



Communication Strategies for Rural Engagement: A Study of Media Subjugation in Omoku, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines communication strategies for rural engagement in Omoku, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, with particular attention to the phenomenon of media subjugation and its inhibiting effects on effective community communication. Drawing on development communication theory, cultural resonance theory, and agenda-setting and framing frameworks, the study argues that rural communities in Nigeria occupy a systematically marginalised position within the national media landscape, a condition that extends beyond infrastructural deficit to encompass content, structural, and epistemological dimensions of communicative exclusion. Through a contextual analysis of Omoku's communication environment shaped by the legacies of oil extraction, inter-communal conflict, and administrative neglect, the paper demonstrates how state and commercial media institutions reproduce deficit representations of the community while excluding its residents from editorial and governance processes. Against this backdrop, the paper identifies and evaluates five strategic intervention areas: community radio as participatory infrastructure, integration of indigenous communication channels, culturally resonant content production, mobile and digital communication, and policy advocacy for regulatory reform. The study concludes that effective rural engagement requires a fundamental reorientation of communication practice, one that is participatory in design, grounded in indigenous communicative traditions, and structurally accountable to the communities it seeks to serve.

Keywords: Rural Communication, Media Subjugation, Community Radio, Cultural Resonance, Participatory Communication

Introduction

Rural communities in Nigeria have long occupied a peripheral position in the national media landscape. Despite constituting a significant proportion of the country's population, rural dwellers, including those in Omoku, a semi-urban community in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) of Rivers State, remain systematically underrepresented in media content, underserved by communication infrastructure, and largely excluded from the discourses that shape their lived realities (Daramola, 2023). This structural disadvantage has been described in communication scholarship as media subjugation: a condition in which the communicative needs, cultural expressions, and political interests of rural populations are subordinated to the priorities of dominant urban or elite media interests (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022). The concept of rural engagement in communication refers to deliberate strategies through which media institutions, development organisations, government agencies, and civil society actors seek to involve rural communities as active participants in the production, dissemination, and consumption of mediated information (Anaeto et al., 2021). Effective rural engagement is predicated not merely on the physical reach of broadcast signals or the distribution of print materials, but on the cultural relevance, linguistic accessibility, and participatory character of communication processes (Folarin, 2019). Where these conditions are absent, even the most technically sophisticated communication interventions risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Omoku presents a compelling case study for this inquiry. As a community shaped by the oil economy, inter-communal conflicts, environmental degradation, and administrative marginalisation, its residents encounter a complex and often hostile information environment (Nwachukwu & Amadi, 2020). Local radio stations, community town criers, religious institutions, and social media platforms coexist with national and international broadcast media, yet the community's communication needs remain inadequately addressed. This paper therefore poses the question: what communication strategies are most effective for rural engagement in communities such as Omoku, and how does media subjugation inhibit or distort these strategies?

Theoretical Framework

Development Communication Theory

Development communication, rooted in the works of Lerner (1958), Rogers (1962), and subsequently revised by Servaes (1999), provides the foundational paradigm through which rural communication has historically been understood. The early modernisation model posited that mass media exposure would catalyse attitude change and behavioral adoption among rural populations, facilitating economic development and social transformation (Rogers, 2003). However, this top-down diffusion model was critiqued for its cultural imperialism, its assumption of passive rural audiences, and its failure to account for structural barriers to communication access (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Participatory models of development communication, championed by scholars such as Freire (1970) and subsequently applied to media contexts by White (1994), challenged this orthodoxy by insisting that rural communities must be constituted as agents rather than objects of communication. Participatory communication therefore emphasises dialogue, horizontal information flows, and the integration of local knowledge systems into development messaging (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). It is within this participatory tradition that the most productive strategies for rural engagement in contexts such as Omoku must be theorised.

Cultural Resonance Theory

Nwosu and Ekwueme's (2022) cultural resonance theory offers a particularly relevant analytical lens for this study. The theory posits that communication messages achieve compliance and behavioural adoption only when they are structurally aligned with the cultural worldview, normative frameworks, and epistemic traditions of the target audience. In rural Nigerian communities where oral tradition, communal authority, and spiritual beliefs constitute powerful epistemic resources, campaigns that ignore or contradict these cultural logics are likely to encounter resistance, even when technically well-executed (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022). Applied to Omoku, cultural resonance theory suggests that communication strategies must engage with the community's Ogba cultural heritage, its patterns of communal decision-making, and its religious landscape in order to achieve meaningful rural engagement. Media subjugation, in this framework, constitutes not only a structural but an epistemological violence: it displaces indigenous communicative forms and imposes culturally alien messages upon communities ill-equipped to critically negotiate them (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012).

Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory illuminates how media institutions determine what issues rural communities come to regard as important. When national and state-level media consistently omit Omoku from their coverage, or frame the community exclusively in terms of insecurity and conflict, residents are denied the informational resources necessary for civic participation and self-advocacy (Igbudu & Nwosu, 2021). Entman's (1993) framing theory extends this analysis by showing how the selection and salience of particular attributes within media coverage constructs interpretive frameworks that may either empower or disempower rural audiences. Together, these theories establish that media subjugation is not merely a logistical deficit a matter of insufficient broadcast towers or inadequate newspaper distribution but a systemic condition that shapes rural communities' self-perception, political agency, and communicative capacity (Okunna, 2018).

Communication Strategies for Rural Development in Nigeria

The literature on communication strategies for rural development in Nigeria reflects several decades of theoretical debate and empirical experimentation. Okunna (2018) identifies four broad categories of strategies that have been deployed in Nigerian rural contexts: mass media campaigns, folk or traditional media, interpersonal communication, and community radio. Each strategy carries distinct advantages and limitations, and their relative effectiveness varies significantly depending on the socio-cultural characteristics of the target community.

Mass media campaigns, particularly radio broadcasts, have historically dominated governmental and NGO communication efforts in rural Nigeria (Daramola, 2023). Radio's broad geographic reach, relatively low cost of access, and oral delivery mode make it particularly suited to communities with high rates of functional illiteracy. However, as Anaeto et al. (2021) observe, the effectiveness of radio campaigns is severely attenuated when content is produced in languages or registers unfamiliar to rural audiences, or when broadcast schedules fail to account for the daily rhythms of rural life. Furthermore, the centralised production structures of most Nigerian radio stations mean that rural communities rarely participate in content creation, producing a systematic disconnect between broadcast messages and community realities. Folk and traditional media, including masquerades, town crier systems, age-grade associations, women's groups, and community festivals, have been recognised by scholars such as Ugboajah (1985) as constituting a robust indigenous communication infrastructure that predates and in many respects exceeds the penetrative capacity of modern mass media. Folarin (2019) argues that these channels carry inherent cultural authority and enjoy levels of community trust that externally produced media rarely achieve. Despite this recognition, traditional media continue to be marginalised in formal development communication planning, treated as supplementary rather than primary channels (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022). Community radio has attracted considerable scholarly and practitioner attention as a potential vehicle for participatory rural communication. Bosch (2014) documents the transformative potential of community radio in South Africa, while Omenugha and Oji (2011) demonstrate how community broadcasting, when genuinely owned and managed by local communities, can address the structural failures of state and commercial broadcasting in serving rural populations. In Nigeria, however, the regulatory environment has historically constrained the development of genuine community radio, with licensing structures favouring state and commercial operators over community-managed broadcasters (Aliagan, 2015).

Media Subjugation: Conceptual and Empirical Dimensions

The concept of media subjugation, while not always labelled as such in the Nigerian communication literature, has been theorised under several related constructs including communication exclusion (Melkote & Steeves, 2001), information poverty (Igbudu & Nwosu, 2021), and communicative marginalisation (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). At its core, media subjugation refers to a condition in which a community's communicative needs, cultural expressions, and political interests are systematically subordinated to the priorities of more powerful media actors. Empirically, media subjugation manifests along several dimensions. Content analysis studies of Nigerian broadcasting have consistently documented the disproportionate allocation of airtime to urban issues, elite perspectives, and English-language discourse at the expense of rural communities, local languages, and non-elite voices (Daramola, 2023; Nwachukwu & Amadi, 2020). Studies of media access and ownership reveal that rural communities rarely participate in broadcast governance, editorial decision-making, or media ownership structures (Aliagan, 2015). Research on audience reception indicates that rural media consumers often experience dominant media content as culturally alienating, informationally irrelevant, or politically disempowering (Igbudu & Nwosu, 2021). Nwachukwu and Amadi (2020) document the specific communication challenges of oil-producing communities in Rivers State, arguing that the dominance of corporate and governmental communication in these communities constitutes a form of media subjugation that serves economic and political interests antithetical to community welfare. Their findings are directly applicable to Omoku, where the legacies of oil extraction, ethnic conflict, and political neglect have produced an information environment characterised by disinformation, communication asymmetry, and institutional distrust.

