
Utilizing Advocacy Journalism for Rural Development in Taraba State

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Abstract

Development in most developing countries has been uneven and lopsided owing to several reasons stemming from horizontal flow of development communication and urban-centred nature of the mass media, high level of illiteracy, non-involvement/participation of other segments of the society, particularly the rural areas, among other factors. This study, therefore, examines the utilisation of advocacy journalism for the promotion of rural development in Taraba State. Democratic participant media theory was used as the theoretical underpinning for the study. The study adopts an in-depth interview as a methodology where data were collected from journalists in public and private media outfits in Taraba State. The findings of the study show that although journalists in Taraba state know about advocacy journalism, the majority do not practice advocacy journalism owing to operational difficulties, poor funding, and a lack of proper orientation on advocacy, among others. Among other things, the study recommends the need for the incorporation of advocacy journalism into the curriculum and training of journalists in Nigeria at all levels. The study also recommends that government and private media owners should improve the funding and remuneration of journalists, as well as help them surmount operational difficulties to carry out their responsibility of advocacy effectively.

Keywords: Advocacy, Journalism, Participation, Rural development, Subjective reporting.

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INTRODUCTION

Journalism is majorly concerned with the business of collecting, analyzing, verifying and presenting news regarding current events, trends, issues and people (Hasan, 2013). The essential role of every journalist is the inquisitiveness to find answers to the fundamental questions of Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? on burning issues of concern in the society (NICO, 2012). This essential role makes journalism an integral part of any development programme in society. Journalists and the mass media have been recognized as an important resource for mobilising an entire nation towards national development. Being an integral part of the social system, the mass media is a major stakeholder in the realization of sustainable development in Nigeria (Tsegwu, 2015). As the German scholar, Paul Watzlawick, once opined, “You cannot not communicate,” to illustrate how important and indispensable communication is to any civilisation and society as a whole. Journalists are saddled with the responsibility of collecting relevant information, processing the same, and disseminating the information to the general public for the purposes of education, entertainment, correlation of different segments of society, transmission of cultural heritage, among others (Lasswell, 1948, cited in Hasan, 2013). The society heavily relies on journalists using the various mass media to communicate messages to different strata of the society, thereby bridging the existing gap between the information-rich and information-poor members of the society. These essential roles of the mass media, carried out by journalists, set the scene for any meaningful development that will be sustainable in society. Journalists achieve this feat of fostering development via constructive reportage of events across various segments and sectors of society through a practice known as advocacy journalism (Janowitz, 1975, cited in Yousaf, Raza & Kamboh, 2022).

Advocacy journalism is a practice whereby journalists serve as active interpreters and participants who speak on behalf of certain groups, most especially the marginalized population of society who are often denied equal access and use of the mass media to air their views (Janowitz, 1975, cited in Caceres, 2019). Uneven development in developing countries has made information flow to be urban-centred, top-down, and linear, where certain groups referred to as minorities and or rural dwellers are sidelined from airing their views on the mass media. Advocacy journalism seeks to bridge this communication gap by bringing the media close to such groups courtesy of “advocate journalists” who take the responsibility of speaking for the “voiceless” and disadvantaged populations. Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009) argued that contemporary advocacy journalism is not limited to Janowitz’s concept of the “advocate-journalist.” Another form is the civic model of advocacy journalism. Civic model of advocacy journalism refers to organized groups that use the news media to influence reporting, and ultimately, affect public policies for public benefit. It belongs to forms of socio-political mobilization that “seek to increase the power of people and groups and to make institutions more responsive to human needs.” This was recently seen in the harsh tag protest on social media by Nigerian youth which led to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Arm (SARS) squad of the Nigerian Police Force in 2020. Civic advocacy attempts “to widen and diversify the range of choices that people have by

increasing their power to define problems and solutions and participate in the broader social and policy arena" (Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba, 1993, cited in Omotoso, 2010). Through advocacy journalism, journalists and civic organizations aim to raise awareness, generate public debate, influence public opinion, enlighten and mobilize development targets and key decision makers, and promote policy and programmatic changes around specific issues aimed at improving the lives of the people. Advocacy journalism brings issues that might often be neglected to the front burners, where they will attract public attention, sympathy, as well as elicit the necessary line of action for change. Suffice to say that the role of advocacy journalism in promoting development, especially in rural areas, cannot be overemphasised.

