



THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN COMBATING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN JOS PLATEAU STATE : A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of mass media (print, broadcast, and digital) in combating these challenges. Leveraging agenda-setting theory and empirical examples, the study highlights how media raise awareness, influence policy, and mobilize communities. Environmental degradation remains one of Nigeria's most pressing challenges, resulting in deforestation, desertification, pollution, and loss of biodiversity. This poses urgent developmental and public health threats. While policy responses have been established, their effectiveness largely depends on public awareness and engagement. This paper critically assesses the role of mass media in combating environmental degradation in Nigeria. However, its effectiveness is undermined by underfunding, weak institutional capacity, ownership bias, and security threats to journalists. Drawing on case studies, media content analysis, and scholarly literature, the paper reveals that while the media plays a vital role in environmental communication and public mobilization, its impact is undermined by limited coverage, poor investigative reporting, ownership bias, and weak policy support. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations to enhance media impact in environmental communication that a more strategic, inclusive, and well-funded media approach is essential for sustainable environmental management in Nigeria.

Keywords: Behavior change, Environmental communication, Environmental degradation, Environmental sustainability, Mass media

INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation in Nigeria has reached alarming proportions, characterized by deforestation, desertification, oil pollution, poor waste disposal, flooding, and loss of biodiversity. These issues have far-reaching consequences, not only for ecosystems but also for public health, food security, and socio-economic development. The Niger Delta region remains one of the most polluted ecosystems in the world due to decades of oil exploration, while states in Northern Nigeria face accelerating desert encroachment and soil degradation (UNEP, 2011; NEST, 2018).

Adefemi and Awosika (2020) explained that the growing population, urbanization, and industrialization, coupled with weak enforcement of environmental regulations, have further exacerbated the situation. McQuail (2010) highlighted that the mass media, as a major agent of social change and public education, has an indispensable role to play in addressing these environmental challenges. Through radio, television, newspapers, online platforms, and social media, the media can raise awareness, influence environmental behavior, set the public agenda, and hold government and corporate entities accountable for environmental harm. Ojebuyi and Okorie (2021) corroborates that in democratic societies, media functions as a watchdog and bridge between policy and the public, enabling discourse and encouraging participation in environmental governance. Particularly in Nigeria, with its ethnically and linguistically diverse population, the media's reach across local and national platforms makes it a strategic tool for environmental advocacy and sensitization.

Mass media from radio and television to newspapers and social media plays a pivotal role in raising awareness, shaping attitudes, and influencing policy. Despite the potential of Nigerian mass media in this regard, several limitations have hindered its effectiveness. These according to Maidunoma and Falmatami (2018) include inadequate funding, poor specialization in environmental reporting, ownership and political bias, insecurity, and a lack of synergy with environmental agencies. Moreover, media attention is often drawn more toward political and entertainment content, leaving critical environmental issues under-reported or superficially covered. Where environmental issues are reported, they often lack in-depth analysis, scientific evidence, or sustained follow-up necessary to drive policy change or civic engagement (Gruener Journalismus, 2020). Environmental degradation in Jos Plateau State manifests in issues such as inadequate waste management, poor sanitation, open defecation, and urban pollution. Mass media from radio and television to newspapers and social media plays a pivotal role in raising awareness, shaping attitudes, and influencing policy. This paper examines the strategies employed, their outcomes, and prospects for impact improvement.

This paper critically assesses the role of mass media in combating environmental degradation in Nigeria. It seeks to evaluate how the media raises public awareness, influences behavior, promotes environmental literacy, and advocates for sustainable practices. It also explores the challenges limiting the media's effectiveness in this role and provides recommendations to strengthen its impact. The study draws on relevant literature, empirical examples, and theoretical insights particularly agenda-setting theory to examine the extent to which Nigerian media serves as a transformative force for environmental sustainability.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria is facing escalating environmental degradation, ranging from oil spills and gas flaring in the Niger Delta, to deforestation in the Middle Belt, and desertification in the North. These environmental issues not only threaten ecological balance but also undermine public health, food security, and socio-economic development. Despite the enactment of various environmental

policies and the presence of agencies such as NESREA and NOSDRA, enforcement remains weak, and public compliance is low. One of the major gaps identified in combating environmental degradation is the insufficient public awareness and lack of citizen engagement in environmental protection efforts areas where mass media is expected to play a crucial role. While the mass media has the potential to shape public perception, influence environmental behavior, and hold institutions accountable, it has not fully maximized this role in Nigeria. Coverage of environmental issues is often inconsistent, under-prioritized, or presented without depth and continuity. Most media outlets focus extensively on politics, sports, and entertainment, leaving environmental content marginalized. Moreover, a significant number of Nigerian journalists lack the training and resources to carry out investigative environmental reporting, while media ownership and political interests often influence editorial direction, limiting critical reporting on powerful polluters or negligent agencies. The limited capacity of the mass media to fulfill its environmental communication role undermines efforts toward achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and environmental justice in Nigeria. The absence of strategic collaboration between media, environmental experts, and policy institutions also weakens the flow of accurate and impactful information to the public. This situation calls for a critical assessment of the role of the Nigerian media in environmental protection, the challenges it faces, and how it can be repositioned as an effective actor in the fight against environmental degradation.

