

Why Journalists Don't Work in the Village: The Rural Challenge to Nigerian Journalism

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Introduction and Problem

A geographical profile of journalism in Nigeria shows a city-centric norm. Not only is that the case today, it has apparently been so over the last one hundred years. The vibrant colonial titles such as *The Weekly Record* (1890) and *The West African Pilot* (1939), and post-colonial ones such as *The Punch* (1969) and *The Guardian* (1983) were all city-centric, that is, they were urban in the focus of their content as well as in the base/location of their operations. The exception of village- or rural-centric journalism has tended to be either short-lived or to be not very vibrant. This tendency is theoretically significant in at least two ways. One, it shows a dysfunctionality of the communication order which echoes the concerns of the champions of the new world information and communication order (NWICO) of the 1980s and 1990s. And two, it suggests the existence of social exclusion in the public communication process in Nigeria. The NWICO concern arose from an observed imbalance in international flows of information as well as a tendency for the global metropolis to have a relationship of domination over the global peripheries.

The NWICO debate popularised the centre-periphery analytic lens of *dependencia*. And extended it from the international to the national sphere. Thus, it became an issue that lopsided flows and domination relationships might exist between centres and peripheries not only at the global level but also at the national level. The question then becomes: To

what extent are the lopsidedness and domination of international communication replicated in national communication. From participant observation of the information and communication industries in Nigeria, there is very little evidence in support of a thesis of information flows largely from national centres to the peripheries. Neither can there be claims to significant reverse flows from the peripheries to the centre. Instead what might be observed is a pattern in which the national information space is dominated by the centre. It is the argument of this paper that while lopsidedness may not be easily observed, domination is observed easily enough. At the national level, the urban-centre dominates the rural-periphery. This it does by monopolising the public information space in the news media. In other words, the content as well as the focus of the news media deal more with urban/centre issues than with rural/periphery issues. This phenomenon also ties in with the concept of social exclusion. In other words, when the urban-centre monopolises the national information space, the rural-periphery is denied access to the national information and communication resource. This denial of access reflects an infringement of the right to communicate in the national space of the rural citizenry. It is particularly disturbing when it is realised that the rural population constitutes a significant proportion of Nigerian society. Against this background, this article explores the phenomenon of under-representation of the rural milieu in Nigerian journalism. The basic question investigated concerns how social-structural and cultural factors explain the under-representation of the rural milieu in Nigerian journalism.

Design and Method

The method used is the comparative case study of two rural-focused newspapers, namely *Ikale News* and *Rivers Community Concord*. The former operates in the south-western region of Nigeria, while the other operated in the south-southern (Niger Delta) region of Nigeria. While one had a lot of resources and yet went defunct, the other operates on a shoe-string budget but has lasted for eighteen years now. Information was gathered from in-depth interviews with key informants as well as by examining copies of the newspaper publications. The informants were: Bolu Folayan, publisher of *Ikale News*, one of the few long-surviving rural-centric publications; Tinu Odugbemi, former editor of *Rivers*

Community Concord; Ralph Akinfeleye, journalism professor and founding project consultant of *Community Concord* newspapers; Doyin Abiola, founding editor-in-chief of *Community Concord* newspapers; and Lanre Idowu, editor-in-chief of *Media Review* and of *Media World*, as well as CEO of Diamond Awards for Media Excellence (DAME).

The two cases provide two extreme examples of attempts at carrying out rural-centric journalism in Nigeria. The first, the *Ikale News*, has operated for eighteen years while the other, the *Rivers Community Concord*, (now defunct) survived for a couple of years largely in the late 1980s. The interview schedule used contained items to probe the vision and mission of the publications, the scope, set-up and operations of the publications. The instrument also explored the challenges faced by the practitioners of rural-centric (that is, rural-based and or rural-focused) news media as well as the strategies employed by these practitioners in tackling the challenges. Finally, journalists' cultural orientations/attitudes toward rural-centric journalism in Nigeria were explored.