Statement of the problem

Development in most developing countries has been uneven and lopsided owing to several reasons stemming from horizontal flow of development communication and urban-centred nature of the mass media, high level of illiteracy, non-involvement/participation of other segments of the society particularly the rural areas, lack of provision/access to social amenities in rural and semi-urban areas, unisectoral approach to development among others (Tsyegyu, 2015; Imoh, 2013). This, therefore, necessitates that the approach to development communication needs to be redefined, most especially in Nigeria, where over 58% of the country's population lives in rural areas, who are often alienated from development programmes (NBS, 2021). There is an eminent need to integrate the rural population into development programmes by first and foremost mobilizing them from being receptive objects to being active objects and participants in the entire development process (Ocheni, 2012). This is where the indispensable role of journalists comes to play as advocates in the development process who are saddled with the responsibility of mobilising, sensitising, enlightening, and designing bespoke programmes that will meet the specific needs of development targets in the rural areas. This can only be achieved via advocacy journalism (Okon, 2013). Through advocacy journalism, the media campaign for a change of situation, improvement of the situation, or maintaining a situation that is considered satisfactory and beneficial to the populace. In doing this, the mass media move away from deadpan reporting and adopt a subjective method of journalism that is focused on fighting for a legitimate cause, and not just mere reportage of societal issues (Ata-Awaji & Ikot-Osin, 2020; Fisher, 2016). It is against this premise that this study, among other things, seeks to investigate the role of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development, and to identify the challenges associated with advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development as well as proffer possible solution to the challenges bedeviling advocacy journalism in promoting rural development in Taraba State.

Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is utilizing advocacy journalism in promoting rural development in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives are to;

1. Ascertain journalists' level of understanding and practice of advocacy journalism in Taraba State
2. Examine the role of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development in Taraba State.
3. Ascertain the challenges of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development in Taraba State
4. Proffer possible solutions to the challenges bedeviling advocacy journalism in promoting rural development in Taraba State.

Conceptual Clarification

Advocacy Journalism

The advocacy journalism paradigm suggests media coverage to immerse stories in order to facilitate human development goals through fostering societal changes (ElAlfy, Darwish, & Weber, 2020). Advocacy journalism revolutionizes the journalistic practices and incorporates the participation of the audience, who are the development target. International Encyclopedia of Communication (2008), cited in Asemah, Edegoh, and Ezebuenyi (2013), defines advocacy journalism as a term that describes the use of journalism techniques to promote a specific political or social cause. For sociosphere.com (2012), advocacy journalism is an evidence-based reporting with a standpoint compared to the traditional media practices that are limited to reporting the mere facts; this genre of journalism guides how to find and action-oriented engagement of the targeted audience. In this way, advocacy journalism serves as an alternative model of journalistic practices to enhance people's engagement in human development issues (Pearson, 2021). This emerging advocacy model gradually counters mainstream media news values and influences journalistic practices. As such, the reliance of the advocacy journalists moves into profoundly transformed journalistic practices focusing on human development issues instead of objectivity (Charles, 2013).

As observed by Janowitz (1975), cited in Caceres (2019), in advocacy journalism, journalists serve as active interpreters and participants who speak on behalf of minority groups who are often denied adequate access and use of the mass media to air their views. The journalists who are often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm take the responsibility of speaking for minority and vulnerable groups in society to present their issues to the appropriate quarters. According to Emmanuel (2020, p.114), minority groups are those who have no equal access to common wealth and are dealt with unfairly by the rest of the population. The hope of this class of people in society lies in advocacy journalism.

Rural Development

Rural development entails progress, infrastructural advancement, and social change in non-urban areas of society, thereby bridging the gap of multi-sectoral development between the urban and rural areas. Most times, rural areas are often neglected or given less attention when it comes

to the provision of social amenities and other life necessities, thereby creating uneven and urban-centred development (Asemah, Victoria & Onyeka, 2013; Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). This alienates the large population of people living in rural areas from accessing developmental projects. As a result, the people living in the rural areas are often illiterates and semi-literates, resistant to change, poor, and disadvantaged from being active participants of any sustainable development that does not first bring about re-orientation of their mindset.

Nikade, Omegor, and Ochenogor (2019) averred that there is gross inequality in the coverage and reportage of development news in rural areas. The mass media focus more on the coverage and reportage of issues in urban areas while neglecting or paying less attention to similar or even more salient issues in rural areas. This negligence in the coverage and reportage of development issues in rural areas is one of the bane of development in Nigeria. Development thrives where the people who are the targets of the development are mobilised and involved throughout the development process in order to achieve the development goal. Where the people are made to be mere passive receivers of development messages, it will be very difficult to have their participation, which will most likely make the development goal a mirage. It is, therefore, imperative to involve the people in designing development messages so as to attain sustainable and people-oriented development at the grassroots level.

