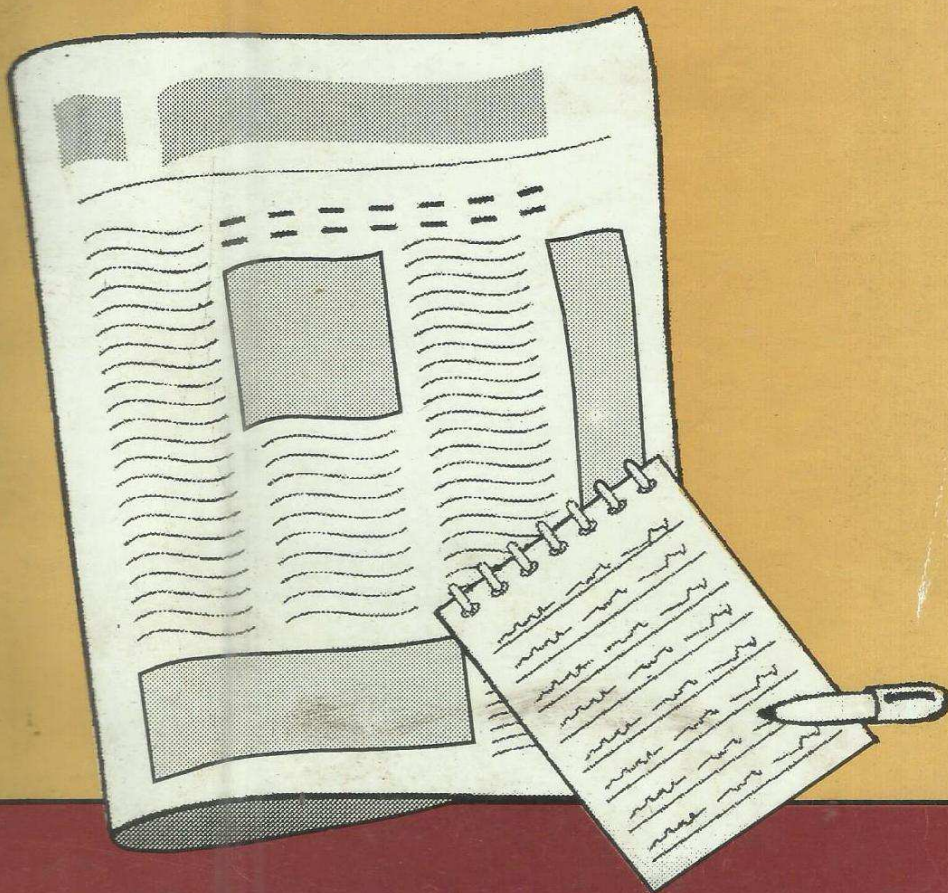


INTRODUCTION TO PRINT MEDIA

Readings in Nigerian Journalism

Edited by DES WILSON



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African News Perspectives

Learning Goals

After reading through this chapter the reader should be able to:

- (i) show a fuller understanding of what news is;
- (ii) identify the changing process of news development and concepts;
- (iii) distinguish between African and Western concepts of news and news values;
- (iv) define news from various perspectives; and
- (v) contribute to the debate on New World Information and Communication Order from African/Third World perspectives.

Introduction

We are now living through a communication revolution in Africa — from the political concern for national communication policies to the noetic search for a redefinition of previously held constructs. This quest is aimed at fully realising Africa's communication goals and objectives. This revolution has long been expected. Like most revolutions, this one was not made to order nor could it be timed to a particular moment, because as Lenin (1986a:547) has pointed out, revolutions 'mature in a process of historical development and break out at a moment determined by a whole complex of internal and external causes'. For Africans, these historical developments which have made them 'break out' and 'come to the conclusion that it is impossible to live in the old way any longer' (Lenin, 1986b:480) are legion: political, linguistic, economic, cultural, scientific and technological, racial, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist, along with a prioritization of national value systems and the development of a national ethos (through national renewal) among others.