Digital Media and Rural Communication

The proliferation of mobile telephony and internet connectivity has introduced new dimensions to the study of rural communication in Nigeria. As of 2023, mobile phone penetration in Rivers State had reached approximately 68%, creating new possibilities for digital engagement even in communities with limited traditional media access (NCC, 2023). Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter/X, have become important channels of community information-sharing in semi-urban communities such as Omoku (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022). However, scholars caution against techno-optimistic accounts that conflate digital access with communicative empowerment. Unequal access to digital infrastructure, literacy disparities, and the dominance of urban-produced digital content reproduce many of the exclusionary dynamics that characterise traditional media in rural contexts (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Moreover, the algorithmic logics of commercial social media platforms may further marginalise local rural content in favour of viral, sensationalist, or commercially sponsored material (Folarin, 2019).

Media Subjugation in Omoku, Rivers State

Socio-Political Context

Omoku is the administrative headquarters of Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) in Rivers State. The community's history is marked by significant oil exploration activity, episodes of violent inter-communal conflict, and persistent allegations of governmental neglect (Nwachukwu & Amadi, 2020). These historical conditions have produced a communication environment characterised by institutional distrust, the circulation of unverified information, and limited civic engagement with formal media institutions. Despite its economic significance as an oil-producing community, Omoku receives disproportionately limited coverage in state and national media. When coverage does occur, it tends to focus on security incidents, youth restiveness, and oil-related crises, constructing a narrow and largely negative frame of the community that fails to represent its cultural richness, economic potential, or civic aspirations (Igbudu & Nwosu, 2021). This selective and deficit-oriented framing exemplifies the agenda-setting and framing dynamics theorised by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Entman (1993).

Communication Infrastructure and Access

Omoku's communication infrastructure reflects the broader patterns of media inequity that characterise rural Rivers State. State-owned broadcast media Rivers State Television (RSTV) and Radio Rivers maintain Port Harcourt-centric production and distribution structures that afford minimal space for community-specific content from ONELGA (Daramola, 2023). Private commercial stations operating in Port Harcourt similarly prioritize urban audiences whose purchasing power represents greater advertiser interest. Community-level communication in Omoku relies heavily on informal channels: religious institutions (particularly churches and mosques), community meetings convened by traditional rulers and age-grade associations, WhatsApp group networks, and the town crier system. These channels carry considerable community trust and cultural authority, yet they remain unintegrated into formal development communication planning by governmental and non-governmental organizations operating in the area (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012).

Dimensions of Media Subjugation

Media subjugation in Omoku operates across three principal dimensions. First, content subjugation: the systematic under-representation and misrepresentation of Omoku in state and national media content, producing an information environment that fails to address the community's specific developmental, cultural, and political needs. Second, structural subjugation: the exclusion of Omoku residents from media ownership, governance, and editorial decision-making processes, denying the community agency over the communicative frameworks through which it is represented. Third, epistemological subjugation: the displacement of indigenous Ogba communicative practices, oral traditions, and local knowledge systems by externally produced media content that privileges urban, elite, and English-language discourse (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022; Okunna, 2018). These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Content subjugation produces audiences who may internalize deficit representations of their community. Structural subjugation ensures that those most affected by communication inequities lack the institutional leverage to address them. Epistemological subjugation erodes the cultural confidence and communicative resources that communities require to resist externally imposed communicative frameworks (Anaeto et al., 2021).

Effective Communication Strategies for Rural Engagement

Community Radio as Participatory Infrastructure

The establishment of a community radio station governed and managed by Omoku residents represents the most structurally significant intervention available for addressing media subjugation. Community radio, as distinguished from state and commercial broadcasting, is defined by its community ownership, participatory programming processes, and mandate to serve the communicative needs of a defined local community (Bosch, 2014). A genuinely community-managed station in Omoku would provide a platform for local language broadcasting in Ogba, Igbo, and Yoruba; coverage of community governance and development issues; and the archiving and transmission of indigenous cultural heritage. Achieving this requires engagement with the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to navigate Nigeria's licensing framework, which has historically disadvantaged community broadcasters (Aliagan, 2015). Advocacy for regulatory reform at the federal level, combined with partnerships with civil society organizations experienced in community broadcasting, would be necessary prerequisites. Donor funding from international development organizations with an interest in participatory communication could provide initial infrastructure support.

