard in 1919 was the Governor who had to grapple with the problems and agitation associated with the Nigerian Council. At first, proved to be up to the tasks of resisting the nationalists’ demand, but at last he gave in and initiated a new constitution usually described as the Clifford constitution.

The constitution provided for an Executive and Legislative Councils. The most significant feature of that constitution was the elective principle which was unprecedented in the political history of Nigeria. One of the advantages of the elective principle was the possibility of learning to take part in elections for eventual self-government. This had the desired effect on political activities in the country such that political parties sprang up in the country, in 1923 with Sir Herbert Macaulay forming the first political party with the name Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). And in order to appeal to the voting masses, and for effective communication, newspapers were floated by politicians. Among the earliest newspapers were Lagos Daily News founded by Sir Herbert Macaulay in 1925, the Nigerian Pioneer founded by Sir Kitoye Ajasa and Daily Times founded in 1926 by Richard Barrow and Co (Thompson and Umoh, 2001).

The birth of newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s brought Nigerian politicians like Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Prof. Eyo Ita, Ahmadu Bello, Alvan Ikoku, etc. to limelight, and their opinions, and those of the people they represented, were made known to the colonial government. Hence, when another colonial regime came on board a fresh

constitution called Author Richard constitution was enacted in 1946. This constitution created three regions in the country based on the people's opinion as canvassed by the mass media. Thus, democracy got expanded, modified and entrenched in the Nigeria from 1923 till date due to public opinions as amplified by the mass media (Thompson and Umoh, 2001).

In other parts of Africa such as Tanzania, Gambia, Kenya, Senegal, Ghana, South Africa, and so on, the media aided the enthronement of democracy and the rise of leaders such as Julius Nyerere, David Kaunda, Kenyatta, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, etc. Even though, at a point (1960-1980) some of these leaders turn themselves to despots partly because of defective media in their respective polities, and partly because of morbidity of their citizenry (Meredith, 2006). Findings show that the very media that catapulted the first generation of African leaders to prominent were also employed in the negative to stampede progress in Africa. At some points, the media were used to whip up ethnic sentiments and useless propaganda. These defective practices in the media contributed to failed democracy, and in some cases, outright dethronement of democracy, in some African states. According to Meredith (2006), the press, in the early days of African independence, existed merely as an outlet for government propaganda. Political debate, in his words, "became matter of platitudes and praise-songs, no longer taken seriously". In one country after another, the first generation of African leaders acted in contempt of constitutional rules, and constitutions were either amended or rewritten, or simply ignored. All this happened because the media ignored the masses and their opinions and rather became pages to the leaders. For instance, in Guinea, the media keyed into the thinking of Sekou Toure and deified him as "Guide Supreme de la Revolution". He was also often referred to as "The great son of Africa", "The Terror of international imperialism, colonialism and Neo-colonialism", and "The Doctor of Revolutionary Sciences" (Meredith, 2006).

Mass media, Public Opinion and the Restoration of Democracy in Africa

Even in the era referred to above, a section of the media in Africa was living up to expectation. But some contributed to the collapse of democracy in almost all African countries and the taking over of the reigns of power by the military juntas. The media was also in the lead to restore democracy in Africa beginning from the 1980s. It was the mass media that forced the then Military President of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida to "step aside despite many years of grand-standing and brutality (Ukpong, Tony 2021: Interview).

The media also played the greatest role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and the eventual enthronement of Nelson Mandela as the first Black President of that country (Meredith, 2006). Thus, there is a nexus between mass media, public opinion and

democracy. Suffice it to state that for an “opinion” to be termed “public”, it must emanate from a credible public. A credible public is that public which is legally, morally, socially and legitimately fit to hold a view or views for or against the government or its policies. A public must be credible in order to be taken serious by the media for the interest of democracy and the people. For instance, medically confirmed lunatics, convicted persons or non-indigenes who are not residents within a given jurisdiction cannot express any valid opinion on a subject of public importance within that state or society. Thus, such “public” and its opinion(s) are “non gratas”, and are readily dismissed. Hasan (2013) defines a public as:

.. a dispersed group of people interested in and divided about an issue, with a view-to-registering a collective opinion, which is expected to affect the course of action of some group or individual.
A public is not one composite group, but a number of interest groups, often working at odds with one another.

