



**Media Practitioners' Awareness - Knowledge Differentials:
A Factor in the Failed Passage of the Freedom of
Information (FOI) Bill by Nigerian Legislative Assembly**

U. Okugo, I. Akpan and M. Mboho
*Department of Communication Arts,
Abia State University, Uturu-Nigeria
American University of Nigeria, Yola- Nigeria
Idorenyin.Akpan@Aun.Edu.Ng
Department of Communication Arts
University of Uyo, Uyo - Nigeria*

ABSTRACT

This study investigated media practitioners' awareness of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill by surveying practitioners based in the South Eastern Nigeria. A sample of 1,000 respondents was selected to participate in the study. Using the questionnaire as the major instrument, with a sampling error of +2.5 % and a computed reliability coefficient of 0.98, results showed that : 1) the Bill sought to give every Nigeria citizen a legally enforceable right to access records, documents and information held by the governments, institutions and agencies as well as private bodies performing public functions.2) that 95% of the subjects were exposed to the Bill 3) that the awareness-differentials on the provisions of the Bill produced a lacuna where 62% had knowledge of the provisions of the Bill, and 38% did not know.4) that 'media combination' and 'on-the-job' factors influenced subjects' levels of awareness, Findings further showed that there was a causal relationship between awareness of the FOI Bill and knowledge of the provisions of the Bill, in much the same context as between awareness and positive attitude to the FOI Bill. The study concluded that media practitioners' are in a position to access records previously classified and consciously unveil the regimes of secrecy and impunity bedevilling the country since independence. It was recommended that an Ombudsman Act be passed to improve access to record and a further study on attitude of government bureaucrats to the Bill.

Keywords: Awareness-Knowledge Differentials; Freedom of Information Bill; Attitude, Media Practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Awareness studies have been an enduring subject of research and visceral opinions of many social critics, including media practitioners. Historically, conventional wisdom long held that persistent social problems could be resolved through public education. However, studies examining public knowledge on a variety of topics and issues have shown that the public did not always know. (Hyman and Sheatley, 1988). Moreover, knowledge and information turned out to be equally distributed across populations. Studies have shown that people with more formal education learn and know more about many issues than people with less formal education. These findings were formerly presented as the knowledge-gap hypothesis by Minnesota researchers Tichenor, Donohue and Olien in 1970. The authors proposed that an increasing flow of information into a social system (from a campaign, for example) is more likely to benefit groups of higher socio-economics status (SES) than those of lower SES groups. Increase in the information available in the system would only exacerbate already existing differences between these groups. The authors supported this proposition using studies of several topics, including health. The study that led to the theory of selective perception or dissonance theory.

Baran (1999:322) argues that:

When confronted by new information, people experience a kind of mental discomfort, a dissonance. As a result, we consciously and subconsciously work to limit or reduce that discomfort through three interrelated selective Processes. These processes help us “select” what Information we consume, remember, and interpret in personally important and idiosyncratic ways.

The implication of this psychological reasoning is that, man is by nature selective in his ways and this nature can be responsible for the level of awareness / awareness differentials in media campaigns. Explaining the factors that contribute to awareness of issues, Viadero (2000) states that the ‘usual explanations’ for why Black and Hispanic children do not perform as well as white children in school, such as peer pressure, are not satisfactory explanations.

Viadero(2000) lists and explains the numerous interdependent factors that contribute to awareness differentials in terms of poor performance of Black and Hispanic children in juxtaposition with White children. The factors include: poverty, peer pressure ,high mobility, teacher quality, parenting, preschool, stereotype threat, the summer effect, teacher expectation television, test bias and genetics .Viadero concludes that with all these interwoven factors in mind, the most important thing is not only to focus on the awareness differentials but also to do something about it. The trick she and many other experts agree is to figure out ‘how’. However, ‘figuring out’, fortunately, has led to the understanding that awareness differentials were not intractable. Nevertheless, the assumption that if you tell them(the

audience) , they will know and the common knowledge that a good number of differential based studies focus on the receiver of the communication process and not the source , promotes the heuristic value of this study .

Background Literature

Blanton (2003) writes that in 2003, Armenia became the 51st country in the world to guarantee its citizens the right to know what their government is up to. Armenia's new Freedom of Information law is among the latest outpost of the worldwide movement towards opening government files – a movement that took off in the 1990s. In view of the above, of all the works examined for this study, five came closest to its concerns but two are however highlighted here. These are: Article 19 (2005) and Kinsman et al (2001).

