



ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM AND SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Environmental problems and issues are today at the front burner of international discourse with various stake holders working to proffer ideals on how to preserve, protect and promote the environment to realize the universal objective of sustainable development in all countries of the world. The mass media as a social institution with its potential and attribute of reaching large heterogeneous and diverse audience combined with its traditional roles of information, education, entertainment and surveillance are veritable instruments to champion this global initiative of ensuring environmentally sustainable society. Hence this work examined the role environmental journalism practice plays in the realization of the goals of sustainable development. The work anchored on the agenda setting theory of the mass media adopted library research methodology and therefore, made use of secondary data. It also made use of contribution of communication scholars and environmental experts to discuss and analyze the following issues: environmental journalism, environment, environmental problems/issues, sustainable development, environmental journalism and sustainable development. In the light of the challenges affecting practice of environmental journalism, it recommended among other things that environmental issues should be given adequate and prominent coverage by various media outfits while special beat on the environment be created with well-trained journalist assigned to man them.

Keywords: Environmental Journalism, Environment, Environmental Problems/Issues, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Journalism as a profession has the media as its institutional, structural and operational frame work. The mass media which comprises all the channels of information dissemination and communication to the society do not however, exist in the vacuum but operate in the environment. The mass media and the environment operate on the principle of reciprocity. By implication, the environment affects the operations of the media and the media in turn shape the environment. The symbiotic or interdependent relationship between man and his environment or between institutions like the media and its environment underscores the imperative of the heightening global environmental consciousness which has resulted to advocacy. Journalism provides the professional framework of this advocacy while the media are the channel of communication. As highlighted by Marou (2011, p.137), "other than through formal education, information about the environment can be effectively communicated through the mass media".

While the environment is made up of human and non-human components, man remains the central figure as far as the environment is concerned and the mass media is a social institution that shapes the environment and also drives the activities of man. The prospect of man's future is therefore, determined by the safety of his environment, hence environment sustainability should be the primary concern of man and this can only be realized through proper environmental education and communication. According to Nwabueze (2011, p.107), the mass media are the most essential tools for environmental communication to diverse audience.

It was also in view of the importance attached to environmental sustainability that the millennium development goal, conceived in the year 2000 by the United Nations, has as its 7th declaration, "the need to ensure environmental sustainability". This further stems from the fact that no meaningful development can take place in any society in an unfriendly environment. The 7th goal was conceptualized to address such environmental hazards that pose threats to the existence and survival of man. It was as a result of such environmental disasters as earthquake, tsunami, hurricane, flood, erosion etc that issues bordering on environmental protection are today placed at the front burner of international discourse using the mass media as key agents of information dissemination in that regard. The importance attached to the environment therefore, informs the creation of environmental beats by both the print and electronic media with specially trained journalists assigned to man the area. Environmental beats focuses on environmental news reporting. This has in recent time blossomed into environmental journalism which is a special field of journalism practice that holistically seeks to disseminate information on issues bordering on the environment to a large heterogenous and diverse audience through the instrumentality of the mass media.

Against this background, this paper dissects the import of environmental journalism and sustainable development in the society. To facilitate understanding of this work, the following concepts and key words were properly defined: journalism, the environment environmental problems/issues, environmental journalism/communication, sustainable development, environmental news reporting as a vehicle for sustainable development.

Journalism Defined

The Longman Contemporary English dictionary defines journalism as "the job or activity of writing news reports for newspapers, magazine, television or radio". Similarly, the American Press Institute says "Journalism is activity of gathering, assessing, creating and presenting news and information

‘Wikipedia gave its own definition by first saying who a journalist is: “a person, who collects, writes and disseminates news or other current information to the public is a journalist. A journalist’s work is called journalism”

Environmental Journalism/Communication

Drawing from the above definition of journalism and reporting, we can now see environmental journalism as journalism geared towards reporting environmental issues and problems that affect the environment. Akakwandu (2016, p.66) defines environmental journalism as: “journalism that is hundred percent environmental sensitive and strives towards providing adequate information, education as well as mobilizing the people on environmental issues, policies and programmes”

Similarly, Nwabueze (2007, p.83) defines environmental journalism as a "specialized aspect of journalism which deals with the gathering, investigation, interpretation, analysis and presentation of information on the environment through a medium to the public" the author went further to define environmental news reporting as "the process of gathering, collating, verification and presentation of news about the environment through a medium for audience consumption”.

