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Nigerian Press Rural Health Coverage: A Content Analysis Of The Punch And The Guardian Newspapers (October To December, 2012)

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Abstract:

The growth of a nation is anchored mainly on the wellbeing of its human resources. In most developing countries like Nigeria, there are marked differences between urban and rural communities. Where urban communities have amenities like good roads, schools, electricity, good health care facilities and human resources to dispense the care, rural communities are marked with lack of most of these basic amenities, abject poverty and neglect. Issues concerning rural areas in Nigeria one of which health is of paramount importance are not often presented in the media particularly the newspaper. Since the well being of every member of the society is paramount to the growth and development of the nation irrespective of their place of residence, it is of great importance that the media give a constant and objective report of what is happening in both the urban and rural areas. It is on this premise that this study titled “Nigerian press rural health coverage: a content analysis of the Punch and Guardian newspaper” was embarked upon by the researchers. Revelations from this study are that newspapers did not give much coverage to rural health reports in terms of prominence, space and genre and rural health reports were far less than urban health reports. It is recommended therefore that the press should pay more attention to rural health issues and lobby the government for better policies that will benefit the rural dwellers.

Key words: Rural areas, urban areas, rural health, health coverage.

1.Introduction

Health is of paramount importance to the society, and whether directly or indirectly, it is fundamental to the economic growth and development of any society. Acknowledging the sentiment that health is a crucial issue, policies are usually put in place in most counties to monitor health service delivery that will ensure the general well-being of the citizenry. The Nigerian government in its health policy for instance, acknowledged the fact that health is wealth and the general well being of Nigerians has a great impact on national development. For this reason, in line with the Millennium Development Goals which the United Nation, in conjunction with about 23 other international organizations and agencies and about one hundred and eighty nine countries (189) including Nigeria adopted at the turn of the new millennium in the year 2000, the major targets of the Nigerian national health policy include reduction by 2/3 and three quarter respectfully in under-5 mortality and maternal mortality by 2015, and to have halted by 2015 the spread of HIV/AIDS, and begin the reverse of incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

The Nigerian nation and its press have come a long way. Despite this phenomenal growth however, there is still a continuous neglect of the rural areas. Rural areas continue to receive less and frequently unbalanced attention from the Nigerian press. Udoaka (1998) observes that:

While international media concentrates their reports on the economic nerve centres around the world, punctuating them with out-of- context negative reports about developing countries, African journalist concentrates their reports on urban centres of their countries and government officials. Most of the reports about rural areas are on crimes, communal clashes, disasters and so on.

Probably anchored on the fact that more than 70% of the populace in Nigeria live in the rural areas, annually, government- federal and state always earmark millions of naira for rural development. This notwithstanding, the state of most rural communities in the country is still deplorable and one begins to wonder where all the allocations have gone. It is expected that the press which in principle should be the watchdog of the society will show more interest in what has been happening in these rural areas and the funds that have been

allocated for their development. The rural areas are only featured in the news when key government functionaries visit the place to commission or launch community projects. Affirming this stance, Udoaka (1998) citing Boafo says:

Disproportionately more space and airtime are given by the press and broadcast media to events concerning the political leadership and other socioeconomic elite than news and information about events in the rural communities.

It is glaring that since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in year 2000, Nigeria is still very far from accomplishing many of the goals that borders on health. The big question then is, how can there be development in the real sense of the word if, more than 70% of the total populace who are rural dwellers and issues concerning them particularly health is not given adequate attention especially by the press? The role of the mass media is pertinent as they constitute the medium through which large number of people can be informed about developmental issues, of which health issues are paramount. Adequate rural development will in no small measures to aid national development. The vital functions of national integration, mobilization, socioeconomic modernization, cultural creativity among others are the responsibility of the press in developing nations like Nigeria. More rural issues coverage and follow-ups to stories should be given attention and interest by the Nigerian press. "Information and knowledge is power. Therefore a lack of information or information imbalance marks a grave difference" (Strampical, 2007). It is in this premise that the present study is on Nigerian press rural health coverage: a content analysis of the Punch and Guardian newspaper" was embarked upon by the researchers.

