MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY IN A MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY

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Abstract

The Importance of the mass media in today's world has been acknowledged globally. They are the main source of information, main definers of social reality and the framework through which many people interpret and understand the world. But as scholars have argued the process through which the media select and process their contents is not value free. It is for this reason that the issue of media and information literacy has assumed crucial importance. This paper contributes to the debate within Nigeria's multi-ethnic social structure. Drawing from critical communication theories we argue that media and information literacy must equip the various social groups in the Nigeria society with the skill, knowledge and resources to establish their media channels thus pluralizing the public sphere for expression of counter-hegemony discourses and appreciation of cultural differences.

Keywords: *Media and Information Literacy, Multi-ethnic Society, Cultural Diversity, Press Freedom, Active Audience.*

MEDIA DAN LITERASI MAKLUMAT DAN DEMOKRASI DALAM MASYARAKAT PELBAGAI ETNIK

Abstrak

Kepentingan media massa dalam dunia semasa semakin di diakui secara global. Media adalah sumber utama maklumat, penilai utama realiti sosial dan merupakan kerangka dimana kebanyakan orang menterjemah dan memahami dunia.Namun, para sarjana telah menegaskan prosedur dimana media memilih dan memproses kandungan maklumat adalah bernilai.Kerana inilah isu media dan literasi maklumat adalah sangat penting.Bertitik tolak dari teori komunikasi kritikal kami menegaskan bahawa media literasi maklumat harus menyediakan beberapa kumpulan sosial dalam masyarakat Nigeria dengan ski, ilmu pengetahuan dan sumber untuk mengukuhkan rangkaian media mereka, seterusnya, menambah sfera awam untuk peluahan wacana 'counter-hegemony' dan penghayatan perbezaan budaya.

Kata kunci: Media dan Literasi Maklumat, kepelbagaian etnik, kepelbagaian budaya, kebebasan berita, khalayak aktif

INTRODUCTION

Today's world is media saturated. This is not just in terms of the various media platforms that have been developed especially with the advent of ICTs, but the multiplicity of contents and voices that now pervade the public space, so much information is out there in different forms, variety and quality to the extent that an average citizen may get swamped and confused in its ever flowing torrent. The social political process has been mediatized to the extent that social actors and activities have become highly dependent on the logic of media production. The ubiquity, diversification of media forms and contents, their convergence, social penetration and the likely influence of the media have become issues of interest and concern all over the world.While the abundance in media platforms, contents and voices may satisfy the democratic imperative of media pluralism, it may also pose some problems for it in a fractured multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria.

   The bane of Nigeria's cultural diversity is the lack of consensus on basic national issues. In fact, it could be argued that the various ethnic based fractions of the country's ruling class have found this cultural diversity a potent weapon

to champion their various primordial interests. While the country's geopolitical and structural configuration has largely been responsible for the pluralism and freedom of its mass media, it is also itsAchilles' heels. The observation made by a British author some years ago still holds true today. According to him:

> *The freedom and diversity of the media in Nigeria taken as a whole has beenguaranteed in a rather unexpected way. Newspapers, radio and television are mostly government owned, but there are no fewer than twenty governments. These governments are formed by different parties, each with different views on national and local issues, so that while eachGovernment operates a form of censorship over the media it controls, suchCensorship does not necessarily block the free flow of information…. (Mytton, 1983, p. 119)*

Mytton further observed that though Nigeria enjoys a pluralist mass media system, "it is nevertheless a fractured kind of pluralism which reflects the political situation and in turn helps, to a large extent to define and create the situation it reports" (Ibid, p. 123).

