

Chapter 13

Rethinking Media Engagement Strategies for Social Change in Africa: Context, Approaches, and Implications for Development Communication

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ABSTRACT

Media engagement is a powerful strategy of achieving development outcomes in society. This has resulted in the deployment of different media platforms and processes (including the mass media, community media, mediated media and social media) by development agencies for social change. This chapter examined the imperatives for and the diverse approaches by development organizations in mobilizing the media for social change in Africa. While such media engagement processes have contributed to influencing public and media agenda in line with organizational mandates, they also heavily integrate corporate promotion and individual organizational positioning. Our analysis demonstrates the absence of a collective media engagement strategy aligned with the overarching global and continental development goals among development agencies. Drawing on insights from contemporary development frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063 of the Africa Union, the study calls for a rethink of existing media engagement approaches in achieving social change in Africa. It also recommends actions to enhance issue positioning and advocacy journalism.

INTRODUCTION

Development organizations undertake a variety of media and communication activities to influence social, policy and political agenda. This is predicated on the inherent power of the media in addressing the information gap in the process of social change (McCombs, 2005; Waisbord, 2006) and educating the public on health outcomes (Wallack et al, 1993). Media deployment by development agencies also

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3376-4.ch013

emanates from the conviction that the mass media can either serve as a means of transferring ideas and innovation essential for change (Oxfam. (2015; Praekelt, 2012) or facilitating the creation of an enabling environment for dialogue and empowerment pivotal for sustainable development (PANOS, 2003). Also, the advent of digital media globally and in Africa has led to significant optimism on social media solutions in enhancing civic engagement and collective innovation (Green et al, 2014:208) and social and behaviour change (Fayoyin 2016:9). Undoubtedly, technological innovations have created horizontal integration of the society resulting in multipolar, multidimensional and multidirectional social interaction and information flows (Christakis & Fowler, 2011).

However, the emergence of new development frameworks at the global and continental levels presents new obligations and challenges for media's role in development. First, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 enshrines the global vision for human development to be achieved by 2030 as follows:

We resolve to build a better future for all people, including millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential. We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty, just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet. The world would be a better place in 2030 if we succeed in our objectives (United Nations, 2015:12)

Second, the African Union Agenda 2063 for the continent contains a similar goal for social change and overall development. The aspirations for a new Africa include:

1. A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development;
2. An integrated continent, politically united and based on ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance;
3. An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law; and
4. An Africa whose development is people-driven relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth and caring for children" (Africa Union, 2014:2).

Achieving these laudable objectives requires, among others, the full deployment of all the instruments of social change, including the media. Arguably, the voice of the people which is essential in effecting change cannot be integrated into the development agenda without effective media deployment. Implementing a coherent and comprehensive action for vulnerable people is impossible without the media holding government and other institutions accountable to the people and to the development vision.

Against this backdrop, the chapter examines the current context and approaches of engaging the media for social change in Africa. We define media engagement for development as the deployment of professional journalism skills and utilization of media products, platforms and processes in promoting social change. This perspective also describes media advocacy activities by development agencies in achieving their mandates. Chapman (2004:1) situates media advocacy within the general framework of public health advocacy as the 'strategic use of news media to advance a policy initiative, in the face of opposition' while Wallack *et al.*, (1993:35) describe it as a strategy to use the mass media "appropriately, aggressively and effectively to support the development of healthy public policies". For this paper, media engagement entails the holistic deployment of multiple media platforms to influence public opinion, mobilise community activists, and influence levels of influence and advance social change agenda. In

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