

Environmental Reporting in Nigerian and Indian Newspapers: A Comparative Study of Factors Influencing Coverage.

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Abstract: This is a comparative assessment of the difficulties experienced in environmental reporting by environmental journalists in Nigeria and India. The study relied mainly on structured online interviews of twenty working journalists from each country. A survey of 500 respondents from each country was also used in the study to gauge public opinion about environmental reporting in newspapers. The study observed a similar trend in the challenges faced by environmental journalists in both countries. The results showed that environmental journalists in both countries work under some constraints from government agencies and officials, organisations and powerful individuals. Within newspapers organisations, there are internal censorship from newspaper owners and editors. Retraining of environmental journalists to equip them with the science and technicalities of environmental reporting was suggested a way to improve environmental reporting by newspapers.

Keywords: Nigerian newspapers, Indian newspapers, environment, environmental journalists, climate change, political pressure, greenhouse gas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication scholars and environmentalists have come to acknowledge the indispensable role of the media in environmental sustainability. The public depends on the media for accurate information for what is happening around them for prompt decision. The mass media is powerful because it appeals and is actually able to reach so many people from all ends of the social, economic and political spectrum (Yousaf, 2013). According to Nwabueze (2007) “when incidents with great significance to the environment and to the health of people take place in the society, the media expose such incidents and make the public aware of them.”

Of course, the media have a powerful influence in conveying information to the public (Andina-D'iaz, 2007). The exercise of this powerful influence in disseminating environmental news which should create environmental awareness among the public has been a subject of inquiries among researchers. It is believed that the media is at the centre of what the world makes out of the threat of the numerous existing and incipient environmental issues, given the media's agenda-setting role. Agenda-setting theory describes the news media's influence in telling the public what issues are important and, perhaps, galvanizing audiences to pressure government and other institutions to act (Freedman, 2014).

While there are international collaborations and national policies to tackle existing environmental problems, the greatest burden is ensuring de-escalation by limiting greenhouse gas emissions which is the major culprit. One important catalyst in reaching the milestone of sustainable environment is the media. The media is the vehicle that conveys environmental concerns to the public, and also shape public's perception and opinion about it. In this regard, the mass media have been generally accepted as both an important motivator and an indicator of public concern (Dasgupta, et al, 2000).

However, the media is not an isolated phenomenon. There are intersections between science, policy and the role of the media (Ukonu, et al, 2012) in reporting environmental issues. The policy, as stated here, is all inclusive of interferences to the traditional duty of the media to acquire and disseminate information unfettered. There are numerous examples of interferences by governmental and non-governmental bodies and individuals in the reporting of environmental news. In the guise of providing jobs for the people (Adegoke, 1994), the arms of government are twisted to condone nefarious anti-environmental activities and black out media reports against them. Governments, on their own, apply subtle but pervasive censorship by restricting media contents on projects that impacts on the environment negatively (Fu, et al, 2012) or hoard information on issues relating to government projects (Hasan, 2007).

Media coverage of environmental issues should be examined not in isolation, but inclusive of these intervening factors. This study looks into the various contending forces in newspaper reportage of environmental issues which affect the proficiency of environmental journalists and presentation of environmental news.

1.2 Newspapers and environmental news

Some researchers have highlighted the obstacles encountered by environmental journalists in the course of their work, though there is paucity of elaborate examination of the topic. These obstacles are the factors that determine the focus of textual matter, or contents of whatever is reported in the news, features and opinion (Ukonu, et al, 2012). O'Donnell and Rice (2008) called them practical influences that negatively affect media portrayals of climate change, nay, environmental issues. They went on to list them as reporter knowledge, misreporting or miscommunication, public misunderstanding, little training in science, time and space constraints and commercial pressures on media to be more profitable. These are not exhaustive, though, and they may differ from one place to another depending on the socio-political situation of where a journalist is operating.

