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AYOBAMI OJEBODE & LARINDE AKINLEYE

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# Nigerian silent majorities

## Why the search for global newsflow balance should begin at home

AYOBAMI OJEBODE & LARINDEAKINLEYE

*Abstract:* In the clamour for a new world information and communication order (NWICO), extensive scholarly attention has been given to international disparities and their effects. But national and domestic issues have only been mentioned, when at all, in passing. This article attempts to investigate the possibility of there being a domestic dimension to the world imbalance. The daily news bulletins of four Nigerian broadcast stations were monitored for three months and analysed. The result shows that a very minute proportion of news (7.1%) deals with rural areas and rural issues. Even this little fraction is one-way information to and not from rural people. About one-third of the rural news is decontextualised. All these point to the need to tackle the quest for a new order on the home front as well.

*Keywords:* Nigerian rural areas, Oyo state, world communication, domestic information imbalance

The agitation for an even flow of communication between the global north and south began in the early 1960s and culminated in the publication of the MacBride Commission Report in 1980. The Commission recommends, among other things, the devotion of greater space to, and fairer coverage of, the south by the media of the global north.

But the Commission also hinted that there was domestic disparity in the information and communication flow within nations of the south. The Commission alleged that within each of the southern nations agitating for global information and communication balance, there were dimensions of domestic information imbalance: certain segments of the countries spoke while other segments listened; the media pay attention to certain groups while others are unheard (MacBride Commission 1980, p.166). Among the identified disadvantaged groups were rural dwellers, women, children, the poor and the least educated.

Whereas the international dimension of the claims of information imbalance has been thoroughly investigated and addressed (see Ganley & Ganley 1982; Meyer 1988;

Ojebode 2004), the domestic dimension – in the Nigerian context – remains largely unattended to in an empirical manner. This forms the gap we intend to fill with this article. From among the list of those purportedly information- and communication-disadvantaged, we chose rural dwellers. Broadly speaking, borrowing from Meyer (1988), the article seeks to examine the extent, nature and dimension of coverage given by the Nigerian media to the rural areas in Nigeria. These issues – extent, nature and dimension of coverage – formed the heart of the international agitation for a new world information and communication order (NWICO), to which we return presently.

## RURAL NIGERIA

Rural Nigeria is quite strategic to the survival of the whole country. The World Bank (2009) puts the population of Nigeria at 144 million. Of these, about 80% live in areas classified as rural (Agbola & Hodder 1983, p.31; UNCDF 2009). Not only this, more than two-thirds of the nation's natural resources are in the rural areas. Most oil-producing communities are rural communities, and nearly all of agriculture takes place in the rural areas. In fact, as Bonat (1989, p.51) observed, the World Bank equated rural development with increased agricultural production and so counselled the Nigerian government to embark on rural development in order to boost agriculture. This was seen as a means of fast-tracking overall national development. The connection between agricultural development and national development becomes easy to see when one considers the claim by the National Bureau of Statistics (2009) that in 2008 agriculture contributed 42.07% to the national GDP. This further underscores the importance of rural development.

Strategic as the rural areas are, studies show that they are greatly neglected and impoverished. There is a wide difference in the standard of living, income, access to education and general national visibility of rural- and urban-dwelling Nigerians. About two decades ago, Sada (1989, p.248) called attention to the 'widening gap in the income distribution at the interpersonal level as well as at the rural-urban dimension'. He demonstrated that the situation was worse than it had been: rural average income in the 1960s was about half of the urban, but in the 1980s, when Sada was writing, rural average income had become just about 10% of the urban. The situation appears to have even been on the decline since then.

Poverty is twice as prevalent in rural as it is in urban areas, and about 85% of extremely poor Nigerians are to be found in rural areas (UNCDF 2009; see also Babatunde 2008). Anyanwu (2005) had shown roughly the same picture when he reported that poverty severity was 18.9 in urban Nigeria but 33.0 in rural areas.

