

The Role of the *Zambian Media* in Public Environmental Awareness and Education

by

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ABSTRACT

Successful environmental communication is achieved through a well informed public as it will be better equipped and positioned to tackle environmental challenges of the 21st Century. A well informed public is partly a result of the role the media plays in disseminating information. Hence the media play a strategic role in raising public environmental awareness, dissemination of environmental information and inspiring environmental action. This study looked at the role of the *Zambian media* in public environmental awareness and education.

The study aimed at finding out the role of the *Zambian media* in public environmental awareness and education. The study had three objectives:

1. to find out how many environmental journalists there were in selected media organisations;
2. to determine the content of environmental information published by the selected media; and
3. to find out the contribution of environmental journalism to the lives of ordinary people in the selected *Zambian urban, peri-urban, and rural areas*.

The study used qualitative and quantitative research designs and also a survey research technique. The research analysed environmental contents of three prominent daily newspapers in *Zambia* namely *The Post*, *Zambia Daily Mail* and *Times of Zambia*. The study also captured views and experiences of respondents from which qualitative and quantitative data was obtained. Purposive and random sampling were used to select respondents from the three dailies and from a cross section of the *Zambian society*. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel were used to process field data.

To collect primary data, daily publications in three selected months of May, June and July 2010 by the three newspaper companies were analysed to determine the topics and frequency of environmental news coverage. Questionnaires were administered to editors and journalists from the three daily newspapers and also a cross section of the *Zambian society*.

The findings of the research indicated that the people tasked with the collection and publication of environmental information were not trained in environmental matters hence their inability to successfully communicate environmental information in an interesting and educative manner. More space was dedicated to the printing of political and sports news compared to environmental information which was deemed unsellable and bad for business.

The study further found out that much of the space allocated to environmental coverage was dedicated to pollution. Further, most of the environmental events covered were based in urban areas and were noticed when accompanied by a prominent person in society or the government of the day. The study also found out that the public lacked sensitisation in environmental matters resulting in the inability of the people to be environmentally responsible either individually or at community level.

The study recommended the following:

1. In-service media personnel need to be trained through refresher courses in environmental matters.
2. Environmental programmes to be designed in all institutions of higher learning that will train journalists who will tackle and cover environmental issues ably, as is the case in developed countries; and recommends that
3. The media needs to place value on environmental coverage by carrying out in-depth analyses and research on the issues and events they publish.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Environmental sustainability is an increasingly urgent need for humankind in the world today. In the last forty years, the awareness of human impact on the earth has grown to the point where environmental issues are now at the centre of public discourse (De Beer and Merril, 2004). Today, human beings exert themselves to care about environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity and water scarcity; issues that were unheard of few decades ago (Lester and Hutchins, 2009).

Shortly after the famous Rio Summit in Brazil in 1992, participating journalists from Zambia came back with a passion and more energy to begin reporting on the environment and as a result, terms such as sustainable development became household phrases (UNEP, 2006). This created a new chapter in environmental journalism in the country as reporting on the environment was no longer looked at as something peripheral to media issues that required coverage. This enthusiasm unfortunately faded as years passed by. Today, most of the columns and air space that were dedicated to environmental reporting have since vanished from the mainstream media. Since then, the media in the aspect of environmental journalism has not done enough to facilitate public environmental awareness and the community's active participation in environmental matters. This is evident through negligible media coverage of environmental issues affecting the community. Despite the minimal media coverage of environmental issues in Zambia, the environment is becoming a huge issue internationally, with climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, sustainable development, droughts, floods, water shortages and scarcity gaining the most publicity (Frome, 1998). With the dawn of the environmental era, there is need for informed decision-making on issues facing the environment mentioned above (UNEP, 2006).

