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INSPIRING SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL HABITS: TWO ONLINE NEWSPAPERS SYSTEMS

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CHAPTER SIX



INSPIRING SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL HABITS: TWO ONLINE NEWSPAPERS SYSTEMS

Ifedolapo Ademosu

Introduction

Human progress has come at serious costs to the environment. Progress in itself, is good, but not when the environment is taxed so heavily. Jager (2007), observed that the situation is severe; much of the causal factors regarding environmental change are linked to economic growth, industrialisation and increased consumption which is compounded by rate of consumption in industrialised countries, and increased size of the world population. World population has been growing exponentially since the 1900s, so also consumption of resources advances unchecked, even as more nations strain to become industrialised. Jager argues that all these erode nature's supply. In some cases they destroy that which supports human existence, endangering the very quality of life. Yet human activities in the quest for development continues to drive environmental change, so there is need to address how they affect the environment. Human activities need to become more sustainable. Here is where the media come in. Prior to the turn of the millennium, (as the 21st century dawned) there had been several environmental sustainability campaigns. These were broadly focused yet increasing attention to complexities of climate change was premium. The media featured these but beyond sporadic campaigns, this paper seeks to examine how the media, in their routine coverage can help to inspire more sustainable environmental habits.

According to the World Bank, sustainable development is the meeting of today's needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs. It requires the

balancing of social, economic and environmental objectives. However, processes required to tap available economic resources often degraded, depleted and destabilized environment's natural balance. This should not be; economic development – the output of human activities – should not compromise environmental sustainability.

Sustainability is the ability to keep up a planned course of action for a long duration. Goodland & Daly (1996), a pioneer of ecological sustainability argues that for there to be environmental sustainability there must be a combination of the following conditions:

- Harvesting of renewable resources must not exceed rate at which resources regenerate (sustainable yield);
- Pollution rate must be controlled; waste generation from projects should not exceed environment's assimilative capacity (sustainable waste disposal); and
- Renewable substitutes should replace depleted non-renewable resources.

There are dire consequences when these conditions are breached. On a yearly basis, the world records around 2 million deaths and billions of diseases all attributed to pollution. Environmental degradation threatens all aspects of human well-being. (www.unep.org/geo/geo4/report/01_Environment_for_Development). Yet the environment also provides material assets and economic base for human endeavours. Almost half of jobs worldwide depend on fisheries, forests or agriculture. Non-sustainable use of these natural resources threaten individual livelihoods as well as local, national and international economies.

Environmental sustainability, the 7th millennium development goal is critical to achieving other development goals. Resources from the environment are the mainstay of most poor communities, in fact for about 26% of the wealth of low-income countries. Besides threats to livelihood, up to 20% of disease in developing countries are linked to environmental issues. These are further exacerbated by manifestations of climate change which add to extreme weather events, increase the spread of malaria and other vector diseases. Such is the relationship between human well-being and calls for an integrated solution to environmental sustainability. The UNEP (2009) document states people need access to information, the right to participate in a decision making process that will impact their lives and access to justice in environmental matters in order to ensure environmental protection. This is a right in itself.

It has long been argued as in the 1972 Stockholm Declaration On The Human Environment that “man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations” Environmental challenges and issues are therefore best considered with the participation of citizens at different levels of existence:

home, street, estate, and local government, state and national. Such participation depends on regular access to relevant and important information.

Development tends to be an issue to contend with in areas combating environmental challenges. The United Nations measures development by life expectancy, adult literacy, access to all levels of education, as well as people's average income - a necessary condition of their freedom of choice. In a broader sense, development involves all aspects of human wellbeing from their economic status to their political freedom.

The 2014 Human Development Report is an expression of global agreement on human development. The report indicated that between 2000 and 2013, Sub-Saharan Africa had the highest rate of progress in the Human Development Index (HDI) which combines achievements in income, health and education. The continent still has far to go to ensure that parity in growth is experienced across demographic lines. Incidence of multidimensional poverty with overlapping deprivations in education, health and living standards is still high. Susceptible groups rarely experience improvements in their standard of living because of limited political participation, livelihood options and poor access to basic social services. Accountability and responsive governance are required for there to be improvements in services delivered.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a measure of human rights and development status, were developed to promote parity of experience among countries of the world. They also help to focus national development plans. According to the Human Development Index, Nigeria is no stranger to development plans. It has had several - First National Development Plan (1962-1968), second National Development plan (1970-1974), third and fourth development plans (1975 -1980); (1981 - 1985) the rolling plans (1990-1998) Structural Adjustment Programme, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (2003 – 2007). Vision 2020 is currently in operation. Recent plans tend to reflect MDGs since 2015 was the universally agreed (but evidently elusive) deadline. For instance, the estimated 800 million people who had moved out of the poverty threshold were still vulnerable to shocks that could push them back into abject poverty. 12 per cent (842m) of the world's population still suffer from chronic hunger; a large concentration is in Africa. To address the poverty level, there will be more demand on the environment. Meanwhile, it can be argued that the more the environment is exhausted to increase nations' earning capacity in order to address poverty levels and attendant problems, the more resource foundation of many is destroyed.

