

# Regional Bureaus of Nationwide Media and the Inter-regional Competition for Development Attention in Nigeria



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## Abstract

This study x-rays the place of regional bureaus of nationwide media in the inter-regional competition for development attention in Nigeria. Development Media Theory provides the theoretical foundation for the paper. The paper highlights the roles regional bureaus play in the development of the different regions of the country. It also delves into the history of the Nigerian mass media and explores the competition amongst regional bureaus which causes the affected national media to increase their airtime on their national news reports in respect of attracting development to the regions. To conclude, the study calls on regional bureaus to explore interesting ways of playing up the challenges of the regions and recommends that regional bureau correspondents should be retrained regularly to improve on their ability to craft federal government attention-grabbing programmes that will trigger rapid development in the regions.

**Keywords:** *Inter-regional competition, Mass Media, Regional Bureaus, Development*

## Introduction

The Nigerian media play a crucial role, most notably in executing their duty as the watchdog of society. The media also have the responsibility of creating channels for the circulation of information and ideas and providing platforms for public debate on the development needs of the different regions in the country. The mass media's role in highlighting regions that are in dire need of development is very important because Nigeria as a federation is made up of 36 states which are further grouped into six regions, hence attracting development from the federal government to these regions is near impossible without leveraging on the platforms provided by national media organizations which have their bureaus in the various regions in the country.

The mass media operating at the regional bureaus have special significance for rapid development as the relationship between regional media and persons from the areas and communities they serve tends to be closer, stronger and more representative than equivalent relationships at, say, the national or international levels. That proximity is often evident in audience/readership/user statistics and in levels of participation in the media. The significance of regional media for development can also be gauged by the nature and the focus of regional journalism. This is due first to regional bureaus' coverage of regional politics and issues that are either underrepresented or absent from national reportage. Secondly, regional bureaus also foster public discussions and

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engagement of regional issues. The proximity of regional media to their target communities is a key factor in the expedient development of the affected region.

The information sphere created by regional bureaus allows regional identities (including cultural, linguistic and religious identities) to be explored, developed, sustained and promoted to a greater extent than is usually possible at the national level. Regional identities and languages are sometimes marginalized by national media, which underscores the importance of regional bureaus as alternative discursive forums. The shared nature of the information sphere created by regional bureaus also facilitates inter-cultural dialogue, understanding and tolerance and thus contribute to the pre-emption and countering of hate speech.

It is also important to stress that Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with over 180 million people and its major revenue is got from an estimated two million barrels of crude oil daily and mineral resource deposits in commercial quantities, vast arable land for agriculture yet Nigeria is faced with challenges of providing basic amenities for most of its citizen as there is a noticeable high level of poverty, unemployment, youth restiveness, the decline in economic growth, a dire need for infrastructural development. This glaring need for development in the country can be highlighted by regional bureaus of national media whose correspondents package daily reports on various sectors to first inform the federal government of the need of the region with the aim of attracting rapid development to the region.

Since the 1960s, development has repeatedly been discussed as an issue that the mass media should focus their attention on. For example, Schramm (1964) advocated the direct involvement of the media in the development processes of developing nations. According to him, the media should explain, inform and educate developing societies on crucial issues that bear on their growth and advancement. This work will explore the role which regional bureaus of nationwide media can play in the inter-regional competition for development attention in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The submission of this study is anchored on Development Media Theory. This theory was propounded by Dennis McQuail in 1987 as a normative theory purpose-fit for the press of developing nations. Development Media Theory calls on the press of developing nations to give their journalistic support to the governments of their nations towards the development of their economies and societies. The theory's argument is that until a nation's social and economic development has reached appreciable levels of maturity, the press should be supportive rather than critical of government (McQuail, 1987).

