

Research Article

Local Newspapers Coverage of Rural Development Issues a Decade into the Fourth Republic: A Content Analysis of the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph Newspapers

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A B S T R A C T

This study set out to detect the amount of attention given to rural development issues by Local Newspapers after Nigeria returned from a long spell of military dictatorship to democratic rule in 1999. It also determined the frequency and rate of coverage of the rural development issues by local newspapers using method. The assessment was for a period of six months, January to June, 2009, ten years into the fourth republic, and the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers were content analysed. A sample size of 48 copies of both newspapers were studied, (that is 25% of 192) and the random fraction was $\frac{1}{4}$. The content analysis method was used in collecting data. The data was presented in simple tables of frequency distribution and percentages. An analysis of the data showed that though the Tide covered more rural development issues than the Port Harcourt Telegraph, their total performance towards the coverage of rural development issues was poor. The paper recommended among other things that local newspapers should increase their reportage of rural development issues through their features and editorials.

Keywords: Local, Newspapers, Coverage, Rural, Development, Content Analysis

Introduction

Military regimes in Nigeria came with evident restraints on the media to the extent that the press enjoyed less freedom in executing their social responsibility rights, which was captured by Bittner (1977:348) as "criticising government and institutions" as well as maintaining the stability of society. However, the hopes of the press were raised when General Abdusalami Abubakar ensured the birth of the fourth republic in 1999 after an election that had the candidate of the People's Democratic Party, PDP,

Chief Olusegun Obasanjo become the President of the most populous black nation on planet earth.

Chief Obasanjo was quoted by Frank & Ukpere (2012:286) after his inauguration to have said the days of military coup d'état were gone forever in Nigeria, and that democracy has got no substitute. This speech apparently came to the press as the dawn of a new era of information dissemination, especially on the aspect of holding the government responsible for the development of its citizens, which the press couldn't do effectively because of the highhandedness

and authoritarianism of the military dictators, thereby satisfying the propositions of Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm about the Authoritarian theory of the press. This theory views the press “as an instrument for disseminating the state’s position to the populace, informing the populace what is right and wrong based on the state’s interpretation of issues, and providing official policy statements of the ruling elites” (Bittner, 1977:346). To a large extent during the military regimes in Nigeria, the press played the eye service role, as it is being used to service the objectives of government-“it is a means to an end rather than an instrument of criticism of either means or ends” (Bittner, p. 347). And this is because of fear of prosecution, imprisonment or death. But did the press bounce back to their rightful position as watchdogs of society at the birth of the fourth republic? How much prominence did it ascribe to the reportage of (rural) development and issues that bother on the wellbeing of the citizens of Nigeria? Did it continue with rubbing the backs of the government of the day?

This work looks forward to investigating the efforts of local newspapers in reporting rural development concerns after the country had enjoyed a decade of uninterrupted democratic rule. It will determine the frequency and rate of rural development issues coverage by local newspapers while encouraging local newspapers to execute their watchdog role by reporting events that militate against rural development and taking the coverage of rural development issues as their priority and obligation. It will further serve as a guide to unborn local newspapers to take rural development very seriously, instead of paying attention to reporting government activities for financial benefits.

The study will assess the efforts of local newspapers in reporting rural development issues for a period of six months-January to June of 2009-ten years into the fourth republic. Since there are several local newspapers spread across the country, this paper will limit itself to studying THE TIDE and THE PORT HARCOURT TELEGRAPH newspapers in River State of Nigeria. At the period of study, these newspapers were seasoned and respected local newspaper corporations, with a large readership.

The method of investigation will be content analysis. As a matter of fact, it would not be out of place to mention that the process of coding (placing a unit of analysis into a content category) the content was time consuming; getting coders to code the content as well as analysing the data was tasking.

Significantly, this paper will answer the following questions:

1. How consistent are local newspapers’ coverage of rural development?
2. What is the placement of rural development stories in local newspapers?
3. What is the category of report of rural development by local newspapers?
4. What is the depth of coverage of rural development issues by local newspapers?

