Media Agenda Setting for Development in Nigeria: A Study of Select Nigerian Newspapers Coverage of Development Issues

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Abstract

This study is anchored in Dudley Seers' conceptualization of development with a view to examining newspaper coverage of development issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality with the aim of encouraging adequate participation in the process of social change. This study adopted content analysis as its methodology. Agenda Setting was used to underpin the study. The study, which analysed a total of 1,786 stories, revealed among others that Daily Trust, recorded 1,170 (11.7%) of development coverage issues while The Nation had 616 appearances represented by 6.16% of development issues. The study recommended among others that journalists should be trained and retrained to raise interest in development reporting. This can be achieved by establishing development-oriented papers in the country.

Keywords: Media, Agenda-setting, Development Communication, Nigeria

Introduction

For many centuries, mass media have played an important role in setting Nigeria's news agenda. It has been regarded as an important tool in national development process. The study builds on existing efforts aimed at understanding the role media play in setting agenda for development through an act of development communication. Development communication is widely regarded as a model that promotes national development. The examination of this paradigm is firmly placed within the theoretical contexts of development. While literature offers no prescriptive explanations of the concept of development, conceptions of development nonetheless provide a significant insight into the development journalism model. Development oriented communicated messages are planned and systematic use of communication through interpersonal channels, ICT's, audio, visuals, and the mass media to collect and exchange information among those concerned in planning a development initiative and to mobilize people towards a common societal good (Faruk, Okaiyeto, & Musa, 2018).

Leading development communication scholars Melkote and Steeves (2001, p. 33) conceptualise development simply as improving the living conditions of society. Communication for development communication requires a deliberate and active

role by the media in order to press for development. It is geared towards mobilizing the people for national development. Mwaffisi (in Wolf, 2005) also argued that development communication is not reporting about events, but processes, and not reporting about personalities but issues.

The media's influence and agenda-setting roles can be deployed for development. Communication has for many centuries remained an important social tool with which ideas, feelings, or actions of others are influenced through written, verbal, and non-verbal signs. The mass media remains an important instrument for shaping the development process of any country. Development involves changes or advancement in a nation aimed at improving the politics and economy.

This study builds on existing efforts aimed at understanding media's role in setting agenda for development anchoring it on Dudley Seers' conceptualization of development to encourage adequate participation in the process of development through the use of the newspaper as a medium of communication. Overtime, the media has been acknowledged to be a veritable tool for agenda-setting and by extension promoter of societal development. The assertion that mass media have a considerable function in national development is not in doubt giving the claims that attitudes and behaviour that have a direct influence in driving national development policies can be influenced by the media among other institutions.

The print media, like the other media, can be used to educate, enlighten, and mobilize people to a particular issue of national development. Two unique advantages of print media are its permanence and the possibility of information custody and storage for close reading and future use (Soola, 2007). The role of the press in national development policies and public discourse has been critically articulated in Jimada (2006) regarding the agenda-setting functions of the media. He stated that the news media can help raise public awareness about development problems and issues, create public consciousness about development, inform people and help them to make the right choices, influence policy-makers to pay attention, and reflect public opinion.

Jimada (ibid) suggests 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. Consequently,

the interest of this study is to examine how the press is engaging with and making its contribution to development through its news reporting style, particularly in Nigeria, regarding the norms of development news reporting as formulated by scholars over the years.

This study specifically focuses on development indices as conceptualized by Dudley Seers i.e inequality, poverty, and unemployment. Apart from the three development indices outlined by Dudley Seers, the five development issues this study examined are synonymous with some of the sustainable development goals outlined by the United Nations as a benchmark to facilitate world development, calling for a national and international collaborative effort to resolve some of these problems within a time frame.

