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Media Role in Conflict Resolution and Peaceful Coexistence in Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

Conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in the use of agricultural land are becoming fiercer and increasingly widespread in Nigeria, largely due to 'intensification and extensification' of production activities that are necessitated by increasing human population. The media in this context have become a highly prized strategic resource to all social groups, especially indigenous communities in a conflict situation. Within this context, this paper examines the role of the mass media in conflict resolution and promoting peaceful coexistence in indigenous communities. Secondary data were obtained through a critical review of related literature and documents. The paper adopts the Cultural Theory of conflict to analyse and explain the way that the media plays a role in resolving conflicts between farmers and herders in North-Central and North-East Nigeria. The findings indicate that the media plays a crucial role in conflict resolution between indigenous communities in the country. The paper discovered that ethnic plurality among other things is responsible for increase in ethno-religious conflict in indigenous communities. These crises have led to the wanton destruction of lives and properties across various communities in Nigeria. Notable among such conflicts is the recurring herders-farmers' clashes in North-Central and North East Nigeria with brutal attacks and reprisal attacks in villages in Borno, Adamawa, Benue, Plateau and Taraba States. Efforts to manage the conflicts have largely focused on the mediation, payment of compensations and creation of grazing reserves or cattle colonies in some states of the federation. The paper concludes that without the mass media, the conflict will intrude less significantly into our consciousness and the way people see conflict depends a lot on how it is presented to people by the news media.

Keywords

Indigenous communities, mass media, media and conflicts, peaceful co-existence, and violent conflicts.

Introduction

Conflict has ever been a recurring decimal in history of mankind. More often than not, this is as a result of competition for scarce resources in human society. Conflicts between indigenous communities have existed for a very long time but it may be exactly difficult to pinpoint when the crises actually started. However, from a historical point of view, scholars like Ikezue and Ezeah (2017) refer to the fact that conflicts resulting from cattle grazing have existed for as long as the practice of agriculture. Empirical evidence by Oduma-Aboh (2018) has shown that an attempt to resolve one conflict, another conflict often surface and as such persistence of conflicts in Nigeria indicate that the orthodox methods designed to manage or, and resolve conflicts has not been fully effective (Yar'Adua et al., 2023). It is safe to argue that resource ownership and utilization have directly and indirectly defined the dimensions of most conflicts involving man since time immemorial. Of all resources, however, land has remained an overwhelming source of conflicts among various user groups as well as individuals at varying thresholds (Oduma-Aboh, 2018). Conflicts involving lands have not only heightened the level of insecurity, but have also demonstrated high potential to exacerbate food crisis in Nigeria and other affected countries due to loss of lives, animals, crops and valuable properties (Mojaye & Aondover, 2022).

For instance, the invasion of Agatu in Benue state in north central zone of Nigeria is another killing by the nomadic herdsmen. They rendered some villages in Benue State a gaping wound, spewing forth a river of human blood. No immediate reasons were offered for the attacks. Neither has anybody been able to give the precise number of people killed; but reports say more than a hundred people were killed by the herdsmen. The account of Paul Ede, who coordinated the coalition of civil society groups that visited the National Assembly in Abuja Nigeria to protest the latest killings in Agatu Local Government Area of Benue State, claimed that 400 persons lost their lives in that orgy of violence. The invaders in Agatu reportedly crossed over from Logo and Doma in nearby Nasarawa State and sacked seven villages, namely Okokolo, Aila, Adagbo Akwu, Omikuidi, Ocholonya and Odugbeho. Similarly, in Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani community of Enugu state, it was alleged that no sooner than the law enforcement agents left than the herdsmen struck and ravaged the villages without any challenge whatsoever from the law enforcement agencies. It could be recalled that no fewer than 500 persons were brutally murdered and many wounded in three villages in Jos South and Barakin Ladi local

government areas of Plateau State in north central geo political zone of Nigeria, among other incidents of indigenous community conflicts (Adedogun, 2006).

