

## **Status, Problems and Opportunities of Mass Communication Research as a Social Science Discipline in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This paper has noted that the social scientific paradigm of mass communication research originated in the United States and has generated sufficient theoretical and methodological backgrounds to form a guide for founding and organizing a mass communication research in Nigeria. The paper examined the status of mass communication research in Nigeria, and identified some technical and systemic problems. Specifically, the study found that theoretical propositions used in mass communication research in Nigeria mostly do not reflect rigorous understanding of the theories and, therefore, add nothing to the theoretical front, as most of the theories were wrongly used and cannot generate empirical data to be translated inductively. An institutional apparatus for a national level model institute of journalism and mass communication research was proposed as a strategy for developing the social science discipline of mass communication research in Nigeria. The paper concluded by identifying various opportunities within the field of mass communication theory as a research agenda for the proposed institute.

**Keywords:** Status, Problems, Opportunities, Mass Communication Research, Social science.

### **Introduction**

Over the past five decades, sufficient theoretical and methodological body of knowledge in communication research discipline in Nigeria has failed to answer many questions that are germane to the field of mass communication as a social scientific research field. These questions, according to Disbyanshu (2014) include: what is the status of Mass Communication as a scientific research field? How do we define the parameters of Mass Communication research? And what are appropriate methods of inquiry in the study of communication problems? How do we define the parameters of mass communication research? And what are the appropriate methods of inquiry in the study of communication problems?

These questions continue to dominate much of our discussions because we have not really answered them to every one's satisfaction. An attempt to addressing these issues in mass

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communication research has been a dichotomization of the field. Even though not all communication scholars acknowledged such a division, there is sufficient evidence that two dominant and opposing perspective research groups have emerged in the field of communication, administrative scholars in one hand, and critical scholars on the other.

It is clear from the basic issues that polarize these two groups that social science research, including the questions asked and the methodologies employed, is not independent of the cultural values of those engaged in the enterprise. For instances, the phenomenon of mass communication consists of persons having roles and positions in specialized organizations as subsystems are directly or indirectly but multiply linked with legal, judicial, executive, business and other cultural subsystems within a society. This interaction has resulted in multiple transactions of characteristics of messages, channels, contexts and consumers resulting in intended-unintended, manifest-latent, functional-dysfunctional (Dominick, 2008), cognitive-conative, direct-indirect, immediate-delayed (Mcquail, 2006, Shirely, 2003) types of consequences.

The inherent complexity of the process of mass communication has perhaps been adequately reflected in characterization of communication research. That is, mass communication researchers are compelled to take multi level perspectives because of the complexity of mass communication process and because of the ontological interface of the field of mass communication with other behavioural sciences. Communication as a discipline has borrowed from a great variety of disciplines and has embodied their suppositions as well (Baldwin, Perry, and Moffitt, 2004).

In the US, a lot of mass communication theories, have been discussed, attempted and recommended (Nass and Reeves, 1991), and a sufficient body of knowledge with considerable epistemological credence and evidence has been generated over the years. Mass communication research has been domiciled primarily under a social scientific positivist or empirical paradigm – critical and interpretative paradigms being the other two minor contributors (Potter *et al* 1993).

Social scientific empirical paradigms may be said to have broadly operated within the ambit of a Lasswellian framework of who (control or communicator analysis) to whom (audience analysis) with what effects (effects analysis). The broad perspective has been changed to take into consideration a multiplicity of channels or technologies of communication and contexts of message production and consumption etc.

The social scientific investigation of mass communication phenomena in the US was first conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Wilbur Schramm, Kert Lewin and Carl Hovland (Khan, 1998). Though these researchers belong to the fields of sociology, psychology, they also helped found institutes of Mass Communication Research in US universities. It is these institutions that trained a sufficient number of mass communication and media researchers. Today, communication research has metamorphosed as a separate social discipline. Built around distinct theoretical and

methodological specializations, the institutions offer doctoral programmes. Several professional association of researchers providing grant and forum for annual conferences and number of communication research journals have also exerted a major influence over the development of mass communication research in the United States.

Given the above overview of how communication research discipline evolved in the US with the theoretical and methodological sophistication reached, and the kind of evidence generated through statistically multivariate social scientific designs of surveys, experiments and content analysis, it has generated enough insight to serve as a reference point for launching programmes of Mass Communication Research in Nigeria. This does not mean that the US Mass Communication Research programmes should be implemented hook line and sinker, but indigenous mass communication research programmes should be arranged and organized around all sorts of practical realities obtainable in Nigeria.

In light of the above, this paper built on communication research experience in the US, attempts to describe the status of mass communication research in Nigeria, by identifying hindrances to be overcome and opportunities to be tapped.

