

EXPLICATION OF THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF COMMUNICATION POLICY

JIDE JOHNSON

*Department of Mass Communication
Nigeria Institute of Journalism, Lagos, Nigeria*

WILLIAM ADESOJI JOHNSON

*Department of Media and Communication
Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria*

Abstract

Communication policy is the legal and institutional framework that defines the nature, structure, procedure and operations of media system of any given society. It is influenced and shaped by the prevailing socio-economic and political dimensions of such society. Thus, communication policy varies from society to society, and nations to nations. Communication policy does not only provide the legal framework but also serve as the mechanism and instrument of institutionalization of media system in the society.

The paper provided an explanation of the various theories underpinning communication policy. The paper examined the epistemology of the philosophical thinking that shaped media systems globally. These theories: normative theory of the press, medium theory, general system, agenda setting function, and gate keeping theory; are not mutually exclusive to communication policy, but they provide the framework upon which communication policy could be anchored on.

Though there exist a plethora of theories of communication relating to communication policy, but the theoretical postulations identified and discussed in the paper provided the framework that guides media operations in the society. These theories provided the starting point for critically examining the functions and roles of the media in the society. The authors here situate the assumptions of the theories as a foundation of communication policy, a determining factor outlining media system and practice in modern society.

Key Words: communication policy, media theory, media system, economic system, political system

INTRODUCTION

Communication Policy is the various attempts to control and regulate media of communication and its personnel in the society. "For historical and other reasons, different media are subject to different types and degrees of regulations" (McQuail 2005, p.236). Communication policy is the constitutional, legal and institutional framework that defines the nature, structure, procedure and operations of media system in any given society. These policies are heavily influenced and shaped by the prevailing socio-economic and political dimensions in a given society. Invariably, communication policy varies from society to society and nations to nations. Communication policy does not only provide the legal framework but also serve as the mechanism and instrument of institutionalization of media system in the society.

The overwhelming influence of the media on the political, economic and social landscape made it open to internal and external controls and regulations. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003) claimed that three emergent phases over a period of a century is responsible for communication policy development globally. The phases are: The emergency communication industry policy (late 1800s – 1945); ‘public service’ (1946-1970) and the Trends of internationalization, digitalization and convergence (1980’s till date) (McQuail 2005, p.240).

These phases of developments of policy also provided the various theoretical postulations and frameworks that had evolved over the years on media policy. The linkage between media policy and theories explain the critical role the media play in the society. It helps to explain and describe the social, political and economic context within which the media operates in a given society.

Therefore, this paper focused on the explication of the various theories underpinning communication policy. The paper examined the epistemology of the philosophical or ideological thinking that shaped media systems globally.

Theoretical foundations underpinning Communication policy

This section focused on the identification and explication of some theories of mass communication that provided a framework of understanding the philosophical assumptions of communication policy.

Therefore, the following theories are reviewed: normative theory of the press; medium theory; General system, Agenda setting function and Gate keeping theory. These theories are not mutually exclusive, however, they provide a framework upon which communication policy could be anchored.

The Normative Theories of the Press

Normative theories of the press provide the first attempt to provide a framework to explain and categorize media (policy) systems in the world. Siebert, Schramm and Peterson (1956, pp.1-2) state that “the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially it reflects the system of social control, where the relations of individual and institutions are adjusted.”

Accordingly, McQuail (2005, pp.14-5) pointed out that normative theory “is concerned with examining or prescribing how media *ought* to operate if certain social values are to be observed or attained. Such theory usually stems from the broader social philosophy or ideology [Communication policy] of a given society”

In their classic book, *Theories of the Press*, Siebert et al (1956) came up with this categorization to elucidate the various media system existing in the world:

Libertarian Theory

The theory was based on the premise that there should be no law limiting or governing media operation -- that the media should be free of government control. It was founded on the First Amendment to United States constitution, which states inter alia, “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.” It established the notion of free press.

Social Responsibility Theory

The theory is an outcome of Hutchins’s Commission report (1947) on examining the press performance in the United States in view of growing sensationalism and commercial influence of the press. According to McQuail (2005, p.172), the theory received its philosophical basis from

the 1947 Commission. The theory substitutes media industry and public responsibility for total media freedom on one hand and for external control on the other (Baran & Davis,2012).

McQuail (2005, p.150) described the dominant assumptions of the theory as follows: “The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust; news media should be truthful, accurate, fair and objective and relevant; the media should be free but self-regulated; the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct and under some circumstances, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.”

