

Nigerian Newspaper Coverage of the Millennium Development Goals: The Role of the Media

Jimi Kayode
Journalism Department
Adebola Adegunwa School of Communication, Lagos State University
Lagos, Nigeria
e-mail: jimikayode@yahoo.ca

Raheemat Adeniran
Journalism Department
Adebola Adegunwa School of Communication, Lagos State University
Lagos, Nigeria
e-mail: aderaheemah@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine media coverage of development issues in Nigeria using the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as examples. The agenda setting and development media theories formed the theoretical framework for the study. Two prominent Nigerian national newspapers, *The PUNCH* and *The Guardian*, were sampled for the research. The study covered all 182 editions of each sampled newspaper published from January 1, 2008 to June 30, 2008. Thus, 364 editions were content analysed. The findings showed that the Nigerian media did not give equal coverage to the development issues they covered. They reported some issues frequently, while other equally pressing developmental challenges in the country were neglected. Furthermore, the Nigerian media did not do much to educate, enlighten or motivate the public towards the need to achieve the developmental issues reported.

Key words: Nigeria, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Poverty, Development, Media

1. Introduction

Development is a widely participatory process of social change, intended to bring about both social and material advancement. It involves greater numbers of people gaining control over their environment, empowering people to be self-reliant and creating the right environment for people to improve their living conditions. Low levels of development are a common feature of most developing countries around the world. People experience extreme poverty, with a substantial segment of the population living in deplorable conditions, and lacking basic amenities taken for granted in other parts of the world.

To address this problem, world leaders and leading development institutions around the globe developed a blueprint to galvanise efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. They agreed to work together to end extreme poverty. This blueprint was tagged the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with an eight-point agenda and specific targets (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). The Millennium Declaration was signed by leaders of 189 countries in 2000. The year 2015 was fixed as deadline for achieving most MDGs.

2. Nigeria and the MDGs

Nigeria, a member of the United Nations, appears committed towards achieving the MDGs. Between 2006 and 2009, Nigeria's MDG office spent £1.23 billion (~~₦~~305 billion) towards meeting these targets (Ahmed and Alhassan, 2011). It has been noted, however, that 'poor coordination of development plans within the federal government; together with incompetent delivery of services at state and local government levels; have greatly hampered progress towards the MDGs' (Adebowale, 2008).

The Nigerian government realises the importance of involving the media in achieving the MDGs. A campaign carried out in 2005 included training for media practitioners to encourage reporting on the connection between these and daily life (MDG Monitor, 2008). Considering the responsibilities expected of the media towards achieving the MDGs, the question that arises is whether the Nigerian media are living up to responsibilities in line with the development media and agenda setting theories. Development media theory contends that mass media should give some priority to news that addresses positive development efforts of government and the people. The agenda setting theory posits that the mass media may have powers that shape public opinion.

To what extent have the Nigerian media been able to create public awareness of the MDGs? Have they emphasised the importance of achieving the MDGs in Nigeria? Do they play a watchdog role by investigating approved government spending earmarked for MDGs projects? We address these questions in the present study.

3. Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine newspaper coverage of development issues in Nigeria, using, *straight news, news analysis, features and opinions* as the units of analysis. The study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What development issue is most emphasised in Nigerian newspapers?
2. What level of prominence is given to development issues reported in Nigerian newspapers?
3. How do Nigerian newspapers acquire information they publish on development issues?

We now move to discuss research that has examined the role of development and media, both in general and with specific reference to Nigeria.

4. Role of the Mass Media in Development

A number of roles have been assigned to the media in achieving development within any society. At one point in time, policy makers, government, civil societies, development organisations and the private sector acknowledged the important role the mass media can play in achieving developmental goals or targets. A senior executive of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Narinder Aggarwala (1979), noted that a journalist covering the development beat is expected to:

‘critically examine, evaluate and report on the relevance of a development project to national and local needs, the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation and the difference between its impact on the people as claimed by the government and as it actually is’ (cited in Dare, 2000, p. 164).

