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Newspaper Response to National Mobilization Efforts: An Examination of the Impact of a New Public Policy on Media Coverage

by Hilary Chidi Ozoh*

Abstract

In an attempt to redeem the imbalance in the quality of life between the rural and urban areas, Nigeria's Federal Military Government set up the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in February 1986 to provide the much needed infrastructural base for the development of rural areas. In the same vein, the mass media have been urged to join in this battle to uplift the quality of life in the rural areas. This study examined the two years (1984 and 1985) before the setting up of DFRRI, and 1986 and 1987 when the directorate had operated with a view to finding out if there were qualitative and quantitative differences in Nigerian newspapers' coverage of the rural areas between these two periods. Some were noticed while, in the main, there were little qualitative differences between the two periods.

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La réaction des journaux envers les efforts nationaux de mobilisation: une évaluation de l'impact de la nouvelle stratégie publique relative au travail de médias

Résumé

Dans une tentative pour établir un équilibre entre le standing de vie à la campagne et celui en ville, le gouvernement militaire fédéral nigérian a mis sur pied le DFRRI ou directoire chargé de l'alimentation, des routes et de l'infrastructure rurale en février de 1986. Le DFRRI était conçu pour pourvoir une infrastructure de base au développement de la campagne. Dans cette même optique, les masses médias ont appelés à se joindre à la bataille en vue d'améliorer les conditions de vie en milieu rural.

Cette étude passe en revue les deux années, 1984 et 1985, avant le lancement du DFRRI, et la situation après que le directoire ait passé a en revue les différences qualitatives et quantitatives dans la couverture par les journaux nigériens du milieu rural au cours de ces deux périodes. L'on a pu relever des différences quantitatives tandis qu'en général, il y avait très peu de différence qualitative entre les deux périodes.

Introduction

In many developing countries, the plight of the rural areas has always been a focal point for heated discussion. As is often the case in most of these countries, the drive for industrial development has led to gross disparities between the quality of life in urban and rural areas with consequent migration from the latter to the former (Teheranian 1977). The disparities very visibly extend to mass media coverage of the two areas with the result that while information on urban areas explode on us from the mass media, scant attention is paid to the rural areas where, as is the case in Nigeria, over 80 per cent of the population live. Just as the accusation runs that the globally dominant news agencies cover Third World nations in a 'sparse and unrepresentative manner' (Masmudi 1979), so also has the same charge been levelled against Nigerian and other African countries' mass media in their coverage of the rural areas.

In an attempt to redeem the imbalance in the quality of life between the rural and urban areas', Nigeria's Federal military government set up the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in February 1986. The directorate was charged with the responsibility of accelerating the pace of development in the rural areas through conscious provision of development support facilities such as roads, bridges, electricity, food, hospitals, etc.

Similarly the mass media were urged to join the government in this battle to improve the quality of life of our rural dwellers. The directorate has held meetings and even organized seminars for editors and reporters. Several calls have been made on media houses to assign reporters to cover the rural areas specifically. Research and other academic institutions have been co-opted in the effort to offer expert guidance to the media on how to report the rural areas. In fact one of the most pronounced was a workshop on reporting techniques for rural development, agriculture and MAMSER programmes organized by the Centre for Rural Development and Co-operatives of the University of Nigeria, one of such leading institutions in the country.

This study examines the two years, 1984 and 1985, before the setting up of DFRRI, and 1986 and 1987 when the directorate operated, with a view to finding out if there were qualitative and quantitative differences in Nigerian newspaper coverage of the rural areas between these two periods. An attempt is also made to ascertain if there were discernible differences in patterns of coverage as a result of ownership structure.

Factors Affecting Media Coverage

Several investigations into factors affecting media coverage or response to an issue or event have revealed a number of them among which include professional orientation, subjective values, and ownership (McQuail

1969). Few investigations, however, have been focused specifically on the quantity and quality of coverage of an issue by the mass media following the introduction of a policy or programme on it. However, an early investigation into how new policies and programmes affect press coverage is that by Walter Goodman (1968). In a study of *Ebony's* coverage of the civil rights movement in the U.S.A. in the early 1960s, he noted that the magazine's pages deeply reflected the winds of protests that were evident among blacks during the period. Click (1975) in a content analysis of *Ebony* between 1967 and 1974, found a substantial increase in materials dealing with contemporary black concerns in line with similar changes in the American society.

