



An Ethnographic Study of the Impacts of Local Newspapers in the Socio-Political and Economic Development of Some Rural Communities in Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study is an examination of the impacts of local newspapers on the social, political and economic development of rural communities in Oyo State, Nigeria. A focused ethnographic design was used, and the data was collected over a period of 12 weeks in Awe, Igboora, and Saki through participant observation, 98 interviews, 9 Focus Group Discussions, and document analysis. Based on Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory, it was found out that local newspapers serve as the community “town crier” by disseminating health, education, and project information. Politically, the papers are used to promote participation, accountability and voter education by checking and balancing government promises and local issues. Economically, they support SMEs through advertising and provide market prices information that guides trade. It was also discovered that poor funding and low advertising revenue are banes to sustaining them. The study is anchored on the Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory. The methodology used is a focused ethnography. The study, in conclusion, stated that local newspapers are viable and vital tools for developing rural communities in Oyo State. The study therefore recommended that government patronage, NGO partnerships, and community support will go a long way to sustaining the roles of local newspapers in grassroots development.

Keywords: Local Newspapers, Rural development, Ethnography, Development Media, Oyo State.

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Introduction

Newspaper is one of the earliest channels of communication through which information is disseminated to the masses of the people worldwide. It is used in developing both the rural and urban areas all over the world. It is meant to provide information to the people about the events and happenings locally and internationally, educate the masses on virtually all things, entertain the

people after the fatigue of daily works and create relaxation avenues, mobilize the people and enlighten them about their civic duties and obligations toward the state, and facilitate development to every nooks and crannies of the nation. Newspapers have been utilized variously to achieve a lot of things in the past. The missionaries employed the media (print) to spread the gospel of Jesus in Nigeria, Africa and other continents of the world.

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Through the channel, independence have been gained from the colonial masters, developmental projects have been facilitated, cultural heritages have been conserved and transmitted from generation to other generations, economic transformations have been experienced, political values have been upheld, nations have been built, renovations, transformations, reconstructions, rehabilitations and remaking have been done, and a lot more achieved.

The same way, the local newspapers have been employed to facilitate development to the rural areas. Through local newspapers, transformation have been experienced, local communities have new facelift, developed and reshaped to wear sophisticated look socially, politically and economically. The local newspapers are used as a tool to reconstruct, reshape, rehabilitate and remake the rural areas positively through developmental communication, reporting updates about the rural areas, covering news, events, and happenings and by informing, educating, entertaining, mobilizing, facilitating developmental projects to the areas in question.

The impacts of local newspapers cannot be underestimated in the developmental discourses. The local newspapers are employed for social mobilization, cultural transmission, political mobilization, awareness creation, economic empowerment and promotion, jobs creation, facilitation of economic engagement to the rural areas, and

improvement in the buying and selling of local products and agricultural products. It is equally used to disseminate the policies of the government to the residents of the rural areas and conveys the needs and yearnings of the local residents to the government. The impacts of the local newspapers in the development of the rural communities is tremendous that we cannot but appreciate them and we cannot jettison them in the developmental process.

Theoretical Framework

The theories used for this study are: **Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory**. Both theories explain the role of the press in nation-building and community development which have direct relationship with the use of local newspapers in rural development and transformation.

Development Media Theory as propounded in the 1960s explains the role of the mass media in developing countries. The proponents of this theory argued that Western media models were not suitable for nation-building in post-colonial states. McQuail (2010), opined that Development Media Theory has it that “the media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy”. The theory emphasizes that in developing countries, the media must prioritize information for economic, social and political development over mere entertainment or criticism.

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The Social Responsibility Theory as propounded by Hutchins Commission in the United States of America in 1947 and later adapted to global media systems as documented by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) in their book titled *Four Theories of the Press*, stated that “the Press has certain obligations to society; to provide truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of events, to serve as a forum for the exchange of comments and criticism, and to present a representative picture of constituent groups in society”. The theory is calling for a responsible representation of the press in its reportage of events in the society. The tenets of this theory is that the press has the obligation to provide accurate information needed for self-governance, hold government and leaders accountable to the people, and avoid content that can cause social disharmony but instead promote unity (Ekeanyanwu, 2009).

Both Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory see media as agents of development. They suggest that the media should support development projects and mobilize citizens for national goals (Soola, 2007). Also, they both emphasize that media content should focus on reconstruction, poverty eradication, literacy, and health (Nwosu, 1990). The theories also maintain that the media should cooperate with government while remaining responsible to the public (Akinfeleye, 2003). Both theories complement each other in

explaining how local newspapers can be employed to develop rural communities in Oyo State.

