

Shooting Ourselves in the Foot: A Narrative of Sycophancy in Political Communication

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Abstract

Effective political communication is a necessary lubricant for a healthy democracy. It provides an avenue for actors in the political scene to engage themselves in the political arena. Political actors employ this form of communication to actualize their various political goals at different points in time. This is evidenced in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999. The critical question here is, following the way and manner political communication is utilized in Nigeria's political arena, can one claim it is properly used? Thus, the main thrust of this paper is to ascertain the extent to which political communication has been properly engaged in advancing democracy in Nigeria. Using descriptive research method, this paper unveiled that developments in Nigeria's political arena have signalled the degeneration of political communication to mere sycophantic adventure-a situation where politicians now use the platform to deceive the masses by promising what they will never do, and also, a situation where the media shower praises on politicians and political office holders on what they have not done. Roads and wonderful bridges are constructed on the pages of our newspapers; electricity is, as well, supplied in the airwaves. Hence, this paper, amongst others, made a case for both the media and the politicians to see political communication as a platform to consolidate Nigeria's democracy by providing relevant accurate and objective information to the citizens for better decision making.

Keywords: Sycophancy .Political communication .Objectivity .Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The mass media and politics are interwoven. Their relationship is so intimated that separating one from the other is almost unattainable. This is based on the unprecedented role the media play in the arena of politics.

The mass media are arguably very crucial to the success of political agenda. Their role in politics cannot be overemphasized. One of such ways the media help in politics is by offering effective political communication-a form of communication where the media communicate politics to the public. Here, the media help to advance politics by bringing political issues to the front burner. Pate (2004, p. 129) agreed with the above when he affirmed that "The media play an important role in conveying the message of politicians and political office holders in their bid to capture and retain power, especially during electioneering campaigns".

The developed nations such as US, France, Britain and others have effectively utilized this form of communication to sell their political agenda to their citizens. The last election held in US where Obama emerged as US president and the recent election in France where Francois Hollande emerged as president are very obvious pointers to the importance of political communication in any nation's polity. The media have, no doubt, been very helpful in the political processes of these countries. They have continually ensured they communicate politics to the audience which has led to the growth and sustenance of their political systems.

For any country to make appreciable political progress, the media (in their dissemination of political information) must employ a great deal of objectivity, balance and fairness. All political parties and candidates must be fairly and objectively reported. Politicians on the other hand, must be willing to respect social contracts. They must at all times show their

commitment and sincerity by delivering on their campaign promises. By the time the duo is effectively executed, the political system of such a country is said to be on the path of advancement. However, when the media (as orchestrated by politicians) begin to engage in sycophantic adventure such as deceiving the masses by promising what they will never do and claiming to have done what you can only see on the pages of the print media and in the airwaves of the broadcast media, underdevelopment, Pate (2004, p.13) affirmed that:

The effects of sycophancy are many. First, publicly owned stations are misused to praise failures in the society, encourage dishonesty in governance and bastardize values of the people thus sending and promoting wrong signals to the public. Similarly, sycophancy denies the public the correct information on happenings in government and other circles in the society. It creates a false sense of performance in elected officials, thereby blowing their minds, when in actual sense; they ought to be told to tighten their belts....

The implication of Pate's assertion is that the media and politicians must embrace sincerity, particularly in their utilization of political communication platform to actualize their political ambitions, as anything on the contrary may result in sycophancy may ultimately lead to underdevelopment.

Statement of the Problem

From the inception of Nigeria's independence (1960) till date, particularly, during civilian regimes, politicians have massively utilized the platform of political communication to prosecute their intentions which have culminated to the emergence of several presidents, governor, legislators etc

In their (politicians) utilization of political communication to achieve political gains, promises and other social contracts have been signed between the politicians and the masses, which have always been deliberately thrown into the trash cans by the politicians after their emergence. The media on other hand have often been accused of partnership which has led to several unbalanced political reportage. Eze (2010,p.116) confirmed the above when he unveiled in his study that Nigerian politicians (through the media) use political communication to deceive the citizens saying all manner of things they will not do for the people.

The critical question here is, have Nigerian politicians not successfully reduced political communication to mere sycophancy by using it to deceive the masses for their own selfish political gains? This paper amongst others is therefore geared towards providing an informed answer to the above question.

Theoretical Underpinning

For this paper, conspiracy theory was adjudged the most appropriate theory upon which this paper is anchored.

Conspiracy theory holds that information is most often manipulated to favour some interests, especially, the political and social agenda of some elites in the society. The theory opines that the media conspire with some elites in the society to manipulate information in such a manner that it supports their desires.

