

Mass Media and the Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria's Multi-Ethnic and Multiparty Society

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Abstract

In the process of national development, Nigeria has made several attempts at establishing democratic governance. It accepts a multiparty system as one of the requisites of democracy. But as a political entity, the country also has to grapple with the problems associated with its multi-ethnic structure. The purpose of this article is to examine how the mass media can help in the sustenance of multiparty democracy within the country's multi-ethnic structure.

Introduction

The carnage that followed the December 27, 2007 presidential elections in Kenya was a grim reminder that ethnicity remains a major impediment to nation building and the sustenance of democracy in Africa. As Baldauf (2008) noted, "Just a few weeks ago, Kenya remained an oasis of stability surrounded by nations at war. The tourist-friendly country is East Africa's economic engine, a hub for global trade, and a base for international humanitarian work...But under the placid surface, Kenya boils with deep ethnic resentment that some observers say has been ignored for too long."

Implied in the unraveling of the *placid surface* of Kenya is the fact that the task of national integration in Africa, with the different ethnic nationalities rigged together as nation-states by external forces, is yet to be completed. The worst case scenario is to pretend that ethnicity as a threat to national cohesion does not exist. Baldauf (2008) quotes a Kenyan political analyst¹ as saying, "The matchbox was lit [by the vote], but the fuel was already there. There has always been ethnic tension within Kenyan society that has never truly been removed or dealt with."

As in Kenya, so it is in the rest of Africa, including Nigeria. Often described as tribalism in Anglo-European literature, ethnicity does not always translate to ethnic animosity, as the history of the development of indigenous states in Africa would show. As Uya points out, "the sense of ethnic exclusiveness and incompatibility so prevalent in Africa today was a function of the antics of European colonial masters as part of their strategy to 'divide and rule' over the Africans...Thus, a panoramic survey of the history of the major cultural and ethnic groups in Nigeria shows a tremendous degree of tolerance, mutual accommodation and borrowing among the groups" (p. 16). But the wrong-headed policies and political styles of post-colonial African leaders have done little to reinstate the spirit of healthy rivalry and accommodation that formed part of the features of pre-colonial African society. Thus, the fractionalisation occasioned by the colonial legacies of Africa have

persisted and influenced modern African politics, statecraft and democratisation efforts.

Many historians and social anthropologists indicate that there are about 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria (Uya, 1992). But the geopolitical reality indicates that there are more. Anam-Ndu (1990, p. 16) insists that "Nigeria is a plural society segmented into not less than four hundred and fifty ethnic groups." This is closer to the truth.

The functions of a political system can simply be summed up in one concept: governing the citizens of a political entity. These functions have, however, been disaggregated by political thinkers into political socialisation and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation, rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication (Almond and Coleman, 1960, p. 4 -5). The functioning of the political system is assisted by another entity called government, which is essentially a body that acts on behalf of the people. The people vest this entity with the powers to allocate the functions and values of the political system.

The problem

The more the ethnic nationalities in any polity, or the more plural a society is, the more difficult it is for the political system to perform its functions. Mill offers an explanation: "Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow feeling, especially if they speak and write different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist" (1959, p. 230). Why is that?

Two reasons may be offered here: One, there are too many interests to satisfy. Interest articulation and interest aggregation, for example, become extremely contentious. Two, there is always a temptation or tendency by the major group or major groups within that system to impose their will on the rest. That militates against consensus and, consequently, against the type of socio-political environment appropriate for building and sustaining democracy. On both grounds, it is difficult to develop national consciousness. Factional politics cannot promote national cohesion and cannot, therefore, foster national stability. To weld together Nigeria's mosaic of nationalities and manage it as a political community that pretends to democracy is an uphill as well as a continuing task. Uya (1992) says "each of these groups possesses a distinct language, some clearly identifiable cultural traits and a sense of distinct identity, which present problems for the development of national consciousness" p. 15).

The proposition in this article is that media involvement, whether organised or tangential, is a *sine qua non* in nurturing and sustaining a multi-party democracy in this manifestly multi-ethnic polity.

