# A Comparative Study of Nigerian Press' Coverage of Rural News: Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers

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## Abstract
An attempt was made to look into the nature and extent of coverage of rural news by the Daily Trust and Guardian Newspapers, two of Nigeria's popular dailies. Within the theoretical frame work of development media, the quantitative content analytical study design was adopted. Data were generated with the help of two coders from a systematic random sample of 146 editions of the two newspapers. It is the position of this paper that Nigerian press gives little attention to coverage of developmental issues in the rural areas by choosing to report most often crime and other negative issues associated to the rural communities. Also, even where the press considered it worthy to report rural issues, it downplays it and gives it little or no prominence in terms of placement and headline point sizes. Equally, it was discovered that most if not all rural issues are reported in the straight news format, characteristically skeletal to allow for any meaningful analysis/interpretation. And, on the comparative basis of the coverage of rural issues by the two chosen newspapers, the Daily Trust has been found to do more than the Vanguard newspaper. For the realization of meaningful development of rural communities in Nigeria, the press should give attention to issues of development and economic activities in the rural areas, rather than crime and negative happenings. There should be deliberate government policies and sincere implementation of same targeted at rural development. A forum is advocated for where academic researehers, media executives and practicing journalists intermesh and share experiences on how to attain progress.

## Introduction
Rural areas and issues have no doubt attracted little or no attention of media and press practitioners in developing countries like Nigeria when compared with the coverage of urban areas and issues. Most often, rural areas are reported when strange things happen; for instance, community clashes, murder, ritual sacrifice and other vices; even the coverage of the negative happenings are seldom favourable and fair. The space allotted for rural news is usually not as equal or near equal to that made available for urban news, even if the magnitude or worthiness of the said rural issue is far beyond the urban report. Nwankwo (2004), as cited in Uwakwe, (2007) affirms that "despite their vaunted objectivity and self-acclaimed commitment to fairness, it can be argued that the Nigeria mass media have over

the years solely neglected the rural areas...The media report and write from the standpoint of an urban dwellers world" (p 185).

The urban-oriented press has been instituted in Nigeria by the establishment or location of newspaper organizations in urban areas and the erroneous belief by some reporters that rural dwellers are not literate enough to understand the content of news earned in the newspapers. This section of the press therefore characterizes and grades news according to the taste, experiences, lifestyle, desires and idiosyncrasies of urban dwellers. Basil (2007) noted that over ninety-five percent (95%) of the Nigerian mass media, particularly the print media, can be referred to as the urban press, one that shows indifference to the realities of rural dwellings. Current and available population statistics has put rural population in Nigeria at 49% of the total population, up from about 70% in the 1960s (NPC, 2014). Rural populations in most developing countries are faced with similar developmental challenges which include poor agricultural, health, educational infrastructure, environmental disasters, obnoxious cultural beliefs and practices, increased crime rate, mostly caused by acute poverty. These issues were found in literature to be characteristic challenges of rural communities, and of the press coverage of rural areas in Nigeria (Asemah, Anum & Edegoh, 2013; Ifenkwe, 2008; Okwuchukwu, 2004). Because of the seeming neglect of rural communities and issues, as identified above, rural-urban drift becomes widespread, a development that further complicates socio-economic opportunities at the cities and urban centers. There is over dependence on the few, inadequate and dilapidating urban infrastructure due to over population. It is therefore logical to conclude that, for any meaningful development to take place in Nigeria, the rural areas must be adequately and effectively reported.

**Statement of the Problem**

Rural news coverage is indispensable if any meaningful development is to be achieved in rural areas and the nation at large(Chibueze, 2015; Kamar, Lawal, Babangida, & Jahun, 2014; Nwanne, 2013). Rural areas in developing countries and Nigeria in particular, are characterized by poor or no educational, health facilities, peasant agriculture, poor roads network, inadequate or absence of portable drinking water, low commercial activities, limited access to mass media information and other social amenities (John, 2014). For every average Nigerian to survive and function effectively in our modern and developing society, one needs information about one's government and about the economic state of the nation. Rural dwellers are not exception to this, as Asemah (2011, p. 359) asserted that "rural areas must feel the sense of belonging like their urban counterparts. They want their hopes, aspirations, and developmental achievements reflected in Newspapers."