According to Siebert et al (1956),”Social responsibility theory hold that the government must not merely allow freedom; it must actively promote it...When necessary, therefore, the government should act to protect the freedom of its citizens.

Authoritarian theory

Authoritarian theory is a normative theory advocating the complete domination of media by government [or its agencies] for the purpose of forcing those media to serve government interest (Baran & Davis,2012).

Communism theory of the press

Communism theory of the press is “a normative theory advocating the complete domination of media by a communist government [or its agencies] for the purpose of forcing those media to serve communist party” (Baran & Davis,2012).The theory still subsist in China, North Korea and Modern day Russian under Vladmir Putin’s administration.

McQuail’s extension of Siebert et al classifications

McQuail (1987) extended the normative theories beyond the initial four postulations by Siebert et al (1956) to six, with the inclusion of Democratic participant and Developmental media theory.

Democratic Participant

Democratic Participant theory is a modification of social responsibility theory. It proposes that the media should propagate, support and promote the views and opinions of individuals in respect of governance, leadership and stewardship of leaders in public governance. It emphasized the need for equal and unhindered access regardless of their status, wealth, and position. Participation in societal decision making and involvement in communication activities should not be the exclusive preserve of the rich but of all citizens. Government is required to identify, train and fund small media outfits.

Baran and Davis (2012, pp.149-150) inferred that democratic-participant theory advocates media support for cultural pluralism at grassroots level. Media are used to stimulate and empower pluralistic groups...Most Scandinavian countries practice some form of democratic-participant theory.”

Development theory

Development theory assumes that the media should be used in the interest of the overall development of the society (country). It should focus on the collective interest of the society and not the selfish interest of few individuals. It proposed that government can intervene and foster development through the use of communication programmes and action (policies). Communication can be used for information, awareness education mobilization and persuasion for the good of society.

According to Baran and Davis (2012, p.149), “developmental media theory advocates media support for an existing political regime and its effort to bring about national economic development.” The theory emphasized that the media must play supportive role to government policy and programmes rather than being critical of governments, its programmes and personnel. Several developing countries in South America use this theory (Baran & Davis, 2012).

Stevenson’s Revolutionary Media Theory

According to Baran and Davis (2012), the theory “describes a system in which media are used in the service of revolution. No country officially embraces this... but that does not mean that people and media practitioners do not use a nation’s communication technologies to upset the government.

Stevenson (1994) as cited in Baran and Davis (2012, p.150) claimed that the goals of media in revolutionary concept are to end government monopoly over information, building an opposition to the existing government, destroying legitimacy of an existing government and bringing down the government. The anti-third term campaign in Nigeria, the Arab Spring of 2011, the anti-subsidy removal protest of 2012 in Nigeria are valid examples of this theory.

Stevenson’s postulation underscores the pervasive influence on new technology of communication on media message production, dissemination and delivery in globalised world, aptly termed information society. The software and hardware of information technology has not only empowered the citizen, it has also changed the landscape of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ we communicate today.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have argued that we should forget about normative theories and look more closely at actual arrangements connecting media with society. They propose a typology of relations between the media system and the political system, based on a comparative examination of contemporary national societies. However, McQuail (2005, p.15) conclusion invalidates their submission, and justifies the relevance and importance of normative theories to the study of media system. He argued that: “[The] theory is important because it play a part in shaping and legitimating media institution... A society’s normative theories concerning its own media are usually found in laws, regulations, media policies, and codes of ethics and the substance of public debate.” Regardless of Hallin and Mancini’s submission, the normative theories provide the theoretical construct and framework through communication policy of nations of the world could be categorized and evaluated.

General System Theory

The General System theory is also one of the theories applicable to the study of communication policy. Communication policy defines the scope and boundary of media system in any given society. Every society depends on media system for its survival and sustenance. Emphasizing the centrality of media system to societal existentialism, Dominick (2009, p.28) asserts that: “Perhaps the best way to appreciate the role that mass communication plays in our society is to imagine what it would be like if, all of a sudden, the whole system [political, economic, and social] never existed.”

Every system has a set of elements existing and interacting within a boundary that separates them from the environment. According to the assumption of the theory, every system benefits from both negative and positive feedback, and inputs and outputs for survival.