Elements of Democracy

The concept of democracy is often traced to the Greek city-states. But the philosophical foundation and practices of the Greek city-states were clearly incompatible with the concept of democracy that emerged in the 20th century. For example, though the ancient Greeks built their democracies on the public

participation of all citizens, they did not observe universal suffrage, because many of those who dwelt in the city-states were slaves. They were, like women, excluded from political participation. Besides, Greek philosophers advocated and practised rule by the elite or philosopher-kings. It would, therefore, seem to be more appropriate to adopt the American concept of democracy, especially with regard to the desire of the Nigerian state to aspire to democratic ideals.

The Americans conceived of democracy as government of the people, for the people, and by the people. The American theory of democracy thus places the people at the centre of governance. Without the people, there can be no government. Indeed, the evolution of the state system rested on what came to be known as the Social Contract, most forcefully articulated by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Essentially, the Social Contract involved a voluntary relinquishing of power by the people to be held in trust for them by a group selected by the people for that purpose. It is from here that the concept of people's sovereignty emerged. Rousseau "contended that the only legitimate government is a democracy, where people directly decided the rules and procedures governing their lives" (Curry, Riley and Battistoni, 2003, p. 33). Sovereignty of the people means that political power is to be exercised by the people or by their elected agents through free elections. The basic elements of democracy, then, may be identified as follows:

1. Government recognises that it is a trustee of the people.
2. The people have the liberty to organise themselves freely (in other words, freedom of association) in order to exercise their sovereign power.
3. Inherent in #2 above is the right to form political parties/associations.
4. The people must have the right to choose, at times and seasons decided by consensus, to whom they would hand the instruments of power.
5. #4 above implies that free and fair elections are imperative for the operation of a successful, democratic nation.

Multi-party systems

This brings us to the other major element of this discourse, namely, multi-party systems. From the elements of democracy postulated above, it is impossible for the people to have freedom of choice without a plurality of political parties. In authentic democratic systems, political parties are the organisations designed to link citizens and leaders. They aggregate and bring to bear on the system the electoral resources of citizens, who are individually weak but collectively powerful (Powell, 1992). They are designed to strengthen the participation of citizens in the political process. As Squire, Lindsay, Covington and Smith (1997) observe, "Broadly speaking the parties link the people and the government by providing organisation and information...The organisation is easy to see...The information is less obvious but no less vital. Parties provide information because the parties organise around basic political cleavages" (p. 269). These dual functions of organising and providing information include recruitment of candidates, nominating candidates, mobilising voters, contesting elections, forming governments, coordinating policy across independent units of governments, and providing accountability (p. 270 - 271).

The futility of conducting the governing of men without political parties has been clearly demonstrated by military regimes and the so-called non-party democracies that totalitarian African leaders such as Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia made infamous in the 1980s and early 1990s. Political parties are, therefore, essential to the functioning of true democracies. However, in multi-ethnic societies, two variations of parties are likely to exist. In the first paradigm, the major ethnic groupings would prefer to dominate by imposing their will on the polity by virtue of numbers. Indeed, Kuper and Smith (1969) argue that cultural diversity or pluralism automatically imposes the structural necessity for domination by one of the cultural sections. The second paradigm suggests a multiplicity of parties that tend to represent the many ethnic nationalities. As the experience of Nigeria has shown, the first paradigm tends to prevail. This variation tends to threaten the minority groups, especially in deeply divided societies like Nigeria's.

To build and sustain a truly democratic society, therefore, more parties are to be preferred to fewer, because such a scenario reduces the threat of one-party states that have been coveted by African leaders since the early days of Independence. Since the leopard cannot change its spots, African leaders have found a refuge for their love of one-party systems, even in democratic dispensations, in the so-called strong parties. The case of Nigeria in the last eight years proves the point, with the forced expansion of the People's Democratic Party. In fact, PDP partisans have openly advocated a single party for the country, with the same argument that was fashionable in the 1960s, namely, that many parties make the task of nation-building and development more difficult. This majoritarian approach belongs to what political theorists refer to as aggressive party systems. As Powell (1992) points out, "the aggressive approach sees it as more desirable to submerge such factions within major parties, or deny them representation" (p. 77).

The two-party systems that thrive in polities like the United States and Britain have evolved over time rather than being forced on the people. In other words, if different groups among the many political factions find points of convergence and decide to coalesce round those points, the number of parties shrinks as a result of consensus. Such a development promotes parties based on issues or ideology, rather than ethnic alignments or heavy-handed political manipulations. Democratic systems are thus enhanced when they encourage such alignments, for two reasons. One, they prevent domination by a majority or an alliance of majorities, a situation which engenders a sense of alienation by those who feel sidelined in the political process. Two, they prevent extreme fractionalisation, which promotes rancorous politics and often leads to conflict of the violent kind.

