

The Role of Mass Media in Rural Information System in Nigeria

Stephen Ocheni^[a]; Basil C. Nwankwo^{[b],*}

^[a]Ph.D., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria.

^[b]Professor and Dean, Faculty of Management Sciences, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author.

Received 13 June 2012; accepted 23 August 2012

Abstract

The article examined rural reporting in Nigeria and discovered that the only thing that constitute news for reporters in the country is only when a strange thing negative happens in the rural areas. For example, when there is ritual sacrifice, community clashes, rape, murder, etc.. The press hardly reports any good news about the rural communities in Nigeria. For example, when there is peace, harmony and self-efforts at rural development undertaken by the initiative of the rural community leaders, it is hardly given attention by the press reporters in Nigeria. Consequently, rural poverty continues to increase unabated but the Nigerian press reporters could not effectively expose the deplorable conditions under which the rural dwellers live in. The bias of the reporters is in favour of the urban dwellers who are adjudged to be learned, enlightened and understand the meaning and importance of news. The reporters argue that if the news reported upon is not essentially urban oriented, the patronage especially in the print-media would be very low. The study concluded by observing that the trend should be reversed immediately. In fact the news reporters in Nigeria should show more patriotism in the coverage of events in the rural areas. This is the only way government could know and understand the plights of the rural dwellers for effective public policy-making to reduce the present level of rural poverty and reverse the current rise in rural-urban migration in the country.

Key words: Rural information; Mass media; Nigeria

Stephen Ocheni, Basil C. Nwankwo (2012). The Role of Mass Media in Rural Information System in Nigeria. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 3(3), 10-14. Available from <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/j.sss.1923018420120303.1935>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sss.1923018420120303.1935>

INTRODUCTION

Despite their vaunted objectivity and self-acclaimed commitment to fairness, it can be argued that the Nigerian mass media has over the years, solely neglected the rural areas. The perspective of the Nigeria mass media was, and continues to be (despite some progress), strictly urban. The media reports and writes from the standpoint of an urban dweller's world. The ills of the rural areas, difficulties of life there, their burning sense of grievance, are seldom seriously conveyed. Indeed, over ninety-five percent (95%) of the Nigerian mass media, particularly the print media, can be referred to as the urban press-*après* that repeatedly if unconsciously, reflects the bias, the paternalism and the indifference of the typical urban dweller.

This bias manifests itself in one or two forms: neglect of the majority and distortion of news about the rural populace. While the former refers to neglect of rural efforts, aspirations and overall existence, the latter refers to a situation whereby the issues, events or efforts of our rural areas, whenever reported, are inaccurately and sometimes carelessly reported in the media. In most cases, this inaccuracy or distortion stems from the typical Nigerian journalist's misguided belief that since majority of our rural populace are illiterate, all of them cannot understand whatever was being said.

Talking about neglect of the rural areas by the Nigeria mass media, the temptation is to pass off such neglect as a result of prejudice, on the part of reporters and editors -- unconscious, unintended prejudice nonetheless. To a certain extent, such an argument is valid. However, a more important reason for the neglect stems from the structure

of Nigeria journalism -- from the way the mass media has explicitly or implicitly defined who they are and what journalism in Nigeria is all about.

Arguably, most media houses in the country today believe that since they are situated in the urban areas, their primary task is to satisfy their urban colleagues, who, after all, are mostly those who attend to the media and, of course advertise in the papers and magazines or buy up available air time to slot in their commercials. Perhaps they are right to adopt this stance of concentrating on the urban areas, even if the journalists are 'socialists' at heart.

It is easy to see, therefore, that the most important structural point here concerns the way in which the news media has defined who they are specifically, who reports the news. Journalism in Nigeria has for long been under the control of urban minds and it can be maintained that most of our newsrooms have not yet had reporters who can, and are willing to, bring the perspectives, values and moves needed to broaden coverage.