This raises the issue of sustainability. Daouda Toure, UNDP Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator in Nigeria, believes that more than ever before, the world needs to work together to harness individual and collective capacity for resilience and to achieve the MDGs (HDR 2014 -

www.ng.undp.org/content/Nigeria/en/home).

Pate (2006) cited in Jibril (2013), describes MDGs as a set of eight goals that are interdependent, addressing Poverty Reduction, Universal Primary Education, Gender Equality, Child Mortality, Maternal Health, HIV/AIDS and Malaria, Environmental Sustainability and Global Partnership. These are the greatest threats to individual and collective human development this 21st Century (Igbuzor, 2006; UNDP MDG Report 2012). Achieving the MDGs requires team work and as inferred in the eight goal, the media must be involved.

Measured in 2009, Nigeria performance in her pursuit of the MDGs has been mixed. Progress towards Poverty Reduction, Universal Primary Education, Gender Equality, Child Mortality, Maternal Health has been fair, but progress towards the other three goals, including environmental sustainability has been less satisfactory. Access to safe water and sanitation is not significant. The situation regarding environmental challenges is even tougher; erosion, coastal flooding and climate change, loss of biodiversity due to oil spills are on the increase. These destroy livelihoods (agriculture, fishing and farming), homes, localities and force families to move as squatters to otherwise safe and economically viable areas. Consequently, the number of slums in major cities is on the increase. Partnership for development had also been slow. To advance, the country needs to forge strategical partnerships with relevant institutions including the media (press).

MDGs are country level targets, to drive the process, sustainable development occurs at all levels. Success is measured by the improvements at state and local levels too. Pate (2006) cited in Jibril (2013) stated that media are essential and central in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the success of the MDGs at all administrative levels. With the increasing number of media outlets available in various parts of the country, Nigeria was deemed well equipped for the challenge. Having repeatedly proven their ability to put major (albeit political) issues on the agenda for public discussion, Nigerian media are a force to be reckoned with. The combination of the diversity, reach, visibility and credibility make it possible for the press to actively propagate and monitor the implementation of the MDGs in the country. They would be great tools for persuading individuals to contribute towards environmental sustainability.

That said, Biagi (2012) states that traditional newspaper readership is on the decline, more young adults will tend to read the news online rather than buy a hard copy especially as the news along with other media forms, arrives on their screen promptly. The online platform is therefore a communication channel to be explored in order to engage future leaders (aged 18 -33 years) in ensuring environmental sustainability. World Bank figures indicate that there were 55.9 million internet users (32.9 per cent of the Nigerian population) and 6.6 million Nigerian Facebook users in 2012. Ogunlesi (2013) reports more than four million Nigerians users of smartphones

(according to statistics from Informa Telecoms), six million on Facebook, and approximately 50 million Nigerian users of the internet. These figures far outweighed the circulation on any of the Nigerian newspapers, which on the average was 100,000. (www.presscouncil.gov.ng – accessed at 9.35pm on 28th Nov, 2015; www.answersafrica.com) Young people, including those between ages 18 and 33 constitute the majority (70 per cent) of social media users in Nigeria. This group forms an integral part of the discussion in this study.

Statement of the Problem

Inhabitat.com outlined six most pressing environmental issues as climate change, pollution, soil erosion and degradation, deforestation, water scarcity and loss of biodiversity. An article in USA Today identified same amongst the ten greatest threats facing the world. Environmental challenges such as water crises (scarcity), ranked third highest concern on that list followed by climate change and its effect on extreme weather patterns.

As discussed above, environmental degradation, extinction of species even global warming are due to inhumane exploitation of natural resources. Population growth even at the most minimal rate will further complicate these issues. The future seems bleak, if current choices remain reckless. Today's use of the environment and natural resources impact upon the future. Despite global calls to safeguard the environment, through changes in economic policies and activities evident in the Millennium Development Goal for example, change in policies and government actions appears slow. Change also requires the involvement of individuals whose lives will be affected by environmental crisis. Accountability mechanisms implemented more radically, need to be established for the MDG to be attained. This chapter argues that media in their role as watchdog of society are well positioned to create necessary awareness and push for required action.

The Nigerian constitution defines the media's role. Chapter 2 Section 22 states: “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people”. Section 20 says “The state shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wildlife of Nigeria”.

The press is expected to ensure the continued survival of the Nigerian environment through continuous surveillance of economic policies and activities and their impact on the environmental future of Nigeria but how have they fared? At a time when readership and circulation figures are steadily declining, it is logical to engage with subjects on the form of media which they are more likely to use. So rather than studying traditional newspapers the study reported in this chapter opted to focus on online press. According to Biagi (2012) online editions help sustain some of the existing newspapers.

This empirical study considered how Nigerian online press drove public attention to environmental issues. How had the public been engaged to the end that the country achieves its environmental sustainability goals? Comparing Nigerian papers with their foreign counterparts, the study aimed to demonstrate how online newspapers had been highlighting environmental issues; and how well they had engaged the public towards environmental change given the dynamic media landscape and the pressing deadline for the achievement of the MDGs.