In summary, a multi-ethnic society bears with it the possibilities of unhealthy rivalry based on the defence of ethnic interests. Such societies also exhibit a tendency by the larger groups to seize power, not by force, but by virtue of numerical superiority. The party system in such societies is often used by the major ethnic nationalities to usurp the apparatus of state power by galvanising themselves into one or two parties. Democracy has also been defined as a system based on the

will of the people, whose power is exercised by elected representatives. A major element of democracy has also been identified as the right of the people to periodically decide by means of free, fair and open elections, those to whom they would like to give the mandate to manage their affairs.

Role of the Mass media

This section of the article will attempt to tie together the main elements of the topic: to explicate how the mass media can help in sustaining a multi-ethnic, multiparty, and democratic society.

Mass media as disseminator of socio-political information

The first fundamental role of the media for an open society is to gather, process, and disseminate the news and information by which the people of that society can be guided. McQuail (1977) suggests two patterns of media applications in developing countries. One is the "provision of a consistent picture of the social world which may lead the audience to adopt this version of reality, a reality of facts and norms, values and expectation," while the second is built around a "continuing and selective interaction between self and the media which plays a part in shaping the individual's own behaviour and self-concept" (p. 81). The media are the best equipped institution to perform that role because the complexity of modern societies defies the small scale functions of traditional communication systems or face to face communication. Of course, town hall meetings are still effective in small communities, but also especially in political campaigns in the complex situations. Even here, political office seekers rely on the mass media to take their messages at town hall meetings to faraway places where they hope to garner support for their cause.

But the intelligence that guides the people's day-to-day business, their sustenance, decisions and their hopes are provided largely by the mass media. Even the average African rural dweller gets a fair amount of political information, government information, and health information from the mass media, more particularly the radio, and opinion leaders who would have received their own information from the radio. As van der Veur sums it up: "In a region where functional literacy rates hover around 50 percent...radio has been the primary vehicle for the vast majority living in the rural areas" (2001, p. 81). He adds:

Since its introduction almost sixty years ago, the medium has been billed as the most democratic of media – "the people's medium": crossing the vast territories which divide people, linking people cut off from the rest of the world, expanding people's understanding and extending knowledge, bridging the gaps created by illiteracy, bringing economic prosperity to the poor, preserving cultural artifacts, and providing an outlet for expression (van der Veur, 2001, p. 81).

In the 21st century, the media opportunities are expanding. The masses of any society, particularly a democratic society, need information about the polity to be able to make meaningful contribution towards their own governance. Knowledge is power, and as the Bible authoritatively states, "My people are destroyed for lack

of knowledge” (Hos. 4: 6). Without information, there is no power. Indeed, when one set of humans control another, they do so mainly through the control of information. To free the people, then, they must be empowered. Van der Veur (2001) argues:

If democracy is based on rule by a majority of the population in a free and equitable society, then democratic institutions must work to empower people to make decisions within that society. The ability of the people to assert opinion without restraint is essential to this decision making process. Media freedom is therefore critical to the establishment and continuity of democracy and becomes a primary index of the existence of a democratic society (p. 81).

Not surprisingly, media scholars assert that the most important function of the media for society is the *surveillance* function, namely, the gathering, processing and dissemination of information to the people (Dominick, 2002; Straubhaar and LaRose, 2000.) Dominick further classifies surveillance into *beware* surveillance and *instrumental* surveillance. The former warns us about threats ranging from immediate - like floods, storms, increased banditry, to long-term conditions like pollution, political crisis, a depressed economy, high inflation and the possibility of famine following persistent drought. The latter, instrumental surveillance, “has to do with the transmission of information that is useful and helpful to everyday life... stock market prices, recipes, new movies, new products, and teen fads” (Dominick, 2002, p. 34), and success stories in politics, finance or economics.

