

The Media and the Green Environment: Assessing Context for Newspaper Coverage of Renewable Energy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study presents a content analysis of newspaper coverage of renewable energy in Nigeria. Four newspapers (*The Guardian, Nation, Daily Sun and Vanguard*) were examined. The code sheet served as the instrument for data collection. In the analysis of data for the study, the researchers made use of descriptive statistics while data was presented in charts. The results of the study showed the dominant focus of newspaper stories on renewable energy, namely: benefits of renewable energy; progress in renewable energy; ways of promoting renewable energy; consequences of ignoring renewable energy; requirements for effective renewable energy, and obstacles to renewable energy. Problems confronting the growth of renewable energy in Nigeria are the following: poor budgetary allocation; lack of policy direction; lack of political will; ignorance; and lack of manpower. The authors highlighted the implications of these results on agenda setting theory and renewable energy promotions in Nigeria.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, renewable energy has been gaining prominence in the global energy discourse. Improvements in technology and uncertainties around fossil fuel account for the rising interest in renewable energy. Agbongiarhuoyi (2015, para 1) defines renewable energy as energy that comes from resources which are naturally replenished on a human timescale such as sunlight, wind, rain, tides, waves, and geothermal heat. As noted by Zannawaziri, Kyari and Masud (2012), renewables are the fastest-growing source of world energy, with consumption increasing by 2.8% annually due to demand in many countries globally including the US, a major importer of Nigeria's crude oil. They may constitute 50% of global energy supply by 2040.

The world learned bitter lessons from the Arab oil embargo of 1973, after heavy oil importers began to set targets to find sustainable substitution for fossil fuel (Zannawaziri, Kyari and Masud, 2012). There are still concerns on whether renewable energy sources may be enough to meet global energy demands just as fossil fuel. This is in addition to largely unspoken fears by net oil exporters like Nigeria that a shift from fossil fuel may crack their economies (Ukonu, 2012; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; EREC, 2004). These have been the foci of the global discourses on renewable energy among the major drivers of the debate such as the media. The major factors driving interest in renewable energy within the media have therefore been the need for cleaner energy, reduction of over dependence on fossil fuel, shocks in oil prices, distribution disruptions, fears about the environment and climate change (Abdeshahian, Dashti, Kalil & Yusoff, 2010; Eneh, 2011).

The media in Nigeria assume control of the social discourses on renewable energy towards agenda building and public awareness (Owelle, 2015). This study focuses on media coverage of renewable energy in this country. The renewable energy discourse should be of interest to the mass media in the face of Nigeria's position as a potential powerhouse for renewable energy production as well as a net exporter of fossil fuel, which forms at least

80% of GDP (Owelle, 2015). This is against the backdrop of Nigeria's curiously intractable energy crisis since independence in 1960, which has triggered the search for sustainable solutions among stakeholders such as the government and media.

There are concerns that the country may have started another serendipitous move towards renewable energy development and use. Apart from the expected effects on Nigeria's economy, there are also implications for environmental quality and food production if renewable energy becomes a complete substitute for fossil fuel. The aspects of renewable energy such as biofuel production demands a lot of input in land, water, energy and chemicals (Zannawaziri, Kyari and Masud, 2012). As the media in Nigeria embrace the renewable energy discourse, the question is: what is occupying their interest in the area?

There is a need to ascertain the problems, challenges and new perspectives in energy development as the country has started making inroads into renewable energy exploration (Owelle, 2015; Asu, 2018; Ugwuanyi, 2016; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). In this study, the authors make use of content analysis to examine newspaper coverage of renewable energy issues. The objectives of the study are:

1. Examine the dominant focus of newspaper contents on renewable energy.
2. Determine the issues raised in newspaper reports as the problems facing renewable energy development in Nigeria.

The Media and the Issues in Renewable Energy Awareness

Renewable energy awareness and communication relates to literacy, attitudes to use, knowledge, affective and behavioural characteristics (DeWaters & Powers, 2011; Bamisile, Abbasoglu, Dagbasi & Garba, 2016; Ikejamba, & Schurr, 2016; DeWaters & Powers, 2011). The authors focused on awareness of renewable energy (Mercom Capital Group, 2011), energy literacy (DeWaters & Powers, 2011), and knowledge and uses of renewable energy (Zannawaziri, Konto, Abdulsalam, 2012). They tried to establish correlations between awareness and energy behaviour (Mercom Capital Group, 2011; Owelle, 2015) between knowledge gains and skills/energy conservation (Okanlawon, 2011), and the relationship between energy-related behaviour and affective and cognitive responses (DeWaters & Powers, 2011). They examined newspaper reportage of renewable energy to indicate the face of renewable communication in Nigeria.

