



Community Radio in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: This paper traces the origin of radio broadcasting in Nigeria from the colonial era till date and analyzes the agitation for community radio from 2003, anchoring the discussion on the *development media* and *democratic participant* theories. It notes that the country is in dire need of community radio owing to its legendary cultural diversity of over 250 ethnic groups. Unimpressively, however, the country is one of the few in Africa that have not implemented fully the African Charter that recognizes community radio as the third tier in broadcasting. The government still controls much of the airwaves but has not demonstrated enough courage to make community radio operational going by the existing fuzzy legal, regulatory and administrative frameworks. The authors recommend that license fee waiver, low import duty on equipment and transparency in the allocation of frequencies, among others, are required to make community radio a reality in Nigeria.

Keywords: Radio broadcasting, Nigeria, cultural diversity, community radio, license fees.

Introduction

Radio broadcasting started in Nigeria when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

launched the British Empire Broadcasting service. Based in Daventry, England, the programs of the empire service were relayed in

Lagos to a limited audience. English language was the language of broadcast. The whites (colonial masters) and a few elites who understood English constituted its audience. Later, the Lagos station started experimenting with the re-diffusion service, by distributing programs to subscribers in Lagos, Kano and Ibadan.

The colonial administration, in April, 1951, established the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS). It consequently converted the existing re-diffusion stations into full-fledge radio stations. The NBS was condemned by the public for being bias and acting as a government tool. Nigerians had expected the NBS to be impartial and reflect the divergent views and multi-cultural/religious sensibilities of Nigerians. Hence, D.S. Adegbenro of the Action Group introduced a bill in the Federal Parliament for the conversion of the NBS to an impartial public corporation in August 1954. The bill was passed into law and NBS was renamed Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) on April 1, 1957.

Thereafter, Nigeria witnessed the emergence of regional broadcasting stations. The Western Region headed by the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo blazed the trail in 1959 by setting up the first television station in Africa which started operation on

October 1, 1959. This radio arm (Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service-WNBS) went on air in May 1960. The other two regions followed suit. When the military took over government in 1966 and ruled till 1979, the pattern of ownership did not change. The states that were created in replacement of the regions set up their own radio stations. However, the military government restructured the NBC and renamed it Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) in 1978.

In 1988 there was agitation for the deregulation of the electronic media Nigeria which continued till early 1990s when the military government promulgated decree 38 of 1992 which deregulated the electronic media by allowing private individuals to own both radio and television stations. By June 1993, the first set of broadcast licenses were issued by the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission. Hence, the first private TV station (*Clapperboard TV*) and radio station (*Ray Power FM*) went on air in May 1994 and September 1994 respectively.

Community Radio in Nigeria

In 2003, advocacy for the establishment of community radio in Nigeria became visible and loud. The Panos Institute of West Africa (PIWA) and the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters

(AMARC), in conjunction with the Institute for Media and Society (IMS-Nigeria), launched an initiative on community radio in Nigeria. According to Akingbolu & Menkiti (2008), the steering committee which articulated an action plan put Nigerians in the forefront of the campaign. A lot of awareness was created about community radio across the country. Workshops were held to generate interest in community radio. Several meetings took place to map out strategies to demand for policy, legislative and regulatory restructuring with regard to community broadcasting. In 2004, the federal government on its part, set up a working group to review the outdated National Mass Communication Policy of 1990. In 2005, the Nigeria Community Radio Coalition (NCRC) was formed by stakeholders. It consists of about 200 organizations with members located in all the geographical zones of the country. It has a common bond of social and grassroots development. The federal government went further in 2006 by setting up a committee headed by renowned communication scholar, late Professor Alfred Opubor, to develop a policy framework for the establishment of community radio stations for the country.

The committee succeeded in putting together a draft policy which was submitted to the Federal

Government for necessary action. The stakeholders are still waiting for the Federal Government to legislate on community radio on the guidelines for its licensing and operations. President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration in 2010 that the government will soon commence licensing of community radio is yet to come to reality.

The Problem

Since the advent of radio broadcasting in Nigeria, it has remained entirely an urban affair. Almost all the radio stations are located in urban areas. They cater for the needs and interest of the urban dwellers in their programming. The same trend applies to television, newspapers and Internet while below-the-line media such as digital large screens (Morah & Omojola, 2013, p. 391) are city phenomena. Paradoxically, over 60 percent of Nigerians live in the rural areas. It therefore means that majority of Nigerians who live in the rural areas are cut – off from main stream broadcasting as they are 'denied' access to radio. They are therefore voiceless and could not participate effectively in the running of their own affairs even under democratic setting.

