

Agriculture on Nigerian Television: A Critique of Current Practice

by Lai Oso*

Abstract

This article examines the type, objectives and availability of agricultural programmes on Nigerian television based on an examination of the social structure. Agricultural programmes were limited in focus, perspective and range of issues treated. The programmes were mainly concerned with the transfer of technology and ideas to the neglect of other crucial socio-structural issues.

Because it has been difficult to get sponsors for agricultural programmes, unlike entertainment programmes which dominate the prime viewing hours, the policy of commercialisation is responsible for the lack of agricultural programmes on Nigerian television.

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L'Agriculture à la Télévision Nigérienne: Une Analyse Critique des Pratiques Actuelles

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Résumé

Cet article examine les programmes agricoles - type, objectifs et disponibilité - à la télévision nigérienne. Les programmes s'intéressent principalement au transfert de technologie et des idées au dépens d'autres problèmes cruciaux d'ordre socio-culturel.

L'article examine aussi l'effet de la politique actuelle de commercialisation sur la programmation de la télévision. Selon l'article cette politique est responsable de la disparition des programmes agricoles à la télévision nigérienne.

Introduction

From whatever theoretical or ideological perspective we may view the social role of the mass media in general and television in particular, it is generally agreed that they constitute a crucial variable in the development process of any society. Even in developing countries like Nigeria and Ghana, governments and individuals invest a great deal of resources in the mass media because these media are credited with a lot of power and influence. The intellectual roots of this belief could be found in the works of Western scholars like Lerner, Pye and Schramm, among others. According to Schramm (1964).

... Countries in a hurry cannot afford the luxury of ... an inert mass. They require the active and informed cooperation of their village people as well as their city people. Their human resources are indispensable. Therefore, they are going to have to speed the flow of information, offer education where it has never been offered before, teach literacy and technical skills very widely. This is the only way they can rouse and prepare their populace to climb the economic mountains, and the only way they can do it and keep the timetable they have in mind is to make full use of modern, communication (Schramm, 1964).

The mass media have been charged with the role of diffusion of innovation, social mobilization, attitude change and the creation of psychic mobility and empathy, and in Nigeria, it is not different. For instance, the Second National Development Plan (1970-74) saw the role of public communication as "mobilizing massive support for national development measures and programmes" (Agbaje, 1986). Speaking at the inauguration of WNTV at Ibadan in 1959, Chief Obafemi Awolowo said TV was to "serve as a teacher, entertainer and stimulus to us all to transform Nigeria into a modern and prosperous nation" (Aina, 1990). The conventional view, which is still dominant in the development thinking of Nigeria's public communication and campaign policy-makers, is to regard the mass media as tools to be used to pass official information and development ideas from an enlightened urban-based elite to the illiterate, tradition-bound masses in the rural areas. The mass media are the great teachers and the mobilizers for change. They are there to mobilize human resources by substituting new norms and values, attitudes and behaviours for existing ones in order to stimulate the rural dwellers to increase their productivity. Development, seen mainly within an economic perspective, is aimed at higher productivity and an increase in GDP and national income. It is the values which support this ideology of hard work that the mass

media are supposed to transmit.

Within the last few years, the role of the mass media in development, especially rural development, has received added emphasis. This has come mainly from the shift in development planning toward rural development through such programmes as DFRRI and Better Life for Rural Women.

Generally, people speak of rural development as agricultural development. This is understandable in the sense that almost 80% of the rural population of Nigeria are engaged in agriculture and agricultural related activities. Almost 80% of the nation's population reside and work in the rural areas of the country, which underscores the importance of agriculture in the nation's political economy.

Despite official pronouncements and budgetary allocations agricultural productivity has not improved. In fact, views have changed little since then:

The agricultural sector at present is characterised by very small production unit. The most prominent feature is one of the small holders cultivating two or more acres each. Techniques of production are not advanced. There is little mechanization. The seeds are low yielding. The use of fertilisers and pesticides is not widespread. Prices are low and this reduces incentives to modernise. The land tenure system encourages fragmentation. Storage and marketing facilities are not well organised. Credit facilities are not adequate. Finally, social amenities are generally at a low level when compared with the urban areas of the country (Williams, 1980).

