

**Beyond Local Spaces: Engaging Digital Space/Media in Theatre
for Development Practice**

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Abstract

As a practice, Theatre for Development (TFD) has been significantly employed at local community spaces. This is because TFD prioritizes the challenges affecting ordinary people who are living in marginalized and local community spaces. The essence is to ensure that they are empowered and challenged to play active roles in salvaging their marginalized spaces and to contribute their own quota in addressing development challenges. However, in the light of new realities of today's digital world, there is need to broaden the space of engaging ordinary people, who beyond their local domains, have become part and parcel of an evolving digital world with a real spatial presence that directly affects them. The need to engage ordinary people who are not exempted from the impacts of digital space is quite key in pushing the frontiers of the TFD agenda. This paper therefore seeks to examine the importance of having TFD practice that can attract and engage digital and spatial audience in achieving developmental agenda. Although the paper pays attention to some of the challenges which this platform/approach presents, however the possibilities and prospects of such an engagement is the thrust of this paper.

Keywords: Local Community, Development, Digital Space and Theatre for Development.

Introduction

Theatre for Development in local spaces has significantly demonstrated the pragmatic effectiveness of theatre practice. Developmental agenda in local spaces via TFD has brought about understanding better the complexities that pertains to them. Their challenges and the possibilities towards addressing those challenges have been brought about through TFD experiences. Understanding theatre as an art that can achieve more than entertainment for the wellbeing of the society especially in the critical area of social development have made TFD to record significant impacts in local spaces. Even more, accessing and evaluating how these development goals are attained have also become possible through TFD methodology in communities. Although flexible and amenable depending on the contextual applicability of the TFD experience to be undertaken, the methodology will basically include the following stages: Preliminaries, Community Research, Data Analysis, Scenario Building, Rehearsals, Performance and Post-Performance Discussions, as well as Follow- Through (Abel and Fatima 2019). It is in the implementation of these basic stages that the community relishes from the impacts of the TFD methodology. However it is important to state that despite all these potentials and impacts which TFD holds for the community, it remains within the limited frame or scope of the community. The possibilities of expanding or stretching the impacts in ways that influences or even sustain the tempo of conversation on the issues so raised become difficult. In this regard, Abah argues that “...because development is never terminal; the vortex never stops developing, and Theatre for Development is an unending drama that should keep responding to the exigencies of development” (Abah, 2021:63). TFD been an open ended mode of development conversation, must sustain the tempo not only in the community but

beyond it as it seek to drive further conversation that can break boundaries of the issues so raised.

It is equally important to state that over the years in the practice of TFD, most documents that have provided evidences on the impacts of TFD have always be gotten via printed papers and publications by practitioners and researchers in the field of TFD (Mlama 1991, Byam, 1999, Ewu 2002 and Abah 2005). These documents and many others as useful as they may be, end up as mainly academic derivatives from the projects. These books which are mostly confined to the four walls of academic institutions, does not provide that enabling medium to sustain the impact or issues that the TFD developmental drive has generated from local spaces. Again is the fact that most of these documents become only available much longer after the TFD projects have long begun. Been that development discourse is often humongous and dynamic in nature, it is important that the issues enters a broad base where the matters can generate greater attention and participations. This paper therefore argues for the use of digital spaces as channels that should be explored to provide that broadening and sustenance which the effects of the TFD experience brings forth.

Conceptual Framework:

i. Theatre for Development (TFD)

TFD is a practice that focuses on social development goals through a communication process that involves the employment of drama and/or other arts of theatre. It is often community-centered and as such issues and problems affecting the community usually form the thematic thrust of this kind of theatre. To achieve this, a design or worked out process is taken to engage the community in order to get them understand and address some of the complexities of their social realities. Abah had earlier defined TFD as “the practice by which theatre is put at the service of the disadvantaged rural and urban poor for the purposes of discussing and working out strategies for dealing with their socio–

economic conditions” (Abah, 1990:17). Commenting in a similar vein, Rapheal – Ogu (2009:3) state that “theatre for development is a process of stimulating and sustaining participation with the target community along development lines, using the world of theatre to achieve real solution to practical life problems affecting the people”. The emphasis here is the functionality of the TFD process to bring all concerned to the awareness of the key role they play in shaping their hopes and prosperous livelihood. The local space using Augusto Boal’s language is “conscientized” and made to realize the potentials they have in harnessing both their individual and collective energy towards addressing the myriads of problem they are faced with. In other words “it is a practice that has a grassroots appeal and applicability. This is because it taps its philosophy and material from the life of the people it deals with” (Abah 2005:122). Ayegba explaining the term states that:

Theatre for Development popularly referred to as TFD is an alternative form of theatre practice. It derives its materials from the people’s lived experiences (social, cultural, political, environmental etc), conditions and has an empowering process through which individuals and communities examine their objective conditions. It is a tool for building community cohesion and a process of sharing and learning from each other. TFD as a tool helps to focus attention on critical issues and aids planning for action; the process taps from, and also responds to, the rhythm of the community. As a non-formal system of education, it also offers a forum for community entertainment (Ayegba, 2013:293).