The interplay of all these affects or influences events in the social and political community. Many scholars (Lerner, 1958; Pye, 1963; Schramm, 1964; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1977, 2005, and McQuail, 2005) have clearly associated the mass media with the expansion of the political horizons of peoples in different ages, environments and cultures. This association is underpinned by the supposition that people are affected by the ability of the mass media “to create images of social reality by which the public may structure their views of the world” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1977, p. 252). Limited effects theorists may have a bone to pick with this supposition, but even they admit, as McQuail points out, that “our minds are full of media-derived information and impressions...in a world full of media sounds and images, where politics, government and business operate on the assumption that we know what is going on in the wider world” (2005, p. 456). The ubiquity of politics in the life of contemporary communities makes this particularly relevant to the political domain.

A study by Anim (2004) shows that political news ranks at the top of the news fare of Nigeria’s most widely circulated newspapers. A content analysis of the front-page stories in the *Daily Times*, *The PUNCH*, *The Trust*, the *Champion*, and *The Guardian* showed that during the study period (February 1 – June 30, 2002), politics had the highest distribution of 60 percent. Crime rated 14 percent; Economy: 13 percent; Foreign Affairs: 8 percent; Education: 1.4 percent; Sports: 1.4 percent; Health: 1 percent, and Labour: 1 percent.

Indeed, contemporary political communication is more widespread and more embracing than what took place even less than 10 years ago. As Blumler and Gurevitch (2005) have observed, present political communication occurs in era of "a proliferation of the main means of communication both within and beyond the mainstream mass media" (p. 105). Contemporary communication in the political domain takes place in age of communication abundance. In Nigeria, the broadcast media system has expanded tremendously in the last 15 years. Today there are 97 television stations belonging to the Nigerian Television Authority and 37 radio stations of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria spread over the 36 states of the country; State governments run 40 radio and 32 television stations. But more importantly, from zero in 1992, private radio stations now number 17, while there are 14 private TV stations (NBC, 2004). Besides, there are 42 newspaper titles, and 34 magazine titles, including nine news magazines (world-newspapers.com, 2007).

The government-run broadcast stations may be restrictive in their access to shades of opinions contrary to those of governments; still many of them, especially the small outlets serving disparate communities in areas far away from the seat of power in Abuja, provide the people with local information that form the basis of discussion, debate and re-dissemination within the communities. Add to this the private stations, which have shown an overt desire to be seen as contending with the perspective of public affairs presented by the governments. In this scenario, participatory democracy is encouraged in another way. Political activists and advocates, struggling to "influence and control popular perceptions of political events and issues that take place in all democracies nowadays" (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2005, p. 106), find a ready tool in these broadcast outlets.

In addition, in this Digital Age, the information by which people make up their minds with regard to political, social, and economic issues at the national level are increasingly being influenced by information, events and issues that occur in distant lands. There is the Internet, where anybody who can create a web page can post information or news. There are the online versions of the traditional international media which are not only in competition with other sources of information, but also with their traditional versions. They are more complete, more expansive, and more open to inquiry - with their interactive capabilities and hypertext links to a vast array of sources. There is the almost ubiquitous mobile phone, now cheaper to acquire and still improving in capability.

Direct satellite to home television channels have proliferated in the last 15 years - including the British Broadcasting Corporation, CNN (International), Deustchewelle, SkyNews, China Radio International - providing access to information for Nigerian urban dwellers. The National Broadcasting Commission, Nigeria's broadcast regulator, has licensed over 35 Cable operators all of which offer a variety of international radio and TV channels (NBC, 2004). According to Blumler and Gurevitch, "More people have increasing access to non-national sources of entertainment, information, play, sociability - and politics. Politicians and pressure groups increasingly strive to reach and influence international audiences" (2005, p. 106). They add:

Advances in audio-visual media technology have instituted a more elaborate, fragmented competitive and commercially geared media system. This not only hosts many more channels but an exploding variety of journalistic formats and services, ranging from news flashes to conventional bulletins to 24-hour news...Moreover, individual citizens, who are better placed than ever before to relate to both politics and to communication as they personally choose, are more difficult to predict and master (p. 105).

Nigeria is a participant in this spreading internalisation of political information. As more people have access to these international media, they are being influenced to deal with issues in the domestic political environment in a new fashion. When Nigerians watch what is going on round the world on CNN or BBC World, and Fox News, or listen to BBC Radio reports about Nigeria, they are encouraged, for example, to react to violations of Constitutional guarantees in a variety of rights – political, social, and economic, all of which expand their political space. In the end, democracy is strengthened when more and more people get the kind of exposure to information that leads them to question and challenge the actions, policies, and activities of the authorities of the nation-state and thus influence how they are governed and how those who govern them behave.