### **Mass Communication Research in Nigeria**

Mass Communication as a discipline in Nigeria is studied in various institutional settings such as universities, polytechnics, mass communication research centers, advertising and public relations agencies and colleges. In universities and colleges, mass communication academia and students conduct researches for different purposes. Mass communication researches are conducted in universities for different purposes. Fewer universities in Nigeria offer master and doctoral degrees in mass communication. Students usually conduct content analysis of newspaper issues and oftentimes they conduct survey as part of a thesis towards their degree. Most of these researches remain unpublished, (Nicholas and Isine, 2008).

Communication academics on the other hand, publish their research in different research journals produced by almost all the country's universities, for assessment and promotion. Even though many universities give more priority on high quality research, the works invariably fail to generate sufficient scientific knowledge or offer solutions to problems. Therefore researches at the universities this day remains less than credible, (Adeyanju, 2011).

Tertiary Education Development Found (TEDFUND) sponsors teachers' research projects. Proposals are invited and funds are given for research on an annual basis. Some research works are of historical and descriptive nature. Okigbo (1987), a foremost pioneer of mass communication education in Nigeria and one of the prolific writers on such issues-has been published in the form of the government planning and development division pamphlet of mass communication. However, challenges of elaborate bureaucratic red tape involved in the funding procedure generally keep researchers from sending research proposal to Ted fund.

For the audience research cells in various media organizations which is another institutional setting where audience of mass communication are looked at, Semiu (2015) opines that only NTA Television College, and National Film Institute have surfaced to provide data on audience viewership and listenership behaviours in Nigeria. Often these institutions are poorly staffed and rely mostly on letters to producers of a self selected sample of audience. The same goes for most of the national newspapers where additional research activity include qualitative, yet rudimentary analysis of the content of competing newspapers in the market. Irrespective of their research output, the work of this research cells goes unpublished in Nigeria, and or used primarily by the organizations themselves in planning their programmes or content genres.

Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) and Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) also study audience members media used. Audience demographic profiles and consumption behaviours are statistically described. This information is sometimes shared with mass media organizations and other clients to help them make commercial campaign decisions.

Even with the recent economic liberalization, public opinion poll has not been taking to be any serious aspect of communication research in Nigeria, but nongovernmental organizations involved in projects related to development work, are showing interest in mass communication research. Some of these agencies have links to foreign donors. Such agencies possess the necessary research potentials, and generate credible baseline survey data on development related knowledge-attitude-practice (KAP) issues. ARMAC, FAO, UNICEF, PANA and the World Bank etc are some of the agencies that help found research and often publish data in the form of hand books, manuals and monographs. WHO and UNICEF, in Nigeria invested considerably in guaranteeing data set on the issues of health, children and population welfare, (WHO, 2016). A volume of qualitative research works focusing on the environment of journalists from the practitioner's perspectives have also surfaced (Niazi, 1994). These studies examine government regulatory bodies and other socio political and ethnic entities and the difficulties posed to the profession.

## **Problems**

Mass communication research in Nigeria according to Khan, Zafar and Abbasi (1998) and Adeyanju (2000) suffers from an inter-related set of technical and systematic problems.

### **Technical Problems**

Qualitative mass communication researches in Nigeria are limited in scope and range of topic studied, and they often lack sound philosophical and critical approach. In fact conclusions linking mass communication phenomenon with other socio-structural, cultural and economic entities of the society are missing in Nigeria.

Little light is shed on philosophical issues as mass media institutions and national development, mass communication and its interface as polity, economy. This absence of any philosophical foundation of elaborate inter-relationships of phenomenon, and in the absence also of systematic standards of social scientific research in Nigeria, most works are at best, myths or wish.

On the other hand, qualitative studies of content analysis and social surveys in Nigeria symbolize a poor grasp of social scientific research methods. Our experience as examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate levels works and as referees for most of the research journals in Nigeria show that content analysis are done without regard for setting up properly pretested reliable content categories. In some situations, no effort is made to synchronize the content categories to research questions and conclusions. The applications of sampling and reliable coding procedures are grossly lacking so internal and external validity of the work are nonexistent.

In the same vein, social surveys are merely an exercise in data crunching (Babbie, 2001). Problem formulation and identification are not broad enough, and often lack of real social significance. Literature reviews are neither meaningful nor exhaustive (Disbyanshu, 2014). Often time's questionnaire construction and correspondent to concept measurements are not understood by the researchers; neither are the concepts of questionnaire pretesting, reliability and validity, concept and explication, measurement levels and probability sampling procedures. Information on this aspect of communication research in Nigeria is often paraphrased in individual research reports from texts on research methods, but establishing their relevance to the particular research topic in hand are lost on the researchers. Some supervisors in Nigeria often support their weakness with a statement "you are not writing research textbook, strike-out the headings that define your instrument of data collection and the reasons for using the instruments. In totality, zero attention is given to the real interdependence between and among such stages of scientific inquiry like planning, data collection, and data reduction, and analysis, presentation of findings and discussion of findings.