Udoakah (2004) cited in Nikade, Omegor and Ochenogor (2019), shared his view as he maintains that rural reporting does not necessarily mean citing the location of a radio or television station in a community but the inclusion of community activities (especially those programmes or events that can encourage development efforts in the audience) in the programmes or contents of the mass media. It has to do with providing the people at the rural level with ample opportunity to air their views on issues bothering the development of their community so as to come up with bespoke and fitting solutions to meet the actual needs of the people and not merely the felt needs thought of by development agents. This is to say that rural development can only thrive where the people in rural areas are effectively carried along and involved as active participants throughout the development process, from the designing of the development programmes to the implementation stage.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic participant media theory was used to provide a theoretical underpinning for the study.

Democratic Participant Media Theory

Democratic-participant media theory was proposed in recognition of new media developments and of increasing criticism of the dominance of the main mass media by private or public monopolies (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012). The theory was propounded by Dennis

McQuail in 1967 alongside Development Media theory. The theory advocates for the democratisation and pluralisation of the media to allow people in rural areas to both own and have access to media platforms in order to bring about positive development. This implies that ownership and access to the media should not be an elite affair; it should instead be an all-comers' affair where ordinary citizens who possess the requisite means should be allowed to own and access the mass media without stringent measures that often serve as constraints. Asemah(2022) opined that from the 1960s onward, calls could be heard for alternative grassroots media, expressing the needs of citizens. The theory supports the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back, and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community, interest groups, or subculture (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012). This theory challenged the necessity for and desirability of uniform, elite-based, centralised, high-cost, commercialised, or state-controlled media. In their place should be encouraged multiple, small-scale, local, non-institutional, committed media which link senders to receivers and also favour horizontal patterns of interaction (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012).

This theory is suitable for this study because advocacy journalism will be easy where government policy allows for the democratisation of the media for the people in rural areas to be able to contribute their quota to the development of their own societies. It is difficult, if not impossible, to champion and or sustain the cause of any long-lasting development without the active participation of the people for whom the development is meant (Venatus, 2016). The journalist's role of advocacy will be easily achieved where the media is not elite-centred and where communication is horizontal and not a top-down approach that does not give room for the people's participation.

Literature Review

Advocacy Journalism and Rural Development in Nigeria

Courtesy of advocacy journalism, people and issues that may not have in any way attracted the attention and support of government, non-governmental organisations, and relevant stakeholders were given prime place and made to go viral, thereby compelling the intervention of the stakeholders concerned. Advocacy journalism plays an indispensable role in the development of rural areas in Nigeria. The rural populace in Nigeria is characterised by different factors like poor road network, poor communication network, poor health and or educational system, lack of basic social amenities, illiteracy, and insecurity among others, which are serving as hindrances to development in the affected communities (Asemah, Victoria & Onyeka, 2013). It is the responsibility of the advocate-journalist to bring these issues to the fore, where they can be adequately addressed by appropriate quarters. More so, the media are also used to mobilize the people to become architects of their destinies, where they take responsibility for their development without having to wait for the government all the time.

In some cases, interventions could be made available, but due to conservatism arising from dogmatic cultural and or religious beliefs, the people in the rural areas will resist such change. Over time, to surmount the challenge of resistance to positive change, orientation programmes have to be organized to help people learn, relearn, and unlearn practices that are adversarial to development (Venatus, 2016). This is to say that advocacy journalism plays a different role in championing the cause of development in rural areas in Nigeria. These roles include, but are not limited to, the following;

Mobilisation of the people

The mass media, via advocacy journalism, creates awareness in rural areas of development programmes and innovations that will benefit the people. In addition to creating awareness, advocacy journalists enlighten the ruralites to understand the rationale behind every development programme and what the people stand to benefit from embracing the programme in order to convince them to accept the social change or development programme (Venatus, 2016). This essential role helps to mobilise the people to actively participate in development programmes with understanding, thereby becoming development crusaders themselves by informing and influencing others to do the same. A good example of this was seen during the early days of child-killer disease immunization programme that was first met with stiff resistance in the north on ethnic and religious grounds but with consistent mobilisation from the media, some persons were enlightened to allow their children to get immunized and they equally influenced their communities to do same (Odorume, 2015). It would have been impossible to achieve this feat without mobilizing the people to cooperate with health workers to get their children immunized against child-killer disease to reduce infant mortality in the northern region. Today, people in rural areas do not wait for health practitioners to visit their homes to get their children immunised; they, on their own accord, carry their children to primary health care centres for immunisation courtesy of advocacy journalism.

