

Role of Interest Articulation and Interest Aggregation in National Information Policy in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to reiterate the importance of information to man and society which is more critical to the Nigerian state at this moment of our national political history where hate speeches and other unsavoury circumstances are threatening our cohesion and unity as a people both at home and abroad. To this extent therefore, the paper proposes an active and objective national information policy that is hinged on active interest articulation and aggregation as a panacea to the evil of hate speeches, electoral violence, poverty and corruption currently tearing the nation into shreds. These evils without mincing words had over time cumulatively lead to our youths fleeing the country for anticipated el-dorado; dashed by xenophobic attacks on them by fellow Africans. Here, information is key to Nigerians and especially to the South African government and its youths who apparently are grossly bereft of a robust sense of history, hence their attitude to fellow blacks; making the entire African continent a laughing stock before the international community.*

Findings: *This paper discovered that for Nigeria's information policy to be alive to its responsibilities by achieving the desired objectives, it requires effective interest articulation and interest aggregation.*

Practical Implications: *The practical implications of this work, arises from the understanding that information is germane and remain indispensable in every aspects of human interactions and communication. Which means that information affects behaviour, actions/inactions and outcomes; especially when it is accurate and timely, when it is presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance, when it is used in the right way and for a right purpose, it reduces chaos and uncertainty.*

Originality/Value: *This paper is original in its content, only adding its voice to other similar works celebrating and eulogizing the prime position of information in the day to day activities of man and the devastating consequences of lack of it.*

Paper type: *Qualitative*

Keywords: **Information policy, National information policy, Interest Articulation; Interest aggregation; Nigeria.**

Introduction

Developing an introduction to this paper entitled "The role of interest articulation and interest aggregation in national information policy in Nigeria" will require painting a background of the assumption of the title. To that end, this paper tries to say that formulation of effective information policy in Nigeria is to a very large extent, a function of effective interest articulation and interest aggregation. Put differently, effective management of information activities in Nigeria through a national information policy must begin with

active interest articulation and interest aggregation. In other words, what this paper is saying is that formulating an effective national information policy without the duo of interest articulation and interest aggregation is synonymous with making omelette without egg.

Hypothetically speaking, it means that there is significant relationship between interest articulation/interest aggregation on one hand and policy formulation on the other hand; therefore, to have an active and objective national information

policy hinges squarely on active interest articulation and aggregation. The probable place to start this discourse is an understanding of the relevance of information to man and society.

We are in an era where information has not just become a commodity but has at the same time been generally acknowledged as the fifth factor of production after land, labour, capital and entrepreneur. The slogan, "if you are not informed, you will be deformed", maximally captures the relevance of information to mankind and society. Okiy, (2010) confirms that in this age, it is only the nations that are conscious of the importance of information in its drive towards accelerated development that can survive and thrive in the comity of nations. Buttressing this point, Business Dictionary (2018) posits that information is important in decision making and problem-solving processes. It further states that without the right information, individuals, organizations and society are bound to make costly and regrettable mistakes in those key processes. Put differently, it means that information affects behaviour, a decision or an outcome. So when it is accurate and timely, when it is specific and organized for a purpose, when it is presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance and when it is used in the right way and for the right purpose, information reduces chaos, leads to an increase in understanding and decrease in uncertainty.

From the position which arises from the postulation of Business Dictionary (2018) above, it means that as valuable as information may be, it can be used positively and can also be abused negatively. That is to say that a person can be positively informed and can also be negatively informed and/or misinformed. Therefore, the underlying need to severely reduce the occurrence of abuse of creation, organization, storage, access, dissemination, use, and final disposal of information is the whole essence of (national) information policy.

The above background of the underlying importance of information and its possible dicey use met with the revolutionary changes of the 21st Century brought about by information and communication technologies (ICT); the digital technology and the World Wide Web (www). Its arrival, similar to that of printing brought about not only the ability to create large and complex files of digital information, but to share the large and complex information between and among large populations. That is to say that ICT almost converted the creation, organization, storage, access, dissemination, use, and final disposal of information from being an exclusive reserve of information

professionals into an all comer's affair. In this age, the Internet and its associated technologies are used to harness and enhance access to the immense knowledge of man all over the world. Therefore, technological innovation brought increased supply of information (also known as information explosion) which in turn created the need to regulate or control information activities through information policies. This explains why the Volpe National Transportation Systems Centre (1998) alleges that the increased volume of information makes information integration, analysis and management even more critical.

