

# Who Defines National Identity? Perspectives on Media and Governance

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## Introduction

The idea of national consciousness has developed as the attachment of secondary symbols of nationality to primary items of information moving through channels of social communication, or through the mind of an individual. In creating certain uniformity within nations, many countries look up to the media to lead the way. The media therefore plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of societal structures, values and identity. Several scholars have argued that the media have been the foundation over the past three centuries in the shaping, distribution and institutionalization of identities, affirming that the mass education system and the media are major agencies of socialization.

Consequently, the media has been largely considered and utilized as a potent tool for building national identity.

Due to a lack of a concise and accurate definition of identity in the era of globalization, it is impossible to define the role of mass media as the most important contemporary instrument for strengthening or weakening identities across national frontiers. However, many identity theorists have conceptualized identity as the subjective state of a sense of belonging, as a group phenomenon, in which the members of a group identify with one another.

National Identity has been an underlying theme in communication research since the 1950s. It refers to a person's identity and sense of belonging to one nation; a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status. National identity has been described as a collective sentiment among certain people derived from the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most of the attributes unique to that nation.

Three functions of national identity can be proposed:

- 1- It provides a satisfying answer to the fear of personal oblivion, through identification with a nation.
- 2- It offers personal renewal and dignity by becoming part of a political "super-family".
- 3- It enables the realization of feelings of fraternity, especially through the use of symbols and ceremony.

## Media and National Identity

The most potent source of a national identity is the shared political culture of the public domain. Culture is an ambiguous term and often refers to ways of life, which have little to do with the market place. A national society has its own state controlled religion and official language, but it also has its own literary and artistic traditions, its own cuisine, its own sports and a whole variety of customs and family arrangements that distinguish it from other societies. The national culture in this sense is not completely at the mercy of the forces of modernization. While modernization demands that there should be legal, economic, political and educational institutions of a certain kind, a distinctive national culture is likely to be much more resistant to change.

The newspapers, radio and television are vital for encouraging their audience both to see the world in national terms in general, and to think in patriotic terms about their own nation in particular. However, this relationship between the mass media and nation has been left both under-theorized and empirically untested. As for the question of the relationship of the media to national cultural identity, there was an easy and obvious answer: the media must be important because they are so prevalent.

Estel (2020), in Javadi and Javadi, (2008) describes national identity as a special case of collective identity: This does not mean an objective, i.e. systemic, connection built by human beings, but its interpretation by the members of that collective – hence it must be socially shared, the binding knowledge being the key factor. National identity then means a socially shared and binding knowledge in the form of an officially prevailing conception of itself in a certain nation being imparted through certain institutions.

Das and Harindranath, (2006), in Essays, UK, (2018), argues that identity operates on two levels, the individual and the collective which are often confused in discussions of ethnic and national identity. They add that the broadest subtype of collective cultural identities is the ethnic or

ethnic community. Agreeing to this, if we look at today's countries, many of them seem to build their perceived internal similarity on a premise of shared ethnicity.

A subconscious belief in a group's separate origin and evolution has thus become an important ingredient of national psychology.

National identity and the extent of its existence is also said to be composed of strong linked history and joint choices (Das and Harindranath, 2006, cited in Essays, UK, 2018). "It is a dynamic structure of affiliation, with strong foundations in the past but susceptible to change in the present". Additionally, nations base their claim to statehood on assumptions of a shared cultural heritage, which are in turn most often based on assumptions of shared ethnicity. The latter assumption has less to do with a reality of common ethnicity than with a myth of common ethnicity which is cast over multi-ethnic communities to turn them into politicized 'national' communities.

According to Das and Harindranath (2006), nation states were developed in Europe and Africa using economic, legal, armed forces and processes that were administrative in nature. Disparate populations have been fused into a single ethnic community based on the cultural heritage of the dominant core. This is an example of dominant ethnic models evident in countries like Burma where the dominant Burmese ethnic community has heavily influenced the formation and the nature of the state of Burma (now known as Myanmar), rather than the Karen, Shan or Mon ethnic groups. By implication, other cultures continue to flourish and the identity of the emerging political community is shaped by the historic culture of its dominant ethnic group. Marginal or minority cultures are then formed with the remaining 'non-dominant cultures'.