It is generally accepted, therefore, that the productivity of the rural inhabitants is low. Official efforts to increase the productivity of the peasant farmers involve the application of better technology, diffusion of modern ideas and organization of work. According to O. Ogunfowora,

In recent years, there seems to be a growing theoretical consensus that a combination of increased supply of credit and improved biological and chemical technologies is a measure which has high potential for increasing farm productivity, income and employment (*Ibid.*).

To this end, the rural farmers are to be introduced to new technologies and ideas. This is where the role of the mass media comes into focus. Simply put, they are to be used as agents to transmit the new ideas and technologies, and to create and induce the socio-psychological conditions to make the farmers receptive to these ideas and technologies.

T.V. in the Nigerian Society

The way the TV is used in any development project is influenced by the social structure. The mass media do not exist in isolation, but are part of the complex structure of power and control existing in any particular society. As Opubor once remarked, "Different views of development lead to different views of the relationship between communication and development and hence communication strategies most desirable for development" (Opubor, 1976).

Until recently, Nigeria's development plans have been urban-centred and elite-oriented. National resources, including rural wealth and income, are usually deployed to cater for the needs of the urban elites. The mass media, and especially television, are part of these national resources being used by the ruling elite to serve their interests and those of their allies in the few urban areas of the country. Nigerian mass media are also urban-centred and elite-oriented and do not adequately cater for the needs and interests of the rural dwellers. This is not necessarily out of neglect of working journalists, though they are not totally blameless. Rather it is due mainly to the way and manner in which the mass media and the Nigerian society are constituted. Writing on the centralised nature of Nigerian broadcasting, Professor Opubor observed that,

The messages produced within such a system of communication are directed and controlled by an elite group who have almost pre-emptive access to the media, understand its technology, and use it in a one-way manipulative fashion, exhorting the masses to be patriotic, etc. The content of communication is almost certainly oriented towards the need of the controlling group, and to maintain their position of power and privilege. Consequently, the majority may find the content of the media irrelevant and unresponsive to their needs and views (Opubor, 1976).

The imperatives of state control of mass media "often tend to translate into utilizing the system to transmit the policies, values and ideology of the ruling elite" (Boafo, 1985).

Agricultural Programmes on T.V.

With government's often stated commitment to agricultural development, and rural development in general, one would have expected a vigorous and sustained media campaign on agriculture and related activities; however, this seems not to be so. All the stations visited had one or two programmes on agriculture. Apart

from LTV 8 (the Lagos State owned TV), all the stations broadcast the programmes in indigenous languages.

The objectives of the programmes are similar. Generally they are designed to enlighten the farmers on new farming techniques (OGTV, Abeokuta); let the people know that there is dignity in being a farmer (NTA 7, Ikeja); teach practical farming (OGTV); give information about forming farmer's cooperative societies (OGTV); highlight government activities in the development of agriculture (NTA, Ibadan); encourage the people to go back to the land for mass food production (NTA, Ibadan), and put agriculture back on its feet as the backbone of Nigeria's economy (NTA, Ibadan).

The duration of these weekly programmes did not go beyond 30 minutes and were transmitted during non-peak hours. Indeed, the LTV 8 had no specific time slot for the programme before it died towards the last quarter of 1990.

Though almost all the stations, with the clear exception of NTA 7, Ikeja and LTV 8, stated that their target audience was the peasant farmers, the indication is that the actual receivers and beneficiaries are far from being rural-based peasant farmers. In the rural areas, there was no available electricity and no TV sets among peasant farmers. Our position is buttressed by the Information Officer at the Ogun State Agricultural Development Programme (OGADEP), Abeokuta, and the Producer of Obalagbe on OGTV, who told us most of the letters they received from viewers when the programme was running on OGTV came from the urban centres like Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Sagamo, etc. This, according to the OGADEP officer, differed from the letters coming from radio listeners who were, according to him, "really rural people".

From the various topics treated in the programmes, it is clear that emphasis was on teaching farming techniques, introduction and application of fertilisers and herbicides. Other topics included the activities of ministries of agriculture, IITA, Ogun Oshun River Basin and Rural Development Authority, fisheries and then such items as the processing of cassava into different food flours – *garí*, *lafun*, *fufu*, etc. The programmes on OGTV also treated issues like sources of loans and the procedure for obtaining the loans, as well as planting seasons for different products.

