

Assessment of the Impact of Participatory Journalism on Good Governance Ugwu Nnenna Jovita

Department of Publication and Extension, Kampala International University,
Uganda

ABSTRACT

The operations of the mainstream media structure in most African countries, often leads to public disengagement in politics and mass alienation from governance. Public media are often too bureaucratic while private media are commercialized and none of these media systems serve grassroots interest in Africa. Media systems in Africa have reflected journalistic professional hegemony, through mediation in the construction of political reality; boundary setting in the public sphere; disillusionment of liberal media operations and perpetuation of the elitist political class, who are often alienated from their grassroots or origins. The Nigerian case is a typical example of grassroots alienation whereby most politicians visit rural areas only during electioneering periods, which come once in four years, to seek supports and votes. Political communication in most African democracies have thus manifested vertical or top-down model that prevents equality and leads to poor political participation of grassroots people. This has often resulted in voter apathy, low voter turnout, public distrust in leadership and a host of attendant social, economic and political crisis. Consequently, this paper evaluates the capacity of the mass media in engendering wide political participation, which is crucial to good governance in Nigeria, and on the continent at large.

Keywords: Mass media, Participation, Politics, Good governance, Commercial

INTRODUCTION

The roles of the media to provide accurate and objective information about political processes in every democracy cannot be over-emphasized because of the media's assigned roles in the societies [1,2,3,4,5]. Vivian [1] observes that the mass media are pervasive and this status makes people learn almost everything about the world through them, especially events and issues beyond their immediate contact; the media have the ability to disseminate information and engender citizens' political involvement in modern democracies and they are capable of influencing the populace on political ideologies [6,7,8,9]. McQuail [2] observes the roles of the media in political participation from the perspective of the flow of information about public events to citizens and exposure of governance to the public for awareness and criticism. It should be noted that the roles of the mass media suggest that they constitute an important institution, not only as vital information sources, but also for

interpretation, linkage, entrenchment of values, affiliation and expression, all of which would engender participation in democratic governance [3]. In spite of the ascribed roles of the media (as watchdog and fourth estate of the realm) in modern democracies, the performance of the mainstream media in engendering political participation in African democracies has come under criticisms [10,11,12,13,14]. McQuail [2] observes negative influences of the mainstream media as manifest in the dominance of information channels and resources by few voices in the political class and the commercialization of the media market [15,16,17]. The resultant effects of the scenario include promotion of sectional interests of the political class against public interest, vertical information flow from governments to the people, limited citizens' access to the political space and their discouragement from participation in political dialogue.

Furthermore, African democracies have arguably been modeled after politics of mass disengagement, with political parties setting election agenda for the media, staging political events, determining the flow and quality of information disseminated from the media to the people and ultimately dictating public policies all without the involvement and input of grassroots that constitute the largest segments of the population. At the levels of political processes and governance, the citizens are often cut off from engagement and negotiation about public affairs which affect them directly. This has widened the gap between leadership and followership in Africa -a situation that has widely led to leadership distrust. The pitfall in the mainstream media performance as regards engendering political participation in democracies has led to heavy reliance on the new media "as a potential way of escape from oppressive top-down politics of mass democracies" [4]. This assertion is an indication that in spite of the pervasiveness of the mass media, the dynamic interactions of media professionals with political actors, governments and its agencies have not engendered wide political participation in many African countries. The new media have thus been considered as alternative avenues that offer access to dialogue, negotiation and engagements in politics and governance. The comparative advantages of the new media over the mainstream media in the provision of opportunities for wider political participation are summarised in [2] thus: the new media offer interactivity over the vertical information flow of the mainstream media; there is co-presence of vertical and horizontal communication models, which promotes equality; the advent of the new media has led to disintermediation, which means a reduction in the mediating roles of journalists between political actors and citizens; the use of the new media has led to low cost of media usage for both senders and receivers; the new media offer greater speed than the

mainstream media; and with the new media, there has been narrowness of information boundaries. Burton [5] describes political communication as the dynamic interaction among political actors, the media and the audience, having its principal focus on the nature of the relationship between the media and government on the one hand, and media and society on the other. Thus, the media occupy a pivotal position in the communicative interaction among actors in the political space of every democratic society. A situation whereby the media are manipulated or dominated by the political class to reflect their interests and project their voices, without cognisance of mass engagement in political affairs, often leads to poor political participation. Such a situation is a commonplace in many African nascent democracies, characterised by poor governance [14,15,16].