In the 21st Century, environmental information is cardinal for responsible actions to take place by the community. In this regard, every organisation and institution needs to employ and have an environmental journalist because Environmental journalism

has become an imperative subject in public awareness of the environment because it is providing the public with timely, accurate and unbiased information (Hattingh, Lotz-Sisitka and O'Donogue, 2002). Further, it will enable the public to understand the nexus between the environment, media and education for the environment (UNEP, 2006). Unfortunately, this is not the case with Zambia as the existing media organisations have more journalists in other fields but not specifically in environmental journalism.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Environmental Journalism has a critical role and responsibility of informing and educating the public about environmental problems and their adverse impact on humans and the environment. However, Environmental Journalism as a practice is more pronounced in developed countries than in developing countries. In Zambia, the media had in a small way especially after the famous Rio Summit tried to report on the environment as a way of informing, entertaining and educating people. However, there was no deliberate and sustained commitment from the media of pushing the agenda of public environmental awareness, education and action as compared to what should be implemented on the ground. This situation creates a problem in that the citizenry remains ill-informed and poorly informed about environmental issues relevant to their daily living and, in so doing, contributing unwittingly to environmental deterioration.

Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The study mainly used description (qualitative) as research questions were used in the place of hypotheses as some of the views from the respondents were subjective. However, quantitative evaluations were also used because some of the data that was collected required quantification for easy analysis and interpretation. This was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Microsoft Excel was also used in the quantitative analysis of the newspapers content and frequency analysis data. Qualitative research design was used to explore attitudes, behaviour, experiences and attempts to get in-depth opinions from respondents (Sim and Wright, 2000). Quantitative research design was used to generate statistical data which makes it easy to interpret and understand large amounts of data.

Target Population

There were two target populations for the study. The first target were three daily explicit newspapers. *The Post*, *Times of Zambia* and *the Zambia Daily Mail* (that is, three months by three daily publications). The second target population was a total of 250 respondents that were distributed as follows: 65 journalists from the three selected daily newspapers, 150 people from the selected urban (Lusaka), Peri-Urban (Mazabuka) and rural (Chongwe) areas of Zambia, and 35 editors from the three daily newspapers in question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data was analysed using different themes that emerged during the collection of field and secondary data. Quantitative data on the other hand was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while the newspaper content review was analysed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the newspaper analysis of environmental news coverage and frequency, the research findings indicate that in all the three dailies in question, most of the daily publications did not carry any environmental article as was observed from the number of days in which no environmental article was printed, that is, on a scale of 140 days, 123 days did not carry any environmental article at all. However, for those daily publications that carried environmental articles, the articles that were popular were those on mining, human and environmental health, water and sanitation and waste management.

It is, however, worth noting that if the environmental problems were presented individually, the percentages would be much lower than they actually are presented when tabulated and 5 presented individually, the articles that carry more tallies are on wildlife, mostly from *The Post* newspaper due to the wildlife columns published weekly. On the other hand, articles about air, water and land pollution together with articles about a number of cross-cutting environmental issues were only covered once during the three months period of study.

For the articles on cultural heritage preservation, it is worth noting that they may have appeared more frequently than they would have, for instance, if the study was carried out during the rainy season due to the reason that the three months of study (May, June and July) were among the months in which the country celebrates its cultural heritage through various cultural ceremonies recognised by various ethnic groups across the country. This period usually lasts from around February to about early November every year when people get busy with farming activities after the onset of the rainy season. The newspaper analysis was conducted in the months of May, June and July 2010.

For the *Times of Zambia* and the *Zambia Daily Mail*, most of the environmental articles covered were associated with the people in the limelight such as politicians and those working for the government of the day. For *The Post* newspaper, the observation was that there was space dedicated to a weekly environmental article that covered issues related to wildlife and fauna while some issues were rarely paid attention to. This is not supposed to be the case as there is need for a balanced environmental coverage of issues by any daily publication. This should be so because the public need to learn and know about the environmental issues surrounding them and their country at large.

Another finding from the analysis of the three newspapers in question was that each paper somehow managed to carry an environmental article on a weekly basis although

the numbers varied from one article per week to about five. In most instances, there would be a number of environmental articles in a given week in the papers if a significant environmental day was recognised and attended by prominent people and politicians in society. A similar observation was that there were only a few environmental articles that were carried out by the three dailies which were not associated with prominent people, politicians and the government of the day.