In the same vein, the language of broadcasting in Nigeria is usually English. English language is an urban language and a medium of expression for the elites in the

country. Majority of the rural dwellers cannot speak or write in the language. The high illiteracy level therefore negatively affects them in terms of listening to radio. The implication of this is that radio could not be used to mobilize the rural dwellers effectively for development. News/information on development, health, farming, environment, knowledge acquisition, education, behavioral change and so on that could motivate the people would not be able to reach them effectively. This mass of the people will continue to remain poor and underdeveloped.

Against this background, community radio has become a necessity in Nigeria. The radio will be owned by the people, managed by the people and is not for profit. It broadcasts in the local language of the people that all will understand. Its programme contents will cater mainly for the needs and interests of the people. Community radio will therefore serve as change agent in rural areas and promote development.

Theoretical Foundation

Development Media Theory

The main thrust of the development media theory is how the media can be used in developing countries to promote development. According to the proponent Denis McQuail (2000), mass media serve as agents of development by: disseminating

technical knowledge, encouraging individual change and mobility, spreading democracy (election), promoting consumer demand and aiding literacy, education, health, population control. That the media serve as catalyst for development is not in doubt. If properly managed, the media can be used to promote development in all its ramifications. Towards this ends, the media will serve as agents of mobilization for development. As agents of mobilization, Rosengren (2000) observes that the media provide formal, educationally oriented socialization. He adds further that the media help to conserve existing structures of power at the same time as preparing the ground for those on-going processes of change so vital to any modern, industrial and post-industrial society and presumably, to all post-modern ones as well. Community radio is suited for the tasks assigned to the media under this theory.

Democratic – Participant Media Theory

The Democratic-participant theory preaches easier media access for all potential users and consumers of media. According to McQuail (2000), the theory supports the right to relevant 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 group or sub-culture.

Instead of a centralized, high – cost or state controlled media, this theory advocates small – scale, local, non – institutional committed media which link senders to receivers and also favor horizontal patterns of interaction. Community radio fits perfectly into the structure being advocated by this theory. It is owned by the community, managed by the community, broadcast in the local language and is not for profit purpose.

The Need for Community Radio in Nigeria

It is surprising that Nigeria, the biggest and the richest country in West Africa, does not have a single community radio station. In fact, it is the only country in West Africa without a community radio. Nigeria has a population of over 160 million, comprising people from more than 250 ethnic groups. Besides, about 60 per cent of Nigeria’s population lives in the rural areas, where access to the media is restricted by numerous factors. Some 51 per cent of Nigerians are not literate in the official English Language, making the existing traditional radio structure unsuitable for reaching them. Sufficient evidence exists to show that though radio has tremendous potential to engender development in the rural areas, the conventional radio system has failed toward this end (Moemeka, 1981; Brieger, 1990; El Nafaty. 1999;

Ojebode, 2003 & 2005; Yahaya, 2003).

One of the earliest attempts to use radio to promote development was pioneered by the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. Moemeka (1981, pp. 3-4) recalls that the university in 1971 created the Adult Education and General Extension Services Unit (later renamed Centre for Adult Education and Extension Services). The centre was to enlighten and mobilize the rural population towards development issues. Specifically, the mass media section of the centre catered for the educational interests of the rural communities by providing, through radio, information and guidance on such topics as health, culture, history, sanitation, business management, family life, childcare and politics. Development-oriented programs were created by experts from different fields and produced by the centre. The programs were then broadcast through the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), Kaduna. But as Moemeka (1981, pp. 3-4) observes, the people were made passive listeners in the programs, noting that many of the producers lacked first-hand knowledge of the socio-political, economic and cultural situations of the audiences of these programs.” He concludes by saying that the producers “were in the community but not of the community.”

The need for community radio in Nigeria stems from the inalienable right of the people *to know* what their elected representatives in government are doing with the mandate given them. It also arises from the failure of the existing two tiers of broadcasting—publicly-owned and commercially-oriented privately-owned stations—to meet the information needs and interests of the people. The development imperative of the nation makes the application and use of community radio imperative. Radio has been identified as the most accessible and participatory of the traditional mass media systems.

Ojebode & Adegbola (2007, pp.28-30), in a review of some studies previously carried out on radio as a development communication medium in Nigeria, raised five pertinent conclusions: first, existing radio stations have performed below expectation; second, listeners' needs and interests vary widely, and it is consequently impossible for a single radio station to satisfy everyone in a state or region; third, listeners want a radio station that is close to them, speaking to them in their own language or dialect; fourth, government's failure to provide enabling environment for behavior modification or change and finally, programme producers over-estimate the impact of their programs.