A pluralized media system which can facilitate the expression of collective dialogue is definitely a prerequisite of deliberative and participatory democracy and must be defended. However, in a country where the various factions hardly share consensus on any issue, where primordial interests and ethnic sentiments are ostensibly promoted over national interests, the various media organizations could easily become the captive instruments of the ever feuding ethnic champions. A highly politicized and fractured media system like what obtains in Nigeria could also be used to recruit followership along fractured lines in terms and perspectives dictated by the interests of wrangling fractions of the ruling class (Agbaje, 1992). For the concept of media pluralism to be meaningful and relevant to democratic practices, the media must be rescued from the control of the various factions of the ruling elite, though incoherent and fractured, especially along ethnic lines, are united by a common world view and acceptance of what ClamdeAke has termed minimalist liberal democracy and grim struggle to privatize the state. A plural media system under such ownership and control will be a problem to the polity. A more normative conception must relate media pluralism to the distribution of communicative power, the ability of the various organs of civil society, not, only to own their media but to challenge social inequality and injustice.

The deleterious impact of the fractured media pluralism that exists in Nigeria is eloquently captured by one of the country renowned writer and academic, Adebayo Williams;

> *The narrative of the press is also a narrative of the nation. But rather than looking for a monolithic narrative with its coherence and cohesion, we are confronted with a dialogic narrative with*

> *contradictory multiple voices without a great narrator. It*
> *is polyphonic journalism of a polyphonic nation (Williams,*
> *Forthcoming)*

In this context public discourse on policies and activities of the government is more often than structured by ethnic and primordial considerations. This makes inter-ethnic dialogue and understanding quite difficult. Nigerian politicians and even the ordinary citizen love to talk politics, and are quite valuable and cantankerous but they seldom listen and understand one another. This no doubt is partlyfailure of the mass media, which are the main channels of conveying the conflicting ethnic-based messages generated by members of the political class. It is a major democratic deficit of the Nigerian mass media which must be remedied in the interest of democracy and good governance.

Caveat Emptor
The fact sketched above about the socio-cultural and political environment within which the media exist and function in Nigeria and the growing dominance of mediated communication in the lives of the citizens and impact on the society cannot be wished away or dismissed. It is an established fact of the modernist experience of the world we live in. This point was eloquently expressed by The Grunwald Declaration on Media Education;

> *We live in a world where media are omnipresent: an increasing*
> *number of people spend a great deal of time watching television,*
> *reading newspaper and magazines; playing records and listening*
> *to the radio. In some counties, for example, children already spend*
> *more time watching television than they do attend school. Rather*
> *than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we*
> *need to accept their significant impact and penetrationthroughout*
> *the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their*
> *importance as an element of culture in today's world. The role*
> *of communicationand media in the process of development should*
> *not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instrument*
> *for the citizen's active participationin society. Political and*
> *educational systems need to recognize their obligations to promote*
> *in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomenon of*
> *communication (quoted on O'Neil and Barness, 2008, p. 20)*

The concern about the fate of the citizen in the face of the diverse messages (news, drama, advertisements, etc.) she comes across on a daily basis through the media as a long pedigree in media and communication studies. Generally known as 'effects studies' the pendulum has swung back and forth to the present era where much emphasis is placed on the role of what I will like to call the citizen- consumer. Whether from the perspective of The Uses and Gratification approach or cultural and reception studies, the citizen is now credited with some

power in the communication process. The new media environment brought about by digitization and subsequent media convergence has further heightened the concern about the power and role of the media in the society and the citizen or audience of the media. The idea of the active audience in the communication process seems to find some resonance in the conceptualization and ambit of media and information literacy.

There is a generally accepted notion that the mass media are crucial to the functioning of democracy and good governance. This is in the sense that as the main organ of the public sphere the media provide the information required of the citizen to be able to actively exercise the essential requirements of citizenship. Democratictheory assumes that without the right information (in terms of quality and quantity) people can hardly make the appropriate choice, take decision or influence the socio-political system within which they live. In appreciation of this assumption Deacon and Golding have argued that "when we talk aboutcitizenship, we soon arrive at notions such as participation and involvement, but above all we will inevitably stumble across the phantom of the informed citizen (Deacon and Golding, 1994, p. 1). With the deluge of media and information now flowing ceaselessly acrosssociety, it is very tempting to assume that the citizen is actually informed and equipped with the right knowledge to make the rightdecision and choice at least in accordance with his/her interest. As the above two authors rightly observed "…. The informed citizen exercises choice on the basis of information received" (Ibid).

