REALITY TELEVISION AND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA: DAWN IN THE CREEKS AS A PARADIGM

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Abstract

In this digital era, when technology, innovation and globalization continue to drive major disruptions in different sectors, the media not exempted. With the advent of new media and the World Wide Web, fresh windows of communication have been opened up. One of such innovations, Reality Television has been deployed to foster participation of locals in their development programmes with relative success in certain parts of Africa and there is no gainsaying the fact that there is an imperative for change in diverse frontiers of the Nigerian polity. The reality show Dawn in the Creeks, directed by Jeta Amata, was set in three communities of the region-Ozoro in Delta State, Nembe in Bayelsa and Erema in Rivers State, It was televised on five national television stations and the local TV stations of those states concerned. The study has been anchored on maior theories. including Paulo Freire's Theory Conscientization and Critical Consciousness, and the Democratic-Participant Theory. Data from questionnaires was generated for analysis, to measure the effectiveness of the programme in reducing incidences of violence among the youths of two of the three communities, namely, Ozoro and Erema, The research work investigates the above-mentioned media campaign and underlines the need for a truly people-driven participatory development practice. It also concludes that with altruism and sincere effort on the part of would-be change-agents, Reality TV is a veritable weapon for social reformation and reconstruction.

Key Words: Reality Television, Participation Development and Development Communication.

Introduction

If the influence of mass media on society could be said to have been substantial a few decades ago, it has now become more pervasive with the advent of new media. Development Communication. an arm of communication studies, has flourished with the increasing knowledge of the power of the mass media. The emergence of new digital channels of communication does not only assure faster speed of information dissemination, allowing a huge increase in volume of communication, it has also altered the meaning of geographical distance and provided opportunities for interactive communication. This development has also signaled a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources. Journalists, producers and other media practitioners are taking advantage of the new media to involve the erstwhile audience into the programme making process, thereby involving them in charting the course of experiences that would engender change in their personal lives and in society.

This ability of digital media to offer platforms of convergence is proving invaluable to development media practitioners and the propagation of Participatory Development. In his essay on participation, Majid Rahnema notes that following the recommendations of their own experts, a number of major international aid organizations agreed that development projects had often floundered because people were left out. According to Rahnema, "it was found that, whenever people were locally involved, and actively participating, in the projects, much more was achieved with much less, even in sheer financial terms" (117). He opines that Participatory Action Research PAR theorists advocate participation as the only way to save development from degenerating into a bureaucratic, top-down and dependency creating institution (120).

The theatre has been identified as one of the media for engendering participatory development and even more so in these era of digital possibilities. Throughout the history of theatre, there have existed varying views as to its purpose and significance. Indeed, emphasis is often being placed on the entertainment value of theatre, consequently, the value and potential of the theatre as an agent of change has been largely overlooked and relegated in some quarters. However, ever since ancient times when primitive man first attempted to use ritual and mimesis to ensure the stability and sustainability of his society, theatre has always served a purpose which is to enhance the quality of life of its society.

Reality Television, a relatively new mode of mass communication which often utilizes web and mobile based technologies of the new media, has become very propitious in galvanizing participatory development. Dawn in the Creeks, is one of such programmes, produced through a collaboration between the United States Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), the Stakeholders Democracy Network and a popular Nigerian film maker Jeta Amata, to reduce the likelihood of mass violence in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The programme utilizes a combination of the reality television documentary format and the benefits of digital technology to teach the youths of Niger Delta how to address their problems with film.

This study takes a critical look at Amata's application of the Reality TV format in their bid to achieve behavior change and combat the violent tendencies among the youths of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It also seeks to determine how propitious the programme format could be to the present government's Change Agenda.

