Problems and Possibilities for the Formulation of a Comprehensive Communication Policy for Liberia

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Abstract

This article examines the problems and possibilities of formulating a comprehensive national communication policy for Liberia. It analyses several difficulties that militate against the formulation of such a policy in the country. It notes, however, that as varied and complex as these problems are, there nevertheless exist some possibilities for evolving a comprehensive communication policy in the country. The article suggests a couple of concrete policy issues and measures that a comprehensive communication policy for Liberia needs to embody in light of the prevailing communications system and the development needs of the country.

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Problèmes et possibilités de formulation d'une stratégie globale de communication

Résumé

Cet article traite des problèmes et possibilités de formulation d'une stratégie nationale globale de communication pour le Libéria. Il passe en revue plusieurs difficultés qui s'opposent à la formulation d'une telle stratégie dans ce pays. Toutefois, aussi complexes et variés que ces problèmes puissent être, l'article note qu'il existe quelques possibilités de développer une stratégie globale de communication dans le pays. L'article propose un couple de sujets et mesures stratégiques qui montre qu'une stratégie globale de communication pour le Libéria doit être mise sur pied à la lumière des systèmes de communication et des besoins de développement prévalant dans le pays.

Introduction

It has been established that effective communication (in its various forms) is a vital component in the task of achieving development goals in the least developed countries (Schramm 1964, Rogers 1969, Hedebro 1982, and Kunczik 1984). It has equally been noted by policy experts and planners, that to harness the catalytic potential of communication in national development efforts, communication and communication technologies need to be systematized and rationalized in a way that will yield the greatest benefits for the generality of a people (Hancock 1981, McDonnel 1988).

Faced with numerous challenges of development, some so-called developing countries have begun to integrate their communication sector into their overall national development plans (Jussawalla 1988). While this is so, it is important to note that despite the continents' multifarious developmental challenges, there is yet no evidence of any African country evolving and implementing such an integrated and comprehensive communication policy (Boafo 1986).

Liberia is a typical example of this non-policy scenario. Despite its credential as the oldest independent African state, the country has little to show in terms of real progress in several areas of national life. We hold the view that the country has been left behind in development terms, and that the continued absence of a comprehensive communication policy to ensure efficient utilization of the nation's communication resources for development may not be in the best interest of its development efforts.

This article identifies the problems that stand in the way of formulating such a policy, and offers the possibilities for evolving one.

Background

Located on the south-western corner of West Africa, Liberia was formally founded by the American Colonization Society as a haven for freed Black captives in the USA. Long before the so-called pioneers arrived, the land was settled by various African ethnic groupings which had pushed their way toward the 350-mile coastline following the collapse of the pre-colonial kingdoms (Cassell 1970).

On July 26, 1847, Liberia declared itself a sovereign independent nation (Kieh 1989). From that point up to April 1980 when the first military coup in the country took place, Liberia was ruled by what came to be known as the Americo-Liberian oligarchy which excluded the majority of the indigenous people from national decision-making processes.

By the time of the coup, the country was displaying startling statistics. For example, less than 15% of the nation's two million people (the population is now estimated at 3 million) could read and write; a mere 4%

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of the people — mostly an elite group of privileged Americo-Liberian families — controlled more than 80% of the economy. The country was heavily dependent on external sources for the supply of its staple food (rice) and other essential items. The health and education sectors as well as the transportation and communication systems left much to be desired (Liebenow 1969, 1981; Wonkeryor 1985; Sawyer 1973; Kieh 1989; Berkeley 1986). Although the country came to have one of the highest per capita incomes on the continent, it experienced a typical case of growth without development (Clower *et al.* 1966).

To many observers, a decade after the bloody but popular military coup that toppled the William R. Tolbert regime, the situation in the country has not changed much for the better. Critics contend that if anything, things have only become worse (Berkeley 1986). Whatever the situation may be in Liberia at the moment, one thing is clear: the nation continues to be faced with monumental problems of development — especially in the areas of education, health, food production and manpower training. To at least minimize these problems, the country needs to adopt all relevant strategies that will help quicken its development pace, including that of formulating a comprehensive and holistic communication policy that will be dovetailed into the country's development efforts.

