



AGRICULTURAL JOURNALISM, AN IMPERATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Rapid growth and development in Agriculture has become a global yearning. This is so because, not only will it guarantee food sufficiency, it has the potential to provide prime solution to dwindling economies. The World Bank for instance is of the opinion that “Agriculture can help reduce poverty, raise incomes and improve food security for 80% of the world’s poor, who live in rural areas and work mainly in farming” (World Bank Group, 2021). In recent times, it appears there is a paradigm shift from the old order where farming remained an exclusive preserve of the ‘illiterate’ rural dwellers, to a broad spectrum of more active participants spread across semi-urban and urban areas. Today, there is no gainsaying that agriculture is back on the development agenda of world economies. What this portends is that, with new entrants into the Agribusiness sector, there is going to be an increase in the demand for information, education and news bothering on innovations, breakthroughs and inventions in Agric. The Institute of Agricultural Research and Training (IART) for example has as one of its core mandates, amongst others, ‘to conduct national research into the development of improved processing and utilization of technology for crops and livestock.’ However, the extent to which these research findings, discoveries and innovations in Agric are diffused will require the expertise and specialty of Agricultural Journalists in discharging the function of informing and educating farmers. It is on this premise that a conscious attempt is made in this work to pointedly advance a linking pin between Agricultural Journalism and Agricultural Development.

INTRODUCTION

Interestingly, agricultural journalism has gained popularity in recent times. This evolution in the field of journalism, being a very important aspect of specialized reporting, having a broad scope, with concepts like Agricultural Communication, Farm Journalism, Agro-journalism and so on has made huge impacts in the agricultural sector of countries like the US and India.

Supporting this phenomenon, Sharma, A. et al (2018), opined that “Agricultural journalism is a novel sector of agricultural science. It will offer, not only education but also generate opportunities for the agriculture profession and non-agriculture profession. It improves and progresses national production, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), farming system, farmer problems, doubling of farmer income and unemployment. It will bring huge revolution into universities education system and mass media corporations. It would transform the agriculture aspects and scenario in India.”

By year 2000 for instance, agricultural media in the US had exploded with 101 agricultural newspapers, 432 magazines, 1001 AM stations, 745 FM stations, 12 state and 3 regional radio networks and 3 television station (Tedrick, 2009).

Today, agricultural journalism has become a discipline of its own in institutions like Princeton University, Texas University, G.B Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, University of Iowa etc.

This has become imperative since agriculture on the other hand has become a leeway through harsh prevailing economic doldrums, the dearth of research-based agricultural information for farmers notwithstanding. Effective communication of new research findings and technologies in agriculture to rural farmers remain a promising strategy for increasing agricultural productivity (Banmeke and Olowu, 2005).

Agricultural journalists, in addition to their traditional role of informing and educating the public, which has over time been largely restricted to reports on natural disasters, food shortages and rising food prices etc., have been saddled with the onerous responsibility “to find strategies for mobilizing people and consequently resources, for developmental goals. The diffusion of knowledge and information are necessary for people to respond profitably to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic and technological changes, including those that help to improve agricultural productivity, food security and rural livelihoods (Soola, 2002).

The media and its practitioners have the propensity to drive development in any regard, agricultural development inclusive. As Adhikari, B., Goswami, P., and Kashyap, S.K. (2020), rightly notes, “communication is essential for development but the more important role is played by the medium, which act as catalyst in making the communication more effective, accessible, affordable and far reaching. Journalism has played crucial role in development through mass media including both electronic as well as print media.”

There is a need for information and this is greater than ever – more so if farmers are to cope with climate change, small landholdings, increase their productivity, add value to their crops, and if agriculture is to have any future at all in Africa – inspire and keep the next generation as farming entrepreneurs (WREN media, 2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing Theory: Advanced by Erving Goffman in the 1970s, this theory hinges on how the media packages and presents information to the public. It is also sometimes referred to as second-level agenda setting because of its close relation to **Agenda-Setting Theory** because it

depicts how news is used to influence our notion on certain issues. Framing argues that when an issue is continuously framed in the form of news and media reports, individuals would unwittingly assimilate them. That is, the media highlights certain events and then places them within a particular context to encourage or discourage certain interpretations.

Framing has considerable effects on audiences. Aside from restricting the information by which people judge events, framing can motivate people to make riskier decisions than they otherwise would (CS, 2020). Supporting this claim, Wainwright (2020), maintained that “the framing effect has consistently proven to be one of the strongest biases in decision making. The ways it can be used are basically endless, and we are all consciously or unconsciously susceptible.”

The Concept of Agricultural Journalism

Journalism has often been regarded as the publication of news and views on different aspects of human activities, mainly in newspapers and periodicals. The American Press Institute for instance defines journalism as “the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities.”