The General System concepts include: *Elements* -- existing and interacting within a boundary; *Concepts* -- the complexity or simplicity of a *concept* -- what are the factors and

elements within the Nigerian communication system; *Holism* -- every system has sets of elements that works as a whole, which is more than the sum of its parts; *Synergy* -- The combination of two parts of a system (Ray power and AIT) produces better result; *Hierarchy* -- every system has order; *Negentropy* -- every system is sustained by tallying of inputs and bringing outputs through processing to enhance rejuvenation and forestall death and degradation; *Purpose* -- every system has a purpose, a goal that is set to achieve; *Equifinality* -- is the manifestation of differences in outputs of a system despite similar inputs, for instance, students receiving same lecture, answering the same questions but ended up with different results; and *Feedback* -- every system sends information to its various elements to know success or failure of information sent. Every system benefit from negative feedback.

General System Theory is a contributive general theory that can be used to explain communication -- the principal vehicle of human communication. What is the communication system of Nigeria, by this we mean, the nature of Nigerian communication policy? Communication policy can be studied as a general system of media ownership, operation, training and practice.

Classical Medium Theory (See Baran and Davis,2012, and Littlejohn and Foss,2008)

The theory was propounded by Marshal McLuhan, who was influenced by the writings of Harold Adam Innis, who posits that "Communication media are the essence of civilization and that history is directed by predominant media of each age."

According to McLuhan, electronic media has revolutionized society. In essence, he feels that society is highly dependent on mediated technology and that society's social order is based on its ability to deal with that technology. Media, in general, act directly to mold and organize a culture (West and Turner,2004, p.427).

Thesis: the media, apart from whatever content it transmitted, impact individuals and society (Little John & Foss, 2005 p.290). Television affects you regardless of what you watch. The internet impacts society, regardless of what sites people visit. Personal media (e.g. I-pods) change society; it does not matter what musical selections an I-pod user makes" (Little John & Foss *ibid*). The three major assumptions of the theory are: The media infuse every act and action in society; media fix our perception and organize our experiences; media tie the world together (Global village).

In essence, the pervasive nature of the media, its influence and capabilities in the society made it open to control and regulations through one form of policy or the other. We cannot avoid or evade the media in our lives. It is always and will always be there. McLuhan (1964,p.49) as cited in West and Turner (2004,p.428) concludes that "media interpreted in the broadest sense are ever-present in our lives. These media transform our society, whether through games we play, the radios we listen to, or the televisions we watch. At the same time, media depend on society for interplay and evolution"

The Agenda-setting theory

The theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. It evolved out of the study conducted on establishing linkage between media discourse and public opinion on issues and ranking of the issues using three Presidential elections in US as case study.

The media through its pervasive presence and influence directs and shapes the flow of public discourse. This influence has been termed and conceptualized as Agenda Setting theory of the media. Contextualizing it, Wiki online encyclopaedia, states *inter alia* that, "the Agenda Setting

theory subsists that, the news media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider Newsworthy and how much Prominence and Space to give them”.

The major assumption of the theories is the “salience transfer.” This is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their news media agendas to public agendas. Through their day to day selection and display of news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda setting role of the news media. Agreeing with the assertion, Littlejohn and Foss (2008) conclude that “agenda setting establishes the salient issues or images in the mind of the public.”

McCombs and Shaw as cited in Baran and Davis (2012, p.347), posit that: “In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position...The mass media may well determine the important issues -- that is, the media may set the ‘agenda’ of the campaign.”

In line with the above postulations, and in agreement with the agenda setting functions of the media, McQuail (2005, p.512) describes the core idea that the news media indicate to the public what the issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues. Rogers and Dearing (1996) called it “an ongoing competition among issue protagonists to gain the attention of media professionals, the public and policy elites.” This is an essential part of advocacy and attempts at influencing the public opinion (McQuail 2010). Dearing and Roger (1996) explained further that “It is not the absolute significance of an issue that counts, but the relative strength of the forces and people trying to define and promote an issue. And finally, the position of an issue on the media agenda importantly determines that issue’s salience in the public agenda.”

McCombs and Shaw (1977) as cited in Littlejohn and Foss (2008, p.293) established the locus of Agenda Setting function as Communication Policy instrument: “Considerable evidence has accumulated that editors and broadcasters play an important part in shaping our social reality as they go about their day-to-day task of choosing and displaying news...This impact of mass media -- the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking -- has been labeled the agenda setting function of mass communication. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.”

