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Development Journalism in Nigeria: Practice, Problems and Prospects

Ifeanyi Martins Nwokeocha¹, George Nathan Brown², Esther George Ntegwung, PhD³¹Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Federal University Otuoke Bayelsa State Nigeria²Department of Mass Communication, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.³Department of Mass Communication, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

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Abstract: This study examined the practice, problems and prospects of development journalism in Nigeria. Three research objectives were raised in this study. The study was anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory and the Development Communication Theory, which together explain how the media can prioritise developmental concerns while also promoting participatory communication. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected development journalists, media managers and communication experts in Akwa Ibom State. A content analysis of 100 development news stories from Nigerian newspapers and online platforms was also conducted. The findings showed that development journalism in Nigeria is marked by a paradox of rhetorical commitment and weak practice, with greater emphasis still placed on politics and elite-centred stories than on poverty, health, education and rural development. The study identified key challenges, including inadequate funding, political interference, poor professional training, technological limitations and audience apathy. Despite these obstacles, development journalism was found to have contributed to socio-economic development by promoting accountability, amplifying community voices and shaping behavioural change through campaigns. The study concluded that unless deliberate efforts are made to institutionalise and strengthen development journalism, its potential to drive national progress will remain unfulfilled. Recommendations were made for media organisations, government, journalism schools, donor agencies and practitioners on strategies to reposition development journalism as a veritable tool for national development.

Keywords: Development journalism, Media practice, Socio-economic development, Nigeria, Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Journalism in Nigeria has long served as a vital pillar of public life, evolving from its early nationalist role into a force that shapes civic discourse and governmental accountability. Indeed, the press began as a voice in the independence struggle and now remains central to democracy and public engagement (Odozi & Nyam, 2014). Emergence of development-focused reporting reflects this shift, with journalists increasingly foregrounding issues such as poverty reduction, education and healthcare in underserved communities (Nwanchor, Obi & Egere, 2021). Investigative media initiatives such as the Foundation for Investigative Journalism and the Centre for Journalism Innovation & Development have reinforced that journalists are not mere reporters but advocates for justice, amplifying citizen voices to demand transparent governance (Olorunyomi, 2025).

Challenges confronting journalism in Nigeria are both systemic and pressing. Political interference and legal constraints often exercised under statutes such as the Cybercrime Act have been used to intimidate journalists and curtail freedom of expression (AP News, 2024). Commercial pressures and media ownership structures also limit critical reporting on development matters, as media outlets often shy away from contentious topics that may alienate advertisers or powerful interests (Kwararafa, Uzah & Inobemhe, 2024).

Expansion of digital platforms has offered new avenues for civic engagement, yet journalists struggle with unreliable data access, low digital literacy, intermittent power supply and insecurity when investigating sensitive matters (Dogo, 2025; Ufot, Akarika & Ukpe, 2023).

Hope lies in the firm and growing commitment to development journalism in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. Data journalism platforms such as Dataphyte and networks like Code for Africa are equipping journalists with tools to uncover and visualise issues ranging from public procurement to social services (Dataphyte wiki, 2025; Code for Africa wiki, 2025). Several media development scholars argue that advocating for editorial independence, diversified funding sources and legal reforms can create an ecosystem where journalism supports sustainable development (Kwararafa, Uzah & Inobemhe 2024). Such efforts suggest that, with strategic collaborations among journalists, civil society and government, journalism in Nigeria can not only survive under constraint but flourish as an agent of inclusive progress.

Statement of the Problem

The Nigerian press has historically been recognised as a formidable institution in shaping democratic participation and amplifying citizens' voices, yet the expectations placed on journalism as an instrument of national development remain far from

fulfilled. Brown, Morah, Nwokeocha, Egeh and Obi (2025) observed that while digital media has broadened the space for inclusivity by amplifying marginalised voices in local communities, structural limitations in mainstream journalism continue to hinder its developmental role. Journalism is expected to serve as a watchdog, inform policy debates, and stimulate civic engagement through rigorous, development-oriented reporting, but the profession continues to be constrained by political interference, ownership influence, and precarious working conditions that limit its transformative role (Kwararafa, Uzah & Inobemhe, 2024). In principle, development journalism ought to illuminate issues of poverty, education, healthcare, and governance with depth and accuracy, creating space for inclusive dialogue that can foster social progress; however, in practice, many journalists face censorship, self-censorship, poor remuneration, and safety concerns that undermine this mandate (Dogo, 2025; Ufot, Akarika & Ukpe, 2023). This contradiction between the normative ideals of journalism and the lived realities of practitioners constitutes a dilemma that erodes public trust and weakens journalism's capacity to mobilise society towards sustainable development. While previous studies have examined media freedom and the structural challenges of Nigerian journalism, little scholarly attention has been devoted to how development journalism is currently practised, the ethical dilemmas encountered, and the prospects that exist for strengthening its contribution to democratic governance and social change. It is this gap that underscores the relevance of the present study.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to:

RO1: To examine the current practice of development journalism in Nigeria.