National Information Policy

An understanding of the concept of "national information policy" can be better achieved through an analytic/synthetic definition of the constituent concepts – policy, information and national. Akpan (1982) defines policy as a form of law(s) made by governing bodies to govern, direct, control, and regulate the activities of persons. Therefore, policy is a regulatory framework that guides the activities of persons in different given contexts.

The English word "information" as a concept has different meanings in different contexts. It apparently derives from the Latin stem "information-of the nominative "information", which is derived from the verb "informare" which means to inform. Information as organized data (BusinessDictionary,2010) refers to knowledge about a particular subject, issue, event or process. According to Glasgow Caledonian University (2010) Information can be obtained from various sources: you can buy information, you can be told information, for example through a lecture or a television program, or you can find information through your own research. Information is essential to finding your route to university in the morning, writing an essay, getting the right ingredients for a recipe, conducting an experiment, finding the right drug for treating a given ailment, renting a flat, filling in a job application form, exam revision and for sundry other every day and not-so-everyday tasks.

Much as information can perform these miracles, it can also be a menace; a perceived threat or danger. It can mislead, it can create mistrust and animosity, it can bring disorder, it can also create uncertainty. Information can rent peace and entrench war; it can increase chaos and it can also bring retrogression. All these (i.e. whatever information can do) depend on how it is produced, how it is disseminated and how it is used. In other words, misapplied information could be more dangerous than a misfired bullet. For example, the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War could have been

averted but for several negative propaganda by the concerned war lords and interests. Hate speeches is a type of information though of negative implications and consequences its damage to people's psyche-brother against brother, community against community, nations against nations is untold. That is why this paper maintains that information policy is very essential to regulate and control people's activities in relation to the creation, organization, storage, access, dissemination, use, and disposal of information as it helps to ensure that information is used positively rather than negatively.

An information policy accordingly is a law, regulation or policy that encourages, discourages, or regulates the creation, use, storage, access, and communication and dissemination of information.

(Weingarten,1989).Vancouver Community Network (VCN) (2005) asserts that information policy determines the kind of information collected, created, organized, stored, accessed, disseminated and retained. Who can use the information, whether there will be charges for access, and the amount charged, could also be an issue. Information policy would therefore establish the rules within which private information providers and the media would effectively operate.

It became a prominent field of study during the latter half of the 20th Century as the shift from an industrial to an information society transpired. Information policy has since then evolved from being seen as relatively unimportant to having a much more overarching strategic significance since it establishes the conditions "under which all other decision making, public discourse, and political activity occur" (Braman, 2011). The growing awareness in the importance of information policy has sparked an interest in various groups to further study and analyse its magnitude. Consequently, VCN (2005) further states that information policy includes the following areas:

- literacy
- privatization and distribution of government information
- freedom of information access
- protection of personal privacy
- intellectual property rights
- retention of archival copies of material
- Citizen's Charter of Information Rights

In contrast to "being a citizen of a nation", "national" as used here in national information policy is an adjective which shows that a thing has to do with a nation, or by extension, relationship or connectedness with a country (sovereign state). If national has to do with a nation-state in the context of this paper, then

national information policy can simply be defined as the laws, regulations or policies of a country that encourage, discourage, or regulate the creation, use, storage, access, and communication and dissemination of information.

Now that we know what national information policy is or tend to do, the next level would be to x-ray the concepts of interest articulation and interest aggregation with a view to knowing the roles they play in national information policy.

Interest Articulation and National Information Policy

Interest articulation is essential to policy formulation. Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz (2014) posit that the quality of democratic institutions as a tool of political representation depends on interest articulation: the opportunity and willingness of citizens to communicate their needs and preferences to their representatives in government. According to them, what politicians think, how they vote, and what they prioritize depends in part on what they hear from constituents. So, if interests are not properly articulated, policy makers will make mistakes.