These questions, as it were, will serve as a compass to realising the goal of the investigation, which is to prove if the local press has played its role in the polity and not been carried away by distracters to development.

The Background

Rural Development is about improving the living standards of the mass of the low income population residing in the rural areas and making the process of their development self sustaining. It is a necessity and cannot be overemphasised.

Over the years, in Nigeria precisely, there has been a high influx of the people from the rural settlements to the urban areas in search of greener pastures. As a result of this rural-urban migration, the rural communities are rendered unproductive. This is so because the governments and private organizations have concentrated their operations and development programmes on the bigger cities, thereby causing poverty to increase in the rural areas as well as causing congestion in towns and cities.

The truth still remains that for development to be evenly distributed, the rural communities have to enjoy the little that cities are already enjoying.

Over the years, the mass media have struggled to play the role of promoting the yearnings and aspirations of their audiences because of repressive governments. However, it is obligated to serve the people by disseminating information about the happenings just as they unfold. As the fourth estate of the realm, they have no excuse than to stand as watchdogs no matter what.

The press comprises both the print and electronic media. However, this concentrates mainly on the newspaper which is a major force in forming public opinion and affecting national and international efforts towards economic progress and global understanding (Bittner, 1977).

Ndimele and Kasarachi (2006: 17) quotes Sandman et al (1976:260) as saying that the newspaper is an unbound, printed publication issued at regular intervals which presents information in words often supplemented with pictures. This work beams its searchlight on rural development issues and the role of local newspapers facilitating that. But then, before proceeding on this, it would be good to trace and highlight some perspectives of the concept of Development.

How is Development perceived in the Literature?

Let us begin with a coitus analogy. After coitus, the male

gamete swims to the female ovary and fertilizes it; a zygote is formed instantly and "Development" has just begun. There will be a gradual growth of this zygote into a foetus after nine months in normal circumstances, and the baby comes. The fact is, that zygote underwent a metamorphosing process, month by month and attained the advanced stage of being called a baby. Little wonder the Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary defines development as "the gradual growth of something so that it becomes bigger or more advanced, stronger...". Thus, every aspect of human life and even animals need some form of development, improvement and advancement. Life cannot be meaningful if there is no development.

According to Udoidem (1992:1024), Development has its root from the French word "Volper" meaning "to wrap". To develop thus means to "de-wrap" or to unfold gradually, to cause to grow gradually, fuller, larger, stronger, and better. Development, therefore, is a process or a state of being developed. As a follow up to the above definition, Unegbe (2002:95) defines development as "a process of unfolding, evolving or maturing that entails a movement from a lesser stage to greater one." And so to develop in some cases is to increase in dimension, to mature and in some others to out full and perhaps complete. Unegbe further elucidated that development in other words can be described simply as "qualitative increase, an improvement in quality or a process of maturation or advancement in qualities."

Development, defined in terms of quantitative growth and or maturation has many facets and this accounts for discussion of development in various forms and spheres of existence. Hence, we talk of human development, animal development, development of both organic and inorganic beings, provided they are capable of some growth in quality or growth in the intensity of their internal constitutive elements (Unegbe, 2002: 101, 102).

In a long essay I wrote in 2013, while assessing the extent to which the right to development is compatible, and/or at odds with a human rights-based approach to development, I noted that "Development" was "the most mentioned or referred to in international discussion and agenda. It has ignited so many debates since the mid of the 20th century, and it has become a norm that when countries meet, and even within states, 'development' tend to constitute the centre of deliberations. It is either they are deliberating on how to formulate policies or strategies to improving the conditions of states that have been marked as not developed, or there would be no deliberations." Kingsbury (2012: 1) believes "Development" has to do with how developing countries organise themselves and it could be linked to how developing countries make efforts to make the living standards of their citizens improve, by reducing absolute poverty and to build an atmosphere that would

be conducive for social and political gains.