While the environmental journalist reports environmental issues, he is also engaging in environmental communication which Nwodu (2004) defined as a conscious communicative effort to bring people to the knowledge of environmental problems around them; encourage them to desist from actions that are harmful to the environment; and sensitize them to show greater commitment to activities aimed at safe guarding the environment. The environmental journalist on environmental news reporter in addition to all the environmental issues and problems identified above will derive his stories from issues and events like promulgation of laws and legislations on environmental matters, policies, workshop/seminars/conferences on 'environment, activities of environmental protection agencies, advocacy groups and activists involved in promotion of sustainable environment etc. environmental news reports can be presented in various forms outside the usual straight or hard news reports like editorials, features stories, opinion articles, news commentaries, news analysis. Presenting a more elaborate picture of the forms of environmental news reports, Nwabueze (2011, P 199) listed it to include "investigative, interpretative, analytical and in-depth reports as well as featurized reports with background information the present news behind the news'.

The scope of environmental news reports imposes on the environmental journalists the task of having adequate knowledge of diverse issues in addition to possessing the basic formal education. It further demands that the environmental reporter be familiar with relevant terminologies and concepts that deal with environmental matters. While reporting environmental stories, he is expected to break technical terms and jargons down to the understanding of his audience. The environmental journalist is usually assigned to environmental beat. The beat is a specific area or issues of coverage assigned to a journalist. It promotes efficiency and expertise in reporting even as it enhances adequate coverage of the society and particular area or issues of jurisdiction.

The environmental journalist has the responsibility to engage in effective communication of environmental related information to the public. Unfortunately environmental problems and issue have not been receiving the required attention from the media for one reason or another. Corroborating this situation, Moeti et al (2011) observed that "information about environmental issues hardly ever reaches many people through the mainstream media such as newspapers, radio and television in Africa because of a number of problems among which are the complexity of the presentation language, lack of interest by media personnel and other factors influencing production of media publication". The author quoting the work of Shawa and Mapura says one of the possible cause for the media to be snubbing environmental issues is that journalists do not easily understand some of

the environmental terminology To this, Nwabueze (2007) lamented that “this is a worrisome development because the mass media shape social norms and value systems and also influence people’s decision-making in ways that foster a more environmentally sustainable and acceptable society.”

The environmental journalist has both print and electronic media as a channel of disseminating information to the audience. The print media comprises newspaper, magazine and lately the internet which shares dual attributes of print and electronic while the electronic media is made up of radio, television, firms and the internet. All have the ability to take the message to a large diverse audience but each has a unique attribute of disseminating information to the audience.

The radio for instance deals with sound that is audio. It is regarded as the most popular medium as breaks the barrier of illiteracy. This means that the message can be communicated to the audience in the native dialect. It is also relatively cheap as many families have access to it even as the message can be received while the audience engages in other activities. The television on the other hand combines sound, sight and motion pictures to transmit the message. For these attributes, the television has appealing and persuasive potential to the audience.

Then the newspaper and magazine which deals on textual materials present detailed stories to the audience. They are portable and durable while the message in it can be read many times by the reader unlike the electronic media message which is transient. The magazine in particular carries in-depth and well investigated stories that satisfy the curiosity of the reader. Nworgu (2005, p.72) corroborated this fact that the magazine report has a broader news vision than the newspaper and magazines are one of the most effective tools for societal information and change. Other members of the mass media family which the journalists can make use of in the task of information dissemination include books and journals. In all, it has been generally observed that the mass media exert strong influence on people’s life worlds and behavior outcomes (Hagedorn 1998, p.81). The mass media have as a primary function information, education, entertainment, and enlightenment, transmission of cultural heritage and surveillance of the environment.

The environment conceptualized

The environment has been given different interpretations and definitions by different authors. Nevertheless all points to the fact that the environment is the natural habitat in which man lives with other creatures and carry out his activities otherwise, the environment could be simply referred to as the entire universe. Nwabueze (2007, P 2) sees the environment as: "any natural or artificial habitation in which people co-exist with plants and animals. It includes the totality of activities, actions and situations that shape the existence of man or any organism in a given habitation". Similarly, Anayato (2004) cited in Nwabueze (2007) defined the environment as: "a collection of natural and artificial arrangements in which humanity is completely dependent for survival and sustenance through food, water and the trees for shelter"

In his own definition, Maier (1998) sees the environment as " the conditions, circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organism and group of organisms", while Olatunji (2002) says “ the environment is all embracing concept, involving all the facets that comprise the planet earth and its surroundings". To this extent, the author defines man's environment to include the land into which he is born, lives and dies, the air he breaths, the hydrographic and all aquatic lives", concluding that man therefore, is both a product and shaper of his environment.