A more recent and relevant study compared *Ebony's* coverage of the civil rights movement two years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the first two years of the operation of the law (Atwater 1982). The study's primary quest was to ascertain if the magazine's contents reflected greater emphasis on civil rights issues after the passage of the law. It found that the coverage of civil rights did increase after the enactment of the act.

Unlike in some Western countries where ownership of the mass media (particularly print) is private, that of Nigeria and most other African countries is neatly divided into government-owned and privately-owned. Research has shown that ownership structure tends to affect the degree of support as well as the pattern of coverage among Nigerian newspapers, particularly with development-oriented issues. Government-owned newspapers tend to be more supportive, cover more favourably, issues and programmes run by the government (Edeani 1989).

Hypotheses

Given the above findings and the central questions of this study, the following hypotheses were developed for testing:

- H1: Nigerian newspapers reported more positive news and features on the rural areas in 1986/87 than in 1984/85.

The central objects of the efforts of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) is the provision of as many infrastructures as possible in the rural areas as well as mobilizing the people therein to engage in meaningful self-development efforts. Consequently, the pace of activities as they relate to rural development will certainly increase. It is assumed that Nigerian newspapers will show more interest and thus devote more attention to this new phenomenon, more especially when they have been specifically requested to help the government to mobilize the people for rural development.

- H2: Government-owned newspapers carried more positive news and features on the rural areas than privately-owned newspapers in the period 1986/87.

Since government-owned mass media are often regarded as an extension of the public relations arm of the government, they are always expected to promote the activities of government, one of which is the DFRRI. Evidence provided by previous research seems to indicate that they would tackle this assignment more vigorously than privately-owned mass media.

- H3: Nigerian newspapers were more in-depth in their news coverage of the rural areas in the period 1986/87 than in 1984/85.
- H4: Nigerian newspapers gave more prominence to rural news in the period 1986/87 than in 1984/85.

The government, through the agency of DFRRI, had organized a number of seminars and workshops for journalists. The dominant aim of all these efforts was to sensitize the journalists to the importance of the effort to improve the quality of life in the rural areas and, hence, gain their co-operation in mobilizing the people and creating a conducive atmosphere for such mobilization efforts. The newspapers are likely to reflect their presumed increased sensitivity to the rural areas in greater depth and prominence given to events happening there or concerning these areas.

Methodology

Since DFRRI is a Federal Government programme, attention was paid to only federally-owned and nationally-spread privately-owned newspapers.

The two Federal Government-owned newspapers *Daily Times*¹ and *New Nigeria* were content-analysed in the study. So also were two private newspapers randomly selected from those that were in operation in 1984 and still remain so. The two papers are *National Concord* and *The Guardian*.

The four newspapers were content analysed over the four-year period, 1984-1987 for news and features relating to rural development. They are all national newspapers in the sense that all of them are read almost all over the country on the same day of publication. Also, since the primary focus of this study was on Federal Government-owned newspapers, and since there were two, it was only consistent to select randomly two 'national' private newspapers so that comparison could be made between the two groups. Moreover, the study was limited only to newspapers because of the obvious difficulties associated with getting 'back-tapes' of broadcast news in developing countries.

A sample of 224 copies of the aforementioned newspapers were randomly selected for this study. Composite and continuous weeks² were selected for each of the years of the study. For the continuous week, a

listing of the weeks in the year was prepared, and then one was randomly picked for the study. Regarding the composite weeks for each day of the week, a listing of all the dates of the year on which it fell was first prepared and then one randomly picked. Two coders scanned the sampled copies for news and features on rural areas, and then coded them into defined categories.

Rural news or a features item was defined as any news or feature that is focused primarily on event(s) or condition in the rural area. Newstory or feature slant was defined in terms of positive, negative and neutral. Positive refers to newstories and features that are primarily focused on achievement, progress or development in the rural areas, while negative was defined as newstories and features that are primarily focused on neglect, under-development and problems in the rural areas. Neutral was operationalized as newstories and features that cannot be classified as either positive or negative. Newstory depth was defined in terms of story length and they were measured in column inches. Newstory prominence was operationalized in terms of story placement and the placement categories were front page, insides, and back page.

