

APPROACHES FOR EFFECTIVE REPORTAGE OF RURAL AREAS BY NIGERIAN MASS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper, on approaches to effective rural reportage by Nigerian mass media sought to proffer the practical strategies available to Nigerian Mass Media in reporting the rural areas. The paper is predicated on the fact that there is imbalance information flow in terms of rural and urban reportage by Nigerian mass media. Anchored on the development media theory and the need to use the mass media to bring about the development of the rural areas, the paper outlines some practical strategies and comes to the conclusion that Nigerian mass media can cover the rural areas effectively, and that the adoption of these approaches will go a long way in changing the current level of rural reportage.

Keywords: *Reportage, rural areas, mass media*

INTRODUCTION

The controversy about the global information flow has been raging and engaging the attention of government, media practitioners and academics for some time now. The argument about the imbalance of information flow from the developed to the developing world has become familiar. Nwosu (1985) observes that experts seem to agree that the search for solution to this world information flow problem will continue because of the proven influence of mass communication in world politics, peace and violence.

The information flow imbalance is not limited to the international scene. Within Nigeria there is a contention about the rural and urban reportage by Nigerian mass media. According to Idemili (1992), the Nigerian press neglects the rural areas in its news coverage and is primarily concerned with reporting activities in the urban centres in spite of the fact that more Nigerians live in rural areas. He concluded by calling on the third world countries to set their domestic information flow in order before fighting for balanced information flow at the international level. However, Omu (1993) has this to say about Nigerian mass media:

"...steeped in the tradition of nationalist and oppositionist politics, many Nigerian mass media tend to concentrate on the activities of government and political leaders And since the national scene is the main focus of political activity, the mass media published in state capitals have tended to assume the stature of national institutions catering to a national audience. In their hierarchy of interest and priorities, the affairs of the rural areas occupy a very low position even though the developmental role of the press is advertised as the main justification for government ownership of mass media."

There are advocacies by several scholars for community journalism. However, what most of them actually advocate is the sitting of media outfits in the rural communities, such as rural community newspapers, radio and television. Although the idea of rural community media is good, this paper focuses on the coverage and reportage of rural communities by existing media organizations in Nigeria whether such media houses are located in the rural or urban communities.

Presently, the Nigerian mass media place emphasis on urban areas. High premium is placed on urban centres to the detriment of rural areas. Omeje (2004) notes that by concentrating their activities at the urban areas, the media have succeeded in creating disparity, depreciation and a gulf between urban and rural inhabitants. Today in Nigeria, the only mass medium that is accessible to both urban and rural dwellers is the radio. This is so because; it has the capacity to cut through barriers of illiteracy and poor infrastructural facilities which could limit the print media and television (Okunna, 1999). Some radio sets are cheap and can be operated with battery bought at even twenty naira (N20.00). The cost of having and operating a television set puts it beyond the reach of most rural dwellers. In the case of the print media, the language of communication bars most of the rural dwellers from reading.

However, as noted earlier, whether the language used by the media is English or vernacular, the issue is the content. How many of the rural areas are reflected in the mass media? This paper is hinged on the development media theory. This theory presupposes that mass media should accept and carry out positive development task in line with nationally established policy. The theory expects media to give priority in their content to national culture, language and developmental issues (McQuail, 1987).

MASS MEDIA AND THE SOCIETY

A society has been defined as a group of interacting individuals sharing the same territory and participating in a common

culture (Robertson, 1977). From the definition, there are distinct conditions or indices that must be met in order to qualify people as living in a society. The first condition is that they must occupy a common territory. Second, is that they must interact in the shared territory. The third condition is that of having common culture which in turn entails a shared sense of membership in a group as well as commitment to the same group.

The foregoing clearly indicates that human beings are social beings. Without social living, the quality of "humanity" cannot exist. Pettman (1979) cited in Udoakah (2006) defines society as "a collection of people in some sense autonomous and internally organized with a place and history of their own, a common sense of their identity...and a shared style of life." Udoakah further clarified that the society functions effectively through the interplay of political organizations, economic activities, social control, education and communication. He submits that of all these structures, communication is the greatest and that none of the other structures can function without communication since they all depend on communication. It has been rightly observed that there is no person whose behaviour and personality have not developed in the context of some human society.