The thrust of Article 19, a London-based NGO, was on the Freedom of Information legislation and its impact on the news media in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The main findings of the study indicate that access to information for the media often turned into a hurdle-race. And for the record, the study stated that accesses to official information by the media include: The lack of procedures and mechanism for access to information, or the lack of appropriate legislature that create the environment for arbitrary refusals, manipulation of information by officials; The lack of awareness among the journalists of their legal rights; even where is an awareness of their rights and the provisions in local FOI legislature guaranteeing those rights, there is no tradition among the media of going court to defend their rights, mainly due to scepticism about the fair administration of justice, and lengthy court proceedings;

When accesses to the requested information are refused,; media professionals often use alternative sources of information. The study concluded that the joint efforts of the media and their professional associations, civil society groups, international actors, and above all, government institutions themselves are needed to advance the media to play their key role as an intermediary between the people and the government.

In a similar vein, Kinsman (2001) studied awareness differentials among Ugandan school children on condom, In a survey of 1,821 pupils, aged 9 to 24 , results showed ,among others that:Pupils have relatively high levels of knowledge about condoms; about two-thirds of boys, and half the girls claim they would use condom if they were available. This gender gap disappears by age 17; Roman Catholics make up nearly half of the population. They are less knowledge and less positive about condoms than non-Catholics.

The researchers recommended among others that policy makers attempting to improve the sexual health of Uganda's school pupils should improve awareness among men that their power over women in the negotiation of condom use comes with a responsibility to protect both themselves and their young partners. Other studies on awareness differentials show existence of awareness differentials on cervical, colorectal cancer among US women. Gaziano, Cecilia, Horowitz and Alice (2001) found awareness differential among women aged 40 and over concerning cervical

Media Practitioners' Awareness - Knowledge Differentials

and colorectal cancers. The difference occurred greatest for the more publicized issue, colorectal cancer. One of the methods employed by the researchers was by comparing the magnitude of the relationships between education and knowledge under the conditions of higher and lower amounts of media coverage. The researchers chose formal education as the indicator of SES as previous research has shown that most awareness differentials studies use education as an indicator of SES. More so, the main reason for such a comparative analysis by the researchers being to determine the magnitude of awareness between the high and low education groups.

In any case, our current research investigation differs from previous awareness studies research in two different ways. First, the population studied here is specialized and, being the public educators, their level of education and professionalism did place them at the top of the population which could be regarded as 'information rich'. Second, investigating awareness differentials in this group represents a different environment compared to the destination – recipients in the communication process, which formed the focus of most earlier awareness studies. This later reason is even more pungent given that much awareness research has used respondent's educational level as a key differentiator within samples. The socioeconomic status (SES) of media workers was not investigated because entry into the profession was based on a minimum of professional diploma in journalism.

Theoretical Framework

This study was principally built around the theoretical postulations of Leon Festinger, in the *cognitive dissonance theory*. The crux of the theory posits that the individual avoids discomfort and uncertainty by selecting information likely to reinforce his convictions. Similarly, he would reject information that conflicts with previously held ideas. Expressing further views on Festinger's theory, Baran (1999:322) asserts that:

Dissonance theory argues that when confronted by new information people experience a kind of mental discomfort, a dissonance. As a result, people conscious and subconsciously work to limit or reduce that discomfort through three interrelated selective process. The author argues that these processes help us "select" what information we consume, remember (be aware of) and interpret, in personally important and idiosyncratic ways.

The three interrelated selective processes are: Selective exposure (or selective attention) is the process by which people only expose them to or attend to those messages consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs; Selective retention assumes that people remember best and longest those messages that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Selective perception predicts that people will interpret messages in a manner consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. This psychological reasoning implies that man is selective by nature. Selectivity can be responsible for levels of awareness / awareness differentials in every aspect of human endeavor, for instance, awareness of health campaign like HIV /

AIDS, Polio, Policy enactments such as Electoral Acts and Freedom of Information Bill.

HYPOTHESES

Two research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study.

