



NIGERIAN COMMUNICATION POLICY: CONCEPT, APPROACH AND EFFECTS

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Abstract

This study looks at the significance of the concept of communication policy as a system, its purpose and how it affects the developmental bid of growing nations, with focus on Nigeria. The study assumes that Nigeria's communication policy system is not well propagated to cater for the cross-sectional needs of the stakeholders, practitioners and scholars. Thus, there is urgent need for re-engineering, re-tooling or total review of the policy to adequately take care of the agitations of the aggrieved. Though the implementation of a policy is often the most difficult phase in the policy process and it could be argued that due to the complex socio-political, cultural and economic scope of such policies, it is a particularly problematic area of study. Whilst this does not mean that all previous policies in Nigeria are redundant, it forces policy makers and others to re-consider their usefulness within the more global contexts. New policies usually occupy a rather crowded space inhabited by the existing laws, organisations and interest groups. However, the need for greater inclusion in Nigeria's communication policy formulation is hinged on the different, if not conflicting and restrictive patterns of politically motivated media policy regimes that tend to dampen innovations, limit consumer choices. The study utilizes secondary sources such as libraries, archives, internet and desk study in its methodology and it is anchored on one relevant communication theory -The general systems theory. The study found out that implementation phase requires great attention and high level of coordinated actions by those involved in the social, economic, political, cultural and foreign affairs of a country. It also found out that the resources available for implementing policy in Nigeria may no longer be adequate. The study concludes that the recent convergence and digitization has forced policy actors and regulators to consider how best to deal with telecommunication operators who now deliver both old and new content alongside traditional content providers. The study recommends that there should be a review of Nigeria's communication policy in accordance with the country's development priorities. It recommends that a series of preliminary studies should be conducted across different geo-political zones in Nigeria.

Keywords: Communication policy, Effects, Approaches, National development

Statement of the problem

Communication policy addresses a wide spectrum of contemporary concerns regarding the structures and the organization of communication systems in the pasts, in the present and the future. To really discover the factors that influenced communication policy, one must go beyond conventional view of media and communication studies and endeavour to combine them with policy studies. This is because communication policy is a product of politics, economics, philosophy, technology, sociology and culture. Media systems do not emerge spontaneously from the logic of communication technology, from the business plans of media corporations, from the imaginations of creative individuals but purposefully created and shaped by competing political interests that seek to inscribe their own values and objectives. There is, therefore, little that is incurable about the shape of the media in a country or region. Whether the media is largely commercial or state controlled, whether it is open or closed to technological change, whether it is critical or complacent in terms of its social roles, there is the need for a regulatory system that would spell out the activities of the media systems. It is on this premise that this study is looking at the concept of communication policy, its effects and approach to national development.

Methodology

The study utilized secondary sources in its data gathering. These include libraries, archives, Magazines, Newspapers, internet, and desk studies.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the General Systems Theory which was propounded by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy in 1976. The theory assumes that a system is characterized by the interactions of its components and the non-linearity of those interactions. This means that one part of a system enables people to know something about another part. Therefore, a change in the system will affect components of the system and even the whole system environment.

The System theory emphasizes the wholeness of interaction with the environment, for instance when it comes to communication systems, the systems theory regards it as integrated rather than as an isolated single event. However, the theory ignores one-way causality and regards communication as a dynamic interaction by viewing it as an operational concept that cuts across every facet of media control and directives. The theory establishes that changes are effected in response to information. According to the theory, this is referred to as the detector, selector and effector functions of the system. The detector is concerned with communication of information between systems, the selector is defined by the rules that the system uses to make decisions and the effector is how transactions are made between systems.

Communication and the policy transactions are the only intersystem interactions that navigate a country's media systems. Communication is the exchange of information while transaction involves the engagement of matter concerning its practices and operations. Therefore, the system theory provides an internally consistent framework for classifying and evaluating the media policy systems.

