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## EXPERTS AS SOURCES IN REPORTED AGRICULTURAL ARTICLES IN NIGERIAN DAILIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Agricultural stories are routinely reported in daily newspapers in Nigeria. Few studies have however provided empirical evidence that experts were contacted for comments in reported agricultural stories. In this study, four major Nigerian daily newspapers were content analysed to determine if experts were contacted for comments in the coverage of agricultural stories over a five-year time frame -from January 1 through December 31, 2004. Findings reveal a continuous coverage of agricultural stories with a majority (25%) reported in 2001. Coverage of agricultural stories was highest (31.6%) in the Guardian newspaper. The study identified that expert comments were relied upon by all daily newspapers for all reported agricultural stories within the time frame of the study. Although, fluctuations were observed, findings suggest increase in use of experts comments in reported agricultural stories, as all the newspapers routinely contacted experts for comments in all the years investigated. Overall, it is suggested that Nigerian daily newspapers sustain this trend, and increase the frequency of their agricultural contents.*

**Key words:** Experts, Agricultural stories, Newspapers, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Reaching the farming audience with relevant information increases their chance of making informed decision about their agricultural practices. While newspapers coverage offer a wide range of agricultural information to farmers in areas of economy, health and food safety innovation in animal science and crop production, the media has also

been identified as the most likely source of information for lay consumers, food producers and processors during incidences of epidemics relating to agricultural products (Amanda, Eubanks & Telg, 2005)

Too often, the agricultural content of newspapers continues to generate concerns among agricultural communicators. A variety of studies have reported the general nature of agricultural content of newspapers. In a content study of Brazilian daily newspapers, Fett (1972) reported a large amount of agricultural stories with little agricultural relevance to farmers. Similarly Olowu (1990) observed that Nigerian daily newspapers focused more on stories with revenue generating content than those with agricultural subject matter. He thus suggested that these newspapers should serve as catalyst for accelerating and sustaining innovation campaign and better ways of performing agricultural operations. Also studies have indicated that editors not only perceived agricultural topics as 'water quality' (Sitton, Terry, Cartmell, & Keys, 2004), but found them to use more opinion than facts when reporting on issues particularly when it relates to agriculture.

However, current trend shows that newspapers use expert comments more now than in the past for coverage. Central to this trend is the reliance of modern societies on expert knowledge (Bell, 1991; Brzezinski, 1970; & Lane, 1966,). Giddens (1990) explained that modern society is highly dependent on expert system not just for solving problems, but also for understanding modern society itself. A study of Danish daily newspapers revealed a dramatic and accelerating seven-fold increase in the number of stories referring to researchers (Christiansen, Lise and Erik, 2003). Christiansen *et al* (2003) thus argued that, if this concept is correct, then journalists would rely more on experts for information and to interpret daily occurrences. They reported accelerating increase in stories referring to researchers in their study of Danish newspapers. Furthermore, Agbamu (2006) identifies that news coverage is currently consumer friendly because the print media recognizes its role to influence the practices and attitudes of news consumers. Christiansen *et al* (2003) also observed that the news media, which hitherto, focused on important personalities, now address the

needs of consumers, rather than those of the sender of news messages and programming.

Literature is replete with evidence of coverage of agriculture related issues. Earlier studies of the coverage of agricultural stories in daily newspapers focused on the reportage of agricultural news (Olowu, 1990), and Coverage of women's agricultural activities (Fawole & Olowu, 1997), to mention a few. Few studies, however, have provided empirical evidence concerning possible changes over time in the use of expert comments in the coverage of agricultural stories in Nigerian daily newspapers. Although agriculture significantly affects the life of every individual, it continues to be a topic neglected in the mass media (Stringer and Thomson, 1999). The interest of this study is to investigate what changes there are in the use of expert sources in reportage of agricultural news from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2004.

In line with the interest of this study, the following research questions (RQ) were developed to investigate the use of experts' comments in reported agricultural stories in selected Nigeria daily newspapers.

1. What is the frequency of reported agricultural stories selected newspapers within the time frame of the study?
2. Were expert sources cited in reported agricultural news articles selected newspapers?
3. Did the use of experts' sources in reported agricultural stories increased within the time frame of the study?