Theoretical Framework

In a technologically determinist argument, Baran and Davis (2012) suggest that new media change or heighten our experience of ourselves and our society. This view is relevant given the size of the online population. Platforms of delivery may heighten the experience of information and the meaning thus generated though the message is also important yet there really is more to the news than facts delivered.

The Agenda setting theory of Shaw and McCombs presupposes that it is the responsibility of the news media to indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are. This in turn structures what the public perceives as main issues of each day (McQuail, 2012). This explains why the message is important to our study. Newspapers are expected to give prominence to urgent and topical goal-driven issues. In anticipation of 2015 when the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) should have been attained, environmental sustainability issues should have been highly prioritised in the press, especially online platforms to which young adults are more inclined as mentioned earlier.

The 18-33 age group is important as they will bear consequences of current decisions and actions taken on environmental matters. Besides, they are critical targets to promote continuity of efforts; the media have a responsibility to ensure that future decision makers are adequately informed on environmental issues. They should learn about climate change, pollution, soil erosion and degradation, deforestation, water scarcity and loss of bio-diversity the oil spills, the implications of these on individuals and the nation. They should also learn of possible solutions offered by many including professionals. Failure on this front will likely mean that future policy makers are inadequately informed to deal with the environmental problems that keep evolving.

Framing is a further consideration of how readers are guided to value particular elements of stories based on the prominence given to these issues. The highlighted angle in a news story is deemed to affect the value which readers place on its importance Carvalho (2007, cited in Batta, Ashong & Bashir, 2013), states that framing is more about categorisation (largely quantitative) and organisation around central ideas or perspectives or calling attention to some aspects of reality against others. The press is therefore expected to highlight and repeatedly cover the major areas or issues they expect their target readers to focus on.

Frames are “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Hanson, 2010 cited in Batta, Ashong & Bashir, 2013). Hanson explained that frames tend to select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more pronounced in a communication text, in order to highlight a particular problem, its definition, description, moral implications and/or treatment recommendations to tackle the issue described” (p5). In essence framing offers an interpretation of the story and gets people focused on that specific train of thought. Frames explain why an issue is a problem, and describes the roots and or triggers and the possible ways to resolve or tackle those said issues. According to Nisbet cited by Hanson, audiences rely on frames to understand and discuss issues. So, for readers to become change agents, the press must actually capture problems and frame these in ways that the audiences understand. Triggers in messages, implications of issues to readers' lives and what changes are required from individuals in order to address issues at stake must be made clear.

This view is supported by Lakoff (2010, p71-72), who states that thanks to science, man is known to think typically in terms of unconscious structures called "frames" and these are evaluated against roles, relationships and other frames. He explained that frames come in systems and as such a single word can activate not only a frame but also the system. He also states that many of these frames are connected to the emotional regions of the brain which determine what an individual likes or dislikes.

Lakoff argues that since frames cannot be avoided, the question to contemplate is whose frames are being activated that in turn shape the public's perspective. This may be applied to the coverage of climate change. So far, that issue has largely been addressed on the global stage. It is not yet to on the front burner of Nigerian media. This might be due to a lack of understanding of the issues or failure to recognise its local impact on everyday life. This pattern of reporting is not likely to yield desired behaviour or attitude change. Based on Nisbet's explanation, the media are expected to use frames to make the environmental issues interesting and appealing to the readers. Stories should explain the premise and expectations of policy makers, define policy options, and simplify proffered expert solutions in relevant and persuasive ways. He maintains that for [guiding] public engagement in communicating environmental issues, frames matter a lot.

The language used in a report must make sense within the existing system of frames available to the public if the story is to work. A story must be introduced in a system that allows it to be understandable across a good proportion of the population, adequate for the story to be repeated and for those conveying the message to be trusted. Readers are able to receive the news with their own frames and stories must connect with their emotional regions. Here is the weakness of the logic of framing, since readers may hold frames that differ from one to another. Lakoff (2010), states that this is because there are limited possibilities for changing frames.

The press must work around this weakness to ensure that they deliver more than simple reports. As Baran and Davis (2012) quoting Bernard Cohen (1963) explain, “the press is much more than just a purveyor of information and opinion”. Using the right frames which connect to the public’s existing frame structures, the press should engage readers in ways that drive action or the process of change.

Jibril’s (2013), study to ascertain how Nigerian newspapers covered issues relating to the MDGs premised on the view that the media (press) are central to the implementation of action, to monitoring and evaluation of the success of MDGs at the local, state and national level. His study, also anchored on the Agenda setting theory, viewed newspapers as tools for raising the salience of MDGs amongst relevant community actors.