Countering conspiracy theories and re-orientation

Conspiracy theories are bound to exist in a media pluralistic environment owing to information democratisation. Conspiracy theories are untrue information circulated to the people, mostly via informal means, and are beginning to be believed. During the outbreak of the coronavirus in Nigeria in 2020, several conspiracy theories were making the rounds and posing a serious hindrance to the government's effort to contain the spread of the virus (Lucas et al, 2020). Some of the conspiracy theories during the outbreak of the coronavirus include: the coronavirus cannot contact a black man because of the skin pigment melanin, use of neem tree and alcohol prevents one from contracting Covid-19, taking the Covid-19 vaccine opens one up to opportunistic diseases that led to death among others (Nigeria Health Watch, 2021). These conspiracy theories were countered via serious campaign programmes by the media and the involvement of traditional and religious leaders to disabuse the people of the negative impressions they had previously had. Re-orientation is highly instrumental to help people unlearn habits and

dangerous beliefs to enable them to accept social change, without which the people will not drop their ideologies to accept any change.

Ensuring Participatory Communication

Advocacy journalism provides people in rural areas with the opportunity to access the media to air their views. Two-way horizontal communication is important to achieving any sustainable development. The people for whom the development is meant should be given the opportunity to bare their minds to unravel the issues to be addressed (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). Doing this will give the people a sense of belonging and will provide an avenue to elicit relevant information needed to bring about development. Participatory communication brings about participatory development where the development targets are not just passive receivers of “felt needs” designed by development sponsors but the people are seen as active participants and stakeholders in the entire development programme (Mohammed & Suleiman, 2023). An essential feature of horizontal communication is that it allows for understanding and feedback, without which it will be difficult to measure the success and or failure of a development programme. One of the reasons why development keeps eluding some African countries despite huge support from International Non-governmental organisations is that the development planners do not carry along the development targets; the development targets are mere “dumping grounds” of whatever the development sponsors and planners decide. Traditional and religious leaders should be integrated into advocacy journalism programmes at the grassroots.

Attracting the attention/intervention of relevant stakeholders

The mass media, through their agenda-setting role, raise people and issues from oblivion to prominence, where public opinion will be formed about such issues. Cohen once opined that the media may not always tell us what to think, but they always successfully tell us what to think about (Asemah, Edegoh & Ezebuenyi, 2013). Any issue given adequate coverage and reportage by the media is bound to attract the attention of the public. Advocacy journalism harnesses this strength of the media to promote issues in rural areas to prominence, where they can compel public attention and sympathy to elicit the necessary action. The mass media, through advocacy journalism, have been able to attract the attention of local and international sponsors to support people in the rural areas. During the recent flooding in 2022, the federal government, through the Office of the Vice President and the Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, projected to the international scene the devastating effect of the flood on various local government areas and states of the federation(OCHA, 2022). The news was given wide coverage and publicity by various mass media platforms on satellite, which attracted international donors’ attention. The report attracted foreign support from international Non-Governmental Organisations and charity organisations towards assisting the flood victims and communities to cushion the effects of the disaster.

Challenges Bedevilling Advocacy Journalism in Nigeria

Advocacy journalism in Nigeria is bedeviled by several challenges, which include but not limited to the following;

Media ownership

Partisanship has characterised the media ownership in Nigeria, whereby most media outlets are mere extensions of their founders' ideologies and not socially responsible to carry out their duties as expected (Bassey-Duke, Brown & Talabi, 2017). As the popular saying goes, "he who pays the piper dictates the tune." The media today "sells" news to the highest bidder due to news commercialisation and the pressure to make profits at all costs. This kind of practice negates advocacy journalism because people in rural areas often do not have the money to give news organisations and journalists the due consideration they deserve. The media have become elite-centred due to their drive for profit-making against public interest reporting that will have a direct impact on the lives of the people at the grassroots.

Inadequate funds/Poor staff remuneration

Advocacy journalism is a capital-intensive activity because roving into hinterlands and rural areas will always require funds to access such places. Most times, journalists roam for news only within the urban areas due to the cost involved in travelling to rural areas, which are often far and disconnected from urban areas where the media stations are located. Where the money to travel to distant locations in rural areas is not available, journalists are left with no other alternative but to resort to roving within the urban areas, which is their immediate environment. In addition to inadequate funding of the media, journalists themselves are not properly remunerated to carry out their duties effectively (NICO, 2012). The poor welfare system has made many journalists resort to the collection of brown envelopes and other unethical practices in their bid for survival. The quest for survival by all means has made so many journalists to sell their conscience and compromise on professionalism in exchange for financial gains.

