



Bridging the Trust Deficit: Strategic Communication as an Imperative for Governance in Nigeria

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Received: 25.12.2025 | Accepted: 15.01.2026 | Published: 18.01.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18287790](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18287790)

Abstract		Original Research Article
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This research paper looks at the important role of strategic communication in today's Nigerian governance. Nigeria deals with ongoing issues like public distrust, failed policy implementation, and social unrest, often worsened by poor communication. Using current analysis and case studies, this paper argues that strategic communication, defined as the intentional and goal-driven management of information and discussion, is essential for ethical leadership, transparency, and good governance. The analysis highlights a common pattern of reactive, one-way communication from the government, which hurts public trust and impairs policy success. On the other hand, the paper shows that proactive, transparent, and participatory communication strategies can close the gap between citizens and the government, improve policy legitimacy, and encourage national development. The findings suggest a complete overhaul of government communication methods, focusing on including stakeholders, using digital innovations, and fostering a culture of accountability and dialogue.

Keywords: Strategic communication, governance in Nigeria, public trust, policy implementation, citizen engagement.

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1. Introduction

In modern governance, the ability to inform, engage, and inspire citizens is as important as the policies themselves. For Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, effective communication is even more necessary due to its complex social and political situation, history of governance problems, and a widespread lack of trust between the state and its citizens (1)(4). Strategic communication goes beyond just sharing information; it is a purposeful process of creating and delivering messages through suitable channels to

meet specific governance goals, build relationships, and encourage public trust (4).

The idea of using communication for governance is not new in Nigeria. Its origins can be found in highly developed pre-colonial systems where empires and chiefdoms used intentional tactics like talking drums, town criers, symbolic art (symbolography), and structured oral poetry (Akvesi, Roko) to enact laws, organize communities, and carry out diplomacy (10). An indigenous understanding of communication as a tool for social control and coordination is demonstrated by this historical precedent. This



practice developed with new media during the colonial and post-colonial eras, adjusting to the difficulties of nationalism, civil war, and state-building (10).

Recent events, like protests against economic hardship labeled #EndBadGovernance, show the serious consequences of communication failure. These protests, which turned violent in some regions, highlighted deep public frustrations and a perceived disconnect from the government (1). Successive governments have often responded reactively, addressing the nation only after public discontent escalates. This approach fails to proactively shape understanding and manage expectations (1). This paper argues that integrating strong, strategic communication frameworks is crucial for ethical leadership, participatory governance, and sustainable development in Nigeria. The main point is that without a thoughtful communication strategy, even well-intentioned policies are likely to fail, and governance will appear ineffective and illegitimate to the public.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The link between communication and governance is well-recognized in academic and policy literature. Strategic communication is defined as a purposeful process of planning, creating, delivering, and assessing messages to achieve specific organizational or social goals (4). In governance, it aligns public messaging with policy objectives to ensure transparency, boost stakeholder engagement, and build institutional trust (4).

Two key theoretical frameworks guide this analysis. First, Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that organizations, including governments, must manage relationships with all groups affected by their actions. Effective governance requires recognizing various stakeholder interests—citizens, civil society, the private sector, and the media—and involving them through ongoing dialogue (2)(4). Second, the concept of Ethical Leadership emphasizes integrity, accountability, and commitment to public well-being. Researchers like Brown and Treviño connect ethical leadership to communication, noting that leaders who practice transparency and engage in honest dialogue create environments of trust and

compliance (4). Similarly, transformational and servant leadership theories also stress the leader's role in sharing a compelling vision and prioritizing public welfare through open communication (4).