Notably, there are some multi-ethnic states where discrepancy in inter-ethnic power is marginal enough to allow for a state along the lines of the supra-ethnic model, where the emphasis is on political rather cultural unity. However, that examples of this situation are limited, does not make such a framework unquestionable. An examples of this is Nigeria where efforts to construct a supra-ethnic states most often results in power residing with three major ethnic groups, out of more than 250 others. So, it is suffice to say that a people who are politically and culturally pre-eminent in a state (even though other groups are present in significant numbers) tend to equate the entire country with their own ethnic homeland, and to perceive the state as an

extension of their particular ethnic group. It therefore holds that once a multi-ethnic or poly-ethnic state emerges, it becomes a reality-in-itself. The coexistence and interaction among the different nations or ethnic groups are most likely to produce certain emergent properties which give a new meaning and a collective self-identification to the constituent units. Resultantly, national identity, accordingly is borne out of somewhat collective self-identification of a people within a nation-state. This is the situation in Nigeria and some African nations.

The issue of building definite 'sameness' within nation-states and the quest for nation-building then comes to the forefront and most nations resort to media use to create, sustain and maintain national culture for national identity. Herein lies the question, why the media?

Considering how much of a nation's peoples' knowledge of the world is derived from communication, the mass media and new media channels stand as strong and potent sources of influence on societal structures of identification since it is apparently difficult for people, government and the governed to accomplish very abstract levels of identification (as with a nation-state) by exclusive reliance on direct lived experience or face to face communication interactions.

Media are the communication vehicles used to store and disseminate information, data as well as facts and figures to a large heterogeneous and anonymous audience simultaneously. The components of the media which include, but not limited to the Newspaper, Magazine, Radio, Television, Cinema, Publishing and Photography, Cable Satellite, and the Internet, have helped to connect myriads of people across the globe and they have been used to affect human behaviour. Today, media use has greatly changed and dispersed in different directions based on the sociocultural nuances and effects of media content and performance. (Popoola, & Oboh, 2019). For instance, biased towards media acts can affect minor religious or ethnic groups in form of racism in the media and religious bias in the media. The media must perform some traditional or conventional functions by providing information in the society on daily basis.

The members of the society mostly acquire education, knowledge and relevant skills. The media must keep watch on the activities of government and correct uncomplimentary occurrences in the society. It is worthy of note that the media have that power to galvanize

members of the society to share common values and to agree on what constitute acceptable norms. The media have a duty to share opinions and thoughts with members of the society through the transmission of tales, folklore and social norms, songs and artifacts and through messages about the preservation of peoples' ways of life in terms of dressing and cultural festivals. It is the duty of the media to select, evaluate and interpret news with focus on the most significant aspect of life rather than over stimulating and over mobilizing the population. The media can influence the thinking of members of the public in taking decision on issues of public importance- be it politics, economic and social uprightness through the court of public opinion.

Media have typically been institutional products of nations and, as such, play a fundamental role in their maintenance. Terzis (2005) explains that, in most countries, national broadcasting in its early forms (especially before its commercialisation, when it could not afford the stratification of its audience), has made possible the transformations of individual dramas, performances, activities, memories, into fictions of collective national life for millions of individuals who may never interact with one another. It is imperative that nation states have a measure of common culture and civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas that bind the population together in their homeland. The major agencies through which this socialization is achievable, are the mass education system and the mass media.

As observed by Terzis (2005), Essays, Uk (2018) and Salawu (2019), the contemporary national media play significant roles in the two processes of national identity definition and building – first as tellers of national myths in terms of 'engravers' of national symbols upon the nation's memory and presenters of national rituals (elections, celebrations, civic duties and responsibilities, among others. In this light, for media content providers, the prominence of national identity in the media content is encouraged by the knowledge that they (the media content providers) are constructing news for a national audience with which they share national membership. Secondly, the media constructs and strengthens the "relational opposition of 'us' and the 'others'. One media content in respect of which nationalist discourse today is very high, is news, and especially the coverage of foreign affairs. Comparative international news research shows the significant role of the media in perpetuating a world view that consistently favours the home nation perspective. Also, it is noteworthy that one prominent pattern that emerges in the images of

nationhood is the definition of 'national' and 'anti-national' by the media, the 'normal' and 'abnormal', the 'good' and the 'bad'. This demarcation is key especially where diversity is synonymous with nation states as evident in Nigeria and several other African countries. In the Nigerian case, for example, it is evident in the country's national polity that some mother tongues and their associated religions and ways of life are being treated as primary and superior to the 'unpopular' others, causing bitter power and class struggles.

National identity has also been maintained for those living outside of their respective nations, through new and evolving forms of media and communications such as the internet. This tool can transmit information essential to maintain national identity, especially for those in the diaspora. Virtual national communities are created by the internet and have often acquainted people scattered around the globe with ways of maintaining their national identity without having a physical nation state. Despite the criticism that the Internet subverts national identity by eliding national information boundaries and encouraging the more active, interpersonal and uncensored exchange of information on the one hand, and observed lower levels of national pride and the endorsement of cultural frames that are critical of national identities on the other hand, the Web arguably works to enhance both global and local identities within a post-national and cosmopolitan context. (Smith and Phillips, 2008). Nonetheless, the media engender a 'we-feeling,' a feeling of family, among the community, providing continual opportunities for identification with the nation. The media provide narratives and discourses that enable citizens to participate in the everyday life of a country-wide community, uniting individual members of the national family into a shared political and cultural rubric.