The truth remains that in the complex interaction between the individual and society, society is usually the dominant partner. Society existed long before we are born into it, and it exists long after we are gone. Scholars and observers have rightly come to the conclusion that society gives content, direction, and meaning to our lives, and we, in turn, in countless ways, reshape the society that we leave to the next generation.

However, it is very interesting to observe that the society exists through communication. Communication is the most important human survival skill since it is needed to maintain contact with the society. It is simply an attempt to share our meanings with others by calling up inside another person experience and reaction

similar to ours. Fiske (1990) cited in Okunna (1999) defines communication in general terms as "social interaction through messages". Okunna (1995) defines communication to mean sharing of ideas, information, opinions, feelings or experiences between people. Since man is constantly in relationship with others, he communicates in order to share meaning, feelings, attitudes and experiences with others with whom he relates.

Communication enables members of the society to share knowledge, innovations, feelings and ideas which are used for the development and preservation of the society. Writing about the linkage between communication and social wellbeing, Ende (2008) posits that communication when well applied can create awareness and cause some behavioural change through persuasion. Citing Mowlana and Wilson (1989), Nwawene (2008) describes communication as social interaction by means of messages which are both human and technological. The basic idea here is that something is transferred or transmitted from one person to another during the communication process.

Mass communication is messages or information or stimuli communicated through a channel or medium to a large and heterogeneous audience in different locations simultaneously. Bittner, (1989) states that communication does not operate in a social vacuum as a machine does. He explains that when a computer receives a message, it provides an answer based on the original message, and if the computer is functioning properly, the same answer will appear every time the identical message is sent. It is not so with mass communication as other variables affect both the message and the consumers' responses to the message. Mass communication operates in a social context for people in the society.

The society, as seen earlier, is a complex interplay of social variables. Social groups such as family, friends and co-workers affect

or influence a person's reaction to mass communication contents. The social, economic, political, religious, cultural and moral values of persons in a society will greatly affect the contents of mass communication that are transmitted as well as the reaction to the contents of such mass communicated messages.

RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES

For the purpose of this paper, an attempt will be made to put the rural and urban communities in perspectives. Sociologically, there seems to be no agreement regarding the meaning of community. The term community can be used as a synonym for society. Thus a society is an aggregate of people living together in a particular place or area. Differentiating between rural and urban communities can best be done by describing the two in terms of infrastructures and social amenities available.

Urban communities are the towns and cities. They have facilities such as electricity, good road network, pipe-borne water, educational and health institutions, financial establishments, big and modern markets, sea and airports, libraries, radio and television stations. The urban dwellers are near to and have access to newspapers, magazines, books, journals, posters, billboards, postal services, telephone, satellite and cable transmissions (Omeje 2004). The rural communities are simply the opposite. These are communities without the basic facilities and have no access to the mass media apart from radio signals, and to a very little extent, television. They read newspapers, magazines and books occasionally when relatives who dwell in the urban centres go home.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA REPORTAGE

At present, nearly all the media houses in Nigeria are located in the state capitals and few in other urban centres outside the state capitals. Thus, according to Omu (1993) since the national scene is

assumed to be where political, economic and social activities are going on, all the newspapers located in the state capital and other urban centres concentrate on the national scene forgetting about the rural areas. Just as stated by Omu:

In their hierarchy of interest and priorities, the affairs of the rural areas occupy a very low position even though the developmental role of the press is advertised as the main justification for Government ownership of media houses.

With the location of the media houses in the cities and urban centres, reporters are stationed in the cities and correspondents sent to cover the rural areas only when top government functionaries have a duty to perform there. These media houses, particularly the state owned media houses, have as a policy and mission the coverage of the rural areas. For instance, the Pioneer Newspaper owned by the Akwa Ibom State Government in its maiden editorial on Monday, April 11, 1988 stated:

“We will seek to uplift the concept of regional journalism which we recognize immediately as a daunting task in a media environment where media houses pretend to be “National.” The regional journalism we aim to practice will be anchored to a faithful coverage of rural Akwa Ibom, mainstream Akwa Ibom, the nation and the world in that order...”