The mass media rely on the public; and without the public the media has no function. Therefore, public opinions shape the character of the mass media for better or for worse. Hasan admonishes that the public should ensure that whatever opinion brought to bear on the mass media are for the better. She also sees “public as a heterogeneous group of people interested in an issue but having difference of opinion and aiming to reach a collective opinion to affect a particular course of action.

The absence of public opinion is the death of democracy. And public opinion would be or remain a mere rumour or gossip in the absence of the mass media. That is to say, it is the mass media that orchestrate opinions in a democratic setting and wax them into a viable weapon of development. Mass media, to a greater extent, is the arsenal that guard democracy. They are a vehicle through which the people’s voices are conveyed to the elected officials to guide them in the discharge of their duties. The weight of public opinions is determined by the support of the media, and the credibility of the public.

Since the return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the masses have constantly aired their views and aspiration on matters of state importance. The people have wished that their wishes on state matters be considered by the officials, but often times, their wishes are dashed by the media practitioners who instead choose to support the government and their officials against the people. Hasan (2013) maintains that:

Public opinion is the engine that keeps the wheels of a democracy turning. Though we elect officials to conduct our government, they are restrained by influence of the same public opinion that put them into office. The average person is strongly affected by the social group and the opinion leaders who reflect the opinions obtained from the mass media. Thus, the divergent views and in-depth analysis presented by the mass media are of vital importance in the stance public takes on critical issues.

Global Concord Newspaper, in one of its editorials published on Thursday 26/1/2012, states that "the media sniff at instances of ineptitude, malfunctioning and corruption, and inform the public accordingly. Once a deleterious situation is exposed, public opinion could force a reform". This is to say that not the public alone feeds the media, the media also feeds the public. This is where symbiotic relationship between the public and the media comes in. The public and the media feed each other with information that help democracy to thrive.

In a democratic setting, the mass media is the melting pot of political thought. The policies and aims of government are made known through the press, and are deliberated upon by opposition political figures, editors, commentators and the public at large. Sometimes, a high government official intentionally sets to test public reaction to a policy idea; somehow, he gets the idea to the press. Analysts examine the proposal in print and on the air, and before long, millions of the citizenry are aware of the tentative plan and form an opinion. If the policy idea meets with heavy opposition, it is quietly abandoned. If it gets popular support, it is put into operation.

Interview sessions conducted by local state owned news media are, to say the least, pedestrian, of late, and obviously driven by sycophancy. A journalist is trained to ask incisive questions with the aim of unraveling the truth and getting the people better informed. Not the show of shame we watch on television when a high public official is guest. He is never made to feel the heat. He is never asked a question over which he needs to ponder before attempting a reply. And the public ends up as the loser.

In January, 2012 the whole world was subjected to a spectacle for over two weeks when the traditional two-way transmission of political policy and reaction suffered, and Nigerian government apologists had a field day. The ordinary Nigerian was bombarded with figures government considered would sway public opinion in its favour. Some of the not-too-clean facts about the so-called subsidy were hushed up and therefore affected the quality of the debate and gave the government the cheap opportunity of running away with a pyrrhic victory. The ugly facts, however, emerged later from the House of Representatives.

The House of Representatives Ad-hoc Committee investigating the management of fuel subsidy headed by Farouk Lawan was shocked to learn that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) did not have documents to back up fuel importation. The allegation was made by the relevant authority which should know: the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS). It said the Federal Ministry of Finance aided the "illegality" by warning customs in writing to overlook the essential documents to "avert undue hardship on Nigerians." Julius Ndubusi Nwankwo, Deputy Controller General also added that most fuel importation did not follow due process, that Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) was not in a position to give

the exact number of vessels imported by the NNPC; that the vessels do not get to the ports here in Nigeria; that the manifests covering these imports simply read “Offshore Cotonou” or “Offshore Lome”. That customs did not board those vessels as they were anchored outside Nigeria’s territorial waters and could therefore not ascertain the volume of imports. He also said that the NNPC had not paid duty, as at January 2012, of N45B for PMS imported between 1999 and 2002 when such duty was suspended. Government was aware of these and other facts, but chose to keep them to itself. Government had been smarter because the public did not care, and the media subsequently became aloof - which is a clear sign that Nigerian’s democracy is not too far from being a modified form of dictatorship.

If the citizens are denied full disclosure of facts, where do they turn to? The investigative work of the news media, of course. This is the only way the public could have the complete story. Governments generally release and stress on facts favourable to their cause. But the public is entitled to all the facts in a political situation to enable it take educated stance.