1. H1: There is a relationship between media practitioners' level of exposure to the FOI Bill and their knowledge of the provisions of the Freedom of Information Bill.
2. H2: There is a significant relationship between media practitioners' awareness of the Freedom of Information Bill and their attitudes to the Bill.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In response to this question bothering on factors that influenced the level of awareness of subjects, the following results were arrived at. A large proportion of the respondents forty- five per cent (45%) observed that media combination in terms of the coverage given to the Freedom of Information Bill were factors that influence their awareness level. These are a combination of Radio, Television, Newspaper, Magazine, and the Internet. This finding reinforces the prevalent opinion among advertisers, public relations officers and media scholars that to embark on successful media campaign, a combination of the media is necessary. The result further shows that thirty-seven per cent (37%) of the respondents stated that 'on-the job' factor influenced their level of awareness. This aspect of the finding is surprising in the sense that on-the job factor was rated higher than Television and Radio. The implication is that media practitioners interact more among themselves and in the process exchange information and influence among themselves. This finding supports the limited effects theories which identified those individual and social characteristics that led audience member to be influenced. What emerged was the view that media influence was limited by social categories and social relationships.

Again, the result of media combination playing more influence on awareness on the FOI Bill shows the efficacy of the media strategy adopted by the non-governmental organizations in sensitizing the civil society. For instance, Ojo (2003) reports that the advocacy efforts on the FOI Bill were conducted on a three-pronged approach involving media campaigns, activities targeted at the legislatures and activities aimed at ensuring broad civil society involvement in the campaign. More so, media campaigns involved visits to media houses, to solicit their help through publications of articles, editorial comments, news commentaries, news analysis, stories, features, and advertorials. Also, information on the Bill was posted on websites, billboards and hand-bills by Media Rights Agenda, Article 19 and other Freedom of Information Coalition Organizations. For instance, the

Media Practitioners' Awareness - Knowledge Differentials

website of Article 19 is www.article19.org and this is common knowledge to media practitioners.

Furthermore, another reason that could have made on- the-job factory play a greater role in influence could have been the interactions between the media practitioners and the legislators. The legislators have constituencies (of which the media practitioners are one) on the happenings at the National Assembly. Again, periodically the legislators call press conferences and attend public functions where they make their views on national issues like the FOI Bill known. The media practitioners as part of their functions cover such events. In all, the findings here is dissimilar to a related study on "Awareness and Attitudes to Noise as Environmental Pollution" by Soola (2006). With a research question on what are discussants' sources (mass and interpersonal networks) of noise as environmental pollution.

TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS

Hypothesis H01: There is no significant relationship between South East Nigeria media practitioners' level of exposure to the FOI bill and their knowledge of the provisions of the FOI bill.

Table 1. Chi-Square Analysis of exposure to the FOI Bill and knowledge of its provisions.

| Awareness | | |
|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Yes | No | Total (Row) |
| 793 (659.2) | 42 (175.8) | 835 |
| 489 (622.8) | 300 (166.2) | 789 |
| 1282 | 342 | 1624 |

The Chi-square is defined as:

$$X^2 = \frac{\sum (O - E)^2}{E}$$

O = Observed Frequency

E = Expected Frequency

X² = Chi-square = 1234.5

When the chi-square was applied, the calculated statistical value (1234.5) was greater than the critical value (3.841) at degree of freedom = 1 and 0.5 level of significance. The null hypothesis is, therefore, not accepted. This means that there is a significant relationship between the media practitioners' exposure to the FOI Bill and their knowledge of the provisions of the Bill. This result is surprising in the sense that the Freedom of Information Coalition did not organize any workshop, seminar or conference on the Bill in south East Nigeria, like the coalition organized such events in South West

U. Okugo, I. Akpan and M. Mboho

Nigeria and the Federal Capital, Abuja, to sensitize media practitioners, Human Rights activist and the civil society on the FOI Bill.

However, successive anti-democratic military regimes, press attacks and, especially, organized structured/institutionalized marginalization of the South East in terms of infrastructural development, appointments into sensitive/key positions at the federal level and the general alienation of South East from main stream politics and decision-making at the federal level could have aided the rejection of the null hypothesis. Again, the endemic corruption by public office-holders could have contributed to the rejection of null hypothesis. For instance, the United Nations under Secretary-General, Dr. Antonio Maria Costa, state that

The theft of Nigeria’s assets by past corrupt leaders and the looting of the treasure by kleptomaniac leaders who between 1960 and 1999 is the bane of Nigeria ... (sic).(Daily Sun November 14, 2007, p.4)

The result of this hypothesis is similar to the findings of Vega (2006) on “a Preliminary Evaluation of Awareness, Knowledge and Attitude in Environmental Education among Specialists, Instructors, Students and Parents in South West Florida”. The result showed that environmental instructors had a high level of awareness which led to knowledge of environmental issues more than any other group under study, like students, education specialists and parents. The similarity of Vega’s study and this research lie in the method of data analysis which involved the use of database utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences: Graduate Pack 11.0 for Window (SPSS No.00S2 2006). Significance for the statistical measures was determined at the 0.05 alpha level which is the significant level of statistical measure for this study. Also, the (SPSS) is a non-parametric method of analysis just like this current study is using the chi-square (non-parametric) for analysis.