Problems of Communication Policy Formulation

The task of evolving a policy that will ensure the systematic and efficient use of the process of communication and information technologies for the improvement of the living conditions of Liberians is fraught with several problems. One of these is the low level of awareness on the part of most of our policy makers with regard to the utilization of communication facilities for development purposes:

Indeed, for the time being, there seems to be little indication that policy makers in the country are aware of the socio-economic view of communication/information as a resource that is 'capable of being allocated, conserved and re-distributed' in a manner that will help accelerate a country's development strides (Hancock 1981).

Thus, questions of how to positively utilize this resource so as to have it optimally contribute to the realization of such national objectives as proper nutrition, improved agriculture and education, especially in the rural areas, do not, in any meaningful way, form part of the current agenda of the country's policy makers.

So far, the means of communication in the country are mostly used for purposes other than development. Little wonder that current policies governing the operation of available communication facilities are more politically than socio-economically oriented. A typical case in point, which in itself reflects another problem in the way of formulating a

comprehensive communication policy for the country, is the recent passing of an Act by the national Legislature setting up what is being described as a National Communication Policy and Regulatory Commission (NCPRC).

As well indicated in the preamble to the Act, the functions and membership of the commission would seem to reflect the kind of understanding most of our policy makers in Liberia have regarding the type of communication policy and system the country should have. The preamble, for example, refers to 'activities ... inconsistent with journalistic ethics', and 'regulations dealing with problems attendant to the proliferation of newspapers, magazines, ... radio and telecommunication' (Liberia 1989).

While journalism-related issues may form part of a national communication policy, the emphasis given to them by the Act, as well as certain ominous measures the NCPRC is empowered to take against violators would suggest one of two possibilities: either the policy makers are finding a veiled way of censoring the outspoken local media, or they simply are unaware of the vital need to set up such a commission as a first step in the process of formulating a comprehensive communication policy that is primarily meant for development purposes.

Evidence of the first possibility is provided in the measure empowering 'The Commission, through the Ministry of Post and Telecommunicatios . . . to impose punitive measures, to include fines, revocation of license and/or permit any violator of its policies and/or regulations . . .' (Liberia 1989).

Coming on the heels of numerous clashes between the Government of Liberia and the independent media in the country — which have, at the time of writing, left two privately-owned newspapers and one radio station arbitrarily closed — the so-called Communications Policy Act is seen by critics as a grand design to rein in the local media rather than a comprehensive plan to harness the country's communication facilities for national development purposes.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Press Union of Liberia and the opposition political parties have all denounced the setting up of the commission; they argue that what Liberia needs now is not a communication policy that only adds to existing regulations stacked against press freedom but, rather, a policy that is primarily aimed at utilizing communication facilities in the country for the speedy attainment of national development objectives *(Herald* 1989).

The NCPRC can be regarded as illustrative of the lopsided view many policy makers in the country hold regarding what a communication policy is, or should be. It also serves to reinforce assertions by experts regarding the formulation of communication policies in Africa. Boafo (1986), for example, has observed that:

Very often communication policies and regulations seem to have been hurriedly drawn up or announced as a reaction to some events or response to one problem or another generated by a particular use of communication technology in the society. The general approach to communication policies and regulations in Africa *is piecemeal, compartmentalized and sometimes conflicting with professed goals of society.* (author's emphasis.)

Another major problem of formulating a meaningful communication policy in Liberia is instability within the governmental apparatus. In addition to the fluid political environment generally, the rapidity with which ministers·and other government functionaries are removed and replaced in Liberia has a distruptive impact and militate against the effective operation of the various agencies of government, as new appointees are often all too anxious to discard the policy proposals of their predecessors, no matter how sound and relevant some of the proposals may be. For example, in the last eight to nine years, the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism·(which is designated as co-chairman for the NCPRC) has seen a total of seven ministers. A similar scenario obtains in the case of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications within which the NCPRC is established. Given such a situation, it becomes difficult to ensure that one minister's enthusiasm for a particular policy or problem can be shared by his/her predecessor. The overall effect of such administrative dislocations is to subject such policies and programmes to a state of unpredictability which may be asynchronous with any meaningful strategic planning and implementation.