The operations of elitist media structure in most African democracies, often leads to public disengagement in politics and mass alienation from governance. Public media are often too bureaucratic while private media are commercialized and none of these media systems serve grassroots interest in Africa. Media systems in Africa have reflected journalistic professional hegemony, through mediation in the construction of political reality; boundary setting in the public sphere; disillusionment of liberal media operations and perpetuation of the elitist political class, who are often alienated from their grassroots or origins [4]. The Nigerian case is a typical example of grassroots alienation whereby most politicians visit rural areas only during electioneering periods, which come once in four years, to seek supports and votes. Political communication in most African democracies have thus manifested vertical or top-down model that prevents equality and leads to poor political participation of grassroots people. This has often resulted in voter apathy, low voter turnout, public distrust in leadership and a host of attendant social, economic and political crisis.

Consequently, this paper evaluates the capacity of the mass media in engendering wide political participation,

which is crucial to good governance in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Participant theory

This paper is anchored on democratic participant theory, which that “advocates media support for cultural pluralism at a grassroots level” [6]. The theory suggests pluralism in form of multiple small-scale media structure, which aims to break the professional hegemony of the mass media that supports and perpetuates few voices in the political class. It takes cognisance of the need for political participation as a necessary ingredient for the growth of emerging democracies such as those of many African countries. Participatory media theory is based on the principles of “participation, interaction, smallness of scale, locatedness, cultural autonomy and variety, emancipation and self-help” [4]. These are meant to engender coalition of ideas necessary for good governance. The principles of participatory media theory aptly describe the nature of the internet-enabled new media in general, and citizen journalism in particular. The principles also describe the nature of the innovative media under citizens’ control in a political system referred to in [6]. Thus, in line with the discourse in this paper, there is the need for small-scale, innovative, citizen-controlled and participatory media, if popular participation is to be considered as a crucial ingredient of democratic growth and good governance in Africa. Participatory journalism is thus recommended as an innovative avenue through which popular participation could be encouraged and good governance engendered for in Africa.

Participatory Journalism and Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression refers to the natural and universal right of individual citizen which makes him/her enjoy liberty to express ideas or opinions, seek, receive and share information as well as participate in dialogues and debates about varied issues in the society without let or hindrance. Ruzic [7] defines it “a fundamental human right

enabling individuals to freely express their opinion and views, to take part in political or other debates opening the possibility to criticize old and propose new concepts”. Freedom of expression is fundamental, natural and universal, and includes individual right not only to express, seek and receive information, but also to criticize ideas, opinions and policies and suggest new ideas. Mihajlova, *et al*, [8] observe the scope of freedom of expression by identifying the classes of information an individual could seek, receive and share as well as forms of communication he/she could engage in. The classes of information are political, artistic and commercial information, and the forms of communication as oral, written, artistic and any other media including new technologies. These suffice it to say that citizen journalism as an internet and/or new media-enabled communication is covered under the provision for freedom of expression. The provisions for freedom of expression in international laws and treaties are similar, both at global and regional levels. For instance, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948 states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” This implies that every human being should enjoy the liberty to seek, hold, impart and receive ideas, opinions and information without any hindrance and the expression could take place through any media, including the new media. This provision is applicable to modern means of communication, which include but not limited to sending and receiving e-mails, producing messages and posting them on blogs, social and mainstream media. Such messages can be used for personal purposes, scientific or artistic work; serve as a strategy for

promotion of government policies and services or for any other political purpose by an individual or group [8]. The provision thus covers all manners of expression exercised through the new media which are carried out on the mainstream media. The application or domestication of the Universal Declaration on freedom of expression varies among countries of the world as political systems vary. However, the fact that freedom is a basic ideal of democracy has attached the crusade for freedom of expression to democratic governance. In spite of this, the facts that democratic governance is founded on the rule of law and the law does not guarantee absolute freedom to humans suggest that there are legal limitations to freedom of expression. These limitations are recognised at the international level and are also domesticated at national levels. An example of an international law that sets boundaries on freedom of expression at the United Nations level is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted in 1966 and came into effect in 1976. Article 19 of the Covenant states that: everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference and everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression. The provisions of the Covenant stipulate the necessity of freedom of expression as a fundamental right and set boundaries for the exercise of the right, indicating that there is no absolute freedom to seek, express or hold opinions. Basically, the provisions attach special duties and responsibilities to the exercise of the freedom by citizens. By implication, government can place restrictions to freedom of expression, provided that such restrictions are backed by law and are necessary. The conditions for necessity of the restrictions are to protect the rights and reputation of others, and protect national security or public order. The first condition takes cognisance of the possibility of the exercise of the right of an individual to freely express him/herself to come in conflict with the rights of others, especially to build and

maintain good reputations. In this case, laws such as those related to defamation exist even in democratic societies as restrictions to freedom of expression.