It is this general failure of the broadcasting system in Nigeria that has necessitated the clamor for community radio as the third tier of the broadcasting system in Nigeria. The advocacy for the establishment of community radio is being spear-headed by the Institute for Media and Society (IMS), with strong support from Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA) and the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). The partnership gave birth to *Initiative on Building Community Radio in Nigeria*. The community radio (CR) advocacy, according to Akingbulu and Menkiti (2008, pp.10-11), has achieved worthwhile results. These include:

- The participation base of advocates has tremendously expanded. From an 11-member steering committee at take-off in 2003, there are today about 200 organizations and individuals within the Nigeria Community Radio Coalition, the umbrella body which was formed by stakeholders in 2005. The membership is drawn from a broad spectrum of constituencies with a common bond of social and grassroots development. Members are located in all the geographical zones of the country.
- A strong awareness of the benefits of community radio has

permeated numerous communities. This has led to an upsurge in the interest and resolve to own/establish community radio and to demand for licenses and frequencies.

- Several international development agencies have not only appreciated but also expressed commitment to the advocacy as well as establishment initiatives in some communities.
- The broadcasting regulatory agency, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), has reviewed its industry regulatory instrument, the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, to provide wider accommodation for the licensing of community radio.
- The federal government has instituted three policy processes. In mid-2004, it established a Working Group to review the moribund National Mass Communication Policy (of 1990), while in 2006, it also set up Working Groups to design a National Community Radio Policy and a National Frequency Spectrum Management Policy. The reports of these working groups are in its custody.
- Members of parliament at national and state (second tier of government levels) have expressed support for

community radio and willingness to facilitate legal reform in its favor.

- Community radio issues have moved up to top priority on the agenda of media development in Nigeria. For example, CR now receives prime consideration on the programs of media conferences in Nigeria.

The Role of Community Radio in Nigeria's Development

Radio is the most accessible of all the mass media types in Nigeria. For instance, Pate (2006, p.27) describes radio as "the most patronized means of mass communication in Nigeria." Quoting the 1999 National Demographic and Health Survey, Pate remarks that 62 per cent of households in Nigeria own one or more radio sets. Things have even become better as more people now have access to radio stations through their mobile handsets.

At the moment, Nigeria is confronted with a myriad of socio-political and economic problems. Community radio is expected to play vital role in mobilizing the rural populace. Majority of Nigerians living in the vast rural communities are practically cut off from the mainstream media. They are hardly heard because news is about prominence. Therefore, community radio, when fully

operational in Nigeria, will be expected to give voice to the local population in the following areas:

Politics

Democracy is all about the government of the people, by the people and for the people. The participation of people in governance has been hampered over the years because of the inaccessibility to and unavailability of media outlets in the rural areas. In-between elections, people are expected to participate actively in public affairs, through robust debates on issues that affect their lives. Besides that, the need exists for constant flow of information that allows people take informed decisions on matters of public interest. There is need for the education of the rural populace on political matters.

Economy

Mass poverty, exacerbated by mind-boggling corruption, is one of the greatest challenges facing the Nigeria at the moment. Omojola (2010, p.25; 2008) notes that corruption is a “polygonized” practice as it involves many sides, including the media, that perpetrate it. One way media have been found to abet corruption is when they do not exist to hold politicians and civil servants accountable. The 2011 Human Development Index ranks Nigeria as the 156th of the 177 nations on earth. Corruption is one

of the factors that account for the poor rating. Poverty reduction is a major component of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but overcoming poverty in a country like Nigeria requires mass mobilization of the people for development programs. Only community radio that speaks to the people in their own language can do the job better.

Education

Literacy level in the rural areas of Nigeria is still very low. National literacy rate is 67 per cent (Akingbulu & Menkiti, 2008, p.12). Majority of the uneducated people lives in the rural areas where educational facilities are either non-existent or inadequate. Community radio will be a vital tool in adult education. It is difficult to conceive development in modern times without one form of education or the other.

Health

No nation on earth is free from health challenges, but these challenges are more serious in some countries than others. Health issues require joint action of the citizenry. Community radio can be used to promote appropriate health behaviors that prolong life and ensure disease control/eradication in the rural areas.

Culture

With the wide application of the new media technologies and the real

threat of cultural imperialism, there is urgent need to protect the cultural heritage of Nigeria. Community radio is one of the best means of preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of the people.

Challenges

A lot of challenges have continued to face Nigeria in her attempt at starting a community radio. The greatest challenge facing Nigeria is the lack of courage by the government. Nigerian governments over the years have not demonstrated strong political will for the takeoff of community broadcasting. The lack of political will is demonstrated in a number of ways.

Nigeria is a signatory of the African Charter on Broadcasting which recommended the setting up of community broadcasting as the third tier of the broadcasting system. It remains one of the few African countries yet to implement fully the provisions of this charter. Nigeria, till date, has not segmented the broadcast sector into public, commercial and community broadcasting. This is unlike what happens in sister West African countries. Even in Mali, a less endowed country, the third tier of broadcasting is further segmented into community, co-operative, confessional and cultural radio stations.

