

Liberalizing Telecommunication in Nigeria: Argument for a Democratic Model

Essienubong H. Ikpe* and Nsikak S. Idiong**

Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

*E-mail: *dr_ikpe@yahoo.com, **nsi-nsing@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Deregulation. Democratization. Participation. Equality and Free Access. Democracy

ABSTRACT In this discussion, we assess the liberalized telecommunication sector in Nigeria against the backdrop of the social and economic realities of a developing society such as ours. In doing so, we demonstrate that the contemporary telecommunication policy in Nigeria is based on a transmission model of communication, a situation which has several negative socio-economic implications, chief among which are economic disempowerment and social exclusion. In the alternative, we advocate a different model for telecommunication policy-making. Such recourse, we argue, can lead to greater democratization of telecommunication and satisfy the communal, cultural and ritual exigencies which Carey's model expects communication policy to satisfy. The model being proposed here is the community - cultural - ritual model of democratic telecommunications. Such an approach is also in keeping with the emancipatory theory of media. It is expected that a recourse to this model will safeguard the participation of all sectors of the society whether rich or poor, majority or minority.

INTRODUCTION

We are witnesses in this age to the realization of the global village. Numerous communication networks are making distance, and consequently, boundaries of ethnicity, cultural diversity, and indeed, national sovereignty, matters of reduced significance. Consequently, this is a time of great importance for those who are concerned about the relationship between the emerging forces of liberalized telecommunications and the values of society.

Around the world today, liberalization has become the dominant trend in telecommunications policy. It may help at this point, though, to define what we mean by this concept. At the risk of oversimplification, liberalization means, as a former American President Ronald Reagan said, "the unleashing of the magic of the marketplace" (Lenert 1998: 3). The hallmark of a policy of liberalization is a relatively easy-to-understand focus on achieving competition geared to moving information as quickly and inexpensively as possible. A programme of deregulation and laissez faire usually accompanies this.

In Nigeria today, the telecommunications environment has been deregulated, allowing private companies like Vmobile (Celtel, Zain), MTN and Globacom to provide mobile telephone services to Nigerians through the Global System of Mobile Telecommunications (GSM). Where the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL)

held monopolistic sway, private enterprises are free to provide competitive services. In broadcasting, this trend has been replicated in the licensing of private broadcast operators, both those operating terrestrial transmission states and those providing satellite-based broadcasting services. In this paper, however, our focus shall be on the liberalization of public telephony in Nigeria and how this affects socio-economic development, particularly in the rural areas.

The goal of telecommunications liberalization regimes all over the world is to "harness maximum public good from free markets and global competition" (Lenert 1998: 10). However, the so-called 'universal service' provided by private telecommunications operators has been shown to reflect an imbalance in the allocation of communication resources, through the action of market mechanisms which are "naturally skewed in favour of the higher income-earning classes of society" (Barber 1995: 237).

The question then revolves around the extent to which economic exigencies must be balanced against social objectives of inclusion and equality of opportunity (Dordick 1995). When this question is considered, democratization becomes an urgent alternative to the present liberalization craze. As a process, UNESCO (1981: 166) operationalizes democratization as the process whereby:

- (a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication,

- (b) the variety of messages exchanged increases, and
- (c) the extent to which the quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented.

Therefore, from the preceding explanation, democratization as a concept recognizes that it would be unfair, for instance, to allow people from high-income levels access to the information resources of the internet while denying access to those in the low-income levels.

In a political democracy, such glaring disparity becomes a political problem necessarily addressed by political means. It therefore seems likely that in the important area of universal (telecommunications) service, we are faced with negotiating some mix of market forces and state coordination.

The thrust of this paper, therefore, is first to show the fundamental contradiction embedded in the practice of liberalization in the Nigerian telecommunications industry. Second, we attempt to demonstrate that this conflict can be usefully aligned with the competing communication theories of transmission and community, a framework based on the work of James Carey (1989). This framework, originally conceptualized for the critical analysis of communication and culture in the United States of America, can be employed to illuminate the underlying tensions and complexities of telecommunications policy alternatives in Nigeria as well. In doing this, the goal is to show the socio-cultural values threatened by the adoption of the policy of liberalization in its present form. In addition, this essay attempts to bridge the gap between communication theory and politico-economic practice by advancing specific communication-based approaches to the analysis and resolution of telecommunications policy conflicts.