2.Statement Of The Problem

The wealth of a nation lies in the strength and well being of its human population because health is wealth. Based on the fact that the development of a nation is anchored primarily on the strength and well being of its human resources irrespective of their place of residence, it is imperative that there is equal health attention as well as equal media coverage of issues pertaining to health in both urban and rural communities. The Nigerian press has a responsibility of bringing the needs especially that of health of the rural people to public notice. It seems the press in Nigeria has adopted the western ideology where the urban society is the focus of attention and activities in these areas considered more newsworthy whereas; rural areas and activities or issues concerning these areas are relegated to the background. This lack of information has constituted a major problem. If indeed a nation would develop, it is imperative that there should be information balance in both rural and urban health reportage by the Nigerian press because in reality, more than 70% of the populace in Nigeria according to Mabogunje (1980) resides in the rural areas.

3.Objectives Of The Study

In view of the above, the main objectives of this study is to find out:

- Coverage in terms of prominence, space and genre, given to rural health in the Punch and Guardian newspapers and,
- The ratio of rural health coverage compared to that of urban in the selected newspapers.

4.Research Questions

- How much coverage in terms of prominence, space and genre is given to rural health in Punch and Guardian newspapers?
- What is the ratio of rural health coverage compared to that of urban in the selected newspapers?

5.Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the intellectual frame of the social responsibility theory. Social responsibility is an ethical ideology anchored on the notion that an individual, group, or organization, has an obligation to act in a way that will benefit the society at large. The emphasis of this theory is based on the notion that there is no "absolute" freedom of the press as advocated for by the libertarians, rather, the freedom advocated for must be attached with concomitant obligations to the masses. The chief duty of the media within this theory according to Folarin (1998) is to raise conflict to the plain of discussion. In the case of the media, it is their responsibility to perform information dissemination duties that will positively or directly advance social goals in the society. This theory urges the journalist to put the media to a "constructive role of social development" hence the role of the press under this theory is; assigned, contracted and self imposed.

The 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has a clearly designated role for the media press. Section 21 directs that "the media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people". Braced with this law, it is the responsibility of the press to give right and balanced information not only on urban but also rural issues of which health is of paramount importance so that, a wholesome national development can be guaranteed. The mass media serve as a major source of information and enlightenment for their audience. Any change in our society, real or imaginary therefore could be traced to the influence of the mass media.

5.1.Rural News Reporting

To achieve rural development there is need to carry both urban and rural dwellers along. Previous research has it that the bulk of the nation (Nigeria) resides in the rural area this means that for any meaningful development to take place, the rural dwellers must not be left out of the development process. The mass media in their reportage must adequately cover not only the urban areas but also the rural areas and keep the rural dwellers adequately informed on happenings that affect for them. What this means is that there should be a balance in the information flow patterns for adequate and meaningful development to take place.

Rural news is news written and reported from a rural perspective. It is news gathered and packaged mainly in the rural areas as opposed to news written for the urban dwellers (Nwosu, 1988).

According to Nwosu (1988 p.38) rural news is “news that informs, educates urbanites or urban elites and governments about the needs, aspirations, problems, successes, joys, values and general life of the rural dwellers, and informs and educates rural dwellers about government policies, activities, programmes, philosophies, materials, ideas and such other factors they might need for survival, progress or improved living standards.”

Nwosu (1988 p.38) further adds that The approach to rural development is a consciously-formulated, planned, and executed systematic and multi-sectoral programme, aimed at integrating the marginalized people of the rural areas into the mainstream of better living, as opposed to mere existence or subsistence.

Rural health news is not only important for the rural dwellers to know what is happening and how to tackle them but also for the reports to have an impact on health care policy in the country. Rural health reports are also important in that the reports can generate new insights into other problems. One of the best ways to address rural health and health care challenges is to promote dialogue among policy makers both at the national, state and local levels and also to involve the rural dwellers. This means that there should be more in-depth coverage of rural health issues by the Nigerian media and the print media in particular.

6. Research Design And Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is the content analysis. According to Berelson (1971), ‘content analysis is a research technique for the systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.’ Similar to this, Kelinger (1986), sees content analysis as ‘a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables’. Ajala (1996) defines it as ‘a systematic, objective and quantitative procedure to examine the contents of recorded information’.