Agricultural journalism on the other hand is a branch of journalism which is concerned with receiving, writing, editing and reporting agricultural information through the media like newspapers, radio, television, advertising among others. It is a form of gathering information on modern farming and disseminating the information to the farmers through mass media (Amadi, N.S and Raji, W.I., 2020). Simply put, agriculture journalists basically, amongst others, plan, produce and diffuse web and print articles that report current trends in agriculture, and research with verifiable data from professional sources.

Since it is a specialized form of reporting, it is not an all-comers affair. In what could be described as the ABC of journalism - Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity, an agricultural journalist is

supposed to go after and select verifiable facts, sift those facts and present them in the most accurate, clear and concise manner. The job of a good agricultural journalist is to provide news relating to land, problems and issues of the farmers in the country, and modern agricultural methods and techniques. This type of journalism has most recently become popular among young people because many institutions are offering courses in agricultural journalism and the demand for this discipline is increasing by the day.

India, for instance is predominantly an agrarian rural economy, with around 69% of its population living in rural areas and around 47% engaged in agriculture. Agricultural research, education and extension are said to be the most important components for promoting farm productivity and income. The extension system bridges the gap between research labs and farmer's field, and this has greatly improved their livelihood conditions.

The Need for Agricultural Journalism

The farmer to extension worker ratio is unarguably very wide, thus public extension system is unable to meet the demand of farmers for information. The mass media, especially in this age of technological advancement in new media technologies is capable of reaching vast widespread audience.

Also, technical information on improved agricultural practices needs to be provided to the farmers at the right time and in the right way, so that their productivity can be optimised. News about various agricultural activities, guidance and recommendations, successful achievements, market news, research findings, problems faced by the farming population and so on.

The success of agricultural development programmes in developing countries has overtime proven to largely depend on the extent to which the mass media is used in mobilising the people towards development.

Balamurugan (2017), in corroborating the role of the mass media in Agricultural development puts it this way:

- To communicate feasible farm technologies in such a manner to attract the attention of farmers,
- Help them to understand and remember the message,
- Ultimately facilitate them to take appropriate decision.

Also, justifying the role and significance of journalists themselves in agricultural development, Kuprashvili and Chalaganidze (2018) outlines the basic functions of agro-journalism as follows:

- Education – providing information is a tool to (by giving the information to the potential audience) implement the goal;
- Motivating and Organizing - motivating individuals and groups of people, who are, potentially or actually, involved in the agricultural sector, to improve performance / efficiency, which makes the media not a simple observer, but a participant of the process
- Communication and Advocacy – when the media is a link between professional groups, governmental programs and its beneficiaries, including the farmers.
- Development - when the media is helping and supporting society to improve its living conditions through in-depth coverage of the problems and showing ways to solve them and encouraging the country's economic progress.

Barriers to Effective Agricultural Journalism

Oladehinde (2015) in an attempt to present the challenges in reporting agriculture lists the following:

- Lack of skill to properly report agriculture as it is supposed to be from the holistic point of view where various stakeholders at the crops value chains are given fair consideration

- Scientists or Researchers, farmers, processors, inputs providers, and marketing, donor agencies, financial institutions etc. how many special publication do we have on each value chain crops-like groundnut voice or G/N news.
- Most stakeholders in the sector do not have enough confidence in journalists for the fear of being quoted out of context even when such reporter is skillful.
- Most agricultural projects do not always make budget provision for journalists' honorarium because some developmental partners believe they are doing you a favour by giving out information as they see it as free service forgetting a reporter too has financial obligations to meet.
- There are many hotline news contending with agricultural news which always lead to dropping some of the sector's news especially when there are breaking news at the main stream media.
- Agricultural sector is not properly structured especially at the rural level for a reporter to easily get information that will enhance his report. Emphasis is concentrated at the top why there is neglect at where local production of agricultural produce is coming from.
- The challenges are more on specialized agricultural publications like Food Farm News as both public and private stakeholders that supposed to embrace and see the medium as effective communication tool never see the green light opportunity as maximally expected but few do see the opportunity whereas in Uganda, the use of specialized agricultural publication has increased the reporting of the sector.
- The public sector of Agriculture always frowns at any report or news that did not soothe their organization thereby forgetting the standards and ethics expected of a reporter. Many information officers go to the extent of refusing to invite such reporter to any of their function as way of showing their resentment. Alternatively in such occasion a rejoinder may have better solved the issue that is if there is any. For example, David

Mowbray, BBC World Service Trust, United Kingdom at the 2009 annual seminar of Centre for Technical Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) submitted that “journalist’s job is not to be the public relations tool of the development organization, of the Ministry of Agriculture or of the farmers' organization, rather the journalist's job is to find and tell good stories and if people don't understand that distinction they are never going to be satisfied with what journalists do”.

