NEWSPAPERS' AGRICULTURAL AGENDA SETTING AND EXTENSION AGENTS' VIEWS ON AGRICULTURAL ISSUES IN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to examine how newspapers' agricultural agenda setting influences the importance agricultural extension agents place on agricultural issues. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from extension agents. All zonal extension agents (4) and 50% of block extension agents (10) were included in the population for the study. However, the village extension agents (60) were selected using random sampling technique. Newspapers content were analyzed from January to June 2002 for agricultural issues raised in them. Data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and Spearman rho correlation coefficient. The results revealed that extension agents ranked storage problems as most important (4.24) and investment in agriculture second (4.27). In the content analysis of newspapers, investment in agriculture ranked highest (740.2 in column inches and 121 times of occurrence in the newspapers). The results showed that there was a positive relationship between the ranking of agricultural extension agents and that of newspapers about what they considered important agricultural issues (r = 0.61 for column inches and 0.58 for number of times issues occur in the news papers, p = 0.05). The relationship though positive was moderate. The results also revealed that newspapers did not allocate much space to agricultural news and hence may not be efficient in creating awareness about current agricultural information. Most of the respondents preferred research institutes and agricultural agencies to newspapers as sources of agricultural information.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Extension agents as professionals are supposed to have a more objective view of governments agricultural programmes since they are to disseminate information concerning agriculture to farmers. Extension agents are also aware that their credibility is at stake if they pass on worthless information to farmers. This study would therefore focus mainly on the relationship between newspapers and extension agents' agenda. This is in order to obtain a balanced view of issues arising from government's agricultural policies and programmes.

Agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to influence the level of the public's awareness of issues as opposed to their specific knowledge about those issues i.e. what to think about as opposed to what they think. Agenda setting creates an opportunity for members of the public to increase their level of awareness about issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972:176-187). As a result people would be able to express their attitude about those issues. This is of particular importance in agriculture especially in a developing country like Nigeria where different successive governments have different policies in agriculture (Idachaba, 2000:42). Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gandet (1944:42) referred to agenda-setting as "structure issues". An example was given of a situation in which politicians seek to convince voters as to what from their party stand points, are the most important issues. This was seen as an attempt and opinion shaping through persuasive campaigns. As further pointed out by Trenaman and McQuail (1961:45), people think about what they are told. McQuail (1987:275) gave evidence showing a correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to "issues" and the order of significance attached to the same issues by the public and the politicians. This is considered by McQuail (1987:275) as the essence of agenda-setting.

In order to concretely show a casual connection between the various issue 'agendas' there is need, as asserted by McQuail (1987:75) for a combination of content analysis showing media attention to different issues in the relevant period and some indication of relevant media used by the public concerned, in this study, the extension agents. Agenda-setting according to Davis and Robinson (1986:179-210) should neglect possible effects on what people think about: What is important; who is important; where important things happen and why things are

important. McQuail (1987:275) suggests that agenda-setting hypothesis (also applicable to the present study) presupposes a process of influence from the priorities of political or other interest groups to the news priorities of media, in which news values and audience interests play a strong part and from there, to the opinion of the public.

It is one of the aims of agricultural extension services to influence people's attitude and change their attitude towards acceptance of new technology that could help improve production techniques. In Nigeria, in recent years, efforts are being made to accelerate the flow of farm information from agricultural research institutes to farmers through extension services. Extension personnel, therefore, play a key role in the communication of new technology from research sources to farm people. The questions that arise are-: what are the sources operating for communicating such information to them (Extension Agents)? Which communication sources are considered credible by the farmers? How useful are these sources perceived by them? The answers to these questions would help to determine how effective newspapers are in communicating agricultural information to the potential users for the wide spread adoption of new technology in agriculture.