In this direction, the mass media are expected to contribute immensely to the resolution of conflicts among indigenous communities "because of the central place of media in disseminating information to the people … they have power to aggravate and minimize issues depending on the way they report" (Sandra, 2008, p. 42). Thus, the mass media play a vital role in conflict prevention, resolution, and transformation. They are essential not only for systems growth but also for peacebuilding and stability (Yar'Adua et al., 2021). Conflict is said to be inevitable in every society but all its segments of society are expected to find ways of resolving them (Yar'Adua & Aondver, 2020). This perhaps explains the position of Oso (2017) that behind every concern expressed about the mass media, whether in popular or academic discourse, is the issue of effect. This may be either positive or negative. It concerns factual presentation (journalism) and fictional exhibition (entertainment) and even advertising. Though the age-long debate has been quite controversial and unsettled, there is the general assumption that media through their various offerings do have some effect on attitude, behaviour, ideas, and perception of social reality (McQuail, 2010).

Within this context, the media are often in liberal theory referred to as the "Fourth Estate of the Realm" and the "watchdog of the society", meaning that the media exist as an organ of information sourcing and dissemination, educational promotion, surveillance, social enlightenment, and mobilization. These functions set the media apart as an important link or factor in the relationship between the government and the governed and make them sine qua non to societal growth and development (Sabiu, & Aondover, 2023a). Thus, the expectation is that the media will be vibrant in handling conflict cases in a positive direction so that the government can be able to take proper action. Again, the media must play pivotal roles in promoting indigenous communities in preventing conflicts and to resolves such conflicts through several strategies. It is in this direction that this paper examines how the media assist indigenous communities in averting conflicts and in promoting peaceful co-existence. Based on the lacuna in the literature, the following are the objectives of the paper: to examine the media and conflict reporting, to interrogate the objectivity question in conflict and violence reporting, to explore the role of the media in managing and resolving conflict and to examine mass media and indigenous communities in conflict resolution.

Cultural Theory of Conflict and Media Conflict Resolution

The Cultural Theory of Conflict serves the study goal. This paper used the cultural theory of conflict as its theoretical justification to explain vividly the supposed role of the mass media in a conflict situation. This theory identifies social difference, particularly cultural, as the main factor that creates a social identity and social exclusion thereby creating "we" against "them" feeling which nurtures animosity, hatred, and contemptuous relationship among people of divergent cultures leading to conflict, how the competing interest of groups tie conflict directly into the social, economic and political organizations of society as well as the nature and strength of social networks within and between community groups (Ademola, 2005).

The culturally-induced conflict that this relationship cultivates is a result of the creation of the enemy image which is learned from the early stage of growth to adulthood and is passed on from generation to generation. An example is seen in the case of Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. The theory believes that different forms of identities in various societies exist; however, the one that has ethnic origin is the most dangerous identity and the one that most explains violent conflicts. Psycho-cultural theory of conflict argues that conflict is avoidable when tolerance and understanding among people of different races, cultures, languages, and historic are established. The theory however becomes relevant as it addresses the feeling which nurtures animosity, hatred, and contemptuous relationship among people of divergent cultures leading to conflict.

In this context, there is a nexus between the theory and the study because of the violent extremism in Nigeria and the traumatic condition such conflicts create among indigenous community. The assumption of the theory becomes imperative through which this study is borne out of the realization that in a mix where "indigenous community" meet, most especially as a result of social and geographical contacts, a culture shock is produced. Thus, the politicization or poor mediation of these community members could produce shocks that can explode into social conflict with devastating consequences.

Indigenous Communities and Conflict Resolution in North-Central and North-East Nigeria

Adedogun (2006) traced communal conflicts between the people of Agila in Benue State and Ngbo of Ebonyi State in Nigeria to disagreement over land. He stressed the need to undertake a thorough analysis of the conflict to understand its background, causes, dynamics, parties (direct and indirect) and their positions. This, according to him will help in redesigning a new approach that will provide grounds for the resolution of the conflict. Alimba (2014) posited

that Nigerian elites have not demonstrated enough seriousness and political will to arrest the situation. The outcome is that this has further deepened the underlying cultural and social differences among the different regions, communities, tribes and groups in Nigeria. These differences have plunged many tribes in Nigeria into inter and intra conflicts with the recurrent one being the Herders and Farmers communal conflict in North Central and North East Nigeria.

