

# **Development Information Content in the African Mass Media: A Study of Two Nigerian Dailies**

**by Cosmas Nwokeafor and R. Nwafo Nwanko\***

## **Abstract**

The specific role of mass communication and the mass media in the development dynamics is still quite controvertible. So is the status of development communication as a theoretical construct, as the multiplicity of its definitions suggests. These issues have become more critical in the light of recent world-wide political changes and of the many instances of debilitating ethnic conflicts.

It is in this context that this paper investigated the incidence of development-oriented content in two Nigerian dailies, hypothesizing that, despite the claims that Nigerian newspapers have been excessively political, their contents are significantly more development-oriented than not and that this orientation is topically diversified and consistent over time. The results of the content-analysis study showed that the papers were more non-developmental in their orientation than developmental. Other aspects of the findings suggest, however, that sustained development requires a communication and governance system that accounts for both human rights and human needs.

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# **Developpement du Contenu d'Ordre Economique dans les Mass Media d'Afrique: Une Analyse de Deux Quotidiens Nigérians**

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## **Résumé**

Le rôle spécifique de la communication de la masse et des mass média dans la dynamique du développement est, à l'heure actuelle, toujours controversé. Il en est de même en ce qui concerne la communication du développement en tant que proposition théorique. La multiplicité des définitions qu'on en fait en est la preuve. Ces questions prennent encore plus d'ampleur quand elles sont examinées à la lumière des changements politiques que connaît le monde entier et des effets débilissants des conflits ethniques qui ne cessent d'éclater ici et là.

C'est dans ce contexte qu'a été entreprise cette étude qui analyse la fréquence du contenu d'ordre économique dans deux quotidiens nigérians et qui avance comme hypothèse que malgré les affirmations que les journaux nigérians se préoccupent surtout de la politique, le contenu de ceux-ci est beaucoup plus orienté vers le développement qu'on ne l'admet et que cette orientation est très diversifiée du point de vue thèmes et s'avère constante au fil d'une période donnée.

L'étude et l'analyse du contenu des deux journaux a finalement mené à la conclusion que les deux quotidiens étaient moins plutôt que plus orientés vers le développement. Par ailleurs, certains aspects des résultats obtenus suggèrent que le développement soutenu ne pourrait se réaliser en l'absence de systèmes de communication et de gouvernement qui tiennent compte des droits et des besoins de l'être-humain.



## **Introduction**

Communication serves very many functions(Lasswell, 1984; Theodorson and Theodorson, 1969). As an agent of socialization, mass-mediated communication contributes to the dissemination of values and information among parts of a society and the world. This function of communication is said to be greatly limited in the developing nations because of several constraining factors that include the control of the news and information media in these nations by their respective governments. But even in these so-called developing countries, mass-mediated communication is expected, as a part of its socialization function, to be an important part of national development efforts. Quebral (1975:2) has, for example, discussed development communication as "an art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of it's people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfillment of human potentials."

Many other research scholars of development have made similar assertions about development communication. Ogan (1982) has, for example, described development communication as "a process used only to serve the development goals of the government in power and also as a means to critical examination, evaluation and report of the relevance, enactment and impact of development programs." Kenyatta (1976) has described development communication as the "creation of national consciousness and unity," maintaining that development communication is an encouragement of cooperation and peaceful co-existence among diverse and sometimes hostile communities. Political scientists Lerner (1983), de Sola Pool (1983), and Pye (1984) have discussed development communication as the increasing of urbanization which increases the level of literacy and the use of the information media, with Lerner (1983) maintaining that development communication would, in turn, increase the per capita income of a society, project an interest in democratic citizenship, and help increase the integration and prosperity of new nations.

## **Statement of the Problem**

These ideas about development and other views similar to them were not lost on African nations who, prior to the 1972 United Nations(U.N.) recommendation encouraging development communication, recognized the importance, for national development, of communication through the mass media and had begun to explore ways to use these media



more productively. At a 1961 conference on educational broadcasting held in Moshi, Tanzania and sponsored by the U.N., the conferees recognized that broadcasting remained the main source of national and international information in Africa. The conferees, therefore, placed emphasis on the socio-economic command of the development of science and technology needed for the dissemination of news and information to the public (Vandi, 1979; Beltran, 1976; Bordenave, 1976; Rogers, 1969).