Extension services in Nigeria, according to Idachaba (2000:36) is embedded in the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) statewide. The ADPs presently adopt the training and visit (T & V) system of extension. This suggests that agricultural information on government policies and scientists innovations get to extension agents (EAs) through meetings such as: the monthly technology review meeting. (MTRM). At this meeting, the scientists, resource personnel, subject matter specialists and government representatives rub minds with field extension agents. Here extension agents receive current information about new ideas and innovation. Problems of farmers are also made known to the scientists. In addition to this medium, newspapers are also means by which the extension agents and the public at large obtain information on policy issues and scientific findings in agriculture. Government policies especially recent pronouncements are usually well carried by newspapers – government owned and /or private. As regards scientific findings, some newspapers have special sections or columns for new invention/innovations in agriculture. Extension agents could also obtain information on innovations in agriculture through newspaper. The information so obtained are passed to farmers

during training sessions. Under the T & V system of extension, such training sessions are carried out during the fortnight training (FNT) programmes of the ADPs at the field levels. It is also at the FNT that information obtained by EAs at MTRM earlier discussed is utilized for the benefit of the farmers. Farmers on their own too especially the literate ones are at liberty to purchase and obtain helpful information from newspaper articles on agriculture.

Another area that needs to be looked into is newspapers as a news source. It has been argued by McCombs and Shaw (1972:176-187) that the corpus of information found in newspapers is more substantive, more central or more informative than other forms of mass media. Despite this assertion, Sanoria and Singh (1976:22-26) identified newspaper releases as one of the sources least used by extension workers. On the contrary, Weaver, Combs and Spellman (1976:458-472) reported that newspapers exercised a strong agenda setting influence in terms of local issues which are mainly agricultural.

Agenda setting f or agricultural extension agents on certain agricultural issues is of paramount importance (Adeokun, 1988:24). This is because agricultural extension agents disseminate information concerning agriculture to farmers. In addition, they also help to change the attitude of farmers towards acceptance or adoption of innovations and impacting knowledge and skills to farmers about modern methods of farming. The use of newspapers by agricultural extension agents as a source of information from government and researchers needs to be acknowledged even though research results indicate that very few extension agents especially at the village level read newspapers. But as widely reported in literature, newspapers' agricultural editors on the other hand contact extension agents for confirmation of genuineness of the agricultural news they (the editors) obtain from the researchers and government. For instance in a survey carried out by McCombs and Shaw (1972:156-158), several hundred agricultural editors listed the principal and favoured sources of farm news for their papers as follows:- County extension agents, state extension agents, state college of agricultural, their own correspondents, local farmers and farmers' organizations. Some editors prefer county or local extension agents as sources of agricultural news because it is their feeling that more accurate and relevant news would be obtained from them. In advanced countries, some newspaper agricultural editors after collecting news

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from federal or state departments of agricultural will still want to find out from the county extension agents what the news story means or its relevance to farmers at the local level before such news can be used- a respect for public agenda. The perception of extension agents about agricultural issues considered important could therefore be regarded as credible and relevant to what farmers could also consider relevant agricultural issues. This is because the field extension agents are, in the Nigeria context, very close to the farmers especially at the village level. The extension agents normally obtain information from government agencies and research institutes as well as scientific agricultural publications in news papers Such information would assist the extension agents to up-date themselves in modern or recent news about agricultural development. This calls for better newspaper readership and linkage with relevant governmental and research agencies by extension agents especially at the village level.

To benefit from improved agricultural practices, research results and innovations, farmers will have to master new skills and learn to manage and manipulate various inputs. This is possible only, if there is a sound communication strategy which would effectively and quickly disseminate the latest technology to the farming community and influence the individual farmer in adopting it.

The degree to which the media attend to a given issue determines the degree to which the public ascribes importance to that issue (Adeokun, 1988:24). Of great importance is the nature of the news carried by the consumers of the news. The justification for this study is based on the criticism of past agenda setting research for neglecting possible effects on what is important, where important things happen and why things are important. This study will look at agricultural issues from the point of view of the print media (newspapers) and agricultural extension agents.

2.   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of this research is to examine the ranking of certain agricultural issues raised in some national daily newspapers by extension agents with a view to comparing this ranking with the ordering of the same issues by the national daily newspaper. Specific objectives include to:-

(i)   describe the personal characteristics of extension agents

(ii)   investigate similarity or otherwise in the views of extension
        agents and content analysis of selected national newspapers
        about some important agricultural issues

3.   HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The hypothesis tested in this study is as follows. There is no significant
relationship between the ranking by extension agents and ordering of
newspapers about certain agricultural issues.

4.   PROCEDURE

The study was carried out among agricultural extension workers in
Ogun State Agricultural Development project (OGADEP). The
OGADEP is located in Ogun- State, Nigeria with the headquarters at
Abeokuta. Data were collected from the respondents using a survey
questionnaire. Data were collected from 74 respondents who were
extension agents.