Similarly, Ajibo et al (2018) examined the social dynamics of farmers' and herdsmen clashes in Nigeria with emphasis on the effects of such clashes on the nation's life, causes and prospect for peace and lasting solution recommended an establishment of conflict mediation, resolution, reconciliation and peace building mechanism, but the study did not specify any mechanism to engender lasting peace between the farmers and herdsmen Sabiu, & Aondover, 2023b).

Yahaya, (2011) carried out a study on the *Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Kaduna and Plateau States: Implications for Development in Nigeria*. He employed qualitative research design (oral interview and documentary sources) in order to elicit relevant responses from both Christians and Muslims of Kaduna and Plateau states. Some of the major findings of the study are: Socially, the conflicts succeed in limiting social interaction and harmony between Christians and Muslims. Economically, the Nigerian economy is weakened particularly through the cost of investment by the conflicts in the affected states as well the discouragement of foreign investors from investing in the country. Politically, the country is now divided along religious lines because of such crises.

Kajuru, (2015) carried out a research on *Audience Perception of Media Coverage and Management of the 2011 Post Election Violence in Kaduna State*. The researcher employed survey research method and functional theory as the theoretical framework of the study. Some of the major findings of the study are: Improved professionalism in peace journalism, good knowledge of and understanding of conflict, its sensitivity and how to report conflict in an objective and matured manner can be used to achieve peaceful co-existence among the people, media had played a vital role in conflict management and reconciliation through positive contribution to peace building by preaching tolerance; respect, trust and understanding among heterogeneous people of Kaduna state as well as setting agenda and playing reconciliatory role during the conflict.

Ummi (2014) carried out a study on *Conflict-Sensitive Reporting in Northern Nigeria: A Study of Selected Newspaper Reportage*. She used qualitative research design (critical discuss analysis) and agenda setting as well as social responsibility theories as theoretical framework. One of the principal findings of the study is that, in some conflict situations, some people used to react violently because of media reports, especially when they feel that their ethnic or religious group is under attack. The study recommends that, situations that show a potential for conflict, should not be ignored by the media until the conflict becomes violent because conflict turns violent when no common ground or shared interest can be established. Therefore in situations like these, the media should endeavour to educate the public to ties that bound and also be pro-peace in their reports (Idris & Msughter, 2022).

Nkechi (2012) in his study used quantitative research design (content analysis) and social responsibility theory as the theoretical framework. Some of the major findings of the study are: Nigerian press actually used sufficient space in their publications in the reportage of religious crises-based issues between 2010 and 2011, prominence were also given to the religious crises-based stories within the study period and evidence in the research data prove that newspaper publishers of religious crises were to a great extent balanced in their reportages. The study recommends that, the mass media, especially, the print, should go beyond mere reportage of religious crises through news stories. They should go into modern journalistic mainstreams to help in preventing ethnic and religious intolerance in Nigeria as well as see a peaceful, united and prosperous Nigeria as a more demanding task.

Within this contextual context, even the most encouraging communication atmosphere cannot guarantee complete harmony. Regardless of what we may wish for, a conflict-free world just doesn't exist. Even the best communicators, the luckiest people, are bound to be subjective in situations when their needs differ from the needs of others. Thousands of issues arise and keep us from living in a state of perpetual agreement – power, aesthetics taste, money, sex, times, humour, etc. Communication specialists recognise that although it is impossible to do away with conflict, there are, however, ways of managing it effectively and skillfully for healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships. In the Nigerian situation, the salvation potentially lies in the alternative indigenous community media system, a system that promises to give a voice to the majority of people in the country. This can be done through dialogues with experts and leaders of the rise to conflicting situations and how to overcome them. Community indigenous media (radio

and newspaper) can facilitate conflict management by focusing its attention on salient issues that affect the unity of the society and facilitate discussion and debates on such issues. For instance, Izuba Community Radio played a vital role in encouraging its members to partake in the traditional Gacaca courts where genocide cases were tried throughout Rwanda.