The extensive and apparently rewarding application of the broadcast media to development efforts around the world led such development experts as Klee(1981) and Rogers(1969) to propose that the broadcast media should be an important growing point during the United Nations' second development decade. This prompted the United Nations to recommend the formulation, by all nations but particularly the developing countries, of comprehensive communication policies that are linked to the nations' overall social, cultural, political, and economic development (Klee, 1981; MacBride Commission, 1980). Along the lines of this policy recommendation, the Moshi conference urged the development of comprehensive national radio networks that are capable of reaching remote areas, concluding that the development of such networks should precede the development of television and video systems and such other technologies that were assumed to facilitate the production of programs that are relevant to and supportive of community development. The conferees also recommended greater efforts to stimulate public participatory and diversified cultural expression in various languages as are appropriate in various social contexts.

Researchers like Ghandi (1968), however, recognized quite early that there is a need to minimize exogenous political and commercial pressures. Ghandi(1968) maintained that, for development communication in developing nations to succeed, the goals and strategies of Western countries should be examined critically and a radical rethinking of the implications of development encouraged. Some political leaders in some African countries took significant note of these ideas in their development communication efforts. The Ujama project in Tanzania and the Operation Feed the Nation project in Nigeria are examples of projects that attempted to implement these ideas (Ghandi, 1968; Gowon, 1971; Nyerere, 1968). Because the success of projects like these has not been particularly glaring, the critical re-examination of the early approaches to development continued, with development communication researchers and practitioners suggesting numerous alternative approaches to development (Melkote, 1991; Boaso and George, 1991; Odhiambo,

1991).

One point of agreement among the myriad of suggested alternative approaches is the need for development-oriented information to be available and accessible at all levels of the society. Thus, one critical or criterion factor to be considered when evaluating the quality of any communication development ideas and efforts is the extent to which they translated into increased development-oriented information content in all the available channels of public communications, including national daily newspapers.

It is with the above in mind that this study examined some Nigerian newspapers and analyzed quantitatively the incidence of development-oriented news and information in their contents. The study assumed that:

- (1) the Nigerian newspapers do have a role to play in the nation's development, even if that role is limited to gathering and disseminating development news and information to all Nigerians;
- (2) the co-existence of self-supporting newspapers and those heavily subsidized by government may generate adversarial relations that, in turn, may affect the whole conduct of the press in relation to national development efforts;
- (3) government subsidies and government interference are inseparable factors in terms of their impact on the political environment in which the newspapers operate; and
- (4) the use of the press to promote ethnicity and ethnic interests limit the reach of, and the audience access to, newspapers.

These assumptions involve some controvertible questions of control, management, funding and ownership of the press in developing countries. These questions are significant to the effectiveness of development communication efforts and, therefore, deserve more attention from researchers than they have been accorded. Is there any evidence to support Schramm's (1964) assertion that unless a nation uses its media to develop spiritual and human potentialities, it cannot develop much else? Many other researchers and theorists seem to agree that the relationship between mass media use and development are concomitant, mutual, and reciprocal (Balcon, 1978; Banks, 1978). Pye (1964), in fact, suggests that mass communication systems are a key to structuring the political process of a country and are of critical importance in determining the future of developing countries. If the mass media are indispensable tools for the structuring of the political process which, in turn, affects the course of economic development, the understanding of media structure and process as they are related to development goals is of paramount importance.



Yet media researchers, apparently drawing questionable conclusions from some of the criticisms of the so-called "dominant paradigm" (Melkote, 1991), have failed to focus adequate attention on the context and process of development communication decision-making by media professionals in media organizations and how these factors affect the development process. There are very few published empirical data on this issue about the Nigerian mass media, although there has been some research on the performance of the Nigerian media during crisis situations (Ugboajah, 1975; Uche, 1977) and the social integration dimension of national development (Obotette, 1984).

It is to this end that this study set out to examine critically the development news and information content of the major Nigerian newspapers in its cultural, political, economic, and the other significant dimensions of development.

This critical examination is guided by two specific questions:

1. To what extent are the Nigerian newspapers consistent in their support of development?
2. How thematically diverse is the development content of Nigerian newspapers?

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

Much of the attention of development communication researchers, especially those of the "dominant paradigm" persuasion, has focused on identifying "the role that communication plays" in the development process. Although the early principles of development theory and practice have undergone, many significant modifications (Melkote, 1991), the concerns of theorists and practitioners about the adequacy and the appropriate application of communication resources, including technology, to the solution of development problems has remained basic and consistent. Dissanayake (1981), Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964), Pye (1963), Rogers (1976), and Hedebrö (1982) have all held the view that communication possesses the potential to teach people to behave, reason, and think differently. According to Dissanayake (1981), for instance, "the most productive sector of modern society is the industrial sector which disseminates its knowledge and skill through communication channels." Hedebrö (1982) similarly thinks that the role of communication is to "mobilize human resources by substituting new norms, attitudes, and behaviors for old ones in order to stimulate increased productivity." Agreeing with the above views, Barnlund (1970) and Rogers (1976) add the suggestion that the appropriate strategy for developing countries in their development efforts should

be one that makes use of the general media system of communication to effect two-way communications between government development planners and the members of the public. They also believe resources would enhance the strategic integration of development ideas and efforts which, in turn, would ensure proper emphasis on the use of appropriate technology, the fulfillment of people's basic needs, and the maintenance of people's cultural integrity.