Statement of Problem

Issues of development border on improving, advancing, or modernizing the living conditions of people especially in the rural areas. Development issues are more than ever topical in all spheres of human endeavour. However, the issue must be well articulated and communicated to enlighten the people concerned about developmental activities and others. There is a strong relationship between the mass media specifically newspapers and development. This belief is entrenched in the agenda-setting role of the mass media in their functions of surveillance, interpretation, linkage, and transmission of values/cultures. Regrettably, developing countries such as Nigeria are faced with so many problems that deter the judicious utilisation of the mass media to promote development. In developed countries of the world, the newspapers strongly setting the agenda for development issues are of serious concern. In Africa, however, media devotes more time and space to politics, household issues, and other issues, especially at the national level.

While the basic role of the media are to educate, inform, and entertain; its contribution to development largely depends on the nature of the content it disseminates. In this respect, therefore, the media are expected to serve as drivers of development. Lending his voice, Locksley (2009) observes that the creation and dissemination of knowledge are key factors in the development process where the media have been instrumental as a means of storing and sharing knowledge. It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to analyse two Nigerian newspapers (*The Nation* and *Daily Trust*). It seeks to find out further whether issues of development are adequately reported in the select newspapers, especially concerning poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

Research Objectives:
This study pursues the following research objectives
1. To determine the most prominent development news story covered by *Daily Trust* and *The Nation* newspapers.
2. To identify development news categories that are most frequently covered in the select newspapers, and if those frequently used categories match development priorities expressed in Dudley Seer's conceptualization of development.

Literature Review

Perspectives on Development and Communication

According to Seers (1969), development means that if the level of poverty, unemployment, and inequality declines over a period, then development can be said to have occurred. Conversely, the standard of living of individuals would have improved socially and economically. According to Seers, true development lies in the elimination of poverty, increase in literacy, and improvement in the health system as opposed to the increase of per capita output. In this essay, we attempt to relate the Nigerian situation with Dudley Seer's theory of development specifically by using his key performance indicators (poverty rate, unemployment, and inequality) for measuring development based on his theory.

It is also observed that development communication is a purposeful communication effort geared towards the realisation of human potential and transformation from a bad situation to a good one. That is why Moemeka (1991) defines development communication as the application of the process of communication to the development process. All development requires some kind of behaviour change on the part of stakeholders. But the observation here is that changing knowledge and attitudes does not necessarily translate into behaviour change.

Among the definitions that specifically emphasised social change is Okunna (2002) who states that development communication is viewed as the entire process of communication with a specific group of people who require development, to achieve the social change that should positively change their lives, thus giving them better living conditions. A similar point was emphasised by Middleton and Wedeneyer (1985), as they described development communication as any series of planned communication activities aimed at individual and social change. In this sense, meaningful communication is about getting information out to particular audiences, listening to their feedback, and responding appropriately. Whether discussing a development project or broader economic reforms, from health to education or rural development to agriculture,

the idea is to build consensus through raising public understanding and generating well-informed dialogue among the people.

Quebral (1975, pp.1-12) views development communication as an art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of human potential. The emphasis in this definition is on both socio-economic change and the ultimate transformation of the individual towards realizing his goals. If the goals of the people are realized, then the underlining objectives of development communication are considered to be achieved. It is a known fact that development communication brings about a planned growth intended to promote human development, reducing, if not eradicating poverty, unemployment, and other social inequalities. It is engaged not only in mere reporting of facts or opinions but also in teaching the people and leading them to action. It imparts and shares ideas to nurture and cultivate the proper attitudes, skills, and values that are needed to develop.

Undoubtedly, there is a symbiotic relationship between development and communication; the latter is a veritable instrument for achieving socio-political and economic developments. Okunna (2002) argues that communication is so closely interconnected with development that there can be no development without communication. The above postulations cannot be faulted because of the role communication play in the development enterprise.

According to Ngugi (1995), the media have the potential for reaching huge audiences. Thus, journalists must assume an educational role. But before a journalist can do that, he needs first and foremost to be informed about the issues. He needs to be knowledgeable and be in a position to understand what development means, how people are affected by government development policies, and assess the merits and demerits of such policies.