### Methods

The time frame of the study was from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2004. Because public daily newspapers are moribund, four newspapers (The Punch, Nigerian Tribune, Guardian and Vanguard) were randomly chosen from amongst the largest daily newspapers based on percentage readership in Nigeria (Media Reach OMD Nigeria, 2005). The study adopted the sampling technique described by Amanda, Eubanks, & Telg (2005) in a similar content study. This involved the identification of all agricultural stories in the selected newspapers, which yielded approximately 183 articles (Guardian 58, Nigerian Tribune 56, Punch 37 and Vanguard 32). Due to the small amount of coverage within the time

frame chosen for the study, all the agricultural articles from the selected newspapers were analyzed for this study.

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual article in which one or more experts, and institutions represented were specified by name. Each story was coded for date, headline, and expert/experts mentioned in reported stories. To determine increase in agricultural stories referring to experts within the time frame of the study, all stories with expert comments were noted for each year in all newspapers separately. The stories were examined by two researchers using code sheets, based on the research questions developed for the study.

Inter-coder reliability test was conducted using Holsti (1969) reliability formula. The reliability coefficients obtained were 0.86 (The Punch), 0.96 (The Guardian), 0.89 (Nigerian Tribune) and 0.79 (The Vanguard). These values established acceptable reliability levels. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages are presented and discussed.

### Results and Discussion

RQ 1: What is the frequency of reported agricultural stories selected newspapers within the time frame of the study?

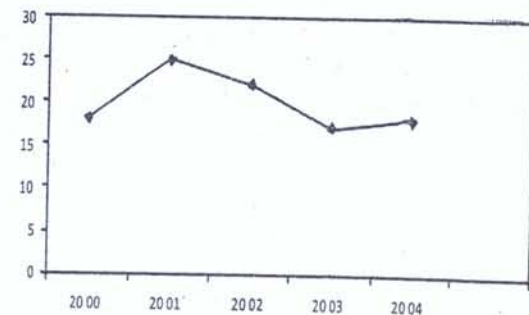


Figure1. Reported agricultural news articles selected newspapers 2000-2004.

The four newspapers content analyzed for this study produced 183 agricultural news articles. Reportage of agricultural stories was highest

in 2001 (25%) and dropped slightly (22%) in the year 2002. The frequency of agricultural stories that were reported for the other years are 2004(18.0%), 2000(18.0%) and 2003(17.0%) (Figure1). Previous findings indicate reported only 3% increase in the reportage of agricultural stories in Nigerian daily newspapers over a 21 year period (Fawole and Olowu ,1997).

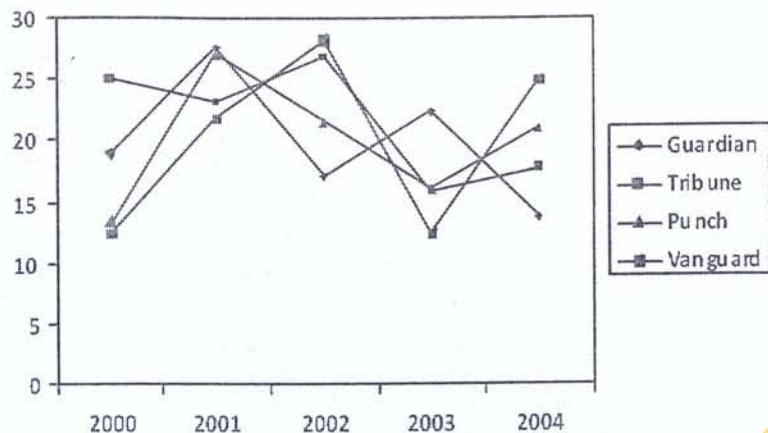


Figure 2. Reportage of agricultural news articles by newspaper.

The results show variations exist in the reportage of agricultural news articles amongst selected newspapers (Figure 2). The Tribune reported more agricultural news in 2000, 2002 and 2004, and The Guardian in 2001 and 2003. The Vanguard reported the least agricultural news articles within the time frame of the study. Overall, The Guardian newspaper reported more (31.6%) agricultural news articles than The Tribune (30.6%), The Punch (20.2%) and The Vanguard (17.5%) newspapers. The agricultural news content in these newspapers is considered generally and confirms Stringer and Thomson (1999) finding that the mass media continues to neglect agricultural issues, though it continues to significantly affect the life of every individual.