Aggarwala’s description of development journalism emphasises the watchdog role of the press.

In a CIMA report on independent media’s role in development, Graves (2007) noted the need for the media to provide reliable sources. According to this report, developing an appropriate media development strategy can create accelerated sustainable democratic and economic development. The report also noted that the media can enhance democratic development by giving a voice to the people, acting as a balance and watchdog to potential government misconduct.

Wood and Barnes (2007) acknowledged the role of the media in reducing poverty via a) raising public awareness and debate, and b) shifting public and political opinion. They recommended the following functions for the media:

- Informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues;
- Providing an open forum to reflect different public views, including those of economically poor people;
- Providing an inclusive platform for public debate.;
- Scrutinising and holding all actors to account for their actions.

As with most developmental goals and targets, the media are expected to play certain roles to ensure attainment of the MDGs. At the launching of the MDGs Media Awards in Nepal, the United Nations under-secretary-general, Kim Hak-Su, noted that the media can play an important role in promoting and communicating the MDGs to the general public¹ (UNESCAP, 2006). Through the awards, reporters were encouraged to report on one or all of the following categories:

- *Tracking progress on MDGs:* Reporters are expected to develop stories on how countries are performing, which countries are likely to achieve the MDGs and which are not. Why are some countries performing and not others?
- *Human Face:* Reporters are expected to report on the consequence of the MDGs to people's daily lives and specify the role of civil society. They are expected to report success stories and achievements towards 2015, and also the key players driving forward change with their activities.
- *Changes needed in achieving the MDGs:* Reporters are expected to report on changes needed to meet the 2015 target such as improving public service delivery (including education, health, water and sanitation), engaging communities, empowering women and fostering public/private partnership, among others.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2005) noted that development objectives such as the MDGs can only be effective if they help in getting the message across. The commission pointed out that the media can contribute to achieving developmental objectives through continued training, and more back-up for African journalists.

Deane (2007) explored two themes that characterised the role of the media in supporting the achievement of the MDGs. The themes include:

- The media's role in advocating for, and actively working toward the achievement of the MDGs.
- The media's role in providing information to people most affected by development-related issues and providing opportunities for them to voice their perspectives through public debate.

Deane noted that the media are also expected to provide an avenue where diverse and opposing perspectives can be aired in ways that can influence and improve public policy. He therefore called for broader media strategies that would enhance reportage; and provide a more balanced perspective on the problems.

¹ The awards were launched to encourage increased MDGs reporting in the Asia Pacific region, and to show the human faces behind efforts being made to meet the 2015 deadline.

Pigot (2007) identified *awareness building* and *stressing solidarity* as two specific roles of the press in promoting the MDGs. He noted that the MDGs are a collective responsibility. The press, on their part require self-education and commitment in reporting on the goals.

The Nigerian government is not neglecting the media in its drive to achieve the MDGs and meet the 2015 deadline. In 2005, the government embarked on an awareness campaign that included training for the media to encourage reporting development news. Despite this effort, the level of awareness and enlightenment among the populace is still poor, with more emphasis still placed on issues other than development.

A number of studies have been conducted on the role of mass media in achieving the MDGs in Nigeria. Oyero and Areoye (2008) conducted a study to assess the impact of the Nigerian press on National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), a Nigerian reform programme, intended to revive the Nigerian economy. Their findings showed that the Nigerian press did not adequately report on the economic reform programme, and urged the press to rise to its responsibility. They stressed the need for an enabling environment that would aid effective performance and media contribution to economic development; crucial for transforming a situation of conflict to coordination. They also advocated for a qualitative media that guarantee good media management.

Olatunji (2008) conducted a study on roles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in achieving the MDGs in Nigeria. He studied the CSR programmes of selected manufacturing companies in two areas in the south-west. His findings showed that more CSR programmes for manufacturing companies are needed to achieve the goals (i.e. universal primary education, poverty eradication, improvement of maternal and children's health including HIV/AIDS reduction, and sustainable environmental practices). He also called for increased community involvement, and empowerment in developmental projects, rather than the present approach that emphasises 'money-giving' and haphazard execution of CSR projects.