His research objectives translated into questions on frequency of coverage, prominence of reports, direction of the reports on the MDGs. It also considered which of the issues was given more coverage. Using content analysis, he found, that during the studied time frame coverage of MDGs was much less than coverage of other issues. Some of the MDGs were given more attention than others, and the media did not really act as efficient custodians of developmental information. He went on to recommend that newspapers should rate MDGs issues highly, as they do politics, economics, and entertainment for example. Those findings and recommendations were instructive for this study.

Online Newspapers versus Traditional Newspapers

Regardless of the medium, the definition of news remains constant. It is information about recent events or happenings that are worthy of attention. In the last decade, the news industry transitioned in a difficult terrain with multiple platforms of delivering information often for free, and a decline in readership of newspapers amongst other factors (Saperstein, 2014).

Mitchell, director of journalism research for the Pew Research Centre (in an interview with the HPR quoted in Saperstein, 2014), says the difficulty is as a result of the news industry being unsure of how to function and adapt given the increasingly established digital space, the way content is organised on it and the way it is being used by people. The digital space has therefore become a tipping point threatening the structures and approach of traditional newspapers and possibly their survival in the face of non-adaptability to the new technological advancement (<http://harvardpolitics.com/covers/future-print-newspapers-struggle-survive-age-technology/>). This tipping point is that moment when change whether minor and insignificant occurs. In this instance the change is the access to the digital space or online media. Stuart Allan (2010) believes that this had profound consequences.

Abbate (1999)’s expresses a similar view, that the internet’s identity as a communication medium was not in-built in the technology. It was rather constructed

through a series of social choices. As such, the creativity of the builders and the application by users are both essential in defining exactly how and what the internet is used for. This leaves room for constant invention every time the technology is improved upon.

One such use of the internet was the introduction and increasing importance of online journalism. Online journalism is widely used in scholarly literature to refer to news production and distribution over the internet, mainly through websites. (Deuze et al cited in Domingo, 2006). It is a spawn of the new media that has affected the way newspapers get and circulate their news (Garrison, 2001). News organisations had since considered as bleak the future of journalism (Saperstein, 2014). This view is linked to a concern that to retain audiences (whose attention span seems to be shrinking), they need to continually dumb down stories. However in reality demand for in-depth reporting has remained. The key is to innovate; it is essential to keep newspapers relevant for technologically savvy audiences.

Liew and Teng (n.d.) believe that online news are new means for communicating, and a symbol for emerging social practices. It is a platform for easier and 'free' access to news on digital (often personal) devices. There is also the ease of two way communication enhancing the feedback in proportions hitherto unknown in mass communication.

Many newspapers have modelled their online content to suit young and heavy internet users for whom it may be a convenient means to get information updates. Statistics from Malaysia show that readership for a particular news website reached the 4.35 million mark. Use of online news in the country increased from 24 to 33 per cent. Online news consumption in Malaysia was mainly among younger people rather than baby boomers or the elderly. This could explain a decline in readership of traditional newspapers, a pattern evident in other countries by about 40 per cent. (Scott, 2010 cited in Liew and Teng n.d.)

Access to smart phones, tablets or other mobile platforms have encouraged the consumption of news online. Dramatic changes in the news environment can also be traced to the rise of social networking sites. In a study reported in 2012, 19 per cent of Americans said they saw news or news headlines on a social networking site the day before. This was double the 2010 measure (9%). Almost as many younger adults (below 30), had seen the news on a social networking site the previous day (33%) as had seen it on television (34%). Only 13% had read a newspaper either in print or digital form (<http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>).

Functions of the Mass Media

The media are tasked with the responsibility of getting relevant information across to members of the society. Dominick (2011) has highlighted surveillance, interpretation

and transmission of cultural heritage as the core responsibilities of the media. Referring to news and information service provided by the press, Surveillance is the vigilant lookout for dangers. This is in keeping with our focus. The press can either bring to the attention of their readers, warnings of dangers occurring within the environment, or useful tips about how to avert environmental dangers. Online newspaper platforms are designed and equipped to provide these. This function is critical because for many age groups in society, the media are their primary source of information.

Atinmo and Madueke (1999) as cited in Busari (2002), believe information can change people's attitude, behaviour and perception towards the state of their physical environment. This is what is required most for the MDGs to be attained, and sustainable environmental habits established. The Interpretation function builds on the surveillance function of the press. The press does not just supply facts and data, they provide information on the meaning and significance of events. Readers are given three packages in one – interpretation, comment and opinion - to sharpen their perspective on events or issues in focus. These should include analysis of cause(s) of events, discussion on implications of government policies or lack of thereof, for the growth of environmental sustainability.

Transmission of cultural heritage is the socialization role of the media. Readers' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs are shaped by information derived from the media, including coverage of expert opinions. . Individuals may adopt behaviour and values of their reference group. In this role, the press is under pressure to develop particular nuances of what environmentally sustainable behaviour should be. The press and online newspapers are expected to model values that are important to a society, mould readers' aspirations and endorse ideals of a beautiful and healthy environment.

