

Feedback: An Important Component of Decision Making¹

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Ideas abound everywhere. The powers that be, only have to create a conducive and threat-free, political milieu to explore and exploit them for the betterment of the society.

Feedback is a term borrowed from the field of electronics and was first formulated in the 1940s. Feedback involves the primary means by which a political actor "A" learns of the effects of his or her decision on "B" and vice versa, to enable him to modify or change the decision, to ensure survival, continuity and stability within the environment. Feedback includes messages, demands and inputs. Simple forms of feedback are vote, legal action or litigation² and what Meadow refers to as "citizen-initiated contacts"³ such as petitions, letter writing and non-violent demonstration. Severe forms of feedback include arson, violent demonstration and protest.

Any feedback which informs a political actor or system on what it is doing or any feedback which points that the system's decision is not popular and does not have the desired effect, is "negative feedback."⁴ But on the other hand, any feedback which informs and supports the system, is seen to be on the right course and is a positive feedback. The political effect of cumulative negative feedback on a system may be instability. Rhee contends the positive feedback, "depending upon its magnitude... does not lead to system breakdown."⁵

This study asserts that in order for any system to prevent instability and its demise, it can ill afford to ignore any feedback, especially negative feedback emanating from the environment. When information is available, the way it is processed is of critical importance and could go a long way to determining the success or failure of a decision or program.

Feedback occurs virtually in all political systems, irrespective of their ideology and structure. To maintain dynamic equilibrium and eventually its survival, every system uses and depend on feedback. In other words, there would be a total system dysfunction, disequilibrium, chaos and demise without getting a feedback. Despite its importance, there is relatively little research done on the concept in most developing countries like Nigeria.

Feedback is a multipurpose concept. Norbert Wiener, one of the scholars who first formulated the communication or information theory after World War II studies the control aspect of communication. Wiener argued that communication, and indeed its survival, cannot continue in the absence of feedback. He went to state that for any system to remain in equilibrium within its environment, and in order to avoid "entropy,"⁶ it had to maintain an efficient feedback mechanism.

Understanding the Importance of Feedback

Today the question of democracy is a fundamental problem that confront most of the developing nations. Their leaders, who in most cases came to power through "undemocratic" means, are said to invariably ignore, suppress, and even react with brutality to views which are contrary to their line of reasoning.

In Nigeria's post-independence era, Yakubu Gowon, who came to power through military coup, is the Head of State who has had the longest tenure in office (1966 to 1975). Many major and important public policy decisions, such as the creation of states; the location of the new capital Abuja; the 1973 national census; and the establishment of the Economic Council of West African States (ECOWAS) were made during his administration.

In the case of creating states, for instance, we notice a momentous decision, that is the political shift and restructuring of Nigeria from four regions to twelve states in 1966 and to nineteen in 1975. This however was formulated and implemented by a few military officers. It could possibly have been made with the help of a few unelected civilians. But it is true to tell that this was made without any participation and input by those directly affected by the decision, and the general public. Okolo argues that the creation of the twelve states was undoubtedly the most immediate reason for Biafra secession.⁷ This culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war and the death of thousands of people.

It has been said that despite his accomplishments, Gowon's downfall came about because he failed to honour the promise he made to hand over power to the civilians. He also,

isolated himself not only from the general public but from his immediate lieutenants. Also, Gowon chose to ignore all advise and criticisms which did not fit his grand political design.⁸

This point is buttressed by another former Nigerian military Head of State, the late Murtala Mohammed. He cited among other reasons "insensitivity ... to the true feelings and yearnings of the people"⁹ for the overthrow of Gowon.

Today, one can hardly find in Africa "where two political leaders could disagree so widely, yet come together in mutual respect."¹⁰ It is a cliché that political actors in developing nations do not see eye-to-eye. Politics is one of naked power play and "zero-sum game" – winner takes all. It is extensively documented that many who have attempted to make logical and constructive contributions and input in the political decision-making process have been arrested, accused of seditious acts and imprisoned. Others who have dared to raise a voice of dissent and criticism have been tortured, forced into exile or killed.

As past events have demonstrated, these leaders stifle opposition and dissent. They govern with the help of "yes" men, who do not debate the issues of concern to their societies and only serve to rubber stamp the decisions of the leaders. In other words, they rule in an undemocratic fashion and, above all, make major decisions in which the citizens do not have input. Feedback is an important aspect of the political process which this study maintains is not fully appreciated by the leaders of the developing nations often leading to decisions which are difficult to legitimize.