As Asu stated, Nigeria has enormous renewable energy potentials but lacks the technical and communication framework necessary to maximize the nation's renewable energy potentials (2018). This defines the role of the media in renewable energy awareness. Dudley (1993), as quoted in Adum (2013), agrees that effective communication is essential for the transfer of knowledge and information, which is critical for people to respond successfully to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic and technological changes. Dudley (1993) further argues that knowledge and information can only be useful when they are communicated clearly without misunderstanding and ambiguities.

Ramirez and Quarry (2004) agree sustainable development can succeed only when development issues are communicated in the processes that will help people to exchange experiences, find common ground for collaboration and actively participate in and manage development activities. In this context, key players in renewable energy such as the media have critical roles to play to help people understand the benefits of turning to renewable energy sources. When the target population is properly educated and informed on the benefits of developing renewable energy in communities, misconceptions be far less numerous and harmful (Owelle, 2015; Asu, 2018). Baru (2015). They postulates on information and public awareness campaigns as indispensable tools in making the general public understand the concept of any renewable energy projects. Adum (2013) advises that the nature of communication should be participatory in order to carry the audience along.

This has implications for the type of content used by journalists in communicating renewable energy.

The authors noted using news as the dominant media genre in communicating issues such as climate change will not offer the media the much-needed opportunity to mould and drive public opinion. News often aims at balance, such that the opinions of pro- and anti-renewable energy advocates, for instance, receive equal attention (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; Ukonu, 2012). Therefore, to shape opinion and drive the discourse on any social topic, the media need to conscientiously frame, prime and set an agenda on the issue. Key topics or subject matter should drive media reportage of important issues so as to impact audience awareness and knowledge. In order to determine the important drivers of media coverage, several studies have been done on media framing and agenda setting.

The key issues have attracted the authors' attention in the area of renewable energy are Nigeria's enormous renewable energy potentials (Sambo, 2014) and large market (Akorede, Ibrahim, & Amuda, & Olufeagba, 2017; Nhaji, 2017). We focused on the several challenges in the renewable energy sector in Nigeria (Alli, 2017; Asu, 2018). These challenges, problems and uncertainties are the result of many factors, paramount among which is communication related (Bamisile, Abbasoglu, Dagbasi & Garba, 2016; Ikejamba, & Schurr, 2016). This study highlighted the need for renewable energy reportage to be undertaken along these lines (Mercom Capital Group, 2011; 2011; Kaygusuz, 2012).

Framing, Agenda Setting and Priming

Studies on media reportage have usually made use of the three (framing, agenda setting, and agenda priming) most important theories of media coverage of social issues. The media use considerable powers in determining the images people have in their heads. Literature established a correlation between media attention on public issues, and the importance attributed to the issues by the mass media audience, (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, Iyengar, 1991). Agenda setting, priming and framing have therefore been Siamese twins in driving media coverage. Agenda setting focuses on issues. Priming decides where the issues are placed in the scheme of socially important ideas. Framing provides the words, schemes and characterisation features used to set agenda on issues (Scheufele, 1999). Framing and agenda setting have raised concerns on the extent to which media agenda and frames correspond with audience agenda on certain subjects. This is where priming plays a major part (Iyengar & Kinder, 1991). The theory attempts to show how the media originate ideas and handle the ideas in ways that make them to precondition how people see future discussions about the idea. Priming is a stage in the agenda setting process of mass communication. The media, in the bid to be the agenda setters, introduce ideas, words, images, frames and construct meanings. They attempt to sustain agenda setting through framing and priming.

People try to construct meanings about social issues and events based on prior experiences and knowledge. The media attempt to be the underlying constructors of the main meanings people hold about events. The priming was based on the following canons:

- a. media construct meanings for people and create experiences that people rely on to further understand issues in the future,
- b. the media purposely emphasise some issues, ignore others, and can influence people's decisions on those issues,
- c. media can determine how people interpret new information,
- d. past information provided by the media becomes the filter through which people sift and interpret new information,
- e. media provide the frame of reference that helps people to process and interpret new information.

