Efficacy Of Roving Reporting For Television News

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Abstract: The fraction of daily activities in different communities which the mass media are able to identify, cover and present to people is exceedingly low. The huge gap is no doubt attributable to the phenomenal increases in population as well as events and activities in different communities which are yet to be matched by the quantum of human and material resources available to the media. If this is a challenge to the ingenuity of media managers, how best can it be redressed? In a bid to contribute to the search for solutions, this paper explored the potency of 'roving' reporting which entails the roaming around a community by reporters in search of newsworthy events. The study which employed the survey research methods of questionnaire and interview as instruments for data gathering was anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory. Findings revealed that although roving reporting is sparingly in use it is best positioned to produce human interest as well as breaking and actuality news reports. What this implies is that the approach can augment the gains of the traditional methods of general and beat reporting. Consequently, the paper recommends the upgrading of roving reporting to a formal and regular method of newsgathering in the hope that it would enhance news reporting especially for Television which possesses the credible features of picture and sound combined.

Keywords: News, Reporting, Television, Agenda setting, Roving

I. INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of an event by reporting its details for news is known as news reporting. There are two common forms of news reporting. They are 'general assignment/schedule' reporting and 'beat/specialized' reporting. The more common of the two is the scheduled or general assignment reporting - a process in which media organizations send out reporters to cover events which they get to know about. This flows from requests by event organizers to the media to cover their events with a view to publicising such events. The assignment officer in a typical broadcast station then prepares a schedule of all such invitations and thereafter conspicuously displays in a designated location in the newsroom, those approved for coverage by the editorial board along with the coverage crew assigned to each event (Coker, 2017). The events listed for coverage are therefore known, their organizers are also known just as the venue; date and time of each event are similarly disclosed. General reporting can therefore be regarded as the coverage of pre-arranged and scheduled events. For the broadcast media especially television, this would include any

LIVE coverage using an outside broadcast (OB) van. General assignment reporting is not limited to those to which the media are invited. There are fixed events which are within the knowledge of the media which require no invitation for coverage. National Independence Day and Workers' Day celebrations are two obvious examples. Like those for which invitations are usually distributed, these are also scheduled events; which are fixed in advance and are usually prepared for.

The second approach to news reporting known as beat/specialized reporting involves the coverage by a reporter of a specified subject or location on a continuous basis. A beat reporter is therefore one who exclusively covers for his organization, one field of interest, such as sports, politics, science, business, music, war, crime, fashion etc. Beat reporting, is also often described as specialized reporting, because many beat reporters are assigned to their areas of interest or strength or expertise. Those who may not have been specialists in the strict sense at the point of deployment are in due course so recognized by virtue of their familiarity with the terrain as a result of longevity at a location.

There are many other news gathering forms which are not as commonly used as the two described above. These include: roving reporting, sourcing news from the internet, monitoring other news sources such as news agencies and other media organizations and using freelance and citizen journalists to gather news. These other forms are generally used merely to supplement the formal forms.

II. CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM

With increasing population and corresponding increases in societal activities, there is doubt if the two formal news reporting forms can cope with the number of daily events. For scheduled or general reporting in particular, inadequacy of resources, both human and material is an immediate problem. This is because television stations especially those in developing societies such as Nigeria, are generally under-staffed due to poor forecasting and planning (Mokelu, 2018; Aderiye, 2004). Even if a station has many reporters, it may not have enough facilities to enable the reporters operate concurrently especially where events are scheduled to hold simultaneously. Due to the capital-intensive nature of television broadcasting, it may be hard to persuade broadcast proprietors to expand the business by recruiting more operatives and procuring more technical facilities. While public stations may be hampered by inadequate subventions occasioned by rigid budgetary arrangements, it might be harder to convince proprietors of private stations who are more profit-oriented to accept the option of further investments at the expense of a high profit margin. To make matters worse, many posts in stations are usually filled by the kith and Kin of proprietors and managers who have little or no journalism qualifications or cognate experience. With this, many stations are made to carry along a team of novices who may not improve the dire situation of insufficient staffing. The public stations also face the same dilemma as personnel get employed on the basis of prescriptive criteria like place of origin etc. rather than merit.

