Development Communication and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa: Analyzing Media's Impact on Governance and Political Participation

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Abstract

A number of mass media scholars observe that development communication has taken new directions since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and they are reconceptualizing a range of variables associated with development, including interdependence between media and politics, new media and diffusion of innovation, and sustainability of political development, communication ethics and its impact on democratization, re-examination of media objectivity, role of the media in disseminating information, and agenda-setting process for effective citizens' participation in the political process. This reconceptualization is increasingly attracting the interest of academics, practitioners, and independent consultants around the world, which is leading to a rethinking of current media perspectives and theoretical frameworks guiding development communication debates. With increasing globalization and nations of the world have become interconnected because of global markets and investments, it is important that countries understand one another's need for development communication to ensure continuing growth and sustainability. Recent media studies have traced the slow growth of political development to a lack of development communication, inadequate strategic communication skills, unwillingness of citizens to engage in democratic debates, and unawareness of the consequences of political apathy. This chapter is focused on development communication contexts, issues, and theoretical frameworks in sub-Saharan Africa. It then provides conclusion and recommendations for effective utilization of development communication to enhance political participation, generate a keen interest in the political process, and ultimately increase the quality of national governance.

Keywords: Strategic communication, development communication, political communication, communication theories, sustainability, globalization

Introduction

There seems to be overwhelming difficulties when examining and analyzing development communication, media role, and politics in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past four decades, development communication has drawn the interests of many scholars, and theories associated with the field of development communication have undergone significant and rigorous interpretations and reconceptualization. This chapter attempts to refocus on some of the unresolved issues that continue to generate debates on specific aspects of contemporary development communication theoretical initiatives and directions. Academics and communication scholars across disciplines (Anderson, 2006; Nwokeafor & Okunoye, 2013, Okoro, 2014) explained that analyzing development communication in sub-Saharan Africa has been enormous and challenging undertaking, largely because of the adversarial relationship existing between the media and governance over the years. Central to the debates and agitation are enduring issues that have increased the ongoing concerns about the quality and scope of political development in most of developing nations, and have caused strong ideological disagreements and sentiments in many communication contexts. Some of the primary concerns stemmed from the inception of discussions regarding development communication in Africa, such as government control of information flow, ownership, and lopsided flow of information channels in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

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For instance, the current trends in Africa's political development efforts in the twenty-first century indicate that to achieve and sustain democratic transformation in the regions, the role of the mass media, especially the new media, is critical in the production and dissemination of news and political reforms.

Communication for Development in sub-Saharan Africa

Quite recently, a plethora of theories have been developed to enhance the understanding of the processes of development and intercultural communication in   order to increase the flow of human interaction and to improve organizational/societal relationships. But, like the field of development communication itself, these theories are imbued with controversies and inconsistencies driven by a number of divergent   philosophical orientations. According to past studies (Asante, 1989; Hornk, 1988; Mody, 1985), some of the theories are pro-West, such as free flow of information and modernization; others are anti-West such as dependency and structural imperialism.

As the debates and discussions focusing on the structural and functional dimensions of development communication continued, it became apparent that issues of development and political communication, fundamentally intercultural, are in fact at the focus of global conflicts. Additionally, certain enduring issues pertaining to development communication infrastructure continued to evoke very strong emotions among citizens of developing nations specifically citizens of the sub-Saharan Africa. Issues involving media control, independent press, structure of information flow, globalization, media ownership, structure of media messages, and now the digital divide as a consequence of innovations in mass communications have further complicated the flow of debates and disagreements in the analysis of development agenda. More than ever before, African governments consistently demonstrate their commitment to political and economic development, but this laudable objective seems far-fetched as a result of the minimal role of the mass media in educating citizens and encouraging effective participation in the political process. Indeed, as the debate on Africa's development agenda and reforms continued to take different and complex dimensions, researchers across development and political disciplines (Ziegler and Asante, 1992; Okoro, 1993; and Entman 1989) strongly suggested that new media system should be effectively utilized as agents for sustainable development communication in order to achieve political landscape in many counties of Africa.

Over many years, the sensitive and controversial issue concerning the adversarial relationship between the media and governments in Africa has been viewed as instrumental to the growing instability and apathy among the citizens. Against this background, various studies (World Bank, 2002, 2008; UNESCO, 2003) examined the role of development communication and the media, and identified the variables that could contribute effectively to sustainable political development. In light of decades of disturbing conflict between the media and politics regarding the functions of the former, various political climates in sub-Saharan Africa were analyzed for context as well as impact on national and political development. The World Bank Report (2008) on *sub-Saharan Africa from Crisis to Sustainable Growth* recognized the urgent need for improved relationship between governance and the mass media in order that African countries, such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, etc., could achieve political development through effective and participatory communication. The report strongly identified better governance as a prerequisite for political renewal in sub-Saharan Africa, and it further suggested that in order to advance politically, the political system of African countries must guard against all forms of corruption from the highest to the lowest levels. This could be achieved by establishing good precedents, strengthening accountability, encouraging public debate, and fostering a free and independent press, which is the focus of development communication.