COMMUNICATION THEORY AND THE TELECOMMUNICATION POLICY QUESTION

The basic question of whether communication resources and structures need to be liberalized more than democratized or vice versa, has been in the public domain for "nearly as long as the modern communication structures themselves have existed" (Lenert 1998: 6). The problem, however, is that most communication scholars have not paid much attention to what

they can contribute to public policy in this area. Noam (1993 : 200), for example, observes that:

When a discipline (communication) that is by now fairly substantial in terms of numbers and maturity is largely absent in the shaping of society's treatment of the very subject of its study, one must take note.

Similarly, Mueller (1995: 459), in his review of the relationship between communication scholarship and U.S. telecommunications policy, expresses the idea that "the closer we get to ideas which have directly shaped public policy, the more communication scholarship recedes from the picture". If this paucity of communication-based research on telecommunications policy is so noticeable in developed countries like the USA, it is even more obvious in a developing country like Nigeria. Mueller notes the contributions of other disciplines, such as Economics, Political Science, and Law, and concludes that the "almost unnoticeable" role played by communication constructs in this process is "disturbing".

It is this absence of a genuine effort to address typical communication questions in the practice of liberalization - questions of equality and free access, of culture and community, of participation in and maintenance of society - that gives rise to the conflicts that this paper attempts to address. Our goal is to answer Mueller's question "What (does) communication bring to the table that has not already been put there by technologists, economists, and lawyers?"

A Theoretical Appraisal of Modern-Day Liberalization

One significant way of answering Mueller's (1995) query is to harness the communication theory perspective embodied in the work of Carey (1989). This approach certainly leads us in the direction suggested by Rowland (1993: 208), who sees "telecommunications as part of the social theory of communications technology". Carey's conceptualization of communication as both transmission and community, culture and ritual, can help us identify and classify the consequences of present-day liberalization, and plot a roadmap, as it were, towards a more equitable re-arrangement of the status quo in favour of greater democratization of telecommunications infrastructure and resources in Nigeria.

Carey (1989) argues for recognition of the dual

nature of communication. According to him, communication simultaneously has transmission or transportation, as well as community, cultural, and ritual (CCR) aspects. In other words, the definition of communication includes both (a) the movement of messages in space, and (b) the continuity of human existence in time.

The first sense of communication, transportation, is the one with which most people are familiar. It would appear that this is the sense in which most advocates of present-day liberalization understand the term. To them, when you create more diversity you create more access. With more access the entrepreneurs and economic elites smile and the demands of modern-day capitalism are satisfied. Under this paradigm, no regard seems to be given to the economically disadvantaged sections of the society - the section, which has no economic power to acquire for itself the means of telecommunication. Unwittingly, these become the communication have-nots of the society. Indeed for them there is little means of participation in society.

In the second sense, communication is linked to the ideas of sharing, participation, association, and fellowship (Carey 1989: 18). It concerns the representation of shared beliefs, rather than the imparting of information, and is directed toward the maintenance of society in time as well as the extension of messages in space. In other words, to communicate does not only mean two or more people exchanging messages. The overall goal of communication is the creation and maintenance of bonds of community and inclusiveness.

From this second perspective, then, one is able to recognize the need for the democratization of communication structures and resources. When applied to telecommunications, this idea makes possible the creation of a concept of communal involvement for most sections of the society. Furthermore, it brings about the creation and maintenance of a public sphere, a discursive realm in which individuals and groups create the social-psychological space of a common world having common meanings for those who inhabit it. The key element is a "dialogic flow of communication in a public sphere" (Habermas 1989: 23).