RQ2: To identify the major challenges facing development journalism in Nigeria.

RO3: To investigate the impact of development journalism on socio-economic development in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of development journalism in Nigeria has historically been shaped by the nation's political transitions, its socio-economic priorities, and the expectations placed on the press as a catalyst for change. Nigerian journalism emerged during the colonial period as a platform for nationalist struggle, and after independence in 1960, expectations shifted toward using the press as a tool for national integration and development (Asemah, 2011). Scholars argue that Nigerian journalism has always carried a dual burden of watchdog and developmental roles, but it has struggled to reconcile these responsibilities effectively (Oso, 2012). Development journalism is supposed to focus on stories that highlight poverty reduction, education, rural transformation, healthcare delivery, and infrastructural growth. Yet Nigerian journalists often devote more

energy to politics and elite-driven news rather than to the concerns of the wider populace. Asemah (2013) noted that a development-oriented press should not merely inform but should interpret issues in ways that stimulate citizen participation and empower communities to demand accountability. In the 1980s and 1990s, state-owned media houses were officially mandated to emphasise development news, but critics such as Okoro and Agbo (2003) pointed out that such directives often meant propagating government projects uncritically, rather than engaging in rigorous analysis of whether these projects genuinely improved the lives of citizens. The result has been a partial implementation of development journalism, where newspapers and broadcast stations highlight government initiatives but fail to interrogate the deeper structural issues hindering development. This sets the stage for questioning how Nigerian journalism has continued to navigate its developmental mandate in the face of commercialisation, political pressure, and technological disruptions.

The evolution of development journalism practice in Nigeria cannot be discussed without considering the ideological expectations that scholars and policymakers placed on the media as drivers of national transformation. Asemah (2014) explained that journalism in developing societies is not expected to imitate Western models that prioritise sensationalism or political spectacle; rather, it ought to align itself with the national interest by addressing the social and economic conditions of the people. This expectation has often been captured in Nigerian media policy documents, which call on journalists to support government programmes on agriculture, literacy campaigns, family planning, and rural electrification. However, practice has not always matched prescription. Studies such as that of Nwosu (1990) established that while Nigerian journalists express rhetorical commitment to developmental reporting, they frequently lack the training, resources, and institutional encouragement needed to sustain this form of journalism. Even contemporary analyses, like those of Asemah, Anum and Edegoh (2013), demonstrate that although journalists acknowledge the importance of development stories, they prioritise stories that attract advertising revenue or political attention. For instance, rural communities in Benue and Kogi States often receive coverage only during crises such as flooding or communal clashes, whereas their long-term developmental needs such as road networks and access to quality education remain largely invisible in mainstream media (Okoro & Odoemelam, 2013). Such patterns reveal that the practice of development journalism in Nigeria has remained largely episodic, dictated by immediate newsworthiness rather than a sustained developmental agenda. This gap between normative expectations and practical realities connects directly to the challenges that continue to bedevil the field, ranging from financial pressures to professional orientation.

At the practical level, Nigerian journalists have occasionally demonstrated the transformative potential of development journalism, even though such examples are scattered and inconsistent. Asemah (2011) asserted that when journalism deliberately targets rural communities and marginalised groups, it contributes directly to democratic participation and inclusive development. A good example can be drawn from health communication campaigns during the Ebola outbreak in 2014, where Nigerian media played a key role in disseminating accurate information on prevention and treatment, thereby curtailing the spread of the disease (Edeani, 2015). This demonstrated that when journalists prioritise development-driven reporting, they can directly influence national outcomes. Another case is found in agricultural reporting, where media coverage of innovations such as improved cassava varieties and dry-season farming techniques helped farmers in states such as Oyo and Kaduna adopt new practices, as documented by Oso and Pate (2011). Yet these instances remain exceptions rather than the norm. Too often, development journalism is relegated to the background, overshadowed by stories about politics, celebrity culture, and urban-centred events. Okunna (2003) noted that the marginalisation of development content reflects a wider structural bias in Nigerian journalism, where urban elites and advertisers shape media priorities, leaving rural communities under-represented. This reality affirms Asemah's (2013) argument that without deliberate institutional commitment to developmental reporting, Nigerian journalism will continue to prioritise the interests of the few over the needs of the many. These observations naturally lead to the pressing question of why, despite acknowledging its importance, Nigerian journalism continues to struggle in embedding development content at the core of its practice.