Factors Militating Against the Media and Democracy in Africa

Media in Africa is under serious threat, and the threat to media is to a greater extent, the threat to democracy. Media houses are now living in past glories because they are no longer living up to expectations as the key objective of almost every media organization now in Africa has been monetary gains, hence, the reason they embark on “Brown Envelope” practices.

Media practitioners are into partisan politicking, thus, abandoning the ethics and principles of the practice which are fashioned along democratic tenets. Objectivity in media practice in Africa is fast becoming a farce because of partisanship of media practitioners. What is in vogue in Nigeria, for example, is the “PDP and APC” – reporters, as well as media houses. And the worse is that the masses have keyed into such “demonic” media divides to the detriment of democracy and national development.

Media houses and media practitioners churn out half-truths or outright falsehood with impunity. Propaganda are now presented as “news” by media houses. By propaganda we mean the art of presenting a piece of information with less than fifty percent verity in a bid to influence the psyche of the public. Hasan (2013) sees propaganda as:

A specific type of message presentation directly aimed at influencing the opinions or behaviour of people, rather than impartiality providing information.

Propaganda is characterized by distortion of facts. It appeals to emotions, and it’s misleading in nature. Propaganda thrives on coloured, biased, or one-sided information. The

aim is to gag the public and bar them from making their own decisions on issues of democracy or any other issue of state importance.

Also, the elected officials are themselves a threat to the media, and by extension democracy which they profess. No leader or official likes to be criticized although some tolerate criticisms more than some. The yearning of every African leader, right from the dawn of independence, has been to have the media on his side, and any attempt by a media practitioner to be independent ignites acrimony and clamp-down. The need for press freedom is a *sine-qua-non* to effective functioning of democracy. Press freedom, according to Nwabueze (1985), means freedom from all prior restraints, whether in the form of license refusal or a ban or proscription of further publication or distribution. There are cases where journalists in Africa are thrown into police detention for reporting what is unfriendly to an official of the state.

In democracy, the press is supposed to be free, and the media practitioners are supposed to exercise their inalienable rights of freedom of speech and expression, and freedom to hold opinions and to hold the leaders accountable. But these rights and or freedom are stifled by the officials of the state directly or through proxies or through some obnoxious laws and policies. Media practitioners also get these rights forfeited by state-induced poverty. No one wants to be poor, as such every media practitioner wants to own at least a house, a car and every other luxury owned and enjoyed by his or her contemporaries in other professions. Hence, a media practitioner in Africa is always tempted to “go low” in his practice in order to satisfy his or her desires. This is why Akpanobong (2003) asserts that:

Of all facts of poverty... It has greatly impeded the development and sustenance of democracy. The perpetual struggle for existence and survival has almost always been how to conquer poverty. In consequence with such major concern with matters of mere survival, apathy sets into the practice of democracy.

In Africa, the journalists are paid, and they readily accept, to brainwash the masses using propaganda as tools. By doing this the masses are made to also look the other way like the journalists do, while the state officials are busy strangulating democracy in their respective jurisdictions. The prospect of the media in Africa will be limitless if management and staff of every media house in Africa would always pursue editorial policies that are objective, realistic, national and mass-oriented.

Another threat to the media and democracy in Africa is ethnicity. Today, every journalist want to champion the cause of his or her people. They incite their respective kinsmen and women against the state for pecuniary and parochial interests. Ethnicity obviously is another dark hood covering the prisms of media practitioners in Africa.

Political Education as a *Sine-qua-non* for Informed publics and democracy in Africa

Democracy cannot thrive where the masses are morbid and timid. A morbid or timid public aid tyranny, and are ready tools in the hands of destroyers of democracy. In order to have a vibrant public for the survival and growth of democracy and its attendant dividends, an informed public is imperative. But sadly, the media which should educate the masses have aligned with the government against the people.

As the “Fourth estate of the realm”, it is the duty of the media to educate and mobilize the citizens for the growth and sustenance of democracy in Africa. This is because the media is the purveyor of information, and whoever is in position to control the flow of information exercises great powers. In this regard, Thompson and Umoh posits that the press could therefore utilize these powers to better the lots of the citizenry. If the mass media practitioners could see themselves as indivisible, see themselves as epitome of truth, the protector of the oppressed, and more so, as responsible men and women who, because of their professional calling, are opportune to lead, direct, inform, educate and entertain people, democracy in Africa, as in the Western world, would grow, and development will be ushered in.