Overall, the number of environmental articles in all the three dailies over the three months period of study ranged from one to thirty-five only. This shows that in any of the three given months of study, there was very minimal coverage of environmental issues in the selected daily newspapers. The findings of the research also showed that people tasked with the collection and publication of environmental information were not trained in the area of environmental journalism and, hence their inability to successfully communicate environmental information in an interesting and educative manner. While journalists lacked interest and motivation in the collection of environmental information, editors dedicated more space to the printing of political and sports news compared to environmental information which was deemed unsellable and bad for business. This simply means that there are no trained environmental journalists in the country.

The study also found out that much of the space allocated to environmental coverage was dedicated to pollution; and that among all the environmental problems experienced and known in the country, respondents considered pollution to be the major environmental problem which the country faces. According to the respondents, 52 per cent of all environmental problems had to do with pollution, 16 per cent with all environmental problems combined, 13 per cent with climate change, and floods and droughts respectively while 6 per cent covered land degradation.

Besides pollution, the editors gave more priority to environmental news or stories that had to do with deforestation as far as the three dailies were concerned. About 65 per cent was given to issues that had to do with deforestation while only 35 per cent was shared amongst the remaining environmental problems. The reason advanced for the concentration on deforestation was that the indiscriminate cutting of trees for charcoal production was so much evident if one checked the areas next to urban areas which had second growth trees or shrubs and the number of bags of charcoal in circulation or by the road sides as one travelled from one place to another.

Furthermore, the research also found that most of the environmental events covered were seasonal, such as floods and droughts. These environmental events covered were based in urban areas and that these were covered when accompanied by a prominent person in society or the government of the day.

With regard to reading newspapers, the data obtained in the study indicated that 40 per cent of the respondents (a cross section of society) read newspapers once in a while, 38 per cent on a daily basis, 20 per cent twice a week and 2 per cent once a month. This means that on average, people do actually read newspapers despite the poor reading culture. This shows that people are quite up-to-date with current affairs including environmental news.

The findings further indicated that most people read politics more than any other information in the newspapers. Of all the respondents, 44 per cent only read politics or political news, 29 per cent read everything, 16 per cent read sports news, 6 per cent read business news while 5 per cent read adverts or commercials. This means that people are not oriented towards environmental stories or information hence those that read everything, read even environmental information for the sake of reading the newspapers.

The study also revealed that the public lacked sensitisation in environmental matters resulting in their inability to be environmentally responsible either individually or at community level. Some respondents (59%) were not even aware of environmental problems surrounding their communities let alone major environmental issues in the country. Generally, people longed to read more and more environmental news in the three daily newspapers and not politics which made daily front page headlines or sports news which made back page headlines every day.

Discussion of Research Findings

From the newspaper analysis of environmental news coverage, it is aparent that most of the environmental articles that were carried by the three dailies lacked credibility as most articles were written as a follow-up to an event attended by politicians or were statements made at an event by the same people in the limelight. This means that the articles were shallow and did not give the public all the necessary information for them to know and act responsibly for their own as well as for environmental health. Consequently, most environmental articles published by the three dailies lacked an in-depth content presentation of the facts in question. Moreover, due to lack of proper understanding and credible sources of the environmental issues at hand, most articles were written using a language that was too technical, a language that was probably quite difficult for the general public (an average literate person) to understand.

The study established that there is need for environmental reporters to carry out detailed research before presenting the information to the public. There is also need for a variety of environmental issues and problems affecting the country to be published in the three daily publications. This simply points to the urgent need for journalists especially those that are tasked with environmental reporting to learn more about environmental issues and problems in order to enhance their interest and understanding of these issues. This will enhance environmental awareness and ultimately education so that the public can make informed environmental decisions in their daily exploitation of environmental resources. The observation that environmental stories and events only became visible when accompanied by the government of the day or prominent people in society meant that most politicians talked and commented on environmental issues which they did not fully understand; or were not very conversant with the same issues as they were not environmentalists. This, consequently, resulted in the newspapers giving the public sub-standard information. To the papers in question, however, the story was considered very important simply because it had something to do with a politician or the ruling government. However, for accurate and beneficial environmental reporting, this is not supposed to be the case.