The persistence of these struggles suggests that the practice of development journalism in Nigeria is less a matter of intention and more a matter of systemic orientation. Asemah (2014) underscored that journalism must be guided by a philosophy that places social responsibility above commercial or political gains. In practice, however, Nigerian journalism remains heavily commercialised, with editors prioritising stories that attract sponsorships or political patronage. Scholars such as Ojebode (2010) and Oso (2012) observed that many media houses, especially privately owned ones, concentrate on stories that guarantee readership and revenue, often at the expense of stories that would empower rural dwellers or vulnerable populations. The imbalance between political reporting and development reporting is evident in the front pages of most national dailies, where electoral campaigns, legislative conflicts, and partisan scandals dominate coverage, while developmental concerns such as maternal mortality in Northern Nigeria or youth unemployment in the Niger Delta appear as secondary items buried within inside pages. This state of affairs raises important implications for journalism's social role. If the press is to truly serve

as a development actor, it must consistently highlight issues that resonate with the daily struggles of ordinary Nigerians, not just the elite. Asemah (2011) emphasised that journalism's relevance in a developing society lies not in echoing the corridors of power but in amplifying the silent voices of the rural majority. Therefore, the practice of development journalism in Nigeria, though historically significant, remains fraught with contradictions that must be resolved if the press is to fulfil its promise as a genuine agent of national transformation. This reality provides a foundation for examining the structural and professional challenges that continue to obstruct the growth of development journalism in Nigeria, which forms the basis of the next section.

Challenges of Development Journalism in Nigeria

The practice of development journalism in Nigeria has long been confronted with financial constraints that fundamentally shape editorial choices and limit the sustainability of development-focused reporting. Asemah (2011) has consistently argued that journalism cannot flourish in an environment where the survival of media organisations depends almost entirely on advertising revenue. The Nigerian media system, particularly the privately owned press, is deeply commercialised, and this has forced editors and reporters to give preference to stories that attract sponsorship and advertising rather than those that highlight the developmental concerns of ordinary citizens (Oso, 2012). In practice, this commercial pressure has pushed development stories such as those on rural electrification, maternal health, or agricultural support to the margins of newsrooms, while sensational political reports and entertainment stories dominate prime spaces. Okunna (2003) observed that in the struggle to survive financially, newspapers and broadcast stations have gradually become more oriented toward revenue generation than developmental responsibility. For instance, when community newspapers in states such as Katsina and Niger attempted to give consistent coverage to rural development projects, they quickly encountered financial roadblocks, since advertisers were unwilling to invest in content that did not directly translate into consumer sales (Garba & Yusuf, 2020). This financial dependency reduces the autonomy of journalists and undermines their capacity to sustain a development agenda. It also creates a vicious cycle: development journalism is underfunded because it does not attract advertisers, and because it is underfunded, its reach and influence diminish, further discouraging investment. This economic reality provides a foundation for appreciating why, despite rhetorical commitment, Nigerian journalism has struggled to sustain development-focused practices. Yet financial constraints are not the only hurdle; they intersect with political influences that equally stifle development-oriented reporting.

Political interference constitutes another significant obstacle to the growth of development journalism in Nigeria. Historically, government ownership and control of major broadcast stations, such as the Nigerian Television Authority and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, have made these outlets more inclined to serve as mouthpieces for state policies than as independent evaluators of development projects (Okoro & Agbo, 2003). Asemah (2013) maintained that a press shackled by government influence cannot meaningfully serve as a catalyst for development, since its reporting is often reduced to propaganda and self-congratulatory coverage of government achievements. For example, during the Structural Adjustment Programme era of the 1980s, state-owned media routinely reported government claims about economic recovery without interrogating the adverse impact of such policies on rural dwellers, thereby leaving the public with a distorted picture of development (Ojebode, 2010). Even in contemporary Nigeria, restrictive laws such as the Cybercrime Act and the Official Secrets Act have been wielded against journalists who attempt to investigate corruption or failed development projects (Oso & Pate, 2011). The arrest of journalists exposing mismanagement of funds, as documented in recent studies on media freedom in Nigeria, demonstrates how political power is used to silence development-focused reporting. This creates a culture of self-censorship in which reporters avoid sensitive developmental issues for fear of retribution. Consequently, while financial pressure pushes journalists toward commercially profitable stories, political interference deters them from critically engaging with development issues. This dual constraint severely limits the capacity of Nigerian journalism to live up to its developmental promise, leading naturally to questions about professional orientation and skill gaps within the industry.

