

Challenges of Radio Journalism and Management of Broadcasting in Nigeria during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *The present study examines the challenges of radio journalism and management of broadcasting in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic. Radio remains an important mass medium in Nigeria and across Africa. Issues of power availability, internet connectivity, and media costs, make radio a highly sought after medium for public information. One of the major problems encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic was misinformation. The effects of misinformation took a serious toll in Nigeria. Several deaths and hospitalizations due to chloroquine overdose and food poisoning were reported. While existing efforts have mainly been focused on social media, SMS, TV and live media briefings, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been downplayed. Radio is one of Nigeria's leading media channels, with a capacity to reach tens of millions daily. There is a need to employ radio in the disseminating of safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing and other safe practices to prevent the transmission of the corona virus in Nigeria. Radio has the potential to influence opinions, change behavior and accurately inform the public about COVID-19.*

Keywords: Radio, Journalism, Broadcasting, Covid-19, Media

1. INTRODUCTION

Journalism comprises of several different types of media which include newspaper, magazine, radios, television, cinema, internet based websites, blogs, phones and now social media. Broadcast journalism is the reporting of news using various different kinds of broadcast media like the TV, internet and the radio along with various aspects of traditional print (newspapers, magazines etc.) journalism. The media which consist of the radio, television, newspaper, magazine and the internet have been described by Edmund Burke in the late-eighteenth-century England as the Fourth Estate of the Realm or the fourth branch of government (McQuail, 2006). This assertion supports the popular statement of Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd American President (1801-1809); which states categorically that “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter”.

Broadcasting is the distribution of audio and video contents to a dispersed audience via any audio-visual medium. Receiving parties may include the general public or a relatively large subset thereof. It has been used for purposes of private recreation, non-commercial exchange of messages, experimentation, self-training, and emergency communication such as amateur (Ham) radio and amateur television (ATV), in addition to commercial purposes like popular radio or TV stations with advertisements. Broadcasting is a very large and significant segment of the mass media and the two major types are radio and television. Broadcasting is very important in Africa because a majority of Africans get their information, education and entertainment from primarily radio and then television. The press tends to have an urban bias and is dependent on literacy. Radio uses more African languages than television and is therefore more accessible. However, the influence and role of television has grown among urban dwellers in Africa. Television has low penetration because of the high costs of sets, lack of electricity and weak coverage. In the overwhelming majority of African countries, broadcasting has been the most controlled medium for both technical and political reasons.

The end product of a lot of journalistic effort is what radio listeners hear when they tune in to their preferred radio station to get their daily dose of news update. Sourcing, gathering and compiling of a radio news bulletin does not come on a platter of gold; infact the

radio journalist had to cross and overcome several hurdles at different intervals to have in his/her possession what can be reasonably considered as news or a journalistic work.

The covid-19 pandemic literally aggravated the natural stress attached to different field of practice and the field of journalism and broadcasting is not excluded from the list. With a pause in day to day activities and caution attached to contact with human being, a radio journalist therefore had to develop skillful and skeptical means to go about the challenges attached to his/her journalistic responsibilities. Therefore, this paper is aimed at highlighting the challenges of radio journalism and management of broadcasting in Nigeria.

2. EARLY BROADCASTING IN NIGERIA

Although the colonial masters introduced broadcasting to Nigeria in 1932, there was really no broadcasting in the country until April 1st, 1957. This was when the National Broadcasting Service was established as a department of government. Prior to this date, however, there were in some parts of the country skeletal services, mainly wired relay stations operated by P&T and what was then the Public Relations Service, but broadcasting service as it obtains today did not exist (Knott 1957).

What the British colonialist did was to link Nigeria and other colonial territories to the “mother country”, thus providing a flow of propaganda materials about Britain and other wider world. The white “settler” colonies had earlier established service link with Britain. The Broadcasting Service introduced into Nigeria B.B.C selected programmes to the places that subscribed to the service. This was not dissimilar to the radio relay service that had been in operation in Britain since the 1920s. It was the nature of the service that earned it the name, Radio Distribution Service(RDS).

