Communication and Empowerment of Civil Society

By Onuora E. Nwuneli

Abstract

African nations are at the crossroads. Some of their economies are tottering, and on the brink of collapse while social, cultural and political structures are becoming weaker by the day. There is need for better management of Africa's resources.

The article advances an argument that communication is critical in the empowerment of civil society. It points out that communication is a double-edged blade that can either empower or disempower a civil society.

The paper highlights key areas in which communication can empower a society. These are in the economic, cultural and political spheres. The effects of modern communication technology especially the internet and e-mail among others, which have radically transformed information dissemination system are discussed.

It includes that African countries must take cognisance of the role of communication and harness it for their benefit.

Onuora E. Nwuneli, is Professor of Mass Communication, and IEC Consultant to the Government of Botswana.

Communication et Passage du Pouvoir à la Société Civile

Par Prof Onuora E. Nwuneli

Résumé

Actuellement, les Etats africains se trouvent au carrefour. Tout d'abord, l'état économique dans ces pays est déplorable. Ensuite, les institutions sociales, culturelles et politiques se désintègrent, pendant que les modèles occidentaux s'accélèrent. La pauvreté et l'ignorance sapent la crédibilité des élections politiques, sans parler de la dégradation graduelle dans les domaines de l'éducation et la santé.

L'article de Prof Nwuneli soutient que la communication est comme un couteau à double tranchoir, à la fois capable de faciliter ou de freiner ce passage. Le point central de son argument demeure la clarté de l'intentionalité de communiquer et la capacité de décoder le message chez le destinataire.

Selon Prof Nwuneli, la réaction (positive ou négative) de ce dernier à l'incitation des médias est d'une importance capitale.

Parmi les aspects analysés dans cette communication figurent l'économie, la culture et la politique. L'auteur n'oublie pas, non plus, de signaler les effets de l'avancement technologique (Internet, E-mail), sur la diffusion d'informations.

Prof Nwuneli est de l'avis que les Etats africains devraient reconnaitre l'importance et la nécessité d'adapter les modes modernes de communication, au profit de tous les citoyens.

Prof Onuora E. Nwuneli (PhD) enseigne la Communication de Masse et l'IEC, tout en étant consultant de son gouvernement au Botswana.

The concept of communication empowerment as used here seems to suggest that the civil society is somewhat disempowered and hapless. One could understand and appreciate the outcry for the empowerment of women and concern for the girl child, because of the listless things men have perpetrated on our women folks in the past. The biased socialization of the girl child would also be a source of concern (Bem, 1970).

But when the concept of communication empowerment is broadened to include the Civil Society, especially after the collapse of the Berlin wall one's mind races to the concept of political democratization, the advocacy activities of all the regional Human Rights watch groups, and those of the pro-democracy groups in the new democracies, and the other concepts associated with the Brettonwoods institutions, including the operations of the "seven sisters."

If one tackles this theme from a purely theoretical perspective, it would definitely lead to brilliant and elegant postulates, propositions and abstractions that assume that the observable and measurable variables are system free. But to assume that is to be unmindful of the fact that social science theories and concepts are not really systems free (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). Thus for me to initiate this discourse from a purely theoretical perspective is to assume that:

- one must have absorbed a considerable amount of Western political and economic thoughts and philosophies to the point that one's African experiences and sensibilities no longer matter.

- one's approach to this theme must be non-systemic or systems free and thus not limited by spatial temporal parameters (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

- one must not have been part of the great debate on the passing of the dominant paradigm on communication and development (Rogers, 1962; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1973, Rogers, 1976; Schramm, W. 1964)

- one must have a considerable disregard for the McBride Commission report (1980).

But if one is sensitive to the concerns outlined in these sketched background, one's emerging thought process on the issue at hand would be more encompassing yet sombre.

It will be very interesting to find out if more complex emotions on this theme could or would not be aroused if one attempts to improve on the wordings of the theme even though limiting its scope to read like this:-

- Communication, empowerment, civil society and the military in Africa; or

- Communication, empowerment, civil society and the kleptocratic pseudo democratic dictators in Africa.

Discourse of these variants of the theme would definitely expose self inflicted pain on Africa by Africans in the attempt to use communication and information to empower the civil society. We have all witnessed the use of "advertorials" and destructive aggressive disinformation in some African countries by the media, the military, the politicians and some pro-democracy groups to destabilize civil society in the guise of communication empowerment.

The traumatized Africa's civil society cannot be captured any better than by President Kaunda's poem *Masai Mara*. An extract from the poem reads:-

Masai Mara (*Extract*)

Oh God my God:
How dare I sleep?
Africa my Africa knows no sleep.
The bleeding of Somalia is deep!
Lord, it is Somalia killing Somalia
Lord it is Moslem killing Moslem,
Oh God my God what of Djibouti?
How dare I sleep even if there be
hope for Ethiopia.