Professional limitations within Nigerian journalism have further weakened the practice of development reporting. Asemah, Anum and Edegoh (2013) highlighted that many Nigerian journalists, although trained in basic news reporting, lack the specialised knowledge and skills required for investigative and interpretative journalism that development reporting demands. Development journalism requires not only a commitment to highlighting the needs of society but also the ability to explain complex economic, health, agricultural, and social issues in ways that are accessible to ordinary citizens. Yet many Nigerian journalists rely on event-based reporting, reproducing government press releases or conducting surface-level interviews rather than pursuing in-depth analyses. Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) noted that this tendency has left development journalism shallow and episodic, preventing it from achieving the sustained impact required to drive societal transformation. For example, coverage of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigerian newspapers often consisted of reporting government workshops and

donor conferences without interrogating whether targets on poverty reduction or maternal health were being met (Odozi & Nyam, 2014). This professional gap is compounded by inadequate training opportunities and limited access to resources such as data, statistics, and research findings, which are essential for rigorous development reporting. Asemah (2014) cautioned that journalism without professional depth risks degenerating into mere stenography, leaving the public uninformed about issues critical to their welfare. The absence of consistent professional training in development journalism thus reinforces the financial and political pressures already discussed, creating an ecosystem in which developmental reporting struggles to thrive. These professional gaps point directly to the technological and infrastructural challenges that frame the practice of development journalism in Nigeria today.

Technological and infrastructural challenges form another layer of difficulty in the practice of development journalism in Nigeria. While the rise of digital media has opened new opportunities for citizen participation and wider dissemination of development stories, Nigerian journalists face persistent barriers such as unreliable electricity supply, high costs of internet access, and poor availability of data for reporting (Dogo, 2025). Many rural communities, which should be the central focus of development journalism, remain outside the digital grid, limiting the ability of journalists to gather and share information about their conditions. Asemah (2011) observed that a media system without adequate infrastructure will always struggle to reach the most vulnerable populations, thereby undermining its developmental mandate. Even within urban centres, journalists often encounter technical obstacles, including lack of modern equipment, outdated newsrooms, and insufficient training on digital tools that could enhance their reporting. For instance, while data journalism could potentially transform the way Nigerian reporters track development indicators such as education outcomes or public health expenditure, limited skills and resources have stunted its adoption (Oso, 2012). The result is that Nigerian development journalism remains largely analogue in a digital age, unable to take full advantage of emerging technologies to strengthen its relevance. These infrastructural limitations, when combined with financial pressures, political interference, and professional gaps, create a layered web of challenges that has consistently undermined the promise of development journalism in Nigeria. Recognising these obstacles is essential for appreciating the uneven relationship between development journalism and socio-economic transformation, which will form the focus of the next section.

Development Journalism and Socio-economic Development in Nigeria

The role of development journalism in shaping socio-economic development in Nigeria has remained a subject of sustained scholarly debate, with Nigerian

authors repeatedly affirming that journalism possesses the potential to act as a catalyst for societal growth when properly directed. Asemah (2011) noted that journalism in developing societies cannot restrict itself to the watchdog role alone, but must consciously embrace developmental responsibilities if it is to be meaningful to citizens whose daily lives are defined by poverty, limited access to healthcare, inadequate infrastructure, and unemployment. In this sense, journalism becomes both a reflector and a driver of socio-economic change, capable of shaping attitudes and influencing public policy. Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) added that development journalism can enhance participatory governance by ensuring that communities are adequately informed about government initiatives and by giving citizens the knowledge required to hold leaders accountable. For instance, during the debate around the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme in the early 2000s, Nigerian newspapers that provided detailed coverage helped parents and teachers in rural areas to appreciate their rights to free education, which in turn generated pressure on local governments to expand school facilities in states such as Enugu and Kogi. Similarly, Ojebode (2010) argued that the ability of journalism to amplify the needs of rural populations is central to achieving any form of inclusive development. This early linkage between journalism and socio-economic transformation illustrates the foundational argument that the media can be a bridge connecting national policies with the grassroots realities of ordinary Nigerians. The next step, however, is to examine concrete instances where development journalism has demonstrably influenced socio-economic outcomes in Nigerian society.

One significant way development journalism has contributed to socio-economic development in Nigeria is through health communication, where the media have been pivotal in raising awareness about epidemics, reproductive health, and preventive care. Asemah (2014) explained that journalism, when it gives sustained attention to health issues, performs the dual role of educating the populace and pressuring authorities to provide improved services. The Ebola crisis of 2014 provided an instructive example. Nigerian newspapers and radio stations adopted a development journalism approach by disseminating accurate information on preventive measures, debunking rumours, and highlighting government preparedness (Edeani, 2015). This coverage not only reassured the public but also encouraged behavioural changes that helped contain the outbreak. Similarly, extensive media campaigns on polio eradication in Northern Nigeria, supported by both local journalists and international agencies, helped mobilise rural populations to accept vaccination after years of resistance (Okunna, 2003). These cases underline the capacity of development journalism to influence health outcomes, which are a direct component of socio-economic development. Beyond health, agricultural reporting has also played a developmental role. Oso and Pate (2011) documented how reports on improved

farming techniques, government fertiliser subsidies, and access to microcredit facilities empowered farmers in states like Kaduna and Oyo to enhance productivity. In essence, the socio-economic impact of development journalism becomes visible in those instances where journalists align their work with the real needs of communities, creating awareness that translates into action. Nevertheless, while these examples demonstrate potential, the consistency and depth of such interventions remain limited, leading to questions about sustainability and institutionalisation of development journalism in Nigeria.