The attempt is to suggest community indigenous media as a solution to the frequent outburst of conflicts that have defied the conventional approaches to peace-resolution and management. The belief is that when the marginalised and hindered groups are targeted and made partners in the joint effort of the transformation process, the influence of the privileged ones will subtle. Ekwueme and Akpan (2011) observed that when indigenous communities' media are fully operational, they can be used to reach out to conflicting parties and call for restraints and understanding even before the outbreak of hostilities. Such media outlets can be used to reach out to their followers and give the appropriate advice that could nip the trouble in the bud, lead to peaceful resolution of such clashes and bring about peaceful coexistence between the warring parties.

In its ideal sense, indigenous community media in a conflict situation shall provide knowledge to each of the parties involved. That knowledge, according to Orhewere (2009) shall include inference about the culture of the conflicting parties; accuracy in the judgments made about each party's beliefs, values, and norms; and an increased degree of confidence that is being perceived accurately. The local impact will be to offer a public dialogue about an alternative to violent confrontation and space for airing and discussing problems and solutions. The overall impact will be to strengthen the capacity of community media as agents of mediation in social conflict and an advocate of non-violence. Community media, if appropriately and effectively used, could provide a forum for such religious dialogue and could bring about peace and harmony among people of diverse beliefs and religious leaning.

The Media and Conflict Reporting

The media, according to Wilson (2009) have an important role to play in promoting an honest and pluralistic political debate and in providing accurate and timely information about the issues, policies, and strategies that will reduce tension, create the conditions for equitable development and reduce the level of ignorance and fear that contribute to misunderstanding and hostility in society. The MacBride Commission (1980) viewed the roles of media in times of conflict as significant in informing the public of the necessary facts however unpleasant or

distributing they might be. According to Uchenya (2003) the information the media provides becomes a vital factor for evolving and fully enlightening the masses to be fully responsive to the dynamics of society.

Uchem (2003) stated that responsible and useful communication can heal conflict. Aliagan (2006) also observed that there cannot be peace and understanding among members of the community unless they have better and truer information about one another, which is the idea behind conflict reporting. Conflict reporting is the art and practice of gathering, compiling, and disseminating information about the conflict through the mass media. It involves reporting and writing on events and situations of conflict or impending conflict and its magnitude and consequences. Conflict reporting has also been called peace journalism or conflict resolution journalism (Anaeto as cited in Wilson, 2009).

Conflict reporting in the media makes for the introduction, interpretation, or clarification of issues in a conflict situation to which many have given little or no attention at all. Orhewere (2004) states that the media in conflict reporting puts the reader to task to think, brainstorm, dialogue, agree and disagree, accuse, and counter-accuse to bring a lasting solution to the conflict. The role of the media in conflict reporting is basically for conflict solutions. It is to bring about peace. It seeks to bring the parties in the conflict to a peaceful common plane. Conflict reporting assists citizens to rebuild their society and reduce tension or at least not exacerbate existing divisions (Aondover et al, 2023)

According to Pate (2002) conflict reporting tries to depolarize conflict by showing the black and white of all sides and de-escalating by highlighting peace and conflict resolutions as much as violence. Peace journalism seeks to minimize the rift between opposed parties by not repeating facts that demonize one side and set the stage for conflict. In conflict reporting, journalists need to work independently and make a decision on everything from the headline, to the people interview and the selection of images, quotes, and the language used, to the basic decision of what stories are covered and why (Park & Deshapriya, 2008).

Wilson (2009) adds that in covering conflict stories, journalists should add an 'S' for a solution and a 'C' for common ground to the additional 'five W's and H formula (who, what, when, where, why, and how). This is simply corroborating the idea that the ultimate goal of conflict reporting is conflict resolution. Pate (2013) summarizes the common professional errors that are found in media reports thus:

Promoting prejudicial stereotypes about groups and individuals through selective reporting; Reporting intergroup conflicts out of their fundamental sociological, economic, political, and other contents; Making generalized statements not supported by concrete facts and figures. Similarly, attributing statements by individuals to collectives; Publishing rumors as facts; Publishing unfair and discriminating advert; Using inflammatory language in news reporting; The use of inflammatory, misleading and sensational headlines to attract sales. Also, demonizing certain ethnic religious or political groups in an already divided and tense society; Un-objective and biased reporting against some groups, individuals, or communities; Inappropriate use of language in reporting conflict; Using unrepresentative pictures; Unethical editorial conduct of allowing letters to editors and opinion pages to be used as platforms for making inflammatory statements against people or groups; Exposing sources of information to harm and Exposing victims of violent attacks to further attack.

