

## Handling of Rural Development Issues by Select Dependent and Independent Dailies in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

The researchers investigated the handling of development issues by select dependent and independent newspapers in Akwa Ibom State. The select newspapers were: *Pioneer* and *Daily News*. The study objectives were, among others, to examine the quantity of coverage of rural development issues by the newspapers from February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2022; ascertain the dominant formats adopted in reporting the issues; examine the level of prominence accorded the issues; and examine the extent to which ownership factor influence coverage of rural development issues. The researchers adopted content analysis research design. Using simple sampling technique, 109 editions were drawn from the 270 editions. Major findings were that while development issues were underreported in both newspapers, news and features were the dominant formats used by the newspapers in reporting rural development issues. It was recommended, among other things, that the newspapers should give adequate attention to development news.

**Keywords:** Rural Development, Dependent Newspaper, Development News, Independent Newspaper, Format

### Introduction

The deployment of the traditional and other mass media to propagate the development efforts of governments, groups and individuals, is not a new development, especially in developing countries. It is, among other things, in partial fulfilment of the postulation that the mass media is seen as agents of development. While these development issues could be seen in many areas of life; development efforts in rural areas have become important contents of the mass media. This is because, observably, it is rural communities that require more development than other areas in the society.

As it is the case with broadcast media, the general use of the print media in rural community development is in line with the principles of Development Journalism theory, which, apart from covering broadcast and print media, specifically emphasises the need for provision of information on contemporary developments in such areas and sensitisation as well as involvement of groups of rural people in general developments efforts.

In Akwa Ibom State, there are many locally produced newspapers from which *Pioneer* and *Daily News* are selected for this study. The selection of these two dailies is not without reasons. For instance, these newspapers do not only cover politics, economy, entertainment and such other popular areas of life. They are, therefore, expected to cover many other spheres of life, including abiding by the principles of development journalism. The selection of these two news tabloids is apt as ownership, role and philosophical balance is

struck. For instance, while the former is government-owned; the latter is independent in ownership. Similarly, the two newspapers share general duties and the philosophy of covering local developmental efforts mainly, with a view to informing, educating and entertaining their readers where necessary. Also, since the two newspapers are circulated mainly in the State; it follows that they are exposed to providing this study with the necessary data for reliable results. These, when put together, justify the inevitability of this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Again the location and oftentimes, localisation of newspapers, is usually informed by the need for provision of information, education and entertainment on a wide range of issues to those who are actually in need of certain information. Therefore, the provision of information, education and entertainment on development issues, especially in Akwa Ibom State remains the major functions of the select newspapers. As would be expected, the establishment of *Pioneer* and *Daily News* in the State was in partial fulfillment of this provision as they are expected to emulate their counterparts nationwide to carry contents on a wide range of issues, including development issues in rural areas of the State. But of concern to this study is the extent to which these newspapers handle rural development issues to satisfy the curiosity of their readers who may always be looking up to them for the latest in inventions, discoveries and innovations that would make their life better. It was this concern that gave rise to the question: how do *Pioneer* and *Daily News* handle rural development issues in their efforts to meet the information needs of their readers?

### **Objectives of the Problem**

The objectives were to:

1. Examine the quantity of coverage of rural development issues by *The Pioneer* and *Daily News* from February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2022.
2. Ascertain the dominant format adopted in their handling of the issues.
3. Examine the level of prominence accorded rural development issues.
4. Know the extent to which ownership factors influence coverage.

### **Literature Review**

Many authors have taken their individual and collective looks at the newspapers as a concept. To Udoh (2014), a newspaper is a publication containing news, information, and advertising, usually printed out on low-cost paper called newsprint. To him, the content may be of general or special interest often published daily or weekly. The newspaper, according to Moemeka (2016), can be read and re-read at convenience; thus, allowing for fuller and better understanding of message contents. It can be stored away for future use, thus, making for the presentation of materials that are considered important for future reference. Outside conceptual issues, Udoakah (2016) sees development news to be an account of a development event or stride reported in the mass media. Similarly, he sees it as the account of development problems or challenges that a society is confronted with.