Sustainability of development journalism as a driver of socio-economic change is often questioned because Nigerian journalism has tended to focus on immediate events rather than sustained issues. Okoro and Agbo (2003) remarked that Nigerian media often cover developmental topics during crises or government launches but fail to follow up with long-term monitoring of outcomes. For example, coverage of poverty reduction strategies, such as the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), received wide publicity at inception but dwindled over time, leaving citizens without continuous information about the programme's achievements or shortcomings. This short-lived attention weakens the ability of journalism to influence structural socio-economic development. Asemah, Anum and Edegoh (2013) emphasised that sustained development journalism requires journalists not only to report events but to interrogate policies, provide interpretative analyses, and monitor implementation. Without this continuity, development journalism risks being reduced to episodic storytelling that celebrates policies without measuring their actual impact on citizens. Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) provided evidence that newspapers in Nigeria gave significant attention to the Millennium Development Goals during their introduction but failed to maintain coverage, which contributed to the public's poor awareness of whether goals such as maternal health or gender equality were met. This episodic pattern diminishes journalism's potential contribution to socio-economic transformation, since consistent reporting is crucial for accountability and collective action. The challenge, therefore, lies not only in producing developmental stories but in sustaining them over time, ensuring that they remain in the public consciousness until meaningful change is achieved. It is against this background that the relationship between development journalism and socio-economic accountability must be interrogated more deeply.

The ultimate measure of development journalism's contribution to socio-economic development in Nigeria lies in its ability to stimulate accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. Asemah (2011) asserted that a responsible press compels leaders to act in the interest of the governed, thereby driving equitable development. This is especially

relevant in the Nigerian context, where corruption and mismanagement have persistently undermined socio-economic progress. Journalistic investigations into budget allocations for education, healthcare, and rural electrification have occasionally exposed misappropriation, thereby prompting corrective measures. For example, when Nigerian journalists uncovered irregularities in the Universal Basic Education Commission's disbursement of funds, it generated public debate and forced parliamentary inquiries (Ojebode, 2010). Such interventions directly connect journalism to socio-economic outcomes by ensuring that resources earmarked for development reach their intended beneficiaries. Yet, as Oso (2012) observed, the press does not consistently sustain this watchdog role, often retreating into political reporting while neglecting development issues. The proliferation of digital media has, however, opened new opportunities for citizens and journalists to collaborate in amplifying developmental concerns. Brown, Morah, Nwokeocha, Egeh and Obi (2025) found that digital platforms have enabled marginalised communities in Akwa Ibom to amplify their voices and draw attention to neglected issues, thereby extending the developmental function of journalism. This suggests that the future of development journalism in Nigeria lies in integrating traditional reporting with digital participation to foster transparency and inclusiveness. If journalism can institutionalise this role, its contribution to socio-economic development will become more visible, systematic, and enduring. Thus, while the practice has faced limitations, its potential remains significant, provided that structural reforms and professional commitment are aligned with its developmental mandate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study employed the Agenda-Setting Theory and Development Media Theory. The Agenda-Setting Theory, propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, argues that the media influences public perception by determining which issues are given prominence and which are relegated to the background. This theory demonstrates that the press does not tell people what to think but rather what to think about, and this becomes evident in societies where public discourse is largely shaped by the selection of issues given priority in news reports (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory has since been extended to framing, where the manner of presentation of issues shapes public perception of them (Entman, 1993). In Nigeria, this theoretical position has been applied to explain how the media influences debates on governance, elections, and development matters (Asemah, 2011). For instance, Nigerian newspapers often highlight stories on corruption scandals or electoral malpractices while devoting less attention to grassroots development efforts, thereby shaping the consciousness of citizens on what constitutes national importance (Ekeanyanwu, 2015). The theory is relevant to development journalism because it explains how media organisations can set the tone of national discourse by

focusing attention on critical issues such as poverty reduction, infrastructural development, and health care delivery. However, the theory has been critiqued for not accounting for situations where audiences resist or reinterpret media frames based on their own lived experiences (Asemah, 2013). In the Nigerian context, audiences may bypass mainstream media agenda through alternative sources such as social media, making the influence of traditional gatekeepers less absolute. Despite this limitation, the theory remains highly useful in this study as it shows how development journalism can consciously prioritise developmental concerns to stimulate policy action and public engagement in Nigeria.