Integration of Indigenous Communication Channels

Nwosu and Ekwueme (2022) argue persuasively that indigenous communication channels carry inherent cultural authority that externally produced media rarely achieves in rural contexts. Development communicators working in Omoku should therefore prioritize the systematic integration of the town crier system, traditional ruler networks, religious institutions, and age-grade associations into communication campaign design and delivery. This integration should not be tokenistic a matter of employing traditional channels as delivery mechanisms for externally produced messages but genuinely participatory, involving community communicative agents in the design, content creation, and evaluation of communication interventions. Folarin (2019) identifies several practical modalities for such integration, including the establishment of community communication committees that bring together traditional leaders, religious figures, media practitioners, and civil society representatives to coordinate information flows during public health campaigns, electoral processes, and development initiatives. These committees would serve as nodes connecting formal media institutions with the informal communication networks that carry greatest credibility within the community.

Culturally Resonant Content Production

Building on cultural resonance theory (Nwosu & Ekwueme, 2022), effective communication strategies for Omoku must prioritize content that is linguistically accessible, culturally grounded, and narratively aligned with community values and worldviews. This requires the training and deployment of local content producer's journalists, scriptwriters, community correspondents who possess both the technical skills to produce mediated content and the cultural knowledge to ensure its resonance with local audiences. Content production strategies should incorporate storytelling formats rooted in Ogba oral tradition, use of local proverbs and idioms in campaign messaging, consultation with traditional knowledge-holders in the development of health and agricultural communication, and the representation of positive community narratives that counteract the deficit framing prevalent in external media coverage (Daramola, 2023; Igbudu & Nwosu, 2021).

Digital Strategy and Mobile Communication

Given the relatively high penetration of mobile telephony in Omoku, a digital communication strategy built around WhatsApp community groups, community Facebook pages, and SMS broadcast systems represents a cost-effective complement to broadcast and traditional communication channels. Nwachukwu and Amadi (2020) document the effectiveness of WhatsApp networks in disseminating community-specific information during security incidents and public health emergencies in Rivers State oil communities. However, digital strategies must be accompanied by digital literacy programming that equips community members particularly older residents, women, and less-educated community members with the skills to critically evaluate online information, identify misinformation, and participate productively in digital communication spaces (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Without such programming, digital channels risk exacerbating existing communication inequities rather than addressing them.

Policy and Advocacy Dimensions

At the macro-structural level, addressing media subjugation in Omoku requires policy advocacy targeting both federal media regulation and Rivers State media governance. Specific policy demands would include: amendment of the NBC Act to create a dedicated community broadcasting licensing category with simplified application procedures and reduced fees; allocation of state media resources airtime, production facilities, training programmes to community media organizations; and the establishment of community advisory boards with genuine editorial authority over state media content relating to rural communities (Aliagan, 2015; Okunna, 2018). Media literacy education, integrated into formal school curricula and delivered through community organizations, represents a longer-term strategy for building the critical communicative capacity of Omoku residents. By equipping community members with skills to analyze media representations, identify structural biases, and advocate for communicative rights, media literacy programmes contribute to the erosion of epistemological subjugation over time (Anaeto et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This has examined communication strategies for rural engagement through the lens of media subjugation in Omoku, Rivers State. Drawing on development communication theory, cultural resonance theory, and agenda-setting and framing frameworks, the paper has argued that media subjugation in Omoku operates across content, structural, and epistemological dimensions, producing a communication environment that systematically fails to serve the community's informational, cultural, and political needs. Effective communication strategies for rural engagement in

this context must be simultaneously technical and political: they must address the infrastructural deficits of rural communication while also challenging the power structures that produce and reproduce media subjugation. Community radio, indigenous communication channel integration, culturally resonant content production, contextually appropriate digital strategies, and policy advocacy each represent necessary but individually insufficient components of a comprehensive rural engagement strategy. The case of Omoku speaks to broader dynamics of media inequity in rural Nigeria. As Nwosu and Ekwueme (2022) contend, communication cannot achieve its developmental promise in rural communities until it is genuinely participatory designed with and for communities, rooted in indigenous communicative traditions, and accountable to the people it purports to serve. Achieving this standard in Omoku and communities like it requires not incremental adjustments to existing communication practice but a fundamental reorientation of how media institutions, development organizations, and government agencies understand the relationship between communication and community.

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