The independent monitor surveys done by NGOs like (WHO) in Nigeria are mostly community specific. No national-level data on independent monitor profile are available. WHO in Nigeria sometimes claims national levels data approximation, but with no information on type of probability sampling procedures used, and more so without any knowledge of the particular sampling frames used, no pronouncement can be made about these claims (Cosmos, 2017).

Consequently, however, all types of quantitative studies here in Nigeria are done without any attention to the importance of deductive or theory driven research. No attempt is given to interrelating concepts into simple bivariate or multivariate theoretical prepositions, or into rigorous theory is made (Magga and Suleiman, 2017).

On the theoretical front, unfortunately, it is all gloom and doom because all empirical data, generated in any one or a group of studies here in Nigeria in whatever form, are never translated

indirectly into empirical generalizations. In some Nigerian universities, for instance we see cases of a postulation about “Residential Neighborhood Influences Theory of Advertising (RNITA) which was quashed out by the top academic (Kombol, 2013). Perhaps the concept of inductive reasoning is given scant attention by the researchers in Nigeria.

The fluctuating communication research work in Nigeria has not generated any systematic body of knowledge. Instead our claim is that it is tantamount to meaningless and fragmented explorations into aspects of a process, which is not only very complex, but is also linked to all of human existence, from the individual to social level. It is important to note that, the available training facilities do not equip communication researchers to plan, describe, explain or predict mass communication process in Nigeria, to have any theoretical or empirical payoffs for conducting science of the concrete (Khan, 1998).

### **System Problems**

Deficiencies in mass communication research exist because communication research as a social scientific discipline has for a long time, remained underdeveloped in Nigeria (Nicholas and Isine2008). A social science discipline mainly act as a guide to research, providing and prescribing: (a) priority research methods; (b) preferred methodologies; (c) standard for competence; and (d) forum for practicing grand norms of science (Bibyanshu, 2014).

Using this criteria and given the organizational and operational framework of mass communication education in Nigerian universities, many mass communication departments may be said to have been hampered by the evolution of communication research into social scientific discipline. Although, this failure may be as a result of specific structural-cultural and policy dialectics in the country since and prior to its inception

For instance, theoretically at the macro societal level, development and communication has been intertwining in all three principals paradigms of development: modernization, dependency and multiplicity paradigms (Pate and Sharafa, 2013). Development planners in Nigeria have largely ignored this theoretical inter-relationship, as a result, development plans do not accord any consideration to the role of communication policy and planning in the process of national development. This is why some scholars said Nigerian development is one step forward and two steps backward. The omission of a macro development policy perspective from national plans has resulted in the present primitiveness of the discipline.

Prior to the deregulation of the broadcast industry in Nigeria and even now, we also noticed the absence of strong competitive market in Nigeria. Given the mixed market economy and the protectionist native markets, the market driven needs for studying mass communication has seldom been felt. This is because a developed market plays a key functional role in promoting communication research by providing funding for testing cognitive, affective and behavioural strategies of communication campaigns, and the interface of those strategies with message

contents, formats, and message distribution systems. While these benefit marked related objective, communication theory and methods are also the ultimate beneficiaries (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008).

In the same vein, the primitiveness of communication research in Nigeria could be traced in part to the inadequate or lack of general research culture in Nigerian society. Unlike the experience of the United States, mass communication being multi-disciplinary, could have attracted social scientists from such fields as sociology, psychology and anthropology etc but the phenomenon has not engaged the fancies of Nigeria researchers in those older field. Perhaps, this omission has not occurred just like that, it may be due to the incidence of a mindset uninterested in genuine scientific inquiry. The above mindset has been born out of the historical, cultural and socio-cultural realities that Nigeria is a consuming rather than a producing culture in today's interdependence and an interdependent world (Pate and Sharafa, 2013). It is uncontested that the reasons for this include cultural heritage of a colonial past and successive militocracy which resulted to low investment in education. Thus, the present system of mass communication education in Nigeria is based on inadequate social scientific foundations for supporting the institutional structure of mass communication research scholarship.

### **Opportunities**

There is no denying that various training and research tracks can be taken to address the problems, the systemic approach looks more promising. We understand that mass communication research in Nigeria can be develop as a behavioral discipline on scientific lines through setting up a model institutional apparatus of a National Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication (NIJMC). We link this institute to the present mass communication departments to provide training and research resources, curriculum development support, and programmes accreditation, other than rituals organized by NUC in Nigeria (Matumaini, 2010; Ijeh, 2017).

