



THE MEDIA AND CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The media as the fourth estate of the realm is susceptible to manipulation positively and otherwise, regardless of place and time. This is partly why media-conflict study is gaining currency globally. The role of the media in conflict prevention, resolution and escalation is now of global concern to both peace and conflict scholars and public policy makers. The kind of information the media disseminate is critical to sustaining peace and harmony in society and vice versa. It is on this note, that we examined the role of the Nigerian media in the Niger Delta, Boko Haram and Jos crises. To what extent has the mainstream media shun the principle of 'who pays the piper dictates the tune', a tendency that promotes and escalates conflict in society and concentrate on the issues fuelling the conflict in order to get the government to respond to the grievances of the people before it degenerates into conflict. Using desk research and interview, the paper argues that the media can play a vital role in promoting peace and preventing conflict by embracing the principle of peaceful coexistence as against the policy of disseminating only the kind of information those who pay their wages want them to. The latter often tends to instigate and escalate conflicts as empirical evidence has demonstrated in the Middle East, Sudan, Nigeria and other flash-points across the globe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian media has a long history. The media and media practitioners have suffered deprivation in the hands of both military and civilian regimes. However, this has not in anywhere diminished the growth of the media in all its ramifications. Traditional media genre like newspaper,

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radio and television has received much recognition and seminal attention, but social media such as twitter, facebook, blogging and other internet based media are becoming more popular medium of information dissemination especially in conflict situations across the country.

The mass media is a powerful tool of communication in peace and conflict situations. It can be used positively to promote peace and resolve conflicts at appropriate times. Conversely, it can also be used negatively to initiate, escalate and sustain conflict covertly and overtly. The potentiality of the media as a means of communication to promote peace or conflict cannot be overemphasized. As a matter of fact, the information super-highway or internet and related technology have further enhanced the capacity of the media to either “destroy” or “build” humanity through their stock in trade.

It is against this backdrop that we critically examined the role of the media in the three major crises (Niger Delta, Boko Haram and the Jos crises) that have had the most caustic impact on the Nigerian social formation in the 21st century. And the questions that readily come to mind here are: How did the media handle the reportage of these crises in a turbulent society like Nigeria? Is there a significant relationship between the environment and media reportage? In what ways have media reportage enhanced or reduced these conflicts? These and others are the critical issues this paper addresses with vim and vigor.

1.1. The Media and Niger Delta Conflict

The linkage between resource and conflict is exemplified in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region is richly endowed with crude oil deposits both onshore and offshore. Before the discovery of oil in 1958, the mainstay of the local economy was fishing and farming but all that have been dislocated by oil exploration and exploitation activities. This is partly what has created the fault lines for perennial conflicts over oil in the Niger Delta. Thus, the role of oil in the Niger Delta conflict is paradoxical: while the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state enjoy the revenue accruing from oil exploitation, the communities in the Niger Delta endure the consequences of oil exploration and exploitation such as oil spillage, gas flaring and several forms of ecological disasters. Narrating on the negative impact of oil on oil producing communities, [Oshita and Osaze \(2010\)](#) observed that:

Oil spillages destroyed aquatic life and rendered Fisherman times unemployed. Acres of arable land have been destroyed along the livelihoods of farmers and families. Rooftops are corroded owing to acid rain. The cumulative effects of these are poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and severely fractured cognition for generations. Worse still, there is a dearth of good schools for children. Scarcity of potable water precipitates conflict over water ponds and land (2010:113-114).

Communities, non-state actors and most recently militia groups have protested against the above conditions using both constitutional and unconstitutional means in attempt to draw the attention of successive governments since independence in 1960 to their plight. In response, government resorted to the use of repressive policy and the tactics of playing one community against the other, thereby instigating and intensifying inter and intra communal conflicts in the

Niger Delta. The use of force in the Niger Delta climaxed in 1999, following the Odi massacre, during the Obasanjo administration, 1999 to 2003; which unofficial source claimed 10,000 people were killed including women and children. This happened four years after the execution of environmental and minority rights activists Ken Saro-Wiwa and 9 others for their alleged role in the killing of four Ogoni chiefs by militias who accused them of collaborating with government and Shell to subvert their efforts toward addressing the fundamental issues like neglect, marginalization and injustice.

Thus, the trajectory of conflict in the Niger Delta can best be explained simply as the inability of the government to provide basic social infrastructures and amenities for the people coupled with the economic dislocation occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation activities. It is the politicization of these issues that culminated into resource control and militancy in the Niger Delta. This point is well articulated in the Ogoni Bills of Right, the Kaima Declaration and other protest documents. Therefore, it is not greed that propels the people of the Niger Delta to agitate for their rights like Collier (2000) would want us to believe. For Collier, it is greed more than anything else that ignites resource-based conflicts.