RQ 2: Were expert sources cited in reported agricultural news articles selected newspapers?

Table1. Frequency distribution of experts sources cited in reported agricultural stories

Experts contacted for comments	Frequency
Agricultural scientists	81(71.68%)
Government officials	31(50.00%)
Farmers	21(18.55%)
Socials scientists	19(30.65%)
Veterinary personnel	11(9.77%)
Political leaders	10(16.13%)
Health officials	2(3.22%)

Table 2 presents expert sources cited in reported agricultural stories. Experts contacted for comments included agriculturist (71.68%), government officials (50.0%), social scientists (30.65%), farmers (18.55%), political leaders (16.13%), veterinary personnel (9.77%), and health providers (3.22%). Giddens (1990) reported that the society is depending on the experts' knowledge for problem solving and as a basis for informed decision. The trend he said further influenced journalists to seek experts to interpret the issues in the modern society and is affecting how news coverage and reportage are done by the journalists. Also Haygood, Hagins, Akers & Keith (2002) stated that, reporters are aware of their bias statements which may encourage them to include more factual and verifiable statements. They further stated that, journalists usually acquire more literacy along agricultural news coverage and this enables them to seek for authentic sources for their news articles and to avoid writing controversial news.

RQ3: Did the use of experts' sources in reported agricultural stories increased within the time frame of the study?

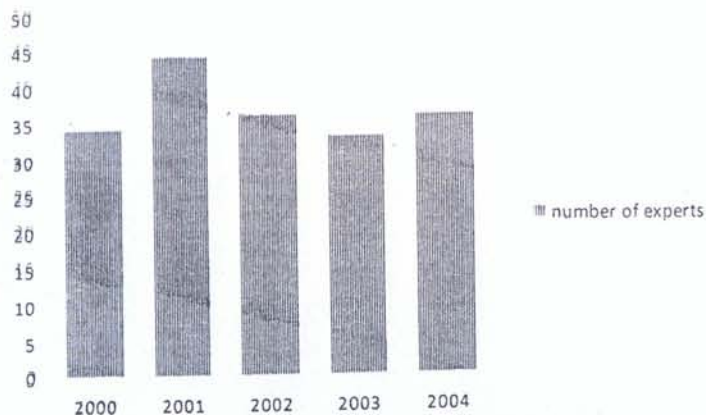


Figure 3. Stories with experts comments from 2000-2004.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of agricultural stories referring to experts sources during the time frame of the study. Agricultural stories referring to experts were more in 2001 (24.04%) than any other year. Stories referring to experts in the other years in descending order are 2002 (19.7%), 2004 (19.6%) 2004 (18.5%) and 2003 (18.04%). However, it is noteworthy, that all reported agricultural stories (183) within the time frame (2000-2004) of the study referred to experts – an indication of increasing dependence on expert sources for reporting agricultural news by Nigerian daily newspapers. Christiansen et al (2003), in a previous study reported dramatic and accelerating rise in number of articles referring to experts in Danish newspapers in a similar study. This trend, they claimed may not be unrelated to attempts by newspapers to increase their credibility, reduce their low level of public trust, and increased competition among the print media to develop audience friendly news coverage.

### Summary and Conclusion

This study has analysed the agricultural news coverage and use of expert comments use reported stories in Nigerian daily newspapers from January 1, 2000 through December 31, 2004. The main purpose was to determine whether if newspapers contacted experts for their comments in the reportage of agricultural stories. Content analysis technique was to collect data from the manifest content of selected daily newspapers. It was found that agricultural stories were continuously reported in the newspapers investigated but fluctuated within the period studied. The frequency of reportage of agricultural stories in Guardian newspaper was higher than that of other newspapers investigated. It is evident from the emerging trend that Nigerian daily newspapers contacted experts to obtain comments in the of coverage agricultural stories, as all stories cited expert sources.

Information is an important input in agricultural development. Though, Nigerian daily newspapers seem to have contacted experts for comments in coverage of agricultural stories within the period investigated, it is suggested that these newspapers sustain this trend and increase their agricultural contents.

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