Within the constraints of their operation, it may be unrealistic to expect the media to discharge the role expected of them within the environmental discourse. Ukonu, et al (2012) noted that "media coverage of climate change takes place in the larger context of regulatory framework, political constraints and economic drivers." This was corroborated by Luedecke and Boykoff (2017) when they gave example with climate change as a "highly politicized media topic, especially in the United States, illustrates how (powerful) groups with diverging political ideologies, worldviews, or economic interests heavily influence the public debate on climate change."

Guyot (2009) noted that "histories of the printed press and occupational myths tend to emphasise that journalists in most European countries have long been concerned about interferences from political authorities in the editorial sphere. But over time, other sources of potential influence, including advertising, commercial pressures, competition and other economic pressures became matters of concern." Among the constraints of environmental journalists in enforcement and compliance monitoring of the environment is the media's tendency to satisfy its commercial interest at the expense of social and scientific interest (Uwejamomere, 1994). The media has often been criticised for not being analytical in their presentation of environmental news. The sacrificing of scientific interest will only present event based environmental stories.

Another detrimental factor to environmental reporting is the threat of powerful individuals and groups (Adegoke, 1994). Explaining Nigerian experience in environmental enforcement in Africa, he stated that threats from these individuals and groups pose the greatest challenges to environmental enforcement in developing countries. He went further to explain that when such individuals and/or groups own industries they form themselves into associations, and become extremely formidable. They are joined by governments who aid them because of perceived economic or political interest (Fu, et al, 2012 and Hasan, 2007).

Freedman (2014) mentioned avoidance to controversy, lack of access to information, self-censorship, limited collaboration and inadequate professional skill as the barriers to coverage of trans border environmental issues in the Ferghana Valley of Central Asia. According to the study, these constraints led to reporting half-truth environmental news, fear to print the truth, and internal censorship by editors. These are part of the controversial issues Guyot (2009) said journalists have to cope with. He said, "the range of sensitive topics goes far beyond traditional political interferences and now includes self-censorship due to conflicts of interests with economic actors such as private media owners who have other industrial activities, advertisers or shareholders."

Journalistic norms are also said to have constituted negative influence on environmental news reporting. The embracement of balanced reporting and the need to be fair to both business and environmental stakeholders by reporters creates apparent conflict in environmental reporting (Williams, et al, (2012). Ukonu, et al (2012) opined that journalistic norms have affected the content of news stories on climate change. Not only on climate change but on all environmental issues.

2 MATERIALS AND METHOD

Both qualitative and quantitative methodology were employed to realise the objective of this study. The quantitative method involves random sampling population of 500 persons in Nigeria and India through a questionnaire. The questionnaires were mainly distributed among universities students and working-class people in order to elicit the right responses. This study draws heavily from structured interviews which were conducted by e-mailing open-ended questions to respondents. The respondents are journalists from different media organisations in Nigeria and India. Twenty practicing journalists were interviewed from each country. The answers to the questions were based on their experiences and knowledge. The aim was to find out the problems militating against the coverage of environmental news by journalists.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Ownership and circulation of newspapers

Nigeria and India operate a free press in which there are no covert censorship. Most, if not all, the newspapers in both countries are privately owned. Private businesses thrive on profit. This is the reason some interviewees identified ownership as a cog in the wheel of environmental reporting by journalists. These twenty percent (20%) of journalists interviewed from Nigeria adduced the business

interest of newspaper owners as affecting environmental issues coverage. One of the respondents simply quipped: “Newspaper owners don’t want environmental news because they fear it might affect their business”.

Another way ownership affects the coverage of environmental news in Nigeria, according to the respondents, is on the geographical location of the environmental issue. Nigerian newspapers are largely national in circulation, but seem to pay more attention to issues emanating from the zone or geographical area where the publisher hails from. A respondent provided this scenario: “If you look at all the national newspapers, you see that their coverage of environmental issues depends on where the owner comes from. If you look at newspapers like Guardian, it covers environmental issues in the South-south geopolitical zone more because the publisher is from there and will like to highlight issues affecting his people. The Sun newspapers also reports on issues affecting the South-east more because the owner is from there. We have less reports on environmental issues like desertification and deforestation affecting the northern part of Nigeria because we don’t have publishers of national newspapers from that zone. Environmental issues affecting northern Nigeria is mentioned in the papers when they become disasters”.