These views, arising from early criticisms of the dominant paradigm, did not have much significant impact on the policies and practices of development communication professionals who remained tied to that Western economic development theory that sees development as an economic process by which overall increases in Gross National Product (GNP) "trickle down" to the masses in the form of jobs and other economic opportunities (Todaro, 1985). Todaro (1985) has pronounced this "trickle down" approach a failure and Rogers (1976) has described the use of GNP as a measure of development as "a deceitful simplicity of measurement" which is both dehumanizing and inconsistent.

Following a similar line of argument, Inayatullah (1976) has suggested an approach to development which emphasizes people's control of their environment and sees development as "a change towards patterns of society that allow better realization of human values, that allow a society greater control over its individuals to gain increased control over themselves." Ogan (1982) similarly rejects, as inappropriate for development, that type of "government say-so journalism" by which communication content and agenda are made to suit the political wishes of the government in power. She sees a media system that is free and independent of government as a condition for an effective communication support of national development efforts. However, as Merrill (1974) has noted, the values related to media operation are affected by a variety of sociopolitical circumstances or philosophies. A proper analysis and interpretation of the contents of the media in a specific social system require a basic knowledge of the environment within which media professionals have to work.

In the case of Nigeria, the society has been pluralistic. With different ethnic groups contending for the control of power, political parties had been formed essentially along ethnic lines. The newspapers which pioneered the media industry in Nigeria, established as they were by political parties, had similarly been ethnically-oriented, although they had at times campaigned against common enemies and for common causes. Even now, it would be unrealistic to underestimate the importance of ethnic chauvinism in Nigerian life and polity. But, if the Nigerian media have been ethnically-oriented, they also have been effective politically (Anamaleze, 1975) by reporting the failures of the



colonial government, interpreting the aspirations of the people, and actually making people think and act. In the reality of the Nigerian situation, political programs and their public discussions have included health, agricultural, economic, cultural, and educational goals and programs; goals and programs that are clearly development-oriented. One would, therefore, expect that the content of the Nigerian media would not be merely political but would also be consistent supportive of development and be thematically diverse in its development-orientation. This study hypothesizes, therefore, that

1. The contents of Nigerian dailies are significantly more supportive of development than not.
2. The development-orientation of the Nigerian media is historically consistent and thematically diversified.

## **Design and Method**

Content analysis was selected as the most appropriate research technique for this study because it was considered the method most capable of providing the best indication of the explicit role of the Nigerian media in support of development. Content analysis has been used widely as an effective scientific research method, although it is said to have started in the 15th century when the Church conducted observations of communication content to prevent the dissemination of religiously inappropriate materials (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis is capable of providing valid and reliable qualitative and quantitative scientific observations because its unobtrusive nature eliminates many confounding antecedent conditions that are often encountered in media research when some other research techniques are used. Although most scientific definitions of content analysis have emphasized attention to manifest content (Kerlinger, 1964; Berelson, 1952; Danielson, 1968; Budd et al., 1978), the requirement that the content analyst be concerned primarily with manifest content to ensure inter-subjectivity does not mean that latent contents are excluded from consideration (Krippendorff, 1980), provided that the content analyst establishes explicitly formulated rules and procedures (Stempel, 1981).

In any case, content analysis is particularly amenable to such historical and controversial research problems as the one being dealt with here. In recent years, Nigerians of various persuasions, including the police and the army, have accused the Nigerian media of publishing materials that create an atmosphere of divisiveness and inter-group tensions. Some Nigerians have accused the government of using the



media as a propaganda tool, thus restricting their effectiveness in development support. Because most, if not all, of the speculations and accusations are based on informal observations of the media, an empirical analysis of the contents of the media is an essential first step to providing valid evidence that support or refute the claims.