While the image of the mass media as a supermarket displaying all kinds of information and ideas looms very large in the liberal account of the media's role in society, we know that the goods on display are not of the same quality, nor are they given the same amount of visibility and prominence, and "some turn out not to be as attractive and glittering as promised on the packaging" (Ibid).

We also know that the news and other contents displayed by the media, includingadvertisements and entertainment are not politically and ideologically innocent or neutral. Another issue that must make us to be concerned and wary of the media is the structure of ownership and control. Today's media have effectively been incorporated into the structure of big business conglomerates. The increasing commodification of media contents has also devalued their social quality and character.

At the national level where they are not explicitly owned by transnational business organizations or moguls like Rupert Murdock, they are part and parcel of business empires owned by individuals who as the Nigerian situation suggests are also active players in the country's politics and economy (Oslo, 2012). In addition to this is the fact that what is offered to the so called informed citizen by the media is often not so much the disinterested and objective selection of the professional in-charge of the news making process but packaged and manufactured product. By this we allude to the increasing practice of news packaging by information specialists working for governments, big organizations, elite social groups and

other interested parties. There has been an increase in the use of Public Relations strategies to manage and influence the news making process, determine the flow of news and character of media coverage of the issue and events (Gandy, 1982, Deacon and Golding, 1998). As many critical scholars have suggested media contents have become more manipulative and/or persuasive than informative. The process of media commercialization and commoditization, tabloidization and the drive for audience have further renderedjournalism, mediaand contents open to a lot of suspicion and criticism. The point is that we are at a point where our phantom informed citizen must not only be wary but must be on alert. Being informed has now gone beyond being able to read and write.

It is the acquisition and deploymentof the requisite skills beyond just reading and writing that media and information literacy is aimed at addressing. It has become imperative for citizens as actors in the political and democratic process to develop more comprehensive new skills in the current environment of converged media and communication services.

Understanding Media and Information Literacy

The realization that citizen must be more active in accessing, consuming and interpreting media contents has pushed the issue of media and information literacy to the front burner of public policy at both national and international levels. This of course is based on the realization of the importance of the media in civil engagement and political participation. As we continue to witness the rapid changes in the technologies of communication and information, the daily changes in the ecology of media practice, itbecomes imperative that for the average citizen to be able to actively exercise his/her citizenship in socio-political arena he/she needs to acquire additional new skills and competences. Media and information literacy addresses the possibilities of acquiring these new skills and competences.

There are many definitions of media literacy though same core concepts unite them. It is an umbrella concept open to a diversity of perspectives (Koltay, 2011). Cecilia Von Feilitzen has argued in this vein that;

> *There exist many definitions of media literacy around the world. More and more often they include the ability. 1.) To access the media 2.) To understand/critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents, 3.) To create media contents/participate in the production process. It is not unusual that the definitions also include aspects of learning to use the media in order to participate in the process for social change, for development towards increased democracy (Commission of the European community 2007, p. 6, in O'Neil and Barnes, 2008, p. 14).*

Sonia Livingstone has offered a very succinct definition which has become widely accepted. She defines it as "The ability to access, analyzes, evaluate and

create messages across a variety of contexts" (Livingstone, 2007).

This definition stresses the interpretative and evaluative autonomy of the consumer in the communication process. Unlike before where the encoding power of the producer of media messages was taken for granted and assumed to be omnipotent, following critical cultural studies the autonomy of the decoder in meaning generation is now asserted. Reception and audience theory also claim that the moment of reception is a contested terrain of cultural struggle (Keller and Share, 2005) Thus, apart from the potential to offer an alternative interpretation to the encoded one, being active also presupposes that the media consumer can produce and disseminate his/her own messages. This becomes more so with ICTs, especially the internet and cell phones. The full range of issues, skill and competencies involved is expressed by Patricia Aufdeheide thus,

> *A media literate person can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy relationship to all media. Emphasis in media literacy training rangeswidely, including informed citizen, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence.A similar view is offered by Kellner and Share in their definition. To them media literacy "involved gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellect as tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society" (Kellner and Share, 2005, p. 369).*