As Azar (1990) argues that 'the failure of the state to address the need-based grievances of communities was the main causes of conflict in the Niger Delta'. Similar conclusions have been reached by other scholars such as (Suberu, 1996; Ibeanu, 2000; Bassey, 2002; Douglas and Okonta, 2003; Ikelegbe, 2004; Akpan, 2005). However, several intervention programmes initiated by government agencies such as Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to mention just the most recent ones, to address the problems of the Niger Delta have performed below expectation. Not even the establishment of the Ministry of Niger Delta, the granting of amnesty and post-amnesty programmes has brought lasting peace to the beleaguered region. Presently, media coverage of the region centers more on government post-amnesty programmes and not on the growing pockets of emerging militants that are not happy with the way those saddle with the implementation of the post-amnesty programmes are going about it. Their main grouse is that 68% of those benefitting from the programme are not true militants. According to them, the real militants have been denied what should be their inalienable rights. What this means is that there is trouble brooding in the region but it is not receiving any media attention. Rather the billions being spent on the post-amnesty programme is what the media is keeping abreast with.

1.2. The Media and Boko Haram Insurgency

The emergence of Boko Haram, a socio-political fundamentalists group, which also goes under the name-"al-Sunnahwaljamma", or followers of Mohammad's teaching in Arabic with socio-political ideology that rejects Western education and culture is still a subject of debate in the public sphere. Available evidence in extant literature suggests that the group was founded by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 in Maiduguri, from where it spread to Yobe, Kano, Bauchi and other parts of northern Nigeria. It draws its members mainly from the socially oppressed, frustrated, unemployed and unemployable youths of the Northern region as well as the youths from neighboring Chad Republic. The group operates mainly underground until July 2009 when it clashed with security forces in Bauchi. According to media report, an estimated 400 people lost

their lives in the clashes. The federal government had to send a detachment of the Nigerian army to engage the fundamentalists who had initially set many police stations, schools and public places on fire in what could be best described as a war. It was during this 'war' that Yusuf was killed by security forces after being captured alive on July 30, 2009.

The killing of Yusuf has not deterred his followers as they have continued to cause mayhem in Bornu and Bauchi states, killing both Muslims and Christians. This explains why some analysts have argued that Boko Haram may not just be an ordinary sectarian crisis because it has both political and economic tinge. This can be garner from the preaching of its leaders on audiotape. They preach about corruption and bad governance and blame it on Western education. Ironically, most of these preachers are products of Western education. Rationalizing why Boko Haram is strictly not a sectarian crisis but a Northern Nigeria version of what is happening in the Niger Delta: [Herskovits \(2009\)](#) argues that both crises are violent reactions to the flagrant lack of concern on the part of those who govern for the welfare of the governed. Furthermore, she argues that recent uprising in Nigeria such as the Niger Delta, Boko Haram and the Jos crises follow the same trajectory and are usually predictable. The trajectory is bad governance. Similar conclusions have been reached by other scholars such as Ken ([Saro-Wiwa, 1995](#)) and [Akpan \(2000\)](#).

1.3. The Jos Crises

What is popularly known as the Jos crises today is a continuation of the violence that followed the November 2008 Jos North Local Government election. Undoubtedly, Jos is the capital of Plateau state of Nigeria and has for some years experienced several sectarian, ethnic and political clashes among which were the September 2001 and April 2004 conflicts leading to the imposition of State of emergency by the Obasanjo -led administration.

The immediate and remote causes of the Jos crises have been politicized along sectarian and ethnic lines. Those incline to the ethnic thesis believe that the crises is a classic case of ethnic cleansing. They argue that the Beron, Anaguta and Afizere and the Hausa-Fulani, laying claim to pre-eminence over one another is the main cause of the crises. These struggles between what has been dubbed "indigenes" and "settlers" dates back to the colonial era and the aforementioned groups have documented evidence to back up their claims. However, the crises were aggravated in 1991 with the creation of Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas by the Babangida led administration. This administrative restructuring located Beron, Anaguta and Afizere in Jos South and Hausa-Fulani in Jos North. However, the crises have now assumed political, sectarian and socio-economic dimensions. The wanton destruction of human lives and property have become a daily past time of warring groups in Jos. The Jos crises have defied all manners of intervention by the Federal and state governments. The media may also have lost interest in keeping abreast with development in Jos. At best, the incidents are reported merely to keep the account of happenings and not to draw any more attention to these incidents.