Beat/specialized reporting on the other hand is hardly in use in every medium. It seems to function only in large organizations and not in a small outfit which has a slightly larger than a one-man newsroom. Under such a situation, the few reporters would have to cover every field thereby technically knocking off specialization. At the same time, some beats in large networks virtually make a mockery of specialized reporting because the way and manner they are organized leaves no room for any specialized treatment of stories; a good example being a typical international television network of the developed world which are generally eulogized as the best news channels. Based on their simplistic perception of Africa, they station one crew (news bureau) in a capital city in a country and expect the beat to cover the entire continent. Such a crew hardly produces specialized credible news reports.

The adoption of scheduled and specialized reporting approaches notwithstanding, several events happen daily which a typical broadcast station may not cover because of lack of knowledge of such events. If the events covered in one day are thus inevitably limited, it can be argued that there is a 'lacuna' – manifest gap, in the reportorial framework for news gathering by media organizations, television stations inclusive. The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the evolution of a design to fill the gap. The following two questions were formulated to aid the study:
- ✓ How adequate are the news reporting strategies commonly employed by television stations?
- ✓ What comprehensive strategy can a station adopt to cover several events especially emergencies as well as those events that are unknown to her?

III. NEWS REPORTING APPROACHES

Akpan (2009, p126) expects the media as the 'nerve centre of information flow in the society' to discharge the institutional function of keeping society appropriately informed. The general assignment strategy of sending out reporters to cover societal activities would therefore appear to be in line with Akpan's expectations. One advantage of the approach is that it gives room to news managers for planning. It is particularly suitable for television which often sends out not just a reporter but an entire crew in a vehicle conveying a whole range of facilities such as cameras, audio machines and their operatives. Bearing in mind that activities to be covered in a day using the approach, are known in advance, a news manager can use effective coordination to ensure that his station's scarce resources are put into optimum use. The practice according to Coker (2017) is to arrange for one vehicle to convey two or more coverage teams to their events one after the other and to pick them up at agreed times.

For the reporter, the approach provides ample opportunities. Apart from the prospects of getting acquainted with the subject in advance, it also offers sufficient room for the reporter to be briefed on the expectations of the station before setting out for the event. This can professionally guide the reporter to undertake a good coverage - an advantage not available to a self-employed freelance journalist. It should be noted however that a supervisor's briefs to a reporter can sometimes be counter-productive because the reporter may consider himself unauthorized to go beyond such professional briefs even where a new development calling for a change of focus occurs at the assignment point. Put differently; some reporters may neither be able to change the anticipated news angle nor seek to cover any other newsworthy item which occurs at the event or at a nearby location. Thus, a reporter covering a scheduled assignment may not be able to utilize his initiative and discretion in the performance of his duties which may result into an uneventful coverage. It probably would have been a different matter if the reporter had gone to an assignment with an open mind.

In the case of beat reporters that ought to be judged by the breath of their knowledge at producing stories from their customary beats, sensationalism and false or inaccurate reporting; which is the anathema of knowledge-driven reports are quite often traceable to so-called specialized reporters (Mokelu, 2018). Also, longevity at a beat can adversely affect the ability of a beat reporter to produce balanced reports about his subject area or location. This is influenced by the tendency for a reporter to naturally develop a strong interpersonal

relationship with his hosts making him fall into the trap of now and again doing pro-beat stories. He can become so engrossed in the beat to the extent of undermining his obligations to his profession, organization and society at large. This may be due to occasional cash gifts given by his hosts in the proverbial brown envelope. Incidentally, this appears to be a trend which cuts across cultures as observed by Jha (2013), an Indian live wire reporter who had studied generations of beat reporters. Akinfeleye (2005) probably had this in mind when he cautioned prospective African journalists in Ghana to avoid 'cocktail' journalism in which news reports are influenced by socials.

Coker (2017) also points out the problem of dry days when little or nothing happens at a beat. For example, when parliament is on break and nothing is happening there, a reporter assigned to the beat has little to offer. At such times, the coverage of legislative oversight functions and a few committee meetings which take place during the break and which are not as coordinated as the main sessions may not be adequately engaging. If this reduces the opportunity of gathering many stories, one option is for a station to go into collaboration with any other station for the exchange of reports. The option may be useful but it could be of limited value because extracting reports all the time from other stations would in a short while depict lack of originality. This can however be supplemented by sourcing the internet, with its sophisticated news gathering technology. Uwakwe (2015) supports this option because of the following:

✓ Open source reporting is based on a collaborative approach –that a community of readers knows more than a single reporter or newsroom.
✓ One can report with greater speed and depth than one could on one's initiative and effort
✓ Open source techniques can prove valuable for solo bloggers and small newsrooms that lack the resources of major news organizations such as widely distributed reporters and editors