The above scenario presupposes that coverage of environmental news by newspapers in Nigeria is skewed along geo-political lines. This may account for why the highest reported local environmental issue in Guardian newspaper within the period of this study is oil spillage. It constituted 10.30% of all environmental news, second only to climate change which is a global environmental concern. A Nigerian journalist gave the reasons for this; “The newspapers focus on places they have the bulk of their readership. It is common knowledge that newspaper readership in Nigeria is along ethnic lines. If a publisher is from a particular ethnic group, his newspaper is seen by members of that ethnic group as projecting and protecting their interest. So, they will patronise the newspaper more. And the newspaper will naturally tilt towards events in that area.”

In India, forty percent (40%) of the journalists interviewed noted ownership of newspapers as a major hinderance to environmental news gathering. They opined that some newspaper owners have vested economic or political interests in some organisations and companies involved in activities affecting the environment. A respondent said: “editors generally say no to environmental issues coverage. And I believe that when they say that, they are speaking the mind of the paymasters.”

We may not understand the exact reasons why the owners of newspapers are not comfortable with environmental news, but a respondent provided an insight; “major newspapers in India have sympathy for one political party or the other. And the companies and individuals engaged in environmental pollution are sympathetic to some political interests also. These things are avoided in order not to ruffle some political feathers or business interests of colleagues”.

The impact of newspaper circulation in the coverage of environmental issues in India is manifest on the structure of national newspapers in the country. Newspapers like The Hindu and The Times of India operate as conglomerates. Their regional publishing outfits have editorial autonomy over contents. As a result, there is no national coverage of environmental issues except when loss of lives occurs.

3.2 Lack of knowledge of environmental issues by environmental journalists

Eighty percent (80%) of journalists interviewed in Nigeria averred that most environmental journalists lack knowledge of environmental issues while ten percent (10%) of respondents in India have same opinion. From the survey, over thirty percent (30.60%) of Nigerians also believe that journalists do not have adequate knowledge of environmental issues. In India, the percentage of sampled population who believe journalists lack appropriate knowledge of environmental issues is 27.20%. Lack of knowledge of environmental issues by environmental journalists is evidenced in their presentation of environmental reports as news instead of analysis that can educate the public. This is a general problem with environmental reporting. A Nigerian respondent attributed the lack of knowledge of environmental issues by journalists to the nature of the profession. “Journalism is an omnibus profession, a jack of all trades, sort of. Training of journalists is not tailored to a particular profession but to all professions. It is expected that a journalist should know a little about every subject. That is why you have different beats such as aviation, education, judiciary, sports, fashion, science, environment, etc, in newsrooms. These beats are not manned by professionals in those areas but by journalists”.

The curriculum of journalism studies may be omnibus as observed by the respondent above but it does not limit professionalism which emanates from experience. An environmental journalist is expected to attain professionalism in a subject he has manned over time. The major factor in attaining professionalism in environmental news reporting is interest. Without interest in the subject, there will be no desire to improve ones’ knowledge and skill in communicating environmental issues to the understanding of the public. Knowledge is important in understanding what environmental issues are and reporting them to the understanding of the masses.

Event reporting pattern of environmental issues by environmental journalists is attributed to deficiency of knowledge of environmental issues. Many respondents opined that environmental journalists will be able to analyse environmental issues when they acquire expert knowledge of the subject. “Environmental issues involve sciences. Ordinary journalism cannot explain it properly. Any journalist who wants to be an expert environmental reporter must study the science and technicalities involved in environmental issues”, one respondent said. Here comes the role of training courses in the knowledge of journalists about environmental issues. Concerning attending environmental courses as a way to improve proficiency of journalists in environmental reporting, 24.20% of the surveyed population from Nigeria and 11.40% from India saw it as the solution.