A good starting point is to empower people with information-economic information, as well as information about the ordinary. It should be the one that highlights innovation, help the public to monitor and evaluate government programmes. Rather than focusing on the social significance of the news, there is a tendency on the part of the media to personalise and infantilise social processes by fragmenting them, by failing to link policies, processes, and actions, with events, happenings, outcomes, and consequences.

Therefore, there should be monitoring and evaluating of government programmes and policies and follow-up stories to ensure that the public pronouncements of politicians and public officials are translated into public actions. As Haas and Steiner (2006) observed, many news organisations began to experiment with ways to enhance civic commitment and participation in democratic processes and to think of their audiences not as 'consumers' but as 'citizens'.

Situational Analysis of Media Coverage of Development Issues in Nigeria

A study was conducted by Raheemat Adeniran and Jim Kayode (2012) on the media coverage of development issues in Nigeria using the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the title: "Nigerian Newspapers Coverage of the Millennium Development Goals: The Role of the Media." The agenda-setting and development media theories were the theoretical frameworks for the study. Two Nigerian national newspapers, *The Punch* and *The Guardian*, were sampled for the research. The study covered 182 editions of each sampled newspaper published from January 1, 2008, to June 30, 2008. Thus, 364 editions were content-analysed. The findings showed that the Nigerian media did not give equal coverage to the development issues they covered. They reported some issues frequently, while other equally pressing developmental challenges in the country were neglected. Furthermore, they revealed that Nigerian media did not do much to educate, enlighten or motivate the public towards the need to achieve the developmental issues reported. It said the Nigerian press did not adequately report on the economic reform programme, and urged the press to rise to its responsibility. They stressed the need for an enabling environment that would aid effective performance and media contribution to economic development which is crucial for transforming a situation of conflict to coordination. They also advocated qualitative media that guarantee good media management. In terms of the sampling procedure, the study did not give details on the procedure adopted for the research; this in most cases allows room for data manoeuvring by researchers. However, the number of editions analysed was enough data to give any information needed.

Another study by Okorie Nelson and Oyedepo Tunji (2010) with the title: "Newspaper Reportage and its Effect towards Promoting Agricultural Development in Nigeria" examined the coverage of agriculture as an aspect of development between January and December 2007. In the study, three newspapers were selected and content-analysed. These are *The Guardian, Nigerian Tribune,* and *The Punch.* The study used a simple random sampling technique of 8 issues per month for every selected newspaper, a total of 4,220 news items were published by the three newspapers. Out of which 750 news items

were devoted to agriculture representing 17.7%. In addition, the data analysed indicated that the inside page and the back page recorded the least. It was observed that the newspapers devoted the back page to sports except for the *Guardian.* More so, the data analyzed also indicated that 401 news items (53.4%) were unfavourable against 164 (21.8%) news items that were favourable to development and 185 (24.6%) that were neutral. This implies that development issues such as agriculture did not receive sufficient coverage from the Nigerian press.

Ifenkwe (2008) in a study on "Assessment of Newspaper Advocacy for Rural Development and Environmental Education in Nigeria" analysed five national newspapers for twelve months. Using a content analysis method, the study revealed that *The Sun* newspaper with 23.65% was considered the best print medium in reporting environmental and rural development news, among the five news media. This was followed by *The Punch* (22.5%) and *The Champion* (21.3%) newspapers. *The Sun* newspaper also exhibited consistent leadership in promoting activities in the health and population and family planning sub-sectors. Other newspapers in the study are *Thisday* and *The Guardian*, coming fourth and fifth respectively. However, the research has not explained fully how the samples were obtained. If the procedure of selection of a sample has a validity problem, then it does affect the outcome of the research. The implications of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the above studies are that the mass media has a critical role to play in the society, which is not only of informing the citizenry but also mobilizing and spurring them towards the attainment of societal development, notwithstanding the prevailing condition of service.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Agenda Setting Theory. The Agenda Setting theory refers to the operation of the media which results in the prioritisation of issues that arise and engage the attention of society. Thus, the issues focused upon by the media become the issues that the public accepts as important for attention and discussion as captured in the words of McQuail (2005). In other words, it is the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues. The media agenda influences the public agenda not by saying this issue is important in an overt way but by giving more space and time to that issue and by giving it more prominence.