UNICEF and the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) demonstrated the multifarious dimensions of rural-urban inequalities in Nigeria in an extensive nationwide survey published in 2001. They show that, for instance, whereas about 78% of urban dwellers have access to sanitary means of disposing human excreta, only 44% in rural

areas have the same; the literacy rate among urban males is about 75% but about 51% among rural males. Among urban females, the literacy rate is about 59% but about 34% among rural females. Whereas about 53% of urban households own a television set, only about 14% of rural households possess same. For radio, ownership ratio is 78% to 55% in favour of urban dwellers. Incidence of under-five mortality is lower in the urban areas (129 of 1,000 births) than in the rural (192 of 1,000 births) (UNICEF & FMOH2001).

Worse still, communal living, which used to cushion the effect of poverty and lack among rural people, is gradually disappearing. It is being replaced with individualism and capitalism; communal labour is being replaced with hired labour. These make 'inequality ... become more marked' (Sada 1989, p.227).

The situation in the oil-producing areas is worse than the national average. Incidence of oil spillage, which typically leads to the massive extermination of aquatic life and renders arable land impotent, continues to be on the increase (Ojebode & Adegbola 2007, p.23). Life in these areas has thus become almost impossible for the majority, whose livelihood comes from fishing and tilling.

It is obvious that though rural Nigeria is strategic to the overall economic and some other aspects of national development, it is the area that has attracted little and unsustainable government attention and care. Hagher (1990, p. 93) suggests that in fact the very existence of some rural people may be unknown to the government. Difficult to take as this may be, he made his point by showing that it was only in 1986 that the Nigerian government 'discovered' the existence of the conservative Koma people of Adamawa state. The fact of government neglect of rural areas is not unknown to many; what we do not know is whether or not the media treat the rural areas differently from the way the government treats them.

#### THE CLAMOUR FOR GLOBAL COMMUNICATION BALANCE

Information and communication imbalance between the developing and the developed worlds has been a subject of research, conference discussions, dispute and as consensus for over four decades now. As far back as 1961, Johan Galtung had come up with a clear articulation of the ideas that later shaped much of the thoughts and contributions associated with the debates on newsflow imbalance till today (Galtung 1979). Such terms included centre-periphery relationship and its three variants, the four worlds and the 12 criteria used by the first world media to judge events as newsworthy.

Between then and 1980, there were three main stages of the debate. First was the politico-ideological confrontation era, meant to stir up ideas and based on the work of researchers. This lasted from 1973 to 1976. This was followed by the era of accumulating data to demonstrate that the ideological allegations were based on facts. This lasted from 1976 to 1979. The last was the publication of the report of the international commission for the study of communication problems (known as the MacBride Com-

mission) in 1980 (Uranga 1984). Along this continuum was the metamorphosis of the acronymic terminologies like NIIO (new international information order), NWIO (new world information order) and finally NWICO (new world information and communication order), all describing a request 'for balancing international inequalities in the flows of information' (Meyer 1988, p.1).

The NWICO, like its economic predecessor, the NWEIO (new world economic order), was an outburst of pent-up tension against perceived injustice meted out by the rich nations (first world or the north or the centre) against the poor ones (third world or the south or the periphery). NWICO proponents have two major allegations. The first is that the flow of international news was one-way. Not only was the portion of western newspapers devoted to international news continuously shrinking (Meyer 1988), but also 'certain regions ... spoke and the rest listened' (Ganley & Ganley 1982, p.41). A major cause of this one-way flow is that the main sources of news for the press in the developing world remain the four major transnational news corporations – Agence France Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP), Reuters and the United Press International (UPI). These feed the developing world with those things that interest the western audience. Coupled with this is the dominance of the global airwaves by just a handful of media mega-corporations. Bagdikian (2004) observes that from 50 in 1983, dominant media corporations worldwide have shrunk to five – Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann and Viacom (formerly CBS). This is a further shrink from the seven listed by McChesney (2001), whose list included Sony and Vivendi. The implication of this is that very few corporations decide what the world will learn or not learn.

The second allegation is that the little coverage given to the developing world is predominantly negative and spotty, i.e. not developmental. The distinction between spotty and developmental news style is that whereas spotty news items focus on events in isolation (spots), developmental news items look at events in contexts and as part of a process. Such items trace history, causes and effects of, and proposed or attempted solutions to, the problem. Whereas spotty reporting focuses on events, developmental reporting combines factual reports with analyses of contexts and underlying structures which gave rise to the report. Spotty items are episodic, taking events as one-off shots, whereas developmental items, even when they focus on unpleasant events such as crimes and natural disasters, try to put events in perspective, taking care to emphasise what is being done in the form of solutions (see Meyer 1988). It is alleged that most news items about developing nations as presented in the news media of the developed countries are spotty and crisis-focused. Again, as Galtung (1984, p.120) points out, this type of news interests the western audience as it 'keeps them convinced of the miserable living conditions in the periphery countries, and consequently of how fortunate they are not to be there'.

Among the direct results of this is that developing nations could not relate and share experiences with or know about one another without going through the developed (centre) because all international information flows into them through the cen-

tre. The term for this is *dependency* – the periphery nations depending on the centre to tell them about one another. As a result, the periphery nations know more about the centre than about one another. In return, they are also influenced by the centre more than they are by one another (Galtung 1984). The situation is perpetual because ‘the developing countries lack the communication resources necessary for integrating and representing their interests effectively’ and because the West is intransigent over possible reforms (Meyer 1988, p.2).

As a way out, NWICO debaters ask for, among other things:

- absolute sovereignty of less developed nations (LDCs) over all of their information sources
- preferential treatment for the developing world news in the western market; better news ratio and horizontal communication among the LDCs
- more coverage of ongoing projects for social, political and economic development instead of ‘spot news’ which focus on coups, riots and disasters
- direct grants and other gifts of advanced communication technology from the developed to the developing world
- the break-up of western news agencies and the establishment of national news agencies in those LDCs that have none
- increased control by the developing world over world communication institutions (MacBride Commission 1980; Galtung 1984; Meyer 1988).

Many western scholars and governments however do not think that the allegations levelled by the NWICO proponents were indices of injustice. To them, imbalance in news or any kind of flow was only natural. Merrill, as quoted by Meyer (1988, p.7), says ‘unevenness of flow is a basic characteristic of news – and not only of news flow, but of water flow, oil flow, money flow, population flow, and food flow’. And the governments of most western nations have kicked against the NWICO. They threatened to (and some did) withdraw their membership of UNESCO as a protest against the NWICO. They proposed a substitute called the ‘New Communication Strategy’.

Meyer (1988) observed that much of the ideological allegations of NWICO had not been subjected to rigorous empirical tests. He therefore chose to test some of them. In a sample of 43 LDCs, he discovered that there was indeed dependency in the area of television programming: about one-third of television broadcasting in the selected LDCs was imported. This was not so with radio, which had only 2% imported content. An analysis of some national newspapers of the LDCs shows that between 56% and 76% of news items were sourced from western news agencies. Not only this, he found out that the LDCs’ dailies follow the lead of western papers, focusing on certain regions and countries. Finally, he observed that 72% of the news about the LDCs relayed by the western news agencies focused on spot events – riots, crimes and disasters.

## THE STUDY

Three issues that were core to the debates on international newsflow imbalance were selected for investigation at the domestic level. The first was *the extent of coverage* given rural areas. By this we mean the proportion of broadcast news that relates to events and projects in the rural areas compared with the urban. The second was the *nature of the coverage*. By this we mean whether reports of rural issues were spotty or developmental. The third issue of concern was the *direction of coverage*. Two categories of direction were identified: *spatial direction*, by which we mean urban-to-rural (top-down) or rural-to-urban (bottom-up) direction of newsflow, and *attitudinal direction*, which has the three usual subcategories – positive, neutral and negative. By this is meant the overall tilt of the story. Stories of war, accidents, upheavals, activities of ethnic militias, and disease outbreak were considered negative, while those of reconciliation, community projects, government commissioning of projects and the like were coded as positive. Not all deaths were considered negative: those occurring naturally of old age, for instance, were coded as positive. We adapted this from Ojebode and Adegbola (2007), who had successfully employed this categorisation.

Four Nigerian broadcast stations were selected: the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS) radio, AM station; BCOS television; the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). The first two are owned by the state government and the last two by the federal government. The major daily news bulletins of the stations were monitored for three randomly selected months.

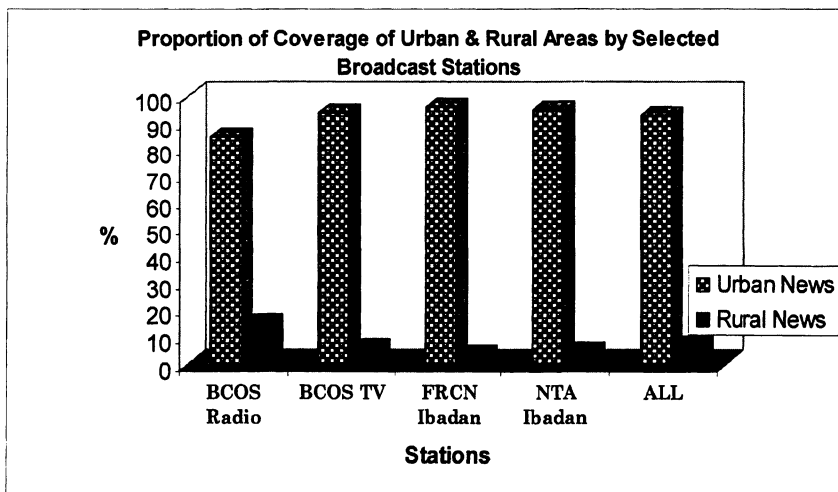
In our classification of areas into urban and rural, we classified the federal and all state capitals as urban. We also classified any town whose population exceeded 60,000 by the last census as urban.

A total of 354 news items were recorded from BCOS radio, while 541 were recorded from BCOS television. A total of 337 and 544 items were recorded from the FRCN and the NTA respectively. These gave a total of 1,776 news items that formed the data for analysis.

## FINDINGS

Our first objective was to determine what proportion of the recorded broadcast news items dealt with rural issues, people and projects. The analysis revealed that 1,650 news items (92.9%) concerned urban affairs. The urban areas were actually the federal and state capitals. The remaining 126 items (7.1%) were devoted to rural areas. The breakdown according to stations revealed a fairly uniformly skewed distribution. This is shown in the graphic presentation below:

### Proportion of coverage of urban and rural areas by selected broadcast stations



The urban areas attracted a proportion of 85%, 94.1%, 96.1% and 94.9% of the news items of BCOS radio, BCOS TV, FRCN and NTA in that order. The remaining 15%, 5.9%, 3.9% and 5.1% were devoted to the rural areas.

Secondly, we studied the nature of the coverage given to the rural areas with regard to whether the items were spotty or developmental. Of the 126 items devoted to rural areas, 81 (64.3%) were developmental and 45 (35.7%) were spotty. The developmental news items covered issues such as commissioning of projects and foundation laying ceremonies; coronation of local or traditional chieftains; appeals to the government; and launching and fundraising ceremonies. The spotty items dealt with the operations of ethnic militias; visits of political leaders from the city; and deaths, accidents and other disasters.

Third, the direction of coverage was studied. First, analysis of spatial direction showed that only seven (5.6%) of the rural news items conveyed information that originated from the rural areas. These items were mainly appeals to the government for some favour regarding infrastructure and relief during disasters. Only these seven items represented upward flow. The remaining 119 items (94.4%) were downward, centre-periphery flow. Horizontal (i.e. rural-to-rural) flow was totally absent.

Still on direction, it was discovered that 850 (47.8%) of the total items analysed were positive, 714 (40.2%) were neutral and 212 (11.9%) were negative. Seventy-five (59.5%) of the 126 items dealing with rural areas were positive, 24 (19.1%) were neutral and 27 (21.4%) were negative. Seven hundred and seventy-five (47%) of the items dealing with urban areas were positive, 690 (41.8%) were neutral and 185 (11.2%) were



negative. In addition, it was discovered that 74% of the 364 first news items were about government officials – specifically the president, the governors, their spouses and their lieutenants.

## DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that there is a domestic replica of the international newsflow imbalance. Only a negligible fraction of news is given to rural areas. The lopsidedness in the proportions is stunningly high, indicating a pinching indictment of the neglect of the Nigerian rural areas – a section which constitutes about 80% of our total population (Agbola & Hodder 1983, p.31).