To check for inter-coder reliability, two coders coded four different issues of the sample newspapers at different times. The final measure of agreement between them was 0.97.

Results

Total coverage of the rural areas by the four newspapers during the period 1984-1987 was not much. Of the 224 copies analysed, only 149 and nine news and features items, respectively pertained to the rural areas. Absolute coverage or attention appeared to have increased with the introduction of the rural development programme, 101 of the 149 news items were for the period 1986/87, while 48 were for 1984/85. Similarly, while 1986/87 had six of the nine features items, 1984/85 had three.

Test of the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 states that newspapers reported more positive news and features on the rural areas in the period 1986/87 than in 1984/85. Total content score for positive rural news in 1984/85 was 8, which amounted to 16.7 per cent of the total rural news for that period. On the other hand, the period 1986/87 recorded more absolute coverage of positive rural news with 35 news items or 34.7 per cent of their total rural news content. A chi-square test on the data produced a statistically significant result of $\chi^2 = 7.32$, $d.f. = 2$, $P < 0.05$, thus confirming the hypothesis.

However, the positive feature content items for the two periods were not absolutely different. While in 1984/85, the newspapers had only 2

positive features amounting to 67 per cent of its total published feature content items, that for 1986/87 was 3 or 50 per cent of the entire content. *T*-test on the data distribution revealed a statistically insignificant result of $t = 1.73$, $d.f. = 4$, $P < 0.05$. This, of course, implies that the newspapers did not publish more positive features on the rural areas after the introduction of DFRRI. Therefore, the apparent difference in quantity of coverage between the two periods under study is not a true one. Hypothesis one is thus only partially confirmed. In other words, the newspapers published more positive rural news in 1986/87 than in 1984/85. There was no difference in publication of rural features between the two periods.

Table 1a. Crosstabulation of Period and Newstory Slant

Period	Positive	Negative	Neutral
1984/85	8	28	12
1986/87	35	37	29
Total	43	45	41

$$\chi^2 = 7.32, d.f. = 2, P < 0.05$$

Table 1b. Crosstabulation of Period and Feature Quality

Period	Positive	Negative	Neutral
1984/85	2	1	0
1986/87	3	2	1
Total	5	3	1

$$t = 1.73, d.f. = 4, P < 0.05$$

Hypothesis 2 states that government-owned newspapers carried more news and features on the rural areas than privately owned newspapers in the period 1986/87. Positive newstories amounted to 22 (or 40 per cent) of the total rural news published by government-owned newspapers within the period. For the private papers, it was 12 or 28.6 per cent. The result of a chi-square test applied to the data distribution ($\chi^2 = 1.18$, $d.f. = 2$, $P < 0.05$) shows a statistically insignificant relation between ownership and news story quality inspite of the apparent difference in the quantity of the coverage.

As regards the feature content items, there was no statistical difference between the two groups. A *t*-test of the data on ownership and feature slant ($t = 0.07$, $d.f. = 2$, $P < 0.05$) does not lend statistical support to hypothesis 2 as far as features are concerned (Table 2b). In effect, hypothesis 2 which states that government-owned newspapers published more positive news and features on rural areas is not supported.

Table 2a. Crosstabulation of Newstory Slant and Ownership

Ownership	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Govt.-owned	23	20	16
Privately-owned	12	17	13
Total	35	37	29

$$\chi^2 = 1.18, df = 2 \quad P < 0.05$$

Table 2b. Crosstabulation of Feature Slant and Ownership

Ownership	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Govt.-owned	1	1	0
Privately-owned	2	1	1
Total	3	2	1

$$\chi^2 = 0.07, df = 2, \quad P < 0.05$$

Hypothesis 3 is concerned with depth of coverage of news stories during the two periods, and expecting that it will be given more play in 1986/87 than in 1984/85. Seventy-three per cent of news stories in the period 1984/85 were under 10 inches, while 27 per cent were above that length. On the other hand, in 1986/87 83.2 per cent of news stories on rural areas published were between 1 and 10 inches, while 16.8 per cent was beyond that length. When hypothesis 3 was tested for significance using the chi-square test, it was found statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 = 2.31, df = 2, P < 0.05$). Therefore, newspapers were not more indepth in their coverage of the rural areas in 1986/87 than they were in 1984/85.