Globally, journalism practice is guided by some operational guidelines of objectivity, balance, fairness, and neutrality which, according to (Shoemaker & Reese, 2009) form the fulcrum of the international principles of journalism and are deemed binding on the practicing journalists and the institutions that employ them. The principle of objectivity behooves journalists (editors and reporters) to give a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of an event in a context that gives them meaning. These they achieve by "selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2009).

Journalists daily receive a large volume of information from different sources out of which they select the newsworthy ones for publication, which is what is being referred to as the gatekeeping function of the media. The principle of objectivity demands that journalists employ appropriate news judgment and value to determine the amount of time (television and radio) and space (newspaper and magazine) allotted to conflicting sides of a news report. It also determines the degree of the importance attached to a story in the newspapers and news broadcast, which in the opinion of Isola (2010) is a function of understanding and experience. "Balance," "fairness" and "neutrality" are other problematic aspects of objectivity. These, according to Isola (2010) presuppose open and free access to media space and time by every participant involved in the news. It is, however, noteworthy that due to time and space constraints not everyone could enjoy this privilege but only those who can pay for it. This is where Oso (2017) notes that the

commercialization and the privatisation of mass media have come to clash with media objectivity. Notwithstanding, it has been observed from the foregoing that objectivity runs through every aspect of the news reporting process.

It is also noteworthy that there is usually a clash of perceptions between journalists and the public over the issues of balancing and fairness in news reporting. Many times the media find themselves in a dilemma when it comes to reflecting a contrary view against public opinion, especially on issues perceived as antisocial or sectional in purpose. For instance, by analyzing and reporting the primary as against secondary causes of violent activities, such as kidnapping, armed robbery, and terrorism among the Nigerian youths, and by locating the cause at the doorstep of the government, media are usually dismissed as rebels and saboteurs. Similarly, the media often run into problems either with the government or with a group when the media attempt to differentiate between sectional and national interests (Aondover et al, 2022)

One other notable component of objectivity is neutrality, which requires a reporter to be emotionally detached from his writing. The aspect of neutrality is the most difficult demand of objectivity that makes reporters walk on a tight rope because human beings have persona idiosyncrasies, which affect their communication process. For example, every journalist brings into the practice some personal attributes or personal history, which somehow influences his perception and understanding of the situations being investigated and reported. His personal history is a product of education, religious and cultural backgrounds, childhood family life, social and economic ties, friendship, and associations. From the several details of an event, the reporter selects which aspect he considers more important based on personal history and experience among other factors. These will equally determine the slant and the direction of the story.

Similarly, how language is used to communicate meaning is critical to the possibility of achieving objectivity in conflict reporting. A language is an indispensable tool of the journalist and, according to McDonald in Oso (2017) it demands the ultimate in craftsmanship, moral sensitivity, and intelligence. This is because the word usage and the meaning attached to it depend on the experience of the reporters and the media literacy level of the readers or the listeners (Governor et al., 2024). Moreover, different words may mean different things to different people. The wrong use of words by a reporter or ascribing wrong meaning to a word by listeners or readers may create a communication gap and the outbreak of conflict.

In managing conflict and creating a peaceful atmosphere for societal advancement, the mass media are thought to have an important role to play. However, such expectations could be seriously vitiated if the mass media are not objective in their presentation of news and issues. Wilson (2009) puts the issues in proper perspective when she notes that, some say journalism is not objective; others say that it cannot be objective and still others say that it should not objective. However, Wilson (2009) states that the ideals of objectivity hold that facts can be separated from values and opinions. He states further that traditional studies of objectivity and bias in news accounts assume that news can and ought to be objective and a reflection of social reality.

