

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM AND PRESS COVERAGE OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Development journalism has a strong normative appeal based on the assumed powers and responsibility of the press to mobilize and educate the public for support and participation in formulating and implementing national development policies. Journalism in developing countries like Nigeria is often associated with this brand of journalism and if that is so, it is expected that journalists, through their reporting style should be able to demonstrate these norms. There are three basic research questions that propelled this paper; Do Nigerian journalists report development issues? If they do, what style of reporting is generally favoured? Are they committed to development journalism by normative standards? Using content analysis to describe the pattern of reporting the activities aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals in some selected newspapers in Nigeria, the conclusions are that the journalists pay attention by reporting the MDG activities but favoure more of straight news than interpretative/in-depth story style which tend to suggest that they give less priority to the norms of development news coverage. Also in terms of MDG goal attraction to the press, environmental sustainability and eradication of poverty scored higher more than gender equality and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

A casual reader of newspapers or listener to the broadcast in Nigeria would attest that there is surplus of the president, governor or any other public office holder speaking, proposing policies, launching one project or the other. There are also diets of political party controversies about office sharing and the various government agencies doing one thing or the other, demonstrating that the government is doing what is possible to improve the lives of the people. It is part of the government development communication strategies that the citizens and the international communities must be made to understand that the government is fulfilling the electoral promises and now delivering the dividends of democracy as promised during the election campaigns.

It is also normal to hear or read news stories and editorials about the failure of government to care for the welfare of the citizens, there stories about social injustice, gender discrimination, armed robbers operating freely and the police doing nothing, bribery and corruption and government too weak to safeguard lives and properties of the citizens. The

pervasive corruption and violent crimes such as abductions and religious terrorist activities have become sore points in the government's claim to political responsibility.

The press in Nigeria is therefore of such contrasting contents, combining adversarial and collaborative postures towards public affairs reporting, such that positive and negative news reporting charge, meaning favourable or unfavourable, as the case may be, have become part of the political register in the country. The common value denominator however is the persistence claim to defense of public interest and contribution to national development (Ajibade, 2003).

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria confers on the mass media the responsibility to monitor governance and ensure compliance with the provisions of the constitution and hold government accountable to the people who elected the government. Moreover, there is some obsession among media scholars and practitioners in Nigeria about professional commitment to development journalism, a normative press theory that ranks among the original four as enunciated by Wilbur Shramm and Patterson as early as 1956. The exact interpretation of the role of the mass media in supporting national development remains controversial as those journalists who are associated with the so called positive news syndrome are practicing the profession different from those who are associated with adversary or critical journalism. The latter believe that the best way the media can contribute to national development is through a principled opposition to government.

Perhaps this sense of mission is absolute in a country where the social and civic institutions are weak to check political powers and other social power blocks in the society. When the government and other state officials have no strong institutionalized opposition for effective checks and balances in the true spirit of representative democracy, the press in Nigeria tends to adorn the role of peoples advocate, conscience of the nation, the watchdog, the gadfly, and the voice of the voiceless and the vulnerable groups in the society.

To the extent that critical and adversarial journalism is justifiable, collaborative journalism is equally justified when it is argued that the collaboration between state officials in educating the citizens and mobilizing them in support of government policies would provide a stable political environment for the survival of government and enhance its capacity to sustain national development.

That assertion that mass media have considerable function in national development is no more controversial giving the claims that attitudes and behavior that have direct influence in driving national development policies and peoples' attitudes towards change or resistance to it in the society can be influenced by the media among other institutions. One way this function can be fulfilled is through the use of appropriate news reporting style to educate and mobilize the citizens for support of policies enunciated by government from time to time (Lerner, 1958, Shramm, 1964 in Servaes, 1995, p.539).

The role the press in national development policies and public discourse has been critically articulated in Jimada (2006, p.13) with reference to the agenda-setting functions of the media. He stated that the news media can help raise public awareness of about development problems and issues; create public consciousness about development; inform people and help them to make right choices; influence policy-makers pay attention and reflect public opinion.

Usman Jimada also suggested that the national media could contribute to development and change by going beyond spot news reporting to engage in analysis of issues in the news. He argues that the mass media cannot solve the immense problem of development but what it can do is to play a participatory and supporting role by helping to focus attention, point out opportunities, attack indifferences, or obstructions; and influence the climate of public opinion and spreading greater understanding of development issues in the developing countries.