Lack of a good road network and other basic social amenities:

Some rural areas are disconnected from urban areas due to a poor road network, making it difficult to access these places. It, therefore, becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for journalists to get to such locations to cover happenings due to the poor motorability of the roads. Where that is practicable, it is done once in a while and may not receive the needed coverage and publicity that will suffice to compel public attention and intervention. Aside from the challenge of a good road network to link rural areas to the urban areas where the media stations are situated, there are no basic social amenities, most especially electricity power supply, in most of these rural areas, which makes such places difficult for the establishment and efficient running of media stations (Bankole, 2021)

Insecurity

Insecurity in Nigeria today portends a serious threat to advocacy journalism. The recent spate of kidnapping, banditry, Boko Haram insurgency, and separatist agitations makes so many rural areas inaccessible to journalists because their safety is not guaranteed in such places. Unfortunately, advocacy journalism can only thrive in an environment where there is peace and tranquility to allow journalists to carry out their social responsibility without any fear of intimidation or harassment. Over the years, some places in Borno and Yobe States have been inaccessible due to Boko Haram insurgency, and of recently, a number of places in the North West are also not accessible due to banditry. In spite of the efforts made by development partners internationally and locally, development continues to elude these places due to insecurity. Pate cited in Adewale (2022) averred that media outfits should ensure journalists working under them are economically safe, psychologically protected, and physically safe. A serious media organization would always have a safety protocol or policy that must cover every staff of the organization, including insurance coverage in a situation where you send journalists to cover a dangerous event or a crisis zone. He added that a study conducted in Nigeria revealed many of the media organizations in the country do not have safety policies or protocols.

Government policy

Government policy and unnecessary bureaucracies can be a serious hindrance to development in rural areas. The federal government has made it compulsory for media outfits to have a headquarters office located in the Federal Capital Territory without appropriating the same in the rural areas. The establishment of media stations in Federal and state capitals promotes “elite-based and pro-urban media.” Coverage and reportage of news stories are either fetched from the urban areas or from the international community with little or no attention given to stories from rural areas. Although the federal government, during President Olusegun Obasanjo, has directed that media stations should report a 60:40 ratio of local to foreign programmes(NBC, 2009). According to NBC (2009, p. 3) “Every licence is required to adhere to a minimum of 60% local broadcast content for open television and 80% local broadcast content for radio. The cable/satellite retransmission stations are mandated to reflect a minimum of 20%”. In addition to this, the standard for Nigerian local content specifies that programmes and advertisements for family belt shall be devoid of sex or overt sexual behaviour, nudity, violence,

bloodletting, smoking, alcohol, drug abuse, denigration of womanhood, offensive, lewd or vulgar language, expression and presentation, etc. This policy has never been taken seriously as media outfits are not fined for reporting of foreign issues at the expense of local issues, a practice known as “Afghanistanism”(Asemah, 2011). More so, licensing fees for broadcast media are too exorbitant for rural areas and non-elites to afford, thereby forestalling media pluralism and information democratisation. The licenses are costly to acquire, especially for private organizations. For instance, by 2006, the lowest license fee for private radio was 15 million Naira, as against the lowest for public stations: 10 million Naira (NBC, 2006, p.13). Moreover, broadcasting regulation is dependent on the cultural norms and also “contributes to the shaping of

these norms, and can at times have a significant impact on the form and content of programmes” (Harvey, 1999, p.3 cited in Ihechu & Okugo, 2013),

Illiteracy

Due to the poor enlightenment level of most of the people staying in rural areas, they always respond to social change with stiff resistance and sometimes react in a hostile way to journalists trying to partner with them for development campaigns and programmes. History is replete with cases of journalists’ harassment in some rural areas in Nigeria due to misconceptions of the journalists’ intentions. In some cases, some journalists are even killed, while some female journalists are also raped. Pate, cited in Adewale (2022), opined that “no news story is worth the blood of any journalist”, and believed that only the reporter who is alive will break the hot story. The renowned Professor of Media and Society, Umaru Pate, spoke while presenting a virtual paper on investigative journalism and the safety of journalists at the opening of a two-day workshop on Rural Health Accountability (RHAP-Project). It is apparent, therefore, to deduce that there is a close relationship between illiteracy and rascism, as the Holy Writ would say, “an idle man (mind) is a devil’s workshop.” Illiterates are easily susceptible to being used as thugs and stooges in the hands of desperate politicians to attack journalists when their political interests are at stake.

Asemah, Victoria, and Onyeka (2013) also stated that illiteracy can serve as a hindrance to social development. Most people in rural areas are functionally illiterate and constitute a major obstacle to the effective flow of information or media communicated messages. The illiterates cannot be reached through newspapers and magazines, even when they are produced in their local languages.

METHODS

To investigate “Utilising advocacy journalism for the promotion of rural development in Taraba State,” in-depth interview was adopted to elicit relevant data from journalists in Taraba State drawn from both public and private media outfits which include Taraba Television Corporation, Taraba State Broadcasting Service, Rock FM, Punch Newspaper, Worldview Magazine, Frontline TV, Haske TV, NTA Jalingo. Hughes, Williamson, and Young (2022) averred that interviews allow the in-depth exploration of the respondents’ experiences on the subject matter. An interview is an important qualitative research method in which the researcher collects data directly from the participants (Showkat & Parveen, 2017).