The argument is that since some journalists did not have science background, courses on environmental science will be of immense benefit to them. An Indian journalist interviewed said: *“journalism studies in Indian universities are very much compartmentalised unlike in some other countries. In some countries, you do some science courses in your first year as a journalism student. Though it may not be enough to give one a sound science background, but it helps”*. The journalists themselves (those who were interviewed) emphasised the need for retraining of environmental journalists for optimum performance. Eighty percent (80%) of interviewees from Nigeria suggested retraining of environmental journalists to acquaint them with the technicalities of environmental reporting. Interestingly, there was no such suggestion from Indian journalists who were interviewed.

Another factor that featured prominently in the discussion of lack of knowledge of environmental issues by environmental journalists is the place of research in environmental reporting. Research will increase the knowledge of journalists on environmental issues and help them to interpret and educate the public about them. It is assumed among respondents that lack of research by environmental journalists is one of the things responsible for event-reporting approach presentation of environmental news. Thirty percent (30%) of Nigerian journalists and forty percent (40%) of Indian journalists interviewed recommended research as a necessary tool for improving the capacity building of environmental journalists. Results from the random survey conducted indicates that 38.60% of Nigerians sampled and 43% of Indians sampled also considered research by environmental journalists as necessary for improvement of coverage of environmental issues.

The inability of environmental journalists to proffer solutions to environmental problems in their articles is seen by respondents as another manifestation of their lack of knowledge of environmental issues. The observation that newspaper owners and editors do not want environmental news may be discouraging to environmental journalists, but it is also believed that the display of expertise and knowledge in environmental reporting can sway their minds. Over fifty-one percent (51.80%) and sixty percent (60.20%) of sampled Nigerians and Indians respectively believed that environmental articles in newspapers do not proffer any solutions to environmental problems. An interviewed journalist from India is not surprised though because *“it requires in-depth understanding and analysis of any environmental problem to proffer solution”*.

3.3 Advertisement and Revenue considerations

Advertisement and revenue considerations by newspaper houses was identified as another hurdle to environmental news reporting by environmental journalists. Twenty percent (20%) of Nigerian respondents and forty percent (40%) of Indian respondents attributed lack of interest in environmental news by owners and editors of newspapers to the fear of losing advertisements and revenue if their newspapers write against activities of firms whose operations are inimical to the environment. A journalist from Nigeria quipped; *“there’s a saying that one should not bite the finger that feeds him. Newspaper publishing is like any other business. It is driven by profit which comes majorly from advertising. We cannot jeopardise the business of any company that advertises with us. If we feel strongly about the adverse effects of the company’s operations on the environment, we talk to them privately, not on the pages of newspaper”*.

In Nigeria, the heaviest advertisers are telecommunication companies. According to Financial Nigeria Magazine, MTN spent N4.7billion; Airtel – N4.1billion; Etisalat – N3.7billion; and Globacom – N3.7billion in advertisements in 2015. Media outfits usually scramble for the advertisements of these companies despite the environmental hazards of their operations. In a study in France on Investigation on the health of people living near mobile telephone relay stations: Incidence according to distance and sex, Santini et al (2002) *“found a variety of self-reported symptoms for people who reported that they were living within 300metres (984 ft) of GSM cell towers in rural areas, or within 100metres (328 ft) of base stations in urban areas. Fatigue, headache, sleep disruption and loss of memory were among the symptoms reported. Similar results have been obtained with GSM cell towers in Spain, Egypt, Poland and Austria. No major studies have been reported in which health effects did not occur on actual populations living near mobile base stations”*.

An Indian journalist interviewed noted that *“environmental news does not attract sponsors and sometimes creates conflict of interests in media organisations”*. It rather attracts threats from some big companies when their development projects are associated with environmental pollution. Environmental journalists who have been threatened said it can come in various ways. One said, *“it can come through your editor who will without any reason kill a story you invested so much time and energy in. And when you ask why, you will just be told to be careful.”*

Another journalist from Nigeria acknowledged threats associated with environmental reporting but said, *“threat is part of journalism work. We are used to it. The only thing peculiar with that of environmental reporting is that it comes from corporate organisations who will try to induce the journalist financially or resort to outright threat. Sometimes, the threats are veiled”*. He went on to narrate his experience as a property/environmental editor in a national newspaper in Nigeria. *“A construction company was developing a building estate on a reclaimed portion of Atlantic Ocean in a city in Nigeria. Knowing the environmental dangers of such a venture, I asked the construction company for the Environmental Impact Assessment of the project. But instead of them to provide the EIA, they resorted to threats.”*