Development Media Theory provides the developmental mandate – that local newspapers must actively support the social, political and economic transformation (McQuail, 2010), while Social Responsibility Theory provides the ethical mandate – that in so doing, the local newspapers must be truthful, balanced and accountable to the people (Siebert, *et al.* 1956). The two theories therefore suggest that local newspapers should give responsible information on government projects, educate for development on health and agriculture, mobilize citizens for collective action, and transform the image of the local communities through ethical reporting. The study therefore adopts both Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory to examine how local newspapers can be effectively used to develop the social, economic and political aspects of the local communities.

Methodology

Research Design

The methodology used is the **Ethnographic Design**. Ethnography is appropriate for this study because the topic is about impact in context. It enables the researcher to examine how local newspapers are used, talked about, and acted upon in daily rural life. For this study, **Focused Ethnography** is most suitable because it targets a specific issue – the impacts of local newspapers- within

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a defined setting. Focused ethnographic designs were selected using 3 communities in Oyo State, 1 each from Oyo Central, Oyo South and Oyo North Senatorial Districts.

The Research Site and Participants

Sites: Three (3) rural communities with active local newspapers circulation: Saki in Saki West LGA, Igboora in Ibarapa Central LGA, and Awe in Oyo East LGA were chosen because of the presence of community newspapers like Oke Ogun Today, Oyo Insights and Ibarapa News. **Participants:** Purposive and Snowball Sampling were used. 25-30 participants were selected among the regular local newspapers readers, newspapers vendors and distributors, community leaders, Baales, and CDAs, Local Government officials, SME owners who place adverts in the newspapers, youths and women group leaders.

Data Collection Methods

Ethnographic Data Collection Plan for this Study include: **Participant Observation:** The researcher spends 4 weeks in each community, attended town hall meetings, market days and 'reading spots' where people gather to read and discuss newspapers, and takes daily field note. The observation they did allows the researcher to see what people do, not just what they say they do. **Ethnographic Interviews:** In-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted for 30-40 key people in the communities. Questions

were conversational. e.g. "when this newspaper wrote that story about the road, what happened next?" Descriptive questions were asked 'to make the familiar strange'. **Focus Group Discussions:** 3 FGDs of 8-10 people were organised in each of the communities. It comprises of 1 with women, 1 with youths, and 1 with community leaders. The FGDs revealed 'shared cultural interviews were missed. **Document and Artifact Analysis:** A collection of 6 months of local newspaper editions, handbills, meeting minutes, and WhatsApp group screenshots where newspapers stories are shared were used. The documents provide 'historical and cultural context'

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Expected themes like 'The Newspaper as Town Crier', 'Paper Talk and Community Action', and 'Advertisement as Rural Economy' were used as themes in analysing the data collected. **Domain Analysis** was done to identify broad categories like 'Ways of getting newspaper', 'Types of stories discussed', 'Actions taken after reading'. **Taxonomic Analysis:** This breaks domains into parts. e.g. Under 'Economic Impact', 'Job Adverts', 'Market prices', 'Business promotions'

Literature Review

Local Newspapers and Social Development of Rural Areas.

Local newspapers are used as tools for promoting health, education, and

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cultural values and heritages of the people in the rural areas. With the local newspapers as an instrument to facilitate development, more hospitals or primary healthcare facilities are built and equipped with necessary drugs in them; more classrooms are built and equipped with the necessary chairs, tables and other learning facilities; and cultural values and heritages are transmitted to the younger generations. Omenugha (2010) discovered that “community newspapers in Nigeria played significant roles in peace-building, social reorientation, and dissemination of public health information after communal conflicts”. Melkote and Steeves (2001) opined that “development communication through local media empowers people to take charge of their own development through information and participation”. This opinion of local media by Melkote and Steeve (2001) is significant as it discusses how the residents in the local areas utilize information at their disposal for development purposes and how it enables the local dwellers to take charge and participate in their own affairs. It simply suggests that the local media are important if development is anticipated in the local areas.

Local Newspapers and the Political Development of Rural Areas

Politically, the impacts of local newspapers on the development of local areas is essential. The media facilitate political participation and accountability.

It enables the residents of local areas to partake in the political affairs of their areas, the state and nation at large. They are used to mobilize and conscientize the people and to enable them to air their views while participating in their own affairs and to make their representatives in government accountable. Akinfeleye (2003) argued that “the Nigerian press at the state and local level remains the most effective vehicle for political mobilization and for holding leaders accountable in rural areas”. Ekeanyanwu (2009) established that “local newspapers increase civic engagement by reporting on local government activities, elections, and policy issues that affect the people directly”. With local newspapers, the civic and political engagements like reports on local government and electoral activities, policy matters and so on as they affect people in the localities are reported.