Apart from these programmes, which are clearly labelled agricultural programmes, Oba-Lagbe (OGTV), Ghogun Tiyan (NTA 7, Lagos), Farming (LTV 8), and Ere Agbe (NTA, Ibadan), there are other agricultural ones such as Iya-Loja on OGTV. This programme is mainly designed for market women and buyers of foodstuffs and is

principally concerned with market days and prices of foodstuffs. In essence, it is mainly designed for women, and the presenter is a woman, while the other agricultural programmes are produced and presented by men.

Nigeria's development policy is obviously based on technology transfer from the advanced industrialised countries to the urbanised elite, and subsequently, from the cities to the villagers. The socio-cultural context within which these technologies exist are often ignored in the eagerness to "develop" and catch up with the West. The parameters and constituents of this very elusive word development are decided by the elites with no inputs from the overwhelming numbers of the lower classes — the peasant farmers and the workers. As a leading Nigerian political economist, Prof. Claude Ake, once remarked,

The Nigerian state is constituted in such a way that it reflects a narrow range of interests mainly that of the Nigerian bourgeoisie and metropolitan capital. The apparatus of the state expresses the power and the interest of labour in a limited way; that of the peasants and subsistence farmers, not at all (Ake, 1985).

In terms of communication practices, what is happening is information transfer and not communication. Communication is a process of popular dialogue, an exchange of ideas, or what is simply called two-way communication. This is very different from information transfer, a process of transmission of facts and ideas from an individual or social group often assumed to be superior to other individuals and social groups, i.e. the supposed receiver, in the society. The mass media, as Moemeka has pointed out, "are not, by nature, channels of mass communication. They are merely channels of mass information, distribution and transmission. The mass media are one-way channels, which means they are channels for making news, facts, figures and opinions available to the public. This is not communication; it is information" (Moemeka, 1990).

The Nigerian communication system is centralized, elitist and hierarchical, owned, financed and controlled by the ruling elites and their business allies. This structure of the mass media easily lends itself to being used and manipulated as instruments of one-way "communication". Though the producers interviewed said they normally consult farmers in making the programmes, our acquaintance with the programmes on television indicates that the farmers are more often than not made to react to pre-set agenda, already pre-determined elsewhere in studios and offices of experts. It is generally assumed that the farmers are ignorant and/or cannot adequately articulate the

issues and problems. Some of the so-called psychological attributes of peasant farmers identified by early communication scholars of the modernization school are apathy, fatalism and parochialism. The mass media are there to cure them of these ailments and make them physically mobile. The social reality being experienced by the peasant farmers, which is quite different from the cosy offices of government officials and research institutes, has not been allowed to have its full impact on agriculture programmes on television and radio.

The point is that there is a communication gap between the government, agricultural experts and TV producers on the one hand and peasant farmers on the other, and this gap is partly responsible for some of the country's agricultural development problems. According to Opubor and Nwuneli, "Some of the most urgent human problems that need to be solved concern the creation of equitable systems of information distribution so that individuals, groups and nations are ennobled to communicate and be communicated with as equals" (Opubor and Mwuoneli, 1985).

Another important aspect of TV agricultural programmes is the adopted strategy of open broadcasting, so called because it is directed to an unorganized audience (Moemeka, 1981). Largely because of the unorganized nature of the audience, it is not certain whether people are watching and, if they are, whether they are benefiting from the programme. Open broadcasting suffers from three main problems:

(a) there is no interaction between TV producers and their audience. Programme planning and production are based on the notion that producers know what the people want;

(b) programmes are devised with little or no input from specialist agencies and virtually no coordination between producers and communication specialists. Such programmes are produced on the perceived or assumed knowledge, both of the subject matter and the environmental conditions of the audiences; and

(c) there is no guidance at the reception level. Because of these problems, the best that can be expected, according to Moemeka, is "chance success".

Commercialization and T.V. Programming

The programmes previously discussed have all been discontinued, victims of the current broadcasting policy of commercialisation. With the advent of the Structural Adjustment Programme, broadcasting has become commercialised. In response to this, the managers of the country's broadcast industry have sought to sell all air-time and

programmes, including news. Agricultural programmes have been major casualties

of this policy. Since 1989, when most stations dropped their agricultural programmes, they have not been able to get sponsors to foot the bills.