Hypothesis H02: There is no significant relationship between South East Nigeria media practitioners’ awareness of the Freedom of Information Bill and their attitudes to the bill.

Table 2. Chi-square Analysis of Awareness and Attitude toward the FOI Bill.

| Question option | Yes | No | Total (Row) |
|----------------------|-------|-----|-------------|
| Awareness of the FOI | 793 | 42 | 835 |
| Attitude to FOI Bill | 600 | 189 | 789 |
| Total (column) | 1,393 | 231 | 1,624 |

O = Observed Frequencies

E = Expected Frequencies

$\chi^2 = 119.1$

Df = 1

Media Practitioners' Awareness - Knowledge Differentials

The result of the Chi-square analysis shows that the calculated value (119.1) is greater than the critical value (3.841) at degree of freedom = 1 and .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis, therefore, is rejected. Since the null hypothesis is rejected, it meant there is a causal relationship between the awareness of the FOI Bill by media practitioners in South East and their attitude towards the Bill. The outcome of this finding is not surprising. It is presumably anchored on the attitude of Nigerian Journalists who can point to several instances in the past, even under civilian dispensations, when official authority was employed to block free access to information. The existence of such laws as Official Secrets Act (1962), the Defamatory and Offensive Publication Act (1966), Printing Press Regulations Act (1964), Section 58 of the Criminal Code act of 1958 and the Newspapers (Amendment) Act of 1964, altogether enforce a regime of secrecy.

Again, the result of null hypothesis two on the awareness and positive attitude to Bill is not surprising since the level of impunity and brutal attack on not just the press but on people's right has denigrated the nation and reduced her esteem in the eyes of the world. Another reason that could have led to the rejection of the second null hypothesis could have the fact that the Bill contains provisions on how to make public institutions more transparent and open to public scrutiny even while guaranteeing the protection of public information and records whose disclosure may not be in the public interest. Also, the positive attitude generated by the data could have been anchored on the fact that the traditional Nigeria tendency to official secrecy will change with the passage of the Bill. The need to know culture will be gone. There will be a statutory right to know.

More so, the result of this hypothesis is similar to the result of Vega (2006) on "Awareness and Attitude to Environmental Education among Instructors, Students, Education Specialists and Parents". The findings of that study showed that the level of attitude to environmental issues as a result of the respondents' awareness of environmental issues was significantly higher among high school students compared to the levels of their corresponding parents, education specialists and instructors.

From the foregoing findings of the study, the theory of Cognitive Dissonance on which this study is principally built has been affirmatively supported. For instance, a lacuna in knowledge of the provisions of the FOI Bill was observed. For the 62 per cent who knew the provisions of the Bill, it was observed that they could have selectively accessed information on the contents of the Bill, thereby, reinforcing their convictions on the need to have the Bill codified into law because of the attendant benefits it will bring to their profession. For the 38 per cent who did not know exogenous factors like lack of awareness of the activities of the National Assembly, "making ends meet" as a result of the vagaries of the economy could have made the respondents to alienate information that would enrich their "pockets would have been consciously accepted more than information on the FOI Bill. Furthermore, 95% of the respondents who were aware of the call for the Freedom of information Bill did so because of the consciousness among the

media practitioners to have such an Act in Nigeria. Information on the FOI Bill was easily assimilated because it reinforced the existing belief among the practitioners that the Bill could and will help media practitioners access public held information by the government.

Again, the awareness-differentials found in the study support the theory of selectivity among the respondents. The respondents' selectivity exposed retained and interpreted information on the FOI Bill. The selective process was observed as a factor that influenced the level of awareness on the FOI Bill. The findings revealed that the media practitioners consciously chose the channels that had influence on their responses.