The press could be of great service to a country if it could try to point it audience in the direction of the bright future for which every responsible government is committed. (Thompson and Umoh, 2001)

Etukudoh (1989) notes that to mobilize the masses for effective and sustainable democracy the mass media cannot be ruled out. But mass mobilization or informing people through the mass media becomes effective only when the people are able to comprehend messages passed to them through the mass media.

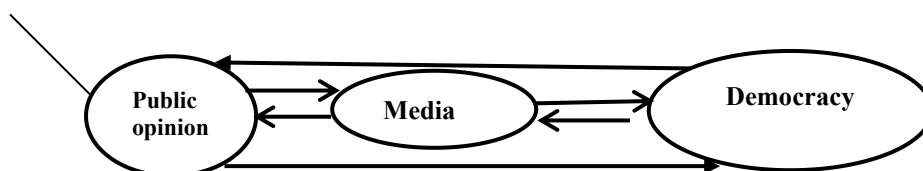
African masses need to be politically informed if democracy is to grow and development witnessed in Africa. If the masses, who constitute the public in democracy, are not politically aware, their opinions would be “off” and the society would be chaotic. Therefore, to “create” an informed public, the mass media hold the ace and/or the key, because of its advantageous great reach. The best purpose media can serve and the best way it can contribute to the progress of democracy (in Africa) is by educating the masses keeping in mind the real needs of the public.

Conclusion

Media, Public opinion and Democracy: Towards a Model

The paper will be incomplete if the authors fail to contribute to knowledge by suggesting a somewhat new model of mass media. Model of mass media are windows through which the media are studied. However, this very model is, for now, suggested for the study of media in relations to democracy and public opinion.

The paper reveals that there is a cordial relationship between the media and the public on the one hand, and between the media and democracy on the other. This relationship is symbiotic such that none of the parties in the said relationship give to the other and not receive in return. Thus, the relationship between the media and public opinion, and between the media and democracy is symbiotic. Hence, the model fashioned out by these researchers is called a “symbiotic model of media, public opinion and democracy”.



A Symbiotic Model of Public Opinion, Media and Democracy

The symbiotic model of public opinion, media, and democracy emphasizes the mutual interdependence of these three elements in sustaining a functioning political order. Public opinion represents the aggregated views and preferences of the citizenry, which confer legitimacy on governance and constitute the moral foundation of democracy. Yet, in practice, public opinion does not emerge in isolation; it is filtered and framed through the media, which serve as the principal channels of information, debate, and political communication. The media provide the narratives and agendas that shape how citizens interpret events, policies, and leadership, while simultaneously responding to public interests and expectations in order to maintain credibility and relevance.

Democracy depends on both public opinion and media to thrive. It requires informed citizens capable of participating in decision-making, and it requires independent media institutions to guarantee transparency, accountability, and the circulation of competing viewpoints. In return, democratic structures secure the rights of citizens to form and express opinions freely and protect the freedom of the press as an indispensable element of public life.

The model is symbiotic because each component is sustained by the others: public opinion needs media to gain visibility and influence, media need democracy to remain free and authoritative, and democracy needs both media and public opinion to uphold legitimacy. When one of these elements is weakened or compromised, the entire system becomes unstable. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between public opinion, media, and democracy forms a dynamic ecosystem in which voice, information, and legitimacy continuously reinforce one another

The “symbiotic model of media, public opinion and democracy” holds that both the media and the public depend on each other for content and motivation, in that public opinion

shapes and can be shaped by the media to create a healthy environment for democracy to thrive. Consequently, the absence of one negates the interrelationship of the others.

The media cannot exist without the people, and the people cannot exist without the media in contemporary world. The media feeds the public with information in order to act for the betterment of the society; and the public feed the media with information in order to stay afloat and also help the society. In other words, the media exist for the public, and without the public, there can never be media, and there would be no need for it; and without the public, there would be no democracy.

For democracy to thrive in Africa, the masses should be well informed and active. And the people can only be better informed if the media live up to expectations, and avoid strange influences such as ethnicity, partisanship, propaganda, etc. It is a well-informed citizenry that can hold their government accountable. Well informed citizens are the opinion leaders, and the media collate information from a public that is well informed politically, socially and educationally. A weak public breeds tyranny and mediocrity in a democracy.

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