As already stated, Development Media Theory is a purpose-fit for developing nations. It was propounded in the realization that the four theories of the press (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956) were normative for developed societies but not all that apt for addressing the peculiar situation and circumstances of developing nations. The theory argues that the peculiarities of the developing world require the media to be willing to subordinate their freedom to the national goals of integration. In other words, Development Media Theory posits that it behooves the press of developing nations to minimize activism and rather maximize the development needs of literacy, health education and political participation. Also, the theory canvases for the press of developing nations to point out to government areas of development gaps and places where development is needed.

This is where regional bureaus can come in. In a country like Nigeria, where the geographical span of the country is massive, it is not unlikely that some of the areas where development gaps and development needs subsist may escape the notice of the government at the centre. Regional bureaus of national media can step in here to fill this knowledge gap. Also, with the fierce competition that seems to be deep-seated between the regions of Nigeria in practically all matters, a region may end up being 'forgotten' by the central government except some voice in that region calls the attention of the central government to the needs of that region. Calling these considerations to account, a competitive work of regional bureaus of national media seems cut out for them. This paper will dwell on their work in this regard.

### **The Media in Focus**

The mass media which consists of radio, television, newspaper, magazine, and social media was described by Edmund Burke in late Eighteenth-Century England as the Fourth Estate of the Realm (or the fourth branch of government in the contemporary context) (McQuail, 2006). This description of the media is supported by a profound statement of Thomas Jefferson, the third American President (1801-1809) that "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Jefferson's statement has since brought to the limelight the important role that the media play in ensuring development in society. This statement of he's also lent credence to the fact that societies can successfully operate without any form of government but it would be catastrophic for any society to exist without the presence of a virile press. The media's role in regional development is fundamental to and instrumental in the emancipation of the people from the shackles and bondage of poverty and underdevelopment in all ramifications.

Kwame Nkrumah, the first African President of Ghana, emphasized the role of the media in the development of society when he articulated that the media should be used as a revolutionary tool for African liberation. He believed that the media are an extension of the government and its policies of social, economic and cultural development (Cited in Domatob & Hall, 1983). Commenting on the role of the media in nation-building, he said: "...our revolutionary African press must carry our revolutionary purpose. This is to establish a progressive political and economic system upon our continent that will free men from want and every form of social injustice and enable them to work out their social and cultural destinies in peace and at ease."

The media are meant to serve both elite and those at the grassroots levels. They are expected to focus their time and resources on sensitive issues that matter most to the people and these issues are usually prevalent in the different regions that make up the country. Watson (2004) buttresses this point by saying that the media must be seen as the representatives of order. He further said that "the media are agencies of policing. They produce stories 'that help to make sense of, and express sensibilities about social order'. Things are represented in terms of correctness or incorrectness rather than in terms of truth or falsehood" (p.110). Regional bureaus are expected to focus their attention on policy formulation and always spotlight the relevance of their stories to policymaking and implementation in order to improve journalism and to produce less "soft news" and more "hard news". The media are supposed to contribute towards making society achieve its social goals. They must see themselves as instruments of

championing a new cause that will empower the people to make informed decisions that will better their lives.

### **The Nigerian Media in Perspective**

The Nigerian media serve as a major means of communication in the country. The different types of media that are all active in the country (print, electronic, and now social media) create awareness on daily occurrences and understanding of happenings. The media in their reportage also take into cognizance the diversities prevalent in the country that cuts across ethnic segmentation, religious affiliations, political orientations, social groupings, and economic opportunities.

The advent of the Nigerian media as an institution can be traced back to 1859 for print media and 1932 for electronic media (Nkwocha, 1999; Ojenike, 2005; Enemaku, 2005). The first newspaper was established by Rev. Henry Townsend, with a publication called *Iwe-Irohin*. The objective of the publication was to get its audience to develop the habit of searching for information through reading. With the increase in daily newspaper production, the media became a platform for the expression of nationalist consciousness. For instance, in 1880, a group of Nigerians established the *Lagos Times*, which immediately started as a series of confrontations with colonial forces.