Yes, Lord they are keen to know which
tribes shall inherit the kingdom of
Monrovia by killing the other tribes
therefore better!
Lord, grant us wisdom; this problem
grows deeper and not better

(Kenneth David Kaunda, 1993)

After studying the full text, I discovered that Nigeria was missing from the array of countries mirrored in that poem. I thus developed a variation of that idea in what I called lamentations for Nigeria. Extract from that lamentation reads thus:-

Lamentations for Nigeria (*Extract*)

Nigeria the giant of Africa is in decay
The giant is sick
And the sickness maybe terminal
The leadership relentlessly raid
The national treasury with reckless abandon;
The politicians old and new breeds are no better.

Bankers raid customers deposits
And flee overseas to carouse their loot.
Businessmen and budding industrialists comb
The Central Bank for transferable hard currency.
The industries become front organizations and
Institutions for laundering money out of the country.

Civil servants latch on to contractors like leeches.
Development projects become paper ideas.
Even if implemented, they are many times their cost
Compared with similar projects elsewhere in the world.
But we believe we are clever.
Too clever for any living soul to challenge.

(Onuora Nwuneli, 1994)

Yes, Africa bleeds. The problem is not insufficient information for the empowerment of the civil society. Sometimes it may be too much information of the wrong type that can be held accountable for Africa's problems. It is this distorted information that fuels fierce ethnic loyalties for economic and political considerations. Examples here will include Angola, Liberia, Rwanda, Somaila, Sudan and Zaire. It is also communication that enhances greed, avarice, psychological immaturity and reckless leadership. Cases of Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Nigeria and Zaire are examples.

Use of communication therefore for the empowerment of civil society viewed purely from a detached theoretical sense would involve both empowerment and disempowerment depending on the intentionality of the information source. Technically communication empowerment must have intentionality for the stimulus-response component of the communicative art to be measurable. Without intentionality impact assessment may be difficult to achieve.

Thus if intentionality of source could lead to empowerment which is good, or disempowerment which is not good, communication and empowerment of the civil society cannot therefore be viewed as if it is on a linear continuum, or that, all communicative acts must lead to positive empowerment for desirable outcomes.

It therefore stands to reason that in all areas in which communication is used to enhance empowerment of a group or groups, the success or failure of that empowering act will definitely depend on the intentionality of the information source and the ability of the receiver or end user of that communication to decipher the intent and act accordingly or otherwise. Let us now look briefly at a few areas of communication and empowerment which are topical today.

Economic Information Empowerment

I remember one of my undergraduate courses in the economy of developing countries in the 1960s. We were told then that the quantity of beef or T-Bone steak eaten is one of the major indicators that correlate highly with the level of economic development of a nation. Thus developed nations tend to significantly consume more beef compared to the developing countries.

"We feed the corn to the cows then we consume the beef. But you fellows from the developing world, can you afford to feed your cows corn when you do not have enough corn to eat yourself?" the professor asked.

All my extra allowances then were spent in steak houses to prove that I was moving up the modernization ladder. Today, can one say that, the information on steak consumption as postulated then is empowering or disempowering?

As we all know correlations do not explain causality in social processes. The Wilbur Schramm correlate between mass media and levels of economic development is another classic example of wrong or inaccurate interpretations of correlations, especially when many of the developing nations were treated as missing data in the correlation analysis.

In the wake of these modernization theories also came the idea that we must all be part of the global economy or be doomed. This is without regard to the Center -Periphery economic dependency theories advanced with strong emotions by development scholars from the developing world (Baran, 1957; Dossantos, 1970). But the geo-political power game does not work that way. The dependency paradigm was too intimidating to the well established industrialized economies for them to allow its continued propagation.

Thus instead of rigorously seeking a permanent solution with the dependistas line of thought in mind to remedy McAnany's (1983:4) criticism of the dependency theory as good on diagnosis of problems but weak in its solutions, we slumped backwards and allowed a new generation of more debilitating but supposedly "economically empowering" theoretical jargons to emerge. These theoretical jargons and concepts include:

- Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)
- Equity swap
- External debt burden
- Deregulation and privatization
- Foreign currency pricing

Our journalists picked up the concept of development journalism, and tried their best to report on the unfolding interpretations of these new concepts but without the full grasp of their meaning, and the extensive and complex

implications of these concepts on the lives of the citizenry. Africa on its part produced more of the primary goods and got less and less. They tried the concept of value added goods through foreign financed small scale industries but these budding industries were confronted with protectionism.

Mistry (1991) pointed out that "protectionism in the world's markets for agricultural products and low-technology manufactures make it particularly difficult for African countries to diversify and increase exports to hard currency markets, thus making it doubly difficult for them to earn their way out of the debt trap".

Gambari (1996) Nigeria's Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, pointed out that "Africa's external debts of $300 billion was the biggest obstacle to the continent's economic development. We are using the scarce resources we have to pay the interest on our debts. We are not even touching the principals". Who said the center-periphery dependency theory is dead?

