

Patterns of Ownership and Accessibility to Information and Media Facilities in Democratizing the Media in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article hypothesizes that the extent of democratization of the mass media in any society is a function of two factors: accessibility to information and the patterns of media ownership in the society. It holds that these two factors determine the extent to which there is free flow of information, the extent to which the citizens have access to information, the degree of mobilization and participation, and the extent to which the society can be described as democratized.

It points out, however, that these two factors are not mutually exclusive because accessibility can be a function of ownership; but some factors which come under accessibility are not traceable to patterns of ownership. The articles also notes that mere guarantee of free press or free speech does not ensure that every citizen has access to information and to the channels through which he can express himself.

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Modèle de propriété et d'accès aux équipements d'information et de Media dans le processus de Democratisation des Médias au Nigeria.

RESUME

Cet article pose comme hypothèse que l'étendue de la démocratisation des mass médias dans toute société est fonction de deux facteurs" l'accès a l'information et les modèles de possession des médias dans la société. Il soutient que ces deux facteurs déterminent à quel point il y a une libre circulation de l'information, jusqu'à quel point les citoyens ont accès à l'information le degré de mobilisation et de participation, et jusqu'à quel point la société peut être décrite comme démocratique.

Cependant il souligne que ces deux facteurs ne sont pas mutuellement exclusifs parce que l'accessibilité peut être une fonction de la propriété mais on ne peut pas faire remonter, certains facteurs, qui dépendent de l'accessibilité aux modèles de propriété. L'article fait aussi remarquer qu'une simple garantie de la liberté de presse ou de parole n'assure pas que chaque citoyen a accès à l'information et aux canaux par lesquels il peut s'exprimer.

Introduction

In discussing the democratizing of the print and electronic media in Africa, it seems natural to begin with an attempt at the definition of democracy. The concept of democracy has, over the years, come to mean different things to different people depending on which side of the fence they stand. Elusive as the concept has become, it is necessary to establish a perspective, if only for the purpose of the present discussion.

According to the dictionary of politics, the term democracy "derived from the Gree 'people' and 'power' and referred to the rights of the citizens of the Greek city states to participate directly in the act of government". (Laqueur, 1971). This concept of democracy appears to be in agreement with modern western understanding of the concept. One of the most frequently cited measures of democracy is the right of all citizens to vote, in other words, universal suffrage (Rodee, Anderson, Christol and Greene, 1983).

In addition to universal suffrage, another characteristic of true democracy is representative government. However, if universal suffrage and representative government are the only elements that distinguish democracy from authoritarianism, then there is hardly any grounds for contention. For as Rodee et al, argue, citizens of the Soviet Union and other so-called authoritarian governments "enjoy some measure of universal suffrage and representative government". In fact, in some Communist Bloc countries, the term "People's Democracy" is used to describe the political system in which the voter has a choice even though the choice is limited to a single list of candidates decided on by the Communist Party. However, there is an important element of true democracy which is lacking in the "People's Democracy". This element is the element of "Interest Groups". (Rodee et al, 1983). This element is important not only because it helps to

distinguish more clearly true democracy from the so-called "People's Democracy", but also because it provides a convenient point of departure from which to focus on our subject.

In this paper, we are concerned with democratizing the print and electronic media, the practitioners of whom form an interest group representing the interest of journalists. Rodee et al, see an interest group as important influences on "party programs and government policies on behalf of their clients - who usually are highly homogeneous because they are drawn from specific occupational categories" (p.280). They argue that the number and variety of interest groups in any given society are useful measures of the extent of democracy in the society.

In Africa in recent years, the print and electronic media have become a powerful interest group to be reckoned with. The media have made and unmade governments in many African States, and are in the forefront of the struggle for true democracy in many African countries.

This is not surprising when it is remembered that a truly democratic society rests upon the rights of free speech. Rodee et al define free speech as "the right of the public or members of a given society to exercise the right of surveillance and constant criticism which would ensure the maintenance of an enlightened public opinion and consequently a public policy based upon principles of social morality and justice". p.139). This is simply a reechoing of George Washington who recognizing the connection between democratic government and an informed populace, expressed his belief in the importance of the free exchange of ideas in a democracy.