The gain for democracy is obvious as this kind of better informed and more exposed citizenry expand. Blumler and Gurevitch (1977) rightly argue that that within a political communication system, a symbiotic relationship exists between political and media organisations, which are separately and jointly engaged in disseminating and processing information and ideas to and from the mass citizenry. There are also specific applications of the media, such as in political campaigns. In the last two General Elections in Nigeria, but particularly the 2008, the campaign periods were so short that the parties had to rely mostly on television and, to a limited extent, on newspapers to reach their audiences. Then “there is the continuous flow of news which carries messages about events that reflect positively or negatively on governments and other actors in the political arena” (McQuail, 2005, p. 524). In the end, the foundations of democracy and its structures are strengthened.

Mass media and national integration

There are also gains for national integration which emanate from the symbiotic relationship between the mass media and other institutions. Better informed and more exposed citizens tend to imbibe a greater sense of national belonging. Nigeria’s nationalist press of the pre-Independence era – when only newspapers straddled the national terrain like a Colossus, was held in high esteem as the protector of the people’s interest. As Ugboajah observed, “press history in Nigeria also serves as a history of Nigerian nationalism. The editor and the nationalist were one and the same” (1980, p. 16). But the rancorous politics of the 1960s gradually moved the press away from that commitment to nation towards regions and eventually to loyalties to the many ethnic groupings by the end of the sixties, especially after the Civil War.

However, the politics of the 1990s has tended to spawn a different attitude among the politically-minded. Data provided by Anim (2004) and Udoakah (1998) suggest, among other things, that broad geopolitical consensus has become more important than ethnic affiliation in Nigerian politics, especially in major national political issues:

Ethnicity may have lost its attraction as a major element in national politics. It is either that politicians no longer want to be seen as "tribal warlords" or that the transformation of the country from a four-region federation to a 36-state structure has eroded the hegemony of the major tribal groupings, the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo. Rather, it appears more fashionable to be identified as a part of major regional blocs that cut across tribal sections (Anim, 2004, p. 80).

A new sense of associational loyalty has increasingly chipped away at ethnic loyalty. In an analysis of newspaper coverage of a major national issue, namely, the decision by former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002 to seek re-election for a second term, **ethnic interest** was used as one of the categories for the analysis. Out of 283 editorials items used for the analysis, only three out of the five newspapers analysed had entries under the **ethnic interest** category: *Daily Trust* showed 2 entries, *The Guardian* - 2 entries, *The PUNCH* - 4, *Daily Champion* - 0, and *Daily Times* - 0. This finding was consistent with findings from Udoakah's study (1998) of political cartoons, which among other things, sought to find out whether the messages in the cartoons contained elements of **ethnic prejudice**. The *Daily Times* and *The PUNCH* were studied for the periods August 1, 1981 - October 1, 1982 and August 27, 1988 to August 27, 1989. At the end the following entries were observed with regard to ethnic prejudice: 14%, 0%, 8% and 5%.

Whether these findings are attributed directly to the influence of the media, there is no doubt that a relationship exists between a more politically enlightened populace nourished by an open and vibrant media system and a reasonably cohesive polity. So is there a relationship between a populace that is shielded from regular, positive media messages either by acts of omission or commission and an unstable political community. For, in any multi-ethnic society, the media play a distinct role in the process of national and social integration. In discussing the theory of social integration as an organising principle, Allen (1977) identifies two levels of integration - functional integration and normative integration. Indeed, the media's function of gathering, processing and disseminating information is a functional integration principle. By definition, a nation is a complex society, but a multi-ethnic and multiparty society that also pretends to democratic principles is even more complex. On that scale, "face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction ceases to be feasible as the main communicative channel" (Allen, 1977, p. 236). Then mass communication and other technological extensions of communication become the main means of coordination and consensus.

Normative integration usually refers to potentially integrative media content that provides symbols and messages that reaffirm social norms and values. The media provides collective representations, that is, the social symbols that promote

cohesion, solidarity, as well as that degree of consensus or common assent necessary to sustain an integrated social system. Again, Allen (1977) states: "Thus, the media are said to generate and maintain value consensus and to promote identification with the community and nation" (p. 237). In other words, the mass media, in generating and popularising symbols that promote commonness and well-being, enable individuals to associate and identify with a pluralistic society that would otherwise be atomistic. Allen (1977), therefore, argues forcefully that "functional and normative integration in both large and small social systems are at least facilitated by, and to some degree dependent upon, mass communication, even if not primarily a result of media effects on social systems" (p. 236).