What this means is that the coverage and reportage of development news not only involves the dissemination of information; but also the effort to pursue development goals or to direct efforts towards solving development problems through mass communication. In their contributions, Anaeto & Anaeto (2010) define development news reporting as the deliberate effort by the mass media to seek solutions to the development problems of a society. This effort is enhanced by the resolve of the mass media to contribute their quota to make the world a better place. The mass media according to Fair & Shah (2017), rather than being purveyors of progress and a means of showcasing development efforts, can in fact, just be one more cause of underdevelopment in that they may serve not only to reinforce but also to perpetuate existing structures of inequality.

According to (Udoh (2014), general use of print media in development is to provide information, to sensitise, reach and stabilise groups of rural people. To him, the print medium has the advantage of being relatively cheap, as well as better to memorise because of the fact that written words or pictures stick better in mind. However, in stressing the need for effective communication, Moemeka (2016) says that effective communication with the rural population would be impossible “unless the communicator enters into cultural context of the people and understands at first hand their economic and social peculiarities.

Among other information needed by rural dwellers is information for increased productivity and income growth, information for social participation and political involvement. For effective rural development, according to Fakunle (2018), the rural dwellers therefore need to be provided with information on health service; agricultural activities; education; political programmes; and infrastructure development.

Popoola (2017) conducted a study to ascertain the extent of select newspapers’ reportage of rural development, realising the implications which rural development has for national development. The study examined the reportage of rural development issues in Nigeria within a period of two years. It investigated the extent of social responsibility displayed by selected newspapers in reporting the issues. The newspapers selected for the study included *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *the Daily Sun*. The researcher adopted a combined use of content analysis and what it termed ‘dialectical hermeneutics style of textual analysis.’ It was, among other things, discovered that agricultural development stories and infrastructure development stories were the most reported by the select newspapers.

In their study, Nikade, Christie & Ochonogor (2019) examined the place of the mass media in accelerating the development of the society. To this effect, investigation was conducted into the coverage of development news reports by journalists in Bayelsa State. The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges of development news reporting in urban and rural areas of Bayelsa State. The specific objectives of the study were, among others, to: evaluate patterns of development news reporting of urban and rural areas by journalists in Bayelsa State; and to find out the challenges of reporting development news events in urban and rural areas of Bayelsa State. The study was anchored on the Agenda-Setting theory. While the investigation used the descriptive survey research design to undertake a census of the 320 registered journalists in Bayelsa State; findings showed that

development news reports in the rural areas were significantly neglected in favour of the urban areas. It was also found out that ownership interest was the leading cause of neglect of development news reports in the urban and rural areas of Bayelsa State.

Similarly, Eshett (2019) found out in his study that, steeped in the tradition of nationalist and oppositionist politics, many Nigerian mass media tend to concentrate on the activities of government and political leaders and since the national scene is the main focus of political activity, the mass media published in state capitals have tended to assume the stature of national institutions catering to a national audience. His paper, on approaches to effective rural reportage by Nigerian mass media sought to proffer the practical strategies available to Nigerian mass media in reporting the rural areas. The paper was predicated on the fact that there is imbalance information flow in terms of rural and urban reportage by Nigerian mass media. Anchored on the development media theory and the need to use the mass media to bring about the development of the rural areas, the paper outlines some practical strategies and comes to the conclusion that Nigerian mass media can cover the rural areas effectively, and that the adoption of these approaches will go a long way in changing the current level of rural reportage.

Theoretically, this study was anchored on agenda setting theory propounded by McCombs & Shaw in 1972. The agenda-setting theory conceptualises the role the mass media play in shaping and influencing the opinion of members of their audiences especially on issues of public interest. The condition that accounts for this situation is based on the fact that regardless of the extent of development or civilisation a society has attained; the fact remains that the mass media serve as people's window to the world. Similarly, the study adopted the Development Media Theory. This theory, which was propounded by Dennis McQuail canvasses media support for an existing government and its efforts to bring about socio-economic development. It argues that until a nation is well established and its economic development well underway, media must be supportive rather than critical of government, but assist them in implementing their policies. As the name implies, the theory relates to media in third world nations. It favours journalism that seeks out good news, requires that bad news stories are treated with caution, for such stories could be economically damaging to a nation.