Previous studies on Nigeria have mainly focused on isolated governance failures or the media's role. This paper combines these perspectives and builds on emerging analyses that view strategic communication as a systemic solution to governance issues (1)(4)(5). It addresses a gap in the literature by exploring how a structured, nationwide communication strategy can transform the fundamental relationship between the Nigerian state and its citizens.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, case-study approach, analyzing secondary data from recent reports, expert opinions, and documented policy events in Nigeria. The data comes from a review of contemporary articles, opinion pieces by communication specialists, and analyses of specific policy communication failures and successes from 2023 to 2025. The cases of Nigeria's currency redesign policy and fuel subsidy removal are reviewed as examples of communication breakdown (2), while regulatory guidelines from the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) show institutional efforts to promote transparency (3). This method offers a whole view of the patterns, challenges, and possibilities of strategic communication within the current Nigerian governance context.

4. Analysis

The communication strategy of the Nigerian government is not just poorly executed but also structurally flawed, relying on outdated methods that worsen governance challenges.

4.1 The Persistence of the One-Way, Elitist Model

A main cause of communication failure is the preference for a top-down, one-way transmission model. Communication is often treated as a finished product—announcing decisions after they have been made inside bureaucratic or political circles. This

model, evident during the 2023 currency redesign crisis, fails to consider the public as stakeholders whose understanding and cooperation are vital for policy success. Information flows from the government to the citizens through formal addresses and press releases, with minimal channels for genuine feedback (2). This elitist approach isolates grassroots citizens and creates a fertile ground for rumors and resistance, as the public is left to guess intentions and deal with consequences without any explanation.

4.2 Institutional Fragmentation and the "Voice of Government" Problem

There is a critical lack of a consistent communication strategy across government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs). Instead of having a unified "voice of government," there is often a mix of conflicting messages from various officials, from the presidency to ministers and agency heads (1). This fragmentation, noted in evaluations of Nigeria's governance, confuses the public, harms credibility, and allows opposition or sensationalist media to control the government's message. Without a central strategy to coordinate message consistency across all government branches, communication becomes ineffective and portrays the state as chaotic.

4.3 The Digital Gap: Between Presence and Engagement

While Nigerian government agencies have a presence on social media, they mainly use these platforms for one-way broadcasts. Channels like Twitter (X) and Facebook are used for announcements rather than engagement. There is a significant lack of using digital tools for listening, sentiment analysis, and participatory involvement (6). During discussions on economic hardship, government social media accounts often continue to post promotional content, appearing disconnected from the public's trending concerns. This gap in digital engagement represents a missed chance to gather real-time public opinion, swiftly counter misinformation, and build communities of informed citizens, particularly among the large youth population.

4.4 The Trust Deficit and Legitimacy Crisis

The ongoing issue of ineffective communication really creates a serious trust deficit. Often, people see government spokespersons more like just voices for the ruling party instead of real sources of public information. This view gets worse when messages are inconsistent or even missing altogether. The World Bank has pointed out that trust in governments is at a historic low worldwide (1). So, it's crucial to rethink how communication is handled. In Nigeria, this lack of trust results in citizens feeling disengaged, skeptical of any government initiatives, and it ultimately weakens the social contract that should exist between the government and the people (1).

4.5 Case Study: The Currency Redesign Policy - A Masterclass in Communication Failure

The 2023 naira redesign policy by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) serves as a key case study. While the policy aimed to curb corruption and inflation, its communication was disastrous (2).

- **Poor Sequencing:** The announcement lacked sufficient preparation with the banking sector, commercial banks, and rural communities dependent on cash.
- **Contradictory Timelines:** Conflicting messages from the CBN, the finance ministry, and the presidency regarding deadline extensions led to panic and uncertainty.
- **Lack of Empathetic Messaging:** Official communications did not acknowledge the severe hardship from cash shortages, contributing to a perception of government insensitivity. The public backlash, widespread protests, and subsequent Supreme Court intervention were direct results of this communication failure, significantly undermining the policy's legitimacy and the involved institutions.