The process is largely a platform for local spaces to interact on issues with the aim of promoting local voices about the issues been addressed. It serves as the people’s media and it utilizes the people’s methods of communication, demanding change in their attitudes and response to addressing problems plaguing their local spaces.

TFD in local spaces across Nigeria and Africa which aims at tackling socio-economic challenges, have no doubt raised the perception of theatre from just being a tool at the service of recreation and entertainment to a tool of social emancipation and transformation. TFD employed as a communication strategy gives ample opportunity for local spaces to raise their voice on the social bottlenecks which the marginalized and poor members of the society are seriously plagued with. Kidd emphasizes further that TFD:

...is a process of social change; changes in self-concept, attitude, awareness, skill, or behaviour. Its art goes beyond metaphorical representations of others- to facilitating actions on social problems. Theatre becomes a forum for organizing communities into participatory decolonizing discourses, thereby providing a means of negotiating the cultural and political terms of their own social progress. Theatre for Development re-conceptualizes the very notion of development in post-colonial Africa to mean not simply the provision of water, hospitals, and shelters for underprivileged communities but, more broadly, to encompass a complex process that uses theatre to enact, critique, and sustain strategies for the full and effective participation of marginalized communities in society (Kidd, 1982:74).

TFD in this context takes into cognizance members of the community inputs as critical and very essential to the actualization of community's goals for enhanced standard of living. Its strength lies firstly in the active participation and involvement from all members of the community. Carrying community member along all through the process is always critical. Issues are not approached from complex dimension which may end up making people find it difficult to follow instead the process ensures that the people are well incorporated into the experience. TFD in this way becomes a bridge building process.

Several versions and practices of TFD either known as community theatre or popular theatre have been developed in local communities across Africa countries particularly in the East, West and Southern regions. Some of these experiences have been documented in a number of publications by scholars and agencies involve in the facilitation of TFD projects. However, from the above examination of the TFD concept, it still remains the fact that the sphere of influence on TFD communication has mainly been confined to the affected community. Therefore to ensure that the sphere of usefulness of the process goes beyond the community the employment of digital social media apps which are capable of furthering the conversation within a wider space becomes necessary. In this sense Umenyilorah states accordingly that “Theatre for Development is therefore transformational, because when it involves the audience, it is never a process that leaves off after the raising of a critical consciousness; rather it is one that leads to subsequent action” (Umenyilorah, 2014:36). This is quite important as it offers possibilities of producing new waves of communicating development beyond target communities. To have this achieve the possibilities which modern technology in form of digital media that opens up a new digital space for continuous communication and broadening of the experience becomes necessary.

ii. Digital space (media)

Digital Space according to London College of Communication is “an open-plan creative information technology hub set up with specialist software for specific subject areas”. IGI Global on their website simply describes digital spaces to mean “what is shown on the screen of a digital gadget (e.g laptops, computers, tablets or smartphones)... we mean the media that relies on a computer machine to produce, distribute, and store information”. Al Sheikh and Al Serhan explain digital media as:

...the media that relies on a computer machine to produce, distribute, and store information. The digital media explosion on the Internet due to the rise of prosumer electronics, Wi-Fi availability, ubiquitous devices, software and applications contributed to the growth and development of the digital media ecosystem on the Internet. (Reyna, Hanham, and Meier, (2018). Digital media now includes text, audio, video, and graphics that is transmitted over the internet, for viewing on the internet. Dan (2012)... This term has emerged right after the internet which has been part of the technology revolution (Al Sheikh and Al Serhan, 2022:178).

Digital space otherwise referred to as digital media continues to gain increasing acceptance for virtual mode of engagement/communication. This is due to its ability to effect change and development within individuals and the society as a whole. Al Sheikh and Al Serhan (2022) in this regard further notes four important characteristics of digital media and this include: interactivity, diversity, integration and surpassing cultural borders. These qualities of digital media as noted by them have increasingly spread its usages worldwide. Abd Al-Hamid (2009) as a way of further explaining the concept of digital media dissects it into four different aspects:

- a. Digital media based on the Internet and its applications: This type is entirely new, giving its distinguishing characteristics and features. This type grows fast and generates countless applications.
- b. Digital media is based on mobile phones: This type grows fast and generates new applications on different mobilized tools, such as mobile phones and personal digital assistants... etc.
- c. Old media type, such as radio and TV: new features were added to this type, for instance, interactivity, digital feature, and demand response.

- d. Digital media based on the computer platform: This type can be exchanged through networks or different storing means, such as the DVD and other means. This type includes visual presentations, video games, electronic books, etc.

Digital spaces/media in the context of this study consider all virtual and online media of communication that are brought about from the revolutionary development in the employment of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which have opened vast possibilities in digital space of engagements via various internet application platforms otherwise called apps. Some of these apps include: Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, Tiktok, Zoom, Skype etc. These digital modes of communication have continued to redefine how modern society is shaped.

