

**Quill Pen**  
A JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, ISSUES AND EVENTS

Annual Publication of  
Resource Center for Arts,  
Culture and Communication  
Development



RECACD



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ISSN 1540-7611



RECACD  
Publishers  
VOLUME 6, 2007

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A Journal of Communication, Issues and Events

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Sixth Edition ISSN 1596-7611

Printed in Nigeria at Jireh-Soft Graphics/Gabriels' Studios,  
4, Irepo Street, Challenge, Ibadan.

Cover, Layout and Graphic Design at Roboland Nig; Ltd

Tel: 07028044388, 0805617589

### Publishers

Resource Centre for Arts, Culture and Communication  
Development

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02-2012611, 02-7514600

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# An Exposition of Mass Communication Obstacles in Nigeria: A Lasswellian Model Diagnosis Approach

Muyiwa Popoola

## Abstract

This study exposed the obstacles, difficulties as well as problems that militate against the effectiveness of Mass Communication practice in Nigeria, adopting the popularly referenced Harold Lasswell's classical model of Mass Communication structure and function. The paper, conscious of the nebulous nature of the problems, used a careful selective and precise approach in laying bare the problems inherent in the WHO, WHAT, CHANNEL, WHOM and EFFECTS components of the process of effective mass communication, and offered solutions to the problems, so as to be able to use communication to bring about development in all spheres and ramifications of life in Nigeria, realizing the indispensability of communication to the successfulness of any developmental gesture and effort.

*Keywords: Mass Communication, Harold Lasswell's Classical Model, Life in Nigeria, Gesture and Effort*

## Introduction

Apparently, the Nigerian political, socio-economic, educational as well as other environments and spheres are replete with instances of problems and pressing issues, which to many Nigerians, demand urgent attention and drastic solutions. Consequently, it is not fallacious for one to submit that, it might be the thinking of some people that devoting an attention to any issue like the one raised in the topic of this paper, is grossly reminiscent of an untimely identification of somewhat less serious problem that, as a result, deserves no interest to the Nigerians who may have assumed the kind of jaundiced psychological disposition to the topic of discourse. What is important for the Nigerian government at all levels must be, to put in place, developmental measures and aggressive positive change efforts, directed at eradicating poverty, hunger, armed robbery, insecurity of life and property, murder and many other vices, arising from the

long-time ailment of economic depression and the multi-problem generated by Nigerian nascent democracy.

This researcher strongly declares that communication is one of the most vital factors in building or developing an organized, united and progressive nation; that without it, it will be difficult to have a national entity. Leaving out communication in the blueprint of any developmental effort will render useless and baseless, any plan, step or action that might be taken to bring about such development. Put in another words, in any reasonable theory, practice and framework of nation building, communication occupies a key position. All the aforementioned about the indispensability of communication is worthy of being scholarly submitted because of the obvious fact, as declared by Hager strand and quoted by Rogers and Rogers (1976) "that all human activities take place in a cross-fire of information flow and communication". This is true, irrespective of where the activity involved is: at the intra-personal, inter-personal, group, local, state, national or international level. Little wonder then, why in Nigeria, there is a national communication policy on development formulated by the federal government, as a framework, blueprint and reference document that spell how the processes of communication are to be applied to, and utilized for, bringing about betterment of life, through positive change and laudable advancements in all ramifications of polity.

Having provided an enabling rationale for this paper, suffice it is now to go ahead and examine the obstacles that stand on the way of mass communication in Nigeria. As it appears, problems in the Nigerian mass communication environment are myriad, and so, may not all be deeply analyzed in one academic. However, attempt will be made in this discourse to highlight and examine what are considered to be the most important mass communication problems in Nigeria.