As covered in the research findings, the people tasked with the collection and publication of environmental information were not trained in the area of environmental journalism hence their inability to successfully communicate environmental information in an interesting and educative manner. While journalists lacked interest and motivation in the collection of environmental information, editors dedicated more space to the printing of political and sports news compared to environmental information which was deemed unsellable and bad for business.

Most of the information that journalists collected as well as the information that editors received for editing was biased towards politics and sports leaving out environmental information. Considering the fact that the target audience for the daily publications is the general public both inside the country and beyond its borders, it was surprising that environmental information was very minimal, and without detail.

The implication is that most of the information type collected was political and sports related; meaning that most of the news that journalists found appealing was either political and or sports related. This pushed environmental information into the third place; meaning it was not much of a priority. This could be attributed to either lack of interest as mentioned above or understanding by the journalists whenever they were out in the field collecting information. What this meant is that environmental coverage was just one of those things that did not really matter much to deserve attention by the media people.

Editors have the final say in the information that is printed in all the dailies and are the ultimate authority or gate keepers on what information does or does not reach the public, however, it was evident that even when journalists did their part of collecting environmental information, the decision of whether or not the information reached the masses lay entirely in the hands of the editors. This calls for an urgent need to get editors know and understand the magnitude of environmental issues as well as the importance of prioritising environmental news coverage.

The discussion above indicates that both the newspapers content analysis and all the respondents pointed to pollution as the number one environmental problem which the country faces. Apparently, this is a blurred picture of the major environmental problems the country faces in that, as much as pollution was evident in the mining towns, there were other major environmental problems which should have been perceived and treated as such. This does not mean that the other minor environmental problems were not important and should not have been paid attention to.

Most of the pollution that the country experienced (according to the respondents and newspapers content analysis) was found on the mining towns of the Copperbelt as people's understanding of pollution generally was that it had to do with mining and related activities such as quarrying. The other reason for the consideration of pollution as the number one environmental problem the country faces was that some environmental events such as floods and droughts were seasonal as compared to pollution which was a daily phenomenon. Pollution was still the issue of in-depth research and the understanding of environmental issues by the media personnel if they were to value and report all environmental problems and issues fairly and frequently

in an educative and interesting manner. That way, the media would set the public agenda towards considering and treating all environmental problems as urgent and serious.

The lack of environmental training could probably also be responsible for the media's inadequate environmental information coverage. Trained as environmental experts, journalists would find it easy to take up any task that involved gathering environmental information despite the location and costs involved. Some reasons advanced by journalists such as logistical costs and the location of some of the environmental events were not convincing if journalists really knew the value of an environmentally informed public which has a right to know. Trained as environmental journalists, they would no longer be interested in reporting on pollution issues only as the findings indicate. Many a time, the journalists in the public (state-owned) media were not free to report on whatever was happening in the country. The reason advanced for this was that they had to write about things that would please the government of the day; and this was no other than politics. Journalists were simply not at liberty to do the right thing, which was reporting objectively on all matters especially those that had a bearing on society. If they went against their superiors, they certainly risked being demoted, fired or retired if they were quite advanced in years. For the two state-owned daily newspapers, they had lost their purpose and meaning as the media personnel had been turned into journalists of the government of the day not of the people. This comes to light by looking at the fact that much of their news coverage had to be politics in favour of the ruling party and against the major opposition parties. This scenario among major players led to negligence of publishing environmental information which the public so much needed.

From a cross section of society, it was clear that people were hungry for quality environmental news and they were tired too of what they termed 'dirty politics' making front page headlines every day. Some respondents even condemned the three daily newspapers when they mentioned that they did not read newspapers on a daily basis as they knew that only insults by opposing political parties were contained in the newspapers.

A cross section of society further revealed that people in the community longed for the media's publication of detailed and sensible information on the dangers of environmental destruction, how to take care and preserve the environment properly and, what is expected of them in the whole arrangement, that is, their roles and responsibilities in the whole environmental sustainability process. Those that knew little about the environment longed to know much through media sensitisation and more environmental education at community level.