Aim and Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically assess the role of mass media in addressing and combating environmental degradation in Nigeria, with a view to understanding its effectiveness, limitations, and potential for enhancing environmental sustainability and public awareness.

Objectives of the study include;

- i. To examine the extent and nature of media coverage of environmental issues in Nigeria.
- ii. To assess the effectiveness of mass media in raising public awareness and influencing environmental behavior.
- iii. To identify the challenges faced by media organizations and journalists in environmental reporting.
- iv. To explore the role of digital and social media platforms in promoting environmental advocacy.
- v. To recommend strategies for strengthening the role of the media in combating environmental degradation and promoting sustainable environmental practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media and Environmental Awareness

Mass media plays a vital role in shaping public perception and enhancing awareness of environmental issues. Through radio, television, newspapers, and online platforms, media outlets can disseminate crucial information about climate change, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and disaster risk reduction. In Nigeria, media campaigns on issues such as flooding in Lagos, oil pollution in the Niger Delta, and plastic waste in urban centers have brought national attention to previously overlooked problems. By simplifying complex scientific and policy-related topics, the media serves as a bridge between experts, policymakers, and the general public, helping individuals understand their role in sustainable environmental management.

The mass media plays a central role in shaping public understanding of environmental issues and mobilizing community responses. According to McQuail (2010), mass media serves as an essential link between scientific knowledge and public perception, simplifying complex environmental phenomena for broader comprehension. In Nigeria, Akinfeleye (2018) explained that the media has been used to disseminate environmental information through various platforms such as radio, television, newspapers, and increasingly, social media. Radio, in particular, has been effective in rural areas due to its affordability and accessibility. However, Egunjobi and Adebayo (2019) argued that the volume and quality of environmental reporting in Nigerian media remain insufficient, with more focus placed on political and entertainment news.

However, despite this potential, the actual influence of media on environmental awareness is inconsistent. Many Nigerians remain unaware or unconcerned about critical environmental threats due to inconsistent coverage and the prioritization of political, social, and entertainment content. A study by Ojebuyi and Edeki (2020) revealed that only a small percentage of daily media content in Nigeria is dedicated to environmental issues, and when covered, the framing is often reactive rather than preventive. As a result, environmental communication in Nigeria must be improved in depth, frequency, and local relevance to foster real awareness and behavioral change.

Agenda-Setting Theory and Environmental Framing

Agenda-setting theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), suggests that the media doesn't tell people what to think, but what to think about. This theoretical framework is useful in understanding how media framing can influence environmental policy and public concern. Media reports that highlight environmental degradation such as oil spills in the Niger Delta or flooding in Lagos can elevate these issues in national discourse and put pressure on policymakers. Yet, Okorie and Oyedepo (2020) point out that in Nigeria, environmental stories are often episodic rather than thematic, lacking continuity and contextual analysis. This gap weakens the media's ability to keep environmental issues in the public eye and to sustain pressure on relevant

institutions. However, framing how media reports are structured affects public perception and response. For instance, if flooding is consistently framed as a natural disaster rather than a consequence of poor urban planning or climate change, audiences may overlook human accountability. In Nigeria, environmental stories are often framed episodically, focusing on events rather than trends, and rarely include scientific analysis or solutions. This limits public understanding and weakens long-term engagement. Therefore, Nigerian media must adopt thematic framing that explores systemic causes, responsibilities, and pathways for environmental recovery and sustainability.

Challenges in Environmental Journalism

Environmental journalism in Nigeria faces numerous obstacles that hinder its effectiveness and depth. Ojebuyi and Edeki (2020) corroborated that despite its strategic position, environmental journalism in Nigeria faces multiple challenges. These include inadequate specialization among journalists, lack of access to scientific data, editorial interference, and poor funding for investigative reporting. One of the most significant challenges is the lack of specialization and training. Most journalists covering environmental issues do so without any background in environmental science or sustainability. This often results in superficial reporting, misinformation, or oversimplification of critical issues. Additionally, environmental stories require investigative effort, long travel, and interaction with remote communities all of which demand resources that many newsrooms lack.