Apart from not implementing the African charter fully, the Nigerian government has not enacted the enabling law to start and guide the operations of the community radio. The NBC only made provisions for the operation and regulations of the first and second tier of broadcasting. Act 38 of 1992 and its subsequent amendment Act 55 of 1999 did not make specific provisions for the licensing of community radio.

Furthermore, the existing law poses a serious challenge for any community seeking a license to own and operate a community radio station (Ojo, 2006). The Nigerian law provides that communities or community-based organizations and other non-profit organizations seeking legal incorporation are registered under a trusteeship with the Corporate Affairs Commission. Any organization registered in this category will not have an Article and Memorandum of Association which is required for corporate bodies to carry out commercial activities. The implication of this is that communities or non-profit organizations do not qualify to apply for broadcast licenses for ownership and operation of community ownership radio station since they are not incorporated as limited liability companies.

The government has not demonstrated commitment to the establishment of community radio

by sending a bill to the national assembly, specifically making provisions for the establishment of community radio or amending the existing law to provide for community radio. Yet, a former minister of Information, Frank Nweke Jnr, in 2009, acknowledged that “the delay in the take-off of community radio in Nigeria is necessitated by the desire to ensure that appropriate legal, regulatory and administrative frameworks crucial to the success of community radio are put in place.” Three years on, Nigerians are still waiting. Not even the government’s declaration of its commitment to issuing licenses for community radio stations has been effected.

The former Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan had declared during the 8th biennial conference of African broadcasters tagged Africast 2010 that “we are aware of the need to expand the broadcast space and give more voice to the people. Consequently, the Federal Executive Council has considered and approved the guidelines proposed by the National Broadcasting Commission for the licensing of community radio in Nigeria”. Two years after, stakeholders are still waiting for the policy guideline on the licensing of community radio. As observed by Garba (2011), despondence has since overtaken the rank of the Nigeria Community Radio Coalition

(NCRC) as they await the realization of their dream. The headquarters of the coalition in Lagos is daily besieged with enquiries about what has happened to the presidential directive.

Moreover, there is lack of an enabling environment for community radio to thrive in Nigeria. The Nigerian government not only dominates the airwaves by its covetous self-allotment radio frequencies, it sees the public service stations as agents established to protect its interests. The government has a near monopoly of the airwaves in Nigeria- the existence of private broadcast stations notwithstanding. Majority of the radio stations in Nigeria are owned by the Federal and state governments. The two levels of government owned 81 stations as against 25 by private individuals.

Private individuals face a lot of difficulties in obtaining broadcast licenses in Nigeria. This results in long wait. The difficulties manifest in excessive high licensing fees being paid by individual organizations. These fees range from \$75,000.00 to \$150,000.00 depending on the category of license being applied for. On the contrary, the government pays little or nothing to obtain license to set up its own station. While individuals pay through their noses to get

license in Nigeria, the situation is different in neighboring West African countries. For instance, in Mali, radio license for community radio is free provided the applicant is a Malian. In Ghana, a mere \$100 (one hundred dollars) is charged for application license while authorization fee is \$2,000 (two thousand dollars).

The NBC seems not prepared yet for the commencement of community radio in Nigeria. Investigation has shown the officials lack experience and training in the operation and regulation of community radio. The NBC is right now pre-occupied with the transition from analog to digital broadcasting. This was a fall-out of its failed, self-imposed deadline of 2012 for the accomplishment of same as against the 2015 deadline set by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). A digital broadcasting demonstration was carried out in Jos in 2016. Since then, not much has taken place. Some observers opine that community radio enthusiasts will not have their dream realized until the digital transition process ends.

Frequent changes in the political leadership at the information ministry constitute a minus for community radio. The careless replacement of top government officials and decision makers has negatively affected the policy thrust

of the government on community radio. Concomitant to this are bureaucratic bottlenecks in governance and annoying red tape.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has identified the need for community radio in Nigeria as it remains the most potent means of reaching the vast majority of Nigerians who reside mostly in the rural areas. It is surprising that Nigeria remains the only country without a community radio in West Africa despite being the largest and richest country in Africa.

Without doubt, community radio will assist greatly in promoting development among the rural populace in Nigeria. It will promote good healthy living, agriculture, adult literacy, and environmental sanitation among others. It could be very useful in promoting peaceful co-existence in the Nigerian society that is highly pluralistic in culture and religion with over 250 ethnic groups. It will serve as the voice of the voiceless and give the local people a say in the running of their affairs of their country particularly at the local level. Besides, community radio will provide jobs for the army of unemployed mass communication graduates and also serve as training ground for others.

For community radio to achieve the laudable objectives and for Nigerians to enjoy the benefits like

their West African neighbors, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Nigerian government should immediately provide the legal framework for the commencement of community radio in Nigeria.
- Licensing fee should be waived for promoters of community radio.
- Government should immediately produce official policy on community.
- Government should reduce import duty on equipment for community radio.

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