The Development Communication Theory, first advanced by Quebral in 1975 and later extended by Servaes in 2008, focuses on the role of communication in facilitating social change and promoting sustainable development. It stresses the participatory role of communication, encouraging bottom-up approaches where communities are empowered to take part in decisions that affect their lives (Quebral, 1975; Servaes, 2008). The theory highlights that communication should not merely be informational but transformative, promoting dialogue, participation, and empowerment of marginalised groups (Henshaw, 2019). Within the Nigerian context, this theoretical approach is significant because it encourages journalists to go beyond elite-centred reporting and instead give prominence to the voices of the poor and disadvantaged, thereby strengthening their participation in governance and development processes (Asemah, 2011). For instance, radio programmes in rural communities have been used to disseminate agricultural innovations that improve food security, while participatory communication strategies in health campaigns have increased vaccination uptake (Ojebode, 2003). The theory has been critiqued for sometimes overestimating the willingness of elites and media organisations to embrace participatory communication in societies where top-down structures dominate (Asemah, 2014). Nevertheless, its relevance to this study lies in the fact that development journalism can serve as a veritable tool for amplifying community voices, addressing socio-economic problems, and promoting inclusive development in Nigeria. By integrating the participatory emphasis of the theory with the agenda-setting function of the media, development journalism can become an effective catalyst for national development, bridging the gap between the government and the governed while at the same time holding leaders accountable.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design, particularly a qualitative phenomenological research design, to explore the practice, problems, and prospects of development journalism in Nigeria. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected development journalists, media

managers, and communication experts in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Additionally, a content analysis of 100 development news stories published in Nigerian newspapers and online news platforms was conducted to identify patterns and trends in development journalism practice. The study also drew on observational data from participant observation of development journalism training workshops and media events.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RO1: Current State of Practice of Development Journalism in Nigeria

The findings of this study revealed that the current state of practice of development journalism in Nigeria is both promising and problematic, reflecting a dual character that mirrors the wider socio-political realities of the nation. Journalism in Nigeria has historically been tasked with serving as a watchdog on governance and as a developmental agent that addresses the needs of the people (Asemah, 2011). Evidence from the interviews and content analysis demonstrated that while Nigerian journalists express rhetorical commitment to development-oriented reporting, the actual practice often falls short, with greater attention still being paid to political stories, conflict, and elite-driven narratives. The Agenda-Setting Theory provides a useful lens for analysing this outcome, since the theory contends that media institutions influence public consciousness by prioritising certain issues in their coverage while downplaying others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Nigerian journalists, in their day-to-day practice, often allow the demands of advertisers and political patrons to dictate the agenda, resulting in an overemphasis on partisan disputes and political intrigues at the expense of rural health care, education, poverty reduction and infrastructural development. The findings from the interviews showed that many journalists still equate development journalism with the mere reporting of government projects rather than interrogating the impact of these projects on the lives of ordinary citizens, which reflects the earlier critiques made by Okoro and Agbo (2003). Such tendencies illustrate that development journalism in Nigeria remains episodic, emerging strongly during crises such as the Ebola outbreak or the COVID-19 pandemic, but waning when such events subside. This episodic pattern was confirmed during the content analysis of sampled news stories, where over 65 per cent of development-related reports were tied to donor conferences, government launches, or emergencies, while only a few sustained investigations into education, healthcare delivery, or rural infrastructure were identified. Asemah (2013) had earlier argued that development journalism ought to interpret events in ways that empower citizens to participate in governance, yet the data revealed that interpretative and investigative approaches remain under-utilised by Nigerian

journalists. The implication of this finding is that journalism is still largely urban-centred, privileging the elite while marginalising the voices of rural dwellers, as also observed by Okunna (2003). What emerged clearly from the study is that although journalists are aware of the normative expectation that their work should address issues central to national development, the orientation and practice of journalism in Nigeria have not fully embraced this responsibility. The current state of practice is therefore a paradox, characterised by rhetorical commitment to development journalism on the one hand, and practical neglect of sustained development coverage on the other.

This contradiction is rooted in the prevailing media culture, where commercial pressures and political patronage shape editorial decisions, thereby undermining the developmental mandate of the press (Oso, 2012). It can be argued, therefore, that the present state of development journalism in Nigeria is best described as fragile, sustained more by sporadic interventions during crises and donor-supported projects than by institutionalised practices within newsrooms. Unless journalists deliberately set the national agenda around issues of poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and infrastructural development, the transformative potential of journalism will remain largely unfulfilled, despite its acknowledged role as an agent of social change in developing societies.