Reality Television: An Overview

Reality television as a form of mass media shares a vital quality with other social media which employ web and mobile based technologies. These internet-based applications support dialogue and introduce substantial and pervasive changes to organizations, communication between communities individuals, allowing for the creation and exchange of usergenerated content. By definition, Reality TV is essentially unscripted programming that, purportedly, does not employ professional actors and focuses on footage of real events or situations. It is non-fictional programming in which portrayal is presumed to present current, historical events or circumstances. however, unlike other programme types in this category, like the Documentary, the intent is not to inform but to entertain. Oxford Dictionaries .com defines Reality shows as television programming in which "ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative. Unlike scripted shows like sitcoms, dramas, and newscasts, reality television does not rely on writers and actors, and much of the show is run by the producer and a team of film editors.

Again, Reality shows differ from other programming such as documentaries, interviews, vox populi, and even talk shows in the sense that a 'situation' is created and 'ordinary' or real people (not actors) are placed in that situation to respond 'naturally' or handle the way they would. They are continuously filmed and beamed out to the public. However, the success of these shows depends largely on the ability of the producer to select a cast that the audience will respond to. They must be people who will mirror the society of the day and at the same time be stereotypical enough to cause a sensation, engender conflicts and tension to raise ratings. Reality shows also often use a host to run the programme or a narrator to tell the story or set the stage for events that are about to unfold. It relies on the camera capturing everything as it happens, whether it is shot in a real setting with real people (much like a documentary), in front of a live studio audience that participates in the programme or uses hidden surveillance.

Reality Television in the context of this paper refers to an unscripted and recorded presentation, whether dramatic or documentary, which uses untrained actors (or ordinary people) in ordinary or arranged settings, responding to situations in an unrehearsed manner. Such a recorded material may also employ web and mobile based technologies which would introduce subtle and pervasive changes to communication between the actors, the producers and the audience, especially allowing for creation and exchange of user-generated content.

Participatory Development

Participatory methods are very much in vogue in development thinking and practice. Development agencies, from grassroots organizations to the World Bank, appear to have embraced the concept of participation in development planning and implementation and the major actor who is expected to participle in the process is the community. Participatory Development, or what is sometimes referred to as popular participation, is a process by which people take an active and influential part in shaping decisions that affect their lives. This implies that development project will address those community or group needs upon which members have chosen to focus and that all phases of the development process will be characterized by the active involvement of the community or organization members.

The words 'participation' or 'participatory', according to Majid Rahnema, appeared for the first time in development lexicon, during the late 1950s. The social activists and field workers encountered much disappointments which they came to attribute to the fact that the populations concerned were kept out of the processes related to the design, formulations and implementation of development projects. In their great majority, they started to advocate the end of 'top-down' strategies of action and the inclusion of participation and participatory methods of interaction as an essential dimension of development... It was found out that

whenever people were locally involved, and actively participating, in the projects, much more was achieved with less, even in sheer financial terms (117).

Richard S. Ondrik in an online essay on "Participatory Approaches to National development" notes that participatory development is a process through which stakeholders can influence and share control over development initiatives, and over the decisions and resources that affect themselves (1). Participatory development seeks to engage local populations in development projects. It is aimed at giving the poor, in particular, a part in initiatives designed for their benefit, in the hope that development will be more sustainable and successful if local populations are engaged in fostering them. As an alternative to mainstream "top-down" development pattern which prevails in many parts of the world, especially in third world countries, it can be used to provide basic services more effectively, pursue advocacy goals, monitor progress towards goals and facilitate reflection and learning among local groups in communities.

There are clearly identifiable stages in participatory development project. Tufte and Mefalopulos identify four key stages:

- 1. The Research Stage where the development problem is accurately defined. All relevant stake holders can be involved in the process. The research around the development problem can include studying previous experiences, individual and community knowledge and attitudes, existing policies and other relevant contextual information related to socio-economic conditions, culture, spirituality, gender, and so on.
- 2. Design stage Here the actual activities are defined. Active participation by local citizens and other stake holders aims to enhance both the quality and relevance of the suggested interventions.

