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Expansion of Public Sphere in Nigerian Democracy: The Imperative of Media Pluralism

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Abstract
Though democracy is the government of the people, for the people and by the people; it is practically impossible for all citizens of a nation to be directly involved in governance. Nonetheless, the participatory idea of democracy is enhanced through accommodation of citizens' views in the public sphere on the platform of democratised communication. However, the Nigeria's media structure and operation have not allowed adequate presentation of divergent views in the public sphere; this is due to its commercialisation, centralisation and monopolisation orientation. This paper therefore argues in favour of media pluralism through operation of non-commercial radio stations to accommodate every segment of the society and expand the public sphere towards deepening our nascent democracy.

Introduction
The traditional western definition of democracy as "government of the people by the people for the people" has always made the idea of democracy so attractive to all reasonable people. However, it is well known that it is not possible in any kind of political system, for all the citizens of a nation to be directly involved in the job of governance. So, democratic societies select representatives on the basis of universal adult suffrage and select some on personal merit to carry out the job on their behalf.

Within this context exist structures that make the representatives accountable to the people. Those in governance are made to govern in accordance with the demands of a social

contract called the constitution. There is also the separation of power, with particular reference to a Federal Presidential Democracy, among the three conventional arms of government, viz the legislative, the executive and the judicial. It is the existence of these major tangible structures and paraphernalia of democracy that give, to a great extent, legitimacy to a government.

Though it is practically impossible for all the citizens of a nation to be directly involved in the job of governance, democracy requires people's participation. The idea of democratic government then must necessarily embrace the popular participation in government and politics, including its organisation, management and conduct; this must include values of democracy namely;

- That there be periodic election to fill the positions in which real governing power is vested.
- That there exist an independent political opposition to those in power and that the power holders be effectively restrained from suppressing this opposition.
- That opportunity be maintained for some significant social and economic mobility both upward and downward.

These principles underscore freedom, oppositions, election and equity as essential ingredients for a thriving democracy. But besides, Mbachu (1994) identifies fundamental characteristics of the liberal democratic system;

- There is more than one political party competing for political power.
- The competition for power is open, not secretive, and is based on established and accepted forms of procedure.
- Entry and recruitment to positions of political power are relatively open.
- There are periodic elections based on universal franchise.
- Pressure groups are able to operate to influence government decisions.

- Associations such as trade unions and other voluntary organisations are not subject to close governmental control.
- Civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, freedom from arbitrary arrest, are recognised and protected within the political system. This assumes that there is a substantial amount of independence and freedom from government control of the mass media, i.e., radio, television, newspapers.
- There are some forms of separation of powers, i.e., a representative assembly has some form of control over the executive and the judiciary is independent of both executive and legislative.

These characteristics emphasised the fact that people's participation and cooperation are central to the progress of democracy.

Public Sphere and Democracy

Habermas (1991) defined the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (176). Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge with a view, to guide-the affairs of the state. In ideal terms, the public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to legitimatise authority in any functioning democracy (Rutherford, 2000). Consequently, communication becomes an indispensable nutrient to the health of democracy. It ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Besides, information has a way of cautioning the elected representatives so that they can uphold their oath of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them.

Since democracy is all about participation, the instrument that guarantees effective participation is communication. Communication is therefore a basic democratic need like food,

clothing and shelter to human. It is vital to creating and maintaining the unique social and cultural habitat that is the source of individual and collective identity. As stressed by Christian Principles of Communication (1986), communication liberates, enables people to articulate their own needs and helps them to act together to meet those needs. It enhances their sense of dignity and underlines their right to full participation in the life of society. It aims to bring about structures in society which are more just, egalitarian and more conducive to the fulfillment of human right.

Thus, the media of mass communication provide the platform for free communication or expression of individual thought and opinion on any issues for the sustenance of democracy. That is the notion of those who support the liberal model, of media operation in any society. According to this model, anybody who has anything to say or publish should be free to do so without being suppressed. The media is supposed to be a market place of idea where both good and bad are allowed to thrive and thus individuals pick up whatever is acceptable to them. The idea is that people are rational enough to differentiate truth from falsehood, thereby making right choices (McQuail, 1987).

Media's role as enabling a 'Public Sphere' to exist is a well-established paradigm for understanding communication and contemporary democracy (Soules, 2001). It describes a realm in which agenda-setting occurs and where (contested and shifting) public opinion is created. Who contributes to the Public Sphere? Governments, business and civil society (such as religious groups, sports groups, trade unions, NGOs). Important in this whole picture is civil society as a counterweight to governments. Media is sometimes romantically reduced to being part of civil society, and to being intrinsically a positive force for democracy. Strictly speaking, however, it may be spread across four sectors of influence. Thus, it may be part of government - as in government controlled broadcasters; it may be part of the public - as in independent public broadcasters; it may be part of business - existing mainly as a means to making money (many newspapers); and it may be part of civil society (as in community radio). In all four areas, there are elements that contribute to democracy.