Everyday media environmental coverage and provision of environmental news and information would over time reinforce positive behaviour change for the environment if the media took this task seriously. After all, it was the same dailies that set the public agenda of what they printed daily in their publications, meaning that they could still be major players in public environmental awareness and education. This came in light of the fact that many people were not environmentally aware and educated. Reasons advanced for this lack of awareness were low education levels and high illiteracy, lack of sensitisation especially by the media on the effects of bad environmental practices

such as deforestation. Respondents also mentioned lack of civic education as well as ignorance on environmental issues; and lack of proper environmental information flow to the general public.

Considering the reasons advanced by the respondents, it was not just the media that was at fault for the community's non-awareness of what was happening in terms of environmental matters. This could only be explained that most of the people in the country were not aware of the environmental problems which the country faced on daily basis. As much as it was the role of the media to make the public aware as well as educate them in environmental matters, other factors were also at play.

Poverty was one of the reasons that were advanced for the community's non-awareness of the environmental problems and issues surrounding them. Many people who were not aware of the environmental problems were from the rural areas. However, one did not need to travel from urban areas to rural areas in order to comprehend the levels of poverty in the lives of ordinarily Zambians. Just like many other developing countries, Zambia has not been spared from the effects of poverty. This is one of the major reasons why most people who were able to read newspapers and understand the issues contained therein would rather not spend their little money on newspapers but buy food to eat. The implication was that people were missing out on vital information whose access seemed more of a luxury than a necessity.

Whereas the media was not responsible for issues such as poverty, it was quite responsible for the lack of sensitisation of the public hence their non-awareness of the environmental problems experienced by their respective communities. The media had not reached out to the general public enough as far as environmental awareness and education was concerned. An average person was aware of what was happening in the political and sports areas but not in environmental matters. Meanwhile, it was the same three daily newspapers that educated people about politics and sports that could do the same for environmental matters which affected everyone irrespective of where they lived in the country or their socio-economic status.

Much more needs to be done by the print media especially considering the fact that unlike their electronic media counterparts in the country, the three daily newspapers in question cover and reach far in remote places. Moreover, the lifespan of information contained in the newspapers is far much longer as compared to that of the electronic media.

According to a cross section of society, the old adage 'no man is an island' still holds as much, even in the role that the media could play in fostering public environmental awareness and education. The media need to wake up and realise that trying to educate the public on matters of the environment cannot be done on their own hence the call to involve all stakeholders. After all, one never forgets what he/she sees and does, but can easily forget what they are told over time.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it is clear that there are no environmental journalists in the country. The journalists who are there are those assigned tasks of reporting on environmental issues; issues they do not understand properly. Moreover, the same journalists that are entrusted with the responsibility of reporting on the environment lack training in environmental issues and interest and motivation to pursue such interests.

The study has also reviewed that even when the journalists are assigned the task of reporting on the environment, they do it because it is out of duty; gate-keeping by the ultimate gate-keepers who are the editors of the respective dailies still keep the information from reaching the public as they find it uninteresting enough to make front page headlines and not good enough for business or profit making purposes.

In a country that is ravaged by poverty and hunger, an average person finds newspapers to be expensive. One would rather buy food than a newspaper in order to satisfy their urgent need for food instead of the quest for information. The same environment which they are supposed to protect and use sustainably is their very source of livelihood, for example, charcoal burners. This makes it difficult for such groups of people to stop the indiscriminate cutting of trees. Moreover, people have an 'I don't care' attitude towards their own surroundings hence even those that know the consequences of poor environmental management continue destroying and mismanaging their immediate environment for immediate needs.

The space given to environmental coverage is very minimal in all the three dailies under study. It is not on a daily basis as is the case in developed countries where environmental coverage has taken centre stage. In developing countries such as Zambia, environmental stories are full of jargon and technical language when covered that make it difficult for the layperson to understand let alone take interest in following up such developments in subsequent publications.

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