Contrary to the mission statements of these media houses, the Nigerian press, as Idemili (1992) noted, neglects the rural areas in its coverage and is primarily concerned with reporting activities in the urban centres, in spite of the fact that more Nigerians live in rural areas. This neglect of the rural areas may be due to inability or unwillingness of the media houses to put in place appropriate and practical measures to ensure effective reportage of the rural areas.

Journalists in Nigeria, both in training and practice, are western oriented. In other words, Nigerian journalists are trained

according to the Western Media Philosophy of Europe and America. They also practice according to their training. Thus, Nigerian journalists' understanding of news and news values are based on the news values formulated in Britain and America. All that Nigerian journalists want to achieve is to write and package news to meet the standard obtained abroad.

Consequently, for any event to be newsworthy, it must feel big, involve prominent personalities such as top government functionaries, politicians and prominent businessmen. The events, in terms of proximity, must occur in the urban centres before the press can cover effectively, since the urban centres are erroneously considered to be more densely populated than the rural areas.

For these reasons given above, Nigerian mass media, see our rural areas as "good for nothing" for media package whereas the popular press in Britain and America report what in Africa values can be considered as trivialities such as death of pets. Udoakah (1998) gives an apt description of the rural reportage by Nigerian newspaper and indeed African journalist thus:

“African journalists are stationed at their regional headquarters or state capitals (in the case of Nigerian), and selected Local Government or District Headquarters. The decision to send reporters to local Government or District Headquarter is usually informed by the economic or political importance of such towns. Hence, journalism in Africa, like Western Europe and America, is essentially an urban phenomenon. Their reports are about the presidents of their countries and ministers, governors and commissioners, chairmen of Local Governments or District Officers and their councilors, and big names in business. The rural areas are in the news only when one thing or another (usually the launching or commissioning of community projects) takes those officials there, and the news will be what they said on the occasion. Or when something with society happens, for instance, an outbreak of an epidemic or communicable disease”.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE RURAL REPORTAGE

If rural areas must be reported effectively, then there must be a departure from the current haphazard and serendipitous coverage of the rural areas. The current practice whereby journalists go to the rural areas only when top government officials go there to commission projects or when something with obvious social implications like epidemic occurs has to be done away with. The following strategies will help ensure effective rural reportage by Nigerian mass media:

Adapt the News Values: The first step to effective rural reportage is the adaptation of the various news values to the rural areas. Journalists in Nigeria have learnt through trainings the various criteria that must be applied in considering the newsworthiness of events or issues. These include timeliness, proximity, prominence, oddity, magnitude, human interest, consequences, and conflict. These are the classic elements that have been followed for decades and are discussed in textbooks on reporting Itule and Anderson, (2003).

To Nigerian journalists, the greatest of the news values is prominence/eminence. Consequently, they think there are no prominent or eminent personalities in the rural areas. This particular news value and indeed others need to be adapted to rural areas. It is not only when people occupy high public offices that they can be considered prominent. There are a lot of retirees, clergies, traditional rulers, business people, civil servants, social activists, creative artist science, traditional birth attendants, herbalists etc in the rural areas. These people are all prominent and should be so considered.

There are a lot of odd things happening in the rural areas, so many events and issues of human interest. These news values apply to rural areas as much as they do to urban adaptation of these values to rural areas by Nigerian journalists. This is the starting point for effective rural reportage.

Assign Correspondents to Rural Areas: The norm in mass media organizations today is to station reporters in urban centres and only send them occasionally to rural areas. Such measure inhibits the effective coverage of rural areas. Several social functions and newsworthy events take place in the rural areas often. But there is no way such events can be reported since reporters are not stationed in the rural areas.

In some cases, the ruralites may want to invite reporters to cover events in the rural communities, but the cost implications of having to travel to the state capital to invite reporters always deter them. This is understandable considering the poverty level in the rural communities. The only way out of this problem is to assign correspondents to cover the rural communities. Correspondents should be stationed in the rural areas not just assigned when the editor feels like. The correspondents so stationed will be able to carry out the surveillance function and be at a vantage position as purveyors of information about the rural communities.