Results and Discussion

Ikale News

The *Ikale News* is rural-centric in focus but its base of operations is in the city of Lagos. Its coverage area is a sub-group of the Yoruba ethnic group, namely the Ikale, covering several local government areas (LGA) in Ondo State of Nigeria. (The LGA is the third tier of political administration in Nigeria.) The newspaper's readership is drawn from the Ikale sub-group, which is found in the Ikale homeland as well as in urban centres in Nigeria and overseas. The newspaper may therefore be seen as an example of 'ethnic media'. The aim of the *Ikale News* in the words of its publisher is "to foster social cohesion, unity and development". Bolu Folayan, the publisher of *Ikale News*, is a trained journalist and began the *Ikale News* as a hobby while he was employed at an urban-centric newspaper called the *Daily Champion*. For Folayan the paper "was based on enthusiasm at the beginning." The reporters of the *Ikale News* were primary school teachers whom the publisher trained in the rudiments of news reporting. Publication of

the paper started in 1992 and has continued since then, except for a rest of four years when the publisher was unable to combine the demands of his regular job with publishing of the *Ikale News*. The paper was published once a month in its first four years and then began to appear once every two months thereafter. The paper sees as a function the provision of information to Ikale people who do not live in their ancestral homelands, but are living in faraway urban Lagos and abroad, yet retain a consciousness of their identity as Ikale. As a result of the highly limited training of the “reporters” who were mainly volunteers, the publisher had to take on all the editorial functions in addition to managing the paper. He was copy editor, news editor and re-write person all rolled into one. The palaces of the traditional chiefs were used as collection points. Thus the stories were sent in to the chiefs’ palaces and picked up from there by the publisher.

On funding the newspaper, Folayan said: “I took it for granted that the two local governments would support me. I started during the military regime and the local government during the military regime patronised me more than during the civilian regime.” His explanation for this difference was that he could keep his editorial independence with local government support under the military regime, but that under the civilian administration the government wanted to “pocket us” and since he didn’t play ball he got little support from the local government councils. The publisher found that advertising support by local businesses, artisans, and traders was not forthcoming so he resorted to covering social events, naming ceremonies, club activities and things like that in order to make money to run the paper. His paper derived income through social events, including birthdays and special interviews, all of which the local communities were willing to pay for in order to be reported on. Folayan, in trying to obtain financial support for the paper, also offered the local government part-ownership of the newspaper. He wrote proposals for the two local governments to take up twenty percent each in the share structure of the paper, but the local governments did not respond. Students and teachers constitute the bulk of the readership of *Ikale News*. Not much patronage comes from the more well-to-do members of the community. Some of the problems that the paper has had were from the traditional chiefs who expected the paper to identify with

them. Thus when the paper carried stories that were seen as unfavourable, some traditional rulers tended to accuse the publisher of working for rival chiefs.

Another area of issue has been that the readership in the towns and villages tended to not dissociate the content of the newspaper from the person of the publisher; thus the publisher had been accused of saying uncomplimentary things about them when his paper contained such reports. On occasion some readers had gone to the publisher's mother to accuse him of making uncomplimentary remarks about them using his newspapers: “and even if somebody wrote [a] letter to the editor, they attributed it to me, saying this is what Bolu wrote; and I had to be educating them.” The traditional rulers, according to the publisher, were originally sceptical, but as time went on they accepted the paper by inviting it to cover their events, providing information for news reports in the paper and also by providing the use of their palaces as distribution points for the newspaper. In the towns, distribution was done using the town development unions. Folayan said, “the regular newspaper vendors would not sell the papers but return them as unsold” as a fallout of competition with larger titles. So he refrained from using vendors or distributors.

The newspaper has also undertaken enterprises in order to raise funds and strengthen its operations. One such event is the Ikale Awards, instituted in 1993, which identifies successful individuals in the villages and towns of Ikale and celebrates them. The event boosts newspaper sales and draws sponsorship funding from well-to-do Ikale indigenes. The language of the medium is English; even though people of the area traditionally speak Ikale, a dialect of the Yoruba language. The publisher believes an English language rural-centric newspaper is able to survive because of high levels of literacy and western education in the area. The Ikale dialect has been used only in an occasional column in the newspaper. Though it was a popular column, it did not go beyond being a featured column into becoming a mode of presenting news and editorial content in the newspaper.

