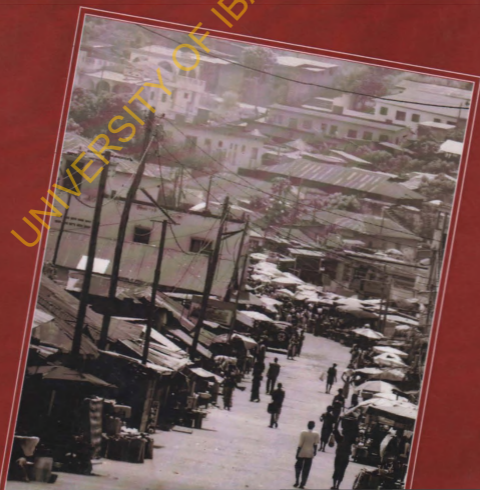


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MEDIA RHETORIC AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN NIGERIA

Isola, Olusola O. and Babatunde, Adebimpe

Abstract

The essential feature of modern mass media is its large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audience. This feature has its root in the audience of the traditional theatre, musical performances and political rallies, which involves physical gathering of people previously sharing little perspectives about the events bringing them together. Rhetorical styles are strong instruments of sustaining the attention of people in such gatherings. Such styles sometimes involve evoking emotions and audience empathy to the cause of the speakers in such gatherings and often, this stimulates the audience into predictable actions. This feature is strongly shared by the modern mass media, whose immense strength to stimulate the masses into negative and positive actions have been recognized. Technological innovations in the media are constantly reinforcing this strength on the audience who are now bigger, much more dispersed and relying more

on the media with pervasive consequences of media messages on their behavioral disposition towards public issues.

This paper critically reviews the rhetorical influence of the mass media on Nigerian society and makes suggestions on ways by which the media could exhibit more social responsibility during their rhetorical transaction with the audience.

Introduction

Rhetoric has been a subject of interest in the intellectual circles and in public discourses since the ancient times. A long list of classical scholars including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustus, Erasmus and so on, have contributed to the body of knowledge about rhetoric and its relevance to human communication. The subject is relevant to contemporary society as it was in 4th Century B. C. Greece. It is even more relevant now because of the important role rhetoric is playing in public communication and the influence of this on the lives of the people in political contexts. The emergence of media of mass communication and the pervasiveness of such media in the lives of the people in the present times have made discourses about media rhetoric a continuous interest in the public sphere.

Rhetoric has different meanings to different people and in different context in the modern times. More importantly, it seems to often take negative connotations among people especially when the message the rhetorician is trying to pass across is politically inclined. Pierce (2003) argues that the word rhetoric 'gets used when people are upset with forms of human communication with which they disagree or disapprove', which often is the case in most public narratives. This gives an impression that when rhetoric is perceived to be powerful or potentially powerful, people tend to quickly develop resistance in order to repel such rhetoric. At other times, people also perceive rhetoric as a

message aiming at depriving them of certain things by the rhetorician and so they quickly trigger their sensibilities against such messages. These negative perception has stimulated debates on the appropriateness of the term when in use even in developmental contexts.

The anatomy of rhetoric is multi-dimensional but equally interesting. Encarta Dictionary gave several descriptions of the word. In its noun format, it describes it as 'a speech or writing that communicates its points persuasively;' as 'complex or elaborate language that only succeeds in sounding pretentious;' as 'ability to use language effectively, especially to persuade or influence people;' as 'the study of methods employed to write or speak effectively and persuasively.' In its adjective format, Encarta Dictionary also describes rhetoric as 'relating to or using language that is elaborate or fine-sounding but insincere;' 'of effective use of language: relating to the skill of using language effectively and persuasively.' In all of these definitions, some key words are very salient and are more associated with rhetoric than others. These key words are 'Effectively,' 'Persuasively' and 'Pretentious.' A rhetorician trying to convey his message to the audience effectively and persuasively does not conjure any negative intention. Rather, it is a skill that is worked on and that takes time to perfect. Since the purpose of any writing is to persuade the audience to view the subject from the point of view of the writer or speech maker, one could assume these two key words are well in order. However, the third key operating word 'Pretentious' has been the defining word for rhetoric in the minds of most people. It is always what they latch on in their perception of rhetoric, in spite of the other positive key defining words. The assumed insincerity involved in crafting the message and the efforts invested in conveying such messages are what stimulate the reaction of the audience to the 'antics' of the rhetorician.