This chapter discusses recent national and international debates on what news is and what the criteria for its selection should be strictly

from African perspectives. This debate has formed part of the widely known controversy on the need for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). But while our approach is to adopt a historical and philosophical view of the major evolutionary mutations in the conceptualization of news and news values, the principal focus here is on their relevance to current African values and thinking. It also seeks to advance the position that there is no reason for the African scholar to have a sense of insularity on this matter because when previous culture specific criteria were set, no account was taken of what really was African. So there is no need to sound apologetic. A re-evaluation should, in the long run, provide food for thought to all those interested in a dialogue, not in intellectual terrorism put in place by media imperialism. Wilson (1982) has previously argued for a re-examination and re-definition of concepts used in western communication thinking in order to accommodate new perspectives from Africa, and similar views are strongly canvassed here.

Early News

News, as all media practitioners and scholars would agree, is as varied in its specific meaning as justice is to philosophers or jurists. Early definitions and attributions covered all such synonyms as novelties, new things, tidings, word, report, rumour, message, bulletin, newspaper, declaration, gospel, story, despatch, hearsay, narration, announcement, advice, warning, notice, notification and of course NEWS. These synonyms have varied senses from the ordinary dictionary meaning to religious, mundane connotations and denotations.

Thus, news in its various meanings and synonyms was expressly a common word used in the scriptures to describe Biblical message or pronouncements. The prophet Isaiah referred to it as 'word' when he said: The Lord has sent Word against Jacob, and it will light upon Israel. (RSV, 1966:695). In the Maccabees 2:13 the translators used the following synonyms:

The same thing are *reported* in the *records* and in the *memoirs* of Nehemiah and also that he found a library and collected the *books* about the kings and prophets, and the

writings of David and *letters* of Kings about votive offerings. (RSV, 1966:973).

And in Proverbs 23:25 we read: As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country. Similar examples are found in the New Testament where in Luke 2:10-11, the Gospeller writes:

And the angel said to them, Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And in St. John's Gospel we find the eternal memory verse:

In the beginning was the *Word*, and the *Word* was with God...and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

while in 1 Peter 1:25, St. Paul writes:

The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord abides for ever. That word is the good news which was preached to you.

These synonyms were considered the best approximate translations from the Hebrew and Greek originals.

Nevertheless, the word news is about six hundred years old in the English language although its variants were used in contexts similar to those of today. It was, however, in common use after 1500 and its earliest use is cited from Scotland where it is dated 1423 (Shaaber, 1966). On the other hand, the quest for news and the organs for its dissemination have been an age-long concern of man. Thomas Love Peacock (1920) captured this desire and concern in his famous essay 'The Four Ages of Poetry' when he stated poignantly:

The natural desire of every man to engross to himself as much power and property as he can acquire by any of the means which might make right, is accompanied by the no less material desire of making known to as many people as possible the extent to which he has been a winner in this universal game. The successful warrior becomes a king; his next want is an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements and the extent of his possessions...

Power, Property and Publicity - these are the three P's of modern living. Any soldier or civilian with a gun in his hand and ambition in

his head would clearly show why managers of government-owned media get harassed sometimes on a daily basis either because there was no coverage of the birthday party of His Excellency's daughter, or some frivolous activity or the other. These three 'demons', Power, Property and Publicity lie behind every soldier's *coup d'etat* or 'civilians' electoral mayhem.

As we can see, the whole history of the development of mass communication technology is a validation of Peacock's assertion on the direction of man's civilization. But let us return to the origins of the word news. It is said to have been derived from the Old French 'noveles' or 'nuveles' which means 'a new thing'. It was variously spelt as 'newes', 'newys', 'newis', 'nevis', 'new(e)s', 'nues', 'nuze', 'nuse', and 'news'. It was sometimes conceived of as a regular noun. Pasquine in 1566 wrote:

I hearde speak of it, when ye newes thereof was brought to Pope Julie
the seconde

while much later, Mary Kingsley wrote in *West Africa* magazine (1897) 'The next news was that I was in the water', the form which is today the standard usage.