However, there seems to be utter neglect of the rural areas and issues by the Nigerian press, where a rural issue hardly graces the front or back page of dailies; and where it ever appears anywhere, it is most often negative stories of rituals, conflicts/ disputes, rather than positive development(Jackson, 2015; Popoola, 2014). Urban areas issues dominate the pages of newspapers. Based on this backdrop, an effort is made in this study to compare the coverage of rural issues between Daily Trust (Northern based) and Vanguard (Southern based) newspapers, so as to appraise the role Nigerian press play in facilitating development of our societies. Comparing the two newspapers would give us an insight into whether there is any significant difference in the coverage of rural issues and areas between Northern and Southern newspapers, taking the two as source of primary data.

**Researeh Objectives**

This study seeks to appraise the coverage of rural issues and rural areas by the Nigerian press, taking the Daily Trust and the Vanguard newspapers as objects of investigation. However, the researeher aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To compare the extent of coverage of rural issues by the selected newspapers;
2. To identify rural issues that the two newspapers under study cover most frequently;
3. To compare the prominence the selected newspapers give to rural issues.

**Researeh Questions**

1. What is the extent of coverage of rural issues by the two newspapers under study?
2. Which rural issues do the selected newspapers cover most frequently?
3. Do the two newspapers give prominence to reporting rural issues?

**Literature Survey**

Media and press historians believe that newspapering in Nigeria dates back to 1846 when a printing press was established and the first newspaper in 1859 by Christian missionaries, which was more of a newsletter. Real newspaper was not in existence? until 1863 when Robert Campbell founded the Anglo African. From there, the establishment of newspapers started proliferating, prominent among them were Lagos Times and the Gold Coast Advertiser between 1863-1879. The West African Pilot was established by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, in Lagos in 1937, to champion the cause which Asemah (2011, p. 47) identifies: "The West African Pilot earned news on the plights of farmers, the unemployed, market women". Today, we have numerous newspapers in Nigeria that are owned by both individuals and government. The history and development of the Nigerian press has always been interwoven with the nation's political development; from a colony into an independent nation as Omu (1993) would note: "...steeped in the tradition of nationalist and oppositionist politics, many Nigerian mass media tend to concentrate on the activities of government and political leaders."

**Nigerian Press Coverage of Rural Areas and Issues**

In developed and developing societies, the press can be veritable tool for attaining every level of development (Chibueze, 2015; Jackson, 2015; John, 2014; Kamar et al., 2014; Popoola, 2014). The Nigerian press is characterized by their national outlook in the coverage of events, happenings and issues across the country. It must maintain neutrality between rural and urban areas and issues. The press must recognize that urban and rural news are both important for the realization of national development (Jackson, 2015; Popoola, 2014). According to Okunna (2002, p. 294) "... in a third world country like Nigeria, it is correct to say that rural development is synonymous with national development." Nwosu (2005) noted that the national or regional media was expected to give coverage to events in all sections of the society; upper to lower, poor to rich and urban to rural. But this is not always so as many newspapers only allotted few inside pages to reporting rural issues in the surface, without going in-depth (Nwosu, 2005). The absence of critical interpretative features about rural issues suggests the sheer nonchalant attitude to rural realities by the Nigerian press. Nwammuo (2009, as cited in Mezieobi, 1994) corroborated Nwosu when he said the aim to reach out to the grassroots remained the driving force for the rapid expansion of mass media facilities, but ironically, the media have been criticised as being too urbanized in content. Stressing the political economy surrounding the sheer neglect of rural issues in the Nigerian press, Opubor (1985, as cited in Nwammuo, 2009) argued that the content of the mass media is oriented towards the need of the ruling class, just as Udokah (1998) compared the abandonment of rural areas by the press with neglect of developing countries by the international news media (Nwammuo, 2009).