The role of communication in nation-building has been a subject of long-standing interests among political theorists and statesmen dating back to early 20th century. Deutsch (1966) states unequivocally that, "communication of all types, including the media, is basic to the development of nationalism or a national community" (p. 101). Markovitz sides with Deutsch that "the growth of a sense of nationhood is a result of improved communications, intensified social contact, the growth of perceived economic advantages that would spring from a new unity... Communication grids...and information of all sorts brought more and more people together" (1970, p. 150).

Contemporary scholars of mass communication have clearly affirmed this integrative potential of the mass media for nations and societies in transition. For example, Dominick (2002), Straubhaar and La Rose (2000), Baran (2004), all ascribe to the mass media the function of transmitting values, otherwise called socialisation, that helps to create among the peoples of specific societies an appreciation of how people are supposed to act and what values are important to them. As McQuail stresses, "we can expect the mass media to tell us about different kinds of social roles and the accompanying expectations, in the sphere of work, family life, political behaviour and so on" (1977, p. 81). It is easy to belabour the point, but there is no doubt that any multi-ethnic society benefits greatly from the ability of the media to raise national consciousness through the images they present and the consensus that may emerge from them.

Mass media and the management of political conflicts

Another level on which the media help in strengthening democracy, especially in a potentially contentious multiethnic, multiparty environment, is in the management of political conflicts. Conflict management, including conflict in the political domain, is a dialectical process. Every solution to a conflict bears with it the seeds of future conflicts. Therefore, political conflict management is a process of continuous negotiations, in which concessions are made, positions change, and issues are negotiated and renegotiated (Anim, 2005).

In all these, the people may seem on the surface to be mere bystanders or pawns in the hands of scheming politicians. A systems approach would attribute political conflict in part to a breakdown in communication in the political system. The conflict management framework would then involve a restoration of adequate information and improved communication. If this is successful, the people are

made active participants in a very real sense. For it is the support that politicians and political parties get from their members and sympathetic publics, uttered or unexpressed, that guides them in this negotiating and renegotiating continuum. The information from which the people proffer that support and accept and offer positions on specific issues emanate, in a very substantial way, from the mass media. The media, especially in the contemporary Digital Age, present a very wide scope in this interest articulation and interest aggregation processes. Because political institutions are or should be the articulators of the people's interest, it would be difficult for representative democracy, which enables elected representatives of the people to act on the people's behalf, to thrive without the mass media. Newspapers in particular, which have remained the anchor of the mass media in Nigeria, play a leading role in this process.

Though the medium tends to be accessible mainly to the literate elite, it is still a major marketplace of ideas and thus presents a viable instrument within a political system such as Nigeria's that is yet to benefit fully from the enormous potentials of new media such as the Internet. The newspaper may be threatened by these new media in the mature democracies, but in Nigeria, where independent newspapers predominate, and have a strong voice, the medium still thrives as the major voice of the people.

The American concept of democracy, which was adopted at the beginning of this essay, is anchored on the belief that only a properly informed people can participate in the management of their resources and values which they willingly conceded to a government. The Americans as a community do not believe that democracy is possible without the ability of the media to provide adequate information and the people's ability to receive that information and provide feedback to those who govern them. Squire et al. (1997) note that:

The authors of the (US) Constitution believed that democracy could not flourish without a free press. In their view, the press – the term news media was invented in the twentieth century to include radio and television – is essential to enable the people to watch over government (p. 233).

Yet there have been times in Nigeria when governments wished there were no mass media. When a president says universities should not offer courses in Mass Communication or Sociology, or when he says he does not read newspapers, it is a manifestation of the antagonism of the ruling elite towards the media. That antagonism appears to emanate from the watchdog role of the media. That is why some of the concepts raised in this paper are more prescriptive than descriptive. Ogundimu (2002) implies this prescriptive dimension. Not only can the people benefit from media content by knowing what goes on in the political arena, but also the media play a great role in the crystallisation of public opinion. He argues:

It is not only in relation to the state that the media may help democratise...They have an influence on the minds of the ordinary citizens. This is true for radio and the print media, as well as, to a more limited extent at least so far, the computer-

based media and the informal media...A communicative space can either be formal or informal but its defining characteristic is the existence of an independent discourse that helps individuals to form opinions on subjects of importance to them (Ogundimu, 2002, p. 213).