But then, in the developing world, the discourse on development was never prioritised during the days of European colonialism; it rather became prominent after World War II during which many of the third world states had gained independence from their colonisers. Gready and Ensor (2005:15) corroborated this when they said, "the modern era of development emerged as overseas aid in the 1950s, in an environment dominated by independence movements and gradual ending of the colonial period". The implication of this, therefore, was that as of the time development was a serious business in today's developed countries, such attention was never thought of being discussed, let alone implemented in today's developing countries, even when these developed countries were their colonisers, heavily controlling their economies.

Painfully, drawing from what Gready and Ensor said, when development was finally considered by these colonisers, "overseas aid" became the approach, which was at odds with what it should actually be. The fact is, the development of a society cannot be sustained by some kind of foreign aid as that did not yield any result rather it increased dependence of these developing states on their colonisers. The only formula to development is by harnessing the resources of the indigenous people or states to their own benefits. Nevertheless, this could not have been possible at the time as developing countries served the economic interests of their "oppressors", who are only are interested in the economic benefits of their subjects. When the grip of colonialism loosened on developing states, a similar and recurring challenge was experienced by virtually all the developing countries; this was the inability to manage their economic, social and political affairs and resources as a result of deficiencies in their practice of democracy. As the colonisers left with their democratic expertise and the new independent states, with inexperienced and half-ready individuals took over leadership, they found themselves in dire straits. The result of their inexperience led them to being slaves to foreign influences and adopting structures that their colonisers developed (Greer, 1987: 536-37).

Matters went from bad to worse with the developing states, African states in particular, from the 1970-80s, experiencing harsh economic dearth and deceleration to the extent that they were forced to depend on "international development assistance, thereby incurring enormous debts" (Keller 2007: 46). Arising from this, the developed and highly industrialised states resolved to take the responsibility of assisting the poor states to improve their economic, social and political environments (Kingsbury 2012: 1). However, from the 1970s, there was a change of events in the global schema, up until the late 1980s.

The living standard of people deteriorated drastically in

African states and Nigeria was not left out as it found itself in the quagmire of poverty and austerity due to gross mismanagement and corruption, so that even the oil boom in the 1970s could not rub off on the West African state for long. The devastating economic challenges of the country and many developing countries would lead them into debts, and with the intention of lifting them out of this quandary, International Financial Institutions like the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the World Bank recommended Structural Adjustment Policies, which in the late 80s, the General Ibrahim Babangida regime test ran. Though, according to the World Bank (1981), the structural adjustment loan was:

“...designed to improve the level of public savings and the efficiency in the use of public resources; restructure the agricultural planning system and associated development institutions so that an expanded, well designed investment program yielding high returns can be mounted in the sector; reflect the costs of providing public services to the sector; assure that rational prices and world market conditions would guide decisions to invest and produce; restructure public enterprise, management, financing and accountability to ensure efficient market oriented operations; and restructure incentives, to promote efficient export-oriented industrial investments,”

the “structural adjustment did not succeed in adjusting macroeconomic policy and growth outcomes very much... There were some successes, but also big disasters... There is no evidence in any of the statistical exercises that per capita growth improved with increased intensity of structural adjustment lending” (Easterly, 2005:20).

Nigeria, specifically, was a testimony of Easterly’s conclusion on the foreign economic policy which failed to meet local realities. And as a matter of fact, no remedy was reached as the country transited into another military regime led by General Sani Abacha that further maimed the freedom of expression as enshrined in the constitution and notable with the hanging of the Ogoni martyrs. The press was repressed and gagged, so that playing the watchdog role seemed a risky venture.

This was the status quo until the fourth republic was born in 1999. With democracy on board, did the press recover from the prolonged gagging by reporting development issues which it was unable to do effectively during the military era? How was rural development covered in the wake of the fourth republic?

Theories Relevant to Study

In communication studies, it is imperative that whatever findings one intends to carry out is dependent or guided by any of the host of communication theories propounded by communication experts including the normative theories

of the press, media effects and violence theories, uses and gratification among others. For this study, two theories constitute the framework. They include: (i) Social Responsibility Theory (ii) Development Media Theory.