This method was adopted in this study to aid practical analysis of the quantity and quality of the coverage given to rural health in Nigeria by the two selected newspapers. It provided the framework for classifying, measuring, drawing inferences and qualifying what were mainly quantitative data on the pages of the selected newspapers.

7. Population Of The Study And Sample Size

The universe of contents for analysis comprised of the daily editions of The Punch and The Guardian newspapers in 2012. In all, the editions for The Punch are 92 while The Guardian totalled 92. All editions, that is starting from Monday, October 1st to Monday, December 31st were picked and analysed. A total of 184 editions of newspapers was considered for the study.

8. Units Of Analysis And Categories Of Content

The major content categories for this study are: Prominence, Genre, Space, and Frequency.

For genre, the categories of content include news, features and editorial. For space, length of coverage given to rural health would stories by each of the selected newspapers for every selected edition was examined. Considerations here are based on the number of paragraphs, columns, pages (full, half or over one page) allotted to the stories covered. This in no small measure helped in determining the depth of coverage given to rural health issues by the selected newspapers.

Prominence refers to the position or placement of rural health issues in the selected newspapers. Categories used to determine this are: front page, back page, inside pages, dedicated health page, centre page. Frequency looked at the number of stories published within the period of study.

The units of analysis in this study are Straight News; Features; and Editorials

Editorials: these are newspaper articles or opinion columns that are strongly worded on rural health issues. It seeks to persuade or enlighten represents the opinion of its publishers about a recent occurrence or issue. It also presents argument of particular concern or importance which in this case is rural health.

Straight news: these are reports about rural health written in conventional news format, that is, the inverted pyramid form. This reportage focuses on rural health without personal comments, analysis or opinion of the writer.

Feature: this is an in-depth analysis of issues in a more relaxed tone than that of straight news item.

The units of analysis- straight news, features and editorial- were chosen because they are journalistic writings which originate from the media house.

9. Research Instrument

To facilitate data gathering, a coding which is a leave form of a codebook sheet was designed and duplicated. This sheet contained description of the variables considered in the study. The sheets made provisions for the editions, genre, space and prominence allotted to the rural health news that were used.

10. Analysis And Discussion Of Findings

10.1.RQ 1: How Much Coverage In Terms Of Prominence, Space And Genre Is Given To Rural Health In The Punch And The Guardian Newspapers?

Newspaper	Frequency (Percent)
THE PUNCH	128 (61%)
THE GUARDIAN	82 (39%)
Total	210 (100.0%)

Table 1: Total No Of Stories Per Newspaper

This table shows the frequency of health reports within the period of study. It revealed that The Punch newspaper had 128 (61%) reports while The Guardian newspaper had 82 (39%) reports. A total of 210 health stories were analyzed for this report out of the 184 editions of newspapers studied.

	THE GUARDIAN	THE PUNCH	COMBINED TOTAL
	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
FRONT PAGE	1 (1.22%)	-	1 (0.47%)
OTHER FRONT PAGE	-	-	-
OP-ED PAGE	1 (1.22%)	-	1 (0.47%)
INSIDE PAGES	17(20.7%)	60 (46.9%)	77 (36.7%)
DEDICATED HEALTH PAGE	63 (76.8%)	68 (53.1%)	131 (62.4%)
BACK PAGE	-	-	-
Total	82 (100.0%)	128 (100.0%)	210 (100.0%)

Table 2: Table Showing The Prominence/Position Of Reports In The Newspapers

The analysis shows the position of stories and prominence given to stories in the selected newspapers. Only 1 (1.22%) story was given front page prominence in The Guardian. Majority of stories- 131 (62.4%) analysed were on the dedicated health page that is the page solely devoted to health stories in the selected papers. From the table and analysis, it means that the newspapers under study did not give enough prominence to health reports by way of placing them on pages of importance to attract readers' attention. This means health stories were under reported in the newspapers.

The African Woman and Child Feature Service (AWCFS) report on "Media Coverage of HIV/AIDS and Health Issues in Africa: Needs Assessment in Kenya" confirms that "there is an undue emphasis on political stories and this cause less coverage of development messages like health. Some media houses might claim too many health reports might not attract readers when there are other important reports with more conflict and controversies like politics and the economy."