Structurally, then, the Nigeria mass media has, largely been without the adequate first hand knowledge needed to help them improve coverage of the rural area. Most of the reporters live in the cities and are more likely to notice things that are happening within their vicinity rather than the problems, issues and developmental efforts of our rural populace. Thus, a conflict over the quality of secondary school education in a remote rural location. For instance, such conflict in Abuja is more likely to receive ongoing news and features coverage by media houses across the nation while a similar conflict in, say, Obimo Ikwoka village in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state will be very likely to receive a single feature story in a paper like the Guardian. In the same vein, the coverage of a disease striking down Enugu residents, with ten people dying daily is more likely to get sustained national attention than an epidemic of measles at Umunebo village in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra state which may have killed more people than the disease in Enugu before it begins to be noticed by our urban based media houses.

The other reason for the neglect of the rural populace by the media over the years is as the first, but it is no less significant. Nigeria journalists, unfortunately, define news in such a way that the rural dwellers are almost automatically excluded. Unless they happen to be involved in communal clashes, or are protesting against the confiscation of their farmlands by the government without adequate compensation; this structural definition limits coverage to that which entails a sort of conflict or unusualness. What is done by people who are defined as "significant".

The central focus of this paper is how to get the Nigerian mass media to play more vital and important role in rural information system in the country. To tackle this arduous task, we shall first examine some of the vital roles which the mass media can play in rural information

system such as educating, informing, entertaining, audience-penetration, efficiency and effectiveness of message (or information) delivery and unification of the rural problems of rural reporting in Nigeria as well as make recommendations for future actions and conclusion.

1. VITAL AND IMPORTANT ROLES MASS MEDIA CAN PLAY IN RURAL INFORMATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

The term "mass media" as used in this work include both print and electronic media. Some of the vital roles which the mass media can play in rural information system include:

1.1 Education

Education of the audience is an important role the mass media can play in rural information system. There is high level of illiteracy and low level of education among the populace in our rural communities. The mass media through publications in the newspapers and magazines, as well as programmes in the radio and television can educate the illiterate rural masses on issues of political, economic and social importance in nation-building. The following are some of the examples:

- Political education as in electoral processes: how to register and how to vote, the need for subjugating certain primordial sentiments and parochial allegiance, to national goals, civic right and responsibilities, and good citizenship.
- Desirable social values as in distinguishing between good and bad behaviour on public places and developing the spirit of tolerance for differences between individuals and between groups in a heterogeneous society.
- Cultural education as in distinguishing between indigenous culture and alien culture as well as cultural relativity, understand the positive aspects of indigenous culture (to be preserved) and the negative aspect of indigenous culture (to be avoided) and similarly the positive aspects of foreign culture in the local context.
- Health education as in child-care, immunization schedules, basic hygiene and health care for the family, nutritional foods, balanced diets and physical fitness.
- Technological education -- a lack of which is often the reason for underdevelopment as in the use of tools and machinery, inculcating a scientific and rational attitude to life, promoting originality and inventiveness in technical work.

1.2 Information

The mass media can assist the federal government to bring rural development at the grassroots through proper and effective dissemination of information. It

is difficult to think of any national objectives which can be pursued effectively, let alone achieve, without adequate information and communication support. This is particularly true of those national objectives which are concerned with making changes in human values, attitudes, behaviour patterns, cognitive skills, productive capabilities, life styles, life quality, etc.. Rural development, properly conceived, is one such objective.

Without proper information and education, the consciousness of the people will remain at a level that can hardly spur them to action. An awakened conscious is a liberating force. And what is liberation? It is simply the culmination in the struggle for spiritual, physical and mental emancipation from physical and structural violence.

What the mass media do in rural development is to emphasize the main and social input without which the best projects cannot take off. A well informed populace is an asset to rural development and good governance which ensure political stability and national integration.

1.3 Entertainment

Through songs and dances, festivals, arts, etc. the mass media, especially the electronic media can assist the rural populace to fight against tension, streets desolation, desperation and boredom arising from poverty and hardship. The entertainment offered on the broadcasting media helps to bring the rural populace to be at par with their urban counterparts and this gives them a sense of belonging in the society by negating the effects of rural poverty and hardship. However, care should be exercised in choosing programmes aimed at the entertainment of the rural populace, so as not to negate the very national objectives being targeted in broadcasting. The portrayal of crime, violence and sex on television for their entertainment values as in many foreign or urban films, is not appropriate for rural children and the youth, if not offensive to many rural adults who still believe in the traditional social values.