- Reporters are being short- changed by information managers of many organizations especially the government officials at MDAs at any slightest opportunity (through editing).
- Low remuneration affects journalists’ morale which is being occasionally complimented by rewards from stakeholders. For example a political beat reporter is more buoyant than any science based reporter. *Daniel Aghan, Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture, Kenya* said that when a journalist goes to a farmer he is paid less than US\$10 for his story. Yet a politician somewhere is waiting for him in a very posh hotel, he is going to buy him a drink, he is going to give him taxi home, he is going to give him some money for the family. Why will he chase after farmers?
- There are little or no availability of much information materials about agricultural activities thereby making it compulsory for a reporter to personally generate news. Most states and national libraries have little or no much material.
- Conflicting roles of MDAs coupled misplacement of some agencies in a ministry when they are actually supposed to be. For example NACGRAB (National Centre for Genetic Resources and Biotechnology) in the Ministry of science should have been better placed under agric for easy connectivity by the any reporters.

- Language barrier- there many situations when a reporter will have to look for an interpreter who one may not really get the exact message the way one would have understood.
- Incompetency of the many information and communication officers of MDAs as regards dynamics of reporting the value chain agricultural sector.
- Discrimination against media organization.

Possible Solutions to some Barriers bedeviling effective Agricultural Journalism

- Continuous training and retraining of journalists who have opted to undertake agriculture as their beat. This will sharpen and up their skill to enable them effectively diffuse agricultural information to teaming audience.
- Collaboration among stakeholders in the sector should be encouraged. Rather than seeing themselves as rivals, they should see themselves as development partners, working together for the overall developmental good of their society.
- Funding is critical. Good journalism requires money. Journalists should be able to access funds to undertake certain reports, and above all, meet their basic needs, as this could motivate them perform better.
- Reports on Agriculture should not be trivialized. Editors, media proprietors etc. should see themselves as critical partners by ensuring that news bordering on Agriculture are adequately represented in their organisations.

- Access to documented and archived research materials should be granted to journalists. This will enable them present research-based facts vital to growth and development in this regard.
- The emoluments of agricultural journalists should be fair enough by every reasonable standard, as this will boost their morale.
- More research should be encouraged in the field of agriculture, and the findings from such researches should be diffused for the overall benefit of stakeholders in the sector. Journalists should be seen as partners, instead of being viewed with suspicion.

Summary

In many countries, there are separate news channels and newspapers designated to share information on agriculture. In Bangladesh for instance, the BTV (Bangladesh Television) and Channel i (a private TV channel), some other private TV channels, Radio, Bangladesh are conducting separate agriculture programmes regularly. Examples of such programmes are Mati O Manush and Ridaya Mati O Manush, Desher Mati. This type of broadcasting has positive effects on farmers, producers, and consumers in Bangladesh. Their educative and motivational works about agriculture and agro-related reports have encouraged many youths, young entrepreneurs to be self-employed in the urban and rural areas. They make and construct many agro-farms, poultry, fisheries, animal husbandry, and dairy in their native areas.

The agro-related news presenter Shaikh Seraj of Channel i has received several awards nationally and internationally for his contribution in this field. The agricultural sector (crop, fisheries, livestock and forests) contributes a lot to the country's GDP, provides employment for nearly half of the labour force and supplies raw materials to the agro-based industries.

Agriculture is a special field of social activity which is closely related to important issues like ensuring food and nutrition of people, creating scope of income and poverty alleviation.

Over 60% of the total population in the Bangladesh depends on agriculture and the country has achieved a significant progress in food and agriculture. It has attained food autarky and able to export agro-based commodities in the world market.

Now it is the time to give more attention to our agriculture for more return from this sector. The price scandal of onion has shown us the path to go in order to suppress all wrong news, rumor about our agricultural products so that our farmers, producers and consumers do not suffer from this type of wrong news and rumor. A strong, honest, accountable and exclusive agricultural journalism policy can solve the problems of rumor and sufferings of the people originating from this sector.

As Oladehinde (2015) rightly avers, “the level of agricultural reporting in the country can be enhanced if especially the stakeholders who are the owners of this information are ready to see the media as development partners and not just being seen as special invitees during a launch or release of any news material. The case of the Avian Influenza outbreak in 2007 is a perfect example where Nigeria was well adjudged best in the world in the fight against H5N1 spread at the time due to the involvement of the media.

With mass media technologies, accurate and useful information can be disseminated to large number of farmers.

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