These new economic empowering jargons became the death of Africa instead of empowering her. The concepts drove the Dracular's sword, deep into the heart of the budding industries in Africa. Similarly, these SAP concepts wiped out overnight the African professional and middle classes. Auramovic (1991) noted that "labour costs in Africa are now among the lowest in the world. Real wages have been falling since 1973 as a result of insufficient job creation, rapid labour force growth, inflation, stagnation, structural adjustment and devaluations".

The additional effect of this economic restructuring prompted by the Brettonwood institutions is the mass exodus or the brain drain of the class of highly trained professionals to the Middle East and Western nations. African nations were thus deprived of their highly skilled manpower limiting further their economic decision making prowess.

Attempts by some African economists and ECA (1989) to draw attention to this economic human disaster in Africa was only accepted after the damage has been done. General Obasạnjo of Nigeria had to raise the issue of SAP with a human face due to the ever increasing pain and anguish of the African masses. We finally got an answer. The poverty alleviation program and the research into the social dimensions of SAP. Some of the initiated alleviation programs include:-

Regardless of these alleviation programs it may take two or more generations for the damage done by this Western nation's initiated SAP strategy and tragedy to be rectified. It therefore appears to one that communication empowerment in this context amounts to being force fed high sounding theoretical unverified concepts in the name of economic development empowerment of the civil society but with very fine prints. And the way this empowerment game is played, one gets the impression that as soon as ideas are somewhat understood, the rules of the game change; new and so called empowering concepts emerge. Communication and empowerment therefore become whatever the information source says they are, in time and in place.

Cultural Empowerment

It is not uncommon these days to hear the Western rap, hard metal music and their imitations oozing out of African hamlets and villages. Our young disc jockeys who man music programs on radio stations try very hard to imitate Western accent. Television music videos mirror some of the good and the bad of their original cultures. Maybe that is the way it should be. As Ekwelie (1995) pointed out, "Africa has enjoyed about three and a half decades of self rule. In those years, the continent has laid a valid claim to a culture of destruction, indolence, inertia, greed and retrogression". Not even the FESTAC African Cultural extravanganza of 1977 in Nigeria gave the African cultural evolution that needed forward nod.

And now that modern communication hardware ownership has become more expensive and content programming through satellite has become global there is nowhere to hide. We are now in the world of computers, e-mail, internet and satellite transponder rentals. Marshall McLuhan (1966) should be beaming in his grave with deep contentment for his predictions have come true. We used to complain about cultural invasion. But that was before the advent of satellite direct home broadcast, with their disproportionate Western popular culture content base. Should we now call that cultural invasion, cultural empowerment, cultural synchronization or cultural triangulation?

In whatever name or concept it is clothed, the fact that the global satellite cable networks have already sung the requiem for the African aesthetics and socio-cultural values cannot be overstated. The West African highlife music, the Zaire Kwasakwasa and other modern African music will with time become *archival* materials. The Western mass culture is now with us. Is this cultural empowerment or disempowerment?

The Western mass culture will with the turn of the millennium predominate, due to its unlimited access to capital, delivery technology capability, and highly skilled manpower. The Africans on their part will increasingly become victims or seating ducks to this singular world culture they cannot escape from even in their living and bedrooms. Is this cultural empowerment?

Political Empowerment

I remember my first attempt for a national political office. My campaign plank was "no more corruption." One day on the campaign trail, an elderly man a friend of my father approached me.

"I need an advice" he said "Yes" "Well this friend of yours running against you in the primaries gave me 250 Naira for me to place my thumb on the voting card. You see, my young son was admitted to a secondary school for two years now but no money to send him. I cannot even plough my farm. If you were me what would you do?".

Democracy and political empowerment are in progress here, with the civil society trying to exercise its franchise, but poverty, food insecurity and limited ability to understand issues are at stake. But here, issues do not count. It is ethnic loyalties; and temporary financial handouts to ameliorate hunger, and poverty. The politician understands this. He also understands that democratization also involves membership and recruitment drives, primaries and electioneering campaigns.

These are very expensive activities often a little too much for many African nations with practically no infrastructure or industrial base worth much.

The politician to win and survive this process, sells his family property; borrows and pledges future gains to campaign for an elective office. If he gets elected the first order of business is to raid the national treasury to recover

election debts. Which in turn swells the nations deficits both internally and externally.

While democracy has today established itself as the dominant political culture of the future, it is still a very expensive affair for many African countries. Even in the old democracies like America, funding the multi-party electioneering campaign is often a bit more than the contesting parties can often chew.

That may be one of the reasons that led Putnam (1993) to conclude that democracy is not something that can be put on like a coat; it is part of a country's social fabric and takes decades, even centuries to develop. This knowledge not withstanding, "most developed nations insist with a passion on multi-partyism as a criterion for certification for resource flow into the African region even though multipartyism is no guarantee for democracy in Africa" (Africa Leadership Forum 1995).

How can we use communication to advance development, empower civil society and nationhood in the system prevailing in Africa? There is need to state the constraints. But we must also strive to overcome the constraints and turn the table around. It is a task that needs to be done without prostituting much of Africa's socio-cultural backgrounds.

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