Literature Review

Policy and communication: In search of definition

In seeking to make sense of the study, it is significant to begin with some attempt at discerning how the two key terms are conceived and utilized. Gelders (2007) described communication as a systematic way of passing messages from one person to the other, that is from the sender to the receiver through an appropriate channel to elicit a response. The response could be negative or positive. Biblically, since creation, communication was the tool God used to create the world, 'Let there be light' and there was light. Even the interaction between God and Adam in the garden of Eden was made possible through communication. Of course, the world would have been 'null and void' without the concept of 'Communication'. There are three fundamental attributes of effective and successful communication - gain attention of the receiver, shared signals by the source and the receiver, and must arouse needs in the receiver and suggest some ways of satisfying these needs.

Policy on the other hand is defined in different ways and perspectives. The diversity of the concept poses a challenge to academics in their attempt to come up with one best definition of Policy. For instance, Hall and Ginty (1979), refer to policy as a set of explanations and intentions. Syvertsen (2007) states that policy is the outcome of an interactive problem-solving approach by a government, including bargaining and other actions/actors engaged in the formulation of policy the outcome. Laswell (2003) described policy as the domain of small thoughts, bureaucratic tidiness and administrative electiveness. Hoppe (1999) argues that policy practice is a decisive arena in which different political preferences are celebrated, contested and compromised. Graham (1998) opined that policy is not and can never be the tidy creation of ideal situations, compromise and trade-offs.

Therefore, it is difficult to conceptualize policy even as a team because it usually involves a wide range of issues, actors and aspects. Looking at the above stated definitions, a policy ideally derives from a central authority which through a rational review process sets clear objectives and every step of policy making is marked by fierce competition, deployment of resource, influence and power. However, four major facts are deduced from the above existing stock knowledge - that policy making is a political act, that it is marked by conflict of opinion, that it focuses on underlying assumptions and ideas, that it is a government dynamic and actor-driven in the pursuit of different norms and goals, finally , it emphasizes the importance of political agency in the media process

Broadly speaking, Communication policy seeks to examine the ways in which policies in the field of communication are generated and implemented, as well as their repercussions for the field of communications (Halloran, 1986). Communication policy also involves general thematic requirements and prohibitions concerning a form of communication, information or document. Such prohibitions include requirements concerning general or limited access to or use of specific types of information. Communication policy also describes the general principles which guide decisions of authorities, usually governments, about the functions of mass media. Furthermore, it refers to the set of norms and institutions used to administer or manage the rights and obligations of media professionals and organizations at maintaining journalistic ethics, advertising standards and generally by self-regulation of the relationships between the media and the publics. Moreover, it is the ways in which the public authorities shape or try to shape the structures and practices of the media (Garnham, 1998)

In the sum, these definitions focus attention on the agents of change (Public authorities) and the specific mechanisms that are deployed to the media policy concentrated in the actions of governments, civil servants, regulators and experts in the policy communities engaged the development of legally enforceable rules (Rhodes, 1990). Communication policy according to their perspectives means the drawing up of legally sanctioned tools that are designed to modify the structure and behaviour of media markets, such tools include licensing power, content rules, non-intervention, trade agreement, tax activities and codes and protocols e.t.c.

Communication policy approach

In setting out the approach to the study of communication policy, it is important to pay some attention to the place of the state in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Dallil, (1921) states three major ways in which communication policy could be approached. These are;

Group and interests approaches to communication policy

The focus of attention here is on group or individual vested interests which go into process of bargaining within the polity. Not surprisingly in Nigeria, more notice is taken of the preferences of intensely influential groups than the weaker ones. Moreover, the policy process occurs temporally through a formal development process and partially across linked sites of responsibility. Communication in general and media structure are influenced by the relevant interest groups more than governments. The bargaining process among interest group leaders in the formation of communication/media policies especially in Nigeria is usually saddled with self-centeredness and power-driven.