There are many ways through which the above-stated task can be handled. Captivatingly, adopted for this discourse is a simple, direct but very effective approach: the Lasswell's (1948) model of the structure and function of mass communication. According to this model, the whole communication process can be reduced to the simple descriptive and explanative questions: who said what, to whom, in what channels and with what effects? In adopting this model therefore, this paper examines communication problems in contemporary Nigeria at the level of the "who" component, the "what" component, the "channel" concerned and the "whom" component. In other words, examining the "who" component, the problems related to the communicator or source of communication in Nigeria shall be exposed while in the "what" component, this paper deals with problems related to the content or message in the communication process. Obviously, the "channel" component analyses the

problems directly related to the various channels or media that carry the communicated message. Finally in the "whom" component this paper focuses on problems related to the audience or receiver of the communicated information. It is believed that by adopting this approach, there will be reasonable justice, albeit summarily, to the onerous task of analyzing the many communication problems we have in today's Nigeria. Now, looking at each of the components, what are the problems militating against the effectiveness of mass communication in Nigeria?

### Who-Related Problems in Nigeria

The "who" component; is very important in the communication process. It refers to the communicator or the source of the communicated message. The communicator is the initiator and prime mover in the communication process. Like the train driver, he is undeniably responsible for the safe and hitch free landing of the communicated message to the desired destination. as the main motivator in the communication, he has a very big task to perform. The source or "who" component is the person that writes a news story, an article, letter or similar write-ups. The "who" is also the person speaking to other people orally in such communication situations as press interviews, radio broadcasts and television newscasts. If the communicator is an amateur, the whole communication process is adversely affected. In Nigeria, it is apparent that there are many communicators in the communication industry that can easily be said to be ineffective. One easily identifiable area is the area of training. Many Nigerian communicators have not taken the time to learn the art and science of communications. Training in this area should not be seen only from the narrow view of knowing how to write news, features and other editorial items in correct language and style. Rather, should the training being talked about means having the ability, pleasantness and the oratory power to present programmes in the broadcast media. The training being advocated includes a deep knowledge of the theory, modern techniques and practices in communication. Spending at least four years in a journalism and mass communication school will fetch him a Higher National Diploma (HND) or Bachelor Degree in journalism or mass communication. This does not only provide the communicator with the above mentioned skills, theories and practices, but exposes him to the wide gamut of intellectual domains like science, arts, business, engineering and technology, which a modern communicator in today's sophisticated world needs in order to be effective.

According to National Universities Commission (NUC) report, there are now more than 60 mass communication training institutions in Nigeria. This would suggest that the Nigerian mass communication industry is fortified with professionals who know the nitty-gritty of qualitative communication. The current situation appears not so, as there are instances of half-baked communicators, gatecrashers, adventurers and charlatans who masquerade as professional communicators. The situation in any other segment of mass communication in Nigeria is not as disturbing and pissing-off as seemingly as it is in the broadcast media. In the past, before the deregulation of the Nigerian broadcast industry, broadcast media were being sufficiently funded by their proprietors – government at state and national levels. From the funds and subvention, the media were able to train their staff to become professionals especially in the areas of programme presentation and production in spite of any formal training that the staff might have passed through. In this situation, the said workers were programme presenters, producers and directors, who were discharging their functions in line with the philosophy of broadcasting. However, as a result of economic depression, governments were not (and still not) able again to release enough funds, from which the broadcast media staff could be sent on training. In order to buckie the onus of this challenge, the media had to resort to selling their air-time to freelancers, so as to generate funds needed to meet their financial commitments. Now, the so called freelancers are apparently amateurs and inexperienced individuals, as far as qualitative programme presentation, production and directing is concerned. Seemingly, they are people who think that broadcasting is just about being articulate and having strong public speaking power. Monitoring their programmes, one discovers that, the programme presentation style, language and manner of a good number of these charlatans, are in contrary to values and ideals of broadcasting. Some of them appear as opportunists looking for cheap popularity and fame, having realized that broadcasting is glamorous, but forgetting that it is sensitive, fragile, fleeting and volatile.

Apart from formal education or training, which is a sine qua non for effectiveness, mass communicators in contemporary Nigeria do not appear as avid readers, thereby not having a continuous learning attitude. Forming this type of habit, one can be sure that the communicators are always current and well informed. An uninformed information or communication officer or journalist, is not only a nuisance to the society, but can militate against development.