The media are seen to fulfil particular social and political duties; hence, media freedom while desirable, should be subordinated to national integration, socio-economic modernisation, promotion of literacy and cultural creativity. Development media theory seeks to accentuate the positive; it nurtures the autonomy of the developing nations and gives special emphasis to indigenous cultures. It is both a theory of state support and one of resistance to the norms of competing nations and competing theories of media.

### **Methodology**

This study was content analysed 270 copies of *Pioneer* and *Daily News* published from February 1, 2021 through January 31, 2022. The two newspapers were selected based on their closeness to rural development issues. *Pioneer* - a government owned newspaper outlet, published three times a week making a total of 162 publications from February 1, 2021 through January 31, 2022. *Daily News* is a privately owned newspaper published two

times a week making a total of 108 copies of publication from February 1, 2021 through January 31, 2022. The sample size of this study is 109 editions (44 editions of *Daily News* and 65 editions of *Pioneer*) drawn randomly from the population (270 editions) of the study. A sample chosen randomly is meant to be an unbiased representation of the total population. Items on rural development in *Pioneer* and *Daily News* were organised into the content categories, namely: wealth creation; economic and political Inclusion; poverty alleviation; infrastructure; consolidation/expansion; job creation; crime eradication/peace maintenance. The units of analysis were news, editorials, features, opinions, advertorials, letters and photographs.

**Presentation of Data and Analysis**

**Table 1: Quantity of Rural Development News handled by *Pioneer* and *Daily News***

Quantity of Coverage	Pioneer		Daily News	
	n	%	n	%
Wealth creation	29	(2.5)	31	(3.7)
Economic/political inclusion	43	(3.7)	52	(6.2)
Infrastructure	71	(6.2)	66	(7.9)
consolidation/expansion				
Poverty alleviation	47	(4.1)	84	(10)
Crime eradication/peace maintenance	28	(2.4)	19	(2.3)
Job creation	39	(3.4)	43	(5.1)
Other issues	891	(77.6)	543	(64.8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1, 148</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>838</b>	<b>(100)</b>

The Table shows that the two newspapers gave less than 50% attention, in terms of quantity, to rural development issues within the period under review.

**Table 2: Dominant Format adopted by *Pioneer* and *Daily News***

Genres	Pioneer		Daily News		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
News reports	161	(62.6)	154	(52.2)	315	(57.1)
Features	54	(21)	71	(24.1)	125	(22.6)
Editorials/Opinions	33	(12.8)	47	(15.9)	80	(14.5)
Columns	9	(3.5)	16	(5.4)	25	(4.5)
Cartoons	-	(0)	7	(2.4)	7	(1.3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>(100)</b>

Table 2 shows that *Pioneer* and *Daily News* presented development issues in news format mainly (n=315, 57.1%).

**Table 3: The Level of Prominence accorded Rural Development News**

Prominence	Daily News		Pioneer		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Front page	79	26.8	52	20.2	131	23.7
Back page	27	9.2	6	2.3	33	6
Centre spread	11	3.7	14	5.4	25	4.5
Other pages	178	60.3	185	72	363	65.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 shows that *Pioneer* and *Daily News* gave no prominence to development news. Most of the development issues are found on the inside pages (n=363, 65.8%).

**Table 4: The influence of Ownership Factor on handling of Rural Development Issues**

Issues	Daily News		Pioneer		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Development news	295	35.2	257	22.4	552	27.8
Other news	543	64.8	891	7.6	1434	72.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>838</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1148</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4 shows that the privately owned *Daily News* published more development news (n=295, 35.2%) than *Pioneer*, which is a government owned newspaper (n=257, 22.4%).