	THE GUARDIAN	THE PUNCH	COMBINED TOTAL
	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
FULL PAGE	5(6.1%)	13 (10.2%)	18 (8.6%)
HALF PAGE	12(14.6%)	7(5.5%)	19 (9.04%)
COMBINED TWO PAGES	-	-	-
LESS THAN HALF PAGE	57 (69.5%)	99(77.3%)	156 (74.3%)
MORE THAN HALF PAGE	6 (7.3%)	8(9.8%)	14 (6.67%)
OVER FULL PAGE	2 (2.44%)	1 (0.8%)	3 (1.43%)
TOTAL	82 (100%)	128 (100%)	210 (100%)

Table 3: Table Showing Space Allocated To Stories

From the table, it can be said that both newspapers did not give enough space to health stories. 18 (8.6%) stories were given full page, 3 (1.43%) stories were reported in more than one page while 156 (74.3%) reports were reported in less than half pages. This means that the space allocated health stories were small.

	Punch	Guardian	Total
Straight News story	64(50%)	45(54.9%)	109(52%)
Editorial	1 (0.78%)	1 (1.22%)	2 (0.95%)
Feature	63(49.2%)	36 (44%)	99(47.1%)
TOTAL	128(100%)	82(100%)	210 (100%)

Table 4: Table Showing Genre Of Reports

This table shows that the most reported type of story on health was straight news with 109(52%). Features were 99(47.1%) while editorial was featured 2 times with 0.95%. This analysis shows that the reports were not given elaborate analysis but were reported just as the event happened without in-depth analysis. Editorials were too few and it would have been an avenue for the media

organisations to take a stand on certain issues and ultimately propel the government and policy makers to take a decision and come up with favourable policies.

From the tables above, it means that not much coverage was given to rural health reports. Urban health reports took the lead.

As for the sources of the reports, the newspapers depended more on research findings by researchers and experts, some reports were got through on the spot coverage. Others were through press conferences, statements, and also news agencies. This is in accordance with the findings of the African Woman and Child Feature Services (AWCFS) report. The document asserts that most reports covered by the media were covered through statements made from research findings by medical experts and researchers and also seminars or sensitisation workshops organised by organisations. The main speakers in most of the reports were also medical experts and researchers. It means the reporters gave credence to the information they got from research findings and medical experts more than other sources.

10.2.RQ 2: What Is The Ratio Of Rural Health Coverage Compared To That Of Urban In The Selected Newspapers?

Type of report/ Newspaper	THE PUNCH	THE GUARDIAN	
Urban	126 (97.7%)	73 (89%)	199 (94.7%)
Rural	2 (2.3%)	9 (11%)	11 (5.2%)
Total	128 (100%)	82 (100%)	210 (100%)

Table 5: Ratio Of Rural To Urban

The table shows the ratio of rural to urban health reports in the selected newspapers. It reveals that rural based reports were under-reported while most of the reports were urban-based. This might be attributed to the fact that these papers are based in urban areas and have majority of their audiences as urban dwellers. This shows that there is information imbalance and the media is not doing enough to reach out to rural dwellers especially to meet their health concerns.

11. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that the newspapers did not give prominence to the selected health issues. Stories were not given front page prominence which is the first page any reader sees in the newspaper. Also, the spaces allotted to stories were small as shown in table 3. The most reported genre was straight news showing that the reports were not given an in-depth analysis. The findings further reveal that rural health was given less coverage than the urban health report.

12. Recommendations

The media are termed voice of the voiceless and this implied that they are to give voice to the marginalised rural dwellers which constitute the larger population. Through their reports they can be advocates of the people and lobby the government for good health policies for the rural dwellers. The selected newspapers and other media organisations should give more coverage to health especially as it concerns the rural dwellers and also give it prominence. To lend credence to their reports, health report should also continue to liaise with health workers and professionals to help them understand the issues so they can report it in simple language to the people especially the rural people. The reports should also be packaged in a way that will attract and appeal to the readers.

Some of the limitations of this research are that it was confined to two papers and a 3-month period. Further research can be done for a longer period and a wider array of papers or also on the electronic media.

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