Policies as the actions or inactions of governments are formulated and implemented to satisfy the desires or yearnings of the subsystems or members of a system. In the words of Okereke (2003), (public) policy refers to those definite acts or actions of government geared toward the fulfilment of the obligations of government on the citizens, that is, the maintenance of law and order, and the provision of necessary social and economic facilities needed for an enhanced standard of living and peaceful coexistence among the people. In a heterogeneous and complex society like Nigeria, citizens hold various values or preferences that they wish to promote in public policy, such as protecting the rights of owners of intellectual properties or encouraging intellectual adventure, and this amount to their interests in government and politics. According to Janda (2011), in a heterogeneous and complex society like Nigeria, citizens hold various values or preferences that they wish to promote in public policy, such as protecting the rights of owners of intellectual properties or encouraging intellectual adventure, and this amount to their interests in government and politics. This is more so in the area of information policy because the information needs of people, their characteristics and behaviour towards information appreciation and utilization differ according to their profession/work environment, gender, education, social status, location, ethnic group, religion and even socio-cultural background (Uhegbu, 2007).

Coupled with the fact that the interests of persons may be swayed or shaped by external influences such as 'agenda setting', it is usually difficult for individual citizens in a political system to clearly enunciate their interests. To that extent, interest articulation becomes a function of interest groups.

Interest 'agenda-setting' is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. It describes the way that media attempts to influence viewers, and establish a hierarchy of news prevalence. It can also be described as the "ability (of the news media) to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda (Wikipedia, 2010). Orr (2012) sees it as the idea that what the public thinks about societal events is set by the media. However, the media sometimes mislead the public which in turn affects objectivity in interest articulation. This is so because two basic assumptions underlie most researches on agenda-setting:

- the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it;
- media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues

To articulate an interest means to express it clearly and concisely to make it worthy to find a place in the policy agenda. According to Almond and Coleman (1960), interests are usually articulated by organizations, or interest groups, that present specific desires before relevant political actors, such as legislatures, executives, bureaucracies, voters, and courts. For example, a 'Nollywood' group may back legislation to increase punishment for copyright violators. Interest groups typically—but not exclusively—engage in interest articulation. In other words, the strengths or weaknesses of such interest groups as the Nigerian Library Association (NLA), Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) etc determines the direction of information interest articulation.

Interest groups that articulate interest include but are not limited to the following:

- Professional associations such as the Nigerian Library Association (NLA), the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA).
- Trade unions such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC).
- The media Such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspapers Proprietors Association (NPA) and the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE).

- Student Associations such as National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS).
- Women organizations such as the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) and the Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN).

Interest Aggregation

Interest aggregation means to collect and balance different, often competing, interests. Suppose that a library association fronts a legislation to make establishment of a library a precondition for the establishment of nursery, primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. That legislation could increase the cost of establishing or running a private school in Nigeria. So an association of private school proprietors lobbies against it. In such a scenario, the policy making body (which may be the legislature) would decide between the competing interests or strike a compromise between the two interest groups. In either case, it assumes the task of interest aggregation (Janda, 2011). On another hand, it could be that several demands are placed on the state's 'lean' resources by different interest groups. All the demands cannot be attended to at the same time and some of them may never receive attention at all. So interest aggregation also means the ability of policy makers to scale preferences of demands placed on it by various different groups. Where preferences of demands are not objectively scaled in terms of their various gravities, it could result in mistakes in authoritative allocation of values and resources by interest aggregators.

Okereke (2003) admits that public policy is made within a complex of pulls or pressures. According to him, the policy making arena is always rowdy and crowded because policy makers often find themselves confronted by a maze of demands that are in many cases conflicting. There are several things that call for the attention of government. So, aggregating interests in a heterogeneous and complex society like Nigeria becomes a herculean task.

As Ofili (2016) puts it, Nigeria, as a country, came into existence in 1960 with the British amalgamation of the erstwhile autonomous empires, kingdoms and city states which had nothing in common apart from trade and wars of expansion. The amalgamation saw the fusion of these political entities into one with the associated interactional pattern between and among members of these distinct groups. The various groups in their attempt to be relevant economically, politically and otherwise, developed the 'we' and 'they' consciousness or sentiment which defined the form, manner and nature of the relationships among these

federating units (ethno-linguistic groups) in the country (Nigeria).