Newspaper, as a mass medium is obligated to play the watchdog role by reporting government activities to the people as well as assess government and governance. But while it does this, it is expected to be reasonable enough to discharge its duties without causing uproar or hostilities in the society. Nigeria as a developing nation requires that media practices should be tailored towards national development and as a matter of obligation be involved in the business of development. It is in this regard that the social responsibility and development media theories become relevant to this paper.

Social Responsibility Theory

The Social responsibility theory proposes that since the press has the right to publish, it should be socially responsible while responding to the wishes and aspirations of the people to create a better society.

Ndimele and Kasarachi (2007: 267, 268) mentions that the formation of the social responsibility theory is based on the recommendations designed by the Hutchins commission which was set up in 1947 to fashion out a workable media system that will balance freedom with maintaining societal cohesion. In other words, the media should be available for the representation of all shades of opinion and interest. Social responsibility theory according to Baran and Davis (1995) emphasises the need for an independent press that scrutinises other social institutions and provides objective, accurate news reports. The theory calls for the media to be responsible for fostering productive and creative “great communities”. It is said that the media should do this by prioritizing cultural pluralism not just elite groups that had dominated national, regional or local cultures in the past. It appealed to unite them in the service of culturalism.

In the same vein, Bittner (1977: 348) says that a press has the right to criticise government and institutions but also has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society. Jide (2008) explains that social responsibility is sometimes used as an omnibus term by various professionals. It is a theoretical underpinning that requires journalists to approach their works with caution.

Mcquail (1992) summarised the basic principles of the social responsibility theory as:

- Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society.
- These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
- The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime

violence or civil disorder or give offence to minority groups.

- The media as a whole should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of their society giving access to various points of views and to right of reply.
- Society and the public have a right to expect high standards of performance, and intervention can be justified for public good.
- Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as employers and the market.

Ndimele and Kasarachi (2007: 268) summarises the recommendations of Hutchins commission in which the mass media are expected to:

- Provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.
- Provide a forum for the exchange of comments and criticism.
- Provide a representative picture of the constituent groups in society.
- Be responsible for the presentation and classification of the goals and values of the society.
- Provide full access to the day's intelligence.

Development Media Theory

While the Press should apply caution in fulfilling the obligations of the people through its reportage, it should think about their development as well. This is what the Development Media Theory entails. This theory opines that the media when reporting should always channel its mind towards achieving national development and that the media should be involved in the business of development as a matter of obligation. It holds that the media in developing nations should be used exclusively for the development of the society especially in the areas of agriculture, health and social mobilization (Ndimele & Kasarachi, 2007:273, 274). In determining the bedrock of this theory, Daramola (2003:74) observes that the press has "the right to communicate" as well as "the need to use communication to achieve social change and better life". In the same vein, Nnadi (2008) posits that the development media theory is a product of media experts of the developing countries whose aim was to use the media to accomplish development, projects, encourage popular and greater participation in physical structures of the state, reduce foreign domination, dependency and opposition to authoritarianism in government. Constructive criticism and healthy opposition are encouraged. On the other hand, cases of distractions and disunity are to be handled with maturity and the attention required.

This is how Mcquail (1987:121) summarises the components of development media theory:

- Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
- Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
- Media should give priority to news and information gathering and dissemination tasks.

Empirical Considerations

Scholarly works had been done on areas other than the focus of this paper, which are on crime and corruption coverage. One work that has indirect bearing to this study is the work of Chang (1981) which is on the "Coverage of unification issue in North and South Korea papers". He content analysed two national newspapers, one from the north and other from the south. The result revealed that both papers from the north did more depth reporting of unification issues than the one from the south.

Nwosu (1984) was quoted in Amadi (2007:34), "A comparative study of the crime content of the editorials of Daily Times and the New Nigerian: A content Analysis". The researcher content analysed all news pertaining to crime as it appeared on the editorial column of the aforementioned newspapers and the result revealed that crime is on the increase. It also showed the existence of imbalance in the coverage of crime. Daily Times did more coverage of crime than the New Nigerian newspaper.