However, as observed by Oboh, and Popoola, (2019), the media, given their ownership structures, political economy and 'democratised' stances, can be harnessed to divisive purposes which might have the consequence of impeding the construction of a good national identity or of undermining the force of one or more elements of the symbolic repertoire of nationalistic ideology. As Terzis (2005) notes, in some cases, nationalist views and provocative views have provoked some of the world's worst massacres. One such example is major role the Hutu radio/television station in Rwanda, RTLM played in 1994 Rwandan genocide where thousands of Tutsis were slaughtered by another tribe – the Hutu.

It was observed that the RTLM repeatedly broadcast messages which maligned Tutsis and called on Hutus to rid the country of them. Ethnic hate and xenophobia being spewed from national media have also contributed to cataclysmic destruction of lives of foreigners, most especially, Nigerians, in South Africa.

Meanwhile, the fact that national media are established to homogenize the citizens is not a sufficient reason to conclude that audiences are homogenized since advocacy does not always mean acceptance. In cases where the national image promoted by the media is not accepted, it does meet with resistance from sections of the population. While some resistance is severe as in the case of Rwanda, the aggrieved groups might use organized forms of resistance where the aggrieved groups find peaceful ways of asserting their own identities.

### **National Identity in the Absence of Media**

With the compelling impact of media in shaping the socialization process and therefore the behavior of people, it holds that the media remain potent forces in shaping a national identity. For democratic institutions, the media play a powerful instrument in shaping public opinion whether in politics, culture and religion. Media presence in this regard has been so imposing across national frontiers, that citizens in democratic countries take media narratives and education as a part of life. However, in countries where government control of the media is evident and unavoidable, the media act as stooges, megaphones and amplifiers of the governing institution. The consequence of this is that such media are reduced and to propaganda outfits. In this context, how can a nation shape its identity when in the described operational and phenomenal sense, there is an absence of media?

There are two ways that media can be considered absent: (1) If the media do not exist; and (2) if the media are controlled, censored and are restricted. Given the fact that the media are strong forces in the socialization and national identity formation process, what happens then to national identity? National identity is patterned according to what the controlling body (a dictatorship or any institution that controls media) wants the people to be. This is the practice in nations that gag the media, and impose certain responsibilities on their media in order to preserve obvious political and economic teachings. Since the media might provide narratives and discourses that might be regarded as 'uncomplimentary' to governance, and the identity that the government might want to shape, media role in national identity becomes hampered and endangered. It is in this

light that good governance is a fundamental drive of a good and enviable national identity.

### **Conclusion**

Good governance is a process in which people in government deal with official document or request by using policy method or legal system to lead societies that are consisting of the same or similar body of citizens and/or dissimilar or diverse constituency. Development-enabling governance is such that moderates a country's national interest, national security, national identity and public loyalty through a political process that exists in transparent motives. According to Bevir and Rhodes (2016) as cited in Byram, M, (2018) "governance comprises all the processes of governing: whether undertaken by the government of a state, by a market or by a network over a social system such as family, tribe, organization, territory or across territories and whether through the laws, norms, power or language of an organized society." It relates to "the processes of interaction and decision-making among those that take part in any government affair to collectively solve problem that can lead to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions" (Hufty, 2011). Positive governance is the administrative system in which elected political candidates continuously exercise authority over the citizens. It is a performative act in which political entity is classified according to the distribution of power within it. It can comprise the body of persons that constitute the governing authority of a political organization. It can be contextually described as a process in which small cabal group secretly holding the principal political positions of a nation are engaging in artifices and intrigues to direct and supervise public affairs. Good governance presupposes different rules, norms and actions that are structured, sustained and regulated by the ruling body that should be held accountable by the media organization. Laudable governance can appear in distinct forms that are driven by diverse motivations in order to achieve different results. It is pertinent to state that the motivating factors that can generate different outcomes in a nation's governance are judicious use of means to accomplish an end, consistent management, cohesive policies, guidance, processes and decision rights for a given area of responsibility, and proper oversight, accountability and mechanisms that must function in a manner that allows the governed to respect the rights and interest of fellow-country men in the spirit of democracy.

In a good democracy there should be prescribed norms of how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources. These prescribed norms must be justified

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on the basic principle that they are conducive to economic ends like the eradication of poverty and successful economic development.

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