The lack of co-ordination between various sectoral agencies and ministries in particular can serve as a major stumbling block to any effective communication policy formulation. Surely, the tendency of each of these agencies to consider themselves as separate and distinct rather than integral parts of the national development mosaic, does not create the proper atmosphere for intersectoral communication support system.

Yet another problem in the way of an effective and comprehensive communication policy formulation in Liberia lies in the limited number of trained manpower in the communication sector. Partly as a result of the country's historical circumstances (which did not favour education generally), and partly as a consequence of the negligible attention paid to the training component of the communication sector over the past few decades by successive regimes, Liberia today suffers from a dearth of trained professionals to tackle the various aspects of, and issues related to, communication policy making. To be sure, there are only a few well-trained persons in the production, engineering, writing and management areas of the communication sector. The situation is particularly complicated by new information technologies being introduced into the country. In this regard, a comprehensive policy formulation would

require a certain degree of specialized knowledge that may not be readily available in Liberia.

The few relatively qualified Liberians manning the communications facilities hold their positions at the pleasure of their political sponsors. In the event, these bureaucrats are preoccupied more with making their paymasters look good than in earnestly streamlining the nation's communication resources for more relevant development purposes.

A classic example of what can happen in such a situation is reflected in the recently built ultra-modern television studios, Channel 8. The Japanese government is said to have donated this facility for the expressed purpose of using it for educational matters. The current reality is that the channel has since been converted into a medium catering largely to the urban elite. Meanwhile, Channel 6, less sophisticated in terms of reception and reach, has been abandoned.

One direct result of this is a media content that is anything but development-related. Indeed, research undertaken in the area of media content analysis shows some worrying results. The hypothesis that the media in Liberia are generally not adequately or significantly utilized for development purposes has consistently been supported (Waritary 1983, 1987; Norman 1988).

A related problem, as far as communication policy-making is concerned, is that research, as an integral element in such policy formulation (and implementation), is not an area attractive to even those with the communication skills and expertise. At the nation's two universities, the lack of resources to undertake research has provided a convenient (some might say, legitimate) excuse for not venturing into this domain. In the absence of an inclination to undertake such a much needed task, it becomes doubtful whether, for example, a sub-committee set up for the purpose of researching the issues in communication policy formulation and subsequent implementation will find it easy to recruit the necessary manpower.

A further hindrance to formulating a comprehensive communication policy for Liberia is the lack of financing. In a country plagued by negative growth rates for the past several years, huge debt repayments, an unemployment rate of around 50%, problems of resource management, and an inflation level of, some say, over 30%, the competing demands on the central government for the limited funds available certainly impose constraints on the government's ability to adequately fund such an exercise.[1]

In such a situation, some might consider the private sector and foreign assistance potential sources of funding. However, in Liberia, the private sector is too concerned with the commercial benefits of communication to consider long-range national plans on the matter. And external assistance, if available, sometimes involves certain preconditions or strings which may be in conflict with a national communication policy,

especially in respect of issues dealing with international communication.

One communication policy-making problem some may consider peripheral, but which certainly is not, has to do with the understanding policy makers in Liberia have about 'development'. Born and bred in a capitalistic environment characterized by growth without real development, many policy makers in the country view development largely in terms of material considerations and such indicators as gross national product and per capita income (Hedebro 1982, Hancock 1981). 'Development', in terms of self-reliance and mobilization of available resources to improve the living conditions of the generality of the people, especially the ruralites, is not, for example, part of the general understanding. Thus, any serious attempt at embarking on a comprehensive communication policy formulation will have to address this vital issue, otherwise the end-product will be a skewed one, with the rural sector, which is already disadvantaged in communication resource distribution, and which should be a focus of any national development plan, left out in the process.

A final problem for communication policy making in Liberia relates to the political environment in the country. Politically, the country has remained polarized since before the 1980 coup; some say the situation has become exacerbated since then, and that this has given rise to a society exhausted by disruptive political schisms, individual and sectoral suspicions, extreme sensitivity on the part of the authorities to open criticism and free dialogue on issues of national concern, cynicism and debilitating apathy.