As the 21st century was ushered in, the world became agitated by mass poverty and declining values of human lives particularly in the least developed countries. The United Nations came up with what is now known as Millennium Development Goals as a solution to the problems of development in the world by 2015 but later revised to 2020. Nigeria, being a developing nation keyed into this programme and made it a benchmark for its national development efforts.

Fourteen years into the implementation of the programme, it takes on a scholarly interest to examine how the press is engaging with and making its contribution to the actualization of the development goals through its news reporting style, particularly in Nigeria, with reference to the norms of development news reporting as formulated by scholars over the years.

NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

In considering the normative character of development journalism, McQuail in Folarin (1998) prescribed the following attributes: The media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy; freedom of the media should be open to the economic priorities and development needs of the society; media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally and politically, among other attributes.

Rampal (1984 in Thusu, 1996, p.13) espousing the essence of development journalism states that “development journalism, as is all journalism, is information, analysis, comment and interpretation. But it also includes motivation- motivating people and motivating policy towards what people want and need. Exposing and publicizing successes and failures, and reasons for them, part of development journalism”.

Aggarwala (1979, in Thusu, 1996, p. 9) shared similar programmatic views when he held that “in covering the development news beat, the journalist should critically examine, evaluate, and report the relevance of a development project to national and local needs, the difference between a planned and its actual implementation, and the difference between its impact on people as claimed by government officials and as it actually is”. This approach he claimed would be a departure from the western news norms that emphasize action and spot news reporting.

Shah (1990) prescribes that development news should provide contextual and background information about the development process, discuss the impact of plans, projects, policies, problems, and issues on people, and speculate about the future of development (see also Jimada, 2006, Edeani, 1993, Folarin, 1998).

Edeani (1993) identified three categories of journalists in how they report development issues, their news style and level of commitment to the ideals of development journalism. These include; conventional journalist who merely reports development regularly at its face value and with much professional detachment, and refrains from news interpretation and analysis; the developmental journalist who reports development on *ad hoc* basis, and he normally acts as an information officer to government in publicizing policies, statements and projects without evaluating them; and the development journalist, he explains, holds the view that news events can only be meaningful and useful to the audience if they are presented in a context through which relevant background information and analysis accompanying straight news, and does not hesitate to evaluate, criticize and apportion lames or praises where necessary.

The emerging scenario from these prescriptions of what development journalism should be is that development journalist is all of the following; an advocate who gives voice to the voiceless and the socially weak, an agitator for the common good and social justice, an organizer or propagandist for national transformation and a journalist with a social conscience and mission.

In addition, it provides for a typical news reporting style that tends to repudiate the western news values of unusualness, oddities and a penchant for being the first to break the news in a horse race fashion. Development journalism is rooted in the ethos that factual reporting is not enough. He is also a writer. The news audience should be educated and motivated through the perspectives and opinions offered about the news reports.

The press in Nigeria has been playing a historic role in the struggles for national development beginning from the nationalist movement for political independence to the anti-military regimes in the country. The struggle appears to be a continuous one and each historical epoch presented different developmental concerns and so have journalists been responding giving the political tendencies presented (Odozi, 2007). The tempo is still currently sustained as it is clear from the daily news reports in the Nigerian mass media that government is under surveillance and

constant pressure to ensure accountability and responsibility as prescribed in the Constitution of the country.

It is significant to underscore that despite different shades of opinion about the nature of development journalism, there is a close perception of development news as normatively interpretative and investigative among media scholars (Edeani, 1993. p. 132). Available literatures as highlighted above have made it clear that the practice of development journalism has acquired a normative status comparable in rank to the other press theories (Siebert, Peterson, Schramm, 1956 in McQuail, 2005). As stipulated in the four theories of the press, an influential source of normative press theorization among scholars over the years, "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (McQuail, 2005, p.176). Development press is considered a unique press theory reflecting the social and political system of the developing countries, including Nigeria.

Development journalism has its norms and values which emphasize information, analysis, commentary, and interpretation aimed at motivating people and policies for national development. Contrary to the idea of detached news reporting, development journalism should encourage participation and civic engagement with public interest and common good of the nation as the focus.

Giving the above press context, how much of these defining values of development journalism are reflected in the reporting of national development issues in the Nigerian newspapers? This question is the fundamental consideration in this paper. The focus is the dimensions of press coverage of the millennium development programmes in Nigeria for the past three years.