The public sphere remains a site for the production of public opinion that is given concrete form by surveys and polls which, to a degree, actually fashion the opinion through the process of asking certain questions (and not asking others). Because of an excess of goods and risks competing for attention, the sphere continues to be a contested arena; however, much of the excess is manufactured by people and institutions with money, moral clout, or other forms of power. The mass media play out a double role here, both as the vehicle for competitive spectacles and as the source of news.

However, the success of the public sphere depends on certain factors outlined by Rutherford (2000:18):

- the extent of access (as close to universal as possible),
- the degree of autonomy (the citizens must be free of coercion),
- the rejection of hierarchy (so that each might participate on an equal footing),
- the rule of law (particularly the subordination of the state),and
- the quality of participation (the common commitment to the ways of logic). (Rutherford).

Access to the public sphere and freedom of expression are thus central to democracy. As Voltaire is supposed to have remarked, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death, your right to say it". The right and freedom to communicate affirms the possibility of asserting a different point of view, of claiming a different individual or communication history, of articulating a different identity – with the sole proviso that no one suffers as a result. This, in part, becomes a question of being able to recognise oneself in the public sphere, of seeing one's image in the public record of a nation or community, especially in the mass media that reflect that image. The liberalisation media model believes that the media exist to check the excesses of the government in power. It also requires that the media be seen as partners with government in the search for truth, rather than a tool in the hand of government.

Though this theory appears to place responsibility in the hands of media practitioners, so that democratic goods can be better delivered, the freedom for expression is by no means curtailed. This review as exemplified in the Hutchin's Commission on the Freedom of the Press report, which crystallised into the social responsibility theory of the media, believes that the media should serve as a watchdog in order to check the excess in government. One way of doing this is to raise conflict to the plane of discussion, allowing people's participation and reasoning to decide the issues (Folarin, 2006). This stressed the vital position that the media occupy in the democratic society.

We will now turn to specific roles that the media are to play in democratic sustenance. One of such roles is the provision of a wide variety of ideas that will keep the people properly informed about the activities of government, its policies, development efforts and programmes. This is necessary because, if a people are to be sovereign, they must have adequate information about public affairs (LaMay, 2006). As a matter of fact, provision of information is very central to the conduct of free elections. The role of the media is to provide voters with information about parties, candidates, polling places and times and so on.

In line with this is building a culture of free expression, to which end we talk about a range of issues associated with the "watchdog" role of the press and the need to provide citizens with access to news and information, as well as the platform to express themselves freely. Doing this enables the media to enhance the bonds of community, build citizenship and promote individuality, conditions necessary for the thriving of democracy.

The media are also charged with the role of holding governments accountable and guarding against the abuse of power, hence the need to raise countervailing structures of surveillances to monitor government's activities and stem an inherent disposition towards excess" (Oseni, 1995:3). This perception finds constitutional recognition in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution, which specifically requires the media to

"monitor governance and to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the governed to the people." Similarly, having played a seminal role in civil society struggles against the authoritarian state, the media are expected to advance the cause of democracy by holding elected leaders up to standards of decency and probity.

The Nigerian Constitution further says that:

> The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.

The objectives referred to here concerns the welfare and safety of Nigerians. We can, therefore, conveniently conclude that the media have the constitutional recognition as the fourth Estate of the Realm. It follows then that they have to work in conjunction with the three arms of government in achieving the fundamental objectives and directive principle of state policy as contained in chapter two of 1999 Constitution.

The Nigerian Media Challenge

Unfortunately, the current media structure in Nigeria does not actually allow effective performance of these roles; despite the steady growth in the number of media organisations in the country. Nigeria has the largest press community in Africa, followed by South Africa and Kenya (Parker, 1995). Ogbodo (1996) conservatively puts the number of publications (weeklies, dailies, and magazines) at 116, although a number of these are at the margins of survival. A more recent census of the Nigerian media published in the 1999 edition of the Media World Yearbook puts the number of regular newspapers at 78, magazines at 45, television stations at 52, and radio stations at 31 (Oseni, 2000).

The period since 1999 has witnessed a mushrooming of sorts in the newspaper industry, with new titles like *the Anchor*, *the Sun* and *the Daily Independent* springing up as well as the relaunching of moribund titles such as the *Daily Times*. We should also take cognisance of the recent proliferation of *NTA* relay stations under the Obasanjo government, which has considerably added to the number of television stations in the country (Olukoju, 2004). All these however do not guarantee the ideal system that will help in building a virile democratic society.

While the print media have been very dynamic due to private involvement, their shortcomings lie in the limitation of their reach. This limitation covers economic, content and availability dimensions. The poor economic nature of the country does not allow affordability of the newspapers and magazines, consequently, the print media reach is limited to small fraction of the population who can afford them and few others who have free access to them. This, of course, brings the problem of access, since the media organisation will not necessarily produce copies that are beyond the number they can conveniently sell. Beside this, the print medium is limited to the literate members of the society, thus large unlettered population cannot be reached by this medium.

