

Reportage of Agricultural News in the Pioneer Newspaper (2004-ad) Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the level of reportage of agricultural news vis-à-vis other news items in The Pioneer, a newspaper publication of the Akwa-Ibom State Government of Nigeria. Content analysis performed on 144 editions of the newspaper published in 2004 AD, revealed that agricultural news was accorded a very low level of reportage, as they ranked 8th and 7th (out of 9 news items) respectively; in terms of prominence and frequency of reportage. Recommendations have been articulated to enable the newspaper play its expected facilitatory role in furtherance of agricultural and rural development of Akwa- Ibom State and Nigeria, in general.

Key Words: Agricultural news; The pioneer newspaper; Reportage; Akwa ibom state; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a desideratum for sustainable development. This is due to its efficient role in the development of human capacity to disseminate, absorb and protect knowledge and exploit it as a powerful tool for social transformation (GOI, 2001; Meera *et al.*, 2004) in the same context Hoffman (2000) asserted that communication and interaction are central to the development process. Efforts to use communication in development aim to find and provide information and generally facilitate dialogue among audiences (Mundy & Sultan, 1999). It also helps to provide platforms to keep in touch with family, prices, weather and modern trends (Ramirez & Quarry, 2004). Essentially, communication is a basic and dynamic process that involves a constant change of ideas and interaction among people for problem solution. In this vein, communication may be described as the process by which an idea is transferred from a source to one or more receivers with the intent to change their behavior in a desired direction.

Agricultural development is indispensable for sustainable rural development. Agriculture is becoming increasingly information sensitive (Padre *et al.*, 2003) hence access to information has become a pre-requisite and a valuable resource for agricultural development. In this context, information is needed to exploit opportunities in time, raise awareness about the potential negative impacts of current choices and to get to know about opportunities of other farmers, in order to search for better opportunities and sustainable solutions (LEISA, 2002) Success in enhancing food production, providing income and job opportunities and ensuring that the agricultural sub-sector performs its manifest functions in furtherance of rural and overall

national development, depend largely on the communication system adopted to implement various agricultural programs.

The mass media is a very important communication outlet and it has been found to play a greater role in the process of positive change than earlier envisaged. Van den Ban and Hawkins (1996) opine that the mass media does this by: setting agenda for important discussion topics, transferring knowledge, forming and changing opinions and changing behavior. The media is also believed to create awareness and diffuse a personal value system favorable to innovations, mobility, achievement and consumption (Mc quail, 1987). For instance, Lenner (1958) and Wesseler and Brinkman (2002) asserted that the media helps to clear the mist of traditionalism, which is inimical to modernity. This it does by inculcating in the traditional man a desire for a better alternative for himself and his family; by widening his horizon and broadening his vision of what is possible and attainable.

Despite the pervasive role of the electronic media in agricultural communication and based on the recommendation of the British Cabinet Office (2002) on the necessity for a rethink of the ways in which advice and information are made available to farmers, it becomes pertinent to focus on the print media as an important source of agro-information to farmers (Padre *et al.*, 2003). The newspaper is an enduring and very popular print media organ. This is because it can be read and re-read at convenience, thus allowing for a fuller and better understanding of mass contents. Newspapers also help the process of information exchange between those searching for information and also support new behaviors (Albrecht *et al.*, 1989; Lightfoot, 2003). In essence, the newspaper is a potent and fundamental tool for technology transfer in aid of

agricultural and rural development. Thus, Aina (1990) with reference to USA and Canada and Fett (1972) with reference to Brazil; attributed successes recorded in agricultural production, to farmer's ready access to agro-information, as contained in newspapers. This is however not the case in Nigeria, where there is a concurrence of research results (Agumagu, 1988; Olowu, 1990; Mundy & Sultan, 1999) on the very poor level of reportage of agro and rural developments news by the newspapers, despite the importance of agriculture to the Nigerian economy. Reasons adduced for the poor performance of the print media in this regard include; financial and space constraints, illiteracy and language barrier, lack of participation, poor revenue generating potential, personal values and the belief of the editor, advertisers and media owners (Ozowa, 1995; Van den Ban & Hawkins, 1996; Mundy & Sultan, 1999; Nwachukwu, 2005).

These problems notwithstanding, the newspaper has a very important role to play in Akwa Ibom State, most especially as the only functional Television Station and the only Radio Station in the State are haphazard in operation. Many agricultural and rural development programmes are on-going in the State, including: the State sponsored Integrated Farmers Scheme; Life Enhancement Program and activities of the Bureau of Co-operatives. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in the state, is also very functional and the Agricultural Development Program in the state (AKADEP) is in dire need of a veritable mass mediated organ to enable it disseminate current information on its numerous development activities. It is also important to take cognizance of the increasing number of literate but non-agro trained farmers, consisting of un-employed graduates, retired civil servants and military personnel; now engaged in various forms and scale of agricultural enterprises. This last group of individuals, mainly urban based, will definitely rely on the newspaper for much needed agro-information.