- 3. Implementation stage- This is when the planned intervention is implemented. Participation at this stage increases commitment, relevance and sustainability
- 4. Evaluation Stage For a meaningful evaluation, indicators and measurements should be defined in a participatory process at the very beginning of the initiative involving all relevant stake holders (6).

In this work, participatory development simply refers to a development project or programme addressing a major need in the existence of a people, in which they, as major stakeholders, play the leading role in its formulation or planning and execution.

Development Communication

In simple parlance, development describes the process of growth or progress, to full potentiality, of an object or organism. It is a process of change, often natural, as the organism evolves into different stages of being, till it achieves its full potential.

Transposed from the biological to the social arena, the development of a people will always imply a change from a simpler to a more complex, from a worse to a better, from a lower to a higher state particularly in terms of infrastructure, inter and intra communal associations and economic indices.

For many years, global institutions erroneously equated development with infrastructural increase, especially along western paradigms. Others weigh all countries on the economic scale and declare them to be "developed", "developing" or "least developed", based primarily, on the growth or otherwise of their respective gross national products (G N P). Richard Kagolobia, along with other development experts, argue that in a bid to systematically follow the footsteps of the western development model, development planners in the south, sometimes, trample upon the indigenous or local knowledge base while implementing development projects. This is because traditional societies and their knowledge matrix have been

superciliously associated with backwardness. paganism. subsistence, conservatism, lack of ambition and irrationality (214). It was in recognition of the narrowness of this Western economic paradigm that development economists broadened and redefined the concept in terms of reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment within the context of a growing economy. Furthermore, recent development strategists conclude development is a participatory process. According to Luke Uche. development is centered on people; development is based on the culture, values, traditions and orientations of the people being programmed to accept a new social order; development is based on an even flow of information (13).

an approach communication. development to communication provides groups of people or communities with information which they can use to achieve a better quality of life. Such information provided, though applied as part of community development, must also address needs which the people themselves For Chinvere Okunna. effective development identified. communication revolves around the concept of mobilization which she defines as being majorly concerned with rallying people together and motivating them to achieve the goals that have been set in a development project (295).

The highpoint of communication for development is behavior change, hence, the practice of development communication or 'devcom' comprises definite communication activities, which must be undertaken as carefully planned aspects of a coordinated process. This involves, starting with pre-project research, designing relevant messages, carrying out an information campaign, then "marketing" the project through advocacy. The process also involves eliciting popular participation and the end which is to achieve attitude and behavior change.

Theoretical Framework:

Paulo Freire's Theory of Conscientization and Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire found a direct correlation in the process of educating with political relationship in a society, which was a revolutionary approach to understanding of social systems. This engendered a movement that manifested in diverse forms, one of which is the radical grassroots community theatre in Brazil championed by Augusto Boal. In his 1970 publication, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire champions that education should allow the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity, in turn overcoming their condition. However, he acknowledges that for this to occur, the oppressed individual must play a role in their liberation. Freire posits that students must be made aware of the 'politics' that surround education. The way students are taught and what they are taught serves a political agenda. He thus attacked the banking model of education in which the student was viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher noting that it transforms students into receiving objects or receptacles.

This 'banking' model, Freire says "attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" He goes on to propose that the learner must develop a "critical consciousness" in order to recognize that the system of dominant social relations has created in him a "culture of silence" which instills a negative, silenced and suppressed self-image.

Democratic-Participant Theory

Democratic-participant theory was proposed in recognition of new media developments and of increasing criticism of the dominance of the main mass media by private or public monopolies. It is an answer to a call from the 1960's onwards for alternative, grass-roots media, expressing the needs of citizens. The theory supports "the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community, interest groups or subculture" (Aggarwai and Gupta, 47), It also challenged the necessity for and desirability of uniform, centralized, high cost, commercialized, professionalized or state-controlled media. In their place, multiple, small-scale, local, non-institutional, committed media should be encouraged which link senders to receivers and also favor horizontal patterns of interaction.