Cohen's (1963) study of foreign policy has been a stimulant of agenda-setting research. Cohen notes that the press may not be successful much of the time in

telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. According to him, the world looks different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) investigation lends great credence to the agenda-setting hypothesis. They did a content analysis of newspapers and television coverage of the 1968 American presidential election. The analysis considered the time and space accorded to various issues and served as a representative of the media agenda.

The main thrust of Agenda Setting theory is that the media may not completely change one's point of view on a particular issue, but it tends to change one's perception to an extent. Severin and Tankard (1997) define agenda-setting as a process of media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind. That is to say in simple terms that the inherent influencing power of media makes it to be seen and applied as an important instrument in developmental policies.

This theory thus provides the basis for examining how the press has been able to set agenda for development issues by assigning relative importance to them through the frequency of reporting, the prominence given to such reports, and the conflict generated in them. The probability of people thinking alike about an issue is very high. Again, it has an organizing and explanatory power because it explains why most people go for one particular piece of information. There is a sizeable impact on the individual reader and the policy outcome. The media, newspaper in particular can draw attention to the players involved in the policy process by publishing a greater volume of stories on an issue that requires attention. Therefore, news coverage is an important source of information that can frame the discussion on issues concerning development.

Based on the agenda-setting, the study seeks to examine the Nigerian newspapers' content to see whether these development issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality are adequately covered. This is particularly important as the media can spur development through the dissemination of development-driven information in the form of news, editorial, and features, among others.

Methodology

The study adopted quantitative content analysis of the news stories of 2 Nigerian newspapers (*Daily Trust* and *The Nation* newspapers) given to their wider circulation, readership, and accessibility to the researchers. The study focused on those stories about development issues especially issues of poverty,

unemployment, and inequality in the newspapers from January 2012-December 2013. A systematic sampling technique was adopted and a sample size of 348 editions of the two newspapers. The content categories for the study are development issues in form of straight news, features, opinions, editorial, comments, pictures, and cartoons while the unit of analysis was entire stories, including pictures published by *Daily Trust* and *The Nation*. The data were presented and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. To follow the rule of mutual exclusivity of coding, where a unit of analysis contains two opposing descriptors, we coded as the present the descriptor with higher presence, and coded as absent the descriptor with lesser presence. This approach is consistent with existing literature in the content study (Lee & Maslog, 2005; Faruk & Pius, 2021). Prominence was measured through the placement, size, and tone of the stories in the two newspapers. The tone of coverage means the slant of the story; that is whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. For this story, a story is considered positive if it affects the lives of the people in a positive form and negative if it affects the lives of the people negatively.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Development News Items Covered in Daily Trust and The Nation Newspapers

Daily Trust	**Unemployment**	**Poverty**	**Inequality**	**The Nation**	**Unemployment**	**Poverty**	**Inequality**
News	15	23	16	News	60	54	54
Feature	35	41	41	Feature	36	36	33
Editorial	48	50	27	Editorial	7	15	23
Cartoon	80	122	32	Cartoon	29	36	19
Research reports	85	65	47	Research reports	31	28	14
Pictures	156	185	102	Pictures	39	50	52
Total	419	486	265	Total	202	219	195

There are 1170 news stories on development issues covered by the *Daily Trust* newspaper during the period under study while The Nation has 616 news stories on development. Therefore, it can be argued without fear of contradiction that *Daily Trust* newspaper covers more development news more than *The Nation* newspapers during the period under review.