The need to keep public peace, order and national security gives impetus to the second condition for restriction. The law of sedition is an example of the legal restriction to freedom of expression, which seeks to protect the society. As the communication landscape develops and the human society advances, the legal limitations to freedom of expression have been expanded. This expansion has led to legislation on hate speech, protection of children, and protection of the right to privacy or data protection, fight against terrorism and organised crime, and state control [7]. It should be noted that the duties and responsibilities to exercise legal and necessary restrictions are vested in the government of every country as well as its relevant law making and enforcement agencies and institutions. Apart from the general legal restrictions on freedom of expression which apply to mainstream and new media, there are specific conventions that are meant to regulate expression on the internet and its platforms. An example of this convention to regulate communication in the cyberspace was the Cybercrime Convention, which evolved as a result of efforts of various organisations, nation-states and private sector to address the misuse of the internet and new media technologies. The debate in this regard was triggered by the growing wave of criminal offences committed through computer networks. The Council of Europe made up of members of European Convention-adopted the Cybercrime Convention on November 23, 2001. The Convention was signed by 38 member-states and four non-member states - United States, Japan, Canada and South Africa which participated in the debate and it came into effect on July 1, 2004.

Good Governance

In order to bring the term 'good governance' into proper perspective, it is appropriate to first examine the meaning

of governance. Governance has been defined as the exercise of political, economic and social authority to regulate human interactions for the well-being of society [9]. In this sense, governance can be seen as an attempt by the state machinery (government or constituted authority) to translate into concrete realities, the objectives for which a political society is established which in the main consists of maintenance of law and order and the promotion of the welfare of the members of the political society in all ramifications. Governance, according to [10] can be defined as the fundamental process by which the lives and dreams of people are jointly pursued by deliberate and systematic strategies and policies for the attainment of their maximum potential. Adebisi [9] cites the African Leadership Forum to have defined good governance as “a state of satisfactory fulfillment of expectations and the achievement of societal well-being by the mandated authority”. To the author, the attainment of good governance in essence requires accountability, transparency, the rule of law and respect for human rights; responsiveness, a strong civil society, free press, social sanctions and reward system, popular participation, efficient systems and structures. However, this paper narrowed good governance down to the parameters of freed press, which is derived from freedom of expression as a fundamental human right and popular participation among citizens in public affairs.

Participatory journalism enhances accountability and good governance. Furthermore, governance embraces all of the methods-good and bad -that societies use to distribute power and public resources. The problems of good governance are therefore a subset of governance wherein public resources and problems are managed effectively, efficiently and in response to critical needs of society. Effective democratic forms of governance ideally should rely on wide public participation,

accountability and transparency [11]. This implies a high level of organisational effectiveness in relation to policy formulation and implementation, especially in the conduct of economic policy and its contribution to growth, stability and popular welfare. The fact that popular participation is a necessary ingredient of good governance in a democracy suffices it to say that good governance is factored on openness which involves and engages citizens not only in political processes, but also in issues of public affairs leading to good policy formulation and implementation towards public welfare.

The United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) 2018 report enlists the characteristics of good governance to include participatory activities, legitimacy and acceptability to the people, sustainability, transparency, promotion of equity and equality, ability to develop the resources and methods of governance. It also leads to the promotion of gender balance, tolerance and acceptance of diverse perspectives and ability to mobilise resources for social purposes. It also strengthens indigenous mechanism, the rule of law, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources, engenders commending respect and trust to define and take ownership of resources; regulatory rather than controlling; and creates the ability to deal with temporal issues and service-oriented leadership [9; 10]. The fact that participatory activities come first on the list of the characteristics of good governance suggests not just its importance, but also, a prelude to other factors. Popular participation, no doubt, will engender wide consultations and involvements of citizens in order to create mass engagement in political affairs. Such engagements will enrich policy formulation and implementation towards the pursuit of public welfare in all areas of life. It is indeed the pursuit of public welfare that good democratic governance is based.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

At both international and national levels, the legal provisions for freedom of expression have laid solid foundations on which citizens' engagement could be built. However, the guarantee of freedom of expression is not without its legal limitations just as the practice of participatory journalism has its attendant ethical and normative challenges. Within the legal limitations of freedom of expression, this paper stipulates participatory journalism as an alternative avenue for political participation among citizens in a political system—a necessary

ingredient of good governance. As such, this paper calls for a high degree of media literacy among citizens for them to be able to fully utilize the potentials of the internet-enabled participatory journalism as a platform for political participation. The creation of increased political consciousness among the citizenry through grassroots campaigns is advocated, while increased political consciousness is also a necessary measure that will empower people to utilise online journalism in order to make governments accountable to the people.

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