With this background, it becomes pertinent to ascertain the level of reportage of agricultural news by The Pioneer newspaper, which is the main newspaper published in, and concentrating on Akwa Ibom, as its catchment and news coverage area. This will enable recommendations to be made on how the print media can be assisted to play more relevant roles in the process of agricultural development in Akwa Ibom State in particular and the wider Nigerian society in general. As a consequence, this study will attempt to ascertain the prominence attached to agricultural news and the frequency of insertion of agro-related news items, vis-à-vis other news items, in The Pioneer newspaper. The study will also identify the socio-economic characteristics of journalists in the employ of the newspaper.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Pioneer newspaper, which was established in

1998 is owned by the Akwa Ibom State Government. The paper is published three times a week, by a work force of 146 employees consisting of 32 journalists and 114 ancillary staff. Akwa Ibom State is an agrarian society where more than 70% of the population is involved in one form of agricultural enterprise or the other, and in various scales of operation. The prevalent farming system is mixed cropping with cassava, maize and oil palm as dominant crops. Poverty is rife and un-employment is high in the State, and this has necessitated the entry of a core of literate, well-trained personnel into agricultural production.

The universe for the study was all the 32 journalists employed by The Pioneer. Data were however collected from 26 journalists that were readily available. Also, the entire 144 editions of The Pioneer published between January and December 2001, were utilized for the study. Data were generated through interviews and structured questionnaires. Instrument validation was by content validity, while a test-retest reliability test yielded a coefficient of 0.77. Content analysis was also conducted on all the 144 editions of The Pioneer, sampled for the study.

Determination of prominence and frequency of agricultural news vis-a-vis other news items. With regard to prominence, nine categories of news items (including agricultural news) were identified (Table II & III). A content analysis was thereafter conducted on the sampled newspapers by considering the front-page and back-page news, as most prominent; centre-spread news, were regarded as "less prominent"; while news items on other pages were categorized as "not prominent". Respective attitudinal scores of "5", "3" and "1" were also awarded for each category. Total scores were thereafter computed for each news category, after which a mean score was obtained and ranks assigned.

For frequency of agro-related news items, content analysis was also conducted on the sampled newspaper editions and this was by simple frequency counts of number of occurrences for different news categories (9 in number). Percentage scores were thereafter computed and ranks assigned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of respondents' characteristics. Data (Table I) revealed that majority (73.08%) of the journalists were male, with a predominant (96.15%) age range of between 21 - 40 years. All respondents had acquired a tertiary level of education, 50% of whom were graduates of the liberal arts, while only 7.69% graduated in agricultural related courses.

In the same vein, more than 46%, respondents were revealed to cover political news items, compared to only 7.69% (2 reporters), who cover and report on agro-related news. As per professional status, editorial staff and reporters predominated, more than 65% of whom had accumulated a 6 - 10 year tenure in the profession. It was also indicated that

Table I. Distribution of respondents' characteristics

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| Sex | Male | 19 | 73.08 |
| | Female | 7 | 26.92 |
| Age | Less than 21 | 0 | 0 |
| | 21-40 | 25 | 96.15 |
| | 41-60 | 1 | 3.85 |
| | >60 | 0 | 0 |
| Marital status | Single | 11 | 42.31 |
| | Married | 15 | 57.69 |
| News Beat | Agriculture | 2 | 7.69 |
| | Politics | 12 | 46.15 |
| | Bus/tourism | 5 | 19.23 |
| | Sports | 1 | 3.85 |
| | Health | 1 | 3.85 |
| | None of the above | 5 | 19.23 |
| Professional status | Editorial | 12 | 46.15 |
| | Communist | 3 | 11.54 |
| | Reporters | 11 | 42.31 |
| Educational | SSCE/GCE | 0 | 0 |
| Achievements | OND | 10 | 38.46 |
| | HND/First Degree | 16 | 61.54 |
| Area of specialization | Agric science | 2 | 7.69 |
| | Pure science | 2 | 7.69 |
| | Social science | 9 | 34.62 |
| | Arts | 13 | 50.00 |
| Tenure in Profession | Below 5 years | 6 | 23.08 |
| | 6-10 Yrs | 17 | 65.38 |
| | 11-15 Yrs | 2 | 7.69 |
| | > 16 Yrs | 1 | 3.85 |
| Home background | Rural community | 17 | 65.38 |
| | Urban community | 9 | 34.62 |
| Nature of appointment | Permanent | 17 | 65.38 |
| | Provisional | 6 | 23.08 |
| | Temporary | 3 | 11.54 |
| | Part-time | 0 | 0 |

more than 65%, respondents were assured of job security through the permanent nature of appointment held, while a similar percentage of respondents, possess rural backgrounds and orientation, which is favorable for the reportage of agro-related items. It may be inferred from the findings above that editorial policy does not favor reportage of agro-related news in The Pioneer. This is confirmed by the assignment of only two correspondents to cover agro-related news items, compared to 12 (46.15%) for political news; even though the rural background orientation of most correspondents predispose them to effectively cover and

report on rural and agro-related news items.