In fact, using the media for attaining development of the entire Nigerian society has been the driving force behind government ownership, but it is unfortunately found that, in their (the press) hierarehy 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 (Omu, 1993). Urban and rural areas in most developing countries are faced with myriads of problems and challenges bordering on development. However, the urban centres would usually have some minimally functional social amenities and infrastructure; rural areas on the other hand are mostly bereft of the essential amenities and infrastructure critical to development. The most common of the problems bedeviling rural communities in Nigeria include inadequate or absence of portable drinking water, poor or no power supply, poor transportation and communication equipments and systems (Nwosu, 2005). Some more stringent rural issues pertain to the poor economic state in which rural dwellers wallow. These include acute poverty, high level of illiteracy, environmental degradation, deplorable health system, etc(Popoola, 2014). Rural development is, on the basis of the above, a multi-dimensional approach to attaining human and material growth for revolutionary attitudinal, socio-economic, political and technological change for betterment of human society (Chibueze, 2015; John, 2014; Nwanne, 2013).

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is set within the framework of the Development media as propounded by Dennis McQuail in 1987. The theory seeks to prescribe the function of the press in developing nations of the world in which Nigeria is one. It holds that the media have a role to play in facilitating the process of development in the developing countries. According to the development media theory, the media are to be used to serve the general good of the nation; the media can do that by functioning as government instruments for achieving economic and political growth, cultural development, national sovereignty, etc. They are seen as agents of development and social construction which should be used to complement government's efforts by carrying out programmes that will lead to positive behavioural change among the people. The development media theory according to Okunna (1999), accepts' that economic development and nation building should take precedence over some freedom of the press and of individuals. 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).Nwanne (2013) has identified that a typical development press should be one that capitalizes on its surveillance and agenda setting roles to prioritize critical development issues in rural communities. Part of the daunting challenges of rural development, dearth of infrastructure has been widely acknowledged.

**Methodology and Researeh Design**

Content analysis has been adopted as the researeh design appropriately applicable in this study for its potentials in systematically analyzing, synthesizing and detecting patterns of recorded communication (Sobowale, 2008), which is the concern of the current study. In order to answer the researeh questions raised at the inception of this study, two Nigerian daily newspapers (Daily Trust, northern based; & the Guardian, Southern based) were purposively selected for coding. Selection was based on the wide circulation both newspapers enjoy in the regions where they originate and the nation at large. 1460 editions of the two newspapers published during the period of July 2012 to June 2014 (24 months). The population as presented comprised of both the daily and weekend editions of the selected newspapers as the problem under study is not characteristically limited to only week days. Using systematic random sampling technique, a sample of 146 (1/10 fraction of the total

population) editions was drawn at sampling interval of three, based on a sapling frame constructed using calendar days. Each edition of the publications was represented by a specific calendar day/date, Sunday to Saturday, through the 24 months study period.

To adequately answer the researeh questions raised in this study, the following units of analysis were identified and incorporated into the coding form: News stories, Feature articles, Editorials, Opinions, and Prominence which was analysed through placement (front, inside and back pages). Items on the front or back pages are more prominent and important than items placed inside pages of the newspapers. The above units were coded based on content categories developed for the study. They include: Developmental issues (agriculture, health care, education), Environmental issues, Cultural issues. Crime/oddities reports. These issues were found in literature to be characteristic of the challenges of rural communities, and of the press coverage of rural areas in Nigeria (Asemah, Anum & Edegoh, 2013; Ifenkwe, 2008: Okwuchukwu, 2004). Thus, the units and contcnt categories were used to design coding sheets for data generation. Two senior colleagues had vetted the instrument before final copies were produced. Coding was done with the help of two researeh assistants who were HNDII students of mass communication (at the time of this researeh), and were trained and tested to ensure inter-coder reliability.

The method of data analysis adopted in this study was quantitative owing to the descriptive nature of the study. Data were presented in simple frequency tables and analysis and interpretation of same was done based on the researeh questions viz:

**RQ1**: What is the extent of coverage of rural issues by the two newspapers under study?
**RQ2**: Which rural issues do the selected newspapers cover most frequently?
**RQ3**: Do the two newspapers give prominence to reporting rural issues?