### Discussion of Findings

The main focus of this study was to examine the handling of rural development issues by *Daily News* and *Pioneer*. From table 1, *Daily News* and *Pioneer* published a total of 1, 986 issues. Specifically, *Pioneer* published 257 (22.4%) and *Daily News* had 295 (35.2%) of rural development issues in the 109 editions drawn as sample. However, *Daily News* published 543 (64.8%) and *Pioneer* published 891 (77.6%) of non-development issues. This clearly shows that the rural development issues were underreported by the two local newspapers. This is in agreement with the findings of Popoola (2017) which argues that Nigerian newspapers underreport development related issues especially to the segregation of rural communities.

The discouraging representation of development issues by the two newspapers is a marginal departure from the provisions of the development media theory which argues that mass media must accept and carry out positive development tasks that are in line with the policies formulated by the political leadership. Also, the findings showed that the two media outfits did not live up to the agenda setting function of the media. In recognition of the role of the mass media in building public frame, Health (2005) sums that the level of attention accorded an issue by the mass media mass media makes that issue to assume some degree of relevance in the conjecture of their audiences.

From the analysis in table 2, the two newspapers presented more of development issues as a news reports (*Pioneer*, n=161, 62.6%) and *Daily News* n=154, 52.2%). This simply suggests that most of the development issues that were published by *Pioneer* and *Daily News* were development programmes of government, groups and individuals.

Feature stories were the next most adopted format for publication of rural development news. Within this period, *Pioneer* presented no development issue in cartoon format, *Daily News* presented only n=7, 2.4% development item in cartoon format. Consequent upon these findings, this study observes that *Pioneer* and *Daily News* were not so committed to promoting development issues in the society. Particularly, the findings revealed that they were overly episodic and less expository in their coverage of development related programmes. This, however, affirms one of the major assumptions of the agenda setting theory which states that for the media to succeed in setting media agenda, such issue must be carefully represented in all media forms. Although news report is important in media agenda, effective agenda are set and built through the use of all media genres including opinions, photographs, editorials, columns, cartoons and news analysis.

From Table 3, majority of development issues carried by the newspapers were buried in the inside pages (*Pioneer*: n=185, 72%) and *Daily News*: n=178, 60.3%). Minority of development issues were either promoted in the front page (n=131, 23.7%), Back page (n=33, 6%) or centre spread (n=25, 4.5%) of the two newspapers. The findings revealed that low prominence was accorded rural development issues by *Pioneer* and *Daily News*. At this point, it is pertinent to restate the ongoing argument among media scholars that the importance and prominence of a news story is determined by the location and placement of the stories in any publication. In supportive of this assertion, Udoh (2014) states that any news outlet reflects in various ways its order of priorities and the relative importance it places on the items. In a newspaper, for example, issues considered to be important are likely to be emphasised by placement, headline size and amount of coverage. The front page typically presents the top item on each day's agenda. Important issues stand a good chance of manifesting in other ways as well: editorial comments, discussion by columnists, and letters to the editor.

Table 4 shows that *Daily News* published a total of n=295, 35.2% of rural development news, while *Pioneer* published n=257, 22.4% rural development news. Although, it is clear that the two newspapers underreported rural development, contrary to the demand of the development media philosophy, *Daily News*, which is a privately owned newspaper in Akwa Ibom State, covered more rural development stories than *Pioneer*, a government owned newspaper. Ownership is a major factor in media business and has a way of deciding what goes to the public. One of the cardinal assumptions of development Journalism is that the media have a responsibility of giving priorities to the coverage of those areas that touch on the live of the people. In other words, the content is usually development-driven and centred on socio-economic and political lives of the people. The study has proved that *Pioneer*, a government owned newspaper, which is supposed to be more development minded rather gave priority to non-development issues.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It could be concluded that development news handling by *Pioneer* and *Daily News* both of which are based in the largely rural Akwa Ibom State is not encouraging and this is more worrisome because even the State government-owned *Pioneer* newspaper, which is supposed to be down-to-earth in the promotion and analysis of sundry development efforts,

was not doing well in its editorial and associated handling of rural development news and its ancillaries within the period under review. Based on the above conclusion, therefore, the two newspapers should, as a part of their social responsibility, improve o their attitude towards development news in their largely rural areas of coverage and give such stories and events better prominence and attention.

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