Apart from knowledge or training, many communicators in contemporary Nigeria appear lacking motivation and correct attitude to the profession. Ill-motivation is infectious and can poison society's collective mind thereby causing damage. One should not join the communication profession unless he has

adequate and correct motivation. Wealth acquisition should not, for instance, be the dominant and perhaps the only motivation for joining the profession. There have been several instances of many unethical practices among Nigerian communicators arising from questionable affluence-seeking attitudes of mass communicators in Nigeria. This negative phenomenon also leads to sycophancy, tardiness or carelessness, as well as lack of dedication to duty. Obviously, no development can be brought about in this situation, unless these traits of lack of professionalism are avoided.

To be effective, Nigerian communicators must not only be trustworthy, knowledgeable, credible, good leaders, good followers, personable and disciplined, but should be seen to be so by members of the public. A properly trained and motivated Nigerian communicator must understand the social, political and economic importance of the profession he has chosen, abide by the rules of the profession and know very well what he wants to communicate and how to communicate it.

#### What-Related Problems in Nigeria

As noted earlier, the "what" component in the communication process refers to the message being communicated. It is the content of communication. A message can be said to be the actual physical product of the communicator. When writing, it refers to the written or printed words or sentences, while when talking, it refers to the spoken words and statements.

There are a number of identifiable problems facing Nigeria's mass communication industry in this component of the message. One such problem is the use of correct codes and symbols for communicating the message. These have to do with correct language use, dictum or right choice of words; appropriate punctuation, syntax or lexis and structure. What is called for here is correct use of whatever language that is being used to communicate the message. If one opens many Nigerian newspapers and magazines, for instance, one still finds many atrocious grammatical language and stylistic errors that could be avoided through meticulous writing and editing. This is unfortunate because such mistakes blur the meaning of the communicated message and mislead unwary readers who sometimes depend on the newspaper, magazines and the electronic media for keeping abreast with correct usages of grammar and style. It does not matter whether the language being used by the communicator is English, Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba, what is being said here is that the communicator has it as a duty to use whatever language of communication in its more correct form: at least within the limit of natural human errors or even

W...-called printer's devil or typing error interferes. Apart from the  
 cc... of the language of the message, it (the language) must have some  
 uti... before it can catch people's attention, arouse their interests and  
 possibly move them to action. This is in line with the Uses and Gratification  
 theory of communication, according to Blumler and Katz (1974). The language  
 used to attract attention getting devices such as bold headlining, carefully  
 selected typography, boxes and illustrations in order to be effective. Many  
 communicators in Nigeria do not yet seem to realize the importance of good  
 message presentation. They seem not to be putting into adequate practice what  
 they know on this issue. Closely related to this is the super sophistication of the  
 language used in the mass communication industry. For instance, a newspaper  
 apparently tries to take care of different classes of readers in one single issue  
 rather than using a language at a level that is comprehensible not only to the  
 few relatively high educated readers, but to the majority of the newspaper  
 readers whose ability to understand English language as an instance is just  
 barely average. The Nigerian newspaper audience, as Adesanoye (1990)  
 describes, is "mixed-brow". One would therefore have expected Nigerian mass  
 communication message designers and disseminators to yield to the advice of  
 Defoe as quoted by Ashe (1984) that:

*If any man were to ask me what I would  
 suppose to be a perfect style of language;  
 I would answer that in which a man  
 speaking to 500 people of all common and  
 various capacities, idiots or lunatics  
 expected should be understood by them  
 all. What Defoe is stressing here is the  
 need for simplicity and understandability  
 of language.*

Simplicity is a cardinal principle of effective communication if the intention  
 is to educate, inform and entertain. Apparently, the language used most often  
 times by the Nigerian print media appear as largely too sophisticated to  
 communicate effectively with the average Nigerian reader. For instance,  
 editorials, which should normally be interpretative and persuasive journalistic  
 pieces, with the intention of educating the populace, are generally pitched at a  
 level far beyond the comprehension of an average Senior School Certificate  
 holder. The editorials of *Guardian Newspaper* are seemingly written at a  
 competence level that most ordinary readers would find frustrating. From the  
 foregoing then, it appears that Nigerian print media from which ever do not  
 appear to be publishing for the mass of the people. Using Ugboajah's (1980)