Regarding the newspaper's relationship with the politicians, Folayan recalls an incident when he used the paper to endorse a friend of his who was running for governor in Ondo

State. Because the aspirant was not popular the result of carrying content supporting the governorship aspirant was the boycott of the paper by large sections of the readership. A lot of unsold copies were returned; some readers even asked the publisher to remove the *Ikale* name from the paper because he had abused their trust and become a sell-out.

The publisher said that until recently he did not have an office, but used his sister's shop over which he put the *Ikale News* signboard. Thus the cost on overhead was kept to the barest minimum. The publisher also underlined the part played by improvements in the economy of the rural areas in his part of southwestern Nigeria. He states that the rate of migration to the city in search of jobs has dropped because there are now more opportunities for young people to be employed through cybercafe start-ups in the villages. Also, because electricity is fairly stable, commercial televiewing centres have sprung up and rural youth are able to watch foreign soccer league matches as their urban counterparts do. And, finally, people who retire from the cities return to the towns and villages to set up businesses such as schools and all of these strengthen the readership for a rural-based newspaper. These trends, in Folayan's view, strengthens the market for rural-centred newspapers such as *Ikale News*.

“The area you want to circulate must dominate at least 70 percent of what you want to report.” For the publisher of the *Ikale News*, this is a key to the longevity of his publication as a rural newspaper. He avers that one of the reasons why the *Community Concord* did not last was because of, in his words, elitism in its coverage. This he interpreted as the practice of reporting from regional centres like Akure, rather than from the towns and villages such as Igbotako where the readership of the rural-centric newspapers is. His strategy for managing the readership is what the publisher calls the use of *Ikale* character. (This echoes the Nigerian federal character principle which promotes equitable distribution of national appointments among the states in the Nigerian federation.) The need for the strategy arose from complaints by sections of the *Ikale News* readership that other sections were being apparently favoured by the newspaper; as a result, the idea of distributing news mention of the constituent areas of *Ikale* was introduced.

An underlying factor is that the publisher sees himself as acting in trust for the Ikale people and therefore he sees the newspaper as well as the Ikale Awards that have spun off from the newspaper as tools for promoting the development of the Ikale people. An incident illustrates this. A traditional chief had written to request that the Ikale Award be renamed the *Ikale News Award* so as to underline the fact that the prize was an activity of a news medium rather than an official activity of the Ikale people. The publisher recounts that he contested the chief's view of the award as a newspaper activity, maintaining that the jury of the award was selected from Ikale people; and the paper was only playing the role of a facilitator for the Ikale people through their representatives in rewarding pro-social traits. And if the paper was to do an *Ikale News* award, it would have been an all-comers affair, done to make money rather than done altruistically as it was presently done for the development of the Ikale people.

Rivers Community Concord

Editor-in-Chief Abiola recalls that the inspiration for the *Community Concord* project was her recognition of the disjunction between rural and urban Nigeria. In her view, rural and urban Nigeria were not on the same page. She therefore proceeded to establish an executive/advisory board that comprised of academics and other expert and socially influential persons from all walks of life. The board provided intellectual direction for the paper. One of the indigenous language papers set up by the Concord group was *Amana*; printed in northern Nigeria. Abiola believed that the organisation was able to touch the lives of rural Nigerians through this publication. Beginning as a pull-out embedded in the mainstream *National Concord* newspaper, the *Community Concord* ran for about a year in that format and was then made into a standalone publication. For Abiola the philosophy and strategy of the *Community Concord* newspaper could be summarised as producing content that is relevant to the rural dwellers so as to get them on the same page with the urban dweller. And the policy was to employ staff from the locality covered by the paper.

For the editor of the *Rivers Community Concord*, Tinu Odugbemi, the rationale for the establishment of *Community Concord* was that the existing Concord group titles (*National Concord*, *Saturday Concord*, and *Sunday Concord*) carried news that were not relevant to the rural people and would therefore not be read by them. Odugbemi asserts that even the local language papers in the Concord group, *Amana*, *Isokan* and *Udoka*, predated the *Community Concord* newspapers and operated more or less as indigenous language translations of the news content of the main Concord titles.

