The Role of the Press and Communication Technology in Democratization

The Nigerian Story

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This book is dedicated to journalists all over the world who give and gave their lives for human rights, equality, justice and a better world for all
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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book began 3 years ago when I was forced to find a topic for my dissertation. While watching a demonstration in Iraq one day, I noticed that one of the demonstrators, who was actively participating in the protest, was recording the event with a small camcorder. The scene reminded me of my father’s arrest in 1994, and the drama that ensued to get him out of prison. Most importantly, I remembered the role his cell phone played in the ordeal. I got really excited and set out to find out if anyone had connected communication technology with political transitions in media research. Alas, very few people had. In fact, no one had examined the possible contributions communication technology would make, and could make, to political transitions particularly in “developing countries.” Though the event occurred almost 10 years later, the events of September 11, 2001 brought democratization in the news again. Democracy became newsworthy again and soon, news of countries undergoing political transitions swarmed the media. I found the events very interesting, and was also excited to learn that though the U.S. media especially was covering the events, it was still reporting without a context for people to understand the unique factors hindering democratization in several countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

The primary purpose of this book is to introduce students, scholars and lovers of knowledge to the chaotic situation of global political transitions. I have two objectives in mind. The first objective is to make people more aware of the tremendous pain in political transitions, especially since interest in global democratization and democracy increases daily. Despite the many comments, articles, documentaries and speeches on the mistakes the West makes in demanding democracy along western lines, many people are yet to understand that political transitions require more than having elections. My hope is that this book will make its reader see the
sometimes devastating effects such an ideology has. Demands and pressure for quick democracy that fail to recognize the unique factors on the ground in different countries and cultures will only harm the masses in the long run. When people are not encouraged to participate beyond voting, do not know their rights; when candidates receive international backing for some old favor without any objective examination of his or her purpose, and the causes of the problem(s) are not taken into account, the process will fail.

The second objective is to recognize the work journalists do, their contributions, their sufferings. Being a journalist’s daughter and a short–time journalist, I understand the importance in appreciating the efforts and sacrifices journalists make to inform, educate and entertain the masses. Though their objectives are not always on the side of right, one must not fail to recognize their contributions. I also hope this book will provide journalists in different countries and cultures with a perspective on journalism in Nigeria. Also, though few participants used communication technology in Nigeria in the 1990s, I hope the book will open the door to awareness about communication technology’s pervasiveness in Nigeria today and encourage studies on how the technology can best foster national growth.

The book is presented in six chapters, and written for anyone interested in politics, journalism and international relations. Getting this book done was not easy. However, I benefited from the generosity of scholars across different disciplines who had written or said something on the topic.

I would also like to thank my parents—Rose and Dan Agbese—who taught me to push my boundaries and never forget where I came from. They made sure I had ample contacts, food and quiet to collect data, and continued to support me when time came to make my dissertation a book. My siblings—Okibe, Igna, Oka, Ene, Ogaba and Edeanya—were awesome too.

I benefited immensely from the wisdom and support of Bettina Heinz who encouraged me every step of the way, and even planted the seed that this project could be a book.

I also want to thank the staff of the National Library and Newswatch library in Lagos, who allowed me to have a quiet corner to gather data for this project, and pointed me in the right direction when I needed materials. My many thanks also goes to the people who participated in this study and made it a reality. Thank you for sharing your experiences. Big thanks are also in order for Ibim, Isiaka and Kabiru, who took me to my appointments.
Chapter One

Introduction

The end of the Cold War between the United States and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1989 ended communism and established liberal democracy as a legitimate global political structure (Adebayo, Onigu, Egwu, Amuwo, Eteng, Kawonise, et al., 1997). By 1990, countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia politically aspired for democracy and transited from authoritarian to democratic forms of government throughout the decade (Schraeder, 2000). For Nigeria, 1990 to 1999 marked a turning point in various ways. Politically, the wave of democratization led to a movement by Nigerians to free Nigeria from military rule that had existed for 29 of its 41 years as an independent nation (Ojo, 2000).