Local Newspapers and the Economic Development of Rural Areas.

In the area of the economy, local newspapers are the significant means of transmitting market information, advertising and promotion of government programmes. They are also used to promote agriculture. Uche (1989) stated that “local newspapers are critical in promoting agricultural extension, cooperative societies, and small-scale enterprises in rural Nigeria”. Similarly, Udeze (2012), in a study of Southwest Nigeria came up with the fact that “advertising in community newspapers

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significantly improved patronage of local markets and awareness of micro-credit schemes". Through the local newspapers, patronage is given to local products because awareness is created and many rural residents have access to micro-finance facilities to improve their local produce.

Local Newspapers in the Southwest Nigeria

The Southwest geopolitical zone comprises of Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti and Lagos States has a long history of local press because of the high level of western education and literacy cum political consciousness.

Historically, Southwest is known for being the origin of newspaper journalism in Nigeria. This fact was established when Akinfeleye (2003) traced the origin of print media to *Iwe Iroyin* published in Abeokuta in 1859, noting that "the Yoruba people embraced the press early as a tool for education and political expression". This was substantiated when Akinwumi (2010) did a study in Oke Ogun area of Oyo State and came to a conclusion that "local newspapers increased political participation and awareness of development projects in rural communities". On his own, Adebayo (2015) conducted an examination of community papers in Oyo State and discovered that "local reporting increased awareness of health and education programmes in rural communities by 38%". Soola (2007) observed that in Ogun

State, "local newspapers serve as platforms for promoting cooperative societies and agricultural development among Yoruba farmers". Akinwumi, (2010) and Ogunsiji, (2018) in their researches across the Southwest, agreed that local newspapers help to "reconstruct community identity, rehabilitate neglected areas, and remake the narrative of development from the grassroots".

Summarily, local newspapers in Nigeria are conceptualized as grassroots media functioning as the platforms for promoting information, education, and mobilization. Their application to development covers social, political, and economic areas. In the Southwest, their roles are both historical and contemporary in promoting political awareness, literacy and economic activities because the region adopted the press early for its culture and agrarian economy. In the words of Okunna (2003), "the strength of local newspapers lies in their ability to speak directly to the people about issues that affect their daily lives, thereby making development a participatory process".

Findings and Discussion

The focused ethnographic fieldwork were conducted in 3 rural communities in Oyo State namely, Awe, Igboora and Saki taken from the 3 Senatorial Districts of the state were generated using participant observation. 98 in-depth ethnographic interviews, 9 Focus Group Discussions were analysed

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on the newspaper editions and community documents.

The analysis is guided by the theories employed for the study, that is, Development Media Theory and Social Responsibility Theory. Development Media Theory holds that media in developing nations should support national development goals (McQuail, 2010), while Social Responsibility Theory posits that the press has obligations to society to provide truthful, relevant information for self-governance (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956).

The findings are presented thematically to demonstrate how local newspapers are incorporated in the day-to-day life of the people and the meanings the residents attached to them.

Theme 1: Social Development - 'The Newspaper as our Town Crier'

In all the 3 communities, local newspapers are used primarily as the source of community information. During participant observation at the 5 "newspaper reading joints" in Awe, the researcher observed that 20-35 people gathered every Friday to listen to stories read aloud. A Baale in Awe noted that "this paper is our notice board. When government wants to do borehole, when there is outbreak of disease(s), the paper informs us first. Radio does not mention Awe". Respondent 8. In Igboora, FGD with women revealed that a 3-week health campaign in Oyo Insight Community Edition on maternal health led 18 of 25 women to attend a free clinic.

A woman retorted: "If the paper did not write it with our pictures, we would not have believed it was real". It was shown in document analysis that 60% of social stories covered education, health and festivals. This finding is in line with Development Media Theory. McQuail (2010), believed that in developing societies, media should 'give priority to information for development'. By reporting localized events, education, and cultural events, the newspapers are directly contributing to social awareness and behavioural change. It also shows Social Responsibility Theory. Siebert, *et al.* (1956) opined that the press must "serve the political system" and "inform the public". The newspapers are supplying essential information that are jettisoned by the national newspapers to the public. This therefore enables the residents to make informed decisions about their welfare (Akinfeleye, 2003).

Theme 2: Political Development - "From Paper to Palace": Mobilization and Accountability

It was discovered that local newspapers are central to political engagement. During the 2024 council elections, all 3 local newspapers had candidates profiles published and kept records of their campaign promises. In Saki, participant observation at a community meeting showed residents in confrontation with a councillor representing their ward with a 2-month old newspaper clipping on an abandoned road project. A youth leader said: "we

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keep the paper, when they come to lie during election, we open the page and ask them". Respondent 52.