structure of a typical African country, there are three clearly discernible classes  
 of people in an African country (like Nigeria) – the urbanites, the 'slum dwellers'  
 and 'rural dwellers', represented respectively by 5%, 25% and 75% of the  
 population. According to him, as Adesanoye (1990) documents, "it is the tiny  
 minority of urbanites – politicians, academics, white – collar jobbers, civil  
 servants, managers, military and police top brass, business executives,  
 expatriates, the orthodox and Pentecostal clergies as well as other professionals  
 that monopolize for their own benefit most of the nation's natural resources and  
 other facilities including, of course, communication". Relating this to the matter  
 being discussed, one could say that Nigeria's print media, to judge from their  
 geographical deployment, intended audience and the language of expression,  
 apparently belong to Nigerian urbanites. It is elite communication par excellence  
 both in conception and practice. Consequently then, one can declare that such  
 situation is mass in-communication and not mass communication, as observed by  
 Adesanoye (1990).

### Channel-Related Communication Problems

The channel is the vehicle or tool with which the message is communicated or  
 transmitted. In mass communication, it includes technology assisted hard wares  
 like radio, television, video tape recorders, newspapers, magazines and even  
 telephones.

Nigeria has many communication problems arising from this "channel"  
 component of the communication process. Some of such problems have been  
 briefly mentioned or alluded to in earlier discussions in this paper. It is  
 imperative to specifically identify paucity as a major problem in this area. It  
 seems Nigeria is yet to have sufficient media outlets for the ever increasing  
 Nigeria population. Newspapers and magazines, for instance, have been  
 unsteady in their development. In fact, they are marked by upward and  
 downward fluctuations that witness sudden increase in number of newspapers  
 and magazines; followed almost immediately by a sharp fall in number. Political,  
 Management and Capital-related reasons can be adduced for this unfortunate  
 trend.

Following this is also the channel-related problem of ownership. Most mass  
 communication media in Nigeria, especially broadcast are owned by the Federal  
 and State governments and so end up many-a-times serving as mere  
 mouthpieces, megaphones and mere amplifiers of various government activities  
 at various levels. Most times such activities are nothing other than pernicious  
 propaganda. This does not make for balanced, extensive and fair  
 communication. Even some privately-owned newspapers and magazines, as well

as radio and television stations also suffer from this problem of undue influence, interference or control by their owners. Consequently, professional communicators in Nigeria are subjected to duress of advocating "government said," and "errand boy," syndrome. This is pathetic.

In addition to ownership influence, there is also this problem of sometimes too stiff communication laws which Nigerian communicators will have to live and work with. The existing laws of Defamation, Sedition, Official Secrets Acts, Contempt of Court, and other such legal restrictions come in handy as illustration for this point. It is the duty of the mass communicator in contemporary Nigeria to ensure he does not run foul of any of these laws as long as they are constitutionally enshrined in a way that does not hamper the freedom of the press in a democracy which Nigeria claims to be practicing. The mass communicator in Nigeria is expected to, however, offer constructive criticisms of some of these laws when this is reasonable and necessary. There is also the media related problem of access to information sources and information materials for use in the mass media. The extreme secretive nature of some government agencies and agents help to perpetuate this hide-it-all syndrome by withholding even simple information that will do government or the nation no harm if it is made available to communicators.

These government agencies should be told here that apart from a few areas like national security domains, excessive secrecy or hoarding of information is not in the best interest of the Nigeria's young democracy: government at all levels, the media and people of Nigeria. It might be necessary to suggest here the promulgation of a Free Access to Legitimate Information Acts in Nigeria (FALAD), which will be similar to the American Freedom of Information Act (FOI). Such a decree will specify the few types of Information that will not be accessible to the media and people of Nigeria as a matter of right, and throw information-acquisition avenues open to Nigerian media. The FALAD should also provide adequate punishments for both media people and government officials who contravene or abuse its provisions.

### Whom and Effects-Related Communication Problems

Communication by definition is a two-way process. It is an interactional experience between a communicator at one end and the audience, receiver or destination at the other. A piece of communicated message that is not received by its target audience is an exercise in futility. This is why this paper is concerned with the problems communicators face in Nigeria that arise from, or are related to the nature of the communication audience or receivers in Nigeria.