Advocates of media literacy proceed from the realization that the media construct reality and that the information they produce is socially situated, and as such the media audience must not only appreciate this fact, but be able to understand the interests and concerns this reality uphold and those not captured or marginalized. The audience must also understand the impact of techniques and routines of media production, e.g. how news values skew the news towards the elite. The definition provided by the Ontario Association for Media Literacy (AML) is in this direction;

> *Media literacy is concerned with developing an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the technique used by them, and the impact of these techniques. It is education that aims to increase students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products (quoted in Duncan, 2005)*

Objectives of Media and Information Literacy
The objectives, media literacy principally center round inculcating in the

audience critical thinking skills and fostering a "critical autonomy in relationship to all media". There is also recognition that media products have commercial, political and ideological implications. Based on this agreed aims and principles certain key concepts of media literacy have been outlined. For instance, the Ontario government suggests the following.

- All media are construction
- The media construct reality
- Audiences negotiate meaning in the media
- Media have commercial implications
- Media contain ideological and value message
- Media have social and political implication
- Form and content are closely related in the media
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.

In a similar view the US Center for Media Literacy puts forward five concepts.

- All media messages are constructed
- Media message is constructed using a creative language with its own rules
- Different people experience the same message differently
- Media have embedded values and points of view
- Media messages and constructed to gain profit and/or power (quoted on O'Neil and
- Barnes, 2008 : 15-16)

The idea that media messages are constructed is a foundational concept of media literacy. It challenges the idea of objectivity in the news and other media representations. Drawing from semiotics and critical media studies it argues that media contents are social constructions and as such they are problematic and non-transparent. The media consumer is therefore called to question the naturalness of the content or images presented to him or her.

This is reflected in the concept of audience power to decode media messages. Drawing from the Hall's model of encoding/decoding(Hall, 1980) the idea is that different people experience and interpret media messages differently accordingly to their socio-cultural situations. While a preferred reading can be presented by the encoder the notion of active audience invites us to consider the possibility of the reader offering aberrant or opposition meaning which can subvert the preferred hegemonic meaning.

This concept is very important in a multi-ethnic society because it directs attention to the need to inculcate in the people an appreciation of differences. Accordingly,

> *The process of grouping different audience readings and*
> *interpretations enhances democracy as multicultural education*
> *for a pluralistic democracy depends on a citizenry the embraces*
> *multiple perspectives as a natural consequence of varying*
> *experiences,histories and cultures constructed within the structures*
> *of dominance and subordination (Kellner and Share, 2005:376)*

The idea of audience power in deconstructing media messages also points attention to human agency. Media audiences as social actors are able to question the journalistic enterprise with its Western liberal assumptions of objectivity, professional and value neutrality, and create and insert their own perspectives and identities into the meanings and culture circulating in the society. To us the notion of audience power has a dual meaning: technical and social. Technically, it means the ability of the media audience, producing their own programs – news, drama, features documentaries. Socially, through the technical ability of program production, they are thus able to generate their own meaning system and knowledge, construct their own identities and representations. Their being active becomes more meaningful in this sense. Embedded in these dual activities is the analytical skill to interpret and interrogate forms of communication circulating in their social environment.

The idea that the mass media are not value free, ideologically neutral social institution challenges positivist sociology and conservative politics. Media contents inherently embody values and perspectives which support some set of interests against others. Without accepting any notion of conspiracy Marxists and critical media scholars have made us to realize the fact that media predominantly express the ideas of the ruling class while feminist scholars have demonstrated that the media support petrochemical interests and subordination of women. Media literacy therefore recognizes the fact that media representations are subjective. According toKellner and Share (1997) as cited in Kellner and Share (1997) …"The notion that theory, facts and inquiry can be objectively determined and used falls prey to a set of values that are both conservative and mystifying in their political orientation".

An aspect of the experience of modernity is the fact that our experiences have become more and more mediated. The mass media have interposed themselves "between ourselves and any experience of the world beyond our immediate personal environment and our direct sensory observation" (McQuail, 2005, P.81). The picture in our heads is largely painted by the mass media. What we know of others, activities of our social institution and even increasingly acceptable and unacceptable values are largely shaped by what we receive via the mass media.