In broadcasting, while the deregulation of the industry from 1992 has brought little change, allowing for divergent views through the private stations, the problem of monopolisation is still much in place. The monopoly enjoyed by the government media continued to be perpetuated by the exorbitant annual licence fee charged by the National Broadcasting Commission. This situation puts the private stations at a disadvantage as they have to compete with the government-owned station (that are not subjected to the same payment) in the same market.

This difficulty, coupled with the commercial interest of the private stations cannot allow the effective performance of the media responsibility demanded in democratic society. They must first succeed as a business before thinking seriously in terms of public interest and service; consequently, most of their programmes are tilted toward fulfilling their business goals. Their programmes are anything but alien, elitist and imitation of foreign

programmes, not just in content, but also in presentation, entertainment aimed at audience maximisation being main menu (Ayankojo, 2003).

The government-owned media also, most of the times are mere loud-speakers of the government they serve. The government interests are presented as public interests and the level playing ground that will allow rational contention of opposing views by different interest groups are not provided. Evidences abound of how the government-owned media have become propaganda machines for the politicians and political parties in power.

Media Pluralism and Democratisation

The problems highlighted above needs to be corrected through the application of the democratic-participant media theory. The theory advocates media support for cultural pluralism at grass-roots level. Media are to be used to stimulate and empower pluralistic groups. It calls for development of innovative "small" media that can be directly controlled by group members. The existing bureaucracy, commercialisation and professional hegemony in media system should be broken down to allow or guarantee easy media access to all potential users and consumers (Folarin, 2006).

It condemns the commercialisation and monopolisation of private owned media and the concentration and bureaucratisation of government owned media. It also criticises the public media for being too elitist, too susceptible to the whims and caprices of the government, too rigid and too slavish to professional ideals at the expense of social responsibility (Baran & Davis, 2003).

It therefore calls for greater attention of the media to the needs, interests and aspirations of the receiver in a political society. It calls for pluralism in the place of monopolisation, decentralisation and localisation in the place of centralism. It also advocated that media conglomerates be replaced, or mixed with small-scale media enterprises. The theory calls for "horizontal" link in place of top-down communication to ensure feedback and complete communication circuit.

The two necessary conditions for active media participation and contribution to democracy are **media freedom and pluralism**. Therefore, the existing media policy needs to be changed to allow for the establishment of non-commercial radio stations.

As practiced in the United States, there are three types of non-commercial stations namely: community radio, college radio and public radio. Community stations are licensed for civic groups, non-profit foundations and religious organisations. College radios comprise stations licensed for universities and some secondary schools under the umbrella of Intercollegiate Broadcasting Society (IBS). The public radio stations are also known as Corporation for Public Broadcasting-qualified stations. These stations receive funds and programmes from National Public Radio (NPR). Thus, the stations do not have sales department; instead a fund raising unit.

Radio by nature is the ideal medium for development in Africa. It is a veritable medium which has provided a good access to communication for large number of people, both literate and non-literate. Its advantage over other media lies in its relative simplicity, cheapness and ubiquity without dependence on electricity supply. FAO (1998) identifies the strengths of radio in development process. It states that radio is an important mechanism for rapid diffusion of development information in a diversity of languages and to widespread geographical areas; a channel for interactive communication, for dialogue and debate on the major issues of rural development; a platform for democratic and pluralistic expression of the opinions, needs and aspirations of rural communities and a means of raising public awareness and motivation.

Habermas (1991) believes the public sphere can be most effectively constituted and maintained through dialogue, acts of speech, through debate and discussion. He claims that public debate can be animated by "opinion-forming associations"- voluntary associations, social organisations, churches, sports clubs, groups of concerned citizens, grassroots movements, trade unions-to counter or refashion the messages of authority. The pluralism and democratisation of media will definitely give these categories of people space in the public sphere.

Community broadcasting has enormous potential to introduce plural voices to the media sector, to deliver development messages, and to empower communities to take charge of their own information needs and to develop appropriate formats for meeting them. The essential question regarding the establishment of a community station is not one of technology but rather the question of how the community will be able to control the medium technically, politically, and culturally. It is possible to have a community station in a poor area, and to have editorial independence even when the station receives government support. For example, in the United States, public broadcasting would not have been possible without state and federal support. Some of the first radio stations in the country were educational ones operated by state universities in order to extend resources to rural schools and farmers. Through legislative safeguards, there is no government interference with content of local programming.

With the establishment of non-commercial radios, the stage is set for full participation of members of the community. The responsibility then lies on radio practitioners to design radio format that will ensure people's participation. Variety of format like straight news, group discussions, testimonial type interview, magazine programme, a combined entertainment-information format, radio drama or serial, sport announcements etc., can be used to package people's oriented programme that will attract their attention to political issues. What format will best suit which type of topic will be determined by the producer who is trained in that for such purpose.

Conclusion

Great potentials lie in the exploration of non-commercial radio stations for raising political awareness and mobilisation. Its democratised nature allows provision of the required access to information and freedom of expression for deepening of democracy. It is therefore necessary that the current media practice be restructured to permit the type that will aid the growth and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

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