Priming shares a lot with agenda setting and framing theories and stands in between agenda setting and framing. The three theoretical perspectives point to the same media-audience effect that assumes a direction of influence from the media to the audience based on the coverage preferences of the mass media. Agenda setting shows interest in media coverage generally. Media coverage is seen as a prime influence on audience agenda, knowledge and decisions. Agenda setting deals with the importance of an issue to decide which issues are selected for media discussion. Framing deals with how the media choose, name and position the words and images that help them to set agenda for the audience. Priming links agenda setting to framing by showing how media influence the audience through the use of frames that materialise as agenda. Priming attempts to show how individuals store information, from which they draw to process newer information. Ultimately, the effect of agenda setting materialises as priming through media frames. The store of media frames forms the information bank from which people interpret other information and make decisions on issues, especially on issues about which the audience has insufficient knowledge, such as renewable energy. Where such stores of information are lacking, audience awareness, knowledge, understanding and actions suffer. This is where the relevance of the three theories to the present study lies. The theories will provide the basis for judging newspaper coverage of renewable energy and help ask the question: how is renewable energy reported in the media in terms of areas of focus?

Research Design

The main use of content analysis is to examine how newspapers in Nigeria cover renewable energy issues. The choice of content analysis has the potential of allowing the researchers to achieve the objectives of the study. Ahoo, Ogbonne, Kwaghtser (2019); Olijo (2020) and Kari (2020) agree the choice of a research design is normally decided with consideration to the objectives of the study.

The population of the study was made up of the 24 national newspapers (Ugwuanyi, 2017) that are circulated in Nigeria. The 24 newspapers were selected from a ranking of top 24 newspapers in Nigeria by the International Media and Newspapers (2016). The simple random method, through a table of random numbers, was used to select *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun*, and *Nation* newspapers. The four newspapers have national spread as well as energy desks. The number is more than 10% of the population of newspapers in Nigeria, which was considered fit for content analysis by Wimmer and Dominick (2003). The four newspapers combined were studied across 2015 and 2016, which were periods of the adoption of the Paris Climate Accord (2015) and the deadline for nations to ratify it (2016). The newspapers drew more attention to global energy use during these periods, and thus are considered appropriate for newspaper content analysis on renewable energy. The four newspapers combined had a total of 2,920 editions published in 2015 and 2016. All the editions of the newspapers were sampled. The units of analysis were news (straight news), feature (interpretative stories) and opinion stories (articles, columns, editorials). The following were the content categories.

Dominant focus

Benefits of renewable energy: These are stories that highlight the importance of renewable energy.

Progress in renewable energy: These are stories that pay attention to progress made in promoting renewable energy.

Ways of promoting renewable energy: These are stories that suggest how to promote renewable energy.

Consequences of ignoring renewable energy: These are stories that highlight the negative consequences of not paying attention to issues related to renewable energy.

Requirements for effective renewable energy: These are stories that outline the things that

are needed to promote renewable energy.

Obstacles to renewable energy: These are stories that highlight the problems militating against renewable energy.

Problems facing renewable energy development

Poor budgetary allocation: These are stories which highlight lack of funding as a problem against renewable energy progress.

Lack of policy direction: These are stories that point out lack of policy direction as a problem facing renewable energy.

Lack of political will: These stories reveal lack of political will as a problem facing renewable energy.

Ignorance: Stories that suggest ignorance as a problem facing renewable energy.

Lack of manpower: Stories that reveal lack of manpower as a problem facing the progress of renewable energy.

Results

The authors examined the 2,920 editions of the newspapers for the period of two 2015 and 2016. Only 207 editions had stories on renewable energy, representing 7.0% of all editions. The researchers then examined these stories based on the objectives of the study and the results are presented in the following charts:

Question One: Examine the dominant subject matter of newspaper contents on renewable energy in Nigeria.

The results addressing this objective are drawn from the analysis of data on the aspects of the content analysis that dealt with the subject matter of newspaper stories and are presented in Figure 1. The results show that the most dominant subject matter on the pages of newspapers relating to renewable energy was challenges facing renewable energy in Nigeria. The least reported issues are ways of promoting renewable energy in Nigeria. The implication of this result is that the examined media paid less attention in reporting how to promote the development of renewable energy.