A careful study of Nigerian newspapers for the last half of 2005 would show that newspaper readers received a steady stream of information on President Olusegun Obasanjo's alleged plot to stay in office beyond 2007 when his second term as President constitutionally ended. Newspaper editorials, opinion writers, outside contributors to the opinion pages, and regular columnists intensely focused the public mind on the controversy. Indeed, it is fair to state that it was columnists who did the infantry work in the war to stop the country's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) from amending the Constitution to give incumbents in the Executive Branch three terms in office.

The conflict potentials of the third term controversy were palpable. It could conceivably lead to a major political cleavage between the Northern parts of the country against the South. The chances were real that politicians who harboured the ambition of running for the presidency in the future might lose faith in a democratic system and turn to acts and activities that were disruptive to national stability. It is plausible then to conclude that the relentless focusing on the third-term issue by the newspapers helped to move the nation towards the rejection of any such plan.

Another strong tradition of the newspapers is that they also offer interpretation. The interpretation function helps the citizen to sift the information deluge by providing perspectives that give meaning and significance to public debates. Besides, as noted above, newspapers carry a wide range of opinions, both theirs – by way of editorial comments – and those of their readers. The editorial pages thus provide a forum for the expression of diverse opinions, thereby enabling views and counter-views to be freely canvassed and vented. The newspapers' institutional opposition (in formal editorials) to the third term agenda, views of opinion writers, and public input by way of letters and interviews may have forced the Nigerian Senate to finally take a stand on the issue.

In political conflict management, the newspaper provides a reliable source of information, a platform to trade contending opinions in the dialectical process, thus fostering the concept of continuous negotiation. Sometimes there is a sense of chaos in these back and forth contentions. But one of the "strengths of democracy is that it permits catharsis, by turning democracy's apparent chaos into a safety valve that supports rather than undermines the structures of democracy" (Bhagwati, 1995, p. 55).

The watchdog role of the press also facilitates the process of conflict management. The potentials of the communication abundance of the Digital Age also strengthens that role. Blogging, for instance, allows people to present their thoughts in some organised format which can be accessed by all and sundry if they need to. As Fletcher notes, "Journalists do grasp that point, which is why they have

started to use these social sites as a means of publishing information that they could not" (2007). Potential wrong-doers in the political system, aware of the massive possibilities of exposure to negative publicity – opinion articles, criticisms, letters to the editor, and mobile phone text messages to the media, e-mail, website visits and blog comments – may soft-pedal in their iniquities. The watchdog role of the media is also about protecting the public by preventing those with power from overstepping the mark. However, the media can also be viewed in a more expansive way as an agency of information and debate that reduces conflict issues to an exchange of contrary views. Thus Curran asserts that:

In this view, free media brief the electorate, and assist voters to make an informed choice at election time; they provide a channel of communication between government and governed, and they provide a forum of debate in which people can identify problems, propose solutions and reach consensus (2005, p. 129).

Conclusion

It is impossible to overstate the crucial role of the mass media in the sustenance of democracy in any society. But there is no intention in this article to give the impression that the media hold the solutions to the many political problems of Nigeria – or any other political environment for that matter. In fact, as McQuail observes, "Inevitably, the evidence for this process of learning from the media is thin and what there is does little more than reaffirm the plausibility of these theoretical propositions" (1977, p. 81). Squire et al. (1997) state that "if the news media lack the power to influence the fundamental beliefs of the American public, they nonetheless have a significant, though complex, influence on the course of American politics" (p. 231). However, McQuail (2005) affirms that "there is good support in theory for the belief that the news provides a good environment for influential messages..." (p. 525).

Such a role for the mass media is even more important in a country like Nigeria, with its many ethnic nationalities and the untiring efforts of some political actors to limit rather than expand the field of political parties and political participation. That being the case, there is a great responsibility on the part of the media to understand the crucial nature of that role. In an environment where there is little planned and controlled use of the media for purposes such as articulated above (as in socialist ideology), an even higher responsibility lies on media managers to direct the potentials of the media towards framing what they offer in terms that would benefit rather than disadvantage a nation-state in search of a stable democracy.

Notes

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