The argument is however subject to Uwakwe's other observation that "unless handled carefully, freely published information can degenerate into an anonymous bulletin board, baking false reports" (Uwakwe, 2015, p55). The implication of this is that a station which relies on such a platform because of its sophisticated technology may, inadvertently be engaged in transmitting unverifiable materials which can cause incalculable damage to its image. This might also happen if a station relies on utilizing citizen journalists and freelance reporters. A citizen journalist is usually not professionally trained to do the work of a reporter. Consequently, his amateurish contributions would lack professionalism, as he would merely send a story the way he sees it, devoid of any journalistic treatment or interpretation. The citizen journalist can thus not be equated with a professional journalist who is obliged to go beyond telling a story that can enable society to understand the implications to their lives of the event being reported. Otherwise, some viewers may tune off from a station because its bulletins are hardly of news value. In addition, because citizen journalists are not paid for their stories, it is unrealistic to expect them to be as committed as paid professionals. A freelance journalist on his part may not place the required premium on adherence to house styles.

In short, freelancers and citizen journalists are more prone to reporting defamatory stories, which can push a station into irritating apologies or long-drawn-out litigations (Mokelu, 2018). With no guarantee that they would ideally fall within the group that is obliged to internalize media ethics, the invaluable admonition by Nwabueze (2005:193) that a reporter "should not mislead the public in any way just because he wants to make an impact" may fall on deaf ears. Added to this is the caution in section 5.6.2 of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code that "broadcasters shall approach with restraint, the use of materials from user generated sources in order not to embarrass individuals, organizations: or cause disaffection, incite to panic or rift in the society at large."

It would thus appear that the best option is for a station to utilize its own resources both human and material to the fullest. For this to happen, stations may have to resort to greater use of roving reporting which involves the practice of sending their reporters to roam or drive around a community or some segments of society in search of any news worthy event. It is a rather informal approach to news gathering which encourages reporters to cover stories which they stumble upon in the process of roving. The approach is sparingly used by broadcast stations partly because of the large number of items already scheduled for coverage and partly because of what may be described as widespread lethargy in news coverage especially in developing societies. Some stations however employ it but only on a transient basis such as when there is scarcity of events to cover. The approach according to Iredia (2016, p 50) "is probably the most exciting and professionally oriented method of gathering news items as it provokes the creativity, discretion, initiative and news instincts of a reporter." With no specific assignment in mind, a roving reporter is left to rely on what his instincts point to as news. Interestingly, whatever he selects is news because as argued by Mac Dougal, cited in Wakeel (2010, p13), "nothing is news, no matter how important or when it happens until it is reported."

Unlike scheduled reporting where the event to be covered by a reporter is determined and specific, a roving reporter is free to cover whatsoever - hard, straight or soft news in one outing. If he is resourceful, he can produce as many as three news items or more in a single trip thereby covering the field and helping his station to serve as an "irreplaceable mechanism for moving a problem to solution" (Akpan, 2009, p127). However, he has to ensure that in the emotions of the moment associated with some events such as inter-ethnic conflicts, intemperate language by contending parties is not allowed just as he has to maintain balance and objectivity in his reports. The task may be tedious, but it has several advantages. First, the approach can easily assist a reporter to get many human-interest stories as he roams around a community and comes across people and events. This is significant as it offers a rare opportunity for ordinary people to be seen and heard on television-a far departure from the other approaches that are often elitist and urban biased.

Second, roving around a community presupposes that the reporter would produce stories that meet the news element of proximity, as the reporter would cover events within the target audience of his medium. Third, a roving reporter particularly for a small station would easily satisfy another element of

news-timeliness/freshness as he reports on what has just happened and is transmitted with some degree of immediacy. Fourth, in an attempt to get all the sides to an event which may not be as organized as in the scheduled and beat reporting modes, he would be propelled to investigate some of what he sees and hears thereby producing an excellent report resulting from investigative journalism. This tallies with the testimony of Nwabueze (2009, p91) that investigative reporting makes a story more factual, more intriguing more revealing, more complete, more credible, more controversial, more far-reaching, more result-oriented more informative, more persuasive, among other 'notes' it provides…." Any good report is usually the product of research.