Use the Local Language: Language is very important in socialization. Although there are literate people in rural communities, reporters assigned to cover rural areas should as much as possible use the language of the people. The reporter may not necessarily speak the dialect but should use the vernacular instead of English language. English can be used with the learned members of the communities, but not with everybody. This will reduce the suspicions with which ruralities look at reporters.

Identify News Sources: Reporters assigned to rural areas should, as a matter of priority, identify the news sources in the rural areas. In the rural communities, news sources are different from what the reporter may have in urban centres. There may be no press releases, no invitation to press conferences, no ministry information officers, no big sporting events and no top government functionaries to interview. However, there are various sources of news in the rural

communities. These include contacts such as the local pub owners, members of community organizations, youth organization members and individuals that the reporters may make friends with. Other sources are the village council members, the village head, local politicians, local celebrities and business people. (Rudin and Ibbotson, 2002). There are also some civil servants in the rural areas such as medical workers, teachers and Agricultural extension workers. These are also good sources of news.

The customary courts in the rural areas are good sources of information as several cases such as theft, divorce, family and land disputes are usually taken to customary courts. The reporter must also note that churches in the communities are good sources of news.

Locate the Opinion Leaders: The relevance of opinion leaders to the reporters' job is that by virtue of the above-mentioned characteristics, the opinion leaders are more knowledgeable, of issues within and outside their communities. They also know important people outside their communities and are accessible. Among this category of people are teachers, other civil servants, and businessmen who travel out a lot. These opinion leaders are the ones that can give reporters vital and newsworthy information, as well as explanations and interpretations when needed. This is important because in covering an area it is always necessary to have news sources and people who can give their views on issues affecting their communities.

Establish Rapport with Village Heads and Village Councils: The rural areas are made up of villages. At the helm of affairs of these villages are the village heads who rule with the assistance or cooperation of the village councils. Anything that happens in the rural areas happens in a particular village. So it is only natural that the village head and or members of the village council should have something to say. Thus establishing a good rapport with them is essential.

Print Journalists should Make Newspapers Available in Rural Areas: The availability of newspapers in the rural areas will create the willingness in the ruralite to speak to the press. The mere seeing what one spoke or an incident or event that occurred printed in the newspaper will evoke so much interest in the rural dwellers. If a reporter continues to cover an area without the people ever seeing the newspaper, there will be a kind of apathy and resentment for the reporters and their work would be hindered.

WHAT TO REPORT AND HOW TO REPORT

The general perception of the rural areas by journalists in Nigeria has been that nothing newsworthy happens in the rural areas except the cases of communal conflicts, natural disasters and outbreaks of epidemic. This notion is erroneous. The rural people have problems, to be solved, needs to be met and success stories or experiences to share with the rest of the world. They also want government and other members of the society to know about their struggles and efforts made to combat some problems.

It is important to note also that even the urban dwellers are interested in knowing about the social, economic and political situations in the rural areas where most of them hail from. One of the reasons advanced for concentration of mass media in then urban centres is the assumption that the urban areas are where political, economic and social activities take place. The rural areas are considered as dead ends.

Contrary to such faulty notions, a lot of newsworthy activities take place in the rural areas. Politically, there can be no politics at the state or national levels without the grassroots politics at the ward level. Anybody aspiring to any political office in the nation must be registered in a party at the ward level. Each ward elects a councilor who represents people in the legislative council of the local government council. Each word must have executives and the ward executive positions are usually keenly contested. Suffice it to say that politics at the grassroots is very important and politics at

the national level is dependent on the grassroots. Given such importance, it would be absurd to think that nothing newsworthy happens in the rural areas. Consequently, the mass media should assign correspondents to the rural areas to cover the political activities at the grassroots. It will interest the ruralites to read about their political activities in newspapers. Even the urban dwellers are interested in the grassroots politics.