He once noted that the process was necessary so "citizens at large may be well informed and decide, with respect to public measures, upon a thorough knowledge of the facts. Concealment is a species of misinformation". If further support is needed for the view that a free press is a vital component of a true democracy, one should note the view of Justice Potter Stewart when in an address in 1974, he declared, among other things, that "The primary purpose of the constitutional guarantee of a free press was ... to create a fourth institution outside the Government as an additional check on the three official branches".

So far in this discussion, we have attempted to show that free flow of information is essential for the achievement of true democracy. However, mere guarantee of free press, or free speech, does not ensure that every citizen has access to information and to the channels through which he can express himself. There are peculiar circumstances in most African countries that must be taken into consideration if any talk about democratizing the media is to have any meaning. These include the patterns of ownership of media and accessibility to information. It is our hypothesis that the degree of democratization of the media, both print and electronic, in any country is a function of ownership patterns of, and accessibility to, media facilities and information. As such, democratizing the media, for the purpose of this paper, will be understood to mean the process of ensuring that every citizen of every African country has easy and full access to information and to the channels through which he can express his views on issues affecting him and the society of which he is a member, irrespective of his social, economic and political status, and without fear of victimization by those who wield political and/or economic power.

Ownership patterns determine who owns, and consequently who controls media facilities. Accessibility to information is determined by such factors as the ability to own receiving sets such as radio and television sets, availability of electricity, use of indigenous languages in both the print and electronic media so that the vast majority of Nigerians who cannot understand the English Language are not denied access to information, and the location of media facilities. It is only when these factors are taken into consideration that we can begin to talk about democratization of the media.

Democratization of the media in the manner defined earlier would ensure participation by the people in making decisions that affect their lives. This, in our view, is the bottom line in any discussion about democracy. We can only talk about participation and mobilization of the people when there is free flow of information which will facilitate dialogue between the rulers and the ruled. The degree of free flow of information is a function of who owns the media and how much access to information the people have. The rest of this paper will attempt to examine this relationship with particular reference to the Nigerian context.

Patterns of Ownership

1.1. *Government ownership of Media*

If we accept that the free flow of information and ideas is indispensable for democracy, then it is easy to see that ownership patterns are essential indicators of the extent of democratization of media in any country. In most, if not in all African countries, the patterns of ownership are of two forms:

1. Government monopoly of the media, as in Nigeria, especially the electronic media.
2. Monopoly of the media by a few individuals or groups.

Each of these patterns will be examined in more detail in the following pages.

Writing on the history and development of journalism in Nigeria, Obijiofor (1985) expressed concern over government monopoly of the electronic media in Nigeria. He called on government to allow privatization of the broadcast media pointing out that by so doing government would be sewing:

... the seeds of a political culture that fosters tolerance of criticism, social responsibility, public accountability, and at the same time, helping to make broadcasting respond more to the needs of our people

Obijiofor's views on government monopoly of the media, especially the electronic media, are shared by many people in Africa. Nnaemeka (1986) considers government monopoly of radio and television in Nigeria an aberration because, according to him, they:

... constitute a major process of influence over thoughts and when they are in the hands of one agency that is equally controlling the coercive powers of the state, then you are not advancing the human rights philosophy.

In the same vein, Osoba (1987), speaking on media ownership patterns in Nigeria, called on government to relinquish its absolute control of the electronic media. He sees government ownership of newspapers as running counter to the role of the press in upholding the responsibility and accountability of government to the people. Osoba believes that in order for the press to perform its traditional role of disseminating information and thereby encouraging dialogue between the ruler and the ruled, government should "divest itself of the autocratic powers of our traditional past which make it anathema for the ruled to ask the ruler questions". Pointing out that 90 percent of the national newspapers, as well as radio and television stations are owned by different governments in the country, Osoba asked:

If governments are the only ones given the power to run television or radio stations, how can such radio and television stations uphold section 21 of the Constitution which gives the mass media the duty to uphold responsibility and accountability of governments to the people?