The electronic media started with a radio station in 1932 when the British Colonial Government opened a Radio Distribution Service (RDS) in Lagos to transmit British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) programmes in Nigeria (Sulaiman, 2002). The RDS was later transformed into Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) in 1951 and in 1957, the NBS was changed to a corporation status called Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in order to shield it from government interference and undue propagation of the views of the ruling political party.

Still on the advent of the electronic media in Nigeria, the first television station, Western Nigerian Television Service (WNTS) was established in 1959 by an opposition leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who was denied access to national radio (Ojenike, 2005). Thereafter, each regional government followed suit and established its own television station. In this respect, the Federal Government on January 1, 1962, launched an interim service/a global network service which later matured into a full-fledged government parastatal now known as Voice of Nigeria (VON) through Decree 15 of 1991 (Nkwocha, 1999; Ojenike, 2005).

Private media were later set up. These media which all have national patronage also have regional presences aligning with the corresponding geopolitical zone. Whereas most of the federal government's attention is focused on the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, the regional bureaus which are closer to the citizens regularly highlight the needs and peculiarities of their respective regions in order to attract the federal government's attention to it and trigger rapid development.

### **The Media and Development**

It is established that there is a link between media and regional development. This is because the media are carriers of development information i.e. information that leads to better behaviour, healthier eating, better attitude towards politics and government, and other issues of development. Ekwelie (1999) draws a clear link between the media and development. In his words: "We have proof that development and communication can be complementary. We know that communication may fail to generate development. But

after making all the allowances for the accident in nature and society, we are still left with a paradigm that links communication with development" (p.6). Indeed, it is safe to state that without communication, development may be slow in coming or non-existent altogether.

A philosophical and cautious approach is understandable, given the unpredictability of media effects which vary with people. The media, formal or informal, traditional or modern, written or spoken, must in some way interfere or intervene for development to take place. From the moment a child is born, the mother gradually commences socialization, leading to language acquisition and other survival skills.

No matter from which perspective one looks at it, there must be a form of communication for development to coagulate. Quite often, the mass media play this role to different extents in different socio-political contexts. For instance, the role the media would play in a developing country might be quite different from its role in a developed economy with a vibrant economy, infrastructural contentment, high literacy, and other indices of a high level of development.

Being a social system or an institution, the mass media perform roles that relate to societal advancement, despite the fact that many scholars have had cause to attack or excoriate the media for sundry reasons. The idea of the media being an institution is suggestive of a power model which can be underestimated only to our peril. That explains partly why many powerful persons in spite of their accomplishments in several fields, still invest in media ownership.

On the part of the government in Nigeria, the need to own and run media houses has never been in doubt, an indication of its appreciation of the place of the media in societal life. In Nigeria, print media have always been owned and run by both government and private investors. In 1992, the industry was deregulated, bringing into being Ray Power, the first private radio station in Nigeria.

### **Regional Bureaus of Nationwide Media**

Regional bureaus are regional-level operational hubs that national media set up to concentrate their reportorial and correspondent work on the region in focus. Most media organizations have their operational headquarters in Abuja, the federal capital territory, or in Lagos, the commercial capital of the country. With the fast-paced nature of news and information sharing, no serious national media organization can operate without having bureaus that will have correspondents that are on the ground to cover events as they unfold in the regions and feed their parent offices with information.

The regional bureaus in the country are an important part of the community life of the people of the region. The activities of the bureau aid in expanding the horizons of thought of the citizens. The significance of communication for human life cannot be overestimated because, beyond the physical requirement of food and shelter, man needs to communicate with his/her fellow human beings. The urge for communication is a primal one and in our contemporary civilization a necessity for survival. Without communication, no society can exist, much less develop and survive. For the existence as well as the organization of any society, communication is a fundamental and vital process.

In line with the current realities in Nigeria, regional media helps in improving governance by monitoring the actions of those in power and alerting the public to cases of corruption and abuse of trust. A strong, free, and independent media sector leads to

lower corruption levels. Corruption in Nigeria is observed to have permeated all sectors hence while the headquarters of most media organizations are fixated on the activities of the federal government, the regional bureaus play their watchdog role by paying close attention to the activities and policies of the regional leaders and state governments.