Democracy, in the context of this paper, is to be understood in Carey's (1993: 3) sense. To him, democratic arrangements are in place wherever people can "actively participate in the social, cultural and economic transactions that enervate

society". In other words, democratic society goes far beyond the mere act of voting in elections. It is about communication in the context of social, economic, and political structures.

From the perspective of communication theory, then, the central lesson for tele-communications policy concerns the linking of democratic theory with democratic communication practice to create a modern democratic nation, for, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 6) have rightly noted, "no nation can be termed democratic until its media of communication are free"

LIBERALIZATION: WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?

Nigeria today has been caught in the wake of the liberalization fever that began in the United States in the 1960's (Nicolaidis 1995). Altogether, the country seems to have woken up to the need to move away from previously held policies of centralized planning and strict state control over telecommunications. But as Venturelli (1997) observes, this process all over the world is being influenced by new international regulatory regimes, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), which emphasize the role of free markets and competition.

In this emerging scenario, the new telecommunications environment has created a system of interconnectedness that is becoming, at least for the well-to-do sections of the society, a dominant day-to-day reality. But in these new circumstances, Greider (1997: 334) notes that the social question - How does society sustain equitable relations among its own people? - is "being brushed aside by the exigencies of the economic sphere". In his view, there is an inherent imbalance in the so-called liberalization policies that can only be addressed by reconnecting commerce with social consciousness and clarifying what we believe about human society. Peter Drucker, who argues that liberalization alone is not likely to produce equitable access to telecommunications facilities, has made a similar point. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, he asserts that the collapse of state control does not necessarily mean the triumph of democracy. According to Drucker,

Now that there is nothing to compare the democracies with, they will have to prove themselves on their own merits ... Above all, we are learning very fast that the belief that a free market is all that it takes to have a functioning

society-or even a functioning economy-is pure delusion (quoted in Schwartz and Kelly 1996: 116).

These are strong words indeed and it will prove instructive to examine further the relationship between liberalization of telecommunications and a functioning (and inclusive) democratic society.

As new technologies emerge and take their place alongside their traditional counterparts, those involved with telecommunications policy have struggled to answer difficult questions about the democratization of technologies under new political and technological circumstances. Such questions, according to Lenert (1998: 12) include the following:

How will the new technologies relate to democratic practices? Will the new technologies increase or decrease access to the channels of communication? Who should have access to them? What economic interests will they serve?

In discussing the need for democratization of telecommunications, it is often erroneously assumed by advocates of liberalization that deregulation and privatization of telecommunications lead automatically to the democratization of telecommunications. The wisdom of such a laissez-faire telecommunications policy is however open to question. Douglas (1987), in her history of early American broadcasting, suggests that it is typical for the advocates of a new telecommunications technology - whether it be radio, cable television, or the Internet - to say that a technology's social adoption means progress for all.

The arguments for such a bland acceptance of the new telecommunications situation are usually two-fold. First, financially interested parties usually assert that there are no significant tensions between the ambitions of the private telecommunications providers and the desires of customers. Second, it is routinely argued that "the diffusion of new technology is inevitable" (Lenert 1998: 12). Thus, it is assumed that resistance to the social force of new telecommunications practices is "irrational".

Although some compelling arguments can be made that liberalization leads to democratization, the conclusion is by no means certain. In general, it has been noted that much of the marketing of the information age is greatly overstated leading to difficulty with distinguishing fact from fiction and hope from hype. As Douglas (1987) and other communication scholars have shown, the history

of communication suggests that the forces of liberalization and democratization coexist in the context of a struggle for economic and political power, and their contradictory demands are not easily reconciled.

Thus, when applied to telecommunications policy, the relationship of liberalism to democracy and freedom of access is problematic, and the scholarly literature all over the world reflects a historical continuity of concern. The fundamental concerns are the same: how to avoid the danger of domination by the few, avoid the excesses of unchecked competition, and realize the greater public interest. Various scholars such as Altschull (1984), Bagdikian (1987), Barnouw, (1978) and Kellner (1990) seem to agree that for much of the last one century, the telecommunications environment in most countries of the world has been dominated by a few well-financed conglomerates in alliance with the dominant commercial interests that function as their sponsors.