The point ought to be made that like any human device, roving reporting is not full-proof. Considering that an exclusive story is not too easy to corroborate, a reporter can fabricate or over embellish certain reports so that they can qualify to be included in a bulletin. However, for television coverage, the accompanying film which appropriately illustrates the story can place ample check on this. With no story idea in mind, finding a ready story for news may involve roaming around in vain which can be costly and tiring. The reporter can in fact run into some dangerous situations such as unexpected bomb explosions etc. None of these challenges should discourage the use of roving reporting as there is no occupation without its own hazards. There is no evidence that other news gathering modes are less prone to dangers. What is important is to anticipate and make conscious efforts to deal with any challenge that evolves in the news reporting process. In any case, the excitement which the adventure inherent in roving reporting gives to a reporter, especially beginners, is no doubt attractive.

Beyond adventure, roving reporting substantially differs from the main reporting formats. It is different from scheduled reporting which is always pre-arranged; it is also different from specialized reporting where a beat may sometimes have no story. As a mobile news operative, a roving reporter can run into an unscheduled event making him a good journalist that can give an "account of any real happening that may have an interest for or effect on people such as accident, fire, crime, celebrations and so on" (Wakeel 2013, p 13). Whenever this occurs, the roving reporter being the only media professional at the scene of the event takes credit for producing an exclusive report not available to other channels. The situation would have been different if it was a scheduled event at which reporters from different channels are also in attendance and therefore share the credit. The same would have been true of a beat in which different organizations are represented by 'location or subject' correspondents. In other words, a roving reporter is favourably positioned to report on a story to which he can lay claims of originality and exclusivity thereby enhancing the credibility of his medium

IV. RESEARCH PREMISE

This study is instructively anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory in mass communication which was described long ago by McCombs and Shaw as the instinctive determination by the media of what society should embrace as important. The theory suggests that the events which people get to know about are those which the media present to them. In other words, public agenda setting is essentially a function of the media. This is discernible from two dimensions namely: a) the power of the media to select an event for coverage and b) the ability to determine the part of a story to project or ignore in what is generally described as the gate keeping role of the media. In a broadcast station, two groups; news reporters who are assigned to handle the coverage of approved events and news producers who are to collate, align and package all news reports are the principal agents in the setting of agenda by the media. Their proactive role in the subject has over the years popularized the Agenda Setting Theory. However, the efficacy of the theory is of recent being questioned on account of several factors. Among them is the emergence of the social media in which everyone can now gather and disseminate information at a pace reportedly faster than that of the mainstream media (Aruguete, 2017). If therefore, everyone is now an agenda setter, a theory which places its usefulness on the media is likely to wane.

Beyond the new trend of individuals sharing in the hitherto exclusive power of the media to set the public agenda, there is also the reality of people in several communities who for several reasons often ignore or despise the media. To such people, the agenda setting function of the media is not more significant than the art of learning to be abreast of events from opinion leaders of their community. Indeed, in developing societies, many locations which are distant from the metropolitan cities are completely uncovered by the media. In such areas, the general population according to Pate (2014, p12) "has little confidence and trust in the credibility of the broadcast media system to act as watchdogs and platforms for the promotion of democratic values and developmental goals in their immediate communities." What this implies is that there is a gap in the framework for media coverage of events as the media cannot effectively set agenda for areas to which they do not extend their surveillance. If so, what is instructive about the agenda setting theory?

Agenda setting is not just information dissemination which is what many people do with the social media. It is important to stress the point that information dissemination and agenda setting are not coterminous. Television reportage in particular, requires a greater professional insight which Iredia (2016) segments as: i) establishment shot; ii) news angle; iii) headline; iv) body of the report and v) concluding statement." Therefore, meaningful information dissemination, another term for information management which can appropriately set an agenda remains the preserve of the professional journalist who is expected to serve society as its watch dog and determine what news is (Olague, 2017; Aririguzoh, 2006). Thus, a broadcast station which has reporters in several places is more likely to set widespread agenda. This persuasion seems to underscore the wisdom in adopting the Agenda Setting Theory as the most suitable one upon which to anchor this study. It is indeed necessary to engage some reporters in roving reporting to whom a medium can involuntarily delegate the exclusive power to determine what to cover for public consumption without supervision. Other reporters are not similarly positioned because such a role is usually played in the general/scheduled reporting

approach not by the reporter but by the station's assignment officer. The specialized reporter is hardly different from such a tele-guided fate because he is largely dependent on what his beat offers. In a nutshell, a stations needs to adopt a news reporting approach that comprehensively covers the field. In this regard there is wisdom in a station first have roving reporters who by virtue of roaming around a community get to know about every event before seeking to take control of setting the public agenda in such a community.

V. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive quantitative survey with questionnaire as the data gathering instrument was adopted for this study. A sample of 150 participants was drawn from six television stations in Abuja made up of 25 reporters per station. Of the figures retrieved, 136 copies were found useful. Although efforts were made to ensure representativeness in the sample size, prescriptive factors such as ethnicity, religion and gender of participants were considered unimportant. What seems to justify this is the convention in a typical newsroom in which every operative is seen as a man. All the respondents were therefore regarded as capable of answering pertinent questions concerning types and quantum of reporting of events in their stations, adequacy of human and material resources for work as well as opportunities for reporters to use their initiatives /discretion in the performance of their duties. The data were analyzed using simple quantification and percentages. The views of 5 veteran television news managers were used to throw light on the study.

VI. FINDINGS/DISCUSSIONS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: HOW ADEQUATE ARE THE NEWS REPORTING STRATEGIES COMMONLY EMPLOYED BY TELEVISION STATIONS?

One of the requests to the respondents was for them to identify the news reporting strategies in use in their stations. Three main types were identified. These are: i) General Assignment Reporting; ii) Beat Reporting and iii) Monitoring different sources to extract news. The results of frequency of usage are tabulated in Figure 1.
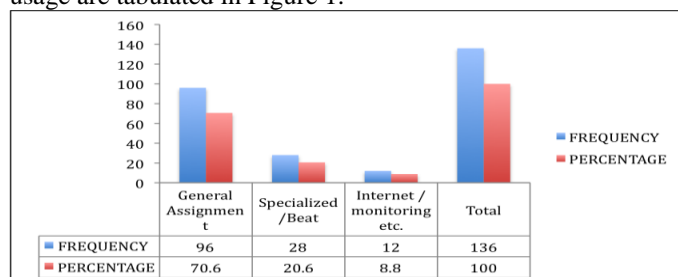

	General Assignment	Specialized /Beat	Internet / monitoring etc.	Total
FREQUENCY	96	28	12	136
PERCENTAGE	70.6	20.6	8.8	100

Figure 1: News reporting strategies

General assignment reporting as seen in the above figure 1 is the most patronized news gathering strategy with 96 respondents representing 70.6 percent stating that they were often engaged in that form of assignment coverage, that is, the coverage of scheduled events. This is understandable as event

organizers would lobby to ensure that their events were accommodated in the day's coverage. Specialized/beat reporting recorded only 28 assignments that is, 20.6% only of a day's coverage while other sources had an insignificant figure of 12 assignments or 08.8% of the day's event. Experts interviewed for this study contended that having too many beat reporters can tie down scarce coverage tools. Consequently, there is not much a station can do about the number of specialized reports it gets because the reports cannot be much more than the number of beats in existence. In which case, organizations without reporters accredited to their beats may therefore have to compete with general assignments.

This conclusion was corroborated by the experts interviewed for this study who also revealed that television coverage of events hardly involves the masses. According to the interviewees, formal, official and elite events take the lion share of events coverage. Based on the responses tabulated in the above figure, it can be assumed that 91.2% made up of 70.6% for scheduled events and 20.6% are for the rich. In other words, there is usually little or no room for private, individual, and non-formal events; thereby confirming the often-stated accusation that television in developing societies is elitist and urban biased. The implication of this for the revelation by Ibagere (2010) that as high as 80 percent of Africans live in rural areas is that many events which happen daily in such areas are ignored either because the stations are unaware of such events or are incapable of covering them. This clearly establishes that the news reporting strategies commonly employed by television stations are inadequate.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: WHAT COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY CAN A STATION ADOPT TO COVER EMERGENCIES AS WELL AS THOSE EVENTS THAT ARE UNKNOWN TO HER?