5. Discussion

To address the identified shortcomings, a fundamental change is needed where strategic communication becomes central to governance. Its

transformative potential can be evident in several key areas:

5.1 Building Trust and Legitimacy

Transparent, consistent, and honest communication is crucial for public trust. When governments explain the reasons behind tough decisions—like economic reforms—and openly recognize challenges, they show accountability and respect for the citizens (2)(5). Trust is built through repeated cycles of open disclosure and responsiveness to feedback. Every major policy should come with a publicly available "Citizen's Explanation Memorandum." This establishes the "apply and explain" principle, changing communication into a commitment. This practice builds trust directly. Research shows that how honest people perceive feedback and how often they receive it are the strongest factors that boost public trust in government (7).

5.2 Enhancing Policy Efficacy and Compliance

Effective communication is vital for implementing policies. A strategic communication plan for a new policy should include clear messages tailored for different audiences (urban, rural, business owners), appropriate channels (local radio, social media, town halls), and mechanisms for two-way feedback (2)(5). This approach fosters understanding, encourages a sense of ownership, and increases the chance of voluntary compliance. The proactive discussion created by Atiku Abubakar's comments on bank transfer fees illustrates how public discourse can pressure institutions to reconsider and reform (5). Additionally, Communication about governance needs to be proactive and involve "policy socialization." This is consistent with narrative change theory, which maintains that significant policy change requires forming the policy image—the combination of factual and sentimental appeals connected to fundamental values (9). A months-long campaign to socialize a complicated policy, such as the removal of subsidies, builds understanding and changes citizens from passive recipients to knowledgeable participants by shifting from education to feedback.

5.3 Fostering Participatory Democracy and National Cohesion

Strategic communication promotes participatory governance. By utilizing digital tools, social media, and inclusive town hall meetings, governments can shift from monologues to dialogues (5). Involving youth, rural communities, and marginalized groups in policy discussions makes governance more inclusive and strengthens the social fabric (2). Additionally, a unified national communication strategy can promote shared values and narratives, counter divisive rhetoric, and encourage unity (5). This approach covers both the digital and physical areas. Digital tools provide scale and instant feedback. Local forums are essential for inclusion, particularly since traditional media like radio is still the main channel in rural areas.

5.4 Institutionalizing Standards: The Regulatory Example

The call for improved communication must also be institutionalized. The Nigerian Communications Commission's (NCC) 2025 Guidelines on Corporate Governance for the communications sector mandate transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement from licensees (3). This "apply and explain" regulatory framework could serve as a model for government agencies, requiring them to clearly communicate their actions and reasons to the public (3). Therefore, a Central Communication Strategy Unit must be established by the government. This is important because formal, hierarchical structures with in-group policing of message content are created by more institutionalized organizations, according to research. A unit like this would create cohesive national narratives, which are essential for changing policies, and require interagency coordination to clear up public misunderstandings (8).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence is clear: Nigeria's governance challenges are closely tied to a failure in strategic communication. Shifting from the current culture of reactive, opaque information management to one of proactive, transparent, and dialogic communication is essential for national progress. Strategic

communication is not an afterthought in public relations but a fundamental governance skill that builds trust, ensures effective policy delivery, and strengthens democracy.

To achieve this change, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The federal government should create and implement a comprehensive national communication strategy. This strategy must be proactive, identifying key policy messages and public concerns in advance, and holistic, using a mixed approach (traditional media, social media, community engagement) to reach all demographics (5).
- Government ministries and agencies should adhere to a strict standard of transparency. Following the NCC's "apply and explain" model, officials should be required to clearly explain policy decisions, implementation processes, and the use of public funds in plain, accessible language (3).
- Significant investment is needed in training government communication staff and establishing strong feedback channels. This includes improving the media's ability to understand and report on complex policies and using technology like social media and messaging apps for effective two-way interaction with citizens (2)(5).
- Communication strategies must intentionally involve grassroots communities, rural populations, and marginalized groups. This means translating messages into local languages, using community radio, and holding genuine town hall meetings focused on dialogue rather than political showmanship (1)(2).

Embracing strategic communication is a crucial step for Nigeria to close its governance gaps, renew the social contract with its people, and accelerate its development in today's world (5). The future of Nigerian governance depends not only on the policies made but also on how effectively they are communicated and co-created with an engaged public.

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