
THE MASS MEDIA AND THE CHALLENGES OF USING LANGUAGE FOR INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the challenges of using language by the mass media in information dissemination and management of political crisis in Nigeria. It has discussed the various forms of language manipulation by the mass media pointing out the harm it poses for crisis management. We suggest that the owners of the mass media who influence news contents for selfish reasons should desist from the practice and give their organizations a free hand in running them for the interest of objectivity. We also suggest that journalists on their part should be guided by the professional ethics in the coverage of issues and they should be mindful of the language they use to avoid crisis.

Keywords: Language, Mass media, Information dissemination, Crisis management, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying that information is basic to the survival of any society. People need to be informed and the information they get determines the choices or decisions they make for their well being. This view finds support in James Madison's expression that "...knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives." (Flint, 2)

The mass media with its capacity of reaching a wide, large and heterogeneous audience as well as transcending space and time remains the most viable tool of information delivery. It surveys the environment, gathers information, processes it and disseminates it to the public. By virtue of this, it is often referred to as the watchdog of society.

The mass media uses the medium of language in conveying information to its audience. Kuiper and Allan (2) define language as a code for conveying a great variety of information. They

proceed to say a language uses sounds as its basic medium. An often quoted authoritative definition of language by Sapir (109) is that language is:

a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols...It is the tool of significant expression.

It is clear from the above definitions that language is a conduit for the transmission of information from the sender to the receiver. Information and language are inseparable. While information is an embodiment of ideas, thoughts, feelings, data etc., language provides the symbols or codes for coordinating and conveying the information.

Language is at the centre of all human interactions and activities including business transactions, legislations, teaching and learning, evangelism, courtship, dialogue, international diplomacy and so forth. The centrality of language to all human operations makes it a veritable tool of national development. Bako (2) captures this view, thus:

...the creation of a new democratic culture, no doubt, depends on language for the articulation of democratic ideals. Nigeria's democratic culture needs this cultural medium of communication for survival.

This is an indication that language is a potent tool for the promotion of democratic ideals. Against this background, we would assess the usage of language by the mass media in the management of political crisis. As a conveyor of information, the mass media is saddled with the unenviable task of providing truthful, balanced and objective information to the masses as a necessary ingredient for national unity and development. Therefore, this paper would address the following questions: How does the mass media utilize language in presenting messages in the face of political crisis? What impression does it create with the kind of messages or news it disseminates? What kind of reactions does it spur from the public? Does it avert or aggravate crisis through the reportage of issues?

The Mass Media and National Unity

The mass media has the responsibility of promoting national peace and unity. This is reflected in the Nigerian Television Authority Decree which states that:

The NTA is also obliged to ensure that the services which it provides when considered as a whole reflect the unity of Nigeria as a federation and at the same time give adequate expression to the culture, characteristics and affairs of each state, zone or other part of the federation.

The Decree also stipulates that:

- Programmes maintain a proper balance in their content and be of high standard.
- News be presented with accuracy, impartiality and objectivity.
- When matters of political, current public policy arise, due impartiality be maintained.

Although these provisions are specific to NTA, they apply to all mass media. All mass media, whether public or private are expected to adequately provide information to the public and serve as a platform for the expression of plural views. The task of delivering information is onerous, considering the role information plays in the sustenance of peace and stability in the society. The media therefore has to operate within an ethical framework to ensure that the information it transmits is in accordance with national goals and interests. With regard to this, Umechukwu (27) states that “the media can be used by anyone who has an idea to express but they are forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt vital social structures or interests.”

This means that the media should be self-disciplined in order to discharge its duties effectively. It should inculcate in citizens ideas and values that are germane to maintaining peace and unity.

The role of the Nigerian mass media in the promotion of national unity cannot be discussed without reference to the Nigerian mass media history. A cursory look at the history which is closely interwoven with Nigeria’s political history reveals that the media has been actively involved in the political affairs of the country. Egbon (50) points out that the pre-independence press fought gallantly against the colonial administration in the struggle for independence. The indigenous press pioneered by Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *West African Pilot* emerged to counter the colonial press which served colonial interests.

The post independence press however changed from being nationalistic in outlook to reinforcing tribal and sectional interests. Each of the regional governments and political parties had at least a newspaper that was loyal to it. For example, the *Daily Sketch* and *Daily Express* served the interests of Western Nigeria, the *Eastern Observer* and *Eastern Sentinel* worked for Eastern Nigeria and the North had the *Nigerian Citizen* and *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo*, a Hausa publication which was very popular in the North.

The trend of bias reporting continued in the Second Republic. Newspaper ownership became the exclusive preserve of the various state governments. Almost all the Ministries of Information in the states operated newspaper corporations. Like in the First Republic, these news papers paid loyalty to the State Governments and ruling political parties in the states. The Second Republic also witnessed the emergence of private papers which paid allegiance to their owners. Popular among these was the *National Concord* which was set up by the Late Moshood Abiola to buffer his position in the NPN and fight Awolowo in UPN.