Majority of Nigerians live in the rural areas with farming as the major occupation. These rural dwellers feed the nation. Unfortunately crop yields, rising cost of farm inputs and services are not reported by the press. Mass media should carry reports about farming and other economic activities in the rural area. Such economic activities include formation of cooperative and establishment of small scale industries by communities. Views of rural entrepreneurs on national issues and economic policies should be sought and reported in Nigerian mass media.

Also newsworthy are community development projects embarked upon by the rural people, fund raising for projects, launching and commissioning of projects by village or clan heads. There are other social functions like coronation of traditional rulers, conferment of chieftaincy titles, youth or village day celebrations, births, deaths and traditional marriages. Accidents, armed robbery incidents, communal clashes and conflict resolution in the rural areas, should also form part of media reports.

Having mapped out the strategies, and having known what to report, the next logical step is how to report the rural areas effectively. There are several ways of reporting. These are news, interview, personally profile, pictorial composition, cartoons, feature, and opinion articles.

News reports that utilize the fives Ws and H have great impact on the public and often attract government attention to the condition in the rural areas. From personal experience, rural communities, some of which have never been in news usually attract

attention of government and indeed the general public. This may be because news reports simply tell what happened where, when, why and who were involved. Added to these is how the event or issue came about, happened or was handled. Thus without keeping the reader in suspense or making the reader spend so much time before getting the vital information, news gives the main points in summary and straight forward manner. Thus, news should be utilized in order to make effective reportage of the rural areas.

Interview is one of the ways of generating and gathering news. But excerpts from interview or the full text can be published or broadcast as a form of report. In the case of rural communities, village or clan heads and opinion leaders can be interviewed on any issue or event to bring the reality of the rural areas to the fore. Interviews allow for in depth, first-hand information from those affected by the deplorable rural conditions.

Feature and Discussion Programmes are simply a special or prominent article or programme on somebody or something. So many people, including those in government who are also the policy makers, do not know what to imagine about rural areas. Yet, they stay in the Federal Capital and urban centres and formulate development policies and programmes for rural areas. Instead of just writing news about rural communities, reporters can also write feature on issues, events, socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of the rural areas. The broadcast journalists can feature the rural areas in discussion programmes.

Pictorial Composition and Documentaries tell stories more than words. The rural situation can be appreciated more if seen in pictures, than read of in lengthy stories or feature articles. Pictures can also complement the stories and help tell the stories vividly. A composition of pictures can be used to highlight the rural conditions and attract the attention of the public and government easily. The broadcast media can produce documentaries that highlight the rural conditions and attract public attention.

Opinion Articles and Commentaries enable the reporter to

express his or her views about several issues and events that impact on the ruralites. Opinion articles allow the reporter to express his opinion about the rural conditions, distribution of amenities and political positions. Commentaries on radio and television serve the same purpose of the opinion articles in the print media.

Personality Profiles are important personalities in the rural areas. These personalities comprise retired civil servants, teachers, and civil servants residing in villages, business and community leaders. Their experiences, ideas and contributions to their communities and the nation are things that will interest leaders and help highlight the trials and efforts and successes of the rural people. It is a very good way of capturing the rural conditions. It is a way of letting government and the general public hears from the horse's mouth.

Cartoons make use of amusing drawings to express their views, criticize or depict a situation. Cartoons can be used to report the situation in the rural areas effectively.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to proffer some practical approaches to effective reportage of rural areas by Nigerian mass media. In doing this, the current nature of rural reportage has been looked at, the functions of the press for society considered, the social responsibility, development and the democratic - participant media theories have been X - rayed. Strategies for effective rural reportage have also been proffered. The paper has also pointed out what should be reported about the rural areas and how they should be reported.

It is now evident that Nigerian mass media can cover the rural areas effectively if they so desire. Rural areas have so much to be reported and it takes reporters and mass media with the willingness to go beyond their urban enclaves into the rural communities to report the rural areas effectively. Since this paper has spelt out

clearly the practical approaches to effective reportage of the rural areas by Nigerian mass media, it can only be recommended that Nigerian mass media and reporters adopt these approaches as they will go a long way in changing the current level of rural reportage. The government should encourage the establishment of rural radio/television stations and print media. Awards should be instituted for best rural area reporters and rural media outfits.

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