In spite of the negative connotations, rhetoric is having substantial influence on the daily lives of the people in the contemporary times. This trend has been enhanced by emergence of new media technologies

or modern public sphere, which pervasiveness at the present time often breaks down human immunities and compels reception of messages conveyed through the media. Everyone now exposes themselves to one form or the other of modern mass media and by so doing, our natural immunities to rhetoric continues to be weakened, especially when it comes to discussions on public matters which directly and indirectly affect the lives of citizens individually and collectively.

The emergence of the traditional public sphere on which the modern mass media builds its operation owes a lot to rhetoric. Habermas (1989) argues that prior to the 18th century when the conditions of modernity facilitated the expansion of the public sphere in Europe, the common people in the lower and the middle class never had the opportunity of contributing to the realm of political debates once held as the exclusive province of the crowns and their designated agents alone. However, the emergence of public avenues such as bar houses, sports arenas, theatres, parliamentary venues, public parks and spaces facilitated the expansion of the public sphere and encouraged contributions into public discourses from the common class. In the traditional public sphere, any individual, irrespective of his creed and education could contribute by way of rhetoric to debates on public matters. Such avenues for public debates are not supposed to be owned by anybody, but could be kept in trust by individuals or groups. The emergence of the newspaper press and the electronic media in the 19th century facilitated the expansion of the public sphere. In essence, journalists and media owners partly became the custodians of such public trust in the public sphere with the major responsibility of keeping the debates on-going in the public interest. This trend gradually brought about dialogue between the ruling class and the commoners which led to reduction in friction and conflicts in the society. The attendant socio-economic and industrial development in Europe and America during this period resulted from the harmony brought about by the emergence of the old and modern public sphere.

However, Habermas contends that the modern public sphere is now being desecrated in the contemporary times by the commercial tendencies of its keepers. He drew this conclusion from his observation of the exclusive nature of operations of the transnational corporations being vested with the ownership of the modern mass media and traces this trend to the ravages of capitalism. This exclusiveness owes its origin and strength to the manipulation of the rhetorical components of the mass media to reflect the ideals of the small dominant class in the political and economic sphere. This development tends to portend danger of returning to the pre-industrial era of complete domination of the political space by the privileged class, which could aggravate social conflicts.

Newspapers, radio, television and other mediated information technologies have so much permeated the lives of the modern man and have become part of many households in urban centers, yet majority of the audience are often excluded from the contents by many inhibiting factors. Many scholars have pointed to the influence of these modern media of communication on societal development and further studies continue to investigate how to encourage the media to adapt its narratives to common realities for peaceful co-existence of people in diverse societies in order to reduce conflicts and frictions. In essence, while the modern mass media is recognized for being capable of delivering the peace and development, it is also capable of being manipulated for negative causes in the society depending on who is manufacturing the contents of the media. In all of these, the use and adaptation of media rhetoric is important and it imposes a responsibility on media managers and content providers to guide the structure of rhetoric that are deployed through the media.

Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory and Modern Mass Media: A Nexus

Although it has been over 20 centuries since he explained the dynamics of public speaking, Aristotle's book, *Rhetoric*, is still considered to be a master piece to which references are being made by philosophers, historians, and communication scholars in the present age. The theories expounded by Aristotle constitute an important foundation of the study of rhetoric and public communication in the modern times. Significantly, Aristotle considers rhetoric as any available means of persuasion but that are short of bribery and torture (West and Turner, 2004). To him, adequate preparation by the rhetorician is very important before embarking on public speaking. The relationship that exists between the speaker and the audience is the most important factor which must be acknowledged by any rhetorician who hopes to make an impression on the audience. As group of individuals with different motivations, the audience has individual choices and decisions which can filter in any message that appeals to them or repel messages that are distasteful to them when a speaker is addressing them. Therefore, audience analysis is considered the first assumption of the Aristotelian theories. This is done on the assumption that each listener within the audience is unique, and therefore, what works for one may not necessarily work for the rest.

The need for audience analysis was realized much earlier by content producers and managers of modern mass media in delivering messages to the media audience. Unfortunately in the contemporary times, this is done not necessarily in their quests to deliver the social goods for the public, but more as a result of the commercial preposition of the mass media in the attempt to cater for the individual tastes of not so much in the best interest of the audience segments as it is for profit maximisation. In essence, the review of audience preferences are done to structure messages and programs in order to capture the interest of the audience and to persuade them to patronize the goods and

services being offered by media patrons. These messages are otherwise called commercials and advertisements in simple parlance. Over time, such messages have emerged to dominate the news and other socially beneficial contents of the media. It is not uncommon for example, to observe that about seventy percent or more of the contents of a typical newspaper in Nigeria are made up of advertisements and commercial information. For the electronic media, as much as half of a one-hour news program or drama could be devoted to commercial messages on a typical television or radio station in one disguise or another. All of these are to the detriment of the public interests which the media organizations are meant to serve.