The Third Republic marked an upsurge of private newspapers. In the opinion of Egbon (55), this introduced another dimension of healthy competition and news balance into newspaper publishing in the country. Today, the news market is flooded with newspapers, magazines, soft-sell journals and tabloids, the number which is difficult to state with exactitude. Igboanusi (47) observes that the lifespan of most of the papers on the newsstands is unpredictable. Some of them just appear to serve some political interests and disappear with time.

Going by the history of the Nigerian press, one may be tempted to hastily conclude that the Nigerian press has not contributed positively to the promotion of national consciousness and unity. Suffice it to say that over the years, some newspapers and magazines or reputed such as the *Newswatch*, *Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *This Day* among others have made landmark in investigative and objective reporting which have been instrumental to national development.

The broadcast media has also had its share in the story. The Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) which came into being in 1957 was enjoined to provide as a public service, independent and impartial broadcasting services to the nation as a whole. However, the regional governments made allegations of sectionalism and partiality against NBC and this led to the subsequent establishment of regional government owned broadcast stations. The regional government broadcast stations unfortunately, did not do any better as they were manipulated by their owners to their own political advantage against both local and national rivals.

The creation of states in 1967 and the further creation of states in the later years led to the establishment of more broadcast stations as each wanted to have its radio and television stations. Today, the various state governments and the ruling parties in the states perpetually use the stations as instruments of propaganda and silencing opposition parties. Attesting to this, Jibo and Simbine (56) cite the case in Benue where the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) had accused the People's Democratic Party (PDP) government led by then George Akume of using Radio Benue to stifle its voice and perpetrating instead uncomplimentary views about the party. A similar observation is made of Achike Udenwa, former Governor of Imo State who prevented the oppositions from the use of both the state radio and television and used stations to attack his major challenger, Rochas Okorocho (Jibo & Simbine, 56).

The broadcast media witnessed another turning point in 1992 when the then military government led by Ibrahim Babangida enacted the National Broadcasting Commission Decree No 38 permitting the privatization and deregulation of the broadcast media. Nwosu in Bala (88) noted that the possible avoidance of undesirable government influence on the broadcast media was one of the reasons for the privatization. It was expected that the private radio and TV stations once free from government strings would be more objective in reporting and would be more pluralistic in projecting the interests of Nigerians than the government stations. This vision however has

not been fully realized as the government, through its agency the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) still exercises undue control over the private stations (Fagbohunlo, 6).

Although privatization of broadcasting in Nigeria has not achieved the desired results, it has been widely observed that relatively the private electronic media have fared better than the government media. Ayo (1) contends that the private stations like AIT, Channels, Ray Power etc. From the foregoing, one would see that the Nigerian mass media has over the years contributed both positively and negatively to the promotion of national integration. On the negative side some media outfits use the information disseminating machinery for propaganda and as weapons of attacks against their rivals thereby provoking more crises. This has largely constrained the liberty of journalists in providing truthful, fair and objective reports.

Language as the Media Tool for Managing Crisis: An Assessment

The most basic and valuable tool journalists use to dispense information is language. Journalists use language in packaging and disseminating news. With language, they make great impressions on the minds of his listeners or readers. They can evoke feelings of affection, disaffection, appreciation, sympathy, apathy etc. among their audience. These impressions can culminate in opinions. In this regard, language plays an important role in opinion information.

The work of the journalist goes beyond the mere provision of information to dissecting or analyzing issues and putting them in perspectives for public consumption. With this, the journalist provides the context that determines what people will think about an issue and gives them a basis to evaluate the issue. This brings to mind the agenda setting role of the media. Sambe (186) quotes Severin and Tankard's definition of agenda setting as "the idea that the news media by their display of news come to determine the issue the public thinks about or talks about." Sambe (186) further asserts that the media exercises the agenda setting role by giving prominence to issues through headline displays, pictures, layout in newspapers and magazines or timing on radio and television. When certain issues are emphasized by the mass media, the attention of the public is drawn to those issues and the issues which ordinarily would have been insignificant become topical issues among the public. In this vein, the mass media directs discourse and influences opinions. Public opinions may spur reactions, for example, a public opinion on an issue can lead to conflict generation or resolution, protests, decision making etc.