RO2: Challenges of Development Journalism in Nigeria

The findings of this study revealed that development journalism in Nigeria faces numerous challenges which collectively weaken its ability to function as a catalyst for social change and national progress. One of the most consistent issues highlighted by both practitioners and scholars is the problem of inadequate funding, which constrains newsrooms from sustaining development-oriented beats such as health, education, and rural development (Oso, 2012). Many media houses operate within fragile financial conditions, heavily dependent on advertisements and political patronage, which in turn influences editorial priorities. Journalists admitted during the fieldwork that pursuing development stories often requires resources for travel to remote rural communities, yet few organisations provide the necessary support. The effect of this is a newsroom culture that prioritises urban and elite-centred stories that are cheaper to cover but less impactful in terms of developmental value. This aligns with the observation of Okunna (2003), who argued that development journalism in Nigeria has been hampered by the inability of the media to reach marginalised populations where development challenges are most severe.

Another significant challenge that emerged is political interference in the practice of journalism. Politicians and government officials frequently attempt to dictate the tone and direction of development stories,

framing them as promotional exercises rather than critical assessments of policies and projects. This politicisation of development reporting was strongly noted during the interviews, where journalists confessed that critical reports on failed projects or corruption in development schemes often attracted threats, censorship, or job insecurity. The Agenda-Setting Theory is relevant in interpreting this finding, since the theory stresses the power of the media to set the agenda for public discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, in the Nigerian context, the agenda-setting role is compromised when political elites hijack media platforms, thereby silencing alternative voices. Instead of highlighting urgent developmental needs, the media often amplifies official narratives that celebrate government achievements while concealing underlying failures. This was also reflected in the content analysis, where a large proportion of development-related stories were framed as “government achievements,” with little or no follow-up on their actual impact on citizens. Such patterns demonstrate the prevalence of what Udejah (2004) described as “government mouthpiece journalism,” which undermines the very essence of development communication.

Poor training and lack of specialisation among journalists were also consistently identified as a major impediment to effective practice. Many reporters lack the skills required to interpret development data, analyse budgets, or investigate long-term policy impacts. Instead, development stories are often reduced to event-based coverage such as project inaugurations, conferences, and political speeches. This weakness reflects the critique raised by Okoro and Agbo (2003), who noted that development journalism in Nigeria has often been practised without the investigative rigour necessary to challenge power and hold institutions accountable. The Development Communication Theory becomes useful here, as it stresses participatory communication and the empowerment of communities (Quebral, 1975; Servaes, 2008). Unfortunately, the findings revealed that Nigerian journalists rarely apply participatory approaches that give rural communities a voice in shaping the narratives around development. Instead, the voices of politicians and officials dominate development coverage, perpetuating a top-down flow of information that alienates those at the grassroots.

Technological challenges also emerged as a limitation. While digital media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide new opportunities for amplifying development issues, journalists in Nigeria still face constraints in terms of digital literacy, poor access to data, and infrastructural limitations such as unstable electricity and poor internet penetration in rural areas (Akinfeleye, 2011). These obstacles prevent many journalists from leveraging the full potentials of new media in advancing development-oriented communication. Although some urban-based journalists are able to use digital platforms to raise awareness about

health campaigns or educational drives, these efforts remain isolated and unsystematic. The uneven adoption of digital tools reflects wider systemic inequalities within Nigerian society, where rural communities continue to experience digital exclusion.

The study also found that audience apathy is a subtle but profound challenge facing development journalism. Audiences in Nigeria, often conditioned by years of sensationalist and political reporting, sometimes regard development stories as less “newsworthy.” Journalists reported that stories on healthcare or poverty reduction rarely receive the same traction as political scandals or celebrity gossip. This perception affects media organisations that are commercially driven, as they prioritise stories likely to attract audience attention and advertising revenue. Asemah (2013) emphasised that journalism must not only inform but also educate and mobilise citizens for societal growth. However, if audiences are indifferent to development issues, media houses may be reluctant to allocate space or airtime to them, thereby creating a vicious cycle of neglect.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that development journalism in Nigeria is constrained by a combination of structural, institutional, and cultural challenges. The financial fragility of media houses, political interference, lack of professional training, technological limitations, and audience apathy all intersect to weaken the developmental mandate of journalism. These challenges mean that while development journalism is recognised as a tool for national progress, its practice remains sporadic and inconsistent. Unless deliberate interventions are made to provide sustainable funding models, strengthen journalistic training, and safeguard editorial independence, the challenges facing development journalism will continue to limit its impact. Development journalism cannot thrive in an environment where journalists lack autonomy, resources, and professional competence. It is therefore imperative that both state and non-state actors recognise these challenges as urgent areas requiring intervention, if the Nigerian media is to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic development.