Rogers and Dearing (1988) captured the relevance and centrality of the theory to communication policy. They assert that: “The agenda-setting function is a three part process. First, the priority of issues to be discussed in the media, or *media agenda* must be set. Second, the media agenda in some way affects or interacts with what the public thinks, creating the *public agenda*. Finally, the public agenda affects or interact in some way with what policy makers consider important called policy agenda.”

The assertion of Rogers and Dearing established the interaction, connectivity and tripartite relationship existing in trion of agenda setting: media agenda, public agenda and policy agenda. Media agenda shapes public and policy agendas and vice versa.

Gate-Keeping Theory

The Gate-Keeping theory is also another mass communication theory, which communication policy can be anchored. Defleur and Dennis (2002) pointed out that “News gatherers constantly feed into editorial offices or news rooms a huge number of stories about what is happening out there in the community, region, society and world. There is so much going on, however, that far more stories are generated than can be included in the daily news presentation of particular paper or news broadcast.”

However, the media limited by availability of space (print) and time (broadcast). Therefore, decisions must to be taken to determine what goes into the news bulletin for broadcast media and contents of the next publication in the print media. This process of screening and selecting has come to be known as “*gate-keeping*.” This process could be internal (self regulations) or external (public policy) structure put in place by media organizations and other political interest groups to regulate the flow of information. As appropriately put by Deborah Potter (2005) the journalist sorts through the information available and determines how much of it is valuable and reliable before passing it on to the public.

The theory was propounded by Kurt Lewin in 1947. Gate keepers are individuals or institutions within a political system whose access to power gives and allows them to regulate the flow of information or happenings in their political sphere of influence (McCombs,2004). Gate keeping process not only determines what information is chosen but actually determines the content and nature of the messages in the news (Shoemaker and Vos,2009). The theory explains the internal policy and public policy that shapes news collection, processing, reportage and dissemination.

Assumptions of the theory

Media Organizations as well as key media professionals [and by extension communication policy] act as gate-keepers to the flood of information coming in from the larger society. The gate [Communication policy acts as the gate for media system operations] can either be opened -- to let some kind of information through for processing and publication; or shut -- to deny other kinds of information the opportunity for processing.

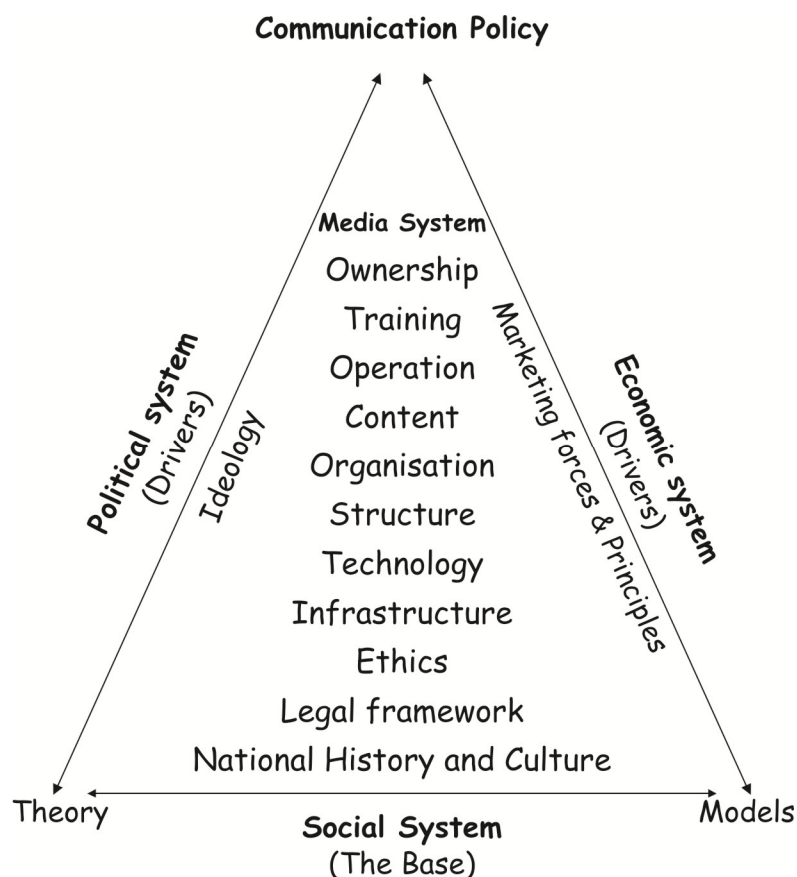
Gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by gate-keepers, with the power to make decisions or to transfer, but that the “power is interdependent on other channel regions and ranges of impartial rules.” The gate keepers’ choices are a complex web of influences, preferences, motives and common values (See.McCombs,2004,Shoemaker&Vos,2009). Confirming these underlining principles of the theory, Ekeli as cited in Folarin (1988) said that: “Gate keeping is nothing but voluntary self censorship performed by the media themselves. Gate keeping emanates from the understanding by journalist that, apart from legal restrictions on what is to be published, including photographs; journalists have a moral right to be socially responsible to their readers in whatever materials they package.”