Against this background, we will address the question, how does the mass media use language in disseminating information in the face of political crisis? With the instrument of language at their disposal, journalists manipulate news to suit various purposes. According to Iwokwagh (7), "news manipulation entails an abnormal control or undue influence of news usually through subtle, clever but unfair means. It is an unprofessional method of gate keeping in that it all about

slanting, hoisting, polishing, embellishment and even ‘killing’ of news stories usually for particular gains.” In simpler words, it is reshaping or ‘adulterating’ news to achieve a particular purpose. News manipulation occurs in various forms:

Misrepresentation of facts: Nigerian journalists have often been accused of misrepresenting facts. Sometimes, they are in a haste to publish stories to break the news or meet deadlines and they fail to crosscheck information to ensure that it is true. Misrepresentations may result from misinterpretations. They may also be deliberately done to achieve a selfish gain. Misrepresentations of issues have often triggered conflicts. There have been instances of interviewees saying that they have been misquoted. To buttress this, an example is given of Late Hon. Ayua Num, one time Speaker of Benue State House of Assembly who in an interview with News Times produced his recorder before the interview commenced alleging that he has been misquoted several times by journalists (Sambe & Ikoni, 307). The case of Senator JKN Waku is another example of misrepresentation. After several years of destructive military rule, the February 2000 edition of Tell Magazine shocked Nigerians with the cover headline: “We Want a Coup” credited to Senator JKN Waku. This publication came after Senator Waku granted the Tell Magazine an interview on 15th January, 2000. Somewhere in the interview, Waku stated:

For me to stay in the National Assembly and have nothing to do for the people who elected me, I prefer the military to be there...instead of allowing that, it is better for the professional coupists to take over while we wait for a better time (Sambe, 197).

Senator Waku did not call for a coup but regretted the dictatorial tendencies and perceived failures of the Obasanjo regime. The Tell Magazine however, ignored all other issues and gave prominence to the issue of coup. That raised dust all over the country. For a country that had desired democracy for a long time, it was a big blow. Although the Senate exonerated Waku, he was condemned by many other Nigerians. His constituency, the Benue North-West Senatorial District filed an application to INEC for his recall from the Senate and the Benue State Government dissociated itself from the Senator.

On the other side, misrepresentation can be advantageous in crisis management. The media can choose to report a low casualty by giving small figures instead of the actual number of casualties involved. This is to assuage political tension to forestall more crises.

Use of sensational headlines: The media is fond of carving sensational news headlines that have a marketing appeal. Catchy headlines attract readers in the case of the print media and listeners/viewers in the case of the electronic media. Sometimes the headlines are unnecessarily

loud and what is in the body of the stories is not as serious as what is contained in the headlines. In times of crisis like the recent post-election, Boko Haram, Jos and Benue Cement Company (BCC), Gboko crises the figures of the death toll including property were underreported. In the June 12 crisis, the media played a leading role in fuelling the crisis on the other hand and in controlling it on the other hand.

Use of Editorials and Commentaries: News editorials and commentaries constitute the view point of the news media on a topical national issue, and it is usually conveyed in serious language with appropriate tone and register usually conveying objectivity. News editorials and commentaries go beyond the straight news writing format to analyzing based on evidence. It usually incorporates the writer's value judgements. On the contrary, most broadcast houses use commentaries for propagandist purposes. They engage in sycophancy, praise singing of political leaders and always giving the impression that all is well when it is not. They habitually use very strong and colourful adjectives in adorning government officials, their programmes and intentions..

Use of derogatory Language: Journalists sometimes use derogatory language to paint personalities black and garner negative opinions against them. For example, the July 19, 1999 issue of the News Magazine had the cover headline: "The Face of a Liar." with the photograph of Salisu Buhari, former Speaker of Representatives. The inside heading was "The Crook in the House" granting that Buhari was guilty of the forgery charge against him did not warrant the use of abusive words against him. Journalists do report facts without causing injury to personalities. The mass media have also been used as tools of assault. This is common during election campaigns when politicians try to make the candidacy of the opponents less appealing.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, we maintain that the Nigerian mass media has not lived up to expectations in the management of crisis politically. It has deviated from its original role of promoting national integration to being a tool of division. It has often done this by wrongly influencing public opinions, alienating some sections of Nigerians in the reportage of issues, misrepresentation of facts, fuelling of crisis with the use of inciting language. The media has also been fond of using language as the weapon to perpetuate these issues. This however does not mean that the mass media has not contributed positively to national development and crisis management. Although this has not been well emphasized in the paper, we must note that some media at various times in the Nigerian political history has staked the lives of their workers by presenting truthful and objective reports. Some media houses have exposed corrupt deals of government officials and have contributed to their being properly tried and punished by the law courts.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the concluding position of this paper, we would also like to make the following suggestions.

Media owners including government should give those running the organization a free hand in reporting. The idea of interfering in the affairs of the media for selfish and manipulative purposes should be stopped. On their parts, journalists should be guided by the ethics of the profession to do their jobs creditably and avoid reportage that can create disaffection and lead to crisis in the country. The editorial boards of news organizations should ensure that whatever is going out for public consumption is devoid of issues that are capable of causing or aggravating crisis.

Journalists should undergo training in the correct and effective use of language. They should avoid using language that has abusive tendencies. They should ensure objective reporting and make efforts to knit the country together.

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