Akujiobu (1988) was also cited by Amadi (2007:36) in "The coverage of corruption news by the Daily Star and Observer". He content analysed all news concerning corruption of Daily Star and Observer for a 180 day period from January 1 to June 31, 1981. It was also found that, the Daily Star devoted more coverage to corruption committed in the private sector while Observer gave more coverage of corruption committed by public servants. The result also showed that the Observer devoted more space to its corruption stories than the Daily Star. In Amadi (2007) "Crime coverage by the mass media: A comparative analysis of the Punch and National Concord", the researcher observed that the Punch attached more importance to criminal happenings than the National Concord, with the fact that the Punch had 19 and 14 crime stories placed on the front and back pages respectively, as against 12 and 7 of the National Concord. Comparatively, the Punch put in more efforts than the National Concord in the coverage of crime and criminal occurrences in Nigeria.

Summarily, Nwosu (1984), Akujiobu (1988) and Amadi (2007) share a common view that Crime and Corruption, at their individual times of existence, were on the high side. They all suggested the need for our mass media organisations to help by informing, interpreting, investigating and suggesting solutions to these social problems.

Methodology

The content analysis method will be used to investigate the degree of prominence local newspapers give to rural development efforts. Content analysis is the examination of the manifest content of communication to discover the patterns existing therein (Ohaja, 2003:14). Such manifest content could be advertisements, news stories, features, opinion articles, editorials, letters-to-the editor, cartoons, photographs and other illustrations in a newspaper or magazine. They are also referred to as units of analysis. Whereas Walizier & Wienir (1978) would say it is any systematic procedure devised to examine the content of record information, Krippendorf (1980) defines it as a research technique for making replicable and valid reference from data to their context. Kerlinger's (1973) description is also very apt as he says it is a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables.

Population

The researcher based his study on two local newspapers. This was done for a period of six months from January to June, 2009. Under this study period, the population of the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers under study was 192 copies. The Tide newspaper publishes five editions every week (Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday), whereas the Port Harcourt Telegraph publishes three editions every week, which means Tide Newspaper publishes 20 editions for a month and for six months, 120 editions. Since Port Harcourt Telegraph publishes thrice in a week, amounting to 12 editions per month, then, in six months the newspaper published 72 editions. That is to say, both newspapers published 192 editions (120+72) within the six months period.

Sampling

The sampling size for this study was 48 copies of the two newspapers (25% of 192); this gave a representative size of the entire population. In selecting the sample, the researcher adopted the simple random sampling method.

The Tide newspaper publishes five editions every week, whereas the Port Harcourt Telegraph publishes thrice a week. One out of the five editions of the Tide and one out of the three editions of the Port Harcourt Telegraph was chosen. Thus, eight copies were gathered from both newspapers for each month. These added up to 48 copies for the six months.

Instruments & Method of Analysis

The researcher used code sheets in the collection of data:

- Number of stories
- Frequency of distribution
- Story placement

- Story type
- Depth of coverage

Data gathered for the study was presented in tables using simple tables of frequency distribution and percentages.

Presentation and Interpretation

Number of Stories

Table 1. Distribution of stories devoted to rural development by the Tide and Port Harcourt Newspapers for January to June 2009

Name of Newspaper	Numbers of stories collected	Total
Tide	65 65.7%	99 stories 100%
Port Harcourt Telegraph	34 34.3%	

The above Table 1, contains just a variable. It shows the number of stories that were studied out of the 192 copies of the newspapers (both Tide Port Harcourt Telegraph) that supposed to be studied. Of course, 40 copies of both newspapers (24 copies to each newspaper) were studied, with no copy missing. These 48 copies were used as samples to the study. From the number of copies studied, a total of 65 stories of rural development efforts were collected for the Tide newspaper and a total of 34 stories were collected for the Port Harcourt Telegraph newspaper, bringing it to 99 stories of rural development gather from both newspapers.

Frequency of Distribution

Research Question 1: How consistent are local newspapers' Coverage of rural development?