The importance of the concept stems from "the basic assumption that error is inherent in all natural, physical and social system."¹¹ Deutsch and others are of the opinion that;

steering depends on... intake of... information from the outside... about the results of the action just taken. It is by responding to this feedback information that errors can be rectified and the entire course corrected.¹²

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Simply stated, political systems that strive to gather undistorted, clear and up-to-date feedback in response to an unpopular decision and which use it to either modify and change the decision are more likely to "steer themselves around obstacles and dangers."¹³

In all political relationships and interactions between citizens, groups and the government, "there is almost always feedback."¹⁴ Also, "when it doesn't exist or is delayed or feeble... the situation engenders doubt and concern... and frustration and sometimes hostility."¹⁵

The importance of feedback is also emphasized by Mytton who states that, effective feedback may be crucial to political stability. In a number of cases where feedback in a political system has... been blocked, serious consequences have arisen from the system as a whole.¹⁶

He also points out that "in a political system, the 'nerves of government' need to be sensitive to feedback and even to seek it out if that system is to be legitimate and accepted."¹⁷

Deutsch is the major political science exponent of the communications theory and cybernetics. According to him, politics and government are perceived as processes designed to steer and coordinate human efforts in order to attain certain objectives. The above processes which in many instances can prove to be complicated, culminate in decision. Politics for Deutsch, is a goal-seeking process that depends upon adequate response to feedback. The concept of feedback is a very important variable in his theory and works.¹⁸

The concept of feedback is just as significant for Easton as it is for Deutsch. Easton popularized the concept with his "input-output" model. He argues that irrespective of the political system, the political structure and ideology of a system, the place and time, there are certain fundamental political activities which take place, among these are feedback. In any political system, there is continuous interaction between the interrelated sub-systems. Easton argues that "if feedback... did not exist, the system would find itself utterly exposed to the vagaries of chance."¹⁹

Information Flow and Feedback in the Democratic and Authoritarian Political Systems

Feedback is of crucial importance to any system. A political system is either "open" or "closed" depending on its degree of interaction with the environment in which it functions. All systems, to a varying degree are open. In other words or in its reality, no system is totally closed. Thus, both the open and closed systems strive to maintain homeostasis or dynamic equilibrium. This task is accomplished by the maintenance of effective feedback mechanisms.

The major difference is that in an open democratic system, there is freedom of speech. Information flow and feedback is a two-way process. Feedback from one political actor to another and from a citizen and group of individuals to the system and political leaders is a common feature. The people freely elect, select and choose their leaders. Public policies and decisions evolve through political dialogue, discussion, debate and "healthy" competition. One way to be efficient and effective is to open up the system to competition. Dissent and criticism are tolerated. Political compromise and consensus are commonplace and mutually acceptable policy outcomes arrived at.

On the other hand, in a closed authoritarian society, feedback is governed from above, not from below. It is not volunteered, it is requested... In the authoritarian model, the feedback is indirect and is to a considerable extent under the control of the higher roles themselves. In the democratic model, the feedback is more direct and has a more powerful influence in the modification of decisions.²⁰

In other words, communication in an authoritarian system can be described as essentially a one-way process as information flows generally from the government to the people. According to Umpleby, "one result of such unidirectional communication is the increasing alienation of the citizen from political and social processes."²¹

Feedback, as mentioned earlier, takes the form of petitions, legal actions, pressures, demands, support and demonstrations, all directed at the political actors and systems which have promoted certain policies. Feedback thus reflects clearly the interests, concerns, thoughts and actions in response to the course of action taken by a political actor and the decision output of a political system.

Other Uses of Feedback

Feedback enables a political system to adopt measures of control and regulation over its environment. To put it differently, a system could determine the activities and development taken place within the system and its environment through the feedback it is receiving. It could then decide on that basis how much information to be absorbed, screened out and the appropriate steps to take. This function could help the system maintain its equilibrium, so as to avoid system overload and eventual chaos and instability.

There is also negative use of feedback. For example, in an authoritarian society, the feedback flowing to the system and the manner it is interpreted, could make it to constantly and menacingly keep watch over political opponents and even innocent citizens. Feedback could be used to answer important questions, such as: "Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect,"²² and who did not say and do anything? This could enable the system to eavesdrop on its citizens in an attempt to determine who is loyal and disloyal, who is a friend and a political enemy and whom to reward and punish.