However, as media scholars have argued the representation offered to the audience by the media is far from the 'reality'. The media merely create a version of reality. What we get via the media "are selective, limited or framed, and mediated" (Bernstein, 2002, P.261). Explaining this further, Denis McQuail(2005:85) says, the 'reality will always be to some extent selected and constructedand there will be certain consistent biases. These will reflect especiallythe different opportunities available for gaining media access andalso the influence of 'media logic' in constituting reality '.

In other words the version of reality represented in the media is a product of not just the professional decision of the media workers, but of many other extra-media factors like the power of sources (what Hall calls the primary definers),

commercial and audience considerations, and ownership among others. These factors operate in the main to the advantage of the elite social groups.

Another concept which media literacy acknowledges is the commercial and economic character of the mass media. While they constitute a crucial cultural institution, the media are also business organizations set up to sell goods and make profit. The mass media's dual character means that they combine both economic power (profit making) and symbolic andideological power of determining social reality, painting the pictures in our heads, framing issues, setting the agenda (Hackett and Carroll, 2006) From this perspective, what the media produce and sell to the public could be regarded as "cross-breed commodity" (Statham, 1996, 543). This is explained by Paul Manning as information which "may serve the public purpose of sustaining political debate, it is also likely to bear the imprint of commercial interests responsible for its production" (Manning, 2001, p. 3). In terms of media and information literacy, this concept invites us to question the type and notion of media products, the sources, the mode of presentation professional values and routines of media production, etc.The issue of the economic and commercial structure of media has assumed greater dimension in recent years as the media become more and more incorporated as part of big conglomerates, as advertising pressure becomes more acute and the drive for audience intensifies.

An understanding of these issues will definitely assist the citizen to analyze and interpret the orientation of each media organization and the biases and interests embedded in what is produced.

While the concept of media literacy seems to enjoy wider recognition, especially among educators, the concept of information literacy has emerged more or less as an extension of information society. It directs our attention to the importance of information as a commodity in a globalised society we are in now. As Alan Bundy terms it, it is a "world ofinfloglut." (Bundy, 2004, p. 8) The American Library Association defines information literacy as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information".

Similar to media literacy, information literacy aims at building skills that will enable the individual to cope with the challenges that arise with the torrent of information flowing from media sources, many of doubtful credibility and intention. As an author has observed "The uncertain quality and expandingquantity of information pose large challenges for society. The sheer abundance of information will not itself create a more informed citizenry without a complementary cluster of abilities necessary to use information effectively."

Being knowledgeable in the info glut world of today with its array of hidden persuaders requires more thanjust having access to the required information. Equally important is the capacity to recognize propaganda, spin, misinformation, etc. It is very easy to lie with statistics and put glossy paint over falsehood. Those equipped with the right information skills and competences are better able

to exercise their civic rights as citizens.

An information literate person is able to determine and control the type of information he needs and how he needs it. He is able to;

- Determine the extent of information needed;
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently;
- Evaluate information and its sources critically;
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base;
- Use information effectively to achieve a specific purpose;
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and   access and use information ethically and legally.

Certain key ideas tie media and information literacy together. These include the ideas of access to the media, ability to interpret and come to informed judgment about media contents, the ability to evaluate the quality and credibility of media sources and producers, the recognition of the social-political, ideological and commercial implication of media products. The inculcating of critical awareness of these issues is further heightened by the recognition of the prevailing media landscape dominated by convergence, its attendant multiplicity and abundance of media platforms and contents. These two forms of literacy address the problems these issues pose for participatory democracy and good governance, especially in a social formation characterized by power asymmetry and unequal access to social and material resources including the media.

The two forms of literacy also share the belief in the critical autonomy of the media audience in the selection, use and interpretation of media content. The audience can access not only diverse meanings as they have access to the different media (old and new) generate their own meanings and perspectives which they can disseminate to others without the barriers of space, time, politics (censorship) and even cost. It is not just a case of being informed, but also crucial is the ability to be able to create and communicate messages in support of one's social values and interest. This process ofempowerment enriches and deepens democratic practices and good governance.