RO3: Development Journalism and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

The findings revealed that development journalism in Nigeria holds enormous potential to stimulate socio-economic transformation, though its current impact is uneven and often diluted by structural challenges. Respondents consistently noted that journalism plays a crucial role in framing developmental priorities and mobilising citizens towards collective action. For instance, several journalists recounted instances where consistent media reporting on poor sanitation and cholera outbreaks in rural communities prompted local governments to take corrective measures. This aligns with the position of Asemah (2011), who

emphasised that journalism is not only about reporting facts but also about constructing narratives that can propel social change and influence policy directions. In this sense, development journalism has been instrumental in drawing attention to issues of poverty, education, healthcare, and gender inequality, which remain central to Nigeria's socio-economic development agenda. However, the extent of this impact varies depending on the level of commitment of the media house, the independence of the journalist, and the responsiveness of government institutions.

The findings further showed that development journalism has the capacity to enhance accountability in governance, which is a key factor in socio-economic development. The Agenda-Setting Theory provides an appropriate lens for explaining this role. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue, the media's ability to prioritise issues determines what the public and policymakers consider important. In Nigeria, when journalists focus persistently on issues such as the misuse of Universal Basic Education funds, dilapidated hospitals, or abandoned rural electrification projects, public opinion is gradually shaped, and pressure is mounted on government institutions to act. Okoro and Agbo (2003) stressed that journalism must go beyond routine reportage to interrogate the processes that determine whether development initiatives achieve their goals. The study confirmed that where development stories are pursued with rigour and consistency, the media can act as a watchdog that strengthens governance and prevents misallocation of resources. However, the findings also revealed that such watchdog journalism remains the exception rather than the rule, as political and financial pressures often blunt the media's critical voice. This gap weakens journalism's transformative impact, thereby reducing its contribution to Nigeria's socio-economic development.

Development journalism was also found to be central to the empowerment of local communities, especially those in marginalised rural areas. The Development Communication Theory underscores this participatory dimension, insisting that communication must be people-oriented, interactive, and empowering (Quebral, 1975; Servaes, 2008). The findings showed that in a few cases, Nigerian journalists have been able to amplify the voices of rural dwellers in decision-making processes, thereby fostering inclusion. For example, coverage of oil spills and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta has given visibility to affected communities, compelling multinational corporations and government agencies to provide compensation or initiate remedial measures. Brown *et al.* (2025) similarly found that digital media has amplified the voices of marginalised groups in Akwa Ibom State, enabling them to demand accountability from duty bearers. Such cases illustrate how development journalism, when effectively practised, can strengthen community participation, promote social justice, and

build stronger linkages between governance structures and grassroots realities. This participatory impact is essential for socio-economic development because it ensures that policies and projects are shaped by the needs and aspirations of the people rather than being imposed from above.

The findings also highlighted the catalytic role of development journalism in shaping behavioural change and promoting social development campaigns. Respondents identified several cases where sustained media campaigns influenced public behaviour in areas such as HIV and AIDS awareness, maternal health, voter education, and anti-corruption drives. These campaigns provided citizens with the knowledge required to make informed decisions, which in turn contributed to social and economic well-being. For instance, radio programmes in local languages were noted to have had significant effects in promoting child immunisation in northern Nigeria, a finding that resonates with the work of Okunna (2003), who observed that media interventions have been effective in mobilising rural communities for health initiatives. Asemah (2013) also affirmed that development-oriented journalism can contribute directly to national development when it goes beyond informing to educating and mobilising citizens for collective progress. However, the findings revealed that such campaigns are not as frequent or sustained as they should be, limiting their long-term impact. Sporadic coverage means that many socio-economic issues remain underreported, thereby hindering the continuity of positive behavioural change.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that development journalism in Nigeria has demonstrated potential as an agent of socio-economic transformation, yet its impact remains inconsistent due to systemic constraints. While journalists occasionally amplify issues of poverty, education, health and governance, the practice is weakened by poor funding, political interference, weak professional training, technological limitations and audience apathy. Unless development journalism is deliberately institutionalised, sustained and insulated from political and commercial pressures, its role in shaping national development will remain largely unrealised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media organisations should allocate sustainable resources and institutionalise development beats to ensure continuous coverage of education, health, poverty reduction and rural development.
- The government should guarantee press freedom and stop political interference to allow journalists to report on development issues without fear or intimidation.
- Journalism training institutions should prioritise development communication, data journalism and

investigative skills to equip practitioners for effective reporting.

- Donor agencies and civil society organisations should collaborate with media houses to provide capacity-building programmes and alternative funding to support development stories.
- Journalists should embrace participatory communication approaches that amplify the voices of rural communities in order to promote inclusive governance and social change.

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