Giving a more elaborate definition of the environment, Moetietal (2011) stated thus:

The environment encompasses both biophysical and socio-economic

components. In the past the term was commonly associated with the natural environmental components such as, rivers, forests, ocean, the atmosphere and ecosystems. It also refers to the human environment, human health and living conditions, urban and rural communities, buildings and historical places, cultural heritage, economic opportunities and risk and accessibility to country's natural resources. Everything that surrounds us, both living and non-living forms our Environment.

From the above definitions, the environment is the society and the society is the environment. Man and his activities are at the center of the environment. That is also to say that "man is the environment and the environment is man", Nwabueze (2007).

Sustainable National Development

Development is a word that encompasses many things and means different thing to different people depending on the indices of its measurement. But generally, it torches on all facets of life that affect the well-being of man. Moemeka (1989) cited in Alozie (2009) sees development as "a change for the better in human cultural, political and socio-economic conditions of the individual and consequently, the society. Sharing related view, Konkwo (2011, p.19) believes that "development whether rural or national is aimed at bringing about beneficial change for the individual in particular and society at large". But Rodney (1974) in Konkwo (2011) who saw it from national view point described development as: "increased skill, capacity and ability of a nation to utilize the resources in its environment for the upliftment of the quality of life of the people". Also, Luis Ramiro Betran (1974, pp.11-27) quoted by same author defines national development thus:

A directed and widely participatory process of deep and accelerated socio-political change geared towards producing substantial changes in the economy, the technology, the ecology and the overall culture of a country, so that the moral and material advancement of the majority of its population can be obtained within conditions of generalized equality, dignity, justice and liberty.

For Onwuka (2013) national development is the overall development or collective socio-economic and political advancement of a country or nation". Going by the above definitions, one can interpret sustainable development to imply enduring or lasting development that can be maintained for the present and future of the society and for the betterment of the citizens without necessarily exhausting available resources of the nation.

Wikipedia, quoting "Brundtland Commission", sees it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Environmental protection is encapsulated in the sustainable development goals conceptualized and agreed by nations of the-world in September 2015. This stems from the fact that every development in the society is tied to environmentally sustainable society. In other words, environmental issues is at the helm of sustainable development in every society hence the people in whose interest development is meant for should be conscious of their actions and inactions the protect, promote and improve the environment or destroy it. Environmental journalism is geared towards bringing such actions and inactions to the knowledge of the people. The potentials of journalism and mass media to accomplish this task is fully examined below:

Methodology

This work adopted the library/desk research method of data collection and analysis in which secondary data were sourced from relevant books and materials. According to SIS International Research (2020), library/desk research is a technique that uses existing and publicly available data. It is also known as “desk research.” It includes material published in research papers and other such documents. The work critically analyzed the views and contributions of environmental experts and communication scholars on relevant issues on the topic.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the agenda setting theory of the mass media. This theory highlights the potency of the mass media in bringing issues into public domain. Under the assumption of this theory "the media may not tell us what to think but media tell us certainly what to think about', Baran (2004). The celebrated international communication scholar further explained the theory thus:

The agenda setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or page. Also important is the fact that there is great consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This consistency and repetition signal to people the importance of the issue or event.

The import of this theory is that through repetition and consistent focus on an issue, the media not only bring the issue into public focus but attach great importance to such issue. The importance attached to such issue also determines the prominence it receives from the media, in terms of space, position or air time. Writing on this theory, Akakwandu (2016) observed that "the mass media qualify as a powerful instrument at dictating and determining what the audience member thinks and talks about."

As regards our topic of discussion, the mass media sets environmental agenda for public debate. It is not surprising that global environmental issues like climate change, global warming, flooding, environmental pollution of all sorts are today in the front burner of global discourse. This stems from the amount of publicity the issues have received from the global media of communication. The media have consistently and repeatedly focused on these issues to the point of bringing them into public consciousness.

Environmental Issues/Problems Around us

The world is today confronted by the realities of environmental disasters of destructive magnitude some of which could be described as natural disasters while others are caused by activities of man on the planet. Interestingly, the need to preserve, protect and promote the environment is gaining global consciousness against the backdrop of the recurring environmental disasters like tsunamis, flooding, earthquake etc. which threatens the existence of man and his channel of communication, the mass media.