NIGERIA AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

This stage of interdependency has produced what Judith Litchten (2000) referred to as "global agenda". According to her, All over the world, there is strong denunciation of the dominance of government in the day to day operation of centralized economic system and the promotion of private sector participation in all sectors of the economy based on respect for free reign of the market forces in the allocation of national resources. It is argued that the former system where government through public entrepreneurship had dominated the economy had resulted in under-utilisation of the national and global resources resulting in mass poverty, diseases, non-functioning urban infrastructures, growth of urban slumps, decay in public utilities, declining creation of wealth, wastages and rural transformation as well as increased marginalization of the vast majority of the citizens in the social and political processes of the society.

This is a summary of the problems that top the agenda of the United Nations at the beginning of the 21st century, when the millennium development goals' project was inaugurated. The purpose was to chart a benchmark to facilitate world development, calling for national and international collaborative effort to resolve some of these problems within a time frame. The millennium development goals (MDGs) are eight items slated to be achieved by 2015. The deadline was shifted to 2020. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations-and signed by 147 heads of state and governments in September 2000. The goals were stated as follows:

Goal 1: Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. The components are the reduction of the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 US dollars per, achieving decent employment for women, men and young people, and reduce the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. It is anticipated that by the 2015, all children, including boys and girls, should be able to complete a full course of primary school education.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Gender equality refers to the valuation by society of both the similarities and differences between male females and the roles they play in the society. It is believed that men and women should enjoy equal status in the society in terms of access to resources and opportunities for realizing their potentials, attributing the gender gap to traditional and cultural beliefs.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality. The target is to reduce by two-thirds by 2015, the rate at which under -five aged children die due to preventable diseases and malnutrition by giving access to primary healthcare and immunization of children.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health. In this sector, it was planned that between 1990 and 2015, death by mothers should be reduced by two-thirds by giving access to reproductive healthcare.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Nations are expected to have halted and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases by 2015 and achieve by 2010, universal access to treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability. Environment and natural resources provide the base for economic and social development including poverty eradication, hunger and poverty. Among some of the components of this goal are to halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, as well as to achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development. This goal emphasised the need to address the peculiar development needs of the least developed countries, deal with international debt overhang on developing nations and cooperate between public and private sectors of the economy for access to news technologies and affordable drugs, among others.

Nigeria has since domesticated this development agenda by adopting several policy strategies to achieve these goals (Adebawale, 2008, Ahmed, 2011). The earliest attempt to implement the MDG goals led to the formulation of the National Economic Empowerment and Development strategies, NEEDS at the national level and SEEDS at the state level, targeted at poverty eradication. This was followed by other policies which included the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE), Federal Road Maintenance Agency (FERMA), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment programme (SURE-P). Others are the Universal basic Education programme (UBE) which captures the needs of nomadic and adult education towards wiping out illiteracy in the country. In order to coordinate the activities of these implementing agencies a national office was created in the presidency in the name of MDG Office (Adebawale, 2008). It is believed that the office has been funded to the tune of over 305 billion naira to date (Ahmed & Alhassan, 2011).

It is the primary assumption of this study that MDG which has formed the basis of much of the Nigerian national development policies, touching every aspect of the lives of the citizens should be able to attract sufficient attention of the press in its reportage in quality and quantity. It is also considered that in consonance with the much canvassed commitment to national development and social responsibility, the press should be able to inform, educate, evaluate and monitor the MDG programmes according to the norms of development journalism. It is therefore significant that media scholars should be interested in how the press has engaged with this national development obligation in the reportage of MDG and its activities in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis is adopted for this study. The purpose is to identify the scope of attention paid to the issue of development by examining what is reported and how it is reported about MDG and related activities in the Nigeria press. Newspaper sample includes; The Guardian, The Punch, and The Nation. These papers are purposely selected as they are considered to be among the leading serious national press in terms of circulation and parade of some of the best known journalists in the country.

The period of study covers from January 2010 to December 2012. This period is arbitrarily chosen to see the effort in the last three years of the campaign for MDG. Only Monday to Friday editions are used for this study. Also, two copies are to be selected for each week by balloting to give a total of 8 copies per month. This number is multiplied by 12 to give a total of 96 copies expected to be captured in the sample frame for one year. Areas of MDG programme selected for analysis includes three of the following; a) Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, b) Gender Equality and women empowerment, and c) Environmental sustainability.