**Results and Discussion**

The data generated via coding sheets from the sampled newspaper editions; 73 for Daily Trust and 73 for the Vanguard newspapers are presented below:

*TABLE 1: Comparative extent of the coverage of rural issues based oil the four units of analysis from July 2012 to June 2014 (24 months)*

| *Units of Annlysis* | *Daily Trust* | *Vangunrd* | *Total* |
|---|---|---|---|
| News | 108<br>(56.54) | 83<br>(43.45) | 191<br>(99.9%) |
| Feature | 12<br>(50.00) | 12<br>(50.00) | 24<br>(100) |
| Editorial | 1<br>(14.28) | 6<br>(85.71) | 7<br>(99.9%) |
| Opinion | 2<br>(50.00) | 2<br>(50.00) | 4<br>(100) |
| ***Total*** | ***123***<br>***(54.42)*** | ***103***<br>***(45.57)*** | ***226***<br>***(99.9%)*** |

*Source: Field survey 2014: NB: figures in parenthesis represent percentage scores*

The results as depicted in table 1, 226 rural issues were covered out of which the Daily Trust newspaper fared well with 123 (54%) of the total. Both newspapers had covered the same number of feature and opinion articles, while the Vanguard had done comparatively better in carrying 6 (86%) editorials when the Daily Trust had only 1 (14%) editorial about a rural issue. However, out of the four units of analysis considered in this study, straight news reports - most of which were about negative developments - had taken the toll with 119 (85%) issues as against 35 (15%) issues collectively for the other three units. This has thus indicated the sheer lack of interest in the coverage of rural news among the Nigerian, if for whole period of 24 months, only a negligible 226 rural issues were featured, that can never stand the thousands of urban issues in the dailies. This is happening in a developing or third world country where according Okunna (2002), rural development should be the foundation of national development. How does a country expects to attain rural development without proper and adequate information from and about rural issues, activities and people, a role that only the media are capable of playing. Furthermore, a developmental press is one that should always strive to strike a balancc between objective reporting and prioritizing development agenda. This could only be achieved if the press were to provide in-depth analysis of issues and intelligently interpret how these issues would affect the socio-economic and political lives of the people. From the data in table 1, the press1 use of straight news for reporting rural issues is far from the desired goal of rural development.

**Table 3**: Prominence given to rural issues through placement from July 2012 to June 2014 (24 months)

| Placement | Daily trust | Vanguard | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Front page | 25 | 20 | 45 |
| | (55.55) | (44.44) | (100) |
| Inside page | 82 | 63 | 145 |
| | (56.55) | (43.44) | (100) |
| Back page | 1 | - | 1 |
| | (100) | - | (100) |
| Total | 108 | 83 | 191 |

Source: Field survey 2014; NB: figures in parenthesis represent percentage scores

As illustrated on table 3 above, both newspapers did not give much prominence to rural issues as only 45 (24%) of the total 191 news Hems appeared on the front page, whereas only the Daily Trust had only 1 issue on the back page, but both newspapers had collectively repotted a total of 145 (76%) news items inside pages. However, in comparison, the Daily Trust could be seen to have attached more prominence to rural issues than the Vanguard newspaper with 25 (56%) and 20 (44%) issues covered respectively.

The analysis of data as presented in the tables above indicated that rural areas no doubt received little attention in terms of newspaper coverage as rural news was reported only 191 times throughout the 24 months period studied. The Daily Trust featured 108 while Vanguard published S3 rural news. Hence, on the extent of coverage by the Nigerian press of rural news and issues, this study has empirically established that the coverage was far behind expectation of a supposedly developmental press. This finding has verified the claim by Basil (2007) that 95% of the print media in Nigeria can be referred to as urban press; a press that repeatedly if unconsciously, reflect the bias against the rural dwellers in the coverage of rural events. H can be logically deduced from the researeh findings that local productive activities and progressive effort to improving rural communities and life get little or no coverage. It is thus in light of this that Nwanko (2005), as cited in Uwakwc, (2007) affirmed that the perspective of the Nigerian mass media report and write from the stand point of an urban dweller's world. The ills in the rural areas, the difficulties of life, the rural dwellers' burning sense of grievance were seldom seriously conveyed.

The study also found out that top priority was given to negative, bizarre happenings in the rural areas; probably because of the growing culture of emphasizing the oddities among press practitioners in Nigeria. The dailies were more interested in crime and less important issues; issues that would nol bring progress to the people/folks in rural areas and given them a sense of belonging and improving their livelihood. Table 2 above depicted that of the 191 news stories published by both newspapers studied, 117 (61%) of the stones covered by both the Vanguard and Daily Trust were crime related or oddities stories while as little as just 25 (13%) of [he story published were on developmental issues; whereas the environmental issues received a negligible 36 (30%) mention. It was evident from the researeh findings that crime related stories as they are considered as human interest stories, providing support to this findings Itule and Anderson (2007), as cited in Uwakwe, (2010) hold that some reporters concentrated solely on investigating wrong doings in the rural areas; "the deal with reporting adversary relationship that are usually not found in beat reporting or other in-depth coverage" (p. 83).