The public is also aware of the conflict of interest in media organisations with regards to the coverage of environmental issues. In the survey conducted, thirteen percent (13%) of Nigerian sample population and twenty-three percent (23.40%) of Indian sample population

thought the fear of losing advertisements and revenue as one of the problems environmental journalists face in the execution of their duties. It is believed by many that corporate interference in environmental reporting is worse than that of government.

3.4 Lack of interest in environmental news by the public

Lack of public interest in environmental news is considered as one of the reasons for its low coverage by newspapers. It is adduced by respondents as one of the impediments for environmental journalists. Whereas Nigerian journalists interviewed did not see lack of public interest in environmental news as of any significance, twenty percent (20%) of interviewed Indian journalists said it constituted a problem to environmental journalists. *“No one produces a product that has no demand. Readers are more interested in politics, sports, fashion, etc than they are in environment. Maybe they see environmental news as too technical or abstract for their understanding.”*

Another interviewee noted that proper environmental reporting requires the collaboration and participation of the public. He said, *“one problem that journalists face in environmental reporting is getting the right data. Most often these data are got from government agencies but there are some data that the public can provide. Getting accurate statistics requires people’s participation but it is not easy to get them to participate voluntarily unless some material gains are promised them.”* People’s lack of interest in environmental news is a big gap in environmental discourse. Times of India newspaper has tried to cover this gap by introducing citizen journalism where members of the public can post photos of environmental nuisance in the society. However, this channel for public participation in environmental news may not be known to most people.

On how environmental journalists can arouse the interest of the public on environmental news, this respondent recommended interactive approach with members of the public on environmental issues. According to him, this approach will create awareness on environmental issues among the people. It will also help to educate them. *“The public will take environmental issues serious when they realise that environmental issues concern their daily lives, and the dangers they pose”*, he said.

Another possible limitation to the interest of the public in environmental news is the language used by environmental journalists in crafting environmental news. Forty-three percent (43%) of interviewees from Nigeria considered use of simple language in environmental communication as the panacea to public apathy to environmental news. Thirty percent (30%) of journalists from India thought likewise. One of them said, *“The ordinary people cannot understand the scientific language of environmental issues. That is, perhaps, why the subject does not enjoy massive following. The environmental journalist is expected to use simple language and terms to make readers understand the concept. Interest will be built as long as they can understand environmental articles.”*

From the random survey, over thirty-three percent (33.80%) of Nigerians agreed that there is lack of interest in environmental news by the public. In India, about twenty-eight percent (28.80%) agreed to this. These number of samples did not only agree to the lack of interest, they also suggested ways to cultivate the interest of the public in it. Survey results showed that 42.20% of respondents from Nigeria and 30.80% from India suggested the use of simple language in environmental reporting will make it more understandable and encourage public interest in environmental news.

It is also believed by respondents that the use of photographs will help to attract the interest of the public to environmental issues in newspapers. Among interviewed journalists from both countries, sixty percent (60%) from Nigeria and thirty percent (30%) from India stressed the importance of photographs in communicating environmental news to the public. A Nigerian journalist said, *“Photographs attract readers to stories they wouldn’t have otherwise read. When someone is attracted to a photograph, the next thing will be to know what the photograph is all about, and that will lead the person to reading the story.”* He encouraged environmental journalists to endeavour using photographs in their stories. An Indian respondent believes that photographs will communicate environmental messages to the public better than words. *“when people see the smog or thick smoke from bush burning, they can readily understand the message. The photographs of flood, refuse dump or dry river can arouse environmental sensitivity in people’s mind.”*

The opinion of journalists is not different from that of the public. Among the sampled population, 37.60% of Nigerians agreed that supporting environmental stories with photographs would enhance the understanding of environmental issues by the public. Indian population accepted that view also. Forty-eight percent (48%) of them said so. Environmental journalists will therefore need to ditch the “run of the mill” attitude to environmental news writing for a creative and imaginative style.