Table 2: Placement of Development news in *Daily Trust* and *The Nation* Newspapers

		Front page	Back page	Centre page	Inside page	Total	Full page	Half page	Quarter page	Less than quarter	Total
Daily Trust	Unemployment	19	15	134	349	517	17	72	263	165	517
	Poverty	33	26	130	409	598	29	89	194	286	598
	Inequality	35	14	82	239	370	15	27	160	168	370
The Nation	Unemployment	57	55	57	84	253	29	56	79	89	253
	Poverty	59	53	46	96	254	25	31	112	86	254
	Inequality	30	32	20	144	226	18	20	98	90	226

Table 2 explains the prominence given to development stories by the *Daily Trust* and *The Nation* newspapers in terms of the placement of the stories. Most of the development stories come in less than a quarter page while few come as full-page stories. For placement, most of the stories occupy the inside pages of the newspaper; only a few come as front-page stories. The back page being the editorial page of the paper has the lowest placement of these development stories.

Table 3: Tone of Coverage of Development News

News	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Unemployment	118 (1.88)	242 (2.42)	157 (1.57)	517 (5.17)
Poverty	145 (1.45)	257 (2.57)	196 (1.96)	598 (5.98)
Rural development	117 (1.17)	167 (1.67)	86 (0.86)	370 (3.7)
Unemployment	57 (0.57)	147 (1.47)	49 (0.49)	253 (2.53)
Poverty	53 (0.53)	125 (1.25)	76 (0.76)	254 (2.54)
Rural development	46 (0.46)	148 (1.48)	32 (0.32)	226 (2.26)

Table 3 shows that most of the messages in the two newspapers tend to be negative carrying the highest percentage (9.38 %). Some of the stories tend to be neutral carrying (5.64%) while positive stories take only (5.6 %) for the two papers. In this light, it could be stated that the direction of message flow in both papers tends to be unfavourable during the period under review.

Discussion of findings

It is evident from the research that both *Daily Trust* and *The Nation* newspapers give little attention to the coverage of development news. Also, *Daily Trust* is relatively doing better than *The Nation* newspaper. Also, development news in the two papers tends to occupy the less important pages of the newspaper because most of the stories come in the inside pages of the newspaper.

Findings from the research show low prominence of coverage of development news. This can be seen from tables 2 and 3 where the placement of the stories and tone of coverage were considered. Most of the stories tend to occupy the inside pages of the newspapers. The centre and front pages are normally filled with other stories (mostly politics), pictures, and even advertisements. This implies that development issues are less considered in the gatekeeping process of news. In the words of Dudley Seers cited in Rodney (1979), development is when three fundamental questions: "unemployment, poverty, and inequality" are answered otherwise. So, it is when these have declined that a nation is experiencing development. It seems that the media do not give much attention to covering development issues despite being a watchdog of the society and even when the media does, most of these stories tend to occupy the inside pages of the paper and they come in a quarter or less than a quarter page.

The findings of this study indicate that these two papers, *Daily Trust* and *The Nation,* newspapers did not use their medium to set the agenda for discourse on the development issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Consistent with this view, Faruk and Pius (2021) citing Beder (2002) observe that Agenda setting is essentially an exercise in power and influence and it involves not only getting issues onto an agenda but also being able to determine the way those issues are defined and the solutions that are considered to be suitable and how they are presented in the media discourse are aligned. The two select newspapers have not done enough to set agenda for these issues. The implications of this are that the Nigerian mass media has failed in its responsibility as the watchdog of the society and has failed to mobilise the Nigerian citizens towards the attainment of social change.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that development issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality were given low coverage by the two newspapers during the period under review. It also concluded that *Daily Trust* paid more significant attention to the reportage of the three (3) development issues than *The Nation* newspaper.

This implies that the Nigerian mass media have failed to serve as agents of development through the messages they disseminate, and in order for development to take place, the citizenry must be inspired to participate and be involved in the process. It is recommended, therefore, that the media should give more coverage to development issues such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality the same way education, environment, agriculture, and health are reported. Also, important pages should be allocated to them just like the other development issues. There is also the need for training and retraining of journalists to raise interest in development reporting. This can be achieved by establishing development-oriented papers in the country.

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