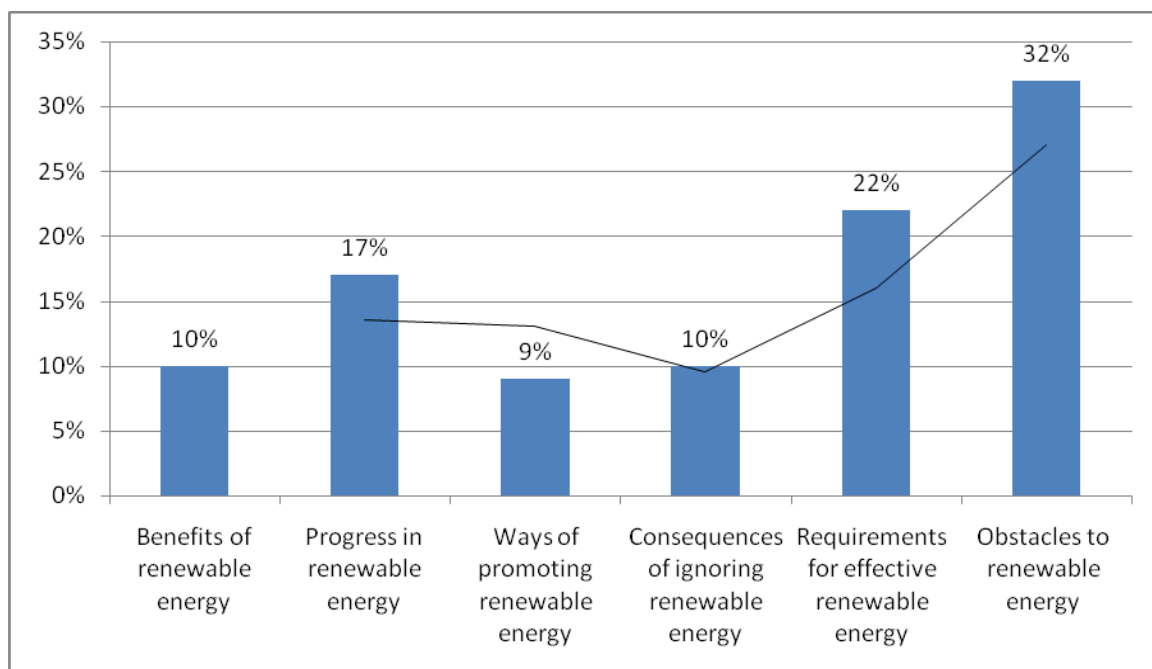


Figure 1: Newspaper stories focusing on renewable energy.

Question Two: Determine the issues raised in newspaper reports as the problems facing renewable energy development in Nigeria.

The results shown in Figure 2 reveal the most reported challenge plaguing renewable energy adoption in Nigeria as presented in newspaper reports was ignorance regarding the development, adoption and implementation of renewable energy policies. This is followed by lack of policy direction (21%) and lack of political will (21%) respectively.