## **The Sample**

It has been suggested that ethnic-based politics has had a significant role in structuring the Nigerian press system. There are more than 100 news publications in Nigeria serving different regions, states, and other specialized markets. More than 19 of these publications are daily newspapers published in English and owned by various state governments dominated by various ethnic groups. The differences in attitudes and rates of development among these groups have been suggested as a major cause of conflict and tension among them. Because the aim of this study does not include the identification of differences in development-orientation among ethnic groups, the sample was limited to those major newspapers that strive for national audiences, with political affiliation, regional interest, circulation size, and longevity as additional selection criteria. The two papers used in the study, the *Daily Times* and the *Nigerian Tribune* have a respective minimum of 25,000 daily circulation and have been in circulation years before Nigeria's independence in 1960 from colonial control. The *Times*, which was formerly privately-owned, is now a quasi-independent newspaper, with the Federal government owning 60 per cent of its shares since 1978. The *Tribune* is a state-owned paper, with some affiliation to the government and and political party that dominated the former Western region.

A systematic sampling of news stories in all the Monday editions of each paper during a 15-year period was conducted. This 15-year period was trichotomized as follows: the pre-independence era, 5 years(1954-1959); the First Republic era, 5 years(1960-1965); and the military period, 5 years(1966-1979). Although the military period spanned 13 years, only 5 of these years were selected, by systematic sample slection method, for inclusion in the study to ensure uniformity in the number of years per period. A total of 106 editions of the selected papers were analyzed. Only the front page of each edition of each paper in the sample as examined for the study as placement of an item in the front page was considered an indication that the paper attached importance to it. Using a theme, defined as a sentence or group of sentences expressing the same idea , as the unit of analysis,

the study found a total of 566 thematic statements.

This sample size was considered adequate for answering the study questions because a review of studies using content analysis techniques showed that a researcher who uses a small well-chosen sample may achieve more accurate results than one with too large a sample, that increasing sample size in proportion to the universe does not guarantee more accurate results (Holsti, 1969). Thus, by focusing on three newspapers and sampling their editions and contents systematically, this study expected to produce acceptably reliable results.

## **Operational Definitions and Coding**

Claims have been made to the effect that Nigerian newspapers concentrated too much on political puffery to the neglect of substantive realities of the Nigerian situation or of issues that encourage genuine development. An earlier study (Nwanko, 1973) found, in fact, that the contents of a flagship nationalist Nigerian paper had a significantly high incidence of political utopia. A basic judgement that guided the construction of the coding scheme for this study was that by focusing on substantive and development-oriented issues, the press would be supporting development and that the failure of the press to focus on such issues would be detrimental to genuine development. Such substantive issues were classified as comprising the following news and information with the following categories of thematic content: (1) General Developmental, (2) Community, (3) Cultural, (4) Youth, (5) Political, (6) Economic.

General news and information themes were defined as those that raise national consciousness, encourage national unity, or call attention generally to problems of rural or urban development. Community news and information themes are those that focus specifically on community development aimed at improving the quality of rural life and include such projects as those that have bearing on farming, healthcare, housing, electricity, and water. Cultural news and information themes are those concerned with preventing the erosion of the intrinsic values of the Nigerian culture which has been said to be responsible for the high incidence of indiscipline in national affairs and for the failure to effectively harness indigenous resources of traditional skills and techniques. Political news and information themes are those that focus on issues directly related to improving the political process, including such issues as electoral processes, budgeting and public policymaking, and the resolution of political party and other public controversies and conflicts. Youth news and information themes are those that focus on the National Youth Service Corps



which was established in 1973 to improve of intra-national cultures among youth and to imbue young Nigerians or with a spirit of oneness and brotherhood regardless of social and cultural differences. Economic news and information themes are those that focus on the economy, including such issues as those dealing with ports, motor parks, railways, tourism, commerce and manufacturing. In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the results of the study, the thematic content categories were carefully defined to ensure their mutual exclusiveness and to improve the accuracy and replicability of coding outcomes. Each item was coded by two coders. An analysis of the two-coder coding decisions on one fifth or 20% of the items indicated a better than 90% agreement, suggesting that the coding scheme can almost be considered to face validity.

## Findings

This study was designed to investigate the incidence of selected dimensions of development communication in two major Nigerian dailies. A content analysis methodology was used to test two propositions drawn from the communication and development literature, as well as from information about the history and character of the Nigerian mass media. The propositions are that (1) news and information in the Nigerian media would be found to be significantly more supportive of development than not and that (2) development news and information content in the Nigerian mass media would be found to be diverse in its topical foci and consistent over time in its development orientation. The results of the analysis of 566 news and information items from a sample of 106 editions of the selected newspapers are presented in Tables 1 to 5. The data in Table 2 show that the difference between the number of development-oriented items(43.0%) and the number of non-development-oriented items(57%) was s significant. The difference between development and non-development items in the editions published during the first and the third historical periods studied but was not significant for the editions published during the second period.