The findings summarised above show how other sectors of the economy can contribute towards achieving the MDGs. From a media perspective, Ogan and Fair (1984) conducted a study of newspapers in eight developing countries and found a high number of government sources. Their findings also showed that most of the stories published were event, rather than process oriented. In the same vein, the researchers found that human sources were consulted more frequently than were documents (cited in Oso, 2002). Their findings thus imply that media professionals in developing countries are not committed to development journalism. Rather, they rely on what individuals say as fact. Therefore, some developmental needs may not be identified or reported. They called for greater use of critical sources and analysis of development topics; and less dependence on government as the main source of information.

The above studies show a common theme, namely a lack of reporting on development issues. We now move to discuss the two theories that form the theoretical framework for our study: the agenda setting and the development media theories.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 The Agenda Setting Theory

The basic premise of the agenda setting theory examines how news media reports on particular issues, and influences or shapes public awareness and debate (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, cited in Franklin et al., 2005, p. 46). Editors act as gatekeepers of mass mediated messages. They promote a media agenda by prioritising certain issues. They can provide sustained and prominent coverage to an issue while others are marginalised or ignored.

Earlier propositions about the agenda setting theory suggested that while media do not tell us what to think, they may tell us what to think about. This suggests that mass media has the potential to draw people's attention to certain issues, and allows for conclusions already raised in the public agenda. Griffin (2011) notes that the agenda setting theory reaffirms the power of the press, while still maintaining the individual's freedom to choose. The theory assumes that individual members of society reflect on such issues already raised, and then make personal submissions based on their subjective reasoning.

5.2 Development Media Theory

The development media theory is a normative theory of mass media designed to a) address the imbalance in development and information flow of third world countries; and b) provide solutions to the technological problems facing them. McQuail (1983, p. 95) highlights the main principles of this theory. We limit these to three points that relate to the present paper:

- Media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy;
- Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or politically;
- Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedoms in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.

Based on the agenda setting and development media theories, we sought to examine the Nigerian media's contribution to achieving the MDGs. We examined whether the press has been able to raise MDG-related issues to the public agenda. The study also examined if the Nigerian press performs a watchdog role (namely holds the government accountable).

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The first step was to take sampling from the content source, which in this case involve two national newspapers published in Nigeria.

The PUNCH <http://www.punchng.com/> and The Guardian <http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/> were those sampled. The two were chosen because they are among the leading Nigerian newspapers. The Guardian is a favourite of the intellectuals, and respected for its independent views, while The PUNCH caters for all social groups (Olukoju, 2004, cited in Oyero and Areoye, 2008, p. 49). Printed copies of both newspapers were used. Our goal was to examine newspaper coverage of the MDGs. Any other development issue not contained in the MDGs was excluded from the study. Content was analysed from January 1, 2008 to June 31, 2008. This period represented a time when the 2015 deadline date set for the MDGs was at the half way mark.

6.2 Research procedure

The units of analysis from the two sampled newspapers included all straight news, news analysis, features, opinions and editorials published on any of the eight MDGs.

A coding schedule was developed as the research instrument to measure different variables (see Appendix 1). The variables are presented in categories, with each category having varying options to choose from. The coding process involved allocating values on the categories for each of the units. The options in each category were not ranked in any order. A fortran coding form, prepared by the University of Ibadan Computing Centre, was used to record the data generated from the analyses.

7. Data Analysis

We now revisit our original research questions:

1. What development issue is most emphasised in Nigerian media?
2. What level of prominence is given development issues reported in Nigerian media?
3. How do Nigerian media acquire the information they publish on development issues?

We examined the percentage of MDGs stories compared to the total number of stories published in each of the newspapers. Articles in five editions each of The PUNCH and The Guardian were counted to find the average number of stories published on a daily basis. Findings showed that The PUNCH published an average of 125 daily, while The Guardian published an average of 140 stories.