Given such a domestic situation, the task of mobilizing the required expertise and ensuring mass participation needed for a comprehensive communication policy formulation, becomes a daunting one.

When this scenario is considered against the backdrop of intermittent sub-regional political and economic disputes involving the country and some of its neighbours, the consequences for strategic policy formulation and planning, especially in regard to such issues as transborder data flow, remote sensing, and satellite facilities, take on added dimensions.

Possibilities of Formulating a Communication Policy

The problems so far discussed are no doubt complex and varied. However, the situation in Liberia with regard to communication policy formulation is not a hopeless one. As few as they may be, possibilities do exist in the country of evolving a comprehensive communication policy.

One important possibility is the creeping awareness (in at least certain professional quarters) of the important role a systematic and well-planned communication sector can play in nation's life. In recent times, articles have appeared in local newspapers regarding the need to utilize

our communication facilities for more relevant purposes (Waritay 1989).

These seem to have come about partly as a result of the externally-related experiences of some Liberian media professionals who have been exposed to the idea of a communication policy and planning for development, and partly because of the controversy the NCPRC has generated in the country.

A series of workshops organized in the past year by the ACCE in collaboration with the University of Liberia have also created some level of awareness regarding media usefulness in a nation's development efforts. Recommendations and resolutions at the end of some of these workshops have all emphasized the need for an effective and efficient media system geared toward national development in such areas as health and nutrition, culture and technology.[2]

In addition, a few preliminary discussions have been held in the past several months between some officials of UNESCO and the authorities at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism and the University of Liberia, regarding a possible co-hosting of a workshop in Development Communication — a course that is already offered by the University's Department of Mass Communication.

It is by no means clear what all these would amount to regarding the possibility of coming up with a real communication policy for the country. However, the fact that some interest and attention are being generated by these rather inconclusive moves should be a source of encouragement.

Similarly, even though it is certainly not the kind of policy council that will deal with the task at hand, the fact that a policy commission has been constituted to address some media-related issues can be considered a symbolic step, at least in the long process of formulating a more development-oriented communication policy for Liberia.

Another possibility for communication policy making in Liberia is somewhat related to the awareness factor already noted; this has to do with the rapid importation into the country — mostly by foreign-based private businesses — of new information technologies, and the political and commercial interests these seem to be whipping up in official quarters. Indeed, from the look of things, it would seem that the unplanned and unregulated introduction into the country of sophisticated communications gadgets like satellite discs is providing the atmosphere for sober reflection on the use and implication of these technologies. So far, however, government response has largely been piecemeal and commercial.[3]

The widespread establishment of video houses — which seem to have taken over from the regular cinema houses — and the availability of a large number of private video sets (and accessories) in the country, is also causing some concern among religious and social workers. There are no accurate official figures for the number of video establishments currently

in the country, as many unregistered ones are difficult to identify, but anywhere between 30 to 40 are said to be registered in the Monrovia (the capital) area alone.[4]

The films screened by these video clubs (some go by such western/American names as Paramount, Videomax, Libra) are mostly American and Indian, with a good doze of Chinese 'Ninja'. Violence (in the mould of 'Rambo' and 'Delta Force'), sex and drugs, constitute the diet of these clubs.

The situation has nudged the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to move against those video centers that have been established without official approval. But these moves, as already noted, have been essentially designed more to ensure that video owners pay the required taxes and business registration fees than to regulate what is being shown at these centers. Nonetheless, such actions can be regarded as potential measures for more serious policy initiatives.

Yet another related possibility for a comprehensive communication policy in Liberia can be found in the availability of communication infrastructure and facilities in the country. Already the country has several radio stations (by African standard), and a color television whose signals are now being extended to several parts of the rural areas.[5]

Although the realities are nothing to fall for, it is, however, heartening to note government's view of radio as 'the easiest medium for the simultaneous projection of educational materials into all homes in the country' (Liberia 1983).