The Table 2, illustrates the number of times (frequency) in a month rural development stories appeared on each of the newspapers from January to June 2009. According to the table, in the month of January, stories on rural development appeared 12 times, which is 18.46% of the total number of stories in the Tide newspaper. In February, it was 16 times, 24.62% of its total number. In March 14 times, 21.54% while April, it was 10 times which is 15.38% of the total. In May, stories on rural development appeared 11 times whereas in June, it was two times which is 3.08% of its total number. The total number of stories in the Tide newspaper is 65.

In the Port Harcourt Telegraph, rural development stories appeared eight times in the month of January which is 23.53% of its total number. In February, rural development stories appeared five times, 14.71% of the total, and in March it appeared three times 8.82%. In April, rural development stories appeared five times, 14.71% of the total. The month of May recorded five, which is 15.63%

Table 2. Distribution of the number of times (frequency) rural development stories appeared each month on the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph Newspapers from January to June 2009

Name of Newspaper	Frequency of rural development stories through the six months						Total
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
Tide	12 18.46%	16 24.62%	14 21.54%	10 15.38%	11 16.92%	2 3.08%	N=65 100%
Port Harcourt Telegraph	8 23.53%	5 14.71%	3 8.82%	5 14.71%	5 14.71%	8 23.53%	N=34 100%

Table 3. Distribution of number of rural development stories that appeared on the Front, Back and Inside pages of the Tide and the Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers from January to June

Name of Newspaper	No. of times rural development stories appeared on the:			Total
	Front Page	Back Page	Inside page	
Tide	6 9.23%	3 4.62%	49 75.38%	N = 65 100%
Port Harcourt Telegraph	2 5.88%	2 5.88%	29 85.29%	N = 34 100%

and in June eight times, 23.53% of the total number of rural development stories.

Story Placement

Research Question 2: What is the placement of rural development stories in local newspaper?

The variable of placement was used to determine the degree of prominence rural development stories were given. According to Table 3, The Tide Newspaper devoted 9.23% of its total news coverage to rural development stories during the period under study to front pages, 4.62% of the back pages and 75.38% of the inside pages to rural development efforts.

On the other hand, the Port Harcourt Telegraph gave 5.88% of the total rural development stories to its front pages, 5.88% to its back pages and 85.29% of the total rural development stories to its inside pages.

From Table 3, it is obvious that the two newspapers had most of the development stories in the inside pages.

There is not much difference between the number of rural development stories that appeared on the front pages of the two newspapers. The same thing to the stories that appeared on the back pages of both newspapers. From the data given above one could be free to aver that local newspapers give no prominence to rural development stories. This is true because it is a generally accepted notion that news stories that appear on the front pages and back pages of a newspaper are regarded as very prominent and important. Stories are actually put on the front pages and probably on the back pages to attract attention and any story that attracts attention is a must read story.

Type of Story

Research Question: What is the category of report of rural development efforts by local newspaper?

The variable, Type of Story (category of report), is another very reliable method to determine the degree of prominence ascribed to particular story. From Table 4, the Editorial of the Tide newspaper carried only one rural development

Table 4. Distribution of development by categories in Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph from January to June 2009

Name of Newspaper	No. of rural development stories studied under:			Total
	Editorial	Straight news	Feature story	
Tide	1 1.54%	58 89.23	6 9.23%	N = 65 100%
Port Harcourt Telegraph	0 0%	33 97.06%	1 2.94%	N = 34 100%

issue all through the 24 copies of the Tide newspaper that were studied, i.e. 1.54% of the stories studied. Under the straight news 58 stories were collected. This is about 89.23% of the total news coverage. And of course, six appeared under the feature articles which are 9.23% of the total rural development news coverage for the period under study.

The Port Harcourt Telegraph under the same period of study had no editorial opinions of rural development published. It recorded 33 straight news stories which is 97.06% of its total news coverage while only one rural development feature story (2.94%) was recorded. Under the period, it did not accommodate any opinion article.