Conclusion

In most political systems, negative feedback is a common feature. In the developing nations, political context and some resources are invariably invested by political actors to device ways and means to respond to negative feedback, especially from their political opponents. Rather than exploit the constructive criticisms, demands and pressures to accommodate other views, reach a consensus, modify and possibly change a decision for the better, they look for ways to "punish" the source of the negative feedback. This explains why assassinations, violence, political instability and military coups are constant features of political life in the developing nations.

Effective and efficient feedback mechanisms and democratic processes enable citizens to express their opinions, desires, or "let-off steam" as the case may be to the political system. This is important because even "the villager's needs, wishes, ideas

and knowledge should enter into the transaction equally with those of the change agent, under the mantle of mutual respect and friendship."²³

There is little or no contact between the rulers and the ruled. This stems from the fact that systematic institutional arrangements for communication between them are all but absent. It is through feedback that the citizens, especially those interested in and affected by an issue and decision, could peacefully make their feelings known to the political leaders.

The decision-maker, on the other hand, would easily find out the people's reaction to the decisions made by him or her. To state differently, those affected by a decision should participate in making the decision and those who govern should do so with the consent of the governed.

The very nature of an open democratic political system encourages adequate exchange of information and political ideas necessary for sustaining itself. As the citizens could always reach out and "talk back" to the leaders, it makes the latter more accountable and responsive to the former. As Parenti put it, it ensures and guarantees "more democracy — that is, more popular participation, more meaningful policy debate... and more accountability and responsiveness to the people."²⁴

Feedback is significant because it provides the basis of comparison in terms of information flow, political ideas, and citizen participation in the political decision-making process between an open democratic system and a closed authoritarian system. The concept helps to show clearly that in the former, unlike the latter, there is a two-way process of communication between the political leaders and decision-makers and the citizens. Any decisional output in most cases is expected to be the reflection of an extensive discussion and debate as well as political consensus reached between the citizens and their leaders.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This article is adapted from "Authoritative Decision as a Function of Feedback and Its Relevance for Democracy: A Nigerian Case Study", a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Howard University, Washington, D.C. 20059 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D., Department of Political Science, 1987.
2. "Further litigation" and "litigation advocacy" are described as obvious forms of feedback by Geogre Fahlund in *Feedback in the Judicial Procedure: The Warren Court and Criminal Procedure* (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Massachusetts, 1971), p. 23.
3. Robert G. Meadow, *Politics and Communication*, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980), p.4.
4. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: AThe M.I.T. Press, 1961), p. 97.
5. Young Pil Rhee, "The Breakdown of Authority Structure in Korea in 1960: A Case study of Concerted Feedback" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1974), p. 39.

6. Entropy is a term used to refer to the amount of disorder present within a system. Wiener in *Human Use of Human Beings*, (New York: Avon Books, 1967), p. 20, writes that as "entropy increases... systems... tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness."
7. Julius E. Okolo, "The Changing Patterns of Federation and Democracy in Nigeria," (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1970), p. 521.
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9. Oyediran, *The Nigerian 1979 Elections* (Lagos: The MacMillan Press, 1981), op. cit., p. 6.
10. *Washington Post*, October 2, 1986, op. cit., p. 4A.
11. Raymond A. Bauer and Kenneth Gergen, eds., *The Study of Policy Formulation* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1971), p. 178.
12. Karl W. Deutsch, Jorge I. Domínguez, and Hugh Hecló, *Comparative Government: Politics of Industrialized and Developing Nations*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), p. 13.
13. Ibid.
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16. Graham Mytton, *Mass Communication in Africa*, (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1983), p. 11.
17. Ibid., p. 12.
18. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government*, (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1966); and *Nationalism and Social Communication*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 117, passim.
19. David Easton, *A Systems Analysis for Political Life*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 367.
20. Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Image* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), pp. 99-100.
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22. Harold Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in Lyman and Bryson, ed. *The Communication of Ideas*, N.Y.: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1948), p. 37.
23. Lucian W. Pye, "Communication, Institutional Building, and Reach of Authority," in Daniel Learner and Wilbur Schramm, eds., *Communication and Change in the Developing Countries*, (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), op. cit., pp. 24-25.
24. Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*, (N.Y.: St. Martin Press, 1983), p. 59