Nigeria’s mass media (print and broadcast) also experienced dramatic changes during this era that contributed towards the movement for political pluralism (Bourgault, 1998). More print journalists stopped defending the compromised press in Nigeria and established their own newspapers and magazines in the 1990s, firmly establishing an era of print media independent of party and government ownership (Ibelema, 2003). The journalism profession also witnessed an influx of “well educated and politically committed” reporters that unlike previous eras had journalism degrees (Olorunyomi, 1998, p. 60). For the broadcast media, the Electronic Privatization Decree of 1992 allowed individuals to open and own radio, television and cable stations and telecommunications, with cyber-cafes and business offices providing Internet, email and fax services (Onwumechili, 1996). Prior to 1992, all broadcast and telecommunication services were government-owned. New communication technologies such as fax machines, cellular phones, satellite dishes and the Internet were also available in Nigeria in the 1990s to help Nigerian journalists and activists mobilize foreign support for a transition to democracy (Olukotun, 2002a). All these challenged
“anew the professionalism, role and corporate security of the military as an institution” (Conteh-Morgan, 2000, p. 341). In return, the military severely repressed the press in the 1990s.

Journalists and publishers were harassed, arrested and detained (Faringer, 1991). Military and security agents firebombed news houses; the government closed news organizations for months, shortened newsprint supply, and banned or seized publications from vendors, distributors and readers (Ogbondah, 1997). Faced with these challenges, journalists devised a new strategy—guerilla journalism—whereby they operated underground to escape capture and seizure of their publications by government officials (Collings, 2001). Also called underground journalism, guerilla journalism is not new. Journalists and political activists in several countries, including China and Poland, have used it to fight authoritarianism (Brodsgaard, 1981; Randall, 1993). For instance, the Chinese Democracy movement in the 1970s began as a dazibao (wall poster) movement in Beijing (Brodsgaard, 1981). They published journals underground and sold or posted them on the Democracy Wall on Sunday afternoons to raise people’s political consciousness. In Poland, opposition movements and nationalists used the underground press to sustain public discussion and opposition (Johnson, 1998). In Nigeria, underground newspapers, magazines and a radio station arose in response to military repression (Olukotun, 2002a). Journalists who worked for or owned major newspapers and magazines used guerilla tactics to avoid arrest and detention or published tabloid versions to avoid seizure of their publications (Ibelema, 2003; Olukotun, 2002a). But something else made their efforts more effective—new communication technologies (Olukotun, 2002a).

Minabere Ibelema (2003) states that the presence of new communication technology counterbalanced military rule in Nigeria. Communication technology played a big role in making guerilla journalism effective in Nigeria in many ways, perhaps because domestic control of global communications is difficult, if not impossible (O’Neil, 1998). As a result, Nigerian journalists, and pro-democracy activists, wrote and sent stories via email and fax, organized pro-democracy events with non-governmental organizations and moved around without detection. Probably the biggest effect was how communication technology produced demonstration effects—the process by which transition processes in one state influence the calculations of societal and state actors in another (O’Neil, 1998).

Scholars in political science, African history and international relations (e.g., Conteh-Morgan, 2000; Ihonvbere & Shaw, 1998; Ijomah, 2000; Njoku, 2001; Ojo, 2000) have extensively researched Nigeria’s transition programs in the 1990s. Others have examined and discussed the mass
media’s (print and broadcast) role in political transitions from military, authoritarian or single party rule to multi-party systems in Asia, Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe (e.g., Bourgault, 1998; Collings, 2001; Ibelema, 2003; Im, 1995; Johnson, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Park, 1998). This area of research is important for though the mass media are “widely recognized as central to democratic construction, our understanding of the role they play in the actual process of transition is poor and largely anecdotal” (O’Neil, 1998, p. 6). However, no one in the literature so far has examined the role communication technology and mass communication played in the process. This is important, for as Volti (2001) points out, communication technologies play a role in societal change. Changes in communication technology have also changed the definition of mass media and pushed the boundaries of communication further, and “such changes have a dramatic impact on the potential for political change in authoritarian systems” (O’Neil, 1998, p.11).

This research fills this gap in the literature by offering a detailed analysis of communication technology and the press’ role in transition programs in Nigeria from 1990 to 1999. This study also addressed how changes in communication technology altered the definition of news reporting and writing, and how recent technological changes contribute to societal change. My purpose here was to critically examine the role communication technologies and the press played in Nigeria’s transition programs from 1990 to 1999. Specifically, what role did communication technology and the press play in Nigeria’s return to democracy? How did journalists use communication technology to advocate for political change and what challenges did they face? Press and print media, used interchangeably in this study, refer to magazine and newspaper organizations and the journalists that work for them. This research was designed to contribute to a growing research area in journalism, political science, and policy literature on the interaction between political transitions and the mass media. Scholars use the term ‘media’ differently, depending on whether or not the medium, or media, of interest can carry out the process of communication studied (DeFleur & Dennis, 2002). In this study, media refers to the major means of information dissemination—print and broadcast. This study asked four research questions:

RQ1: What was the Nigerian print media’s agenda in the 1990s regarding Nigeria’s democratization?