The questionnaire was designed for the extension agents only. Within
the Ogun-State Agricultural Development Project (ADP), there were
four (4) zonal extension agents, 20 block extension officers and 125
village level extension agents i.e. in all there were 149 extension
workers. Therefore, all the zonal extension agents were selected. Fifty
percent (50%) of the block and village level extension agents were
randomly selected for the study. This means 4 zonal extension officers,
10 block level and 60 village level extension workers i.e. 74 of the 149
extension workers were interviewed.

For the newspaper agenda, selected national newspapers were content
analyzed from January to June 2002 for agricultural issues reported in
them. The following ten (10) national newspapers were randomly
selected out of the 14 newspapers available in the Nigerian Institute of
Social and Economic Research (NISER) for analysis:- Chronicle, Daily
Times, Punch, The Anchor, Guardian, The Nigerian Tribune, Nigerian
Observer, New Nigeria, The Reporter and This Day Newspaper. These
newspapers represented views from all parts of the country as the list
included papers from the Northern and Southern parts of the country.

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After random and purposive sampling and selection of the 10 newspapers, 345 editions again were randomly selected for content analysis. The 345 editions comprised of 28 editions of This Day newspaper, 39 of Nigerian Herald, 43 of New Nigerian, 32 of The Anchor, 37 of The Nigeria Tribune, 29 of Chronicle, 42 of Daily Times, 19 of Punch, 34 of Nigerian Observer and 42 issues of Guardian. These editions were selected based on the criterion of agricultural news relevance.

Spearman rho's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was used in comparing the selected newspapers and extension agents for the ranking of agricultural issues. Respondents scored the issues using 1 as the most important and 10 as the least on a 1 – 10 continuum rating scale. The selected newspapers were content analyzed by counting the number of times agricultural issues appeared in the newspapers as justified by Katz (1980:12) and also the column inches allocated to the issues in all the newspapers. The latter method was supported by Singh and Kumar (1977:27-31).

5.   FINDINGS/CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   Personal Characteristics of agricultural extension agents

5.1.1 Gender and marital status

Table 1 indicates that all the respondents were males implying that the extension services in Ogun State ADP were male dominated. About their marital life, 71.6 percent were married and 28.4 percent were single. This showed that most of the extension workers were family people with the majority (58.1 %) having 1 or 2 children. Earlier reports by Katz (1980:12) indicated that there is less newspaper reading in single parent households and in households with younger children. The family structure in the current study could therefore aid newspaper readership since the households are not single parents and the number of children are reasonably few.

5.1.2 Level of education and age

As for their level of education, Table 1 also reveals that 97.3 percent of the extension agents had post secondary education. The remaining 2.7

Table 1:　　Personal characteristics of respondents (n=74)

Variables	Frequencies	Percentages
Marital status		
Married	53	71.6
Single	21	28.4
Total	**74**	**100.0**
Sex		
Male	74	100.0
Female	-	-
Total	**74**	**100.0**
Number of children		
1	21	28.4
2	22	29.7
3	06	8.1
4	13	17.6
5	12	16.2
Total	**74**	**100.0**
Level of education		
Primary	-	-
Secondary	2	2.7
Post secondary	72	97.3
No formal	-	-
Total	**74**	**100.0**
Age		
20 – 30 years	47	63.5
31 –40 years	10	13.5
41 –50 years	13	17.6
Above 50 years	4	5.4
Total	**74**	**100.0**

Source: Field survey 2002

percent (found among the village level extension agents) had only secondary education .This showed that the literacy rate was high among the extension workers. Their level of education was also high and this could favour newspaper readership. Findings by Weaver, Auh, Stehla and Wilhoit (1975:37-42) indicated that daily newspaper reading is positively related to income and education level. Most of the extension agents (63.5 %) fell between ages of 20 and 30 years. The ripe

ages of between 31- 50 constituted 31.12 percent while just about 5 percent were above 50 years.

5.2   Information sources

Table 2 showed that 45.95 percent of agricultural extension agents relied on agricultural agencies such as the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) for their information while 27.0 percent obtained their agricultural information from research stations. This showed that the majority of the agents (72.97 %) obtained information from agricultural agencies and research stations. Only 10.81 percent of the respondents (extension workers) claimed that they obtained information through newspapers. Olowu (1990:195-200) in this respect reported that the majority of agricultural news carried in Nigerian newspaper were of little relevance to farmers needs. Sanoria and Singh (1976: 22-26) in their study on the same issue also classified agricultural University scientists and research stations as being the most commonly used sources of information to extension workers.