State-Centric approaches to communication policy

State-centric approaches have become important in determining public policy. Although there are two variations - left and right. Both argue that public policy is not primarily a reaction to pressures from interested groups. On the contrary, state

preferences are as important as those of civil society in accounting for what the democratic state does or does not do. The state is not only frequently less subject to societal pressure than previously imagined but as it regularly acts upon its preferences, it also becomes relatively autonomous when its references diverge from the demands of the most powerful groups in the said society and imposes such preferences against societal resistance (Linger, 1981).

State- Society approaches and the institutional approach

Policy analysis within the wider framework of state-society relations do not necessitate recourse to pressure group influence models to explain state actions. There are likely to be structural consistencies behind the persistence of distinctive national pattern of policy. States may selectively recognize only some mobilised interests concerned with a policy issue (Emerald, 2000).

Why the Need for Communication Policy?

There are several reasons why communication policy should be implemented and carefully enshrined for nation building. These are;

- **Media is a key economic sector:**

The media are significant driver of economic activities and accounts for the growth in the volume of domestic and world trade. Figures for the specific value of the media are hard to come by and are notoriously unreliable. For example, media often regarded as part of the copyright industries - film television, home video, DVDs, books, printed journals, entertainments and others constitute strong financial strength of a country like Nigeria. Communication policy is necessary since the mass media performs vital functions of informing the public of current political events and opinions.

Nigeria has a robust media economy that makes significant contributions to the national balance sheet either directly or indirectly, as a conduit of advertising to stimulate the market for goods and services, and as a source of employment and careers in various spheres of integrated marketing communications or more. Interestingly, Nigeria's creative industries employs about 20% of the Nigerian population.

- **Media as agent of social reproduction:**

Policy initiatives are also justified by the argument that media products are not ordinary commodities but systems and networks endowed with special political and cultural significance, the media plays key role in facilitating the production and reproduction of social relations (Garbaham, 2000). Tessa Joweu, one-time member of American white house once said in her submission on the communication policy bill, 'communication is about much more than economics. The bill deals with means by which our society speaks to its self, it is how we talk to the world, it is a sharpener of our culture, our identity and our values (HoC Debates, 3 December 2000).

- **Media as agent of development and integration:**

There is a symbolic link between communication and development hence there is a need for the creation of national media system that will provide the information network for the growth and sustenance of the society. Fundamentally, the mass media institutions provide information daily, to aid the steady development of the citizens as well as other socio-economic and political organizations that operate within the country.

- **Media as a catalyst of democracy:**

The proper presentation of national issues when put in their right perspectives by the mass media is the beginning of the mission to attain national integration, the elimination of inter-ethnic tension and disharmony, promotion of national ideas and ethics, supporting the cause and interest of the poor without necessarily inciting insurrection against the upper class and above all, building bridges of unity across the nation. In the past eighteen years of democratization, the Nigerian mass media had pursued the task of enhancing democratic principles. In the light of social and democratic importance, it is not surprising that politics in Nigeria has become a media affair, embracing a wide range of means of communication platforms and technologies of distribution, including books, films and recorded music.

- **Alarming multiplication of the media:**

Nigeria's mass media landscape has grown in capacity and capability between 1999 and today as former Minister of Information and Communication, Chief John Odeh said, 'Nigeria has a total of 152 radio stations, 116 television

stations and 40 cable states located in various states across the country' (Odeh, 2007). However, to moderate the activities of these stations, there is the need for a comprehensive communication policy. Communication policy is also imperative in the quest for professional capacity and capability of the media in identifying and advancing opportunities for national dialogue and development. This indicates that professionals in the field of communication must focus on training of specialists ranging from skills acquisition for field workers to advanced levels academic training for academics, communication planners and managers.