Three possible causes of rural neglect immediately come to mind as causes of this disregard. First, the attention of the average Nigerian journalist is predominantly glued to the city where he/she was trained, where he/she lives and where, by his/her schooled judgement, 'newsworthy' events take place.

Second, most broadcast houses in Nigeria are situated in the urban areas and, contrary to the commonly held belief about broadcasting, proximity is a factor in what the media person sees or does not see. It is hoped that this trend would reduce remarkably with the establishment of new television houses outside the state capitals in Nigeria. But this will only happen if the stations are well enough equipped to embark on independent programming. If they are going to be 'hook-ons' to the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) national network, then a worse situation should be anticipated.

The third factor is the near absolute power that military and political leaders exert(ed) on the media. One may have hoped this would end with the termination of military rule in Nigeria, but occurrences such as the sacking of some management staff of a government-owned media house in the southwest, and the sacking of state house correspondents and others who seem not to be 'publicising' the activities of the government loud enough, indicate that the government-owned media still remain mere palace bards. A newsworthy event appears to be that which concerns the governor, his wives or his men no matter how trivial the event may be. In a democracy, the majority should have their say and their way. Going from the findings of this study, the majority in Nigeria have neither of these.

Disregarding the rural areas in news coverage sends home the message that the events and the people in those areas are insignificant. After all, the status conferral theory of the media has it that if one matters, he/she will be in the news (see Lazarsfeld & Merton 1996). There are several possible negative consequences of such neglect. One is the possibility of rural people wishing to create newsworthy events. Galtung (1984) says this yearning to be in the news is responsible for violence in most parts of the developing world. Meyer's (1988) extensive work also links the lack of international news coverage to wars and crises in the developing world.

Another possible consequence is that there will continue to be an increase in rural-urban migration because people naturally want to be where good things are said to be happening. Of course, not many people understand that what they see or hear in the media about city life may not reflect the reality of life in those cities.

Our study shows that almost one-third of rural news is spotty. It is this news style that the international media adopt in reporting developing nations and which portrays those nations as crisis centres. Much less of this style is expected from the media in the developing world themselves.

While attitudinal direction of the coverage of rural issues was not predominantly negative, the spatial direction indicates an undemocratic flow, the kind condemned by NWICO at the international level. Very insignificantly little is heard from the rural people.

Rural dwellers are generally treated ... as passive recipients of information selected, processed and packaged for them by (urban) professionals. They do not have adequate facilities for voicing their feelings and participating even if only indirectly in taking decisions that affect their lives. (Ansah 1984, p.44)

'They are to hear, not to say; they are to accept, not to propose; they are [at best] objects not subjects of communication' (Somavia 1981, p.21). 'Rural dwellers, who are often poor, have no voice of their own' (Duncan 2006, p.61).

## CONCLUSION

As we think of a new world order and the sustenance of emerging democracies such as we have in Nigeria, we need to put the domestic dimension of information and communication imbalance in perspective. It is not inconceivable that the imbalance at the domestic level far exceeds that at the international level to which decades of political and scholarly attentions have been given. There is need for as much agitation for balance at the national level. In fact, one proof that the request for communication restructuring at the international level is sincerely meant is to demonstrate balance first at home.

There is a need for true community broadcasting in Nigeria. Regional broadcast houses cannot adequately cater to the sharply divergent needs of urban and rural dwellers, including those of the innumerable ethnic minorities found in some states. There have been calls for the establishment of community radio stations, which is different from extending government loudspeakers to the rural areas. A community radio is sited in, owned and run by the community and it articulates the needs, resources and worldviews of such a community. As Megwa (2006, p.126) observes, a community radio is capable of revolutionising life in the rural area. The new order should begin right at home.

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Ayobami Ojebode (PhD, University of Ibadan, Nigeria) is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His research interests include development communication, political communication and cultural communication. He is Coordinator of Postgraduate Programmes in his department, and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Communication and Language Arts*.

Larinde Akinleye (PhD, University of Ibadan, Nigeria) was a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His research interests included broadcasting and indigenous communication. Dr Akinleye passed on before the final completion of this article.

*Correspondence:* Dr Ayobami Ojebode, Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; ph +234 805 6414 798; ayo.ojebode@gmail.com, ayo.ojebode@mail.ui.edu.ng.

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