The practical expressions of the theory are many and varied, including the underground or alternative press, community cable television, micro-media in rural settings, wall posters Media for women and ethnic minorities. The recent rise of community media houses in rural places all over the African continent and beyond owe to increasing relevance of this theory. It reflects the market as a suitable institutional form, as well as all top-down professional provision and control. Participation and interaction are key concepts.

About the Reality Show Dawn in the Creeks

Dawn in the Creeks was produced against the backdrop of the still simmering and underlying violent social condition that followed the amnesty period for the militant youths of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. For almost two decades, the area had been embroiled in cult wars, and fighting between groups of angry youths, on the one hand and the federal government's joint military task force protecting the country's major source of revenue (oil), on the other. Oil installations were bombed by the combatant youths, expatriate workers were kidnapped and some killed, with many casualties from both sides, especially of the soldiers who were not at home in the marshy waters of the creeks. The result of years of reckless exploitation of the region's vast oil resources from irresponsible expatriate companies was a grossly damaged land from oil spillages and bombed gas pipes. Within the communities

themselves, political ambition, greedy leaders and elders, discontent and acrimony among the youths, bred cult groups who fought for control of settlement funds and hand outs from oil companies.

The Reality series is the baby of the United States Consulate General, backed by US Department of States Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (US CSO). It is a contribution towards reducing the likelihood of conflicts in Nigeria's oil-rich but violence-prone Niger Delta region. So, while the US government produced the financial backing, the task before Jeta Amata was to go into the Niger Delta region, visit local communities, select teams of youth and train them on the art of filmmaking. Afterwards, these young people were expected to return to their local communities with their acquired skills, equipment and finances to produce real stories around themes of non-violence, conflict, oil, life reconciliation, among others. Their movies will then be released on the silver screens with star-studded movies premieres. It was the whole experience of their selection and transformation from village yokels to filmmakers that was made into the Reality series Dawn in the Creeks.

Two seasons of the TV reality series were completed. The first three episodes of the first season largely deal with the recruitment of seven youths from each of the three communities chosen to participate in the exercise. These youth were taken to the Nollywood Film Academy in Lagos, and over two weeks, were taught the various skills they needed to produce films that addresses the peculiar problems that persist in their communities. Upon their return, these youths produced movies which were never seen again after the premiere in their town halls The Reality show suffered an abrupt end after the second season with many of the youth left stranded with no jobs to fall back on as they had abandoned their jobs in search of stardom.

Dawn in the Creeks as Development Communication

Finished works by the teams of youth participants of Dawn in the Creeks were meant for the consumption of both the youths and elders of the communities to foster peace and attract attention of authorities to their plight. It was meant to be an avenue to ventilate their frustrations while empowering the youths to take charge of the circumstances of their existence. However, the project fell short of expectation, perhaps due to a dearth of political will and structural deficiencies arising from failure to utilize the facilities of new media.

The adoption of the full interactive participation model towards development involves "beneficiaries deciding which development initiatives should be pursued, whether the initiatives were feasible – prioritizing those that were – and only then deciding how to carry them out, all the while keeping in mind the requirements for sustainability and ultimately 'self-mobilization' upon project completion" (Gary Coldevin, 238). In the project under scrutiny - Dawn in the Creeks, there appears to be a breach of this process as the audience finds the programme opening to a form of selection exercise for a project whose preoccupation or concern had already been determined. As much as the problem of violence and restiveness can easily be identified as endemic with the youths of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there is also need for the local participants themselves to determine if the initiative could be feasible as well as sustained. This critical neglect accounts for the inability of the target community to own and drive the initiative as well as their failure to continue the project when the development agents withdrew from the scene.