Consequently, McChesney (1996: 110) opines that,

Although we are promised that deregulated telecommunications will provide great benefits to all members of society, we also know from experience that capitalism tends to generate highly skewed and class-based divisions that permit a small section of society (i.e., the wealthy) to have inordinate power ...

We can conclude from McChesney's assertion that a central requirement of tele-communication policy-making is to present options and evaluate the effects of a new technology before adopting it. In other words, to look before we leap. This is easier said than done, however. How are we to restrain the complex transformations in telecommunications practice now taking place in our nation and in the world?

Democratized Telecommunication: Recommendations for a CCR-Based Approach

As already noted, Carey's (1989) view of communication is directed towards the maintenance of society in time rather than the extension of messages in space. The community-cultural-ritual perspective links the concepts "commonness and communion, community and communication" (Carey 1989: 18). These concepts should be the concern of all telecommunications policy innovations, if the outcome of such innovations is to be termed democratic. While adopting

communication innovations, it must be remembered that communication forms the basis for society because it produces social bonds that tie localized individuals together and makes associated life possible. As the American philosopher John Dewey noted,

Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. Society is possible because of the binding forces of forces of shared information circulating in an organic system (quoted in Carey, 1989: 22).

Going by these precedents, it becomes obvious that to allow purely market forces to determine access to telecommunications is to create a third world within a third world. In so doing, the poorer sections of society are shut out of society, since they have no means of acquiring the technologies that make them active participants in it. Government, therefore, must exercise some form of effective regulatory control to ensure that the cost of acquiring access is kept within reasonable limits. The definition of "reasonable limits" must take into consideration the income range of most member of the society. To do otherwise is to make effective communication in this modern age an elitist preserve. This would be to fall prey to the allegation made by some scholars of the "cynical school" such as Joseph Pilotta who says that the "telecommunication process is an alienation process" (Pilotta 1992: 106).

At the present stage of the development of the mobile telephone sub sector in Nigeria, the networks are either unable or unwilling to extent their reach to most small towns and other rural communities in the country. They prefer to concentrate their activities in major urban centers. The reason for this situation is obviously economic. Why "waste" your time with villages that for the most part will not generate sufficient profit to make the venture worthwhile? In pure economic terms, it is irrational. But is the need for communication purely an economic one? If government wishes to cater for the needs of all segments of the society, a way must be found to by-pass the economic rhetoric. By so doing the telephone industry can be helped to navigate a course between the transmission and community-cultural-ritual views of communication.

A review of the history of the telephone service in the United States will reveal how a similar compromise was once reached. Tracey

(1997: 25) recalls that shortly after the expiration of the original patent held by the Bell Telephone Corporation, the U.S. government and the telephone industry entered into a social bargain that was honoured until the breakup of AT & T in 1984. The result was a policy of "universal service" that required AT & T to provide equitable and widespread distribution of telecommunications services in exchange for guaranteed profits. As a consequence of this telecommunications policy, nearly all the communities in the United States, including the smallest and most rural, were linked together by a single technologically advanced system. This pact, thus, provided for a system of regulation in which private companies served social goals in the context of a capitalist economy, and it stressed the relationships between telecommunications, commerce, and the social fabric.

CONCLUSION

Linking Communication Theory with Telecommunication Policy

It may be wondered why it is necessary to undertake so elaborate an analysis of the issues surrounding telecommunications policy - except as an academic exercise. Indeed, sometimes it may be hard to see how telecommunications policy matters at all because, as some would argue, communication infrastructures are essentially invisible. They are of increasing importance, though, to the development and evolution of a country like Nigeria in global economy. With the continuing shift toward an information-driven world, no country can afford to be left behind in the march forward. For a country like Nigeria, where the present liberalization movement has revealed conflicts occasioned by the glorification of private business as the principal means towards an ostensibly "better future", the present challenge for policy is to curtail what has been called "the untrammelled sovereignty of economics" (Will 1997: 7).