Commercialization, as presently conceived and practised, is mainly concerned with making profit. The stark reality is that when profit-making becomes the deciding factor in the operation of any organization, public interest suffers. Throwing the country's media industry into the invisible hands of market forces is making capital and the interests it serves become the decider of the form and type of the mass media and the range of products they offer. As an observer noted, "the quarterly programme schedule of network television has shown a consistent bias for entertainment, especially during the peak viewing hours of 8-9 p.m. Informative and educational programmes—those that directly address (hopefully) issues of development—tend more to occupy late evening slots (between 10 and 11 p.m.)" (*The Guardian, Sunday, July 2, 1989*).

The current trend defeats all the ideals and purposes of development journalism, which has been a major plank in the Third World criticism of Western journalistic practice and the subsequent call for a New World Information and Communication Order. For instance, the type of grassroots development based on the idea of basic needs would largely be opposed to the capital intensive import and consumption oriented development strategies favoured by international capital, transnational companies and their local collaborators. In this sense, such interests as those represented by foreign and local capital cannot be expected to whole-heartedly support the tenets of development-oriented communication policy.

In this context, it is not surprising that none of the TV stations has been able to secure a sponsor for its main agricultural programme since 1989. Agricultural programmes are considered rural development programmes designed mainly, if not solely, for the benefit of rural dwellers. Rural dwellers are poor, unsophisticated, uneducated and as such they lack the purchasing power to buy most of the goods and services being advertised in the media. Their tastes and needs are so simple that even the desire to have these goods and services may not arise. One doubts if any of the country's major companies would sponsor a programme on the country's rural area. In the calculation of these companies, any money spent, either as wages and salaries or even charity, is an investment aimed at making profit now or in the future. The rural areas and their inhabitants are not a potential source of profit for these corporate bodies. And our media managers

and operators know this.

Thus there is a paucity and sometimes total absence of rural news,

in particular, and, in general, the views and perspectives of the poor in the mass media. The logic of capital is against wasteful, unproductive and non-profit generating ventures. A broadcasting system whose antenna is turned to profit-making cannot be people-oriented. The search for advertisements and corporate sponsorship of programmes will further consolidate the urban and elite bias of the Nigerian mass media.

Even if any of these companies accepts to sponsor an agricultural programme, it is still doubtful that the contents would reflect the true interests of the peasant farmers. We know that for a company to accept to sponsor a programme, the philosophy and objectives of the programmes must support and advance its corporate interests and objectives. We also know these interests and objectives are often opposed and sometimes detrimental to those of the Third World.

To reject any offer of corporate sponsorship is to risk having no programme. The solution could have been for the government or some of its agencies – Agricultural Development Programmes in each state, DIFFRI, Better Life Programme and The Women Commission, Universities of Agriculture, etc. – to take over these programmes. This was the former practice that has been abandoned and the current dogma in the country is against all subsidies and assistance to the poor.

As a developing nation, the philosophy of public service broadcasting cannot be totally abandoned. Some areas of national interest still have to be protected and presented on television and radio. The state must be as responsible for this as it is for defence and national security. Food production is too strategic to be left to market forces alone.

Effectiveness of T.V. Programmes

TV in general has a limited impact among rural dwellers. Despite the fact that Nigeria has more than 30 TV stations, ownership of TV sets is limited. The estimated total number of TV sets in the country is 2.8 million in a country of more than 80 million people, and these are concentrated in the few urban centres in the country. On the other hand, radio has a much better reach, and is far more popular and available.

TV may actually be increasing the gap in the knowledge of various social farming groups. Development strategy based on the transfer of

technology benefits the privileged and resource-rich groups and individuals more than those on the lower scale of the socio-economic

hierarchy. As Technor *et. al.* (1970) stated, the knowledge gap hypothesis "does not hold that lower status population segments remain completely uninformed (or that the poorer in knowledge get poorer in an absolute sense). Instead the proposition is that growth of knowledge is relatively greater among the higher status segments". There is a class dimension to the utilization of information just like other social resources available in a given society.

Structural constraints impose limitations on the effectiveness of communication technologies and strategies in the development process. Many communication scholars have argued that "the function and impact of communication strategies in development are prescribed by the larger social system and that the main inhibitions to development are more structural than informational" (Boafo, 1985). Grunig came to the following conclusion from his study of Colombian peasants:

Both communication behaviours and accompanying social-psychological characteristics are derived from the situation in which the individual is found. Unless we consider the structural situation in which the communication takes place, we are merely engaging in a vicious cycle of relating characteristics of development while ignoring the reasons which brought them into existence. Unless the situational structure is favourable for development (i.e. opportunities are available), communication can be of little use in development (Boafo, *op. cit.*).