RQ2: What challenges did Nigerian print journalists face during the democratization process in the 1990s?
RQ3: What role did new communication technology play in Nigeria’s democratization in the 1990s?

RQ4: What challenges did Nigerian print journalists face in using new communication technology?

To answer these questions, I interviewed ten Nigerian journalists who had worked for daily Nigerian newspapers and weekly newsmagazines for at least 11 years. Interviews were conducted in English, using an interview guide with primarily open-ended questions. Questions sought to generate knowledge about the participants’ professional background, beliefs regarding journalism’s role in society, experiences under military rule, use of communication technology, access to communication technology, and challenges faced using communication technology. The methodology for this study is discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Data was collected in Lagos, Lagos state, which is located in southwestern Nigeria. Often called Nigeria’s most industrialized city, Lagos has the largest number of mass media organizations and cyber-cafes in Nigeria. In the 1990s, most protests against military rule occurred in Lagos (Bourgault, 1998; Olukotun, 2002b). Nigeria was an ideal arena for this study for various reasons. Twenty-nine years of corrective military rule had made Nigeria a rotting corpse shell by 1990. Nigeria was the 13th poorest nation in the world, its educational and social services had crumbled, and corruption had taken a firm hold of the nation (Ojo, 2000). Nigerians believed democracy was the answer and millions participated in the process they hoped would return the country to civilian rule (Bourgault, 1998). Also, the Nigerian press is the largest in Africa, with over 78 newspapers and 45 magazines (Olukotun, 2004).

Nigeria’s media environment also presents an interesting mix of how the media works when government and private media ownership exists in a political system, thereby providing “significant insight into the dynamics of government-press relations in a transitional-democratizing press system” (Ibelema, 2003, p. 163). This study focused on the Nigerian press because of its long history of political advocacy since its inception in 1859 (Dare, 1996; Ibelema, 2003). Nigeria’s print media has, despite many challenges, remained “one of the most resilient and daring segments of Nigeria’s civil society” (Olukotun, 2004, p. 2). This is not to say broadcasting does not exist. As earlier mentioned, the government controlled broadcasting until 1992. Therefore, most broadcasts presented a government perspective. But when private radio and television stations came into being, their programs differed little from those of government stations. The private stations
focused more on entertainment than playing a watchdog role. Moreover, some owners allied themselves to the government and military contacts to get funding. The Nigerian government targeted the print media because it was independent in many ways of government control (Ogbondah, 1998). It is important to add that my interest in this study came from my experiences as a reporter and the daughter of a Nigerian journalist in the 1990s.

My father, Dan Agbese, was arrested and jailed for a story he reported in *Newswatch* magazine in 1994. The story, an interview with a former member of General Abacha’s cabinet, informed Nigerians that Abacha had no intention of handing over, though his transition program was in progress. My father and two colleagues were arrested and charged with treason for the story. The penalty was death. While in detention, my father used his cell phone to keep in touch with the family, his lawyer and others who pressured the government for their release. They were released after three weeks, and all the charges were dropped. This experience gave me some insights into the study that helped with data collection and analysis. This book is presented in six chapters.

Chapter two examines available literature on democratization in the late 20th century, political transitions and the role of the media and communication technology in political transitions.

Chapter three is on the case study, Nigeria. The chapter provides a historical background of Nigeria, its journey to democratization in the 1990s and its media environment.

Chapter four presents the methods used for data collection. This research used a qualitative method (in-depth interviews) to collect data.

Chapter five presents the findings of the research, while chapter six presents the researcher’s conclusions and suggestions for future study. Following is chapter two, a review of available literature.
In the latter part of the 20th century, over 30 countries chose to change their political structure from a form of authoritarianism to democracy. Samuel Huntington (1991) calls this period the third wave of global democratization. A wave of democratization is a “group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time,” and “usually involves liberalization or partial democratization in political systems that do not become fully democratic” (Huntington, 1991, p. 15). Specifically, a wave of democratization has occurred if political transitions to democracy outnumber transitions to other political systems. Though Samuel Huntington’s work and theory of civilization have generated a lot of controversy and debate, his book, The Third Wave, provides a historical perspective on the process of democratization and is largely cited across the literature on political transitions (Gannon, 2001). Therefore, his work on democratization is used to explain waves of democratization here. Three global waves of democratization have occurred since the 1820s.