A media organization in Nigeria cannot be seen as effective and with rich content in its daily news coverage if it does not highlight stories from different regions in the country. For instance, on Channels TV's flagship news programme, 'News @10', there is a noticeable pattern of broadcasting news stories from the presidency and the national assembly. There, the news stories broadcast usually highlight events occurring in the six regions in the Country. This trend is observed in all the nationwide media (Radio, Newspaper, and Television). They all capture occurrences in the different regions in the country.

Apart from news bulletins, most nationwide media organizations create special programmes that are specifically packaged to highlight the peculiarities of the different regions in the country and it is usually the duty of the regional bureaus to provide the information to be transmitted on the programme and to package it. An example of such a programme is "Inside the Niger Delta" aired on Africa Independent Television. The programme is focused on the development challenges of the Niger Delta region.

### **The Role of Regional Bureaus in Achieving Development**

Regional correspondents are the engine room of regional bureaus hence regional correspondents research, investigate, interpret and communicate news and public affairs through newspapers, television, radio, and other media. They are the face known to the public in the region. The programmes packaged by regional bureaus affect the public (the entire nation) by helping them to form opinions and at the same time help them to change them. The programmes and the news reports also give the media consumers what to think about. In the face of competing information dissemination channels in the country, regional bureaus have been able to achieve the following:

- (i) Paint a picture of the plight of the people residing in the region. The pictures in the minds of the populace create their public opinions.
- (ii) Highlight the dire development needs of the region.
- (iii) Showcase the contributions of the region to national development.

Regional bureaus wield enormous power in shaping and reshaping events. They persuade, crusade for, set agenda, act as a watchdog of society, educate, inform and mobilize people to agitate for their rights or reject government actions or policies. They also entertain and act as status conferrers. The role they play in the different regions was observed in the impasse between the federal government and governors from the southern region of the country. The Federal government has on several occasions announced the approval of open grazing in the country but the governors of the southern region have through the regional bureaus announced their ban on open grazing in their various states. The Governor of Bayelsa State in a televised media chat with regional bureau correspondents of nationwide media at the Bayelsa State Government insisted that open grazing was not permitted in Bayelsa State as the State does not have grazing routes. The governor spoke about the unique terrain of the state and how it is not adequate for open grazing.

The regional correspondents are agents for providing constructive criticism of the state governments that make up the region and its various agencies, informing readers on how the development process is affecting them, and highlighting regional self-help efforts that would contribute meaningfully to the lives of the people that are exposed to the information. From the above, it can be deduced that the role of the regional bureaus is the same as the role of the mass media in any society, the only major difference being that the regional bureaus are focused on only news emanating from their regions.

Apart from attracting development from the federal government to their respective bureaus, regional bureaus also help in the internal development of the regions by executing the following role:

### **Education**

Education of the people is an important role the regional bureaus play in their regions' information system. There is a high level of illiteracy and low level of education among the populace in most regions especially in the rural areas, hence most of the people are completely ignorant of the activities of their state government and regional leaders. The bureaus through their publications can educate the masses on issues of political, economic, and social importance in developing their region.

### **Information**

Through the information function, the federal government is always reminded to bring development to those residing in the various regions in the country and not centralize infrastructural development in the country. Daily, Nigerians wake up to the news of certain projects being earmarked for different regions in the country, they are all an offshoot of the information dynamics of the regional bureaus. If the South-South bureau does not talk about the poor condition of the East/West Road and how it is now a death trap, the federal government may never work on rehabilitating the road as its being done now. It is difficult to think of any national objectives which can be pursued effectively, let alone achieved, without adequate information and communication support from the regions.