In their historic analysis of the role of the press in development communication conducted over two decades ago, author Nwokeafor (1992; Nwokeafor & Okunoye, 2013) contended that in order for the countries in sub-Saharan Africa to cultivate national consciousness beyond ethnic and regional levels, the media must be able to induce and sustain images of a national culture. Furthermore, these authors stressed the importance of a positive relationship between government and the media in order for the country to attain political development – a relationship that is so crucial because it is both topical and significant in the nation's struggle for national development – additionally, it fundamentally and substantially impacts a whole range of subjects, including political stability, social and economic developments, and the nature of information flow and dissemination.

As studies (The World Bank, 2014; Nwokeafor, 2013; Okoro, 2010) substantiated, for various unpredictable reasons, sub-Saharan Africa has attracted the most dramatic political changes over nearly half a century, because of the nature and structure of political governance, which has made development and development communication extremely difficult to accomplish.

For examples, some of the countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, etc.) were prolonged victims of decades of military and corrupt civilian governments, culminating in a range of financial and economic abuses, which the media could not disseminate or expose to the global communities. It was difficult to mobilize citizens to participate in the political process, or engage them in competitive political activities, making development communication unrealistic.

In their analysis of communication strategy for sustainable development in developing countries, UN Economic Commission for Africa (2005) and UNESCO (2005a) explained the importance of an integrated media strategy in advancing the frontiers of sustainable development. As these studies noted, earlier research of 1950s, 1960s, 1970s on development viewed the concept as growth in per capita income. Countries in the sub-Saharan Africa have struggled with development over the years, because of the failure of development communication to define the parameters for development and to encourage participatory governance. Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s (Nwokeafor, 1992; Okoro, 1993; World Bank, 2002) concluded that development whether economic or political was far-fetched because of lack of commitment on public governance, accountability, and collective engagement. As countries in the sub-Saharan Africa continue to focus on development, studies by development experts and research organizations (UNCTAD, 2002; Tholons, 2007; World Bank, 2014) have placed much emphasis on development initiatives and processes, demonstrating that the strategies designed by foreign powers to support the "Third World" countries were grossly defective, counter-productive, and in most cases, unrealistic to achieve its objectives.

Development Communication: Strengthening Democracy and Social Development

As debates on African development crises and situation take on different dimensions, the World Bank (2008) and other institutional researchers (The Economist, 2006; UNESCO, 2007a) have identified the mass media as the critical agents for dismantling negative images and stereotypes which developing nations suffer. However, Dragon (2001) contended that early development efforts in sub-Saharan Africa were unsuccessful mainly because the secondary role assigned to the media was grossly inadequate and, as a result, their effectiveness was largely compromised. A review of a recent study (The World Bank, 2014) delineates several scholars who supported the role of the media in achieving development and modernization. The World Bank (2014) analysis buttressed that participatory approaches to development communication reinforced emphasis on national and political structures for social, economic, and political change to occur. The World Bank report (2008) also contended that a broad-based initiative and debate introduced by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1997 and also emphasized the Communication for Social Change Consortium in subsequent years have focused on structural inequality, social transformation, and political development. As the World Bank (2014) further stated, the "Rockefeller process" contributed to the definition of communication for social change and political development as "a process of public and private dialogue through which people themselves define who they are, what they need and how to get what they need in order to improve their own lives and situations. The report recommended strategic development communication that led to collective problem identification, decision making, and community-based implementation of solutions to development issues. Employing the model of "Change-Agency Communication and Mass Media of Development," Melkote (2013) clearly illustrated the significance of the media in crating widespread awareness of, and interest in the innovations introduced by various international development organizations and agencies, which is quite consistent with the World Bank (2014) debate on the media and development communication. Over the years, specifically in 1990s and presently, development communication in sub-Saharan Africa is designed to strengthen democracy, social development, gender equality, political stability, nation building, education provision, and citizens' participation in the political governance. Furthermore, development communication, according to World Bank (2014), Working Paper No 158, is intended to safeguard, enrich, and expand developing countries' cultural, political, social, and economic fabric. This paper assessed and reevaluated the impact the media have on the development process of development nations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Because the media can be used and delivered in so many different ways and channels, there is no single means of analyzing and evaluating its numerous contributions towards political and economic development.