Snowball sampling technique was used because the researchers did not exhaustively know all the research participants and therefore, had to rely on the journalists identified to recommend others for the study. A total of 14 journalists in Taraba State were interviewed for the purpose of the study. The researchers conducted interviews until they reached the point of data saturation. Saunders et al. (2017) averred that saturation has attained widespread approval as a methodological

principle in qualitative research. It is commonly used to mean that, on the basis of the data that have been collected or analysed hitherto, further data collection and or analysis are unnecessary. In light of the aforementioned, further data collection became unnecessary because the data collected was more or less redundant and a repetition of already collected data. Saturation is therefore used in qualitative research as a criterion for discontinuing data collection and or analysis.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study were gathered from the data collected via in-depth interviews with practicing journalists in Taraba State. The findings were discussed and analysed qualitatively vis-à-vis the findings of other scholars who conducted similar studies. Be that as it may, the work is novel within the area of study, as there was a dearth of extant studies on the subject within the study area. Names and other personal information about the respondents were withheld. Many official ethics guidelines recommend disguising the personal identities of research participants as a default position in qualitative research (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2014). The findings of the study were discussed thematically in line with the objectives of the study.

Journalists' level of understanding and practice of advocacy journalism in Taraba State.

This theme sought to ascertain journalists' level of understanding on the concept of advocacy journalism as well as their level of practice of advocacy in journalism. From the findings of the study, it was established that a few veterans among the journalists who have practiced for over a decade are familiar with the concept and practice of advocacy journalism, whereas the remaining majority have limited knowledge of the concept and practice. While responding to the question of journalists' level of understanding and practice of advocacy journalism in Taraba State, interviewees 1, 2 and 3 opined that:

“We don't have journalists who practice advocacy journalism today, only few still do that.” Another interviewee added that;

Yes, actually, even though most journalists may not really realize that their responsibility is about advocacy. So as a journalist, you speak for people, you fight for the rights of people, that is advocacy in its own self. And that has been the job of a journalist. So it is not a familiar terrain. Apart from the fact that I am also involved in advocacy under other auspices, I am also familiar that my job entails the job of an advocate. So you speak for the people, it's about development, it's about neglect, it's about injustice, you see. As a journalist, it's your responsibility, that's your social responsibility, to speak the truth as it affects the community and to also call attention to the government in giving the people justice, giving them development. So that's all about advocacy.

The above finding is in line with the observation of Jahman Anikulapo, Editor of The Guardian Newspaper in 2012, who noted that the kind of journalism practiced today barely borders on issues of advocacy, where fundamental questions on the state of the nation and welfare of the citizenry need to be asked by journalists (NICO, 2012). Anikulapo recommended that Nigerian journalists should practice advocacy journalism, which will afford them as journalists the opportunity to ask relevant questions. In addressing such questions, journalism practice will be beneficial to the people. Speaking further on journalists' understanding of the concept and practice of advocacy journalism in Taraba State, another interviewee added;

Advocacy journalism means to sensitise the rural communities on the specific targets that we want to achieve. That means you are carrying your advocacy, you are also trying to mobilize and educate them, try to enlighten them. It includes rural sensitization, health campaigns, road enactments, and mobilizations of rural resources to reconstruct feeder roads to developed rural areas. This should be done so that the situation should be improved for the better.

These findings corroborate the studies of Anyanwu, Awaeze and Etumnu(2022) who averred that journalists have the responsibility to educate the public about events and issues and how such issues affect the lives of the public, and that is what makes journalists formidable agents of development.

In spite of the understanding that the journalists demonstrate on the subject of advocacy journalism, many of them admitted to the fact that they do not practice advocacy in their reporting. This finding agrees with the findings of Nikade, Omegor, and Ochenogor (2019), who also established that there is gross inequality in the coverage and reportage of development news by journalists in rural areas.

Interviewee 3 and interviewee 13 stated that;

"I am not too familiar with the concept of advocacy journalism. Most of our activities take place in the state capital; we don't go into the rural areas."

This clearly shows how journalists pay less attention to issues of advocacy in rural areas despite their understanding of the concept. The mass media focus more on the coverage and reportage of issues in urban areas while neglecting or paying less attention to similar or even more salient issues in rural areas (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). This negligence in the coverage and reportage of development issues in rural areas is one of the banes of development in Nigeria.

Examining the role of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development in Taraba State.