As far as the media are concerned, this conspiracy relates with the views of those who claim that they exist. They exist for the process of manipulating messages in order to support those who have the means of production or social class (Ogbuoshi, 2011, p.337)

In line with this paper, the Nigerian media often conspire with the political class to manipulate political information in such a way that they deceive the masses in order to achieve their political interests.

Methodology

Descriptive research method was adopted for this paper. This method entails gathering and analyzing relevant data for the purpose of giving an intelligent description and interpretation of existing situation to prosecute a goal.

To this end, relevant data were gathered and carefully described to actualize the thrust of this paper.

Political Communication in Nigeria: Real or Sycophantic?

As pointed earlier, Nigeria had witnessed and is still witnessing democratic rule which has heralded intense political activities. In their bid to ensure political power, politicians utilize the media to communicate their political agenda to the masses. In the course of reaching out to the masses, they (politicians) make promises which most often are not fulfilled. Consequent upon the above, can we classify political communication in Nigeria as real or mere sycophancy?

Ovieme (2010, p.76) revealed in his study that Nigerian politicians have reduced political communication to a platform for deceit. He further contended that instead of using such wonderful communication platform to effectively engage in the development of politics, the politicians engage in lie telling and insincere promises. Onyebuchi (2011, p. 33) affirmed Ovieme's finding when he also revealed in his study that the corrupt nature of Nigeria's politicians has compelled them to employ political communication as a tool to deceive Nigerians and cling to power. This, Onyebuchi said, has misrepresented the real essence of political communication.

In Nigeria, we have seen countless situations where roads are well constructed on the pages of our newspapers and magazines. Other projects have been well executed just in the airwaves of the broadcast media. While the country is yet to see a visible development, politicians continue to use the media to misinform and deceive the citizens. This is the sorry state the Nigerian media have been reduced to (Onyeji, 2010, p. 41). Igbokwe (2011, p. 13) agreed with the above when he discovered in his study that political communication in Nigeria is nothing, but mere sycophancy.

More so, Okere (2011, p. 63), also, confirmed that Nigerian politicians have utilized the media to convey wrong political communication with the intention to deceive and loot the country of her funds. Kalu (2010, p.4) gave credence to Okere's view when he, also, found out that political communication in Nigeria has always been an avenue for politicians to dish out lies to the electorates just to achieve political gains.

There is no reality of truth in the kind of political information the media churn out. They are all calculated to deceive the poor masses. This has really made a mess of political communication in Nigeria (Nwani, 2010, p.91). Ajala (2011, p. 67) agreed with Nwani when he equally found out from his study that politicians have truly made a nonsense of the media and political communication in Nigeria by using them for just their selfish purposes which involve lying to the public to enable them secure political powers.

Furthermore, Ani (2010, p. 26) supported the fact that Nigerian politicians have misused political communications. He revealed in his study that political communication has been bastardized by the Nigerian politicians. Binaebi (2010, p.15) agreed with Ani when he also revealed that what we call political communication in Nigeria is sycophancy and hypocrisy. Binaebi further contended that political communication is not to tell lies and deceive the citizens, but to communicate true political issue (including campaign promises) to the masses. He stressed that the above is the ideal of political communication.

Sycophantic Political Communication in Nigeria: A Critical Discourse on the Causes

The degeneration of political communication in Nigeria to mere sycophancy has certain been triggered by some factors. The factors include;

Corrupt politicians

Corruption in Nigeria is one major challenge that has been ravaging virtually all sectors of Nigeria. The political sector is no exemption. In fact, studies (Alex, 2010, Apata 2011, Nnanna, 2010) have strongly confirmed that the Nigeria political sector is the worst victim of the corruption menace.

In times of elections and other political activities, politicians utilize political communication to actualize their political ambitions. In doing this, they make promises they will never fulfil. At the end, loot public fund for their personal use. This act has been a recurrent decimal in Nigeria's political system and nothing concrete has been done to wade it off. This has made it possible for politicians to communicate political promises with the intention of deceiving masses. This has fundamentally reduced political communication in

Nigeria to a mere sycophantic adventure. Studies, such as Alabi, 2011, Okoma, 2010, and Abubakar, 2011, all lend credence to the above contention.

The experience in Nigeria since the first Republic is that campaign issues have always centred on the provision of water, electricity, good roads and better health services for the people, etc. Unfortunately, those campaign promises for the provision of basic amenities have always turned out to be empty promises, as these are hardly provided. Experience has, also, shown that as soon as politicians are voted into power, they abandon the masses that voted them into power; pursue their personal agenda of enriching themselves and their relations and few friends to the detriment of the poor masses. This affects reliance on media political messages, which are meant to sell the candidates to the electorate. They regard what they see on the television or hear on the radio and what they read on the print media as mere empty campaign promises that end up as soon as campaigns are over. Therefore, whatever those politicians can offer in terms of money or materials are more important to the masses than what they see, hear, and read on television, radio, newspapers, and magazines respectively.