The estimated number of stories published over 182 days is calculated as follows:

The PUNCH	125	x	182	=	22,750
The Guardian	140	x	182	=	25,480

From the calculations above, an estimated total of 22,750 stories were published by The PUNCH compared to The Guardian that published 25,480. We then looked at the percentage of MDG-related articles published by each newspaper. These figures are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 MDGs articles published in The PUNCH and The Guardian January-June 2008

	The PUNCH	The Guardian	Both Newspapers
Total published stories	22,750	25,480	48,230
Total MDG stories	592	830	1,422
MDG Percentage	2.6%	3.3%	2.9%

Table 1 shows both newspapers published varied MDG-related articles, although on the whole each newspaper devoted less than 4% to such issues. This shows that MDG-related issues were largely under reported by both newspapers.

We then looked at the frequency of topics. The first variable measured was the subject matter. The options within this category included stories reported generally on the MDGs, and each of its 8 goals. However, in the course of the study, the researchers found some stories written on a combination of 2 or more goals. These were coded under general MDG stories. The findings are presented in Figure 1.

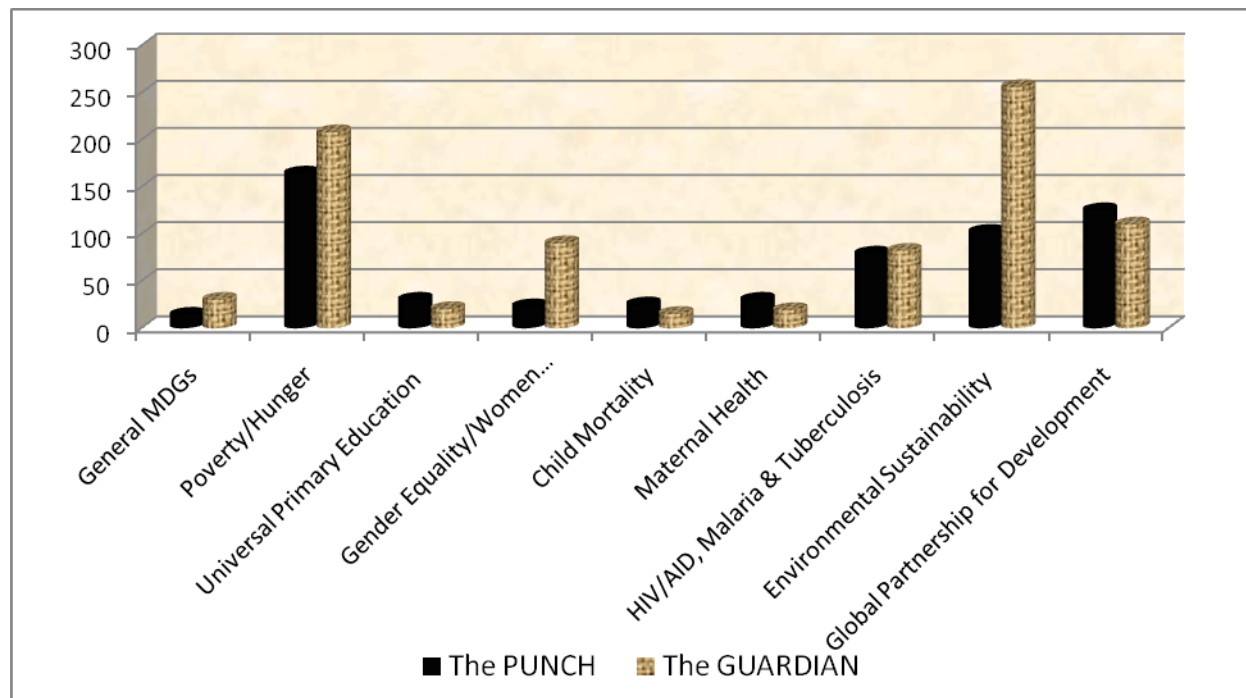
Figure 1 Subject matter of MDG news articles

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of each option. As can be seen, the 2 sampled newspapers varied in the amount of reportage to the MDGs. Both gave predominant coverage to issues relating to poverty and hunger (Goal 1), environmental sustainability (Goal 7) and global partnership for development (Goal 8) in varying order.