The key political (as opposed to economic) telecommunications policy question, then, is what values should be sheltered from the unrestricted workings of the market mechanism (Polanyi 1957). While liberalism would argue for the total elimination of all government control, democratization, which this paper advocates, concedes that it is necessary to encourage innovation and

private enterprise, but demands that government must devise some mechanism to ensure that some sections of society are not disadvantaged in the process of development.

The important issue, therefore, is to whom, not to what, we are connected by the new technologies. We must begin to ask such questions as "How are individuals linked into units of democratic social organization through communication technology?" (Lenert 1998: 19). To fulfill the promise held by the new communication technologies, communication scholarship needs to address alternatives to the ascendant transmission model of communication.

As illustrated in this paper, it is clear that the present public-policy conception of telecommunications in Nigeria is more closely aligned with the transmission model than with a community-cultural-ritual model. But as we have equally shown, an unalloyed policy of liberalization in this context requires that citizens yield control over the resources of communication to a very small number of powerful economic interests. To focus only on the transmission aspects of communication invites us to ignore questions of power, which Carey's model explicitly demands that we address. As Garcia (1996: 47) has noted, we need to inform our regulation of the new technologies with a clear vision of the role of communication in society and a clear set of principles linking telecommunications deregulation to a large set social and economic goals.

REFERENCES

- Abercombie N, Longhurst B 1998. *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*. London: Sage.
- Altschull JH 1984. *Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs*. New York: Longman.
- Bagdikian BH 1987. *The Media Monopoly*. 2nd Edition. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Barber BR 1995. *Jihad vs Mcworld*. New York: Times Books.
- Barnouw E 1978. *The Sponsor*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carey JW 1989. *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Carey JW 1993. The mass media: Between the modern and the postmodern. *Journal of International Affairs*, 47: 1-21.
- Dordick HS 1995. The social consequences of liberalization and corporate control in telecommunications. In: WJ Drake (Ed.): *The New Information Infrastructure*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund, pp.155-172.
- Douglas SJ 1997. *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899 - 1922*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Garcia DL 1996. The failure of telecom reform. *Telecommunications*, 30: 43 - 50.
- Greider W 1997. *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Habermas J 1989. *The Structural transformation of the Public Sphere*. (T Burger, Translator). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original Work Published in 1962)
- Kellner D 1990. *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Lenert EM 1998. A communication theory perspective on telecommunication policy. *Journal of Communication*, 48: 3 - 23.
- McChesney RW 1996. The internet and U.S. communication policy- making in historical and critical perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 46: 98 - 125.
- Mueller M 1995. Why communication policy is passing mass communication By: Political Economy as the missing link. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12: 459 - 473.
- Nicolaidis K 1995. International trade in information-based services: The Uruguay round and beyond. In: WJ Drake (Ed.): *The New Information Infrastructure*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund, pp. 269 - 302.
- Noam E 1993. Reconnecting communication studies with communication policy. *Journal of Communication*, 43: 199 - 206.
- Pilotta J 1992. Cultural integrity in the global communication order: Action research principles. In: C Okigbo, Y Abubakar (Eds.): *New Perspectives in International News Flow*. Lagos: Communication Research Projects, pp. 105 - 122.
- Polanyi K 1957. *The great transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. New York: Beacon.
- Rowland WD 1993. The traditions of communication research and the implications for telecommunications study. *Journal of Communication*, 43: 207 - 218.
- Schwartz P, Kelly M 1996. The relentless contrarian: An interview with Peter Drucker. *Wired*, 408: 116.
- Tracey LV 1997. Thirty Years: A brief history of the communications industry. *Telecommunications*, 31: 24 - 26.
- UNESCO 1981. *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*. Ibadan: University Press, Paris: The UNESCO Press.
- Venturelli S 1997. Information liberalization in the European Union. In: B Kahin, E Wilson (Eds.): *National Information Infrastructure Initiatives: Vision and Policy Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.457 - 482.
- Will G 1997. Revolt against economics. *Austin American Statesmen*, P.7.