1.4. Tumultuous System and Media Reportage

Our thesis is that the kind of information the media disseminates, how it does it, why it does it, and who its target audience is, to a large extent, is significantly influenced by its environment. The following assumptions express the theoretical linkage between the environment and media

reportage. First, there is a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship between these variables. This relationship could be negative or positive. It is positive when it enhances peace and stability in society and negative when it is vice versa. Second, the environment and the kind of information the media disseminates are symbiotically related. This is succinct because the environment shapes the information that comes out of the media and the media also reinforces dominant philosophy in the environment. Third, the nature of the environment and the kind of media reportage that it produces largely influence the quality of governance, peace and stability within any giving political system

In certain circumstances, the media reportage can be an independent variable, while in some situation, it can be dependent variable not minding other intervening variables like government policy (in the case of government own media) and the policies of private media practitioners. Thus, to understand the role of the media in the aforementioned conflicts, one needs to first understand the environment in which the media operates. It is on this note that we present a graphic image of the Nigerian environment as captured by [Herskovits \(2010\)](#):

Ten years of supposed democracy have yielded mounting poverty and deprivation of every kind in Nigeria. Young people, undereducated by a collapsed educational system, may “graduate”, but only into joblessness. Lives decline, frustration grows, and angry young men are too easily persuaded to pick up readily accessible guns in protest when something sparks their rage. Meanwhile, those in power at all levels ignore the business of governing and instead enrich themselves. Law and order deteriorate. The Nigerian police, which are federal, are called on, but they have grievances of their own. Ill-trained, ill-paid, and housed in squalid barracks, they are feared for their indiscriminate use of force. The military, though more professional, is not prepared for dealing with unrest and unrest has proliferated more and more.

What Herskovits thesis suggests is that the political, socio-economic, sectarian, ethnic and other crises bedeviling the country today are products of this turbulent system. These conflicts are consequences of bad governance. This is the same environment in which the media operates, so it is very easy to see why it is difficult for them (government owned media most especially) to avoid the journalism of ‘who pays the piper dictates the tune’ (a tendency that is anti-people most of the time, in the sense that no matter how genuine the grievances of people or groups are, it hardly gets the expected publicity from government owned media; both print and electronic). As a matter of fact, but for the coming of private media (both print and electronic) and most recently, social media like facebook, twitters and others, media reportage was a one-sided affair. For the fear of losing their jobs, government media reported mainly what the government of the day wants to hear instead of illuminating societal problems confronting individuals and groups to those in government so that they can find solutions to the problems. It is interesting to note that the grievances of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta region did not received much media attention until the youths of the region began to respond to government repressive policy with violence, vandalization of oil installations and kidnapping of foreign oil workers. This is what gave rise to the evidential militancy in the region and the corresponding media attention it is now getting. More perturbing, a typical case of bad news sells more than good news.

From our analysis, government media reportage of the Boko Haram and Jos crises also follows the same trajectory with the Niger Delta crises. It is not as if the media was not aware that these crises were brooding. However, very little attention was paid to them until it escalated into full-blown conflicts. In recent times, individuals and groups have used social media to inform both the media and security agencies about intending conflagration between groups but they hardly respond to it until the crises gets out of control.

It is also important to note that sometimes even when private media organizations puts up these issues and grievances in the public realm, those who are supposed to do something about them at all levels of governance (federal, state and local governments), hardly read newspaper or listen to local news. On the same issue, Ken [Saro-Wiwa \(1995\)](#) remark is quite revealing. Saro-Wiwa made the following remarks about African (Nigerian) leaders:

My experience has been that African governments can ignore writers, taking comfort in the fact that only few can read and write. Therefore, the writer must be L 'homme engage the intellectual man of action ([The Guardian Newspaper, 1995](#)).

The implication of the above remarks is that the government can ignore any media reportage especially those dealing with issues the government does not intend to address. This largely explains why successive Nigerian governments often make laws to curtail freedom of the press to square up with private media organizations widely perceived to be a thorn in their flesh. Media ownership or proprietorship in Nigeria tends to support specific interest that promotes their business interests and investments. Oftentimes when powerful people are behind certain conflicts and the media are aware of such persons, hardly has the media lived up to expectations by publishing their names or covering stories relating to the activities of such persons.