The first wave of democratization occurred during the American and French revolutions of the 1820s, and industrialization, and lasted for close to a century (Lewis, 2001). Then, political changes were aimed at replacing absolute monarchies and feudal aristocracies with democracies that allowed working and elite classes to mix and have equal rights (Huntington, 1991–1992). European and North American countries during this period adopted an electoral process that allowed 50 percent of eligible adult males to vote, and the creation of a ruling body through elections or majority parliamentary support (Huntington, 1991). These “met minimal conditions of political freedom” (Lewis, 2001, p. 544). However, the first wave reversed in the 1920s. Old or new countries that adopted democracy before or after World War I replaced democracy with “new mass-based, more brutal and pervasive forms of totalitarianism.”
Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, and Germany are good examples of countries where authoritarian governments replaced democratic ones in the 1920s.

The second wave of democratization started during World War II. In the 1940s, Western allies sought to release nations under fascist, military and authoritarian rule, and replace these political systems with democratic ones (Lewis, 2001). The wave spread beyond Europe to Asia and Latin America where several countries either shifted towards or returned to democracy. The wave also affected countries gaining independence from colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s such as Malaysia, Nigeria and India. But in the early 1960s, the second wave reversed, particularly in Latin America, when military groups started to overthrow democratic leaders. Several military coups occurred in Latin America and Asia, and military rule gradually replaced civilian governments (Huntington, 1991). The wave of military coups soon hit Africa, and by 1970, at least 33 independent African countries had experienced military coups. The authoritarian trend did not last very long.

The third wave of democratization began in Portugal in 1974, when a military coup ousted Marcello Caetano’s dictatorship that had started in 1926 (Huntington, 1991). The wave spread gradually to East European, Asian and African countries where single parties, military regimes and personal dictatorships had suppressed political competition and participation (Huntington, 1991–1992). By 1995, at least 74 percent of the countries in these regions were democratic or democratizing (Lewis, 2001). However, this wave differed from previous ones in one important regard. There were external and internal factors that influenced the push for democratization (Huntington, 1991).

Internally, Asian, Latin American and African countries were facing political, social and economic crises with the failure of development programs based on modernization and development theories to build politically and economically stable countries (Melkote, 2002; O’Neil, 1998; Shah, 1996). Modernization theory, based on liberal political thought and neo-classical economics theory, asserted that developing nations would only develop if they adopted Western political, economic and social institutions, and science and technology (Melkote, 2002). Therefore, development theorists in the 1950s and 1960s recommended modernizing traditional societies and using the mass media to create Western replicas across the globe (Lerner, 1958; Mody, 2002; Rogers, 1969; Schramm, 1964). The mass media were seen as the means for taking ideas from the West to developing nations, and “entrusted with the task of preparing individuals in developing nations for a rapid social change by establishing a climate
of modernization” (Melkote, 2002, p. 424). But by the 1970s, programs based on modernization and development theories failed to make many African, Asian and Latin American countries politically and economically strong. The situation worsened in the 1980s when leaders who received loans from financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were required to implement programs that still followed a Western route (Callaghy, 1995). These programs failed to yield meaningful or lasting results, and people were left starving, poor, dying and insecure in many of these countries. Latin American and Asian scholars, especially, criticized these programs and theories for ignoring the unique characteristics of the countries they were applied to, and for being racist (Huesca, 2002; Mativo, 1989; Melkote & Steeves, 2001). These problems made several governments illegitimate in the eyes of the people, and mass demonstrations occurred, with people calling for political change (Mwangi, 2002). Indeed, early protests in Francophone Africa were over “austerity measures governments were seeking to implement in order to meet their debt payments and the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) requirements of international creditors and lending institutions” (Penna et al., 1990, p. 85). Poor leadership also contributed to the failure of these programs, and people resented the way their leaders ruled (Hyden & Okigbo, 2002). People called for democratic governance, believing democracy would improve their standards of living, and give them a say in their own country.

The presence of pressure and civil groups in countries under authoritarian or totalitarian rule also contributed to democratization (Gibson, 2001). Following years of political and economic instability, many of these countries were ripe for political transitions, and local pressure and civil groups made life difficult for a number of leaders (Decalo, 1992). These groups openly criticized government programs, structures and systems, and worked with international pressure groups like Amnesty International to make these failures known (Randall, 1993).

Externally, international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and countries like the United States and Britain, made democratization a condition for international aid (Harsch, 1993). Countries that needed economic aid needed to democratize and adopt structural adjustment programs to receive loans (Ayittey, 1998). Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) also provided IFI loans to recipient countries for development projects (Gordon & Gordon, 2001). However, these loans came with conditionalities, including downsizing the public sector, lifting restrictions on foreign imports, currency devaluation, increasing trade liberalizations and cutting back on social services (DeLancey, 2001). Borrowing countries were also required