The next Aristotelian assumption for a successful rhetoric is the preparation put in by the rhetorician before and in the process of speech delivery. Aristotle identifies three kind of Proof, namely *Ethos*, *Logos* and *Pathos*. *Ethos* has to do with the perceived character, intelligence and the goodwill that a speaker invests into the speaking process. These are important because any critical observer could easily see through them in the speaker while he is making his delivery. Ryan (1984) further describes *ethos* as the mutual influence the speakers and listeners have on each others in the communication process. Aristotle went on to suggest that a speech made by a trustworthy individual was likely to be more persuasive than that made by someone whose sincerity is in question. This theory has a nexus with the innovation diffusion paradigm of mass communication, where the credibility of the source is regarded as central to the acceptance of the message.

In the early times of the modern mass media, a lot of attention was paid to the quality of presentation, languages and the personalities of writers and presenters of media programs. High premium was paid on the mode of expressions, style of presentations, quality of appearance and diction while employing and training media presenters. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was notable for these qualities and

standards and it was a place for training staff of Anglophone colonies when radio was becoming popular across the world. These efforts were made on the assumption that the audience consists of qualitative minds capable of critically evaluating whatever was being published by the mass media. Therefore, adequate training was not only provided for the presenters and newscasters, but also for other categories of individuals that feature in the media such as dramatists, writers, researchers, and others that worked in media environments.

Such culture seems to have been eroded in the present times. Television seems to be the worse in this trend perhaps because of its ubiquity and proliferation. Presenters are now used to incomplete and careless dressing and they pay little attention to their language of expression and modes of presentation. Many clichés have been introduced into media language in Nigeria while it does not seem to be standard house style for language usage among local broadcasting stations as it was in the past. The consequence of this trend is that it reduces the power and potency of radio, television and newspapers as educational media both for formal and informal learning. Many language viruses have been introduced by the media into the educational system, which are now struggling to gain credibility in the international environment. A unique Nigerian English language has emerged, which, although having its advantages of facilitating understanding in the local environment, faces acceptability and credibility problem in the global environment. This trend poses problems to educators and professionals especially when the local and the global environments are interfacing at a much faster speed than in the past.

Logos, to Aristotle, is the logical proof that speakers employ in their arguments, rationalization and discourses. It involves the act of employing logical claims and clear statements in the delivery process to engender persuasion. Debates and discourses in the public arena, which the mass

media stimulates seems to have lost the quality of being logical, sensible and in-depth in the current times. Political and parochial sentiments seem to have replaced these qualities and intellectual shallowness has become a dominant trend in public debates and in media analysis of issues. It is more common now for participants in public debates to deploy warped logic in argumentations while the media has become accomplice by accommodating such inadequacies. The consequence of this trend is the degraded quality of public debates in the media which appears to be losing the confidence reposed by the public and government in charting the course for public policy making process. The debate on the fight against corruption in Nigeria comes handy as an example in this case. A section of the media, obviously because of ownership affinities, has argued that as long as corrupt officials enjoy the confidence of the electorates in their constituencies, they ought to be left alone to continue with looting of public treasury. This trend is stretching the freedom of expression to the limits which could become a disaster for the fragile Nigerian political system. The natural response of the audience to such media organization who presents such argumentation is to ignore them for others with better ideas.

Pathos, according to Aristotelian theory pertains to the emotions that are drawn out of the listener in the rhetorical process. This emotional reaction from the audience ranges from expression of pain, joy, hatred or fear. Mass media effects theories have stretched this process to also include feelings of apathy or empathy to media messages and have argued that media messages are capable of stimulating physical reactions from the audience, especially those demographic categories that are still emotionally immature or lack sufficient experience with vagaries of life. For example, media effects theories have associated violence in the media to exhibition of actual violent behaviours among children (Grobel, 1998; Linne, 1998). There is also a general consensus that there are associations between media contents and public violence

(see for example Cantril et al, 1940; Shibutani, 1966; Singer, 1970; Spilerman, 1976; McQuail, 2000).