Equally it was also conceived of in a plural sense as when Dryden (1685) wrote of 'The amazing news of Charles at once were spread' and Shelley (1852) wrote later. 'There are bad news from Palemo'. This form has, however, gone out of fashion and it is hardly used in educated circles. The Oxford English Dictionary (vol. vii, 1970) even points out a 1600 usage which made the word a verb:

This being newseed about the Town, many afterwards shunned the
occasion of meeting with the Prince

and another in 1871 where the writer speaks of 'Topics to keep himself and his cronies 'newsing' for several days'!

A number of other great writers have also written about news. John Milton (1608-1674) wrote in his *Samson Agonistes* reflecting its negative and positive aspects thus: For evil news rides post, while good news baits. Charles Dana (1819-1897) was more graphic in his news imagery when he said pithily:

When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man
bites a dog that is news

a view which someone with a knack for the unusual has twisted to read:

When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that
is meat.

The great English playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1611) wrote in his *All's Well that Ends Well* thus:

Though it be honest, it is never good
To bring bad news.

Yet one character in news which has enabled it to retain its attraction lies in its ability to remain as fresh as wine until it is tasted. Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) captures this character in his *The Deserted Village*:

Where village statesmen talked with looks profound,
And news much older than their ale went round.

This is why what you do not know remains news to you even years after others may have heard or known about it.

In addition, the word has a number of compound forms and other words derived from it. For example, we have such forms as news-agent, news-gatherers, news bearer, newsboy, newscasters, news-making, newsprint, news stand, newsletter, newsless, newsiness, newsful and many others.

Everything points to the fact that the word 'news' occupies a very important position in our lives. By whatever name it is called, it can never be mistaken even though usages may change somewhat. News is certainly what makes the world go round.

What is News?

News as we have already seen means anything from 'word' to rumour, gossip, warning and story. Many scholars have attempted to present some of the more interesting, controversial, intellectually exciting and relevant views. An examination of some of these may be necessary here.

- (i) News is any fresh and unusual event.
- (ii) In newspaper practice, news is history, timely report, sensation and human interest. A psychological view believes it satisfied the human need for reward, immediate or delayed. In communist

sense, it maintains and extends the dominant social order. In the scientific objective sense, news is a report of an event.

- (iii) A variation of this vague version 'North, East, West, South-added together spells news'.
- (iv) News is anything which someone wants to suppress. All the rest is advertising.
- (v) The report or account of recent events or occurrences, brought to or coming to one as new information; new occurrences as a subject of report or talk.
- (vi) News is an accurate and unbiased account of timely event that is of human interest to the newspaper readers, radio listeners or television viewers.
- (vii) News is an account of events which disrupt the status quo.
- (viii) Several traditionally accepted definitions of what makes news indicate that the following qualities should be present; it must be circulated quickly after the event, be of wide interest, contain information which the reader or listener has not received before, represent a departure from the everyday pattern of life and contain information that is useful in reaching decisions.
- (ix) The criteria of what news is vary according to the needs of different countries and societies... the definition of news depends ultimately on cultural perception.
- (x) News is what is interesting, not necessarily what is important.
- (xi) So long as news is exclusively concerned with what is out of the ordinary the ordinary becomes invisible to the media and to the audience. The trouble is that we have been culturally attuned to the theatre of news and we find non-theatre boring.
- (xii) News is what happened yesterday, today, last week or a moment ago.
- (xiii) A report of the displacement of the routine.
- (xiv) News is any event, idea or opinion that is timely, that interests or affects a large number of people in a community and that is capable of being understood by them.
- (xv) Sex, money, crime - that is news.

- (xvi) What is new is news.
- (xvii) News is what the city editor says is news.
- (xviii) News is more unpredictable than the wind. Sometimes, it is the repetition with new characters of tales as old as the pyramids, and again it may be almost outside the common experience.
- (xix) A window on the world through whose frame people learn of themselves and others, of their institutions, leaders and life styles of other countries and their people.
- (xx) News is the imperfect result of hurried decisions made under pressure.