In his opinion, Jan Servaes believes the participatory model calls for upward, transitive, open and radical forms of planning that encompass both grassroots collective actions ... which is centrally conceived with human growth, learning processes through mobilization, and the basic aim is to involve the people under study to co-operate with one another in the planning and research process,

with the planner or researcher as a facilitator and participant (214). Once again the emphasis is on prepping the people to decide and plan which course of action to take to address their collective problem. This is probably why Georgios Terzis and Myria Vassiliadou in their essay on "Working with Media in Areas Affected by Ethno-political Conflict" argue that mainstream line of thinking behind 'media and peace-building' which presupposes that media agents are not supposed to 'take sides' on the conflict in question other than the side of peace, is problematic. They insist that issues like who defines peace, how is peace conceptualized, how many types of peace exist for the various stakeholders and how do these apply in particular conflict areas cannot be predetermined by outside agents.

Against the background of considerations like those mentioned above, one could easily query the change agent's choice of films to address problems that are essentially political but with no guarantee of reaching all the parties involved in the conflict. Clearly there is a wide gap between the people's perception of peace and that of the development partners. While the local participants believe peace lies in their control and possession of their natural resources, the development agents see peace in an amicable, dialogue driven resolution of the differences even though control remains with the ruling side. In this situation, whose idea of peace takes pre-eminence?

Clearly, the development agent, in this case- the American Consulate via the Stakeholders Democratic Network, SDN, knew enough about the accessible channels of communication of the communities of target as well as the political permutations at play within the region, which informed their choice of a television programme to address the incessant violence among youths of the region. However, these development agents may not have taken fully into consideration, certain environmental, social and infrastructural challenges such as power outage which may have informed the low viewership of the programme In Ozoro, only

50.2% of those questioned claim to have watched the programme fully and 11.4% saying they have seen parts of it. The result is higher in Erema where 81.6% responded in the affirmative with another 10.9% claiming to have seen parts of it. For a development agenda, this level of response could be better. Again, if the development agents had conducted an extensive and thorough needs-assessment study before designing their development message, it has not left much impression on the people, going by the survey. In Ozoro, only 48.9% of the respondents think the programme clearly addressed the issue of non-violence with another 14.4% agreeing it partially did, while in Erema 59.8% think it did with another 19.7%, acceding some partial success was achieved. Furthermore, 52.4% of respondents in Ozoro believe the producers do not understand the problems of the Niger Delta youths very well from the Reality show they watched, while 41.15 believe same in Erema.

It is easy to conclude that these results do not indicate great success at communicating development, by any standard. Reality television as entertainment education has within it, the potential to make a powerful impression on its audience, thereby encouraging growth and development. Chima Onuekwe, writing on the potential of entertainment-education to impact behavior avers that it can attract and hold the attention of the audience by engaging their emotions and then enhance the knowledge and skills of the learners so that they can reach their potential (6). Continuing Onuekwe notes that "not only does entertainment exploit the vulnerabilities of target groups; it can also be a way of persuading them at the emotional level to adopt behaviors (6). In the same vein, Arvind Singhal and Everret Rogers argue that the purpose of entertainment education is to contribute to the process of directed social change which can occur at the level of an individual, community or society (117). This is the same principle that the Classical poet and philosopher Horace, in 19 B.C describes in his Ars Poetica or The Art of Poetry, when he averred that poetry ought to be "dulce et

utile" or sweet and useful. Horace insists that "the ultimate aim of poetry: to please and to instruct; to seduce and to educate; to entertain and to teach" (343). A programme that is entertaining as well as educating can command the attention of the audience while encouraging their growth and development. This is because it can attract and hold the attention of the audience "by engaging their emotions and then enhance their knowledge and skills of the learners so that they can reach their potential (Onuekwe, 6).

Again, the abrupt conclusion of *Dawn in the Creeks* with total neglect of the need to evaluate, reposition and ensure continuity lends credence to the claim by critics of participatory who adduce that its popularity stems from prevailing factors, many of which are not altruistic. Majid Rahnema, in his essay on 'Participation', identifies various forms of the concept including manipulated, or teleguided forms of participation, and spontaneous ones. According to him, in the former, the participants do not feel they are being forced into doing something, but are actually led to take actions which are inspired or directed by centres outside their control (Sachs ed, 116).