In Igboora FGD, 18 of 20 participants said they discussed newspapers editorials before voting. One elder stated: "National papers talk Abuja. This paper talks our road, our police. So we listen to it".

This shows the watchdog role Social Responsibility Theory prescribed. The theory makes it clear that the media "be a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism" and to "hold government accountable" (Siebert, *et al.*). The newspapers are the avenues through which residents of rural communities question their leaders, thus empowering grassroots democracy. This is also in line with the tenet of Development Media Theory which states media's role in promoting political participation (McQuail, 2010). The newspapers promote local political issues so thereby making politics relevant and actionable for rural residents, aligning with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda setting role.

Theme 3: Economic Development - "Advertisement na Money": Market Linkages and SME Growth.

Economic impact was made obvious in advertising and market information. Interview with 22 SME owners revealed that 17 of them rely on local newspapers for customers. A yam trader in Saki market opined: "When Oke Ogun Today published yam price last month, we all adjusted. If not, buyers

from Ibadan would have cheated us". Respondent 33. A tailor in Awe reported that an advert for "Eid Agbada Discount" brought customers from 3 neighbouring villages. Content analysis of 3 months of editions showed that 38% of adverts were for farm produce, artisans, and job vacancies.

The finding is a direct fulfilment of Development Media Theory. McQuail (2010) stated that media should "promote economic development by providing information about markets and opportunities". The newspapers are considered as the rural marketplace, reducing information asymmetry between buyers and sellers. Soola (2007) stated that "development communication must address the economic realities of the people." By publishing prices and business adverts, the newspapers are improving livelihoods and supporting local entrepreneurship, which is critical for rural economic development.

Theme 4: Challenge - "Owo Nko?" The Threat of Economic Unsustainability.

In spite of the social, political and economic impacts discussed, the major challenge is funding. All the newspaper vendors interviewed mentioned low sales and late supply. An editor in Igboora lamented saying: "Government and big companies don't advertise with us. They say we are small. But we are the ones reporting flood in this village. Meanwhile, observation revealed that some editions had reduced to 4 pages due to printing costs.

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This challenge violates both theories. Social Responsibility Theory assumes a viable press to perform its duties (Siebert, *et al.* 1956). Without advertising revenue and institutional support, the newspapers cannot sustain investigative or development reporting. Also, from Development Media Theory angle, McQuail (2010) had it that media need support to carry out development tasks. The neglect by government and corporate advertisers threatens the ability of these newspapers to continue being useful for the development of the rural communities.

Conclusion

The ethnographic method employed in carrying out this study makes us to come to the conclusion that local newspapers are essential development institutions in rural Oyo State. They serve as active agents for shaping social behaviours, promote political participation and enhance economic activities and not just information dissemination channels.

Findings established that the assertions made by Development Media Theory that media in developing societies must prioritize information that promotes national and community development goals (McQuail, 2010). The local newspapers in Saki, Awe and Igboora are performing the functions that touch the local communities' residents by directly reporting the issues relating to them.

Furthermore, the study also confirms that Social Responsibility Theory tenet that the press has

obligations to society to provide accurate, relevant information and to act as a watchdog (Siebert, *et al.* 1956). The study shows that the local newspapers are tracking government projects and publishing local issues by ensuring citizens participation in governance and holding leaders accountable.

Facing the sustainability challenge, deliberate support for development must be accorded the newspapers to avoid decline. This must be done by understanding the institutions that sustain the local newspapers in Oyo State for sustainability. Local newspapers, therefore, contribute significantly to the social, political and economic development of rural communities in Oyo State, but their continuity hangs on the ability to address the economic and structural challenges facing them.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are made based on the findings and theoretical frameworks:

Government at both state and local government levels should adopt a policy that will enable the local residents' patronage of local newspapers for public notices, health campaigns, and project announcements. This is in line with Development Media Theory which calls for media-government partnership in development.

There should be a rural media support fund to subsidize printing costs for community newspapers by the

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governments at the local government levels.

Media owners and publishers should train reporters in development journalism to improve the quality of reporting health, education, agriculture and governance.

Publishers should also diversify revenue by offering packages for SMEs, traditional rulers, and CDAs. This will strengthen their Social Responsibility to provide information that empowers citizens.

Local newspapers in Oyo State should partner with NGOs for grassroots campaigns since community members trust and act on information from the local newspapers.

Community leaders should institutionalize the purchase of local newspapers in town meetings; and readers should also support the papers by buying copies and patronizing advertisers for sustainability.

More ethnographic studies should be conducted on community media by the scholars.

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