Another challenge is editorial censorship and political influence. Environmental degradation often implicates powerful corporations and government agencies, especially in cases like oil pollution, deforestation, or unregulated mining. Journalists who attempt to expose such issues may face backlash, pressure, or censorship. Moreover, environmental reporting is not commercially attractive; hence, media executives tend to allocate more resources to politically charged or sensational stories. The absence of institutional support, safety mechanisms, and investigative funding continues to hinder the growth of robust environmental journalism in the country. Many journalists rely on press releases from government agencies rather than conducting in-depth environmental reporting. Media owners, often with political or corporate affiliations, may discourage coverage that could expose environmental violations by their associates, Maidunoma and Falmatami (2018) highlights that this limitation weakens the watchdog role of the media, in environmental Journalism.

The Rise of Digital Media and Environmental Advocacy

The advent of digital media has revolutionized environmental advocacy in Nigeria. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become powerful tools for spreading environmental messages, organizing campaigns, and mobilizing communities. Activist movements like Let's Do It Nigeria and SustuVibes have successfully used digital

platforms to engage young Nigerians in climate action, waste cleanup drives, and tree planting initiatives. These platforms allow for real-time updates, visual storytelling, and viral campaigns that can reach thousands of people within hours.

Digital media also enables citizen journalism, where ordinary individuals report on environmental violations and disasters in their communities. This has increased transparency and public pressure on regulators and polluters. However, the digital divide remains a concern, as rural populations and underserved communities may lack access to internet and smartphones, limiting their participation. Furthermore, misinformation, lack of verification, and low media literacy pose challenges to the credibility and impact of digital advocacy. Nevertheless, the growing influence of digital media presents a valuable opportunity to complement traditional journalism and democratize environmental communication across Nigeria.

Digital platforms and social media are emerging as powerful tools for environmental advocacy. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are being used by environmental NGOs, youth groups, and individual activists to document environmental violations, raise awareness, and mobilize action (Adekunle, 2021). Citizen journalism has also played a role in spotlighting localized environmental crises that are overlooked by mainstream media. However, digital media is not without challenges, including misinformation, low data literacy, and unequal internet access, particularly in rural areas. Still, the potential of digital media in democratizing environmental information and amplifying marginalized voices remains significant (UNEP, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques to critically assess the role of mass media in combating environmental degradation in Nigeria. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to media practitioners, environmental experts, and members of the general public across urban centers such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kaduna. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, with a response rate of 85%. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected journalists from prominent media houses (e.g., PRTVC, Standard, and Rhythm FM), as well as with officers of environmental regulatory bodies such as NESREA. This allowed for triangulation of perspectives and enriched the validity of findings.

Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, media reports, policy documents, and environmental agency publications. Content analysis was also conducted on selected news reports and media programs aired between 2020 and 2024 to examine the nature and frequency of environmental coverage. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean scores) via SPSS software, while qualitative data from interviews and content analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The combination of

these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of how Nigerian mass media engages with environmental issues, the challenges encountered, and the implications for sustainable environmental governance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Extent and Nature of Media Coverage of Environmental Issues

Findings:

Findings from the content analysis of selected newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television programs between 2020 and 2024 reveal that environmental issues receive relatively low coverage compared to politics, sports, and entertainment. For example, only 8% of front-page news items in national dailies such as *The Guardian* and *Punch* were focused on environmental topics, and most were event-based rather than investigative or analytical. Furthermore, broadcast content on environmental matters was often short, lacking continuity, and usually aired during off-peak hours. These findings support prior studies by Egunjobi and Adebayo (2019) that argued that Nigerian media tend to underreport environmental crises or treat them superficially.

Discussion

This lack of consistent and prioritized environmental reporting limits the public's understanding of ongoing degradation such as deforestation, erosion, oil spills, and urban pollution. It also affects the public's sense of urgency and responsibility, which are essential for citizen engagement. In contrast, special environmental programs that aired on stations like Channels TV and Radio Nigeria were found to be more in-depth, suggesting that where commitment exists, media can be an effective tool for environmental education.

Effectiveness of Mass Media in Raising Awareness and Influencing Behavior

Finding:

Survey data from 170 respondents revealed that 62% of the general public had learned about environmental issues such as flooding, waste pollution, and oil spills through mass media channels. Radio and social media were cited as the most accessible sources, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas. However, only 34% of respondents felt that media coverage had changed their behavior regarding waste disposal or resource conservation, indicating a gap between awareness and action.

Discussion:

This finding aligns with McQuail's (2010) communication theory which posits that while media can shape perception, additional factors such as cultural values, education level, and policy incentives influence behavior change. Therefore, for media messaging to translate into

behavioral shifts, it must be reinforced by community engagement, school-based education, and regulatory enforcement.

Challenges Faced by Media Organizations in Environmental Reporting

Findings

In-depth interviews with 12 journalists across 6 media houses revealed several recurring challenges. Chief among them were lack of specialized training in environmental journalism, editorial bias, fear of political and corporate backlash, and limited funding for investigative reporting. One journalist noted:

“We rarely get funds to travel to remote polluted areas, and when we do, our stories often get watered down by editors due to political sensitivity.”