There are many of such problems. One of the major audience-related

communication problem in Nigeria is the issue of illiteracy. Many Nigerians still cannot read and write in spite of the educational boom Nigeria has experienced. Such people are functionally illiterate and constitute a major obstacle to effective flow of information or media communicated messages. They cannot be reached through newspapers or magazines, even when these are published in local Nigerian languages. Because radio and television are able to scale the language barrier and do not demand much literacy from the audience, they can be used to communicate with these illiterate Nigerians.

The problem though, is that availability or ownership score of these electronic media is still low among rural Nigerians, as they still tend to be concentrated in the urban towns. Even in these urban centers, the electronic media ownership distribution pattern is not even because as Adesanoye (1990) points out, "media-set ownership in Nigeria still tends to be concentrated among the urban middle and upper classes". This problem is compounded by the fact that even if radio and television sets are made available to these illiterate Nigerians, research evidence has shown that there are still by far more English language programmes in Nigerian radio and television stations than local language ones.

Related to this problem is the question of multiplicity of languages in Nigeria. This appears largely responsible for the inefficient system of communication in Nigeria, as there does not seem to be absolute agreement on the actual number of languages in Nigeria. For instance, Ugboajah (1980), says Nigeria consists of 178 languages, while Hachten (1971) argues there are 250 languages in the country. This paper hereby submits that some dialects may have been mistaken for full-fledged languages by some of the language counters. The point to note, however, is that language multiplicity is a key problem which the Nigerian communicator must learn how to deal with, if he hopes to be effective in his job. The truth in Nigeria today is that most mass mediated messages still go to literate Nigerians who can read and write English or any of the local languages, while the majority of Nigerians who are illiterate and live in rural areas, are still cut off from the flow of mass-mediated information.

Also, there is this additional problem of readership and information acquisition apathy even among the literate and semi literate Nigerians. They would rather drink; play draughts or other games or watch plays and soap operas on television than read a newspaper, magazine or book which seems to them, more taxing than the other preferred activities. As a result, much of the effort of the communicator in Nigeria appears wasted. Closely related to this problem of readership apathy is the problem of little or not audience feedback. Negative and positive feedbacks are necessary for effective two-dimensional/multi-dimensional communication process. If the communicator does not find out



through feedback mechanism how his messages are being perceived and what influences, if any, they are having on the audience, he will not be able to make necessary adjustments that will improve and sustain his communication efforts. Even though, some newspapers and broadcast media of radio and television try in this regard, through 'letter to the editor' and 'phone-in programmes' respectively, Feedback messages from the audience still appear as inadequate and efforts should be made by the communicator to induce these. Audience members can also help by participating more in the communication process through feedback mechanisms.

Finally, there is the common problem of hetero-philious relationship or difference in background between the communicator and audience members. Hetero-philious communication situations are more difficult to handle than homo-philious ones in which the communicator and the audience have similar educational, cultural, social and other backgrounds. The greater the areas of commonness between "Who" and the "whom" or the communicator and the audience, the more effective the communication will be. The Nigerian communicator, who is mostly faced with hetero-philious communicational situations, arising from the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria, should realize this problem and make greater efforts to reach the audience by overcoming some of the differences or barriers between him and the audience. Some audience research, in the simplest sense of the words, may be very helpful as a necessary step before embarking on any communication exercise.

### Conclusion

So far in this paper, the classical model of mass communication has been used to examine communication problems in Nigeria, while some solutions have been proffered to these problems. Being aware of the nebulous nature of these problems, the paper has tried to be as selective and as precise as possible. No doubt, there are many other problems that can be examined in Nigeria's communication industry. It is believed, however, that those examined here are among the most important and most pressing, and that whatever problems left examined must have some bearing on the "Who"- "What" "Channel" and "Whom" communication problems in Nigeria that have been x-rayed here.

Following this analysis, it is easy to see that Nigeria's mass communication industry, government and the public need to work really hard to overcome most of the country's communication problems. A cooperative or integrated approach is called for here. This is because neither the communication industry nor the government and the people of Nigeria can solve all the country's communication

problems alone. On the surface, some of these problems may seem as if they can be solved independently by any of these entities. But on closer examination, it becomes apparent that a large degree of tripartite partnership between the government, communication industry and the masses of Nigeria will be needed before these problems receive any meaningful solutions. This is what it should be so as to make communication vital, virile and workable for national development in Nigeria.

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