Television and mass media in general should therefore go beyond teaching skills or transferring technology. The scope and objectives of TV agricultural programmes should be broadened to include such structural constraints as poverty, the distribution and allocation of social resources, power relations, the operations of state institutions, peasants representation in the state, class division and socio-political issues and problems, all of which are very fundamental to the development process. The role of the mass media is to educate the people to be aware of their social conditions, the origin of their social problems and how to confront, challenge and transform them. The media are to mobilise support among the local people for a structural transformation of the society and should be agents of sensitization of the lower classes.

A Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, has rightly noted that merely transferring knowledge and ideas from an authoritative source to passive receivers is an exercise in domination. On the other hand, liberation education reveals the nature of social reality and makes men critical

thinkers and transformers.

Whereas banking education anaesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (Freire, 1972).

A major precondition for attaining the goals of liberation or problem-posing education through television is the democratization and decentralization of television and other channels of public communication. The people must have access to these channels and be allowed to participate in the communication process as equal subjects in the society. The grassroots people must be provided the opportunity to discuss and bring their perspective to bear on the development process. Access and participation are the cornerstones of rural mobilization and motivation towards development (Moemeka, 1990).

It also demands a restructuring of the Nigerian mass media, and a re-orientation of professional media practice. There is a need to reconceptualize some of the basic tenets and assumptions of media practice. Media workers need to broaden their horizon and socio-cultural assumptions.

Local governments, Ministries of Agriculture and the ADPs should be made to devote a fixed percentage of their budgets for agriculture to communication and information dissemination. The allocation should be substantial enough to cover an integrated communication package (radio, print, television and interpersonal media, including extension services). The production of media programmes and materials should be jointly planned and financed by local governments, ADPs, Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, DIFFRI, Better Life for Rural Dwellers, Agriculture Research, Institutes/Universities, Co-operative Societies and Farmers' Unions, Development Associations and other bodies concerned with agriculture and rural development. Apart from reducing the financial burden on any of the cooperating bodies, this approach will also broaden the concerns and social perspectives of the programmes.

Moreover, it is urgent to establish or reactivate mobile cinema units in the state Ministries of Information and local governments. The operation of the community viewing centres should be strengthened by more money, men and materials. The existing centres are poorly maintained and serviced. Community viewing centres and mobile cinemas will not only solve the problem of non-availability of television

in the rural areas, they are in line with the culture of the rural populace – the essence of group and community living. They will

provide opportunities for combining the positive features of mass and interpersonal communications. Discussions and feedback by the viewers could be monitored, questions raised could be answered and the communication needs of the people satisfied with minimum delay. Programme makers and experts could also benefit from the face-to-face interaction with viewers in such a setting.

Conclusion

The current approach to and objectives of TV programmes on agriculture are too narrow and inadequate. Though they reflect the dominant development thinking in the country (transfer of technology) and the problems of agricultural production (low productivity due to poor farming techniques, lack of modern technology, and the social structure of the farming community), our contention is that structural constraints are probably more fundamental to the development process than information on technology. The farmers may not be as ignorant or non-receptive as we might think. Their problems may stem more from poverty, exploitation and other structural constraints which are usually neglected in the mass media. To be relevant and effective, the mass media have to incorporate these issues by broadening the scope and focus of TV agricultural programmes. Agricultural development is far too complex and important to national development for it to be treated as merely rural development.

Our aim is not to say that we should stop providing information on new farming techniques but that there is more to farming than planting and harvesting. We are gradually seeing the end of public service broadcasting. The present non-availability of agriculture programmes on TV is a clear testimony to this. Therefore, a major step must be taken to give adequate access and participation to the lower classes in the society. This calls for a more democratic media structure and a re-orientation of media practice. Media workers as producers of knowledge must also "face the question, under what conditions can farmers advance and protect their interests, and how can they, in alliance with others establish and maintain those conditions" (Williams, 1980). Improvement in our rural areas and in peasant production can only be achieved when peasants are able to organize themselves to protect and advance their own interests against those of the dominant ruling bloc.

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