The gate keeping is the guiding principle that help media organization, journalists and broadcasters in performing their responsibilities of keeping the people adequately informed of numerous events that happen locally and globally, attaching importance and making inference through which people can derive meanings. And all of these roles, functions and responsibilities exist within the framework of communication policy -- the subsisting media system in that society.

Thematic Model of Communication Policy

Having reviewed the five theories of communication that provide the foundations for communication policy, a thematic construct was designed as model of communication policy.

Fig .1: Thematic Model of Communication policy



A] The Base:

The social system: is the base of communication policy. Communication policy is rooted in national history and culture of its host nation. Every culture has a way and manner of communicating. Media content is actually shaped by culture, values and mores of societies.

B] The Drivers

I] Political system: is one of the two major drivers of communication policy. The subsisting ideology upon which a nation's polity is based shapes and directs media policy. Siebert et al (1956) classifications, McQuail's (1987) and Stevenson's (1994) extensions encapsulate how political system drives and shapes communication policy. Communication policy is usually direct interference in the regulation of media system by government and its agencies.

II] Economic system: is the second major driver of communication. As an industry and a business venture, the media system is driven by the dynamics and the interplay of the market forces and principles shape participation, ownership and access. How opened or closed is the economy? Does the economic system operates on free market, mixed market or closed Market?

C] Communication policy: is the tripartite relationship among the social, economic and political systems that shapes the nature and structure of the media system.

I] The Media system: encapsulate the communication policy of a nation. It include all issues and matters that relates to: Training, Operation, Content, Organisation, Structure, Technology, Infrastructure, Ethics, Legal framework, National History and Culture

Conclusion

There are many theories of communication relating to communication policy. However, the various theoretical postulations identified and discussed above provided the frameworks that guide media operations in the society. These theories provide the starting point of critically examining the functions and roles of the media in the society. The authors here situate the assumptions of the theories as a foundation of communication policy, a determining factor outlining media system and practice in modern society.

References

- Anaeto, S. G, Onabanjo, S. O and Osifeso, B. J (2008).Models and Theories of Communication, Bowie, Maryland: African Renaissance
- Baran,S. J.,& Davis,D.K.(2012).Mass communication theory, foundations, ferment, future,6th edition. United States : Wadsworth Cengage
- Dominick,J.R. (2009).The Dynamics of mass communication, media in the digital age, Tenth edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill
- Hallin,D.& Mancini,P.(2004) Comparing media systems. Cambridge: University of Edinburg Press
- Littlejohnn, S. W and Foss, K.A(2008).Theories of Human Communication, Ninth Edition, Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- McCombs,M. (2004) Setting the agenda: mass media and public opinion. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- McCombs,M.& Becker. M. (1979) Using mass communication theory. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- McLuhan,M.(1964).Understanding media. New York: Mentor.
- McQuail, D. (2005) McQuail's Mass Communication Theory. (5th edition). London: Sage Publications.

Rogers,E.M & Dearing,.J.W(1988).”Agenda setting research:where has it been,where is it going?”In
Communication Yearbook 11,pp. 555-593 .James A.Anderson (ed.).Newbury Park,CA
:Sage

Potter, D. (2006) Journalism Educator Outlines Principles of News Judgement: handbook of
Independent Journalism. Retrieved from <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2006/april>

Shoemaker, P.J.& Vos,T.(2009) Gate-keeping theory London: Routledge

Siebert, F., Schramm, W. and Peterson T. (1956) Four Theories of the Press. Urbana, Illinois:
University of Illinois Press.

Steveson,R.L(1994).Global communication in the Twenty-first Century. New York: Longman.

Van Cuilenburg, J.J. & McQuail,D.(2003) ‘Media policy paradigm shifts: Towards a New
Communication Policy Paradigm’ in European Journal of Communication

West, R and Turner, L.H. (2004). Introducing Communication Theory, Analysis and
Application, Second Edition, Boston: McGraw Hill Inc.