From the data, one would note that the two newspapers were carefree about given their opinions, interpretations and suggestions on the issue of rural development through editorials and feature/opinion articles. The Editorials are the institutionalised opinion or stand of the newspaper, organization on a particular issue. And of course Features are interpretative in structure so that they give an opinionated but factual point of the view to the straight reports of news stories. It is unarguable that the suggestions proffered through these media go a long way to influence the policy and decision makers when they gather to make decisions. It, therefore, means that when a particular issue is continually emphasised on the editorial and feature articles of a newspaper, it simply connotes that the issue has been given a good recognition.

It goes to mean that local newspapers with the Tide and the Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers as samples do contribute to the reason the issue of rural development is not taken seriously by the authorities.

Depth of Coverage

Research Question 4: What is the depth of coverage of rural development issues by local newspapers?

Table 5, shows that in the Tide newspaper one page (1.54%) was devoted to rural development stories out of the total number of stories collected (65 stories). Six stories, 9.23% of the total were given ½ page. 22 stories (33.85%) of rural development enjoyed ¼ page and 36 stories (55.38%) were told in 1/8 page.

For the Port Harcourt Telegraph, no story was devoted

to one page. Only one story (2.94%) of the total was told in ½ page. Four rural development stories were told in ¼ page and the remaining 29 stories (85.29%) were found in 1/8 page.

From the distribution above, it is clear that both newspapers do not give much space to rural development stories. The stories were often short and not detailed. It simply shows that the reporters are not interested in digging deep and most especially giving the colour side bar of the stories. It goes to mean that rural development stories are regarded as less important to other stories. This could be seen from Table 5, when 55.38% and 85.29% of rural development stories were given 1/8 page in the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers respectively.

Summary of Findings

This paper was aimed at investigating how local newspapers have performed a decade into the fourth republic; how have they fared in terms of being the real watchdog of the society using the content analysis method. It looked at the amount of attention given to rural development issues as well as determine the frequency and the rate of coverage of rural development issues by local newspapers.

Two very important aspects of newspapers are their roles of investigation and interpretation. Investigation is exploring into a news story to find out what really transpired through good research. Interpretation is the process of giving meaning to a news story to help readers understand the story. These two terminologies mean having knowledge of the consequence of a story and putting down one's suggestions and opinion based on the consequence of the story. So when you think of editorials and feature articles, they are quite different from straight news reports which have to do with only facts. Editorials and feature/opinion articles make use of investigation and interpretation.

Editorials are the opinions of every newspaper based on the facts at their disposal. A feature article is the opinion of an individual based on facts that the individual possesses.

From Table 4 of the research, Type of Story (Category of Report), the Tide newspaper has on its Editorial rural development issues during the period of study. The paper had only one story which is 1.54% of its total rural

Table 5. Distribution of depth of coverage of rural development stories in the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers from January to June 2009

Name of Newspaper	Classification of the length of rural development stories				Total
	1 page	½ page	¼ page	1/8 page	
Tide	1 1.54%	6 9.23	22 33.85%	36 55.38%	N = 65 100%
Port Harcourt Telegraph	0 0%	1 2.94%	4 11.76%	29 85.29%	N = 34 100%

development coverage, and six feature articles, 9.23% of the total rural development stories published.

The Port Harcourt Telegraph, within the period under study did not publish any story under the editorial on rural development. It also published only one feature story which is 2.94% of the total rural development stories published

This fact shows that the Tide though gave less attention to rural development, did better than the Port Harcourt Telegraph, since it published at least one editorial story on rural development.

Features stories are dedicated to interpreting issues when they arise and they end up suggesting ways to solve the situation. Under the period of study, the Tide newspaper was able to publish six feature stories which made up to 9.23% of the total rural development stories. However, it did better than the Port Harcourt Telegraph which published only one feature story, 2.94% of the total stories it published during the period of study. This clearly shows that local newspapers as represented by these two prominent local newspapers have performed poorly on their reports of rural development. For these two respected newspapers to have performed below expectation is an indication that local newspapers do not regard the issues of rural development as relevant enough as to attract their attention even in the post-military era. Yet there are cases of poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure, inequality, rural-urban migration.