Discussion

These structural constraints echo previous findings by Ojebuyi and Edeki (2020), who emphasized the institutional and commercial limitations of environmental journalism in Nigeria. Without newsroom autonomy and investment in investigative capacity, the media’s role as an environmental watchdog is severely compromised.

Role of Digital and Social Media in Environmental Advocacy

Findings

Despite the shortcomings of traditional media, digital platforms have emerged as important arenas for environmental advocacy. Analysis of trending environmental hashtags (#SayNoToOilSpill, #StopPlasticPollution) on Twitter between 2022 and 2024 showed significant engagement, especially among youth and urban populations. NGOs like Green Alliance Nigeria and Youth4Nature have used YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook to disseminate educational videos, organize clean-up campaigns, and petition government agencies.

Discussion

However, unequal access to digital platforms, misinformation, and lack of regulatory oversight pose challenges. While digital media can democratize environmental discourse, it must be integrated into a broader framework that includes traditional media, civic education, and policy interventions for maximal impact (UNEP, 2021).

Recommendations for Strengthening Media Role in Environmental Sustainability

Findings

The study found strong public and professional support for media reforms to enhance environmental reporting. Respondents recommended the establishment of environmental desks in all major media houses, government and donor support for training programs in environmental journalism, and collaborative frameworks between media, academia, and civil society.

Discussion

Discussion suggests that with improved institutional support, increased editorial independence, and technological investment, the Nigerian media can transition from passive reportage to proactive advocacy. This transformation is crucial in light of Nigeria's increasing vulnerability to climate change and the urgency of meeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study critically examined the role of mass media in combating environmental degradation in Nigeria, drawing insights from content analysis, surveys, and interviews with media practitioners and members of the public. The findings reveal that while the media has made important contributions to raising awareness on environmental issues such as pollution, deforestation, flooding, and climate change, its effectiveness remains hindered by numerous structural, institutional, and societal challenges. Traditional media; newspapers, radio, and television have often relegated environmental news to secondary status, favoring political, entertainment, and sports content. When environmental issues are reported, they are often episodic, shallow, or reactionary, lacking the depth, follow-up, and contextual framing required to influence behavior or policy. Moreover, despite the proliferation of digital and social media platforms that have enhanced environmental advocacy, their reach is largely urban-centered, leaving rural and underserved communities behind. The study also reveals that while the media has potential as a tool for environmental protection, its impact is significantly diluted by lack of specialized training for journalists, editorial censorship, poor funding for investigative journalism, and weak partnerships with environmental stakeholders. There is a clear need for a reimagined media landscape one that integrates traditional and digital platforms, ensures professional capacity development, and positions the media as a vital partner in environmental governance.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and existing literature, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the role of mass media in combating environmental degradation in Nigeria:

- i. **Strengthen Environmental Journalism Capacity:** Media houses should establish dedicated environmental desks staffed by trained reporters with expertise in ecological, scientific, and sustainability issues. Journalists should be supported through training workshops, fellowships, and scholarships in environmental journalism, supported by government agencies, international donors, and NGOs.
- ii. **Promote Investigative and Community-Based Reporting:** Encourage long-form investigative journalism that holds polluters and government agencies accountable. Environmental stories should be localized and presented in Nigerian languages to reach grassroots communities and make environmental issues more relatable.
- iii. **Foster Media–Policy Synergy:** Government institutions such as NESREA, the Federal Ministry of Environment, and state environmental agencies should partner with media organizations to provide access to credible data, early warnings, and expert opinions. Establishment of media environment task forces can facilitate regular dialogue between media professionals and environmental regulators.
- iv. **Leverage the Power of Social and Digital Media:** Environmental NGOs, citizen activists, and government agencies should continue to harness digital platforms (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube) to raise awareness, coordinate campaigns, and counter misinformation. Improve access to digital infrastructure in rural areas to bridge the urban rural gap in environmental communication.
- v. **Provide Institutional and Financial Support:** Government and donor organizations should create grant schemes and funding pools to support investigative environmental journalism, especially in underserved regions. Regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should mandate environmental programming as part of broadcast licensing requirements for public service media.
- vi. **Encourage Civic Environmental Education:** Media content should be aligned with school curricula, public campaigns, and community outreach to reinforce environmental education. Religious institutions, community radio, and cultural festivals can be leveraged as complementary platforms for environmental messaging.

With these reforms, Nigeria’s mass media can transition from being a passive conduit of environmental information to a proactive agent of environmental protection, advocacy, and policy transformation. The environmental future of Nigeria depends not only on laws and institutions but on how informed and engaged its citizens are—and the media is pivotal to making that happen.

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