Prominence and frequency of agro-related news vis-a-vis other news item. Table II depicts political news, with a mean computed value of 4.46 and a rank of 1, as the most prominent category of news in The Pioneer stable; while tourism news with a mean score of 2.15 was shown, as the least prominent news item. Agricultural news was revealed as the 8th prominent category of news item with a mean score of 3.00.

The situation is not quite different for the frequency of reportage of agricultural news, as Table III indicates an 8.12% level of frequency, and a rank of 7, for agricultural news. Political news still ranks first (1) with a percentage score of 22.14; while tourism news still ranks last (9th) with a 0.78% frequency of reportage.

These findings are a very sad commentary on the very low priority accorded to agriculture as news worthy item, and a disconcerting confirmation of Olowu's (1990) assertion that Nigerian newspaper editors place more importance on (perceived) revenue generating content than agricultural subject matter. This assertion is also confirmed by a related finding (Makanjuola, 2002) that inadequate financial gain is a disincentive to publication of agro-related news items. Other reasons for this trend may be related to inadequate lineage correspondents in rural areas as well as lack of newspaper organisational hierarchy's interest in agro-related news items.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The newspaper industry is expected to play a facilitatory role in the enhancement and sustenance of agro and rural development programs. Empirical evidence however reveals that the newspaper industry is not playing its expected roles. With reference to Akwa Ibom State, The Pioneer newspaper has been revealed to confer a low level of priority on the reportage of agro-related news items, and this may not be un-connected with the perception of agriculture and related items, by newspaper management, as incapable of generating revenue. Arising from these findings, the following recommendations seem pertinent:

Table II. Distribution of content analysis on prominence given to agricultural news vis-a-vis other items

| Variables | Not prominent | Less prominent | Most prominent | Total | Mean | Rank |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------|------|------|
| Business news | 5 (19.23)* | 1 (3.85) | 20 (76.92) | 26 (100) | 4.15 | 4 |
| Agric news | 6 (23.8) | 14 (53.85) | 6 (23.08) | 26 (100) | 3.00 | 8 |
| Sports news | 3 (11.54) | 2 (7.69) | 21 (80.77) | 26 (100) | 4.38 | 2 |
| Education news | 1 (3.85) | 8 (30.77) | 17 (65.38) | 26 (100) | 4.23 | 3 |
| Economics news | 2 (7.69) | 8 (30.77) | 16 (61.54) | 26 (100) | 4.08 | 5 |
| Entertainment news | 8 (30.77) | 3 (11.54) | 15 (57.69) | 26 (100) | 3.54 | 6 |
| Health news | 5 (19.23) | 10 (38.46) | 11 (42.31) | 26 (100) | 3.46 | 7 |
| Political news | 2 (7.69) | 3 (11.54) | 21 (80.77) | 26 (100) | 4.46 | 1 |
| Tourism news | 15 (57.69) | 7 (26.92) | 4 (15.39) | 26 (100) | 2.15 | 9 |

• (Percentage in parentheses)

Table III. Distribution of content analysis on frequency of agricultural news and advertisement vis-a-vis other news items in the pioneer newspaper

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage | Rank |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|------|
| Business news | 85 | 9.45 | 6 |
| Agric news | 73 | 8.12 | 7 |
| Sports news | 180 | 20.02 | 2 |
| Education news | 86 | 9.56 | 5 |
| Economics news | 140 | 15.57 | 3 |
| Entertainment news | 37 | 4.12 | 8 |
| Health news | 92 | 10.23 | 4 |
| Political news | 199 | 22.14 | 1 |
| Tourism news | 7 | 0.78 | 9 |

- (1) Non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies involved in agro-production should endeavor to sponsor the publication of agro-related news items, as a form of social service, in The Pioneer. Efforts should also be geared towards encouraging and rewarding journalists with a flair for reportage of agro-related news items.
- (2) Newspaper reporters need to be exposed to in-service training sessions.
- (3) The Development Support and Communication Component (DSCC) of the AKADEP should endeavor to send newsworthy agro-related items to The Pioneer, for publication.
- (4) The State Government, on its own part, should endeavor to subsidize the running cost of The Pioneer so as to enable it carry newsworthy items, but which are of no immediate financial benefit to the newspaper.
- (5) Newspaper editors and agricultural news reporters should realize that farmers are most interested in hearing about the experiences of other farmers, rather than the formulaic recommendation of experts. This re-orientation of agricultural news reporting is expected to engender farmers' interest in the print media and has the ultimate effect of increasing the revenue base of The Pioneer newspaper.

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