Quoting the Australian Library and Information Association, Alan Bundy has outlined the main purpose of media and information literacy to include;

- Participative citizenship;
- Social inclusion;
- The creation of new knowledge;
- Personal empowerment;
- Learning for life.

Form all indication media and information literacy has deep roots in the strong desire for human freedom and democracy. As the British Scholar, Len Masterman has put it, "At stake is the empowerment of majorities andthe strengthening of society's democratic structures." The emergence of new media has further reinforced this position. Kubey has argued in this vein that "in a representative

democracy, people must be educated in all forms of contemporary mediated expression and well beyond the print media" (Kubey, 2004, p.69).

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

A major threat to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria as in many other African countries is the country's ethnic composition. While we may not be able to go into any extensive discussion of this, the inter-ethnic mistrust and lack of consensus on basic issues, the nature of political competition along ethnic and religious lines to a good extent influence the public and media discourseand the media agenda setting and framing roles on public issues and policies.

Whilewe recognize the importance of other social conditions in ensuring the effective participation of the citizen in the democratic process, we also note the centrality of the mass media in that process in any modern society. In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria the mass media are fundamental in registering the tenor and contour of inter-ethnic, citizen-government relations and the generation, amplification and flow of debate on social issues.

Since its inception in 1859, the Nigerian press, both as a participant andreflectorshave become wasa theatre of the inter-ethnic political struggle for the control of the Nigerian state. Its involvement has created the perception of a media system divided along ethno-religious lines reflecting the cleavages and fault lines within the socio-political system. The general impression is that the media arepartisan either in the interest of some dominant ethnic nationalities, especially the Hausa-Fulani in the north and the Yoruba in the South-West or their individual owners who invariably are leading political actors. Many Nigerian scholars and commentators believe that three main factors; ownership control, ethnic affiliation, and location of media organizations explain the behavior of the Nigerian press.Commercialization, which was not a major problem when most of these studies were done should now be added. A recent study by Adebayo and Agbaje (2010, p. 16)concluded that,

> *The media houses… got enmeshed in ostensible proxy wars that betrayed their partisan character as undetached participant in the political disquiet in the first decade of democratization in Nigeria. It would seem that a newspaper treatment of the issue was largely dictated (by) its ethno-proprietorial leaning. The media and their contributors needed appeal to ethnic constituencies more than nationalinterest'.*

It is, however pertinent to observe that the polarization inherent in the news should not make us lose sight of the ideological similarity in the world view of the various factions of the Nigerian ruling class. The media are by and large instruments in the hands of members of the ruling class. Their ethnic-regional coloration only hides the fact that they "serve as a mirror of intra-ruling class

competition, which tends to be expressed in ethnic terms" (Agbaje, 2005). Against the liberal pluralist expectation of the media giving full expression to the diverse voices and perspectives in the society, they serve predominantly as channels for the articulation and dissemination of hegemonic discourses. Access and representation are wittingly and unwittingly limited to the members of the ruling class whatever their ethnic or regional origin or political affiliations. The Nigerian media are articulated to the prevailing structure of power relations and political economy in the country and the global neo-liberal social order.

A major failure of the media in the democratic process is the way ethno-regional and religious discourses have been naturalized and become taken for granted. Hence people seldom question the dominant representation they receive from the media.

The media are crucial in any society in the sense that our consciousness has increasingly become subject to the influence of the received and manipulated symbols they disseminate. This brings to the fore the role of media and information literacy. Kellner and Share have submitted that "there is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitizing students and the public to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race and class inequalities and discrimination (Kellner and Share 2005, p 370) and stereotypes depicted in the media. People also rarely question the social basis of such depictions, the values they express and the interests they serve.

It may further be argued that the Nigerian media have largely failed in providing the social conditions that may enable the majority of the people torealize the five key cultural rights required for active citizenship identified by Graham Murdock (2004): access to information, knowledge, deliberation, representation and participation.