Table 2:   **Major sources of agricultural information to extension agents**

Sources	Frequencies	Percentage
Newspaper	8	11
Television	4	5
Radio	8	11
Research Station	20	27
Agricultural Agencies	34	46
Total	**74**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2002

5.3   Ranking of agricultural issues by extension agents

This was done by using the 1 to 10 continuum rating scale where 1 indicate most important and 10 indicates the least important.

Table 3 indicates that extension agents ranked grains and fruit storage (4.24) as the most important issue in agriculture. This was followed respectively by investment in agriculture (4.27), livestock (4.34), tools and equipment (4.44) agricultural development (4.51), fertilizers (5.28),

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Table 3: **Ranking of agricultural issues considered as being important for agricultural production in Nigeria by extension agents**

Issues	Scores	Ranks
1. Agricultural Development	4.51	5
2. Investment in agriculture	4.27	2
3. Farm Settlement	5. 98	8
4. Farmers organization	6. 14	9
5. Grains /fruit storage	4. 24	1
6. Tools and Equipment	4.44	4
7. Fertilizers	5.28	6
8. Irrigation	5.83	7
9. Land Tenure and Ownership	6.57	10
10. Drought	7. 98	11
11. Livestock	4. 34	3

Source: Field survey, 2002

irrigation (5.83), farm settlement (5.98), farmers' organization (6.14), land tenure and ownership (6.57) and drought (7.98). This implies that in Nigeria's agriculture as perceived by extension agents emphasis is in storage of farm products rather than production per se. This indicates that focus should be more on storage of agriculture products from the perception of extension agents. The perception of extension agents is a reflection on one of the major problems confronting Nigerian agriculture. As revealed by Obigbesan (2002:15), the processing and storage of food products have not kept pace with increased food production. According to the researcher, it has been estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of the harvested products are wasted through poor handling and lack of adequate storage. The Nigerian stored Products Research Institute (NSPRI) as further stated by Obigbesan (2002:17) has not impacted positively on this problem. Though the present research did not investigate how important farmers perceived this problem, but facts abound that farmers experience huge losses in Nigeria especially in the Southern part as drying facilities are quite inadequate to control spoilage caused by high humidity and heavy cloud cover (Idachaba, 2000:42). The EAs' awareness of this problem (poor storage facilities) will inform what they will bring to the notice of scientists during MTRM. The scientists are then expected to come up with appropriate technology in storage for the benefit of the

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farmers. The EAs in turn, are expected to teach farmers research results at the FNT. This implies that the perception of extension agents is a reflection of pressing agricultural problems.

5.4 Content analysis of the selected newspapers

The highest score ranked highest.

From Table 4, it is revealed that investment in agriculture ranks highest (740.2) in column inches, this was followed in descending order by agricultural development (582.9), Grain and storage (310.6), Livestock (250.6), Farmers land tenure and Ownership (208.2), Tools and equipment (161.5), Irrigation (90.5), Drought (58.8) and Farm settlement (53.4).

Table 4: Column inches and ranking of newspapers about agricultural issues

Issues	Column inches scores	Rank
1. Agricultural Development	582.9	2
2. Investment in Agriculture	740.2	1
3. Farm Settlement	53.4	11
4. Farmers' Organization	222.8	5
5. Grains and Storage	310.6	3
6. Livestock	250.6	4
7. Tools and equipment	161.5	8
8. Fertilizers	208.5	6
9. Irrigation	90.2	7
10. Land and Tenure and Ownership	208.2	7
11. Drought	58.8	10

Source: Content analysis, 2002

The content analysis of the selected newspapers was carried out through column inches allocated to the issues and number of times the issues occurred in the newspapers. From the column inches attached to the news items, investment in agriculture relating to agricultural finances appeared to be in the news more than other agricultural issues. Though what extension agents consider the most important is grains storage; ratings through column inches still have grains storage as one of the first 3 important issues. This result implies that there is need for

better collaboration between newspaper agricultural editors and extension agents to determine what really should be important agricultural issues.