Media Corruption and Ownership Influence

It is very heart-breaking to know that most Nigerian media that are required to display a high sense of objectivity are co-conspirators in the degeneration of political communication to mere sycophancy. Here, most media workers collect money from politicians to help them deceive the public by showering praises on the politicians/political office holders for what they have not done. Also, media owners compel their workers (journalists) to proceed on such unacceptable adventure. This is why you always find situations where roads and bridges are constructed on the print media; electricity is supplied in the airwaves of the broadcast stations etc. It is in line with this that Nwosu (1999, p. 3) as quoted in Nwodu (2004, p. 50) wrote that the mass media have been characterized by "Partisanship, ethnic and religious chauvinism, blackmailing of political candidates, distortion of reality, corruption and politicization of the north-south dichotomy". What better way can we describe this act if not sycophancy.

Partisanship and Biased Political Reportage

Some media owners and managing officers often belong to political parties, and in their bid to sell their political programmes. They engage in several biased/and unprofessional political reportage just to win the support of the masses. Ogar (2010,p.80) affirmed the above when he unveiled in his study that some of the practicing journalists are in one political party or the other and this has led to biased and sycophantic political communication. Also, Ayibanua, 2010, Zaki, 2010, and Banki, 2011 all gave credence to the above when they revealed in their studies that partisanship of journalists (in terms of belonging to political parties and participating in politics) is a fundamental cause of sycophantic political communication in Nigeria. They contended that this is majorly because most of the owners of the various media houses in Nigeria are in one way or the other linked to politics.

Praise-Singing

Instead of focusing on the reality of the issues on ground, most media houses (especially government-owned) engage in sycophantic political communication such as praise-singing. They consistently display hypocrisy by raining all manner of praises on politicians and government functionaries without giving any serious consideration to what is truly on ground. This contradicts one of the essential media laws that demand that the media must not glamorize any government functionary or resort to praise-singing and sycophancy in the name of highlighting the activities of government.

Remedies for Sycophantic Media and Communication in Nigeria

To effectively correct the wrong utilization of political communication in Nigeria, the following remedies are, therefore, offered:

Media Objectivity

When engaging in political communication, the media must observe a high sense of objectivity, fairness and balance. They must do this by reporting political issues without any form of bias.

All sides of the political developments must be given equal attention. Also, political parties and candidates must have equal access to the media and the media must not in any way restrict access to any of the political parties. All forms of media corruption (including brown envelop) must be discrete while fairness and objectivity must be embraced. Also, media owners must avoid compelling journalists to engage in unprofessional acts such as corruption.

Politicians Must Shun Corruption

Nigeria politicians must display a true sense of sincerity and commitment by shunning corruption and embracing honesty. Instead of engaging in sycophantic political communication, they must show a real sense of honesty by delivering on their campaign promises. They must ensure they deliver on the political/social contracts they signed with the masses. Odo (2010, p.71) agreed with the above when he recommended in his study that Nigerian politicians should employ a high sense of sincerity for effective political communication.

Non-Partisanship

It is hardly possible for a journalist to belong to a political party and still give a true account of political developments, particularly where his party is involved. To this end, this paper recommends that journalists must abstain from partisan politics and focus on communicating factual and objective political events to the people. This is because partisan politics by journalists engenders sycophantic political communication – always exploring communication avenues (whether right or wrong) to secure support for their political parties. This is in line with the recommendation of Alkali, 2011, Onovo, 2010 and Bakare 2011. They all agreed that it is unacceptable for any journalist to engage in partisan politics as this will threaten the observance of objectivity.

Avoid Unnecessary Praise-Singing

As affirmed earlier, political communication must be engaged with a true sense of sincerity and honesty. This involves the avoidance of unnecessary praises of the government or any other politician even when it is obvious the person/government in question has not done anything to deserve such applauds. If we truly want to strengthen and restore sanity in our political communication system, this hypocritical and sycophantic attitude must be put to a permanent end.

Conclusion

The need for political communication to start witnessing a paradigm shift (from sycophantic to truthfulness) in present-day Nigeria is no doubt, very expedient. Considering Nigeria's drive to becoming one of the leading 20 world economies by the year 2020, the political arena must be much stabilized for such a laudable project to be actualized. We must understand that when there is no stability in the political sector, it spirals to all other sectors. What we get in the end is underdevelopment, since it is said thus; "garbage in, garbage out".

Also, Nigeria must as well understand that democracy thrives on the platform of effective political process. Therefore, we must strive to get our political system right by engaging in objective and honest communication of political agenda to the public rather than engaging in political sycophancy.

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