1.4 Audience Penetration

The mass media is very useful in audience penetration. It can deliver message in both national and local languages and, therefore capable of penetrating both the literate and illiterate segments of the rural population. The easiest way the government can penetrate the rural populace in terms of effective mobilization for national rural development and transformation is through the mass media, especially the electronic media such as radio and television.

Therefore, mass media can play a vital role in rural information system by maintaining effective and efficient delivery of information and messages especially in the area of improvement of rural life-quality and of the total rural human situation.

1.5 Unification of the Rural Areas for National Integration

The mass media in a developing country like Nigeria plays important role in rural information system by

being involved in promotion of unity among the different segments of the rural populace in the country with a diversity of language, culture, religion and social institutions. The behavioural tendency of man to resist change explains why many groups resist government programmes intended for national unity, a conflict that has been aptly described as centripetal forces versus centrifugal forces in national integration.

Apart from the educational programmes directed at resolving the divisive issues, the mass media (especially the electronic media) has another value dimension in unification by virtue of the ability of people from various parts of the country to watch (or listen to) the same programmes at the same time and to be informed of the same (often national) events under the same circumstances. This creates a sense of belonging to one community and, to some degree, a sense of (vicarious) participation.

2. PROBLEMS OF RURAL REPORTING IN NIGERIA

Journalists in Nigeria who attempt to serve the needs of the country's predominantly rural population have one of the most difficult jobs in mass communication. This is a conclusion reached by many media men who must deal concretely and systematically with the problems associated with a rural target audience. It takes patience and dedication to operate any medium which has, for one of its major components, reaching a rural audience. It is easy to become discouraged because feedback is frequently inadequate from listeners, and frequently, there is little money to make improvements which are obvious to the journalist. But there are facts of life which must be dealt with gradually.

One of the greatest problems facing media houses that delve into rural information reporting is obsolete and poorly operating equipment. Frequently, too, there is an almost complete lack of necessary recording equipment, good microphones, etc.. In many rural areas there is no electricity or power supply, and even in those rural areas where they exist, their steady supply is not assured (or guaranteed). Another problem is lack of responsible employees who run equipment or act as its custodians. In most cases, those in radio and television in Nigeria have had to learn on the job. Moreover, Nigerian journalists who venture into the area of rural information reporting, particularly those working with government owned media houses, are in a difficult situation where political leadership demands run counter to good journalism, reflected in dissemination of accurate information and fairness in setting the news agenda. Other challenges include bureaucratic red-tapism, laws governing state secrets, job dissatisfaction, etc..

Nwosu (1987) identifies inadequate training and inadequate research as two factors which constitute a cog

in the wheel of the effective utilization of the mass media in rural information system and posits that these problems have to be eliminated before people can fully realize the rich potential of mass media and significant role it can play in effective rural information dissemination.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian mass media has for too long basked in an urban world. That is no longer good enough. Our experience in this country has shown that access and participation in the communication process are rare opportunities for the rural dweller, mainly because of the media operator's near-total concern for the elite and urban communities and the problem of rural illiteracy.

Hence, the first contribution of the mass media in rural information system should start with reversing the existing position, which does not at all guarantee ruralite's involvement and participation. In this vein, they should make conscientious efforts to bring the rural populace into the communication mainstream of the country through participatory development communication, if the pace of national development is to be accelerated. For effective rural information they should always try to dig beyond handouts and press release.

In a situation where media establishments are not only concentrated in the urban centers but also where media content is determined by urban-based urban-oriented media practitioners who are, arguably, ignorant or indifferent to the plight of rural dwellers, only a haphazard information about the rural areas would be disseminated.