Apart from these identified global issues, every country has its own peculiar environmental

problems and challenges. As, stated above, though, some of these problems are blamed on natural disasters, it is however, glaring that man in the cause of his activities have wittingly and unwittingly contributed in no small measure to the problems. Such unwholesome practices of man that debase the environment include indiscriminate dumping of refuse, toxic waste dump, oil spillage, carbon emission, deforestation, sand mining, building in unauthorized places etc. these environmentally unfriendly practices have led to such issues as climate change, global warming, flooding, erosion and outbreak of epidemics.

While these problems seem to- be globally pronounced, every country has its peculiar environmental challenges. "Nigeria as a nation is grappling with its peculiar environmental problem characteristics of its urban and rural areas for which the Federal and State governments have created environmental protection agencies under different nomenclatures but with similar responsibilities of protection and improvement of the environment. The Niger Delta region, for instance, is bedeviled by oil spillage arising from oil exploration by oil companies", Ogu (2014). This has resulted to serious environmental degradation and ecological devastation. Most cities in the country are known for mounting refuses, defecation in openplaces, indiscriminate dumping of industrial wastes, sand excavation and a whole lot of others.

While oil spillage in the Niger-Delta pollutes the waters, leading to loss of aquatic life which is the major source of income for many families, many cities and rural areas have beendevastated by erosion menace which in many cases is caused by sand excavation as a result of massive housing and road construction by government and individuals.

Industrialization has contributed its own quota to the environmental problems in the land with excessive discharge of waste materials in the rivers and land as well as carbon emission that pollutes the air. Nigeria is said to harbour no less than 3700 registered industrial plants alongside illegal ones, Osuntokun (1999) in Nwabueze (2007). Nwabueze adds that the transport sector has had its own contribution as result of high use of fairly used vehicles popularly known as Tokumbo cars which emit fumes that pollute the air just as pit latrines are still common in some rural areas causing air pollution and pollution of underground water.

All these environmental problems have had radical consequences on the earth planet with man at the receiving end of it. The last week flood in Lagos state that claimed about eleven lives and destroyed properties in Suleja and Niger state (see the Nation Newspaper of 10th July 2017) is linked with the negative impact of global warming and climate change, both of which deal with changes in the atmospheric environment as a result of an increase in global atmospheric temperature, Onwuzuruike (2010). Expectedly these problems and issues have given rise to the growth of environmental activism and advocacy across the globe. Seminars and workshops are being organized by various stake holders and government agencies to sensitize the public on them, there have also been environmental education and networking by environmental activists organization to find a solution to address environmental issues on ground. In all these activities, the mass media have played remarkable roles.

Environmental Journalism as an Instrument for Sustainable National Development

Both the print and electronic media have a social responsibility to inform, educate and enlighten the people on environmental issues and inculcate environmental friendly culture into their culture. One way of achieving these cardinal responsibilities is for the environmental journalists to engage in effective coverage of the environment, highlighting environmental problems and issues. One of the cardinal functions of the mass media is to promote good health and moral behavior. Alozie (2011) strongly believes that the Nigerian newspapers and magazines should focus attention on such things

that will promote good health and moral behavior and such information should also include the dangers and consequences of doing otherwise on the individuals, their families, friends and the society at large".

Communication is very fundamental in actualizing sustainable development and the mass media provides a veritable channel through which communication reaches the audience. According to Adebayo (1990) in Kogah (2007:45) communication is the vehicle to mobilize, motivate, inform, educate and persuade the citizenry. It is the vehicle used by policy planners and implementers to reach vast majority of people with development messages". Environmental journalism should therefore, be used to bring to the awareness of the public harmful environmental practices and their consequences on the society. Such effective communication will also enable the policy makers plan on how to stop or tackle the issues on ground. The potential of rural broadcasting should be harnessed to educate the people on the implication of bush burning, deforestation and excavation and indiscriminate dumping of refuse to the environment and health of the people.