Despite the ambivalence which some persons often associate with objectivity, it is somewhat certain that news consumers want to read reports and features that are close to reality as possible because such useful information would help them in making appropriate decisions. Therefore, if the media truly desires to assist in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, they must be seen to be objective. According to Wilson (2009) there are different aspects of objectivity, including but not limited to the following: truth, fairness, balance, neutrality, and the absence of value judgments.

In achieving a higher level of objectivity, journalists are encouraged to always present conflicting possibilities, supporting evidence, judicious use of quotations, structuring information in appropriate sequences, and above all humility (Nwanne in Wilson, 2007). However, Pate and Dauda (2015) examine the challenges of Nigerian journalists. It can be understood that many of them work to beat very strict deadlines. They are handicapped by a weak resource base, poor infrastructural facilities, the absence of basic working tools, and inadequate security cover, among others. Consequently, they are forced to depend on unreliable or incomplete sources of information without conducting proper, deeper, and contextually relevant journalist investigations. Similarly, some of the journalists, even where they appear complement, are often subdued by the attitude and policies of their individual media houses to the detriment of their professional honour (Ezeonyejiaku et al., 2021). Thus, it is important also to address media owners for their understanding of this issue. Closely linked to the above also is the survival instinct pervading most media organisations. In their desire to sell copies and attract viewers and listeners, they violate journalistic ethics through "colorful, unique and unexpected" stories, which may have negative consequences on society.

No appreciable progress can be made in a society with the absence of peace and order. Since conflict is always present, all concerned must work towards conflict management and peacebuilding, which necessarily requires communication. That is where the mass media, equipped with communication messages and devices, come into the matrix. The media can achieve this important task of minimizing the effects of conflicts and enhancing a peaceful atmosphere, according to Wilson (2009) by:

The agenda-setting role of the mass media is crucial in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is often done by drawing attention to the salient issues in a conflict which those involved may have conveniently ignored either out of genuine ignorance or sheer mischief. Newspapers, magazines, as well as radio and television, often focus attention on different interests in a conflict situation, which might escalate the problem. Indeed, in this era of social responsibility, the media's role in providing credible information is crucial. The mass media while relying on the fairness doctrine must make their space and airtime available to all those involved to ventilate their views. By so doing, the person on the opposing side of the conflict can know their opponent's views on the issues at stake. Government-controlled and privately-owned media are eager to reflect the views of their owners while being slow and often unenthusiastic in airing the views of the other side. Such an unprofessional situation seriously undermines the role of the media in conflict resolution.

One of the factors that often worsen a conflict is the presence of false information and rumors. The media is armed with the professional ability to gather and disseminate true and credible information. With the death of rumors and the birth of true information, the negotiators and mediators of a conflict are better placed to achieve heartwarming results. Through the education functions of the mass media, those involved in the conflict may learn the huge cost of the conflict, which may serve as a disincentive to continue the conflict. Since the media operate in society, it must work hard to ensure peace and tranquility. However, the ability of the media to fulfill these responsibilities credibly depends on several internal and external contingencies like ownership patterns, the openness of the communication system, freedom of the media, and rights of the audience to receive and impact mediated messages (Pate & Dauda, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the fundamental issue of the mass media in conflict resolution and promoting peaceful coexistence in indigenous communities. The paper argued that the media

plays a crucial role in conflict resolution between indigenous communities in the country. It was discovered that ethnic plurality is responsible for increase in ethno-religious conflict in indigenous communities. These crises have led to the wanton destruction of lives and properties across various communities in Nigeria. Notable among such conflicts is the recurring herders-farmers' clashes in North-Central and North East Nigeria with brutal attacks and reprisal attacks in villages in Borno, Adamawa, Benue, Plateau and Taraba States. Efforts to management the conflicts have largely focused on the mediation, payment of compensations and creation of grazing reserves or cattle colonies in some states of the federation. Without the mass media, as observed in the literature, the conflict will intrude less significantly into our consciousness. The paper concludes that the way people see conflict depends on how it is presented to people by the media. Thus, there is a growing body of literature that recognised the importance of communication to conflict management and peace-building initiatives across indigenous communities all over the world.

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