A comparison of Tables 3 through 5 shows that the two newspapers were similar in their general orientation to development as indexed by the number of development and nondevelopment news and information items. There are, however, substantial differences between the papers when specific historical periods are considered. The proportion of items that were non-developmental in the *Daily Times* during the first, second, and third periods respectively were 59%, 53%, and 58%. For the *Tribune*, the proportions were 62%, 49%, and 56%. The data show

that the distribution of developmental and nondevelopment items in the two papers fluctuated but not in a statistically significant manner. This trend appeared to be reversed with regard to the topical diversity of developmental items. While development item diversity was evident in the two papers, the *Daily Times* seemed to be more consistent in its distribution of items among development topic areas. The other paper showed fluctuations in development-orientation not only with regard to topic areas but also with regard to the historical periods studied.

Table 1. Distribution of thematic statements by newspaper and period

Period	Newspaper		
	Times	Tribune	
First period	63%	37%	100% (175)
Second period	65%	35%	100% (195)
Third period	54%	46%	100% (196)
Total	60%	40%	100% (566)

Table 2. Distribution of thematic statements by development orientation and period

Period	Development orientation		
	Development	Non-development	
First period	40%	60%	100% (175)a
Second period	48%	52%	100% (195)b
Third period	42%	57%	100% (196)c
Total	43%	57%	100% (566)d

a.  $\chi^2 = 7.18$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .01$ ; b.  $\chi^2 = 0.25$ ,  $df = 1$ ; ns.; c.  $\chi^2 = 5.38$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .025$   
d.  $\chi^2 = 9.78$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .005$

Table 3. Distribution of development statements by period and topical area

Period	P1	P2	P3	
Topical area				
General development	43%	41%	16%	100% (69)
Community	41%	38%	21%	100% (39)
Cultural	38%	31%	21%	100% (26)
Youth	12%	74%	14%	100% (35)
Political	12%	17%	71%	100% (42)
Economic	13%	26%	61%	100% (38)
Total	28%	38%	34%	100% (38)

$\chi^2 = 3.55$ ,  $df = 2$ ; ns



Table 4. Distribution of Tribune thematic statements by period and development orientation

Period	Development orientation		
	Development	Non-development	
First period	35%	62%	100% (65)a
Second period	51%	49%	100% (71)b
Third period	44%	56%	100% (90)c
Total	45%	55%	100% (226)d

a.  $\chi^2 = 4.06$ , df = 1;  $p < .01$ ; b.  $\chi^2 = 0.03$ , df = 1; ns.; c.  $\chi^2 = 1.12$ , df = 1; ns.; d.  $\chi^2 = 2.56$ , df = 1; ns.

Table 5. Distribution of Daily Times statements by period and development orientation

Period	Development orientation		
	Development	Non-development	
First period	41%	59%	100% (110)a
Second period	47%	53%	100% (124)b
Third period	42%	58%	100% (106)c
Total	44%	56%	100% (340)d

a.  $\chi^2 = 3.64$ , df = 1;  $p < .01$ ; b.  $\chi^2 = 0.28$ , df = 1; ns.; c.  $\chi^2 = 2.42$ , df = 1; ns.; d.  $\chi^2 = 5.7$ , df = 1; ns.

## Summary and Conclusions

This study has analyzed a sample of the contents of two major Nigerian newspapers to identify the degree to which they emphasized development-oriented issues. The study found that the Nigerian papers studied dealt with diverse development issues but, in general, disseminated more non-developmental than developmental content. The study also found that, although the papers differed in some detailed aspects of their attention to development, they were quite similar in their overall attention to development and non-development issues as defined by this study.

With respect to the issue of definitions, one needs to point out that development and the role of the press in the process are, still very controvertible issues (Melkote, 1991). This study has chosen some operational definitions of development and press functions and justified them; other researchers may choose to make other decisions. One researcher may argue that even the communication of utopia is

developmental. Another researcher may argue that only a critical analysis of the social and objective reality of a society can be considered developmental. This study takes the position that nothing is worse, in times of danger, than to live in a dream world. It agrees with Ellul (1965) that to warn a political system of the menace hanging over it should not be seen as an unconscionable attack against it but as the greatest professional service that the press can provide. Development communication as conceptualized by this study should begin with "reality judgement" but should also contain values and preference statements that make it possible for the press to suggest an underlying picture of a nation and society as it ought to be (Gans, 1980:39). Finally and, perhaps, more importantly, the results of this study, especially when viewed in the context of the recent world-wide changes and some resurgence of ethnic conflicts, suggest that another paradigm change in development communication theory and practice is necessary, if it is not already underway. It may appear that genuine development requires a system of political governance that is conducive to the satisfaction of basic human rights and needs.

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