Methodology

In the sense that not enough has been done on media coverage of environmental issues by online Nigerian newspapers this study is exploratory. It also describes how specific aspects of Nigerian online newspapers have been used to cover issues affecting the Nigerian environment, the impact of these and the sustainability of measures taken to address these. It compares these with presumably cutting edge practices in foreign newspapers. This helped to highlight the areas of strength and weaknesses in the performance of online newspapers in their focus on environmental sustainability.

A sample of newspapers texts was drawn from online content of two Nigerian papers - Punch, Vanguard, and two foreign papers - the Guardian, and Independent. Though to help with the description some of the analysis was qualitative, the primary analysis was quantitative. Such content analysis involves measuring phenomena using numbers and counts (Monette, Sullivan and Dejong, 2008). Adler and Clark (2011), explain that it is a technique particularly useful for doing historical investigations by

systematically studying some form of communication (speeches, television programmes, newspaper articles, films, advertisements, even literature anthologies). According to Sobowale (2009) the method helps to detect patterns or connect dots that help to explain trends which would help the researcher arrive at conclusions regarding the studied variables.

Sampling

The sample consists of a total of 80 stories; twenty each from the selected four online newspapers in our study. Two factors affected the sampling approach used in selecting the number of stories to be studied. The first - the fleeting nature of information posted on the World Wide Web, which means that information is archived at the end of each day especially for online newspapers whose information cycle is daily. This is different from traditional newspapers whose past copies can easily be accessed.

The second factor which influenced the sampling technique was the findings from a pre-test of the selected sites. While the foreign newspapers online had dedicated sub-sections titled "Environment", the Nigerian newspapers online did not. An initial search for relevant key words - environment, environmental issues, climate change, pollution - and other specific environment definers (as outlined in the problem statement) turned up an irregular and scanty selection of stories even with a selected time span. This revealed that using a time frame would make the study skewed and imbalanced in favour of the international newspapers, which had defined sub-heads.

Actual reach of these online newspapers was not considered at the time. Rather their potential reach was based on their online presence and the number of online users in Nigeria.

Measurement Indices

Six environmental values were assessed during this study - climate change, pollution, soil erosion and degradation, deforestation, water scarcity and loss of bio-diversity the oil spills. According to the CIA fact book, these are the environmental issues which Nigeria battles.

- Climate change has ceased to be a scientific curiosity according to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). It is beyond a mere environmental and regulatory concern. It is the major, overriding environmental issue of our time, the single greatest challenge facing environmental regulators. Its effects span economic, health and safety, food production, security, and more. Shifting weather patterns threaten food production. Increased unpredictability of precipitation, rising sea levels contaminate coastal freshwater reserves, increase the risk of catastrophic flooding, and warmer atmosphere aids the spread of pests and diseases once limited to the tropics. (<http://www.unep.org/climatechange/SearchResults/tabid/130/Default.aspx?Search=climate+change>)
- Pollution occurs in water, air and land when pollutants (generally waste materials) contaminate natural surroundings. The resultant changes adversely affect lifestyles. Pollution disturbs the ecosystem. It reached an all-time peak with

increasing development and consumption patterns that further fuelled global warming and human illness (<http://www.conserve-energy-future.com/PollutionTypes.php>)

- Rapid urbanisation according to CIA Fact sheet is also a major cause of Soil Erosion and Degradation. The term refers to the loss of the top part of the soil. Besides erosion, soil quality is also affected by certain agricultural activities leading to soil compaction, loss of soil structure, nutrient degradation, and soil salinity. Soil erosion can further compound pollution leading to sedimentation in streams and rivers, clogged up waterways and decline in stock of fish and other species. Degraded land is often less able to hold onto water thus worsening flooding. (<http://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/soil-erosion-and-degradation>).
- Deforestation is the permanent destruction of forests, sometimes on account of other uses of the land. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), an estimated 18 million acres (7.3 million hectares) of forest, which is roughly the size of the Panama are lost each year (www.livescience.com/27692-deforestation.html).
- Water scarcity is either the lack of adequate quantities of water or lack of access to safe water (quality). Up to one billion people are affected. (http://thewaterproject.org/water_scarcity).
- Loss of bio-diversity is due to natural and artificial causes. A main cause of harm to wildlife and marine life in affected areas, oil spills are an example of an artificial cause. Harm occurs through physical contact, ingestion, inhalation or absorption of spillages. Oil spills destroy livelihoods. (<http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/158446/>).

Data Collection

Data required for this study was retrieved online and collated with the aid of a standardized coding sheet. Six constants parameters were employed in the measurement of environmental issues – climate change, pollution, soil erosion and degradation, deforestation, water scarcity and loss of bio-diversity. The independent variable of coverage was divided into categories as described below:

Newspaper Coverage

The independent variable (Newspaper coverage) was observed under the following categories:

1. **Coverage of Stories :**

Yes

No

2. **Focus/Priority of Reports:** This will assess if reports fell into any of the identified categories:

· climate change

· pollution

· soil erosion and degradation

- deforestation
 - water scarcity and
 - loss of bio-diversity
3. **Types of Reports :**
 - News
 - Features
 - Editorials/Op-Ed
 4. **Practicality of Reports:**
 - Inclusion of Action words/ proposed steps for readers to take
 - Non -Inclusion of proposed steps for readers to take
 5. **Relevance of Reports:**
 - Comments with personal action points
 - Comments with irrelevant action points
 6. **Prominence of Reports:**

Ihlström and Lundberg (2004) noted that some online papers positioned news articles by their importance. Traditionally more important stories feature on the front page of the sites while some of the other papers studied used the size of headlines, amount of text or pictures to indicate importance. For this study we would therefore use:

- The number of such environmental stories which feature on the front page of the site especially if the online newspaper does not have a category dedicated to environmental issues.
- Second indicator of prominence would be the number of possible stories on environmental issues that occur within the period of the study.