Odugbemi notes that *Community Concord* newspapers were established firstly in three northern states, then in the eastern states and lastly in the western states of Nigeria. This pattern was based on the perception that there was a particular need for such publications in northern Nigeria since there were few mainstream newspaper publications in that area. Odugbemi further asserts that one of the propelling factors responsible for the growth of the *Community Concord* newspapers was the personality of the publisher MKO Abiola, a highly visible national political figure, who responded to local requests for new state editions of *Community Concord* by authorising the establishment of such editions. Thus the chain of *Community Concord* newspapers grew rapidly.

The publisher apparently was involved in the news process of the *Community Concord* newspapers. Editor Odugbemi recalls that when the publisher visited Rivers State from his base in Lagos, some of the kings/chiefs would complain to him that the affairs of their kingdoms/chiefdoms were not being adequately reflected in the *Rivers Community Concord*. He would then urge the editor to “do something for them”. Thus the editor would be nudged towards sourcing and publishing news about kingdoms/chiefdoms in the state. In this way the publisher used the *Rivers Community Concord* to promote friendships between himself and the elite/leadership in the states in which the paper was established throughout Nigeria.

The structure of the *Rivers Community Concord* included an editor, two editorial staff, and a commercial as well as two operational staff. An eastern zone headed by a zonal editor comprised the state editors of *Community Concord* in eastern Nigeria. Thus there

was a centralising tendency in the organisational structure. The *Community Concord* in each state was part of a larger bureaucracy headed by a national coordinator based at the headquarters in Lagos. The national coordinator travelled around the country monitoring the implementation of the *Community Concord* vision and organising training in community newspapering, an aspect which was emphasised in view of the fact that community newspapering was considered a novel industry in the country. At that time, the zonal offices were in Enugu, Kaduna and Ibadan. In the eastern zone there were six state editors who regularly met at Enugu. Though each exercised his/her editorial judgement, there was coordination among them through the meetings.

Newsgathering involved going round to get news first-hand, buying stories from reporters in 'rival' national newsmedia based in Port Harcourt, and using students as stringers. The *Rivers Community Concord* operated a policy of carrying 70 percent rural content to 30 percent urban content. Editor Odugbemi asserted that the ratio sometimes went up to 80 percent rural news to 20 percent urban news. In that way the rural-centredness of the publication was maintained, though the editorial offices were based in Port Harcourt, the state capital. The print run was centrally pegged at 5000 copies, but states that had higher literacy levels could take their print run, as in the case of Rivers, up to 10,000 copies.

The challenges faced by the newspaper were difficulty in navigating the riverine terrain. Also the large number of ethnic groups, which meant that the paper had to maintain a policy of 'editorial balance', operationalised as making an effort to represent all groups as much as possible an equal number of times over any period of time. Printing was done in Lagos; and the language of publication was English. The papers were published once a month. Pagination was twelve, but was increased to sixteen as the number of adverts increased.

Why was the paper rested? Editor Odugbemi answers that there were complaints from within Publisher Abiola's party that figures from rival parties were getting more news mention than they. Thus there was pressure arising from the political associations of Publisher Abiola. There were also organisational lapses within the *Community Concord*

newspaper chain, such as failures to meet deadlines; and some papers were not breaking even, thus prompting the publisher to direct that they be rested. Since some states could not be without their *Community Concord* while others had it, it became necessary to rest all *Community Concord* titles. And the paper became defunct in 1990.

One of the reasons that the *Community Concord* was eventually rested is illustrated by the fate of the editor of the Hausa language paper *Amana*, one of the titles in the Concord stable. After General Muhammadu Buhari came to power in 1984, the paper offended his administration by writing an editorial critical of the government. The response of the Buhari government was to lock up the editor and “throw away the keys”; the editor was released from detention only when another military government overthrew the Buhari regime. According to Editor-in-Chief Doyin Abiola, the experience broke the editor of *Amana* and he died shortly after he was released from political detention.

“Those of us in influential positions don't care a hoot about the ordinary man.” Editor-in-Chief Abiola's opinion is that the absence of genuine concern about the conditions of the rural dwellers is responsible for the neglect of the rural dwellers by the national elite in the urban-centre. And this may be interpreted as social exclusion at work. Even if it is unstated and uncodified, it is nevertheless a *de facto* policy of social exclusion.