Through environmental education, environmental journalism also educate the public on unhealthy environmental practices that affect the society as well as practices that will promote good and sustainable environment. The role of environmental journalists in this regard becomes very important as man is ignorant of some of his activities that pollute the environment. Man also consciously pollutes the environment in the pursuit of economic ambition. In most of the rural and urban areas big animals like cows and pigs are slaughtered in open areas outside a properly constructed abattoir with functional drainage and water system. The decayed and maggot infested dung, blood and bones of the animals emit choking odor that pollutes the air. Traders also are in the habit of indiscriminate dumping of waste materials especially food stuffs which pollute the market environment. The increasing number of radio and television stations in the society as a result of 1992 deregulation policy on broadcasting which paved way for private ownership of electronic media is of great advantage in this regard as the media will educate the public on such harmful environmental practices.

The mass media through its programme should also engage in public education on the use of pit latrines which characterize mostly the rural areas. Such environmental and health education is necessary especially now that it is no longer the practice for sanitary inspectors to be visiting people's home. Through the surveillance role of the mass media, the environmental journalist exposes the activities of individuals and organizations and institutions that degrade the environment such as oil spillage and gas flaring associated with oil exploration and exploitation by oil companies in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. There are also other small, medium or large scale industries operating both in urban and semi-urban areas associated with discharge and dumping of industrial wastes in unauthorized places. The proliferation of broadcast media also amounts to an increase in the surveillance role of the media apart from indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and refuse; there is the practice of dumping unidentified corpses either in the bush or on the road in some rural and urban areas. The decomposed corpses stay for weeks before they are evacuated due to lack of timely information to the health authorities in the Local governments environmental journalism should be concerned with disseminating such information immediately for the attention of the relevant sanitary authorities.

Through environmental journalism, the needed information and enlightenment to formulate sustainable development policies are communicated to the relevant government authorities. Also by bringing the trend of -environmental issues to public awareness the environmental journalist sensitizes the government on policies that should wither be replaced or reviewed in line with social reality.

The environmental journalist should leverage the agenda setting power of the media to bring issues that either make or mar the environment into public consciousness to bring about social change.

This demands that the media gives adequate and prominent space and air time to environmental stories.

The mass media give voice to environmental activists and non- governmental organizations involved in the advocacy to preserve and protect the environment. These bodies through their activities are partners in progress with the government in the task of addressing potential environmental disasters capable of annihilating humanity just as they work to promote healthy environment.

Conclusion

Man drives the wheel of development. On the other hand, development occurs in the environment and man shapes the environment just as the environment shapes man. Since the life and progress of man in this planet earth is dependent on his environment, it is therefore, pertinent that the environment that nurtures him and his institution, the media should be given utmost priority attention.

One way of giving priority attention to the environment is by giving environmental issues and problems prominence in daily reportage of events and issues by the media. This will attract the attention of both the people and the government to evolve realistic environmental management plans can address the problems that retard sustainable development and those that promote it. Unfortunately, the mass media seem to be lacking in its responsibility of championing the cause of environmentally sustainable society for one reason or the other.

It is expected that the increasing number of broadcast and print media will offer the much needed platform to bring the gospel of healthy environment to the doorstep of the citizens. This can only be realized when the media operators begin to report environment issues with passion and where there are well trained journalist on environmental matters.

Recommendations

In the light of the challenges affecting practice of environmental journalism It is recommended that media outfits that do not operate special beat on the environment should do so with well-trained journalists assigned to man them. The beat should be given adequate space in the newspapers and magazines to be able to accommodate all manner of environmental stories and pictures.

Besides the usual straight news reports, the newspapers and magazines should use editorials, news analysis, feature stories and columns to highlight environmental problems and issues both pictorially and reportorially, with a view to enlightening the public on matters that promote or destroy the environment while the broadcast media should use news commentaries, phone-in programmes, talk shows etc. to promote interaction of man and his environment.

It is necessary indeed for both the print and electronic media to feature environmental experts in both interviews and other programmes by whatever nomenclature. Also research findings and conference speeches of such experts should be given adequate publicity in the media, bearing in mind that such findings and discoveries will be fractured into the nation's policies on environmental issues by the relevant authorities.

Lack of interest in environmental stories by journalists also underscores the need to organize training and retraining programmes such as workshops, conferences, seminars by the government and other stake holders to educate them on technical environmental issues as well as explain evolving environmental policies to them. Such training programmes should also be extended to mass communication lecturers, who are involved in training future journalists, in the form of "train the

trainers programme".

It is also recommended that Environmental Communication should be made compulsory as a course in the tertiary institution of learning. This will help future journalists understand the technicalities of environmental reporting while the members of the society exposed to the course will also understand the jargons associated with environmental issues when the media report environmental issues and problems.

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