Data Analysis

The data acquired was analysed using frequency tables (descriptive measures) that answered the research questions. Findings are as follows:

1. Do online newspapers cover stories on environmental sustainability?

All four newspapers did cover reports on environmental sustainability. However, the foreign newspapers (Guardian and Independent) are more deliberate about their reports. They had dedicated sections for issues on the environment. Foreign newspapers had regular reports on the environment published daily as opposed to Nigerian newspapers which had reports whenever the need arose, or when environmental issues were brought up in the reporting of a related event such as the utterance or action of the President. In one such report, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan talked about the need to plant trees to stem the tide of desertification and erosion.

The Vanguard had an Environment Section. However, being lower down on the page is a possible indication of its secondary importance within other priorities of the publishers. For Punch newspapers, environmental issues did not rank high in priority, going by indicators suggested by Ihlström and Lundberg's 2004 study (p61). In fact, a search on environmental news turned up fewer than 50 stories in the year.

2. Do the reports focus on environmental sustainability?

Table 1: Report on environmental sustainability

	Climate Change	Pollution	Soil Erosion & Degradation	De-forestation	Water Scarcity	Loss of Bio Diversity	More than 1	Total (100%)
Guardian UK	40%	10%	5%	10%	5%	15%	15%	100%
Independent UK	35%	15%	-	10%	10%	20%	10%	100%
Vanguard Nigeria	25%	35%	10%	15%	-	-	15%	100%
Punch Nigeria	15%	15%	10%	10%	15%	5%	30%	100%

The Guardian had most stories on climate change (40%), Independent had slightly fewer stories (35%). They were both higher than the Nigerian papers Vanguard and Punch, which had 25% and 15% respectively. Vanguard had more stories on Pollution (35%) and on Deforestation (15%) than any other newspaper. Water Scarcity was however not attended to by Vanguard. It was fairly low in the other papers as well, especially the Guardian (5%). In spite of regular attention to environmental issues through its devoted section, Vanguard had no story of Loss of Biodiversity either. Punch which did, only fared slightly better (5%). Though foreign papers published a bit more on the subject, it was still rather poor. Guardian (15%) and Independent (20%) The issue which appeared to have attracted the least attention from all the papers is Soil Erosion and Environmental degradation. During the study period, it accounted for 5 percent of the environmental stories from the Guardian's, and was not covered by the Independent at all. Only 1 in 10 of stories from the Punch and also the Vanguard were on the subject. Some stories (recorded in the penultimate column in Table 1) featured a cocktail of issues including environmental matters. These may include some of those themes which appear to have been neglected, yet the fact remains that they are obscured.

1. What types of reports are used to highlight the issues?

Working on the premise that reports are likely to differ based on the narrative forms used to present them, the study elected to examine three key forms typical to newspapers. These are news reports, feature stories and Opinions/Editorials. While news reports are accounts of facts and most commonly used, features are more in-depth stories, offering background information and deeper insight regarding the human interest angles. The Opinion / Editorial stories are written by elite writers for more sophisticated readers – usually decision makers. They also offer some background information but much more peculiar to them are presentation of particular arguments. The treatment in each form is indicative of the weightiness of issues covered and the type of reader the story should attract.

Table 2: Types of Reports on Environmental Issues

	News	Features	Editorials/ OP-ED	Total
The Guardian	65%	25%	10%	100%
Independent	40%	60%	-	100%
Vanguard Nigeria	90%	10%	-	100%
Punch Nigeria	80%	10%	10%	100%

From the table, as expected most of the stories were news reports. The foreign newspapers used more features than their Nigerian counterparts. The Independent is remarkable in that 60% of the stories were features but it had no Op-Ed. Even though only 25% of its stories were features, a smaller proportion of its total compared to the other foreign paper, at least one out of ten reports in the Guardian (10%) was an Op-Ed. This indicates that the paper felt strongly enough about a particular environmental issue.

Both Nigerian newspapers relied almost exclusively on news reports Vanguard (80%) and Punch (90%) in covering environmental issues. In terms of expressing strong views or particular arguments, the Punch fared better in that 10% of its sampled stories was an Op Ed. The Vanguard did not express any particular position on any environmental issue online during the study period.