Unit of Analysis includes news pages in selected newspapers in Nigeria which are to be examined for information about MDG, related agencies, Government pronouncements about millennium goals and projects, actual project sites or launching as well as the activities of NGO's in this regard being reported. Coding Criteria are based on the following; Spot news to be scored (1), Background news (2), Editorial (3). Each unit scores will determine the actual weighted value placed on the subject by journalists.

Straight news includes stories reported solely on the sources and evidence provided by people connected with the breaking news, either as participants or eyewitnesses to the news event. Background news are those stories reported using extra sources and evidences to explain or provide context for the breaking news, calling up the experiences of the reporter to link up issues. To ensure reliability, coders were recruited among Mass Communication lecturers and students who have the basic knowledge competencies to evaluate the news stories as defined.

The content categories considered are **attention, prominence, and commitment**. Attention is measured in terms of inclusion or exclusion of stories involving MDG and related policies in the daily news reports. Prominence is based on the location of the stories in the newspapers, considering editorial page as a measure of priority and value placed on the story, followed by front/back page and inside page as the least position. Commitment is considered according to the style used for reporting the stories. The two categories of reporting styles used are the conventional straight news, in-depth/interpretative approach. The straight news is rated moderate commitment.

Reflecting the definition by Edeani (1993), a conventional journalist believes strongly in the orthodox principle of objectivity and professional detachment in the day to day coverage of development issues. He usually refrains from engaging in news interpretation or analysis that would put the news in a context that will make it understandable or useful to the readers.

Strong commitment to development news for this paper is indicated by the belief that factual presentation of news is not enough as it does not aid public understanding usage of news information. This reporting style must be in-depth and interpretative, making it a point of duty to accompany straight news with interpretations of the news events; relevant background information, extra to the breaking news and also evaluates the significance, implications and consequences of the news. It can be found in the form of Reporters passing value judgments on development policies and offering recommendations or solutions. The data collected from the pages of the newspapers are aggregated as attention, prominence and social commitment variables. The performances of the press are evaluated based on the prescribed norms of development journalism. Based on these criteria, the research questions would have been resolved as contained in the conclusion.

DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1: Guardian Sample Score

Newspapers	Copies with MDG stories	Copies without MDG stories	Total
Guardian 2010	78	18	96
Guardian 2011	40	56	96
Guardian 2012	68	28	96
Total	186	102	288

Table 2: Punch Sample

Newspapers	Copies with MDG stories	Copies without MDG stories	Total
Punch 2010	72	26	96
Punch 2011	48	44	96
Punch 2012	53	43	96
Total	173	113	96

Table 3: The Nation Sample

Newspapers	Copies with MDG stories	Copies without MDG stories	Total
The Nation 2010	72	26	96
The Nation 2011	88	8	96
The Nation 2012	91	5	96
Total	251	39	96

Table 4: News strategies for reporting development news

News Style	Frequency	Percentage
Straight News	1544	73
News with Background	454	21
Editorials	116	5.5
Total		

Table 5: News priority by page positioning for all samples

Page Position	Frequency	Percentage
Front	104	5.0
Inside	1950	92.2
Back	60	2.8
Total	2114	100

Table 6: MDG Goal attention score

MDG Goals	Frequency	Percentage
Goal 1:(Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger)	853	40.30
Goal 3: (Gender equality and Women empowerment)	355	16.80
Goal 7 (Environmental sustainability)	906	42.90
Total	2114	100

DISCUSSION

Tables 1, 2 and 3 represent the total number of newspaper copies sampled at a total of 864. Of that number, 610 copies contained stories about MDG and 254 without, representing 70.60% and 29.40% respectively. This shows that by simple percentages, the three newspapers pay attention to the MDG programme in their reportage, which answers the first research question. It is also evident that in terms of story placement which indicates a measure of prominence, most of the stories were inside page (73%) followed by front page (15%) and editorial pages (5%). In all, the straight news style scored higher than the interpretative/in-depth format, suggesting that the educational and mobilizing functions were lagging behind. Literature for this study is very clear that features writing, in-depth and interpretative reporting is germane to the effectiveness of development news reporting, and with the predominance of straight news style in reporting development issues in the Nigeria newspapers, it is concluded that there is low commitment on the part of the journalists. This conclusion is further buttressed by the fact that development news hardly merits front page report or editorial page commentary.

The suspicion here is that journalists may not have the required knowledge base to interrogate the dynamics of development policies and claims by development officials, so they become deficient in in-depth and interpretative reporting. There is also the suspicion that development news reports

appear to be events and press release driven. All these assumptions can be further investigated and necessary recommendations made to improve the situation.

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