

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PEACE BUILDING AND CONFLICT PREVENTION 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 peace building, and conflict prevention 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 farmers herders conflict. 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. Keywords: Tumultuous Society, Media and Conflicts.

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, radio and television has received much recognition and seminal attention, but social media such as twitter face book, 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 over emphasized. 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.(Oshita and Osaze, 2010).

Internal conflicts do not occur spontaneously but tend to have a history. Local media usually have a deeper understanding of the existing political structures, the participants of the conflict as well as the changes preceding the outbreak of violence. The media can therefore not only influence society before the conflict by recognising and properly addressing the issue but also afterwards. Unlike international media covering conflicts, local media are a recognized part of society with the ability to accelerate and magnify fears or reduce them. One should not forget that journalism can play a role in escalating conflicts, which also demonstrates the potential for positive purposes. The media have the power to defuse tensions before they even reach a critical point and keep a critical eye on government, opposition and society. By supplying credible information and reaching a large audience, the media help in managing conflicts and promote democratic principles. In the aftermath of a conflict, reconciliation and societal development can be encouraged as well. (Deutsche, 2008).

Consequently the media in this transformative process can be seen as agents of peace building as media do educate, inform and enlighten people from various background, and cultures on how to live in peace by overcoming prejudice within and between individuals and communities. It is against this backdrop that this study critically examined the role of the media in peace building and conflict prevention in the three major crises (Niger Delta, Boko Haram and the farmer herder's 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.

Peace Building

Peace building itself could therefore be said to mean establishing structure political, economic, social, etc. that engender a state of concord within a community. In Galtung, (1975), the author attempts to make a distinction between peace building and peace-making. Whereas peacemaking and peacekeeping are efforts that are focused on immediate responses of conflict, peace building deals more with producing sustainable peace for the future. Simply put peace building has the tendency of seeking ways and approaches to build necessary structures to prevent conflict. In this sense, peace building does not focus on 'negative peace (absence of war)' but on 'positive peace' by promoting harmony between people, including respect, justice and inclusiveness (Gill & Niens, 2014).

In this regard, one sees peace building as a transformative process that seeks to establish 'sustainable peace' by addressing the root causes of violent conflict. It proposes a holistic process of peace building that concerns entire societies and the individual within them (Lederach & Maiese, 2009).

The Media and Niger Delta Crisis

Several actors and interest groups are involved in the Niger Delta crisis. Youths across the region are active in various conflict issues. They are, at times, being used by politicians to achieve their political objectives. This was observed to be more the case in virtually all the states with Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers leading the pack. They are an integral part of political processes in these states. Their main roles are to serve as thugs and candidates for election as a form of reward.

There are also traditional rulers who are outwardly concerned for peace by interceding on behalf of governments but are being considered as economic agents and forces. They often clash with the youths on sundry issues such as payment of royalties, succession politics to the thrones and on political plain. Their interests are basically three: to ensure peace, get spoils of office, and recognition from political office holders most times without any consideration for how they assumed political power. (ICPR, NSRP & UNDP Zonal Reports, 2016. p.356).

The linkage between resource and conflict is exemplified in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region is richly endowed with crude oil deposit 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). 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.

Media and Boko Haram

The major security threats and challenges ever recorded in the history of Nigeria is the emergence of the dreaded ‘*Boko Haram*’ insurgency group in the North-East Region of the country. Over time, the militant group increased its activities and succeeded in capturing significant swathes of territory, particularly in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States, and terrorist atrocity Azsies attributed to it in other neighbouring states increased in both number and intensity. These resulted in destruction of lives, invaluable property and means of livelihood, as well as the creation of fear and high degree of insecurity among the populace. In addition to these, the large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), especially in the Region remained a major devastating effect the people, government; national and international humanitarian actors are left to contend with. It is important to note that activities of the insurgents extended also to other neighbouring countries, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

Security challenge in the present day Nigeria is the bane of the nation’s political stability and harmonious co-existence of the citizenry. The troubled zones of the country as we are well aware are principally the North-East (particularly Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa) where Boko Haram is ravaging the land. The North Central (especially Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa where the Fulani herdsmen and the farmers are constantly in conflicts, the herders want to feed their cattle and the latter want to protect their crops. (IPCR & UNDP, 2014).