This theme aimed to find out the role of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development in Taraba State. In response to the question on this theme, the interviewees averred that;

We should also look at developmental journalism, which is very, very important. You need to see how you can influence development among our people. Looking at people who are living actually without social amenities, looking at people where they lack access routes, this you can, as a journalist you should be able to focus on some of those things to attract government attention. Even if the government claims it doesn't know that this is the plight or the problem of a particular community. Journalists can really emphasize some of those things to bring about development in our rural areas. So sometimes you need to highlight some of those issues and bring them to the public glare. Journalists can actually focus on such issues of poverty, marginalisation, segregation, victimization, and outbreaks of diseases to bring about development to the people.

From the foregoing, it is clear that journalists have significant and indispensable roles to play in utilising advocacy journalism for the promotion of rural development in Taraba State and Nigeria as a whole. This finding is in consonance with the view of Anyanwu, Awaeze, and Etumnu(2022), who opined that there is a strong interconnection between communication provided by journalists and development, to the extent that there will be no meaningful development without communication. Journalists are part of the development process; as such, they should carry out their developmental function with every sense of responsibility so that they will not hinder the process of development. Pearson (2021) also added that advocacy journalism is an alternative model of journalistic practices to enhance people's engagement in human development issues. From the findings of this study and the submission of other scholars as cited above, it is apposite to note that advocacy journalists play the role of development partners together with other relevant stakeholders like the targeted population and appropriate authorities like the government and non-governmental organisations. Advocacy journalists are at the vanguard of development programmes through adequate coverage and reportage of developmental issues from the rural areas, and ensuring the information gets to the relevant authorities concerned for action.

In order to achieve this Herculean task, journalists have to collaborate with people in rural areas to know what their problems are so as to advocate for them properly. In line with the need for cooperation with members of the public, the interviewees stressed that there is a need for collaboration and active participation of the members of the public for journalists to carry out advocacy, especially in rural areas.

This approach to journalism that takes audience participation into cognizance in development communication is otherwise known as Participatory Development Communication (Mohammed & Suleiman, 2023). Indeed, the consistency of using Participatory Development Communication to influence perceptions, attitudes, behaviour and awareness is gaining popular

acceptance in a variety of development programmes, including those targeted at decreasing poverty, avoiding child abuse and managing natural resources (Cherdpong & Alexander, 2013; Jensen, Kriz & Skivenes, 2022; Sood & Cronin, 2019 cited in (Mohammed & Suleiman 2023). This study has established that whereas the onus of carrying out advocacy in rural areas lies with the journalists, it is, however, expedient for the targeted population, for whom the development is meant, to cooperate and participate actively in the advocacy programme by providing relevant information to bring about the needed development.

Unravelling the challenges of advocacy journalism in the promotion of rural development in Taraba State

In responding to the question asked on the challenges of utilising advocacy journalism for the promotion of rural development in Taraba State, virtually all the interviewees enumerated similar challenges. An interviewee averred that;

There are many challenges. One, we have the issue of transportation. For me to go to Mambila now, I need at least ₦8,000 or ₦7,000 from the recent increase. So a lot of journalists don't even have the money to sponsor themselves, let alone their stations. If you say you want to go to the local government to cover the rural news, the station will tell you that they don't have money to pay... I was talking about cooperation earlier. There are a lot of rural communities. If you go there now and talk to them about the news, they will say Leave me, I will be going to the farm. That should not arise from the rural people. They should be able to cooperate with journalists. They should be able to give information so that it will help you to develop their community.

Another interviewee added that;

One of the problems actually is that sometimes when you begin to speak the truth about the nature of the development of a place, you are confronted with this ugly reality where sometimes the government in power becomes antagonistic. So sometimes they end up even victimising the journalist because the journalist has been able to speak the truth as it affects the people. There are also operational difficulties of the media. You hardly find even functional vehicles today, even in government organisations where you are expecting that, yes, they should be flourishing. So they have problems with operational vehicles because some of those things would have to involve the movement of journalists to rural areas...

So funding becomes another problem because the media organization or those who are involved actually need to fund the media. We have a situation today that even journalists are not given allowances. You go for an assignment, you don't have your allowance. So, how do you expect the person who doesn't receive a salary to actually be able to move into the hinterland to investigate some stories that concern the people?