Media and information literacy should aim at equipping the citizen with the knowledge that will make them active participants in the political process, not just having access to the media, but also being able to analyze, interpret and create their own meanings. This will require the ability to unravel the political and social construction of knowledge as well as addressing principles of equity and social justice related to representation. (Kellner and Share, 2005). Drawing from the standpoint and feminist theories, Kellner and Share further argues that critical media literacy can learn important concepts which allow the citizens to see through the naturalization of dominant perspectives. This enables the underrepresented and misrepresented groups to deconstruct media texts and gain multiple perspectives on issues and events.

As a process of empowerment, media literacy must inculcate in the people a range of analytic competences. As Sonia Livingstone has said "the ability to analyze symbolic texts lies at the core of literacy" Being able to analyze a media text leads the 'reader' to making a judgement of the quality, accuracy,

objectivity, purpose of the author of the text. The aim is not just to protect the people from "harmful" media content (paternalistic and protectionist orientation of the cultural/political elite) but as part of the process of democratization. It is to build with the people a questioning attitude to understand the context of media production and the implications of this context for them as consumers and citizens. Many people could easily get carried away by the titillating headline of a front page story or the seductive look of a magazine cover girl without considering or understanding their socio-political implications e.g. in terms inter-ethnic relations or sexist ideology.

There is a general consensus among media scholars and commentators that as a mechanism of representation the mass media have poorly served the poor, women and young people. Media representation is inequitable and exclusionary. In the Nigeria case there is a regional imbalance; some parts of the country have better visibility and more positive representation than another, while the rural area is largely absent in the media. The media over-privilege the voices of the elite. They allow the elite to speak for the 'nation' as if the nation is monolithic. It is argued that given the structure of media ownership and control, location, commercial pressure and the conventional routines of media production it is highly difficult to alter this situation.If the media are to serve as a forum for deliberative democracy, a public sphere, then it should be open to accommodate the full expression of the complex social formations making up the society.We must have multiple publicspheres so as to give full and comprehensive expression to all contending values and perspectives in the society.

The failure to do this has led media literacy advocates to argue that content creation and the creation of alternative channels to disseminate such contents should be a major prerequisite of media literacy. This is tied to the right to communicate,self-expression and cultural participation. Giving communication tools and discursive power to the voiceless enables them to express their world views and perspectives and thus beingenabled to actively participate in the political and democratic process.

While ICTs, especially the internet, has greatly facilitated the ability to create and disseminate contents by many individuals and groups (bloggers, citizen journalists) the advocacy for the establishment community radio should be seen as part of the progressive movement for the democratization and decentralization of public machinery of representation.

The progress of this movement is hampered by two main factors. First the Nigerian government has been very reluctant in allowing the establishment of community radio in the country. Despite the existence of the legal and policy frameworks the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has not licensed any community radio. Second, for material and technical inadequacies, there exists a high level of digital divide in the country. We may also add to this higher level of political apathy, especially among the youth. The level of civil engagement is low. To many young people the computer and the internet are mainly tools of

entertainment.

Over the age literacy has been an essential condition for the development of democracy and participation of the citizen. As people become more dependent on the mass media and the society, more complex, the ability to engage with the media in terms of access, being able to analyse and interpret media contents in a way that can serve ones needs has become a major issue of public policy. As the final report of the American Presidential Committee on Information Literacy observed "lives of information illiterates are more likely than others to be narrowly focused on second-hand experiences of life through television".

Not to depend on the second-hand accounts of the media requires being empowered to reflect on such accounts based on one's autonomous critical thinking. It requires being able to search for information from other relevant sources before making judgment. In the prevailing media environment, the people must be empowered to control the type of information they need,the evaluation and the interpretation of such information and be able to generate and communicate their ideas thus being able to represent themselves.

In addition, for effective participation in one's society's democratic life, the media consumer must move from being mere spectators in the spectacle daily staged by the media to becoming an active participant in the production of media content and culture generally. That is when his/her citizenship can have real meaning. This also requires the creation of competing public spheres with different narratives of our social condition.

Appreciating cultural diversity and differences is very important in building inter-ethnic relationship. Being exposed to the views, values and experiences of others and comparing these with one's own in a critical, analytical manner can open such people to an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. This is the essence of media and information literacy.

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