The PUNCH gave the highest coverage to stories related to poverty and hunger, followed by stories and global partnership. The Guardian, however, gave the most coverage to stories on environmental sustainability, which accounted for over 30 percent of the MDGs related stories.

The second variable measured the level of prominence via placements in specific pages of the newspapers. Options in this category included front page, back page, editorial page and other inside pages. The findings are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Page placement of MDG newspaper articles

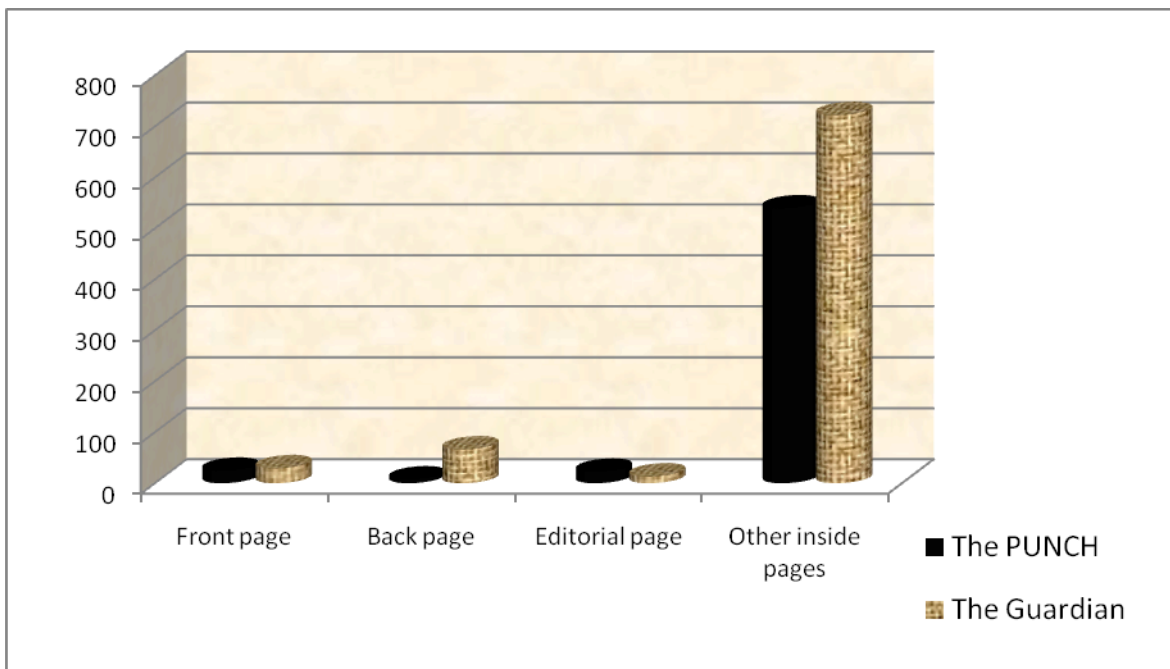


Figure 2 shows very little difference between papers for front and editorial page coverage. It should be noted that The Guardian has a sizeable amount of reports on the back page because the paper devotes this space to news reports. This is unlike The PUNCH, which only publishes opinion articles on the back page. In essence, The Guardian is able to share its most important stories of the day between its first and back page, while The PUNCH is restricted to the front page. The placement of most of the MDG-related articles shows that both newspapers gave little importance to the MDGs.

Another variable measured was the ‘source’ of the MDGs stories published in the sampled newspapers. This was done to examine whether reporters identify the source of stories published. Sources could be implied or explicitly stated in the reports². The findings are presented in Figure 3.