The proposed institution can be tailored with a two-pronged focus: a research training focus and a professional or skills training focus. While the former (research prong of the institute) offers masters and doctorate in mass communication research as an intimate degree, the later (professional/skills prong) should offer training at two levels of specialized bachelor's degree or generalist level, and an ultimate masters or specialist level. The professionally specialized sequences will include news writing and reporting, radio/TV production, PR and advertising, and mass media economics and management among other areas of professional concern. The Bilateral Federal Government Scholarship programme can be used to draw and enlist qualified teachers from Nigerian universities and abroad. Also, leading media practitioners in the country may have to be co-opted as training resource persons for the professional aspect of the prong (Johnson and Alao, 2013; Ijeh, 2017).

The research prong should be packaged to offer masters as a penultimate degree with doctorate in Mass Communication Research as an ultimate degree. Still, the proposed institute will have to

pull together, staff from few properly trained native staff scattered across Nigerian universities, and at the same time, draw trained manpower resources from abroad to refer the multidisciplinary focus of the mass communication field. Matured scholars from level fields, fundamental variable-fields and complex variable-fields should be represented in the research prong of the institute. Gradually however, local graduates of the institute will take over.

It is expected that the institute will have an annual journal for publishing research in the areas of journalism and mass communication. Structurally, the institute journal can act as a central medium for the promotion and dissemination of researches carried out in the institute by a team of scholars and other researches elsewhere. The journal according to Iredia (2017) can also serve as a national medium for publishing scholarly mass communication research for Nigerian universities. This will bring mass communication research under experts scrutiny at the institute, and out of the numerous sub-standards refereed present omnibus journals of research at the Nigerian universities.

Research products of the institute can rely for funding from governmental, non-governmental bodies as well as political advertisers and other market based commercial entities. Students of the institute will provide and generate data set for elaborate testing and replication of the existing mass communication theories e.g. knowledge gap hypothesis and the use of radio in Northern Nigeria prior to the internet communication phones era), Resident Neighborhood Influence hypothesis in advertising, agenda setting and hypodermic needle syringe theory by (Maggai and Suleiman, 2017; Cosmos, 2017).

In sum, the proposed institute can strengthen social scientific communication research in the following ways: it will produce properly trained graduates who will serve as trained man power resources for the existing mass communication departments to tap. Also the institute programs will have a demonstrative model value for the mass communication departments to evaluate their own methods and standards of training and course content. Thirdly, rather than waiting for rare funding opportunities of going abroad for further studies, the existing trainers in mass communication department and staff of media establishment in Nigeria will be apportioned special seat for enrollment into the institute. Upon graduation, this trainers will be obligated to return to their own organizations, were their professional and research skills will be in high demand. This was the philosophy behind NTA TV College, Jos (Ezinwa, & Olisa, 2017).

Fundamentally, the institute research programs will promote communication research discipline by acting as a forum for practicing grand norms of science. Research publications from the institute will be expected to set standards of theory and methodology for communication researchers at the existing departments. This way, social scientific research standards will further hold unto. Also, with the institute's theoretical and methodological training resource of proven quality, communication research at the institute will succeed in generating body of knowledge



with a sound epistemological based. This knowledge will serve as a point of departure for systematic research program in other communication departments in Nigeria (Yusuf, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The existing mass communication research, as a social scientific discipline in Nigeria is weak. Thus, communication research discipline in Nigeria is characterized by episodic, casual, serendipitous, and non-systematic methodologies. Neither the administrative nor the critical schools of thought have been successful in defining the hybrid communication research traditions in Nigeria.

Against this background, two major challenges to scientific study of communication in Nigeria surface to include technical and systematic difficulties. Technically, scientific study of communication in Nigeria suffers from limited scope and range of topic studied, (town crier Afro centricity, old and new media). While quality research suffers from absence of sound philosophical and critical approach, quantitative studies reflect a poor grasp of the social scientific methods, like data crunching in survey and content analysis that has no regard for setting pretested reliability content categories. Consequently, empirical data generated on a theoretical front in Nigeria were never translated into inductive generalizations.

Systematically, the socio-cultural and policy dialectics in Nigeria have made communication research to remain primitive and underdeveloped. The organizational and operational framework on which mass communication education in Nigeria universities are built also hampered the development of communication research into social scientific discipline. We feel that the early development of mass communication studies in Nigeria was deficient, as courses on research methods and theories were relegated to technical and professional courses, leading to multiplication of scientific ignorance in the field of mass communication research in Nigeria.

## **Recommendations**

The following opportunities were identified within areas of mass communication theory and research agenda for strengthening the weak status of communication studies in Nigeria.

1. Establishing National Institute for Journalism and Mass Communication Studies in Nigeria (NIJMCS).
2. Creating communication research and professional pronged to ensure scientific study of mass communication in Nigeria.
3. Mass media outlets should establish a research wing that will generate scientific empirical data leading to indigenous theory.

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