Rationale for Digital Spaces/Media in the TFD Practice:

Digital communication as examined above gives us an understanding of the different possibilities which it offers as modern communication tool in exploring digital space. It is in this context that its employment for the practice of TFD becomes germane. Arguing in this line Rwang states that:

Information and Communication Technology have allowed for mixture of communication and entertainment. The social media have assumed both a pastime and veritable source of information. The internet and the cell-phone powered by the global system mobile (GSM) networks have all served as most intrusive means of communication. Information in text, pictures and videos are sent and shared across with ease using the Youtube, Facebook and Twitter, creating various social impacts on the audience. The nature of convergence of semiotics signs in the social media is simulation for the expansion of space for popular theatre using multi-media strategy...It also strives to create a collaboration where the social media is made a

platform for development based and people oriented theatre (Rwang, 2019:416-417).

This paper therefore highlights some important rationales which the involvement of digital space or media can help the advancement of the TFD practice:

- i. *Wider coverage*: More than the community members who are witnessing the programme physically, persons outside the community can equally witness it spatially and in real time through the employment of digital technology. The digital space in the practice of TFD means that community members and facilitators who are going through the process can gain wider coverage of spreading the importance of the experience beyond the reach of the community.
- ii. *Enhancement of dialogical participation*: One core intention of the TFD process is in the aspect of promoting community dialogue. The community members who are participating on ground are able to connect with members virtually and include them in the different dialogues happening during the different process occurring while the TFD process is going on. Beginning with the community research, data analysis, scenario building, rehearsals, performance and post-performance discussions as well as the follow through stages, community members who are not physically present can still be active part of the conversation and dialogues taking place at these different stages through digital space and media.
- iii. *New approaches in the sustenance of the follow-up stages*: Often a time after the first community engagement most TFD practice seem to come to a halt or close as avenues or channel of linking and further discussing with the community members becomes difficult. A conscious inclusion of digital communication in the process will go a long way to aid the continuity of the process which will indeed benefit community /facilitators relationship in

actualizing the needed objectives and outcomes of the experience.

- iv. *Virtual documentation:* The community members through their digital instruments are able to document their TFD community experience. The intention here is to ensure they are able to equally own the documented works without having recourse to the facilitators and organizers. Most often after an experience, most of the referral documents are usually in the hands of facilitators who have initiated the process in the community. However community members using their digital devices such as phones are able to record and have the document handy for their reference and further actions. They equally can use the saved documents in their devices to always relish and gain lessons from the experiences they have gone through.
- v. *Enhancing networks for greater intervention:* Since digital communication allows awareness creation, this affords the TFD process the possibilities of engaging persons/groups outside of the community to seek support where needed. Greater networking and interdependent engagement with the world outside the community is quite possible. Government and non-governmental stakeholders can get on the spot real understanding of the situation through the different digital devices employed to achieve virtual connection, which can ultimately help to expedite different forms of intervention and support.

Beyond the above stated, communities are better for their experiences as it enable them to advance modern technological development in driving their community's agenda. A citable example in this regard was the TFD experience facilitated by the 400 level students of English Department, Gombe State University in Kulgul Community of Billiri Local Government Area in Gombe State. Idebe (2023) reveals that as

part of the community action plan, the community members and the students agreed to use social media to seek support and intervention on some of the identified developmental issues. It indeed paid off as the community was able to get the intervention of a Non-Governmental Organization who were willing to give some agricultural support to youth and women residing and working in the local community.

Despite the different opportunities and possibilities, it is also important to note that the community and facilitators must equally put into consideration some of the challenges which may arise from this. A particular one in this regard is that of misleading interpretation of facts and data. This can occur when pictures and videos from digital devices are portraying issues about the community which may not be their priority challenge or need. In this case TFD facilitators and community must ensure that content sent on media space are those which from the onset are those which the community have agreed to focus about. Other challenges may include the total absence of internet access in local communities, lack of wherewithal to include the use of digital tools in their TFD experiences and the lack of training and acquaintances in the use of technological devices. Despite these challenges, TFD facilitators must explore all available avenues to encourage local communities in the path of digital engagement of the TFD experience.

Conclusion

The 21st century world has experienced an all-together revolutionary change in the employment of digital technology. There are virtually nothing which has to do with human interaction which the use of ICT is not applicable. More than a physical space for interaction and engagement, digital spaces are becoming more and more needed in our development drive and existence as a whole. It is on this basis that the paper examines how digital space can best serve the actualization of TFD interventions in local communities. It is important to state that while urban and commercially developed communities derive more in

the employment of digital space of engagement, the case is different in local communities. Therefore the need of advancing digital communication and spaces for addressing local community challenges becomes key. The paper which examines TFD as a community based practice for driving development agenda sees the need for more exploration of digital technology and space in pursuing the goals of the TFD experience. From the foregoing highlighted on the importance of engaging digital space the paper argues and seeks that TFD experiences in community should always ensure that there is the involvement of digital space that affords the community members the opportunity to understand how best to advance their development objectives through digital technology advantages.

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