On the issue of professional/cultural attitudes of journalists, according to Professor Ralph Akinfeleye, journalism professor and founding consultant of the *Community Concord* newspapers, the reason that rural-centred journalism has not flourished in Nigeria is the profit-making orientation of publishers. Since rural newspapers are presumably not profitable, the setting up of rural newspapers has not been an attractive option for publishers. A related cultural attitude issue is the promotion of urban presence and the diminishing of rural presence. This inclination is underlined by Akinfeleye's assertion that “most of the newspapers claim to be national; they want to be national and not rural.” (1993: 103). Another factor is the dependence on the use of English rather than the use of indigenous languages. This use of English alienates many of the potential readership among rural dwellers. According to Akinfeleye, some of the purposes/functions of the

Community Concord was to promote development at the grassroots; and the newspaper also was designed to serve as a means of political and citizenship education for the rural dwellers. The policy of publishing in the indigenous languages was adopted in the *Community Concord* experiment. Thus there were three titles in three Nigerian languages: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. According to Akinfeleye, the key objectives of the *Community Concord* project was to mobilise rural dwellers for development, to sensitise them to their rights as citizens and to encourage them to participate in government.

Two observations may be made here. One is the apparently elitist posture underlying the concept of the *Community Concord* project in the sense that the project's designers assumed that the rural dwellers needed to be educated to participate in political life and that they, the promoters, had the knowledge of the direction that participation should take. The second point is that the allegation that the underlying purpose of the *Community Concord* project was to promote the political ambition of Publisher MKO Abiola gets some reinforcement in the statement by Akinfeleye that he was not surprised when MKO Abiola won the presidential elections because the *Community Concord* project had introduced him to the different communities that were served by the community newspaper chain throughout the country.

The *Community Concord's* recruitment policy was to select editorial staff from the state in which a paper operated. This was to ensure that the paper fundamentally shared the values and perspectives of its host community. This policy, however, could not always be practised as is shown by Editor Odugbemi who, though not an indigene of Rivers State, was made editor of the *Community Concord* in Rivers State. The principle of working in sync with the local perspective, however, continued to be promoted as Odugbemi underlined that since she was not from Rivers State she took care to enlist Rivers State indigenes as advisers/assistants, reporters and translators in covering communities in the state.

An orientation in which there is convergence is that the rural milieu can be a source of significant news material. Akinfeleye stresses, as does Folayan of *Ikale News*, that on the

rural beat news happen that could make national newspapers. In other words, the rural milieu is a *bona fide* source of news, comparable to the urban milieu. The reason for under-representation therefore is not to be sought in some deficiency intrinsic to the rural experience but in other factors. The market-centred, adverts-driven business model of newspaper publication was assumed and worked with by the promoters of the *Community Concord* project. In other words, it was not perceived that there was a need for a qualitative shift in the business model of the newspaper as the context changed from urban to rural.

The challenges of the *Community Concord* project, according to Akinfeleye, included the misunderstanding of the paper's philosophy and mission. Since Publisher Abiola was a prominent politician, people assumed that he was setting up the *Community Concord* newspapers as a means for achieving his political goals rather than as a service to the community. The purpose of the publisher, according to Akinfeleye, was however not political but social, to give a voice to the voiceless and to facilitate a shift from urban-centred to rural-centred journalism in Nigeria. An operational strategy was to use students as stringers in getting news from the communities. The production operations were anchored centrally. The news stories were gathered from the community and centrally processed and printed in Lagos at the headquarters of the Concord group. But as time went on, the production was moved from the centre to the states; and where printing facilities were not adequate or satisfactory, some of the printing was outsourced to local printers. Akinfeleye recalls that the initial pagination of the paper was four pages. But by the time the project came to be rested, pagination had increased to twenty pages per edition. There were twenty one editions of the community newspaper, one edition per state, according to Akinfeleye, in all the states of Nigeria at that time.