With the rapid increase in the number of subscriber, distribution stations were set up in Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna, Enugu, Calabar and Port Harcourt in 1944. By 1949, subscribers to the radio distribution service numbered nine thousand, wired to the stations in the country, with 4,562 licensed radio sets.(Vintage Tribune, 1996)

The rapid growth of subscribers to the radio distribution within no short a period, with licensed subscribers numbering 9,000 and wired to the station with about five thousand licensed radio sets in 1949, was a clear demonstration of the quest for information by Nigerians. This thirst for information, besides the political, economic and social developments led to the birth of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in April 1957. This new corporation took over an extensive radio network capable of providing programmes to any member of public in Nigeria who had access to either a wireless receiving set or box. As Knott happily remarked, it marked the establishment in this country of the first service broadcasting corporation of its kind in any colonial territory.

Radio remains an important mass medium in Nigeria and across Africa. Issues of power availability, internet connectivity, and media costs, make radio a highly sort after medium for public information.

Currently in Nigeria, community radio together with more established state- and privately-owned radio stations, work together to disseminate public information to listeners in cities, towns and at the grassroots (Akingbulu, 2007). Radio functions not just as a mass medium for disseminating general information and entertainment, but also in particular as a medium for disseminating public health information, as witnessed during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

3. THE EFFECT OF MEDIA ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19, a deadly illness caused by a corona virus was first reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020. The index case was an Italian construction worker who had returned from Milan. Since February 2020, the number of infections escalated to over 52,000 with over 900 deaths in August. In response to rising infections and deaths, the Nigerian government issued directives for lockdowns and social distancing in the three worst-hit states of Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja, the country’s capital. State governors also issued total or partial lockdowns in their respective regions based on prevailing circumstances. However, lockdowns caused untold hardships for many Nigerians, due to the government’s chaotic and lousy social welfare structures (Ephraim, 2020).

The Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and The Federal Ministry of Health have been at the forefront of efforts to combat COVID-19 in Nigeria. Both organizations have been active in setting up isolation centers, hospitals, and spaces to manage suspected and confirmed cases. The NCDC has also been engaged in training personnel and setting up rapid-response teams across Nigeria’s 36 states (Adepoju, 2020). However, despite efforts to combat the spread COVID-19, both organizations have been seriously challenged by a particular problem - the spread of misinformation or false information about COVID-19. The spread of misinformation has been described as the single biggest danger Nigeria faces in its fight against COVID-19. Misinformation has created public panic and is inhibiting efforts to stop the spread of the corona virus in Nigeria and across Africa (Odubanjo, 2020).

As part of efforts to combat misinformation, NCDC periodically hosts daily press briefings to keep the press and the public up to date with its activities. These briefings are often broadcast live on the major national TV stations including the National Television Authority (NTA), Channels TV and African Independent Television (AIT). The NCDC has also teamed up with leading movie actors to produce public service messages on TV to debunk fake news and rumors about COVID-19. Besides, the NCDC has also teamed up with mobile network operators to send weekly SMS to Nigerians warning them on the dangers of misinformation. Through its social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the NCDC regularly posts messages showing the daily number of confirmed cases, recoveries and deaths.

4. DEVELOPMENT MEDIA THEORY

The call for media intervention in development process is hinged on what Denis McQuail called “development media theory”. This theory is quite influential because it sees the media as a pivot for national development in developing countries. McQuail (1983: 131) stated that the central thesis of the theory is that the mass media in developing nations should be used for “the primacy of the national development task (economic, social, cultural and political); the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy; support for democracy; and solidarity with other developing countries.” He outlined six main principles of the theory:

- Media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- Freedom of the media should be open to restriction according to (1) economic priorities and (2) development needs of society.
- Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
- Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally and politically.
- Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
- In the interest of development ends, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict media operations and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified (McQuail. 1983:95-96).

Primarily, the theory is rooted in the modernization/functionalist paradigm of mass media’s role in development. It presupposes the use of the mass media in achieving development in developing countries. McQuail (1983) is of the view that since the Siebert, et al (1956) ‘four theories of the press’ (Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soviet/Communist and Social Responsibility) are inadequate in explaining the media systems of developing nations, the need for another theory becomes essential. Thus, he propounded the development media theory to take care of how the media can aid the development of those nations. The assumption is that the mass media are part of the instruments for achieving development in developing nations.