Furthermore, since the significant reason for rural neglect by the Nigerian media has to do with the structure of Nigeria journalism i.e. from the way in which the media has defined who they are, what they think, journalism is all about, until that structure is altered, this wanton neglect will probably continue. In particular, there must be deliberate efforts to counter the effects of who is in the newsroom and how news is defined. In this regard, our media establishments should either endeavour to hire more "rural-minded" reporters or impress it upon the existing ones to change their minds about going to the rural areas to cover events or issues.

It is fundamentally important that the rural information reporter in Nigeria does not become to the rural areas what the Western journalist is to Africa and the mind world: a fleeting news person descending on an area with little time to grasp the issues, background and mood of the people in the area being reported on, and, therefore, failing to adequately contextualise the problems peculiar to them. Since the emphasis of rural reporter is supposed to be on rural information dissemination, it is important that the reporter reports with both sympathy and understanding. To do this adequately, the reporter must, of necessity, be resident in the area being covered at least, for as long as necessary.

Finally, since receiving accurate information about the real situation of the rural areas is supposed to be the main thrust of the rural reporter, he must avoid being unnecessarily negative. He should not overemphasize gloom and doom.

He must also not sensationalise, or become unnecessarily cynical of the plight of the rural people. The stories should not be deliberately angled for the entertainment of urban readers, treating the rural areas as places where stranger things happen. Above all, the story or information must be factual and accurate.

CONCLUSION

From all indications, rural reporting in the Nigeria mass media has not yet reached any appreciable standard so as to lay claim to identifying itself as playing any worthwhile role in rural information system in Nigeria. This is because the imbalance in information flow (urban to rural) has no useful value; rather it aggravates the disparity between urban and rural populace and promotes rural-urban drift, thus worsening the prevailing unemployment situation in the country. There is also the fact that those who own and control the mass media in Nigeria perceive themselves as makers of information (news) rather than as agents for dissemination of information. Moreover, orientation of Nigeria journalists is wrong and hence counter-productive to the rural information reporting dissemination.

Looking at the situation, it is easy to see how bleak the future is. The reason is simple: While the impediments to rural information reporting in Nigeria seem to be increasing in geometrical progression, the solutions to them and the resources available to combat them are rapidly dwindling. But the establishment of some community newspapers is an encouraging sign of a shift from the urban-centredness of the media to rural media. While such rural press are still few, there are indications that their number would increase over time. If they are properly managed and adequately funded, and at the service of the rural populace, there is no doubt that they will prove successful not only in rural information reporting system, but also in overall national information dissemination and management.

REFERENCES

- Alkali, M.N. *et al.* (Eds.) (1988). *Mass Media in Africa: A Book of Readings*. Enugu: Delta Publishers.
- Alkins, G., & Rivers, W. (Eds.) (1987). *Reporting with Understanding*. Ames, Iowa, USA: Iowa State University Press.
- Aniebona, E.N. (1990). The Role of Broadcasting in a Developing Context. In I.E. Nwosu (Ed.), *Mass Communication and National Development*. ABU: Frontier Publishers Limited.
- Domato, J.K. *et al.* (Eds.) (1987). *Mass Media and the African Society*. Nairobi: ACCE.

- Garbner, G. (Ed.) (1977). *Mass Media Policies in Our Changing Cultures*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc..
- Hester, A., & To, W.L. (Eds.) (1987). *Hand for Third World Journalists*. Georgia: The Centre for International Mass Communication Training & Research, University of Georgia.
- Mecher, M. (1983). *Basic News Writing*. Dubuque, Iowa: W. M. C. Brown Co. Publishers.
- Moemeka, A. (1981). *Local Radio: Communication, Education for Development*. Zaria: ABU Press Ltd..
- Nuhu, L. (1993). Reporting Rural Development in Nigeria. In E.O. Akeredolu-Ale (Ed.), *Mass Media and Rural Development in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
- Nwuneli, O. (Ed.) (1985). *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Rowlands, D., & Lewis, H. (Eds.) (1985). *Reporting Africa*. London: The Thompson Foundation.
- Wolseley, R.E., & Compbell, L.R. (Eds.) (1957). *Exploring Journalism*. N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc..