

Media Reportage of Agricultural Development in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural development news is believed to have a positive impact on the lives of all or majority of the people that are exposed to it. This belief has generated so many controversies that led scholars to seriously canvass for its use. However, agricultural development news reportage in the media is given a paucity of reports as compared to sensational and political news stories. Agricultural development stories even when they are reported are not critically reported and analyzed for the betterment of the target audience to which the news is intended. Specific kinds of information which satisfy the needs and wants of the people can contribute to the economic and social progress of a country. The need to examine media reportage on agricultural development, therefore, stimulates the interest of this chapter. The media being the watchdog of the society as described by Lasswell had the responsibility of informing the citizens on issues of national interest and agricultural development from time to time. Within this context, information is needed to exploit opportunities in time and raise the awareness level about the potential opportunities for agriculture in Africa.

Keyword: Africa, agriculture, development, information, and media.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident in the existing literature that from the evolution of human history, economic development traces its origin to agriculture. All over the world, the development of an enduring economy goes hand in hand with agricultural development. Agriculture is considered a catalyst for the overall development of any nation. Ogbalubi and Wokocha (2013) observed that agriculture is a critical sector that drives the economic development and industrialization of any developing nation, and also holds the ace for reducing unemployment. As such, its development is important for ensuring food and nutritional security, income, and employment generation and for stimulating industrialization and the overall economic development of the country.

Within this context, development economists have always assigned the agricultural sector a central place in the development process of any nation. Reddy et al (2009) maintain that even the developed countries have taken agriculture seriously and through this sector, such countries have achieved industrial development. Agriculture is becoming information sensitive and access to it had become a prerequisite and a valuable resource for agricultural development. In this context, information is needed to exploit opportunities in time, raise the awareness level about the potential of agriculture in Africa. Scholars like Okoro (2011) observed that success in enhancing food production, providing income and job opportunities, and ensuring that the agricultural sector performs its manifest functions in furtherance of rural and overall national development, depends largely on the communication system adopted to implement various agricultural programs (Fiebelkorn, et al., 2022).

Therefore, the mass media being the watchdog of the society as described by Harold Lasswell had the capacity and the responsibility of informing the citizens on issues of national interest and government

economic policies from time to time. Considering the elements that are used by the media in determining what news is, government economic and national development policies attract media as self-governing and checking functions. Okoro (2011) remarks that government policies gain prominence when the news media adequately publicized them. This indicates that without the media, the majority of economic and development policies of government make little or no impact. Considering how agriculture plays an important role in the provision of food, employment, industrial raw materials, income, and foreign exchange for national development; the media is a veritable tool that can be used to foster agricultural development in Africa, and beyond.

Empirical evidence by researchers and educators has tested the understanding of farmers and other clients on the delivery of educational information (Oelviani et al., 2022). The outcomes of their studies indicate that different media and methods are used by educators to communicate new and emerging technologies to farmers. In this 21st century, access to education, information, knowledge, and communication plays a vital role in individual and social life as well as human development and inclination towards growth. As a pre-requisite of knowledge, information, recognition, and awareness are among the most efficient factors in reaching human development (WSIS, 2005). Ekoja (2003) has mentioned that the information sources in different aspects of agriculture for the farmers are radio and television, daily farm newspapers, agriculture exhibitions, practical education, and consultation services. Jenkins (2003) affirmed mass media platforms are the most important channels for getting information about major issues in agriculture.

The basic functions of the mass media are not to inform, educate, and entertain only but they also serve as veritable channels for a wide range of development campaigns. Okunna in Kuchi (2018) aligns with the description that the mass media, especially the radio and television encourage and ginger people to achieve developmental goals of the society by promoting such goals in the media and stimulating the aspiration and activities of people towards achieving such goals. Over the years, radio is acknowledged as the most important medium for communicating with the rural populations of developing countries (FAO, 2001). However media reportage on agricultural issues in Africa is not given much prominence and this brings the study to the issue at stake, 'media reportage of agricultural development in Africa'.

THE CONTEXT

Developing countries have made deliberate efforts at ensuring self-sufficiency in food production. In spite of the arguments surrounding the successes or failures recorded, a look at the annual budgets of most of these countries reveals that in terms of priority, the agriculture sector takes the lion's share along with education and health (Jubril 2000). A local adage says "when the problem of hunger is solved, then poverty problem to a large extent is resolved. This shows the importance of agriculture as a development issue. Putting food on the table for every man is a major mission of any developing country. A country that cannot feed itself is not worthy to be one. This, therefore, justifies why countries like China, India, the United States, Brazil, Russia, among others developed substantial efforts in agriculture (Rust et al., 2022).

Sustainable development is the process of maximising the use of available resources in order to ensure the long-term well-being of present and future beneficiaries (Asemah, 2011). It is continuous progress that aims for and maintains a constructive state of living in society as preserved by social institutions and systems. However, sustainable development entails economic sustainability, social sustainability, and cultural sustainability. Some of the features of development activity do no damage to natural resources and social system; physical development activity ensures a net positive impact on natural resources; and should not damage the natural resources necessary to sustain it (Oso, 2002). Besides, Nwabueze (2009) views sustainable development as a change process that benefits today's people while

protecting the opportunity of tomorrow's people to develop themselves. This simply means that development in contemporary society should not only be long lasting but the change process should be such that tomorrow's generations can also improve, agriculture is key in the overall process of that improvement because man survives first before he can effectively mobilize resources.

According to Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (2017), agricultural communication has become a branch of reporting that is held in high regard in developed nations, including developing Asian countries today. Statistics point out that India is said to have over 250 journals devoted to agricultural communication. What this means is that agricultural reporting in the 21st century has gone beyond reporting farm news to a rural agricultural audience. It has become a global issue that attracts the attention of donors of all nations.

In aggregate, the global food situation is very favourable today. Already more food is produced than needed to feed the entire population. At the global level, agricultural production has grown much faster than the population in recent decades, leading to a steady increase in per-capita agricultural output (including food) since the late 1970s. This has been achieved primarily with the technological revolution that has increased modern inputs which translated into a globally entwined endeavour in the 21st century.

Today, agriculture reporting is regarded as an activity of double-fold news gathering, writing, and dissemination of farm news across the globe, not only to the rural agricultural audience alone. Thus, the media must come to understand this new trend in their reportage. Agricultural reporting may not be as popular as political, crime, sports, court, or other popular branches of reporting in some parts of African countries. However, it holds a lot of prospects in view of the increasing awareness of the pertinence of agriculture in the existence, survival, and development of the nation. This is so because agricultural reporting today is featured in magazines, newspapers, newsstands, social media, and other media outlets which show that the field is changing as agricultural reporting becomes a global phenomenon of interest to communicators.

Therefore, reporting is an activity. It is double-fold: news gathering and news writing. Both are of equal importance since the ability to use techniques of gathering and verifying news will determine how to write the news on agricultural development. It is often erroneously assumed that the ability of a reporter to accumulate information automatically translates into good reports. Far from it, what makes a good story is the ability of a reporter to make it simple, concise, and translate it to the target audience.

Reporting, with its entire ramification, is just like attending school every day. It involves constant learning and continuous self-education. These tips are sacred to a reporter who is willing to report factual, accurate, and objective news to the farmers. The farmers need to be adequately informed and educated about the goings-on within and outside their immediate environments as far as agriculture is concerned. News reporters are therefore duty-bound to narrow down or close whatever communication gap that exists between the people in agriculture services and what is happening in the sector.

A versatile and objective agriculture reporter must know what to report. Whatever is reported to society must have its impact on them. So, as a first step towards reporting on agriculture, a journalist or reporter must have good knowledge and demonstrate competence in the area of agriculture. This perhaps helps in reporting issues to the intended or target audience. Again, checking and re-checking of facts gathered are very important; this leaves no room for mistakes and omission of vital points. It also facilitates accuracy and precision. This is what reporting is all about. Be fair, treating both sides with equal attention and time. However, in most cases, agricultural reporters are always on the side of the government. The government has done this and that to farmers, but sometimes, if one finds out, it will not be true. Agricultural reporting in the media is one-way because there are no alternatives provided to hear from the government and from the farmers, and this is dangerous.

Agricultural reporting consists of gathering and presentation of news on agriculture to an audience through a mass medium. All forms of reporting straight news, features, interpretative, investigative, etc which are used to keep the audience abreast of developments in agriculture constitute agricultural reporting. While the political correspondent is asking a politician to explain what a recent government policy holds for the citizenry, the agricultural reporter is asking the same politician to explain the implications of the policy on the agric sector. Incidentally, in the case of agricultural reporting, the issue is different. For instance, in Nigeria, a governor can afford to tell the public that he has contributed 200 pages of fertilizers to farmers in a particular community, and the media will only report this without doing a proper investigation. At times, if you go to that community you will find out that what the governor said is propaganda, is either 100 pages of fertilizers are given to farmers in that community or nothing at all. In journalism, there is this theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which postulates that what you hear should not contradict what you see, and what you see should not contradict what you hear. Unfortunately, most of the information on agriculture that the media dish out to people normally contradicts what they hear or see. Sankore (2001) corroborate that among the challenges of agricultural reporting on the African continent is publishing rumors as fact, shallow and episodic coverage, and demonstration of mental laziness on the side of a reporter.

AGRICULTURE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Economic development has often been strongly associated with industrialization prior to the growth of modern development thinking. This warranted the perception of agriculture, not as a primary stimulant of development, but as a subsidiary of the industrial sector, which, according to Nwogbo (2015) is the dynamic and leading sector in any overall strategy of economic development. It was believed that the role of agriculture is merely to ensure food surplus and to transfer surplus labour without a decline in productivity to the industrial sector. Based on this erroneous assumption, industrialization was foregrounded in the process of economic development while conceiving agriculture as playing only a passive role in providing cheap food and surplus labour. However, Dim and Ezenekwe (2013) point out that modeling economic development along the above lines was successful in creating severe distortions in many backward regions of the world, whereas economic development models are based solely on industrialization rather than solving the problem of hunger, unemployment, and human deprivation created issues of rural-urban drift, and its attendant sordid implications (Tien et al., 2022).

They maintained that people grew poorer in both the rural and urban regions in much of the third world countries. The exodus of young people from the rural areas ignoring agriculture created more poor people in the urban centers, while the flagrant neglect suffered by agriculture from the government made rural people poorer. As a result, the neglect of agriculture and the romance with industrialization, not only failed in delivering economic development but also deepened underdevelopment. The evolution of modern development thinking brought agriculture back to the fore of development strategies. As a result of past experiences and the presence of more luscious theoretical conjectures, development economists became less sanguine about the desirability of placing such heavy emphasis on rapid industrialization. They came to realize that far from playing a passive, supporting role in the process of economic development, the agricultural sector in particular and the rural economy, in general, must play an indispensable part in any overall strategy of economic progress (Nwogbo, 2015).

In Nigeria for example, at independence, Nigeria operated a mixed economy. Her prospect for economic growth was heightened by the dependence on agriculture and later oil. "Farming, livestock production, forestry, and fishery contributed more than 66% of the country's GDP. During the period, Nigeria was the world's largest exporter of groundnut and palm produce and the third-largest producer and exporter of cocoa. The diversity of these natural resources gave each region a mark of identity (Palm produce grown in the East, cocoa in the West, and groundnut in the North) (Ogbalubi & Wokocha, 2013).

Agriculture remains a crucial sector in the Nigerian economy, being a major source of raw materials, food, and foreign exchange; capable of employing over 70% of the Nigerian labour force, and serving as a potential vehicle for diversifying the Nigerian economy. However, despite the rapid pace of urbanization taking place in Nigeria, half of Nigerians (approximately 80 million individuals) still live in rural areas; most of them engaged in smallholder semi-subsistence agriculture. Their agricultural activity plays a crucial role in micro and macroeconomic development (Okoro, 2011).

Generally speaking, the agricultural sector contributes to the development of an economy in four major ways: product contribution, factor contribution, market contribution, and foreign exchange contribution. Nigeria for instance is estimated to be the largest contributor to non-oil foreign exchange earnings (Dim & Ezenekwe, 2013). This means that agriculture holds abundant potential for enhancing and sustaining the country's foreign exchange. Omawale and Rodriguez in Kuchi (2018) observed that for most developing countries, agriculture has been assigned an important role in national development. To them, agriculture has been seen as a means of reducing dependence on certain importations, containing food price increases, earning foreign exchange, absorbing many new entrants to the labour market, and increasing farm incomes at times of severe unemployment and rural poverty.

Therefore, the strength of agriculture for national development is fundamental as the role of agriculture in transforming both the social and economic framework of an economy cannot be over-emphasized (Kaurova et al., 2022). It is a source of food and raw materials for the industrial sector, it is also essential for the expansion of employment opportunities, for reduction of poverty and improvement of the income distribution, also for speeding up industrialization, and for easing the pressure on the Balance of Payment. It has been the source of gainful employment from which the nation can feed its teeming population, providing the nation's industries with local raw materials and as a reliable source of government revenue. Agriculture, therefore, contributes to the growth of the economy and also provides employment opportunities for the teeming population, and eradicates poverty in the economy. An articulated agricultural revolution and increased value addition activities in the downstream agro-processing sub-sector can present a potential platform for effective wealth generation and consequently, sustainable poverty eradication in Africa.

THE LATITUDE OF THE AGRICULTURAL BEAT: WHAT TO LOOKOUT FOR

The agricultural beat connotes the geographic or issue-based limits within which an agricultural reporter operates. It is where the reporter plies his trade, nose for news, and monitors trends in the area with the same to the public through a mass medium. The reporter covers this geographic area or subject regularly. The agricultural beat could be geographically based (place beat) whereby a reporter is assigned to cover the ministry of agriculture (at the federal or state level as the case may be), or any other organization which is agro-base. The place beat could also be a state or region where a reporter is assigned to cover primary agricultural issues in the area. For instance, a reporter could be assigned to cover agricultural issues in any part of the country in Africa. He could be working for an agricultural or general-interest newspaper, magazine, or broadcast medium. He is expected to cover developments or events in the state which have a direct or indirect relationship with agriculture. He can also provide a report on the agricultural implications of non-agric events. A reporter could also be attached to an agricultural Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or international bodies focused on agriculture, as a place beat.

Therefore, the concept of 'latitude' here implies the wide range of issues, subjects, or developments that constitute the agricultural beat. These are developments an agricultural reporter should bear his searchlight on while looking for newsworthy agricultural stories. They are the things to look out for in an agric beat. This information is essential because some journalists may be shying away from the agric beat

thinking that it is a dry uneventful beat. It is not. Knowledge of what constitutes an agric beat shows that it is a vast area that could keep a reporter busy on his toes 24 hours a day. Among the wide range of information that should interest an agricultural reporter within the African context include:

1. News on livestock issues like goat, cow, sheep, cattle grazing, pigs, etc. This includes information about their health, outbreak of diseases affecting them (e.g. mad cow disease), economic or political implications of such incidents (as the case outbreak of mad cow disease in Britain which led to the banning of beef from that country in some Asian countries), etc.
2. News on all others kinds of farming, crop farming, fish farming, pig farming, sheep farming, organic farming (the practice of farming without using artificial chemicals), inorganic farming (use of fertilizers and such other chemicals in farming), among others. This includes issues with these kinds of farming, health, the financial, or social life of people engaged in these kinds of farming, among other exciting stories or trends in this area.
3. News on food security, food availability, food insecurity, food sufficiency issues, particularly highlighting their bearing on agricultural and related concerns.
4. News on agronomy, i.e. relationship between crops and their environment.
5. News on agric-business, i.e. activities concerned with the production and marketing of farm products

Interestingly, news on agric education is at every level primary, post-primary and tertiary levels. Special attention should be paid to agric institutes, universities, polytechnic, and colleges of education. What are the latest research findings in these institutions? What is the training environment like? Do they produce for exports or are they simply academic institutions? This list is endless.

THE ROLE AND QUALITIES OF THE AGRICULTURAL REPORTER IN THE SOCIETY

The agricultural reporter is saddled with the responsibilities of every other reporter in the society, albeit with a specific slant on the agriculture sector or concerns. A reporter plying his trade in the specialized field of agricultural journalism has certain specific roles to play which he must bear in mind: These roles are examined thus:

1. To contribute to reviving the agricultural sector through effective coverage of issues and events in the sector or issues that affect agriculture and related areas. This includes empowering the public with agric information capable of spurring them into agricultural or agro-based activities.
2. To explain complex issues associated with the agric sector. It could be the latest trends in a kind of farming that needs to be broken down to farmers through informative or explanatory articles.
3. To provide a platform for agriculturists, the public, farmers' government, and other stakeholders in agriculture to air their views on how to move the agric sector forward.
4. To bring out the lighter-mood stories in agriculture, e.g. sports associated with animals such as bullfights, chicken fights, goat fights, including the social or entertainment life of farmers and others engaged in agriculture. This may seem absurd but agricultural magazine or newspaper needs to excite the readers with such information.

These are among the functions of an agricultural reporter in society. The agric reporter should bear in mind that he is not just engaged in the profession for the fun of it but to contribute his quota to the quest to build a strong industrial base through a viable agric sector and further improve the standard of living of people through this profession.

On the qualities of a good agricultural reporter, the reporter is expected to go after the news, especially where news events are taking place, and bring the same to the attention of the audience. The job of a reporter is not limited to coverage of agricultural events, rather, he reports on conferences, meetings,

and activities; and engages in investigative reporting. The reporter is to unmask all the areas in agriculture and bring them to the public domain. This is because a reporter is just what he is. Simply what he is; simply, he is a reporter and not a writer of essays, editorials, or anything else. A reporter is neither a politician nor *dramatis personae*. Since an agric reporter is not any of these, he must therefore approach every news story to which he is assigned with complete impartiality and fairness. Having briefly touched on the reporter, let's now examine the attributes of an agric reporter.

1. An agric reporter must be neatly dressed. In the past years, it is a common phenomenon to see reporters shabbily dressed but these days, they now embrace what is called 'dress code.' Many reasons advanced by some as being the cause of improper dressing could be described as mere excuses. Once agriculture is mentioned, reporters feel it is a beat that will take them to the bush, far from it; there are modern ways of reporting agriculture not necessary going to meet farmers on their farms.
2. An agric reporter must be courteous and tactful. This means that he must display good manners, be polite and kind to sources, and to all, those who come in contact with him, especially in the course of his official assignment. This disposition should therefore not be construed to mean subservient, or suppliant.
3. He must be vigilant at all times, and be able to think quickly, clearly, and logically. In essence, he is not only ready with appropriate questions but also observant of the actions, reactions, grimaces, hesitations, and mannerisms of the person he talks to.
4. Aggressiveness and resourcefulness are other attributes needed by an agric reporter. He is not expected to be obnoxious. He converses with persons at their level. He strives constantly to overcome any ignorance he may have but never tries to hide his ignorance by professing to know what he does not know.
5. The ability to gain the trust of his sources is a requirement and this could be achieved by being meticulously accurate and keeping a confidence.
6. He must try to develop techniques to improve his newsgathering ability and the quality of his writing by resorting often, to a dictionary or a handbook of the English language.
7. He must develop a reading culture and such must not be confined to his newspaper, but also current magazines, books, and existing competitive newspapers on agriculture.

CAREER PROSPECTS AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN AGRICULTURAL REPORTING

Agricultural journalism is a branch of journalism that is held in high regard in developed nations, including developing countries in Africa. Statistic points out that India is said to have over 250 journals devoted to agricultural journalism. These are countries that appreciate the place of agriculture in nation-building. They also understand the crucial role of journalism in achieving agricultural goals. This specialized branch of journalism is also not given the back seat in western nations. In some African countries, agricultural reporting may not be as popular as political, crime, sports, court, or other popular branches of reporting. However, it holds a lot of prospects given the increasing awareness of the pertinence of agriculture in the existence, survival, and development of the nation. There may not be very popular agricultural magazines, or newspapers on the newsstands today, but this is rather an opportunity for the establishment of such specialized publications in the area of agriculture. In Nigeria for example, hardly one sees community newspapers that specialized in agricultural reporting, and this could serve as an opportunity for a young journalist who wants to specialize in agric beat.

The point being made here is that a reporter who wishes to earn a living in agricultural reporting can get sponsorship for the publication of an agricultural magazine, or newspaper. He can also combine with his

colleagues to pull resources together for floating such specialized publications. Good journalistic practices can earn such publications a sizable share of the audience. People want to be informed on agric issues. Such publications could be used to carve a niche in the media industry. The beginning may not be easy, but once the publication stabilizes, the reporters' careers can blossom in this area.

An agric reporter could also ply his trade in a conventional hard news magazine or daily newspaper as an agricultural correspondent. A good number of media houses – print and electronic – give a level of priority to coverage of agricultural issues. The agric reporter can pursue a career in such conventional media establishments.

Freelance agricultural journalism is also an area a specialized reporter could get into. Such reporters could specialize in scouting for newsworthy agricultural stories and sending them to media houses for a fee. The reporter engaged in this career could have news that would become 'hot cake' because media houses will depend on him for agricultural stories especially those who do not have agricultural correspondents. Agric correspondents in most media houses in Africa also cover other beats. This divided attention could keep them away from the kind of 'hot' stories that a freelance reporter who is solely concerned with nosing for agric news, can get.

Incidentally, agric reporters often face ethical challenges in this profession. They find themselves having to decide between choosing to do what is morally good and what is morally bad. They are faced with having to stick to professionalism and publish a story no matter the effect of having to consider the moral implication of a story they are doing. This includes the moral implications of the process of gathering information for a particular story that could be an exclusive 'hot' story. For instance, trying to interview a dying man instead of sympathizing with him and going for help, or publishing an interview with the teenage son of a fraudster with the boy's real names and photographs are issues that may not be legally wrong, but require moral questions to be answered before going ahead with them.

Ethical issues come up in the use of photographs, the content of stories, slant of stories, story theme, subject, the process of gathering information, etc. Nwabueze (2009) highlights some of these ethical issues thus: accuracy, fairness, privacy, trust, decency, etc. Thus, agric reporters face a wide range of ethical challenges in the line of duty. Most of these challenges are reflected in the code of ethics for journalists. They border on objectivity, fairness, sincerity, integrity, and professionalism in the journalism profession. This includes journalistic values which reporters should respect in practicing their profession.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Agricultural journalism holds good prospects for journalists wishing to pursue a career in the field. It however requires a great deal of hard work and going the extra mile to excel in this field. A generalist reporter wishing to specialize in this area also needs intensive training to succeed. As Whitaker and Dyer (2002) observed that due to the complex nature of agriculture, those journalists who specialize in agricultural reporting should receive special training in agricultural journalism. This is the first step to succeeding in this specialized field. Hence, food occupies a prime position in the hierarchy of what communication scholars termed "the basic needs of man" agriculture reporting must be given due cognizance because man survives first before he can effectively mobilize resources to build or rent a house, and clothe himself. Therefore, to ensure professional handling of agricultural reporting, the following recommendations are made:

1. The mass media should endeavour to give adequate attention to issues concerning agricultural development in their day-to-day activities just like how attention is given to other issues like an advertisement, and entertainment. This will go a long way to facilitating agricultural development and improving the living standard of the people.

2. The media should provide continuous retraining programmes to practicing journalists through refresher workshops and conferences on handling agriculture reporting.
3. Media houses that claim national outlooks should diversify their newsrooms by employing personnel from all sections of the African continent. For example, media outfits in other parts of African countries should deliberately consider recruiting news personnel from other parts of the country.
4. Media organisations should help through different strategies to make the African journalists more responsive to agriculture reporting through some of the following steps: building trust between groups and not further widening the existing gaps between them; helping the constructively analyze issues in agriculture reporting; and solution building.
5. Government or individuals should develop agricultural community newspapers that could focus on agricultural content in the remote areas.

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