The concept of development communication was initiated to improve human conditions, collective participation, and engagement in the democratic processes in development nations. Accordingly, studies by Nwokeafor, 2013; Okoro, 2014, and the World Bank (2014) adequately indicate the significance of media's role in development. Specifically, the World Bank (2008) study and the Commission for Africa (2005) report determined that the media's role and contribution to development occurs along several dimensions: plurality and transparency, behavioral, infrastructure and platform, economic, trade, and politics.

In terms of plurality and transparency, the contributions that a plural media environment makes to good and accountable governance is of inestimable value. Additionally, transparency and the functioning of markets (economic and political, which can be seen as the media's political economy role, is significant for political development. Behaviorally, the media's contributions to inspiring beneficial changes in the attitudes and conduct of citizens, groups, and organizations is critical to the growth and advancement of a nation, which is one of primary goals of development communication. In the area of infrastructure and platform role of the media in development, the provision of compelling content is essential as the main driver of investment in the contemporary broadband infrastructure and platforms, which hold the potential for transformational development and democratic process in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, World Bank (2014) identified and expanded on media's role in global trade. Trade in media, mainly audio-visual products is substantial and attractive, but certain trade barriers restrain investments and limit opportunities for developing country exports, and so media's potential contributions and support for development is instrumental to good governance.

Over many centuries, the human race has witnessed significant political changes and upheavals in countries around the globe, especially in the sub-Saharan region. In more than one instance, some empires collapsed and a number of nations lost their independence to more powerful countries. Indeed, a thorough investigation of past and current literature reveals that, more than anywhere else, the mass media play a distinctive role in disseminating political, crises-oriented, and development-based information and news. The mass media provide critical and objective, evidence-based account, that engender participation in development-oriented projects. Consequently, the citizens are updated through media-based knowledge for comparative assessment of international politics and images. More than five decades ago, Cassata & Asante (1979) stated that the effect of the media has been established on knowledge acquisition, retention, and distribution of power in global societies and organizational entities. Concurrent with Cassata and Asante, Brett (2001) Nwokeafor (1992), Okoro (1993) concluded that the impact of the mass media has been established by examining the political cognition of individuals and groups within a political environment. Independently of each other, these scholars determined that the media are notable in increasing citizens' political awareness and knowledge. Discussing the benefit of development communication in modern times and its role in political competitiveness, Davidson (1976) recognized that the media create as well as transform the images of politicians either favorably or unfavorably by employing and illustrating various human situations, shortcomings, strengths, weaknesses, and deficiencies. This image transformation of politicians is skillfully manipulated during political campaigns and elections hence candidates consistent struggle to favorable interface with various media network. It is in line with this perspective that author Dragon (2001), Girard (2003), Lang & Lang (1981), Nwokeafor & Adeniyu (2013) contended that the media have the capability of changing or impacting voting pattern and behavior of citizens during and after political elections

Development Communication, Political Process, and Democracy

Ever since it became a political issue in the wake of the struggle for democratization among the developing nations, the concept of development has been conceptualized and operationalized to reflect either national growth or political stability. However, an extensive review of past and current political media analysis provides a new conceptualization of development driven toward the utilization of communication channels as agents of development. Some communication studies focused specifically on the application of development communication to sustain democracy (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2005 & 2007; Nwokeafor, 2013; Okoro, 2014). Indeed, looking back over the past decades of communication research on development, it can be argued that the actual and potential role of the media in development efforts, programs, and initiatives is much greater nowadays than ever before, at least in their contributions to democratic sustenance, public awareness, and participation in political process. Historically, while communication scholars (Lippmann, 1922; Shaw, 1977; Harper, (1997) provided consistent findings that support the significance of the media in development initiatives and programs, the World Bank (2002) differed slightly with a perspective that a supportive government is needed in order for the mass media to effective and contribute to development
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Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the decade of the 1960s and 1970s, military dictatorships were a common form of governance in many developing countries, especially in the sub-Saharan Africa, with the result that the concept of development communication was virtually ineffective in achieving political democracy.

Evidently, military governments, wherever they existed, placed more emphasis on the maintenance of law and order, peace, and the prevention of anti-government movements than on political and economic development programs. Therefore, this chapter re-emphasizes that the role of the mass media should be effectively blended in the national agenda in order to realistically achieve, promote, and sustain development efforts. Reinforcing politically-informed and active citizenry is significant to political development, and it is the single most important contribution of development communication in the twenty-first century.

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