1. Are reports practical, spurring readers to action?

Table 3: Practicality of Reports on Environmental Issues

	Yes Feedback	No Feedback	Total
The Guardian	85%	15%	100%
Independent	85%	15%	100%
Vanguard Nigeria	25%	75%	100%
Punch Nigeria	35%	65%	100%

From the stories assessed in the Vanguard and the Punch, only 10% appeared to inspire or spur readers to act decisively. This is contrary to what obtained in the foreign press where there was 30% in the Independent and 45% in the Guardian. In any case, more than half of the stories in all the papers were neutral. With 90% of their stories being neutral, Nigerian newspapers were not inviting any form of action

from their readers.

The disparity in approach betrays a difference in media functions prioritised by Nigerian and foreign press. The Nigerian press stopped at surveillance – efforts focused mainly on news reports of government actions and policy statements. The foreign press with their use of features, went beyond surveillance to interpret different areas of focus covered in the study. They went further still to advocate for change from readers and policy makers alike.

1. What is the average number of feedback/responses given per environmental story/report?

Table 4: Feedback given per story

	Inclusion/Encourage Action	Non-Inclusion/Neutral	Total
The Guardian	45%	55%	100%
Independent	30%	70%	100%
Vanguard Nigeria	10%	90%	100%
Punch Nigeria	10%	90%	100%

The feedback to newspaper stories was a way of gauging their relevance to the readers. An advantage of working with online papers, with guarantee of interactivity, should have fostered this. The study showed that 85% of stories sampled from the Guardian and Independent had feedback while only 25% (Vanguard) and 35% (Punch) of the samples from Nigerian papers attracted feedback.

Analysis Of Coverage - Environmental Sustainability Reports

Stories found in Nigerian newspapers tended to focus more on utterances of public officials or institution about environmental issues, as opposed to actions being taken by them or citizens to address environmental challenges. Challenges addressed in stories were either those experienced at national level, or global concerns which had implications at national level in terms of policies and action plans. This suggests that the press tended to be mere chronicler of events. Reports were less concerned with prompting behaviour change or inspiring positive sustainable environmental habits.

It may be argued that the issue of the environment was not always clear. The study found that in the search for stories using the keyword “Environment”, the first few reports thrown up did not relate to environment as defined by this study at all. Instead, some of the relevant reports were found under various other headings - Politics, Energy, Metro and Economics indicative of the slant stressed in the reports.

Like foreign papers, Vanguard had a section devoted to the environment, but its location at the base of the page undermines its profile. This inference is based on known conventions for newspaper page layout; the most important stories are placed at the top of the page though panels at the base of the page or elsewhere are used to call readers' attention to other important sections. This pattern gives an indication of the scope of coverage, areas of interest and priorities of Nigerian newspapers.

Focus Of Reports

Nigerian newspapers consisted more of news reports hence the dominance of elite reporting - declarations made by government and agency officials on environmental issues. Reports covered complaints but they did not seriously tackle identified challenges or their consequences. Extended forms of writing would have been required for this to happen.

Foreign newspapers carried more of such stories, so they were able to analyse events, their implications and areas of change required from choices and actions of government and individuals. They highlighted topical environmental issues, interpreted relevance to readers and offered possible changes required to effect change. Nigerian newspapers seemed partial to reporting (surveillance role) and particular topics – Climate Change, and Pollution. In spite of having a dedicated Environment section, the Vanguard failed to cover the defined range of environmental issues in its entirety. So for instance, attention to tree planting outweighed issues like loss of biodiversity occasioned by oil spills and long term economic implications for the country and the livelihoods of those in affected areas.

Practicality And Relevance Of Reports To Readers

Based on the premise that prompts are essential for effecting social change, stories are considered as practical depending on prompts given to the reader for necessary action. It appeared that the foreign papers were better at this. Both the Guardian and Independent had slightly more stories pushing for social change. In nine out of ten reports, Nigerian newspapers focused more on reporting statements and political events without signalling action(s) that readers needed to take or how daily living was affected. Reports on oil spills found in the sample made no links to the implications on bio-diversity or the long term economic implications at national and individual levels, or impact on livelihoods of residents in specified polluted areas.

Feedback from readers was used to gauge the relevance of stories. Foreign newspapers seemed to resonate better with their readers. More stories from the Guardian and Independent had feedback unlike the sampled Nigerian newspapers. This may be indicative of other differences, for instance attitudes to participation in public communication, or particular environmental topics. Following are the observations of the assessment of the feedback from the four newspapers in the sample:

- With the Punch newspaper, only one person seemed to understand the report in question. Comments in other feedbacks ended up being wrangling over political

parties. Instances where readers understood the story (based on the fact that the idea expressed was applauded), their comment did not address action plans. This suggests that they did not identify any.

- Vanguard's feedback rate was poorer than that of Punch. Yet similar to the pattern in the Punch, feedback was rather politicised; it was more a critique of the embezzlement culture of political office holders.
- The Independent generated a healthy feedback for their reports. Even though there were a few disgruntled readers, most responses seemed objective in their submissions, considering broadly, the consequences of environmental issues, on all citizens. They also considered alternative courses of action.
- Guardian readers also responded critically to issues raised. Journalists performance in cases of environmental sustainability was critiqued alongside the relevance and depth of some of the reports uploaded on the site.