These and many others are views and definitions of scholars and writers on what they think is news. It is important to point out that, though news selection criteria may vary from individual to individual and from one medium to another, it is not possible to teach news as one might teach children to identify a table or a chair. News selection facility is almost like a feeling — an in-born, incalculable quality of the mind nonetheless acquired through training. John Hohenberg (1984) argues in support of this view when he states that there is no formula for deciding what is news nor is there a book of news tables that one can consult. He adds pointedly:

The things that are and are not news vary from one day to the next, from one country to another, from one city to another, and without doubt from one paper to another.

But it is not difficult to identify news even though it may be extremely difficult to present one. What is news is news and what is not is so identified by both the professional and the novice. Therefore, in order to understand what news really is from our socio-political, economic, linguistic and cultural perspectives, it is necessary to examine what these perspectives are. And this we shall do presently.

African Perspectives of News

Having thus examined the early usages and definitions of the word, it is now pertinent to see what Africans conceive of as news. Before we proceed to do this, it is important to point out at the onset that today both Africans and the West are in disagreement over what constitutes

news. While the West hinges its views on socially determined news values and criteria for news and news selection, the Africans are more eclectic, admitting very ancient views when news itself had not been distinguished from other forms of reports. Western news values are strongly dependent on speed in an age of fast foods, instant replay, drugs, narco-terrorism, space technology and desk top publishing. Most of Africa cannot, even if it wanted, 'achieve' some of these values. The reasons are legion.

Today the African, from the socio-economic and political periscope sees news as a 'story' to be told when desirable. The West no less classified news as a story but it sees this story as a special kind of story imbued with the magical spirit of speed, conflict and disaster among others. But more critical to the African perspectives are the information needs of education, housing, employment, health, community development, recreation, financial matters, agriculture, food and land matters, transportation, religion and spiritual matters, law, politics and government, science and weather reports, security, novelty, ethnic relations among others. Many of these form part of the fare of western news presentations but would hardly be considered by western scholars as significant enough if they are not tinged with elements of conflict and disaster. This is where the Africans differ from the West. The Africans, as they have insistently argued at international fora do not see these elements as significant enough to warrant their being given pre-eminent status. They believe in the Shakespearean view that:

Though it be honest, it is never good

To bring bad news.

That is why they do not place emphasis on news about conflict and disaster. They believe in the news that binds people together, the non-tension-raising news. This is quite apart from the fact that it is natural to find negative reports dominating in gossips especially when it is about someone, some culture other than one's culture. News is seen as a kind of palliative (a cathartic appetiser) meant to reduce tension, conflict, uncertainty and bring about a greater understanding. Western practitioners' pre-occupation with conflict, disaster or bad news today seems to be a playback of man's atavistic instinct. And with

regard to the western world, their news about the Third World — famine, civil war, coups d'etat, failure of development programmes, flood etc - is nothing but a horrific exhibition of verbal violence. And this cannot be our model if we wish to progress in all spheres of development.

As we have already pointed out, the Africans see news essentially as a story or a series of story-telling. That is why a tale by moonlight, a boat disaster, secret love affairs between kings and commoners, the completion of a housing project, the opening of a rural banking facility, a magical cure by a local herbalist, or a strange disease ravaging the countryside, all constitute news and are received with the same amount of relish as those of earthquakes in any part of the world, or the Queen of England's son's sexual escapades in the Carribean. The story element is embedded in categorization of newscasts by all major Nigerian languages: 'Mbuk nkpontippe' (Ibibio), 'Akuko uwa' (Igbo), 'Iroyin' (Yoruba), 'Labarun' (Hausa), etc. So in Africa, the news is a tale. It has most of the features and character of western news values but is not strong on the side of conflict and disasters quite in the same vein as the Pre-Gorbachev Communist Party categorization of news in the Eastern countries.

In Africa, there is very little of the straight news since news is spiced with comments and views, a practice which goes back to ancient times and is embedded in the oramedia tradition. Thus African news values, based on the information needs of the people, can only be validated through professionalising African journalism training. An acceptance of this point of view will help in the understanding of the following news values which are highly rated by the traditional media system, but are here based on the Source, Message, Channel, Receiver and Effects (SMCRE) typology of information processes.