The place of evaluation and feedback in a participatory development process ensures sustainability which in turn produces results. Reports from a media-community project produced in South Africa, Kwanda, attest to the power of Reality TV where there is altruism and will to effect change. Ramafoko, Anderson and Weiner, producers of the Kwanda television series, in their essay, report that a total of 6,776 SMSs were sent by viewers to the live comment crawler during the series. These SMSs comprised messages of support for the communities while others were responses to questions posed during the show. The questions centred on the social issues raised in the episodes. The viewers also commented on the leadership styles of the group chairmen. Ramafako and co conclude that in general, the SMS indicate that the Kwanda series content touched on social issues that were important to viewers. The SMS response also indicated that the

series was pitched at the right level and encouraged viewers to think about social issues in their own communities. They, however, acknowledge that while most viewers generally supported the series and believed that it could make a different in their own communities, some were skeptical about the sustainability of certain initiatives to bringing about long-term social change.

In addition to SMSs, a total of 94 letters were received from both individuals and organizations, according to the initiators of the series. Most of the letters were received from community-based organizations including care groups, youth groups, sports groups, NGOs and religious groups. These letters indicated interests in the series and some were requests for assistance with funding, managerial skills and material for similar projects. Concluding, the *Kwanda* team opines that the initiative was successful because it showed what communities could achieve if they organized themselves. It also showed that television can be a useful medium for making authorities and leaders accountable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If true change, such as is proposed by the present government in Nigeria, would be realized through development media, and other forms of arts, there is need for thorough needs assessment and understanding of the ethno-political origins and nature of problems that exist in target communities, as the first step to any successful 'devcom' campaign. Such assessment process must involve and should be conducted by the people themselves. While the change agent facilitates this, it is important to ensure proper ownership of the programme by the people and make sure the tools of communication are appropriately suited to the target audience. This is important so that every step of the development process is such that the locals themselves can carry it through on their own, especially when the foreign change agents exit the scene. Continuity is of utmost importance in any development communication campaign. All the skills and enablers needed to

ensure this must be communicated and provided to the people if there is sincere intention to engender change. Attitudes and traditions acquired over decades and ages would not be so easily abandoned and a necessary part of the continuous process is evaluation. This is necessary for finding out how well the development communication project is going. It must begin at the onset and run through the programme to ensure that set objectives are being achieved, and must continue even after the foreign change agents have exited the scene. For evaluation to be successful, a two-way communication process must be put in place facilitating a lot of feedback from the target audience. It is important that the development agent continues to dialogue with the people at every stage of the project. Feedback can come through inter-personal communication or SMS facility. Scrolling such short messages across the television screen while airing the programme would also encourage cross fertilization of ideas.

Development programmes ought not to not disrupt the lives of embers of the target communities without providing better options of sustenance. A situation where locals are pulled away from their normal arenas of existence and exposed to seemingly better lives only to be abandoned and left bereft of means of livelihood underlines an insincere and exploitative process that has nothing to do with development. If development should produce a change for the better in human, cultural, socio-economic and political conditions of the individual, and consequently, of society, then the process of communicating it, whether by mass media, interpersonal, traditional or community media, must sincerely aim to achieve this. Participatory development promotes ownership, that is, a group's right to decide how and in which order it will address its development needs and to control the design and implementation of projects they intend to meet those needs. It also empowers the people when individuals in a community have access to and can manage their own development resources such as information and skills training.

The Reality programme *Dawn in the Creeks*, if it had been sincerely executed with the intention to empower the youths of the three communities involved, could have raised a crop of youths who will be in better stead to address their challenges, engage government and authorities, and make room for peaceful intervention in the socio-economic problems of the region. Indeed, the unique programming style of Reality shows, evident in the spontaneity of content, use of real life people instead of trained actions, the educational-entertainment status, not to mention the added advantages of the new media and world wide web to facilitate instant feedback for purposes of evaluation and adjustment, can be invaluable for the purposes of development communication and the country's change imperative.

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