By far the most concrete manifestation of this declaration can perhaps be seen in the Liberia Rural Communications Network (LRCN) — which is supposed to be a development-oriented public service broadcasting system with authority to establish a central programming facility and regional broadcasting stations. (The project is co-sponsored by USAID and the Liberian Government.) LRCN has since gone on air at three transmission stations in three regions of the country.

Also, the existence of a desirable, if struggling rural newspaper, *The Bong Crier,* should create the need for policy makers to calculate its impact on the quality of life of the rural people.

Indeed, these initiatives in rural communication, although somewhat haphazard, should nonetheless lead to questions and inquiries about the possibility of systematically integrating the facilities into rural development efforts.

Meanwhile, the country has, in recent times, been making some strides in strengthening its telecommunications links to the extent that, even though the implications for national development have yet to fully dawn on policy makers, it now boasts of some of the most sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure that could be found anywhere in West Africa.

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The country has acquired a satellite earth station, complete with a multichannel microwave system, which has considerably boosted the telecommunications services in the country. And with the coming into operation a few months ago, of the new Standard 'A' Satellite Earth Station in Wehn Town outside Monrovia (reportedly estimated at US$18.9 million), telephone lines between Liberia and the rest of the world are said to have increased from 40 to 100.

In addition, the country operates automatic international telephone services, as well as an automatic telex system. The PANAFTEL terrestrial link with neighboring Sierra Leone was commissioned in 1981, and the PANAFTEL link with Cote d'Ivoire has since been completed. On this basis, it can be said that the seeds of positive regional co-operation in the formulation and implementation of national communication policies may have been already sown.

Although more efforts need to be directed toward domestic telephony (especially rural telephony), taking into consideration the 17,000 applications for telephone lines currently in file at the Liberia Telecommunications Corporation, such developments have begun to encourage a few policy makers in according 'primacy to the place of telecommunications in national development . . .'

Thus, in Liberia, an inventory of communication facilities yields quite a favourable scenario in terms of communication policy formulation and subsequent planning. The problem, of course, remains the co-ordination of the use of these facilities for the primary purpose of accelerating the attainment of national development objectives.

And so the key question regarding communication policy formulation in Liberia is not whether the country has the communication facilities, but whether these are used for development communication — i.e., the efficient and systematic use of the resources of communication and communication technologies for the improvement of the living conditions of the Liberian people.

With the possible exception of LRCN, all the other media institutions or organs in the country cannot be said to have any deliberate development-oriented communication strategy. Little wonder that much of the activities of these communication institutions are unrelated to development efforts.

Policy Issues and Measures for a Comprehensive Policy

In discussing the problems relating to the formulation of a communication policy for Liberia, reference was made to the skewed nature of the recently established communication policy commission. It was however noted, during the discussion on the possibilities for communication policy formulation, that as lopsided as the NCPRC certainly is in terms of its relevance to development purposes, it

nevertheless could provide an opportunity for the setting up of a development-oriented communication policy council or commission that will tackle the various aspects of formulating a comprehensive national communication policy.

Thus, in order to constitute such a comprehensive communication policy under the present circumstances, the first concrete step would be to reorient the NCPRC to reflect a development-geared mechanism.

In this regard, the NCPRC's terms of reference should be modified to exclude those items that could in fact militate against the efficient utilization of the country's communication facilities for development purposes.

The NCPRC's scope also needs to be widened and made more comprehensive than it is now. Specifically, the commission should be empowered to set up several committees that will tackle various spects of communication policy formulation (Boafo 1986). For example, there is a compelling need to set up a committee on the new information technologies that are being haphazardly diffused into the country.

Such a committee (or sub-committee, as the case may be) will then adress such issues as an inventory of the available communication technologies (telematics and informatics) in the country, the usefulness and impact of these on the society, implications in terms of international regulations, and their possible utilization for overall national development efforts, rather than for a few urban-based elite.

A restructured NCPRC should also reflect a much broader membership that should be intersectoral and interministerial, and representative of various sections of the society. (The Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, which is, interestingly, not part of the current membership of the NCPRC, should be included.) The commission's urban-based membership should be restructured to allow for rural participation, especially with respect to traditional opinion leaders and other rural functionaries.