- S — Authorization, Primacy, Credibility.
- M — Truthfulness, Significance, Timeliness, Objectivity and Balance, Cultural proximity, Conflict.
- C — Relativity of Speed, Relevance, Media Availability, Fidelity.
- R — Utilization, Acceptability.
- E — Consequence.

Put in a more graphic form, SMCRE is understood in this typology to mean Sourced Messages Channelled and Received with desired Effects.

Yet African perspectives of news are not too different from western perspectives. A closer look at the African media system will reveal a typology of communication processes which are quite similar to those processes used in Western media practice. They only differ perhaps at the level of emphasis given to each stage in the process.

At the practice level, the only significant difference between the western reporter and a traditional news man lies in the latter's respect for and adherence to traditional legitimization processes. Thus for example, where a western news reporter might file his report of the death of his country's president or monarch even without an official announcement, the traditional newsman must wait for the mandatory rites of passage to be performed and the official conclave of the elders or kingmakers before a drum signal is sounded to announce the transition of a traditional overlord. By this process, the traditional path is well—prepared for the deceased's passage, and for many cultures a period is provided for the choice of a successor. Thus no embarrassing announcements are made and no hasty retractions are made either.

Thus, news in the African context requires legitimization by the news sources. This becomes a kind of peg upon which the responsibility for the news is hung, that is, someone outside the 'newscaster' is held accountable for the news. The news report that has authorization is held to be credible.

In their message content both systems recognise the need for the news to be truthful, significant, prominent, hard, timely, objective and balanced, and to reflect the cultural proximity of the reporter while also containing elements of conflict. Both systems also acknowledge the need for a speedy dissemination of the message through relevant or appropriate channel, in addition to the channel being readily available and having the desired fidelity. In the traditional system truth cannot be sacrificed on the altar of speed and there are no other voices within the traditional system while modern media practice

recognises the need for a babel of voices otherwise known as the institution of a free market place of ideas.

Today, operators of both systems are beginning to ask, more loudly, questions related to the utility value and acceptability of the message to the receivers. Traditional news media have always recognised the importance of the utilization of the message, since the system never had room for useless information. Whatever are sent out as messages are properly considered and determined to be of use to the target audience before transmission.

Finally, western news media may consider effects, that is, the consequences of messages for their society when issues may border on national security, survival or integrity but hardly would such a consideration be given to other countries. Traditional media have always considered the issue of consequences of paramount importance because in a developing society where issues (political or economic) may not always be fully understood, it is dangerous to disseminate certain kinds of information. Even in western societies certain issues that are considered volatile may not always be reported; but where this is done, the society is presumed to be capable of absorbing shocks arising therefrom. But in developing countries it may be considered an act of self-immolation to publish a potentially volatile story. But American mass media would not promote news about secession by Alaskan nationalists from the American nation but would enthusiastically do so if the issue involved a province in Nigeria attempting to secede from the Nigerian Federation. So the needs of society, as one of our definitions has shown, determine what is presented in the form of media messages.

Nevertheless, this does not excuse the seeming laziness, self-censorship and the lack of courage on the part of many a Third World Journalist. So the question may be asked: What rule in the practice codes stipulates that the president, governor, minister, commissioner or their 'First Ladies' must be reported in the daily press if they have nothing to say that is newsworthy? What then dominates the daily press in Nigeria is what should easily pass for personal 'paid' announcements of government plans and policies which once reported are never followed up to let the people know their outcomes. An event

in which the governor is in attendance should only be reported if something of significance and something fresh is said. The governor should only be mentioned in passing for his prominent role there. There may be other key actors at the event who should be given their pride of place.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of significant, timely, salient and relevant events occur in our society everyday and most of them go unreported except those that involve senior government or community officials. Some of the reporters claim that those highly placed persons in society always decree their presence in the daily press. A well-known editor once told of how government house was always in constant touch with the newsroom to find out why a particular event he featured in was not reported in the news. This is a sad commentary on the state of journalism in Nigeria.