The inevitable conclusion of the responses in Figure 1 that reporting strategies are inadequate is that there are daily assignments which are either not covered by television stations or are covered for them by outside sources. What are these sources and how prevalent is the practice? To respond to this, respondents were requested to identify other methods by which reports get to their stations. Their responses are tabulated in Figure2 below.
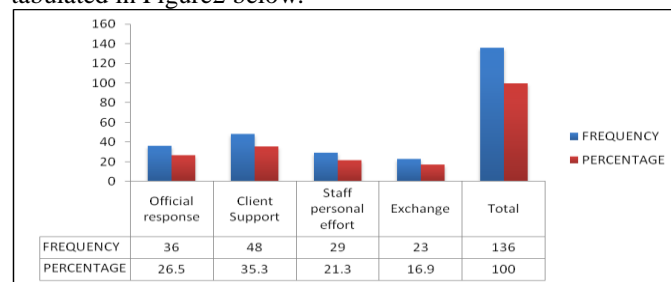

	Official response	Client Support	Staff personal effort	Exchange	Total
FREQUENCY	36	48	29	23	136
PERCENTAGE	26.5	35.3	21.3	16.9	100

Figure 2: Emergencies and unknown events

Only 36 respondents agreed that their stations often deploy them to cover emergencies. This means that out of a total of 136 emergencies and events for which no official invitation got to the media for coverage, only 36 were officially covered. This is a poor performance of 26.5% suggesting that a typical television station would ordinarily

not cover 73% of emergencies and unknown events in a day. This may be due to the preoccupation of the media with events whose organizers normally appeal for coverage. As to why stations do not reserve a few facilities for emergencies, it is obvious that with 100 events covered by outside sources and only 36 by official facilities, which is almost a ratio of 3:1, reserving facilities for unknown events is virtually impossible. The number of uncertain and emergency events would daily overwhelm television stations. What this implies is that television stations are ill-equipped and understaffed - a point clearly made by Abu (2017) at the recent Nigerian Broadcast Summit in Jos, in July 2017. With the deployment of all the facilities of a station to the coverage of scheduled events, the station is compelled to resort to other sources whenever emergencies arise. Respondents were able to identify such other sources to be three: namely a) Assignments covered through facilities supplied by clients, including events covered by freelancers and citizen journalists; b) Events covered by staff members through personal facilities such as personal cars, cameras, etc.; and c) Events covered by other stations that graciously allowed others to dub visuals of events they missed. Figure 2 confirms that client support accounts for 48 events or 35.4% of the day's events. Interviewees of this study explained that to avoid event failure, many interest groups have to provide unofficial facilities for coverage especially for events which come to light either suddenly or after all official facilities had been deployed. Some of such events that were covered by staff through personal facilities were 29 or 21.3% of the day's events. All other events of the day that were culled or dubbed from friendly stations were 23 or 16.9%. According to three of the interviewees, there is an unwritten agreement of collaboration among stations for their reporters to extract reports of events, which they are either unaware of or unable to cover from those who covered such events.

It seems obvious that stations have to develop strategies such as roving reporting in which reporters who are deployed to roam around all nooks and crannies of a community would run into many emergencies and cover them. This would augment the gains of the traditional methods of general and beat reporting and also greatly reduce reliance on outside sources that could be unreliable occasionally.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper highlighted the expedience of placing emphasis on news reporting in view of the realization that the number of news items in a bulletin is greatly contingent on the number gathered by the reportorial team. This would necessitate the strengthening of the reportorial skills of news gathering operatives. The paper then evaluated the utility value of the common approaches to news reporting and based on the several defects it found concluded that new strategies for increased news coverage of events should be designed.

However, the need to be cautious with obtaining stories from other sources such as the Internet and 'freelancers' as well as citizen journalists was stressed; adding that station facilities and staff should be put into better use. Accordingly, a case was made for the adoption of roving reporting - a strategy, which adds more news items to, those sourced by scheduled and specialized reporters. The approach if adopted would facilitate the coverage of emergencies and breaking news as well as human interest stories that are of relevance to people within the target area of a broadcast station. Based on this, the paper makes the following recommendations:

✓ The old practice of using roving reporting sparingly should be reviewed and upgraded to a formal and regular news gathering strategy. This would necessitate deployment of reporters to rove around different communities daily to cover events irrespective of the number of scheduled and beat events envisaged in a day.

✓ Bearing in mind that events in many places hold more often in the early hours of the day, sets of coverage teams should be empowered to undertake all-day roving reporting especially in the later part of the day when facilities used for morning assignments are back to base.

✓ To ensure that the efficacy of roving reporting is not disrupted, the approach should not be left to novices, beginners or persons who are known to be habitually lazy. Instead, roving reporters who must make on the spot professional decisions; should be those adjudged to have ample initiative/ discretion and a high sense of responsibility. Consequently, reporters should be deployed to what can be described as the roving desk.

✓ In agreement with the persuasive argument that many on the spot decisions of the mass media are value laden, vigorous training for roving reporters who constitute first line critical on–the–spot decision makers in the media is expedient.

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