This study did not only find that the print media gave low coverage to rural issues, it also found out that less prominence was given to rural news based on the data gathered and analyzed. Table 3 above indicated that only 1 item appeared at the back page of both newspapers under study, throughout the 24 months study period; 42 out of the 45 items that appeared on the front page were crime related issues while a whooping 145 of the stories appeared on the inside pages, this is an indication that rural news is considered less important and as such less prominent to newspapers when compared with urban issues. However, on the comparative basis of the prominence each of the two newspapers has attached to reporting rural issues, both have been found to share almost the same disposition as the Daily Trust had 25 (55%) items on the front and one report on the back pages, while the Vanguard had 20 (45%) on the front page and none on the back page. Nevertheless, of the J45 rural issues reported on the inside pages of the newspapers, Daily Trust had 82 (57%) items while Vanguard had 63 (43%). This has further provided evidence that, instead of anchoring the development agenda in all sphere of human life, newspapers in Nigeria are largely cut up in the political economy of the contemporary capitalist-driven interests as discussed in the literature review in this study and elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

Although both newspapers could not be said to have done well in projecting rural issues and people, it is however safe to conclude that the Daily Trust has done relatively better in this regard. It is the position of this study that Nigerian press is biased in their reportage of rural areas. They are urban-oriented and are not doing much in the areas of coverage of rural news. Hence, the reportage of Nigerian press is not grass roots-driven despite that the majority of Nigerians dwell in the rural areas. The press interest in the rural areas is mostly geared towards environmental degradation, reporting bizarre happenings and oddities, which most journalists believe are more news worthy and/or have human interest. This believe has made the press not to attach much prominence to rural issues, even when the magnitude of such issues are beyond the ordinary.

Press attitude to reporting rural areas and issues is denying the rural dwellers the opportunity to be heard, and consequently keeping developmental partners away from the rural communities whom most often depicted in newspapers as only engaging in antisocial and retrogressive practices. When an important segment of the country that engages in agricultural activities which provides for about 40% of the total GDP (Olojede, Adekunle & Samuel, 2013)is so neglected, one wonders what development can be achieved and how such a press could ever be called developmental press.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this and the conclusions reached, the following are recommended for a better rural coverage for development:

1. The sheer neglect of the rural areas by successive governments in Nigeria might have influenced the attitude of the press against rural communities and issues. Government policies are required in terms of rural literacy and education, agricultural advancement, improved primary health-care delivery. Sincere implementation of such policies would help revamp the conditions of the rural communities and set it on the pedestal of progress and development, and the press would then be forced to change its attitude to rural reporting, as a lot of development stories would emanate from these areas, big stories that cannot be ignored. There should be deliberate government policies geared toward developing rural communities in Nigeria;

2. Government has the potential of rewarding press practitioners who may fare well in the coverage of rural areas and issues. Thus, besides being socially responsible to fair, accurate and objective coverage of rural issues, the press would take advantage of the incentives as provided by government to cover Lip for what might be lost for not emphasizing the usual political economy of the contemporary press. Government and other development partners need to do more on involving the press in designing policies such a synergy of effort is created among partners in progress of the whole society.
3. It has been observed that gatekeepers and reporters may sometimes not consciously think of the implication of their gatckccping decisions, which may lead to lopsidedncss in the coverage of an issue. Journalism educational and training institutions, media executives and journalists, should therefore provide a forum where they can share among themselves experiences and researeh findings like this so as future improvement could be guaranteed.
4. The advocates of community journalism have argued that the only solution to urban rural imbalance in media reportage is in establishment of community press(Nwanne, 2013; Yahaya, Sambo & Ibrahim, 2015), but it is obvious that the current economic status and literacy level of rural areas in Nigeria is not one that can sustain neither the establishment nor the maintenance of rural press. Thus, the efforts must be expended firstto improving the rural economy and literacy before any meaningful progress can be recorded in establishing and managing a rural press.

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