CONCLUSION

The deductions from the data generated showed that the objectives of this work had been met in the following ways: Media practitioners in Nigeria are highly exposed to the contents and provisions of the FOI Bill; There is an amazing awareness differential/lacuna among the media practitioners on the provisions of the Bill. 62 percent had knowledge of the provisions of the Bill, while 32 percent did not have; Media synergy and on-the-job factor played influential roles in determining levels of influence in awareness more than Radio / Television and newspapers; The contents of the Bill provide enforceable rights to access records of public / private institutions with areas of exemption being defence, international relations, client / solicitor information and personal information.

Again, a further deduction from the data showed a causal relationship between awareness and knowledge among media practitioners on the FOI Bill and awareness and positive attitude towards the FOI Bill. Also, it showed that the media practitioners in Nigeria are alive to the surveillance, agenda setting and the promotion of information functions of the media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. There is need to investigate the attitude of government bureaucrats, civil servant and other institutional technocrats on the Freedom of Information Bill. Building a culture of openness is new in Nigeria and this can lead to distortions of access to the records and bottlenecks by the record keepers. For instance, the survey carried out by Article 19 (2005) on Freedom of Information in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia showed that access to information for the media often turns into a hurdle-race based on soviet-style attitudes and traditions of secrecy amongst official employed different ways of restricting access to information by releasing information at the discretion of public officials, that is only to the "loyal media" and delays

Media Practitioners' Awareness - Knowledge Differentials

in responding to requests, thus diminishing the value of the requested information.

2. There is need to carry the campaign on the Freedom of Information Bill to the ruralites. The rural dwellers awareness / knowledge of the provisions of the Bill have not been determined by the researcher. The first step will be to carry the campaign to their doors steps. Their (rural dwellers) awareness / knowledge of the Bill will add to the growing clamour for the passage of the Bill. This will also enable them to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.

3. There is need for a content analytical study on the Freedom of Information Bill Research has not being carried to the knowledge of this researcher to determine the amount of coverage given to the FOI Bill in relation to other topical issues. This will put the coverage of the FOI Bill in proper perspective. In other words, the continuous coverage of the FOI Bill will enhance the passage of the Bill. This will in turn guarantee participation in democratic processes which can only be effective if it is informed participation.

4. There is need to establish an Ombudsman Act with the sole responsibility to investigate complaints about actions and decision by departments and agencies about requests for access to documents under FOI. The reports of the Ombudsman should include observations about the operation of the Freedom of Information and recommendations on ways to improve public access to documents.

REFERENCES

- Article 19 (2005), "Reports on Freedom of Information in Armenia ,Azerbaijan Georgia": Freedom Info.org.
- Baran, J. Stanley (1999) Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture. London: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Blanton, Thomas "The Right to know is Gaining Around the world". The International Herald Tribune 11 October, 2003.
- Ekwo, Uchenna. "Nigeria's Political Reform and the Media". DAILY SUN (Lagos), 1 April, 2005.
- Gaziano, Cecilie and Horowitz, Alice (2001), "Knowledge Gap on Cervical Colorectal Cancer Exists Among U.S. Women": <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory>.
- Hyman, H. and P. B. Sheatley, (1988) "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," in Schramm and Roberts (eds.). The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. Pp. 448 – 466.
- Kinsman, J. et al (2001). "Knowledge Gap – What do Ugandan School Children know about Condoms?" <http://www.edweek.org>.

U. Okugo, I. Akpan and M. Mboho

- Media Rights Agenda (2000). Unlocking Nigeria's closet of Secrecy: A report on the Campaign for Freedom of information Act in Nigeria, Lagos.
- Media Rights Agenda (2001). Campaigning for Access to Information in Nigeria: A Report of the Legislative Advocacy Program for the Enactment of Freedom of Information Act, Lagos.
- Okoye, Innocent (2004). "Needs Gratification Versus Knowledge Gaps: A Comparative study of the Uses of Satellite and Local TV In The International Journal of Communication. No. 1
- Soola Ebenezer O. (2005). "Awareness to Noise as Environmental Pollution", In Nigeria Journal of Communication, Vol.4, Nos 1& 2, pp 18 – 24.
- THE GUARDIAN. "The Freedom of Information bill" .(Lagos) 10 May 2000.
- Viadero, D (2000). Why do the Achievement Gap Exist? Numerous factors Contribute to the Knowledge Gap." <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory>.
- Vega, Ernesto Lasso De La (2006). "A Preliminary Evaluation of Awareness, Knowledge and Attitude in Environmental Education Specialists, Instructor, Students, and Parents in SouthWest Florida". Florida Scientist, Vol. 69 (0052),pp 166 - 178