Farmers Herders Conflicts

In north central zone, as the most ethno-nationally and religiously diverse geopolitical zone in the country has its own tapestry of conflicts. In the context of resource based conflicts, the geopolitical zone experiences conflicts between farmers and herders, while cattle-rustling are a conflict-generating crime in the zone. The main cause is the environmental resource scarcity induced movement of herders from the northern part of the country southward. Other identifiable causes between the herders and the farmers are the blockage of water points leading to freshwater scarcity, burning of rangelands, cattle theft, inadequate animal health care and disease control, overgrazing of fallow lands deflection on roads and streams by cattle, extensive sedentarisation, and ethnic stereotyping.

The debate on grazing reserves versus ranching continues, while, informally, the top hierarchy of the umbrella body of the herders regularly intervenes to pay compensation in established cases of encroachment

and destruction of produce. But in mismanaged instances, attacks and reprisal attacks have been common. (ICPR, NSRP & UNDP Zonal Reports, 2016. p.30).

Conflict Resolution is seen by Miller (2003:8) as “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems distinct from management or transformation of conflict.” Mialletal (2001:21) indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed. Mitchel and Banks (1996) use conflict resolution to refer to:

- (i) An outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and
 - (ii) Any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.
- Some people may use the term “conflict resolution” to refer to a specialized field of study and practice as in the field of conflict resolution. Putting these ideas together, it can be said that in principle, conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense. Some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable.

From the point of view of needs, a conflict is resolved when the basic needs of parties have been met with necessary satisfiers, and their fears have been allayed. Others, like those over values, may be non-resolvable and can at best be transformed, regulated or managed.

Conflict Management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. This term is sometimes used synonymously with “conflict regulation.” it covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation. In the words of John Burton, this may include “conflict prevention” (Burton, 1990), a term he uses to connote containment of conflict through steps introduced to promote conditions in which collaborative and valued relationships control the behaviour of conflict parties. The term “conflict management” is perhaps an admission of the reality that conflict is inevitable, but that not all conflicts can always be resolved; therefore what practitioners can do is to manage and regulate them. (Shedrack, 2012).

The literature has attempted to enumerate some conflict influencing

Factors as follows (Agbede, 2010):

1. Political Factor: it appears the most outstanding among the conflict influencing factors is the role of political operators who invoke ethnicity and religious mobilization to gain political relevance. Indeed it has been observed that most of the ethno-religious crises in Nigeria can be traceable to politics.
2. Economic Factors: individual and community claims over ownership or use of land, water resources, and other tangible or intangible interests continue to provoke conflicts and crises between communities and ethnic groups.
3. Social Factors: disagreements over cultural, ritual and other social practices may likely provoke violent conflicts. Chieftaincy matters are not left out either.
4. Defective Legal Framework: the legal framework in Nigeria has been blamed for the incidence of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. This can be reflected in the following observations:
 - i. Involvement of religious advancement as a political manifesto in contesting for election in a multi-ethnic and religious country like Nigeria;
 - ii. Military-imposed constitution that conferred enormous powers on the President including control over the Police and the Electoral Commission;

- iii. The “federal character” clause which was inserted to protect minority interest but has now become a qualification for members of the majority groups to get appointed to positions to which they have neither the requisite qualification nor the experience; and,
 - iv. Denial of opportunity for self-expression, self-actualization and self-development. Such deprivation and frustration can inevitably lead to agitation and conflicts.
5. Clumsy, blunt and near paralyzed Investigatory and Law enforcement Machinery: the pervasive corruption, indiscipline and lawlessness on the part of Law Enforcement and investigatory agencies appear to have made nonsense of the dignity of Law in Nigeria. This situation has led to loss of confidence in the government.
 6. Leadership failures: it appears Nigeria is yet to produce a charismatic Leader with the ability to organize responsively its various ethnic and religious groups. Nigeria has not experienced a leader that has demonstrated outstanding ability to lead and inspire confidence in the various ethnic and religious groups.
 7. Failure on the Part of Government: The government has failed in the following ways:
 - (i) Inability to resolve poverty and unemployment issues since the mid-1980s.
 - (ii) Insincerity on the part of government. Reports of Panels set up to investigate various wrong doings continue to gather dust while government appears unconcerned.
 - (iii) Inability of government to pay adequate attention to early warning signals of crises and conflicts.

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 this work presents 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.

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 face book, 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 receive 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 the analysis, government media reportage of the Boko Haram and 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 response 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. SaroWiwa 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. (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 journalists suffering from the harsh socioeconomic 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) itemizes 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. Journalists 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.

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. Ndolo, (2011).

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 extremist group readily comes to mind here). Fourth, the media can promote public approval of the peace process.

Concluding Remarks

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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