To make the council's work more integrated in respect of overall national development, a comprehensive national plan for the country, one which enunciates key national development objectives, will have to be formulated. In this regard, such goals as self-reliance in food production (especially in light of the recently launched 'Green Revolution'), increased literacy, better health, cultural preservation, the narrowing of the gap between the urban and rural sectors of the country with regard to development, and the nuturing of a democratic/pluralistic society that allows for popular participation in the national decision-making process, should constitute an integral part of any such plan.

The council should also be able to specify measures which would enhance a more equitable distribution of communication facilities in the country — especially with regard to their rural spread. For example, such measures should ensure that rural telephony is given adequate attention,

and that the signals of the state-owned television (the only such facility in the country) are extended beyond the present reach (of 130 miles) to benefit other rural dwellers.

Other specific measures should include the establishment of a centrally-based inter-sectoral unit (preferably under the auspices of LRCN) to streamline the production of sectoral development programmes for radio and television. Efforts should also be directed at indigenous skills-formation as well as research and development aimed at harmonizing the country's available traditional means of communication with the new information technologies.

Another measure a comprehensive communication policy council should consider is the orchestration of sub-regional deliberations (involving the neighbouring countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire) on possible joint action on such issues as transborder data flow, remote sensing, satellite ventures, and research and development.

There can be little doubt that such measures will have to be based on sufficient financial outlay and other resources needed for the subsequent implementation of these policy measures. A financially trapped government of the kind now in Liberia may not be too inclined to buy such a communication policy — especially when the benefits of such measures are generally less tangible in terms of financial indicators, vis-a-vis other national development sectors.

Given such a situation, a final task of such a council should be one of educating the policy makers to understand that the long-term social value or benefits of such policy measures would in fact far outweigh concrete short-term financial benefits.

Conclusion

That Liberia needs to accelerate its pace of development is a given. Current statistics regarding sectoral developments do not reflect the fact that the country is the oldest independent black African state (having declared its sovereignty nearly 143 years ago) and, therefore, should by now be in the forefront of progress on the continent. There is, therefore, the need to harness all available resources and adopt all relevant strategies in the national development efforts of the country.

As communication is known as an indispensable factor in the realization of national development goals, there is a compelling need to rationalize and systematize its utilization in the country's overall development efforts. This can be done by formulating a comprehensive national communication policy for the country.

However, the problems of formulating such a policy for the country are quite challenging. Awareness regarding the need for such a policy is still low; so also is knowledge about how to go about putting together such a policy. To be sure, there are serious attitudinal, technical and

political (among other) problems that need to be overcome before such a goal can be fully attained. Meanwhile, the country's communication infrastructure remains largely misapplied and under-utilized with regard to achieving the nation's development objectives.

Notwithstanding such a scenario, a few possibilities do exist for evolving a comprehensive communication policy for the nation, including a creeping awareness among some media professionals and a few policy makers about the need for such a policy, especially in light of the unregulated proliferation in the country of the new information technologies.

If and when such a policy comes into effect, it should, among other measures it would spell out, ensure a more equitable distribution of Liberia's communication facilities and resources, and facilitate a more effective contribution of the available communication facilities to the country's development initiatives.

Notes

1. See 'Liberia Update' (June 1989) for statistics on unemployment rates; also estimates given by Liberian economists and a National Bank of Liberia official on the inflation level in Liberia.
2. See recommendations embodied in the communique from a UNESCO-sponsored subregional workshop on Rural Radio Programme Producers. See also the final report of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) — ACCE 'Media Skills Training for Health Extension Workshop' in Gbarnga, Liberia, August 22-September 2, 1988. These recommendations were published in the local papers as well as on radio and television.
3. See 'The News' of September 18, 1989, for a news story on the meeting held between the Movie Review Board and Video and Cinema operators, held mainly to determine which video and cinema operators did not have registration documents.
4. Figures obtained from sources at the Ministries of Information, Culture and Tourism, and Commerce and Industry in Monrovia. The sources say the figures represent only registered ones. They explain that there are many more video clubs or centres in Monrovia and in the rural areas that are not registered.
5. See Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs 'Second National Development Plan' of 1983.

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