We agree with these views on government monopoly of broadcasting and argue that we cannot begin to talk about democratizing until government releases its stranglehold which has almost already choked the profession of journalism in most African countries. As Idowu (1985) puts it:

Journalism as a profession, as an idea, a commitment to the public good, a dedication to unearthing wrong, is no more as exciting as it used to be. Official bureaucracy has knocked down investigative journalism, in its purest form, from whatever height it rose ...

As long as Government monopoly of the media continues, for so long will free flow of information and easy access to information remain elusive. According to the popular dictum, "he who pays the piper dictates the tune". Therefore, if government controls the media, then government also controls what the media say, and who has access to what information. And one may ask at this point, who is the

government? Even in the most democratic countries, only a small proportion of the people ever have the opportunity to hold office. According to Olumhense (1985):

To the majority, therefore, must be denied the vast challenges of knowing what it is to manage the unmanageable!, the riotous chemistry of men, women, children and animals, each and all unpredictable ...

Olumhense, obviously speaking (or writing) with tongue in cheek, describes government as all-knowing, always with a clear vision of where it is leading the people, and the people as ignorant, impatient, suspicious and always complaining. His advice?

Since government -- always and everywhere knows better, and since it is unlikely that the people are in the wrong anyway, the only answer is for government to ignore both their noise and their ignorance, and just go on, and on, and on.

A government that claims to be all-knowing and which ignores the voices of the very people that gave it mandate, cannot be described as democratic in any sense of the word. For such a government, democratizing the media in the sense of relinquishing absolute control will be anathema.

1.2. *Ownership by a few individuals or groups*

The second form of ownership patterns is ownership by a few individuals or groups. This form of ownership can be as dangerous as Government monopoly. In talking about privatization as a means of democratizing the media industry, care must be taken to ensure that we do not merely substitute government monopoly by the monopoly of a few. The situation must be avoided in which the same individual or group, for example, owns a newspaper, a radio station and a television station, not even if such individual or group has the resources. Such a concentration of ownership will undoubtedly reduce competition, and consequently, journalistic standards.

Apart from this, there is the fear, and a genuine one, that the concentration of ownership in a few hands will result in

the use of the media for the advancement of personal and sectional interests, leading to political and religious instability. Of course, media owners will argue that joint ownership, such as newspaper - broadcast operations, will result in better service but experience in other parts of the world, notably the United States of America, show that such concentration of ownership can be a threat to public access and independent news coverage (Gormley Jr., 1977). In the United States of America, this view is reflected in the ever increasing attacks by organized political and religious groups on both the print and electronic media. These groups often accuse the owners of big media establishments of being more concerned with making profit than with the principles of accuracy and objectivity. Read Irvine (1976), Chairman of Accuracy in Media (AIM), an organization that monitors press and television news reporting accused the big media corporations of using their power "in a biased and, therefore, potentially dangerous fashion".

Such fears are justified, particularly when it is remembered that in performing their functions of agenda setting, and gate-keeping the media depend on relatively few people - editors or producers - who determine which stories are reported by the newspapers or radio and television. The editors and producers also exercise the power to determine the degree of importance attached to a particular news event. With such powers, and in the hands of a few individuals or groups with vested interests, the media can be used in a dangerous and rather destructive way.

Accessibility

The issue of accessibility should be seen in the form of a continuum that ranges from ownership of receiving sets through to the quality of the reception and the languages used and the concentration of media facilities in the urban centres.

The problem of ownership of radio and television sets has been with us for long and the picture gets gloomier everyday. Until recently, newspapers and radio sets were within the reach of most Nigerians.

However, the present economic situation has driven up the prices of radio sets so high as to make their possession a

luxury. With newspapers, even when their prices were within reach, their usefulness was limited by the fact that only a small percentage of Nigerians could read and understand the English language in which most of them are written. However, with the announcement a few days ago of a proposed increase in the price of newspapers from 50K to N.1.00, the newspapers have joined radio and television sets in the ranks of the unaffordables.