3.5 Political pressure

Another challenge faced by environmental journalists which was identified during the interview is political pressure. Forty percent (40%) of interviewed journalists from both countries acknowledged political pressure and lack of co-operation from government officials as major constraints to effective coverage of environmental issues by journalists. Political interference in environmental reporting is believed to be common in certain government projects where information is hoarded. A respondent from India said, *“Politically, some of them are not allowed to cover certain issues or areas. Government bodies do not help them. Newspapers don’t like to dedicate a full page to these issues, so the journalists face a lot of issues as there are political reasons behind them, and corruption stops those issues coming out in the media.”*

Political interference in environmental news reporting is common. Government officials often present themselves as cogs in the wheel of environmental sustainability. According to a Nigerian journalist, *“most government projects are carried out without any verifiable environmental impact assessment (EIA). They harass, intimidate and sometimes blacklist journalists who tried to query them from*

attending functions organised by them.” Another Indian journalist collaborated the above assertion by saying, “red-tapism and issues from private builders and government officials who do not want environmental issues to be highlighted is a big concern to environmental journalists.”

From the survey result, 27.40% of Nigerians considered political interference in environmental reporting as one of the problems faced by journalists. In India, 29.20% of survey result also acknowledged the existence of political interference in environmental news gathering. These respondents believe that the solution to the interference is boldness on the part of the journalists in reporting the environment.

3.6 Few number of environmental journalists.

Not having enough environmental journalists to cover environmental issues was regarded by some Nigerian journalists who were interviewed as a challenge to existing or available environmental journalists. Ten percent (10%) of the respondents said that paucity of environmental journalists is one of the factors affecting the reportage of environmental issues in newspapers. They thought there were few environmental journalists reporting numerous environmental issues, and that it would affect specialization and proficiency. One of them said, “when a newspaper has only one reporter on environment desk, it means the reporter alone will cover all the environmental issues. There are plenty environmental issues – climate change, weather, flood, air and noise pollution, emissions, etc. - all these are too many for one journalist to cover”.

Effective coverage of environmental issues requires some specialization acquired over time through experience from covering a particular environmental issue. This is what journalists are lacking when they are burdened with the coverage of all environmental issues. Another journalist who was interviewed remarked; “professionalism and expertise are the results of doing a particular thing over a considerable period of time. This is what will happen when different journalists are assigned to different environmental issues. The situation on ground now cannot ensure that.” According to him, this is the only thing that will guarantee well-researched and educative environmental articles.

A visit to some newspaper organisations during the study revealed that some newspapers do not have environmental desk or a specific journalist that covers environmental issues. Environmental news in such newspapers are covered like any other news. Perhaps, that is why environmental news are event and disaster driven. These respondents accompanied their observation with a call for the employment of more journalists by newspaper organisations.

The survey result showed an alignment to the view of the journalists. Over nine percent (9.40%) of survey result suggested the employment of more journalists by newspaper organisations as a means of improving the coverage of environmental issues. From India, 26.40% of survey respondents also advocated for the employment of more environmental journalists for effective coverage of environmental news.

According to the findings of this study, one of the things newspapers need to do to improve environmental awareness among the people is more regular reporting of environmental issues. Over thirty-four percent (34.20%) and 22.20% of respondents from Nigeria and India respectively made this submission. Regular reporting of environmental issues in newspapers requires the employment of more journalists by newspapers.

4 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to examine the challenges confronting environmental journalists in Nigeria and India in covering environmental issues for newspapers. The study concludes that environmental journalists in both countries encounter similar difficulties in the course of their duty. These challenges encountered by journalists are of two categories – the outside pressure coming from government officials, political and economic organisations and powerful individuals, and in-house censorship of environmental stories emanating from newspaper owners and editors. Professionalism has its own challenge as it was identified that most environmental journalists lack the prerequisite qualification to report scientific and technical issue like environment. Employment of more environmental journalists by media houses, use of simple language, photographs and well researched articles in environmental reporting were recommended.

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