This gives rise to a country where every move by any group is suspect, a country where territorial politics is the order of the day; "so long as the interest is ours, whether it negatively affects others or not, it must find its way into the nation's policy agenda". Fresh instances are the herdsmen (Fulani cattle rearers)/farmers' brouhaha and the cattle colony/Ruga policy. Ethnicity and religious bigotry have so beclouded the objective reasoning of our interest aggregators thereby preventing them from striking an objective balance between the Fulani herdsmen and the crop farmers. So, Nigeria's complexity and polarity arising from ethnic and religious differences also clog the wheels to effective formulation/implementation of national information policy.

However, while interest articulation is often carried out by interest groups, Almond and Coleman (1960) note that interest aggregation is often performed by another type of political organization; political parties. Contrary to interest groups that are usually formed by those sharing similar and narrow interests, political parties are composed of broad coalitions of citizens with vastly different interests. In assembling that coalition and appealing for electoral support, political parties need to aggregate different interests. Aggregating such interests is usually hindered by the heterogeneous nature of the constituents of political parties. Various politicians would always want the information demands of their various supporters to make the national policy agenda. It goes to show that the sentimental disposition of our leaders also hinder interest articulation and interest aggregation which in turn hinder national information policy formulation. Achebe (1983) squarely pointed out poor leadership as Nigeria's major problem. He said, that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. According to him, the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

The Way Forward

It has been established above that information is an essential ingredient around which the social, cultural, economic, political and technological development of any nation revolves. That means that without information, nations as well as individuals will remain underdeveloped. However, this essential ingredient (information) is more or less a double-edged sword. It can bring development and it can demolish or thwart development. It can bring peace and it can also cause

war. It can reduce uncertainty and it can also bring chaos. The knowledge of the dicey nature of information is the reason why nations as well as organizations try to tame the creation, collection, use, storage, access, communication and dissemination as well as disposal of information through the instrumentality of national information policy.

Cooking up an effective and efficient national information policy requires an objective rapport with information interest(s) articulation and aggregation.

However, these are encumbered by:

- Lack of opportunity and willingness of citizens to communicate their needs and preferences to their representatives in government (interest aggregators).
- Negative impact of external influences such as agenda setting on the interests of persons.
- Weakness of information interest groups.
- The heterogeneous and complex nature of Nigeria which breeds 'we' and 'they' consciousness or sentiment.
- Territorial politics.
- High quantity of demands placed on the state's 'lean' resources by different interest group which makes aggregating interests in Nigeria a herculean task.
- Biased scaling of preferences of demands arising from ethnic/religious inclinations.
- Poor leadership/lack of political will among Nigerian leaders.

From the foregoing, it is glaring that formulating and implementing an effective and efficient national information policy in Nigeria through interest articulation and aggregation is inundated with several challenges. However, the good news is that the challenges are surmountable. The effects of the actions of the challenges can be reversed or undone through the following means:

- Creating accessible avenues through which citizens can communicate their needs and preferences to their representatives in government (interest aggregators) such as regular town hall meetings. This will also increase the willingness of citizens to communicate their interests to interest aggregators.
- Ensuring objective/unbiased news reportage by the media to avoid misguiding interest articulation.
- Strengthening information institutions such as NLA, NUJ, NPA, NGE.

- Encouraging a relationship of mutual trust and respect amongst the constituent entities that make up Nigeria through equality and/or equity.
- Adopting objective/unbiased scaling of preferences of demands arising from the various segments of Nigeria.
- Entrenching good governance in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Achieving an active national information policy through interest articulation and aggregation in a complex society like the much-mouthed giant of Africa (Nigeria) is quite a complex and demanding project. For Nigeria's information policy to be alive to its responsibilities by achieving the desired objectives, it requires effective interest articulation and aggregation. Outcomes should be defined, information security should be well assessed and managed, connected legislations should be carefully observed, references to published guidelines and best practices should be made, preservation and conservation of information should be considered, relevant expertise/professionalism should be identified and drawn upon, information to be created, disseminated or used should be decided, arrangements for the management of data bases and their contents should be made, decision on acceptable modes of information communication should be taken and appropriate disposal policies must be duly followed. If all these and the other recommendations above are given due positive consideration by the concerned authorities, Nigeria can achieve an active information policy via reliable interest articulation/aggregation.

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