With media practitioners especially practicing journalist suffering from the harsh socio-economic and political existential realities in the country, their reportage incidences particularly violent conflicts are informed by these harsh constricting conditions. The media profession like other professions in the society no doubt shares in the limitations and inadequacies inherent in the society. [Ndolo \(2011\)](#) itemize some of the constricting conditions affecting the media and practitioners in Nigeria to include:

- Nigerian journalists are poorly remunerated and are usually owed salaries in excess of at times six months.
- There is a high level of corruption in the media, with. Journalist demanding money before they can write stories or give coverage. They collect “sandwich”, extort gifts and gratifications either directly or indirectly all in attempts to influence news judgment. We now witness a lot of “cash and carry” or “Cajun-pepper” journalism. For the same reason they become chatter boxes and sycophantic megaphones of government (or their sponsors).
- Due to the systematic collapse of tertiary institutions, half baked students are graduated without any academic content and as they enter the industry they become un-trainable.

- There is a decline of professionalism- Media owners are not interested in adding value to their human capital. So, more often than not, those who should be in training are now trainers. Moreover, since media owners do not want to remunerate well they employ quacks.
- Journalists do not enjoy freedom of expression and are denied access to information (perhaps with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, 2011 there would be a difference).
- Journalists are killed, jailed, horsewhipped, branded coup plotters, broken bottle used to shave their heads, their media houses closed, newspapers and magazines proscribed and licenses withdrawn even temporarily (this was more common during the military era, in the current democratic dispensation, politicians use thugs and hired killers to carry out crime against journalists that expose their corruption or related sordid stories) (Ndolo, 2011).

The above conditions amongst many other negative tendencies affecting the media and its practitioners in Nigeria makes it inimical to reportage that are likely to promote peace and help society take positive steps capable of reducing conflict. Undoubtedly, any media that is faced with these conditions is more likely to be owned by media proprietors that are strictly motivated by profit and the provision of propaganda mouth piece for parochial interest in society that tends to stoke conflict.

1.5. The Media and Conflict Reporting: The Way Forward.

The final passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act by the National Assembly would provide ample opportunity for the practice of journalism in Nigeria and the entrenchment of peace media as a major tool for conflict resolution, social justice and human development in the country. However, for the media to become a veritable tool and further perform this transformative role in a deeply divided and conflict prone society like Nigeria, it is important that the media undergo a paradigm shift from its current posture and selective exposure of social and conflict reportage in the country. In other words, the media must be seen as helping to report issues and conflict as they occur without selective coverage. This shift must be such that would provide a place for peace media orientation and operation in order to reduce the tendencies for violent manifestations of conflicts.

The media must present itself as the direct mirror- image of the society, particularly at this historical point when conflicts especially violent conflicts and crimes are prevalent. The media therefore must develop the capacity to help in the reduction of violence in the society. Several scholars and media practitioners have not given the media a place in contributing to peace in the society. Though their pessimism might not be ignored, it is important to ask why this pessimism of the media playing the role of peace maker in a conflict prone society. The media should learn to develop a thorough understanding of the conflict and convey that understanding to their audiences in a way that reflects the truth of the conflict in all its complexity. They should examine the context in which the dispute evolved and explain what caused the conflict in the first instance.

The media or reporters should identify common ground, examine and evaluate efforts made to resolve conflict as well as the power dynamics at play. By critically examining efforts to resolve

the dispute, the media should provide their readers with the paraphernalia upon which to make an informed judgment about the parties and perhaps help to prevent the circulation and broadcasting of propaganda and inflammatory materials, which destroys communities and frustrate the building of trust and peace. Media practitioners must give accurate representation of the causes of a conflict, and the situation in a conflict area to help ensure that the right and most useful type of humanitarian aid are provided by both governments and non-state actors. Sensitivity to religious and cultural philosophy even in time of crises is important. The media should help to counteract the image of those in conflict areas as passive victims by what they put in the public domain.

Generally, the media in its entire genre have four important roles to play in any peace building process. First, they help in defining the socio-economic and political atmosphere in which the peace process takes place. Second, they help to influence the actions of stakeholders in the peace process. Third, the media has an important influence on the nature of debate about the peace process (the debate whether the Federal government of Nigeria should or should not dialogue with the Boko Haram extremists' group readily comes to mind here). Fourth, the media can promote public approval of the peace process.

2. CONCLUSION

The media in its reportage of conflict phenomenon in Nigeria like most other conflict prone society is culpable in stoking conflicts and making reconciliation difficult for conflict parties. The failure of the media and the practitioners alike to rise up to practicing their profession according to the ideal media ethics has generated the emergent quest for peace media in conflict reporting. This quest is derived from the expedient need for media to play key roles in peace building in the country. Finally, there is the need for the convergence of media ethics and peace journalism in the reportage of conflicts issues in Nigeria or elsewhere. This convergence it is hoped will help the media in turbulent systems avoid the pitfalls of propaganda which is likely to escalate conflict in the society.

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