Effect of Communication Policy on Nigerian Media

In the words of Joseph Pulitzer, an American publisher, said, a good press must always fight for itself and reforms, never belong to any party, always devoted to the public welfare, always be dramatically independent and never be afraid. It is unfortunate that dictatorship tendencies of our leaders in Nigeria and the contemporary level of penury makes it hectic for its Communication policy to be effective enough to realize the ideals enunciated by Joseph Pulitzer.

Despite the policy formulation and implementation, Nigerian media has witnessed several cases assassinations assaults, harassments and incarcerations. The case of assault against Vanguard Newspaper's photojournalist by the Lagos State General Hospital mortuary attendant in 2012 and the assassination of a Guardian Newspaper Reporter in 2010 are a typical such media treatments. Up till now, coverage of legislative sessions depends on the whims and caprices of principal members of the legislative arm of government. Not only that, there are incessant cases of litigations between the media and the government which indicate that Nigeria's communication policy is yet to be well developed and propagated in theory and practice in Nigeria. Of course, a confluence of forces has shattered the media efforts at advancement over the years. If not for the unalloyed inputs of some diehard members of the media who remain undaunted continue to damn the consequences of keeping the citizens informed, the very foundation of our nascent democracy would have crumbled.

As we entered the second decade of 21st century, it is hard to jettison the inequalities created by a section of media practitioners or the harmful effects of the callous killings of journalists, setting ablaze of media houses and a host of other unlawful acts against the profession by past and present governments. Nevertheless, the approval of the 'Freedom of Information Bill' by the government of President Goodluck Ebere Jonathan, rekindled the media hope of freedom in the discharge of their responsibilities. The freedom of information bill signed in Nigeria served as an adjunct to the one which has been ratified by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989.

According to the preamble to the bill, it is an act to make public records and information more freely available, that will be consistent with the public interests and protection of personal privacy, protect serving public officers from adverse consequences for disclosing certain kinds of official information without authorization and establish procedures for the achievement of those purposes thereof. (Freedom of Information Bill, 2007)

Factors militating against effective implementation of Communication Policy in Nigeria

The following can be considered as reasons that serve as clog to the wheel of effective implementation of communication policy in Nigeria;

- Dictatorship syndrome of our leaders – self-satisfaction, greed and inordinate ambition.
- Lukewarm attitude of public and private institutions of civil society towards the adequate monitoring of the implementation.
- Incessant changes in the political arena which require changes in the management of public goods and services including those related to communications.
- The process seems to be exclusive of diverse interests.
- Low level of information and sensitizations preclude total agitations for the implementation of the policy.
- Nigerian cultural antecedents are not given priority in the scheme of communication policy implementation.
- Language is the vehicle of communication; Nigerian major indigenous languages are not significantly embedded in the implementation.
- Technologically, Nigerian media systems are yet to meet up with global standards.

Conclusion

The central characteristics of media policy, therefore, is not where it is made (a venue based approach), about the specific tools developed (an instrumental approach) or the results achieved (an end-driven approach) but an approach that would propel effective implementation and operations. Media policy should be defined in a more dynamic way as a process that concerns the interactions between different actors in the process, the institutional structures within which they work and the objectives they pursue. At this point, it is important to know that the media policy means variety of ways in which interested participants or key actors seek to develop both formal and informal mechanisms to shape the conducts of media systems in Nigeria.

Recommendations

There should be a review of Nigeria's Communication Policy in accordance with the development priorities of the country and it should strive to complement other sectoral development policies, promote and support their set objectives.

A series of preliminary studies, preparatory meetings at regional and local levels within the country and political support at the highest level are essential to provide the basic data , background information and identification of communication needs and priorities of different stakeholders including media associations, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs),field workers, and government representatives.

Specialized communication strategies should be formulated for each technical sector and the contents of communication messages must be provided by different technical sectors, group of individuals, Federal and State Ministries of Information with already existing development communication units should maintain responsibility for identifying sectoral communication needs, develop sectoral communication strategies and produce communication materials for their own sectors.

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