The quality of reception of radio and television signals is an important factor to consider when talking about democratizing the media. We cannot talk about free flow of information in a situation in which reception is so poor that the target audience does not see or hear clearly what is being transmitted. In a recent study of the extent of utilization of an English language programme broadcast by the Ondo State Radio-vision Corporation, it was found that a high proportion of respondents complained of very poor reception (Okwudishu, 1988). This factor, no doubt, is a serious obstacle to the utilization of the programme by teachers in their classes. It is common knowledge that it is easier to get the BBC or Voice of America than it is to get any radio station in Nigeria. In the rural areas, the lack of electricity makes the situation worse.

Even where the set is available, there is electricity, and reception is excellent, the matter of language remains a serious problem. In the print media, most newspapers and magazines are written in English. In broadcasting, very few of the hundreds of languages spoken in Nigeria are used. One reason for this is that most indigenous languages do not have standard orthographies that can be used in newspapers or radio and television broadcasts. The result of this is to further limit the percentage of people who have access to information. These factors - high cost of receiving sets, poor reception, lack of electricity and the limited number of indigenous languages that can be used in both the print and electronic media - constitute very serious obstacles to the free flow of information. Such a situation does not, therefore, satisfy our conception of democratization of the media as set out at the beginning of this paper.

One cannot end a discussion on accessibility to information without mentioning the factor of location of media facilities. In Nigeria, and in most African countries, 99

percent of media facilities are located in urban countries. The result is that "events occur only in urban centres". A family planning campaign programme designed for rural women is launched in the Conference Hall of Sheraton Hotel in Lagos by Mrs. Hilda Adefarasin before an audience made up of the likes of Chief, Mrs Bola Kuforiji-Olubi. What a magnificent setting! Or to look at it from the points of view of relevance and language. What about speaking in English to an audience made up of the Ostrich men of Zimbabwe about the excitements of space travel? The point we are trying to make here is that democratization of the media must take into account geographical spread so that both urban and rural areas benefit from the enlightening effects of the media.

Conclusion

In most African countries, the lack of healthy and stable governments can be traced to illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. As Thompson (1981) puts it:

Democratic political processes have been threatened and undermined in many countries by the fact that political leadership has not been constrained by its electorate owing to the lack of general awareness of national development issues and the limited capacity of the mass of the people to participate in decision making, even in the ways open to them, because of their widespread ignorance of the law, of their rights under the law, and of the procedures which they might use to influence those who act on their behalf and in their name ...

Thompson argues that education can be used to harness more effectively the total human resources of the nation and to improve their capacity to participate in the management of their own affairs. The media have been found to be very vital in bringing about such changes. According to Pye (1963):

... It was the pressure of communication which brought about the downfall of traditional societies ... New ideas enter peasant villages from external sources and spread from peasant to peasant. Most traditional

peasants have a very limited view of the world. But as cracks of light from the big society shine into their social and physical isolation, these traditional individuals begin gradually to enter the modern world

...

Pye believes in the power of the mass media to compensate for the physical remoteness of peasant villages. "Exposure of peasants to newspapers, magazines, radio and television", he argues, "spreads the ethic of modernity". Modernization is the process of change from traditional ways of life to more complex technologically advanced and rapidly changing styles of life (Rogers and Burdige, 1972). Modernization involves participation. Participation is democracy, and the media have been found to be indispensable for its achievements.

We would like to conclude by restating our hypothesis that the extent of democratization of the media in a society is a function of two factors - accessibility to information and patterns of ownership of media. Both of these factors determine the extent to which there is free flow of information, the extent to which the citizens have access to information, the degree of mobilization and participation, and consequently, the extent to which the society, including its various organs, can be described as democratized. But these are not two mutually exclusive factors. Indeed accessibility can be a function of ownership patterns but some factors which come under accessibility are not traceable to patterns of ownership.

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