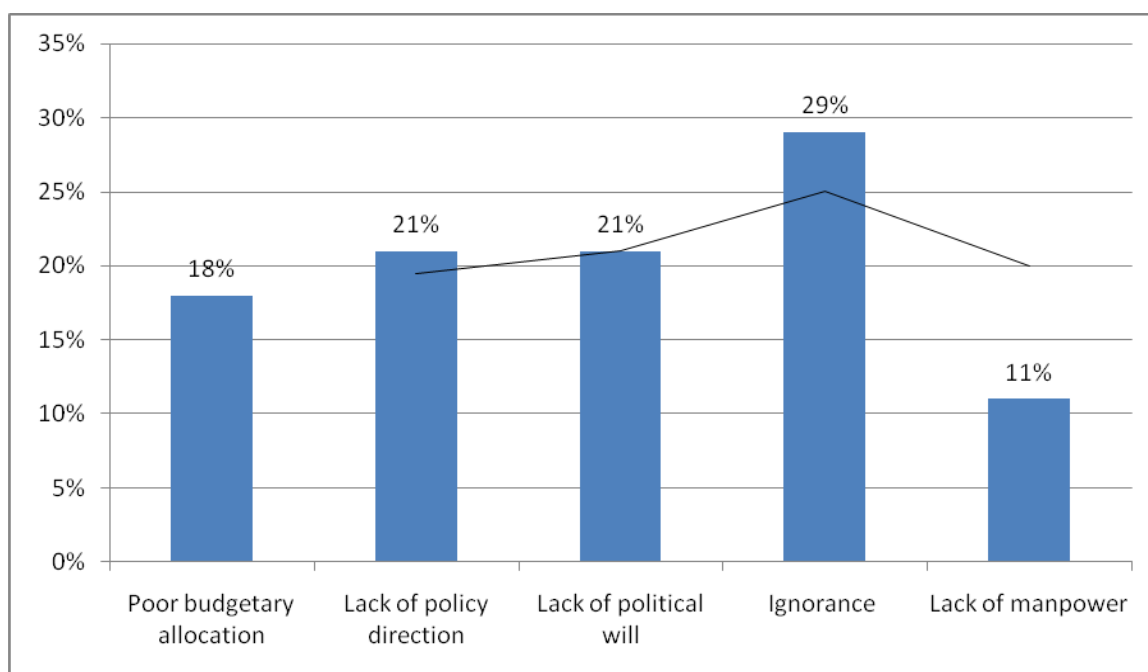


Figure 2: Challenges to renewable energy progress in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The authors paid attention to dominant factors as well as the limitations to renewable energy progress as reported in Nigeria. The items that were measured under dominant focus include: benefits of renewable energy; progress in renewable energy; ways of promoting renewable energy; consequences of ignoring renewable energy; requirements for effective renewable energy and obstacles to renewable energy. The authors found obstacles to renewable energy ranked highest. For example, a story in *The Guardian* (Wednesday, April 15, 2015, p.23) had the following headline: *Clean energy campaign under threat, as investments slump*. The story revealed that renewable energy in Nigeria is suffering from challenges that are limiting it from achieving its full potential. The result of the current study extends arguments on renewable energy by highlighting how the media report the issue.

The second aspect of the study was to determine how the newspapers report the challenges facing renewable energy. Measured variables included: poor budgetary allocation; lack of policy direction; lack of political will; ignorance; and lack of manpower. The study found ignorance was one of the limitations against renewable energy development in Nigeria. The next was lack of political will as well as lack of policy direction on the part of government. Government apathy is a major setback in the development and adoption of renewable energy. This indicates that the problem facing the renewable industry as a result of government apathy may be enormous. According to the newspapers, the Nigerian government is not helping the adoption and development of renewable energy. The viability of the renewable energy industry depends a lot on the government's commitment towards

the project. Low investment and fear/uncertainty were identified to be affecting the renewable energy development and adoption of clear consequences of government's disposition plus poor awareness of the subject matter.

Investment in the industry will remain low and continue to drag the fear of uncertainty where there is no legislation and visible structure from the government towards the development of the industry (Asu, 2018). People need to be communicated/educated on how renewable energy equipment works, what to and what not to do, the routine maintenance plans, availability of spare parts and where to get them, and the availability of technical experts to help out when the equipment needs repairs (Owelle, 2015). The bulk of the matter lies with the government. Until the government gets it right and puts the necessary policies in place, poor awareness, low investment, fear, and uncertainty may govern renewable energy use more than anything. The concern raised in literature is thus germane at this point. Owelle (2015) and Baru (2015) had called on the media and government to stand up to their roles as critical players in renewable energy investment, adoption, and use. The results have implications on agenda setting theory by making a case for the need for the media to continue to set agenda for the general public on the critical role of renewable energy. The media have the ability to create awareness for the general public on issues concerning renewable energy. Regarding renewable energy promotion, the results make a case for improved frequency of reports on renewable energy in manners to propel policy formulation and improved funding on renewable energy efforts.

Conclusion

It was established from the study that awareness on renewable energy is not a dominant subject matter in the media. Absence of statistics, structures, and databases on renewable energy may harm the awareness drive for renewable energy, resulting in a cycle of poor communication and awareness of renewable energy. It was evident poor awareness, government apathy, and the high cost of acquisition and maintenance are the major issues reported in the newspapers as the challenges facing renewable energy development and adoption. These may trigger fear, uncertainty, and poor investment in renewable energy. There may be a link between media reportage of renewable energy and the Nigerian government's apparent lack of interest in the project as shown in literature. Further studies may be needed to ascertain the context of reportage of renewable energy through depth interviews with editors. There will also be a need for a comparative study on reportage and awareness of renewable energy to better define the framing, agenda setting and priming functions of the media towards renewable energy.

Although this study has provided empirical evidence concerning newspaper coverage of renewable energy, in Nigeria, the study did not examine public perception of renewable energy issues. It is important to provide up to date information regarding public views on renewable energy. Additionally, this study did not examine the influence of media coverage of renewable energy on the attitude and knowledge of renewable energy among mass media audiences. Finally, the current study examined only newspapers, thus excluding television stations. Based on these limitations, it is recommended that further studies should be extended to include the observed limitations.

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