It is so obvious from the data presented by the researcher that local newspapers do not provide enough fora to the members of the public for discussion of rural development.

The mass media as the watchdog of the society have the obligation to keep the people informed every now and then on issues surrounding them. One of those issues is rural development. The mass media as a matter of fact, have enormous tasks to influence the decisions of decision and policy makers. The mass media were the tools used by the early nationalists to fight against colonialism and the result was independence in October 1960. Even today, the mass media still have the power to change things through their consistent coverage and reportage of issues that can improve the lives of the people.

As the media do this coverage, the possibility of creating the desired awareness depends on the degree of prominence they ascribe to stories. In the print media, especially the newspaper, the stories could be placed on the front pages, back pages, inside pages and centre page. Editors select stories to be placed on the front pages and after that, the back page and then followed by the inside pages. It is assumed that majority of readers first read the front pages to get the major stories and then the back pages before going to the inside pages. It shows that where the

story is placed in a newspaper determines the degree of prominence given that news story.

Table 3, of this investigation shows that the Tide newspaper devoted six stories, 9.23% of its total news coverage to rural development stories during the period under study to front pages, three stories, 4.62% to the back pages and 49 stories 75.38% to inside pages.

The Port Harcourt Telegraph gave two stories, 5.88% of the total to the front pages, the same percentages to the back pages and 29 stories, 85.29% of the total rural development stories to its inside pages.

Stories that appear on the front pages are seen as more prominent and their prominence is embellished by the way they are being cast which depends on the dexterity of the editor to attract readers with the catchy words he uses on the casting. It is so obvious from the Table that both newspapers gave less attention to rural development stories.

The level of prominence ascribed to news stories will not be complete without taking a look at the space given to them. The space given to a story tells how important the item is. This importance will therefore require an in-depth coverage of the story or issue which furthermore dictates the space the story will take. It is to this fact that the researcher decides to investigate how much prominence local newspapers ascribe to rural development using the 1 page, ½ page, ¼ page and 1/8 page criteria or unit of analysis.

Table 5 shows that the Tide newspaper under the period of study allowed only one story (1.54%) of the total number of stories to take a full page. It was an editorial entitled, "Tackling Pre-Nursery Education in Rivers State". Six stories, 9.23% of the total was given ½ pages. 22 stories (33.85%) of rural development enjoyed ¼ page and 36 stories (55.38%) were told in 1/8 page.

The distribution above simply denotes that both newspapers do not give so much attention to rural development. Their stories do not cover much space thereby leading to less detailed analysis of the news items as well as creating no colour side bar to the story.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the local newspapers represented by the Tide and Port Harcourt Telegraph newspapers have generally done very poorly in covering and reporting rural development efforts. For instance, it is so awkward to find out that only one editorial on rural development was recorded for six months, and it is believed that the mass media as the fourth estate of the realm is supposed to take a strong stand on the issue by checking the government and corporate bodies on their constitutional and social

responsibility to the people. This function of the mass media could be achieved through editorials. There is so much poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas. Rural development stories are supposed to be coming up regularly to voice out the sufferings of the people and overload the authorities on what should be done. This, the local newspapers have failed to do.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, local newspapers no doubt performed below expectation during the period considered for this study, and as a matter of fact did not ascribe any prominence to rural development efforts.

If rural areas have to be developed, going forward, the living standards of those living in the rural areas have to improve. The mass media definitely have a part to play in this since they are the watchdogs of the society.

To this end, the researcher would suggest that:

- Local newspapers which are closer to the people should increase their reportage of rural development issues through their news features and editorials. This means that more space should be devoted to rural development stories for adequate interpretation.
- If perhaps the reason for this low performance was because of the lack of reporters, then, the employment of more reporters to cover the rural areas should be considered.

The research, therefore, believes that if appropriate measures are taken to effect the recommendations stated above, local newspapers, through their coverage, will go a long way to improve the living conditions of the mass of the people living in the rural areas.

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