### **Entertainment**

Through songs and dances, festivals, arts, the regional bureau's aid in educating the populace residing in the different regions, especially in the suburbs of those regions to fight tension, street desolation, desperation and boredom arising from unemployment, absence of some needed modern infrastructure, poverty and hardship. The entertainment offered from the regional bureaus on their national platforms helps to bring the regional populace to be at par with their urban counterparts and this gives them a sense of belonging in the society by negating the effects of regional poverty and hardship.

### **Audience Penetration**

The regional bureaus are very useful in audience penetration. Programmes packaged from the bureaus can be delivered via national and local languages and, therefore capable of penetrating both the literate and illiterate segments of the regional population. The easiest way the federal government usually penetrates the regional populace in terms of effective mobilization for national development and transformation is through the programme from regional bureaus that is aired on their national platforms.

### **Unification of the Regions for National Integration**

The regional bureaus in the country usually play an important role in the regional information system by being involved in the promotion of unity among the different segments of the regional populace. In a country like Nigeria where the populace has a diversity of language, culture, religion, and social institutions unification is very important.

### **Inter-Regional Competition for Development Attention in Nigeria**

Nigeria has six recognized regions and it would be unthoughtful to assume that there is no inter-regional competition for developmental attention by the bureaus from the federal government given the enormous advantage of regional bureaus to attract development to their regions. Every bureau wants to be the toast of its national platform as it is believed that the more airtime, in the case of radio and television, that a regional bureau receives, the higher the bureau's chances to attract development.

Competition is usually observed from regional bureau correspondents of the same media organization but serving at different regions as these correspondents usually produce and package reports that will highlight the needs of their region. At present, the regional bureau correspondents in the northern part of Nigeria, it is observed that most of their stories and reports are channeled to showcase the hardship suffered by the inhabitants of the region as a result of attacks by Boko Haram. The reports are usually couched in a way to evoke sympathy and persuade the federal government to direct development projects to the region. The narrative usually captures images showing structures destroyed by the insurgents and the high level of poverty experienced in the region that lacks basic amenities.

For correspondents in the South-South region, bureau reports would usually highlight the abundant natural resources in the region, the fact that the nation's economy is reliant on the Niger Delta, and how in the midst of its wealth, the people there suffer abject poverty and experience incessant youth restiveness. This trend is not peculiar to the above-mentioned bureaus; it is observed in all the regional bureaus in the country. The regional bureaus latch on their peculiarities to attract development to the affected regions. The competition is commendable as it usually fosters a high level of creativity amongst the regional bureaus, as a region whose programme and reports are not aired or published regularly on the national media stands the chance of being relegated and left to rot in under-development.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The role regional bureaus play in the development of a society cannot be over-stressed. Therefore, regional bureaus must consistently create programmes and package reports that will daily position the regions to attract development from the federal government. The regional media which in this case are the regional bureaus are the last hope of Nigerians residing in the various regions of the country, hence they must always set the agenda that highlights the challenge of underdevelopment experienced in the different regions of the country and the media must be dogged in calling on the ruling class to execute their responsibility of developing the regions in the country and not centralizing development. As the Fourth Estate of the Realm, the media must be willing to regularly



showcase newsworthy events with due consideration for the environment and the development needs of their people. It can therefore be recommended that:

1. Reportage of development-prone news should be given more prominence by the various national media. The editors should ensure that more space is allotted to development-related issues and also the use of pictures should be increased. There is also the need for a more in-depth analysis of development issues affecting the regions, not a recycled narrative. The regional bureaus also have the responsibility of reporting process-oriented and not event-oriented news stories from the government establishments.
2. Media professionals must check the abuse and misuse of the media by government functionaries who take advantage of the media simply because some correspondents are too lazy to critically examine information that is passed down to them and analyze for the development of the society. Little wonder most reports of development stories from the regions are filled with ground-breaking ceremonies and not the actual commissioning of completed quality projects in the regions.
3. There is the need for constant training of regional bureau staff as it has been observed that bureau correspondents are rarely trained as compared to their counterparts at the headquarters. Retraining will increase the capacity of the correspondents to introduce new and interesting ways to report the challenges of the regions to attract rapid development.

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