However, it must be pointed out that seeing news through the African eye does not mean that African media practices do not present some of the concerns expressed against western media practice. Sometimes they do, to ridiculous extents. Our main concern here has been to highlight some of the key areas where differences exist in our visions of today's society and the expectations of tomorrow. The obvious platform upon which this chapter rests its assumptions is the newly spun theoretical linen appropriately named development communication (devcom). Development communication is an unenviable sensitive concept to western intellectual scholarship because it is both a pillar to the much-hounded doctrine of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and is seen as a threat to entrenched western intellectualism especially its links with cultural imperialism (or what Cees Hamelink refers to as cultural synchronization).

Seen from the above viewpoint, African perspectives are thus extensions of the more rational framework for rural-urban information management theory which Wilson (1988) refers to as 'trado-modern' communication and which falls under the ambit of a larger development communication theory. These perspectives deal with relating media practice to the needs of development through news, features, cartoons deliberate campaigns like mass literacy, health, public enlightenment, electoral processes, agriculture, rural banking, national security and

other rural or national developmental goals. It is a brand of journalism practice positively oriented towards the solutions of the educational, socio-economic, political and other problems of the polity. It should not be seen as simply referring to rural news reporting based on the familiar criteria of western news selection. It does not just involve giving more space to rural news in the elite-dominated news media and should not be seen as a singular practice approach but a series of rural communication networks festooned to mass media systems available and usable in the country.

Thus what this chapter argues for is simply that journalism practice as reflected in our concept of news, should be seen as a multi-systems approach whose main objective is to report both the rural and urban areas using acceptable criteria of news selection unique to developing countries. And as Aboyade (1987:28) has stated:

Attempts at communicating modern scientific and technological information to the farmers... should take due cognisance of their culture.

It is often obvious to those on the critical evaluation plane that the failure to achieve success in rural development is often a clear indication of the failure of the communication processes employed and the lack of understanding of the information needs of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one cannot shy away from what may seem a rather difficult task which could bring about information overload. To add a voice to the seemingly endless number of views on what news is, is perhaps not as daunting as committing *harakiri* but it presents a mirror which one can be judged by sometimes in complimentary terms while at others one may be treated to something close to exorcism. And dare we must. But before, that, one should state here that news as seen through the African eye is not a fetish conundrum nor is it an ornately dressed primitive mysticism. During its presentation news sometimes is distorted. Distortion is a universal problem, harmful to both the media and the audience. Perhaps a closer examination of present practices and a re-evaluation of present tenets might help to redefine the vectors of distortion and lead consequently to greater understanding. Rigidity on both sides of the debate cannot help matters, more

especially if we desire an understanding. There is abundant evidence to show that Western practices are sometimes counterproductive in African contexts and a re-definition of news and news values as well as a re-assessment of current criteria for news selection become inevitable. But those definitions and re-assessments notwithstanding, the African identity and character should be seen in our practice as distinct from the western character. Just as British news has its distinctive character from American news, the African character must be stamped on the news we present. But it should never be difficult for the African or the American wherever trained to be able to identify news whether in the *Pioneer* (Nigerian) or in the *New York Times* (US). That is how it should be.

Having said that much, let us return to our view on what news is. It is of course clear by now that western news values do not fit exactly into African epistemological view even though certain aspects are acceptable and coincide with what we may consider as African news perspectives. Thus a re-definition of news is important now more than ever before. One can then define news as the intimations of things hitherto unknown, a confirmation of those uncertain or yet to become reality through the use of traditional and western media systems. That is through the African eye.

Review Questions/Exercises

1. What do you consider to be the ideological position of the writer in relation to what might be emerging as news?
2. Show the difference between what news is today and what the ancients considered as news. Give at least five examples drawn from this chapter.
3. Of all the definitions of news given in this chapter which ones appeal to you most and why?
4. What are the essential differences in the African's conception of news and Euro-American viewpoints?
5. Discuss the information process typology in traditional African society.

6. Discuss the writer's definition of news in the context of what you know news to be.

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