² The researcher identified six possible options for news sources. The ‘no specification’ option was included to code and record the number of stories whose sources could not be determined. The ‘other’ option makes it possible to code sources the researcher may have missed when producing the coding schedule.

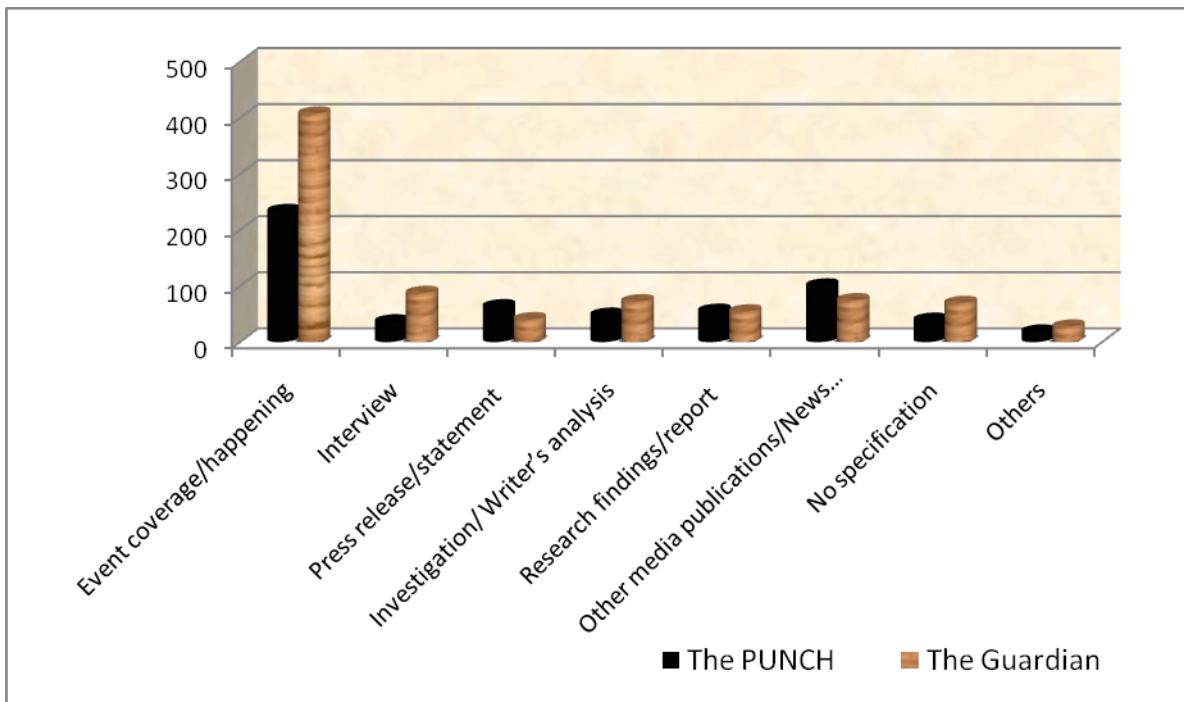
Figure 3 Sources of MDG articles for both newspapers

Figure 3 shows that stories came mostly from *event coverage and happenings* within society. This demonstrates the trend among Nigerian journalists to rely more on occurrences and planned events for news stories. The Guardian seems guiltier in this aspect, as more of their stories were sourced in such a way.

8. Discussion

We now revisit our research questions.

- **What development issue is most emphasised in Nigerian newspapers?**

Our findings show that issues relating to *poverty and hunger*, *environmental sustainability* and *global partnership* are the most reported MDGs in the Nigerian media. Issues pertaining to *universal primary education*, *child health*, and *maternal health* are the least reported.

The high reportage of *poverty and hunger* may be attributed to rising food prices which featured prominently in the media during the period under review. Similarly, *environmental sustainability* and *global partnership for development* had high coverage in the Nigerian mass media, perhaps due to the fact that both issues have several set targets for attainment.