Conclusion

Newspapers should not be “parrots”. Nigerian papers should reduce their penchant to report comments and actions of highly placed - public office holders especially heads of institutions. Observed feedback pattern show that this practice politicises issues, attracting partisan sentiments, and constituting a distraction to germane issues. It is necessary to move beyond mere utterances to explanations which reveal antecedents to present happenings and implications actions and policies.

Nigerian newspapers need to bridge the gaps between the experts who advocate for change in the processes for extracting economic resources to save the environment and those who must effect these changes. They should address the entire populace including the lowly. Every citizen needs to understand the implications of their actions on the environment and recognise what behaviours they need to change. The following story encountered in the course of this research is instructive: “Improved communication between experts and the public key in winning battle to curb climate change claims expert” (The Independent UK).

This view should guide and inform what Nigeria's online newspapers do - bridge the gap between “the experts who know what is going on and the public who need to know what is going on and what to do to change the status quo”. Given the above observations, here are a few recommendations for the sector

Recommendation

Nigerian Newspapers need to go beyond merely reporting statements from elites, to addressing consequences of environmental issues on Nigerians. Overly exposing political and institutional officers increases chances of bringing them to disrepute. Whereas newspapers have space constraints, being online (with use of hypertext, links to other pages, and multimedia platforms) liberates them to discharge their duties as interpreters. They can do more than just report occurrences. They can question harmful practices, expose options, prompt debates through which new consensus

positions can be formed and validated. They can discuss and illustrate implications of issues using words pictures and sound.

Media platforms which offer multiple reception modes are even more important when decline in reading habits (Biagi, 2013) is considered. This is crucial if young adults are more likely to read news online than buy printed newspapers. Nigeria has 55.9 million internet users, (32.9% of the population) These social media users are predominantly young (aged 18 and 33). They are more inclined to visual and interactive multimedia platforms. Reading online offers opportunities to dialogue with these future policy makers and shapers of the environment. Participatory features of online platforms allow readers to engage with stories in-depth - reading questioning, commenting, analysing pieces of information. This nature of engagement should help readers grasp the implications of poor choices of action on the future of the environment; they can even call for changes in policies. Readers should be informed and encouraged to initiate change, and to prod policy makers to action.

- Online newspapers should enhance reader appeal using access, layout, and content that make target readers eager to return to their pages. These combined elements should lead to discussions which foster desired change. It is not enough to set-up a website simply to be online. Design of online platforms should not be restricted by limitations of traditional media. Use of pictures to tell stories may be more convincing. For instance, extent of desert encroachment, may be made starker than written words by using before and after images. Visual reports may better capture the essence of the message than pictures of officials at a conference or seminar, speaking on the same issue. Therefore sound, pictures and videos should be used as complements to written words, to encourage more intense reading. Similarly, when readers have access to post their views, online media pages are more interactive and possibly more appealing. Issues could be made to come alive through the lively engagement of readers.
- Engage youths as change agents, giving the teeming number who are active on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs like Linda Ikeji, Bella Naija. These sites are readily articulated with online newspapers. They are opportunities for newspapers to prompt active engagement. Social media have been used to conduct discussions and debates which may pave the way for effecting social change. Synergies between online newspapers and those platforms could be beneficial in creating sustainable environmental accountability.
- Newspapers may tap into youthful trends (by monitoring their public discussions and performances) and being guided, to design youth oriented messages. Such detailed, relevant and tailored two-way communication can be used to push for the preservation of the environment.
- Nigerian newspapers online should take a cue from their foreign counterparts by taking ownership of environmental issues as did the Guardian with its section environmentguardian and its op-eds. ThisDay, another Nigerian newspaper not included in the sample has such commitments albeit with other themes - ThisDay

Politics, ThisDay Lifestyle and Entertainment. Such structuring signals the importance of the theme and the resources that the organisation is prepared to commit to it.

- The importance of the “environment” as a subject needs to be seen in the visibility of published reports and devoted sections. It should also be seen in the treatment of stories and persistence to see issues resolved. Besides focus on personalities, media need to cascade outcomes of deliberations at relevant conferences and meetings to those who must adjust their actions. Reports on other environmental issues should help readers appreciate how these impact on daily living
- Nigerian online newspapers need to frame environmental stories in such a way that they connect with emotional regions of their readers. Lakoff (2010) stated in his article that humans think in frames and these have structures within each individual. In order to cultivate their readers as change agents, news items must resonate with readers especially within their existing frame networks. Online journalists should therefore organise stories in categories that their readers can relate to. These frames would also help to give readers a sense of connection as to how issues affect them and what they as individuals can do to change the existing situations.
- Greater insight into editorial codes and practices that shape online page layout, the prominence of sections and subjects is also very desirable. A study on this is recommended. Such a study should explore the impact of professionalism and specialization of the journalists/reporters on the performance of their jobs.

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