Professor Akinfeleye asserts that the reasons the paper folded up were the political misadventures of the publisher, and the activity of competitors such as the *Oriwu Sun*. Another reason was that as the publisher went full steam into political campaigns for the presidency, the resources hitherto available to the paper were diverted into the campaign. For example, the Concord project before the commencement of presidential campaigning

had use of the publisher's private jet for its operations. That use was reduced as more need arose for the jet on the campaign trail. In addition to rival community newspapers, rival state newspapers owned by the state governments were set up and these also chipped away at the influence and strength of the *Community Concord* newspapers.

A point needs to be made here. The *Community Concord* newspaper as conceived were state-wide rather than village-based papers. They were therefore in the same market with state papers that were not necessarily village-focused. This point needs further stressing. The two cases of rural-focused papers that we are examining both operationalised rural newspapering in terms of content rather than location. In other words, possibly for reasons of financial viability, rural journalism finds that when its rurality is manifested in content it is better able to command the market share and income it needs to survive rather than when its rurality is manifested in terms of location. This is a proposition that requires further investigation.

Another challenge related to the national policy on the ban on the importation of newsprint at the time. The military government that had seized power at the time in 1984 placed a ban on the importation of newsprint. But shortly after the ban came into force a consignment for the Concord group came into the country. The consignment was seized by the military government thus reducing the availability of the vital resource of newsprint to the *Community Concord* newspaper.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has analysed the question of the under-representation of the rural milieu in Nigerian journalism through a comparative case study of two rural-centric newspapers in the south-western and south-southern regions of Nigeria. The story of the two cases of rural-focus newspapers exemplify a process in which elite players strove to reach the rural populations so that they could be on the same page. These newspaper entrepreneurs perceived the need to reach out, but lacking appropriate media structures, set out to

devise their own media structures that would facilitate their reaching out. Their attempts had varying levels of success as well as common constraints that had to be engaged and overcome. The challenge was to devise a service that would not merely be a translation of existing urban news services, but be a vibrant forum for genuine representations of Nigerian rurality, undistorted by inequality in the possession and utilisation of political resources. One of the fundamental challenges was how to obtain the editorially-savvy manpower that could generate the news content in the rural areas and process and disseminate them given that such skills were generally lacking in the rural areas. The solutions devised in the case of *Ikale News* was to co-opt a rural-based class, the teachers who already had some western education. This strategy is probably explainable by the constraints imposed on the publisher due to minimal funds. In the case of the *Rivers Community Concord* which was not so hamstrung by funds, the strategy was to employ professional journalists and pay them competitive wages; in some cases to transfer journalists from mainstream titles in the Concord group. The constraint that the Concord experiment therefore had to face was to live down the political reputation of its publisher who was a prominent member of the ruling party at the time – the National Party of Nigeria – and the suspicions arising therefrom.

On the way forward, Editor Odugbemi avers that government funding, rather than private funding, might be the realistic source of funding for rural community papers at this point in Nigeria's development; and that form of support should be instituted in appropriate policies. “You have to look at who will advertise; what will sustain the paper; and there are not many of those in the rural community.”

Professor Akinfeleye recommends that more courses should be mounted in journalism schools as a way of furthering the shift in focus from urban-centred to rural-centred journalism in Nigeria. Further he recommends that policy-makers need to make a change in orientation such that the importance of bottom-up development is recognised rather than the current practice of top-down approaches which favour the centre and neglect the rural communities. In other words, a policy of decentralisation of benefits and amenities by the political administration should be followed. Finally the urban-based media would

do well to have rural desks that are focused on gathering and processing and disseminating news from rural Nigeria.

This writer suggests the consideration of alternative business models of newspaper publishing, in particular the non-governmental organisation model. This model may very well provide escape from the tyrannies and distortions implicit in reliance on state and market sponsorship. It might also be an avenue for the strengthening of civil society and popular democratic participations in Nigeria.

A note on limitation: the focus of this article is on rural-centred newspaper journalism, therefore the status of radio or television rural journalism has not been accounted for. A footnote though is that the indication from expert views is that the rural-focus content of radio and television is only a token one; and there is no substantial devotion of broadcast journalism to rural issues. The other option of rural-based radio and television stations may be even more rare than newspaper instances.

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