It is surprising that Goal 4 on *child mortality* and Goal 5 on *maternal health* are among the least reported MDG issues, despite the fact that Nigeria has alarming mortality rates in these areas. This shows an urgent need for an increased media focus on maternal and child health. Goal 2 on *universal primary education* was equally under-reported, despite the country's high illiteracy levels.

It should also be noted that efforts are being made to involve more reporting on maternal and child health issues. For example, the Health Journalists' Immersion Programme for the Media Advocacy of Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) Policy in Nigeria³ addressed issues such as best practice when reporting on health in Nigeria (MP4, 2008a). The project director of DEVCOMS, Mr Akin Jimoh, (personal communication, January 22, 2009) attributed the lack of health journalists in media organisations as a key reason for low media reports.

- **What level of prominence is given to development issues reported in Nigerian newspapers?**

Development issues were given low prominence, as most stories were placed on the inside pages of both newspapers. Reported issues hardly featured on the the front and editorial pages. In newspaper publishing, editors consider the level of importance of each story before deciding whether to feature it on their publication's front page or otherwise. Other important stories that do not make the front page are sometimes published on the back. The editorial page is special to newspaper organisations because that is where journalists are able to lend their voices on burning issues within society. Because of the importance of the editorial to a newspaper organisation, most publications ensure that only the very important issues are presented to readers. The low placement of MDG-related articles on the front and editorial pages strongly suggests that these newspapers did not consider these issues to be significant to society. We argue that in order to raise public awareness, MDG-related articles must feature on the front and editorial pages.

- **How do Nigerian newspapers source the information they publish on development issues?**

The findings of this study also showed that most media reports were derived primarily from events and happenings (see Figure 3). This could imply that most journalists only report on development when there is a major activity occurring about the specific issue. For example, our research shows that most Nigerian journalists rarely conduct interviews or investigate prevailing circumstances. Similarly, informing the public on development challenges and research around the world were also given minimal coverage. The lack of investigative reports, and critical analysis of development news coverage, also suggests that the media in Nigeria rarely performs a watchdog role.

To sum up here, findings of this study show that the two newspapers did not adequately report on the MDGs during the period investigated. Low reportage shows that the Nigerian media failed to set the agenda for public discussion on these issues, thus failing to raise issues for both the government and the populace. The media also failed in their role as disseminators of positive development news, as posited by the development media theory.

³ The programme was developed by Development Communications Network (DEVCOMS) with support from the Ford Foundation.

9 Conclusions and future directions

This study has shown the poor coverage of MDG-related issues by two Nigerian newspapers. Although the study reflects media coverage of the MDG issues four years ago, not much has changed since. The Nigerian media is still largely government oriented, focusing mainly on governance and its politics. We acknowledge that the present work is based on media performance from 2008 and suggest that future research can only benefit from a comparison study to determine significant change since then.

Meeting the 2015 deadline for the MDG's is a major challenge in Nigeria, and requires the collaborative effort of all stakeholders, including the media. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- The media must pay more attention to development issues such as child mortality, maternal health and universal primary education.
- The media needs to diversify their information sources on the development stories they report.
- The media must develop a watchdog role by monitoring progress on developmental projects of government, and report to the public when the government is not living up to its responsibilities.

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Appendix 1: Coding Guide

The Millennium Development Goals, and their specific targets are listed below. Any story relating to these targets was content analysed for the study.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Targets: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than a dollar a day. Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.

Target: Ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferable by 2005, and not later than 2015.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Target: Reduce by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Target: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015 the maternal mortality ratio.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases

Targets: To have halted by 2015, and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
To have halted by 2015, and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Targets: Integrate the principles of development into the country policies and programmes and reverse loss of environmental resources
Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation
By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Targets:

Develop further, an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system

Address the special needs of the least developed countries, includes enhanced programme of debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous Official Development Assistant (ODA) for countries committed to poverty reduction.

Address the special needs of landlocked countries and small islands developing states.

Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term.

In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth.

In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable, essential drugs in developing countries.

In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies especially information and communication.