Table 3. Crosstabulation of Period and News story Depth

Period	1" - 5"	6" - 10"	11" and above
1984/85	9	26	13
1986/87	25	59	17
Total	34	85	30

$$\chi^2 = 2.31, df = 2, P < 0.05$$

Hypothesis 4 states that newspapers gave more prominence to rural news in the period 1986/87 than in 1984/85. Prominence was defined in terms of story placement. In 1984/85, only 10.4% and 18.8% of the published newstories on rural areas appeared in the front and back pages, respectively. For the period 1986/87, the proportion of newstories on rural areas appearing in the front and back pages respectively were 13.9% and 16.8%. The results of a chi-square test applied to these

data ($\chi^2 = 2.38$, $d.f = 2$, $P < 0.05$) does not lend statistical support to the hypothesis. There is, therefore, no difference in prominence given to rural news between the two periods by the newspapers studied.

Table 4. Crosstabulation of Period and Newstory Position

Period	Front Page	Insides	Back Page
1984/85	5	34	9
1986/87	14	70	17
Total	19	104	26

$$\chi^2 = 2.38, d.f = 2, P < 0.05$$

Discussion

The results of this study point to some obvious differences in the coverage of the rural areas by Nigerian newspapers between periods 1984/85 and 1986/87. Nigerian newspapers devoted more space to news stories on the rural areas in 1986/87 than in 1984/85. This finding is consistent with that of Atwater (1982) on the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on *Ebony's* coverage of civil rights issues. The underlying implication of this for national development is that the press in Nigeria is sensitized to important national development issue and areas only when particular programmes and policies have been specifically initiated in that direction. The effort by Nigeria's Federal Government in the form of seminars and symposia through its agencies of DFRRI and MAMSER to sensitize the mass media to key issues of development could not, therefore, have been wasted. The problem of 'development inertia' which seems to be afflicting the press implies that it is not good waiting on it to act in a sustained manner without prior push or motivation.

The results obtained in this study also show that Nigerian journalists have not fully become conscious of the important role feature stories could play in national development. News features and other such dimensions which are more educative, entertaining formats for conveying across development news have not been used remarkably in any large number even with the government's committed emphasis to rural development (three in 1984/85, six in 1986/87). This finding is consistent with that of Christine Ogan (1987) which reported that several content analyses of development news have found that such news is covered more as spot news (about event) than features (about processes).

In spite of the statistically insignificant relation found between ownership and publication of positive rural news and features,

it is pertinent to observe the difference between the two patterns in the absolute coverage they gave to the rural areas. While government-owned newspapers published 59 news content items on the rural areas in 1986/87, the privately-owned papers published 42. On the other hand, the private newspapers published four feature stories on rural areas during the period, while government newspapers published only two. It thus seems that private papers are more attuned to reporting rural news as processes than government-owned papers.

In spite of the increased quantity of coverage of rural areas the new policy on rural development had induced, it is pertinent to examine the situation as it relates to the quality of this coverage. The obvious implication of our findings here is that the new public policy did not lead to increased quantitative coverage of the rural areas. Neither did the newspapers show increases in the depth of their coverage, nor did they give enhanced prominence to the issues in question. The newspapers continued, even after the introduction of DFRRI, with their run-of-the-mill short stories lacking in background. The finding is consistent with that by Ogan (1987) which observed that development news are usually given low priority and not treated in detail.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has only been concerned with Nigerian newspapers' response to a new policy on rural development introduced by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1986. It found marked quantitative difference in newspaper coverage of the rural areas between the period 1984/85 when there was no specifically identifiable programme on rural development, and 1986/87 when DFRRI had been in operation for almost two years, but found no qualitative difference in the coverage. Furthermore, attention was primarily focused on Federal Government-owned and nationally-spread privately-owned papers. State government-owned and other provincial newspapers were not included in the sample. Yet, in spite of these limitations, it is still suggested that further research be done on media responses to other public policies in the hope of ascertaining if there is a general pattern of response by Nigerian newspapers.

Notes

1. Although there is some private shareholding in the *Daily Times*, the Government has controlling shares and decides what happens there including the appointment of key officers.
2. This method of sample selection which was pioneered by Tony Rimms is now widely employed in content analysis.

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