5. CHALLENGES OF MEDIA

It is an obvious fact that the Nigerian media houses are facing a lot of pressures in the discharge of their duties from political leaders and other private interests. These constraints limit their abilities in the development of the society; however, they must not allow these challenges to get into the way of their job. Though the media are privately or publicly owned, the reason for their existence is not to serve as a propagandist machinery of their owners. Media houses sociologically and philosophically exist to serve as the custodian of the rights of the masses and they are supposed to champion the cause of the masses, from the remotest portion of the society to the highest level.

One problem of the media in Nigeria is the irregular power supply in the country which has made newspaper production very frustrating for the media houses. In order to remain in operation, the media houses are always powered by generators which are extra over-head expenditures for them. The use of generator can also be a challenging task during the period of incessant fuel scarcity in the country; which might lead to partial or total paralysis of the business.

Another crucial problem of the Nigeria media is its urban, elite-centred bias, and it’s almost cynical neglect of the rural areas (Kadiri, 2009). Kadiri stated that the acquisition of modern technologies by these media houses further increases the gap between the urban and the rural news reportage. “Urban elite class directly or indirectly call the shot for the mass media ...their agenda and ideology are often at variance with those of the people who receive prominence in the media” (Soola, 2002a:122). The situation above gets deteriorated by the fact that most of the media houses only have reporter in the urban centers at the detriment of the rural areas; even the few reporters in the urban areas are so overwhelmed with duties that they sometimes compromise the ethics of their profession in order to live up to the expectation their bosses. Since the best form of development is said to be bottom-up type, the absence of rural presence cosmetic development of the centre at the expense of the rural areas.

Also, the need for survival of the various mass media made some of them to report sensational news at the detriment of the development news. Most media exist primarily for profit making and class domination. In simple terms, classical Marxists see the media as being controlled and used for the interests of those who control the economic power, the bourgeoisie in capitalist setting. Also, the media owners' views, which are constantly aired through the mass media, become dominant and invariably contribute immensely to the maintenance of inequality between the upper and the lower classes (Lenin 1972).

In a similar vein, Egbon (1989) said that most media personnel in Nigeria have used the mass media to serve the selfish interest of minority elite of the powerful groups, by helping them to maintain the status quo, thereby serving the interests of the few privileged. He contended further that for a nation to develop, its various mass media must be used properly. He asserted that the mass media is not a personal property of anyone but that they belong to all and should be used in the interest, convenience and necessity of the citizens.

One of the main problem of media during the pandemic period was misinformation. The effects of misinformation took a serious toll in Nigeria. Several deaths and hospitalizations due to chloroquine overdose and food poisoning were reported. Many people with serious symptoms refused to turn themselves in to the NCDC, but rather preferred to manage treatment at home with phony herbal mixtures due to fear and stigma (Folorunsho-Francis, 2020). In Cross River State in South Eastern Nigeria, there was severe public panic as it was rumored that a nurse and a university student had already infected hundreds of people in Calabar the capital city. People became terrified and refused to step outside their homes for days. Businesses suffered (Uchekwue, 2020).

While existing efforts have mainly been focused on social media, SMS, TV and live media briefings, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been downplayed. Direct observation of twenty-five radio stations across Nigeria over a three-month period (March to May 2020), revealed the airing of only one radio advert titled 'Make you take responsibility' directly sponsored by the NCDC. The one-minute advert produced in Nigerian pidgin, highlights the need for citizens to take responsibility for their safety through safe practices like hand washing, social distancing and not touching their faces.

6. CONCLUSION

There is still a strong need for the use of radio, Nigerian languages and town criers to ensure that correct information about COVID-19 reaches people, irrespective of their location or literacy level (Obokoh, 2020). Radio is one of Nigeria's leading media channels, with a capacity to reach tens of millions daily. There is a need to employ radio in the disseminating of safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing and other safe practices to prevent the transmission of the corona virus in Nigeria (Adelana, 2020).

Radio has the power to promote citizen's resilience during periods of health crisis. Radio has the potential to influence opinions, change behavior and accurately inform the public about COVID-19 (Kapoor, 2020). In order to effectively position radio to debunk misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria, several strategies could be employed. Using credible sources is probably the first important step towards combating misinformation. UNESCO describes credible news sources as the best vaccine against COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020). These sources comprise of health experts directly working on treatment or limiting the spread of the virus.

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