Media Rhetoric and Social Conflicts

Numerous examples of negative deployment of the media in global societies abound in the modern times. The media was implicated in the aggravation of Nigerian civil war, the Israeli-Arab conflicts, American-Iraqi conflict, and the Rwandan genocide among others, stemming from the roles played by both print and electronic media during those conflicts. Most of the successful coup plots in the political history of Nigeria were aided by the media, and the various political and ethnic conflicts across the country have the mass media implicated in various ways due to their coverage and reporting styles. This tendency cannot be divorced from the traditional definition of news and importance attached to public events consisting of conflicts and clashes by the media.

Because of the confidence reposed in the media, it is in privileged position to serve as intermediaries between the public and location of conflict. In essence, the media has a strong influence on how the public sees or interprets conflict situation and is capable of influencing public reactions to conflicts. Slone, (2000) in an experiment to determine public response to media reporting of terrorism incidents argue that most individuals assess potential threats to personal and public security not on the basis of direct experience, but through exposure to mass media coverage of conflicts. Albert (2002:3) also opines that the public generally believe that the press is at the vanguard of accurate reporting of events since they have the facts and they often have access to the scene of events. Political and social conflicts around the world have however proved this assertion to be fallacious. For example, Gardner (2001) argues that since political leaders and warring factions are well aware of the powers of the news media, the tendency is for them to

manipulate the media to further their political agenda. Unfortunately, the media often fall victim of political manipulations sometimes due to its inherent competitiveness and around the clock reporting of events which does not permit it to do thorough investigations before reporting conflicts and social clashes. This trend has deprived the world of many lives and will continue to do so until the media re-examine its news reporting process.

The use of language by the media during conflicts is very crucial for the outcome and conclusion of conflicts. Languages are capable of escalating as well as dousing conflict situations. Sometimes, conflict parties impose language usage on the media to favour their position during conflicts. For example the careless use of words such as victims, indigenes, settlers, tenants, etc during ethnic conflicts, which are common in Nigeria, could be interpreted in several ways by the audience, which include neutral elements, sympathizers and interested parties during conflicts. It connotes different meanings to different people. While such languages could generate sympathy for any side in a conflict, it could also breed hatred against any of the parties in conflict. Careless use of such languages had escalated such conflicts in the past with attendant revenge attacks, loss of lives and properties. This is the reason why deliberate efforts should be made in inventing appropriate language and paying careful attention to language usage by the mass media during social conflict situations in order to reduce the extent of destructions, hatred and violence that could accompany social conflicts.

Media Rhetoric and Popular Culture

There are also worries about the nature and contents of the programs being broadcast and published by the mass media, some of which are being driven by the global popular culture. The fear in the local environment is

that these programs are capable of breeding amoral youths and eroding the local culture. Violent, sex-laden programs are more attractive to the media in their quest to captivate the younger segment of the population for commercial purposes. This trend has wrecked havoc on the moral fabric of the society and most of the cherished values of old had been discarded by the younger segment of the population. It has reached a situation where educational and even religious institutions are now compelled to regulate the mode of dressing and conduct of the youths in their environment. This trend seems also to have defied concerns expressed by civil society cultural advocates and regulations enunciated by relevant government regulatory agencies to discourage such mostly syndicated programs on the media.

These issues involve the neglect of the social responsibility role by the media in the Nigerian society. In addition to their obligation of being free and fair in their contents, the media also has the duty of being responsible to the society in which it is operating. If it is capable of serving the public violent, sex-laden and other imoral programmes, the mass media is also capable of presenting programmes that have sufficient moral qualities to stimulate positive development in society and to advocate for peaceful co-existence and accommodation among the diverse cultures. The media exists within the society and the fortune of the society determines the survival and true prosperity of the media. The media therefore has the responsibility to constantly craft appropriate rhetoric for the benefit of the society in which it operates.

Conclusion

Although the government had proceeded by exercising some restrictions on media contents through the establishment of, amongst others, the films census board and other regulatory bodies, the only lasting and beneficial regulatory mode is ethical self-regulation and evolution of

monitoring and compliance system within the media. Because of the crucial role it plays in the society, the mass media cannot afford to allow other institutions and arms of government to strictly impose standard of performance on it, lest its freedom is eroded. It must however realize that it owes such freedom to the society and the audience which are becoming more sophisticated. The greatest responsibility the mass media owes Nigerian society is to examine itself and mend its ways.

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