Table 5 shows the ranking of agricultural issues by the number of times the issues appeared in the selected newspapers. From the Table 5, investment in agriculture also ranked highest (121 times), followed in descending order by agricultural development (79), grains storage (49), Livestock (44), Farmers' organization (33), Land tenure and ownership (28), fertilizers (24), tools and equipment (23), irrigation (10), farm settlement (8) and drought (8).

Table 5:   **Ranking according to number of time issues were raised and discussed in Nigerian newspapers**

Issues	Scores (No of times)	Ranks
1. Agricultural Development	79	2
2. Investment in agriculture	121	1
3. Farm settlement	8	10
4. Farmers' organization	33	5
5. Grains /fruit storage	49	3
6. Livestock	44	4
7. Tools of equipment	23	8
8. Fertilizers	24	7
9. Irrigation	10	9
10. Land Tenure and ownership	28	6
11. Drought	8	10

Source: Content analysis, 2002

These results are similar to what were obtained using column inches above. While investment in agriculture topped the list, storage issues ranked third. This implies that the two methods of content analysis gave similar indication of what newspaper considered as important agricultural issues. It also implies the need for better linkage or working relationship between newspaper editors and extension agents in determining what constitutes relevant agricultural information for positive public agenda setting.

Spearman rho rank correlation coefficient was used to determine the degree of agreement between the ranking of issues using column inches and number of times the issues appeared in the selected newspapers. The results revealed a positive correlation (r = 0.99; p = 0.05). This indicates that there was very close agreement using any of the two methods for content analysis of the selected newspapers.

5.5   Testing of hypothesis

The hypothesis for the study was tested by establishing relationships between each of the two methods of content analysis and extension agents' ranking of the same issues. Using Spearman rho correlation coefficient, it was revealed that a positive relationship existed between the ranking of agricultural issues by column inches allocated by selected newspapers to important agricultural issues and extension agents ranking of the same issues (r = 0.61;p=0.05). This implies there was a moderate but positive correlation between extension agents ranking and newspapers' agenda setting. Similarly the number of times agricultural issues were raised in the selected newspapers and extension agents ranking of the same issues again gave a positive correlation (r) of 0.58 and at p level of 0.05. The two results (r = 0.61; p=0.05 and 0.58;p=0.05) showed negligible differences. This is because a high correlation of 0.99 was recorded between the two methods used for the content analysis of the selected newspapers. The positive correlation obtained implies newspapers agenda setting function could have positive impact in influencing what extension agents consider as important in setting priorities for planning relevant training programmes for farmers

5.6   Conclusion and recommendations

This study indicated a moderate relationship between newspaper agricultural agenda and the issues that extension agents consider as important. This moderate relationship implied the need for greater linkage between newspapers and extension agents for better and stronger agenda setting function for the public. Presently, local community based newspapers that could serve the farming audience have emerged in Nigeria. Examples of such community newspaper include The Oke Ogun News (Oyo State); Ogun news (Ogun State); and The Hope (Ekiti State). Though this study did not investigate the extent

to which farmers read newspapers, it is believed that where farmers are illiterates, there will be a member of the family especially the children that would be able to interpret newspaper contents to their parents. Newspapers are expected to inform, educate and entertain members of the public with their news carriage. Extension agents at the village level are closer to the farmers and they know their problems better. Newspapers editors also need to liaise better with extension agents in order to adequately inform the farming community about relevant agricultural news.

For better newspaper/extension agents agenda setting in agriculture, it is recommended that:-

- Newspaper editors should liaise well with research institutions and agricultural agencies for up-to-date and relevant information from which extension agents and even farmers can benefit. This is because this study established the fact that agricultural extension agents made use of these units than newspapers to obtain information.

- There is need to encourage extension agents especially at the village level to use newspapers more effectively for agricultural related news. Incentives such as newspaper allowance could be added to salaries of extension agents to aid better usage of newspapers by the EAs. Also central newspaper reading rooms could be created in the stations of the EAs. The newspapers should in this case be purchased by those in authority.

- The activities of community based newspapers should be well advertised over other mass media such as radio and television for extension agents and farmers to be aware and make use of such newspapers to obtain information about agricultural innovations.

- Newspaper editors should allocate more column inches (space) to agricultural news and increase the number of times in a day or weeks that agricultural news feature in the newspapers.

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