The enumerated challenges bedeviling advocacy journalism in Taraba State as seen in the study agree with the findings of Bankole (2021) who investigated on the challenges and prospects of investigative journalism in Nigeria and he found out that lack of funding, insecurity, ownership influence, poor remuneration, poor access roads, influence to personal life among others served as serious hindrances to investigative journalism and by extension the entire journalism practice in Nigeria. These findings corroborate with the studies of Bassey-Duke, Brown and Talabi (2017) and Tsegwu (2015) where similar challenges to development were listed to include but not limited to; media ownership, elite-based nature of the media, illiteracy, poor implementation, lack of modern equipment, news commercialisation, poor reading and research culture by development journalists among others. This slightly varies with the position of Venatus (2016), who stated that Nigeria has produced a typical example of an ad-mixture of media campaign failures and successes in rural development and overall social mobilisation. He attributed the challenge to the media's failure in the rural development campaign to the inappropriate choice of strategy by the media. It is glaring to note that transportation, journalists' orientation on advocacy journalism, and funding, among others, are serious challenges affecting advocacy journalism in Taraba State, thereby limiting rural development efforts in the state by extension. Places like Sardauna(Mambila) and Kurmi local government areas, as mentioned in the findings, are far away from the capital territory and will require much funding and good means of transportation to be reached.

In addition to this, Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012), in highlighting the challenges of advocacy journalism in Nigeria, stated that the lopsided flow of information (urban to rural) has no useful value; rather it aggravates the disparity between the urban and rural populace and promotes rural-urban migration, thus worsening the prevailing unemployment situation in the country. There is also the fact that those who own and control the mass media in Nigeria perceive themselves as news makers rather than as agents for the dissemination of information. Moreover, the orientation of Nigerian journalists is wrong and hence counterproductive to the rural information reporting dissemination. Therefore, it is noteworthy to say that the challenges mitigating against the success of advocacy journalism in Nigeria spreads across the different agents involved in the development programmes from the journalists where some do not properly understand advocacy journalism, to government who fall short of their obligations and would easily clamp down on any constructive criticism in the name of opposition and the target population who barely cooperate with the journalists to bring issues to public glare.

Tackling challenges bedeviling advocacy journalism in promoting rural development in Nigeria

Findings from the interview sources show that tackling the challenges of advocacy journalism in Taraba State has to be an all-inclusive affair where all hands need to be on deck to ameliorate the situation. All the relevant stakeholders involved in advocacy, ranging from journalists who are at the vanguard, to the ruralites and the government/non-governmental organisations, must all play their individual and collective roles in giving proper coverage,

reportage, and addressing of issues raised in advocacy journalism (Uche, Ezeh, Adline & Nwosu, 2020). While responding to the question on how to tackle the challenges bedeviling advocacy journalism in Taraba State, one of the interviewees said that;

I think there is also what we call censorship, media censorship. So sometimes there are stories that you don't even write because when you bring them, and they affect the government, they will not be utilized. So these are also challenges. I think leadership should not actually be seen as an avenue for victimisation. But leadership should be able to look at criticisms actually and to understand what is happening in the community as a check, as a check to promote good governance, and not to see the media or any form of advocacy actually as an issue coming from an enemy. So leadership should be able to develop the capacity to appreciate advocacy.

It can be deduced that there is a need for the government to stop seeing media advocacy for development in rural areas as confrontation and or opposition, but rather a constructive criticism clamouring for improvement of the people's well-being. In addition to this, another interviewee added, "that the media should focus more of the agenda on advocacy and sensitization of the rural areas on the subject matters that can be given adequate coverage and reporting."

Anyanwu, Awaeze, and Etumnu(2022); Ocheni and Nwankwo(2012) recommended the following measures to tackle the challenges of development in rural reporting;

- i. There must be deliberate efforts to counter the orientation and effects of who is in the newsroom and how news is defined. In this regard, our media establishments should either endeavour to hire more "rural-minded" reporters or impress it upon the existing ones to change their minds about going to the rural areas to cover events or issues.
- ii. There is a need to reverse the existing position, which does not at all guarantee ruralites' involvement and participation. In this vein, the media should make conscientious efforts to bring the rural populace through participatory development communication.
- iii. In order for development to be just and sustainable, citizens must productively participate in the decisions that shape their lives. Participation requires an informed citizenry. Hence, free and independent media are needed to supply timely and relevant information to citizens, allowing them to change their own behaviour and to demand higher social standards for society.

CONCLUSION

To put all that has been said into perspective, advocacy journalism places journalism practice in Nigeria at a pedestal where rural development can be achieved with the active participation of the people in the developmental process. To achieve this herculean task, the advocacy journalists is saddled with the onus of enlightening, convincing, persuading and

mobilizing the people to see the need to accept an innovation or a social cause that is targeted towards improving the quality of their lives. In addition to these, advocacy journalists also serve the role of bridging the communication gap between the rural areas and the government as well as other development partners. The advocacy role of the journalist helps to promote even and multi-sectoral development in the society. It is therefore, expedient to provide advocacy journalists with the enabling environment under a robust welfare scheme to enable them carry out their responsibility without fear or favour.

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