

Political Economy of Conflict Sensitive Reporting in Nigerian Mass Media

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Abstract

Most of the interesting stories by journalists are about conflict. It forms the back-bone of their stories and it is characterised with fiction. The conflict does not have to be a violent one it may be a clash of ideas or ideologies, a disagreement about policies or principles, or an argument about the distribution of resources etc. The media have been criticised of worsening crises through biased, partial and irresponsible coverage and reporting. The paper examines how political economy shapes the coverage of conflict sensitive reporting in Nigeria, and provides a conceptual review of the variables. Agenda Setting Theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework of this study. The study concludes that political economy interest in one way or the other shapes conflict sensitive reporting in Nigeria, both in print and broadcast media sequences as they record high patronage in reporting and sensationalising conflict. The study recommends that the media should engage in responsible practices in times of conflicts.

Keywords: Political Economy, Conflict Reporting, Journalists, Mass Media and Nigeria.

Introduction

“Peace is not everything, but without peace, everything is nothing” (Brandt, 1981). The mass media serve several general and many specific functions. In general, the mass media serve information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion functions. Media serve as watchdog and are regarded as the fourth estate of the realm. They help sanitise the society of all forms of corruption by screening the actions, policies, and performance of those who govern. The media, in its watchdog function, is the vital communicating link between the concerned citizens who want to assess how those who are running things are doing and the evidence that can indicate the quality of their performance. They check the potential for inefficient, irresponsible, unethical, or even illegal behaviour on the part of those who are trusted with leadership. The media have the capability to affect the society in positive or negative way. Asemah (2011) observes that the media in an attempt to educate, inform and entertain have some negative effects on the audience, meaning that the mass media play both functional and dysfunctional roles as well. Akpunonu (2010) posits that the instruments of broadcast, print and new media though wonderful inventions, can become ironic sword producing war inducing features, life-denying counter values, images of human hatred that arouse retaliation, violence,

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apathy and war. Broadcasting with its audio-visual characteristics has the power to stir up feelings of anger, fear and insecurity and these becloud our reasoning. Furthermore, Akpede (2011) asserts that journalists have enormous power in their hands. With the stroke of a pen, they can bring opposing communities or countries together, and with the same pen, they are capable of bringing about disintegration of a nation.

The performance of mass media affects the society and its members in a variety of ways. Since they could be deployed to undermine conflict prevention exercise, the media have often distorted news beyond recognition. With the emergence of internet-based information dissemination and reception platforms often referred to as the “new or social media” and the dependence of people everywhere on these platforms for information, the social inclusiveness of the country’s population are not only despicably portrayed but driven towards conflict among them.

Shehu (2018) argues that “conflict coverage has always been mapped with sensational stories; language framing and captions have ignited sectarian conflict and generated wars since independence” (p.51). Reporters who are conflict sensitive are aware that they are part of the conflict they are reporting on. They recognise that the way they report has an impact on that conflict. They also know that violent conflict is complex and dynamic, and so they try hard to report on efforts to resolve it, rather than focusing exclusively on the violence and its results. In view of the aforementioned, this paper, therefore, examines the political economy of conflict sensitive reporting in Nigeria.

Conflict Sensitive Reporting: A Conceptualization

The elements of newsworthiness are conflict, oddity, proximity, magnitude, prominence, and human interest. Most of these elements can be identified in wars. Sensitive conflict is the prime element of war. In wars, the high casualty figures make them very attractive to reporters. It is one element that prompts the ‘wow’ reaction in news (Mogekwu, n.d). Conflict sensitive reporting is based squarely on the traditional, internationally accepted, journalistic principles of accuracy, impartiality, careful verification of stories and sources, providing context, and an awareness of tone. Conflict sensitive reporting extends and adds to these essential set of principles in order to help journalists become better, more professional reporters. It creates a better understanding and analysis of a conflict. In doing this, it makes journalists more likely to be aware of, and sensitive to the potentially positive or negative implications of what they publish or broadcast. Mass media are always the central institution in the process of mobilization for war or conflict (Musa, 2017).

Arguably it is not the job of a journalist to resolve conflicts, or to be a peace builder, but it is his or her job to ensure that he/she reports in a responsible way, and is conscious of the impact of his/her words on others and on the conflict itself. Journalists make choices about what to report and how to report it, what to leave out just as much as what to leave in. They choose the words they use and the way they describe an event. And these all have an impact. Conflicts are

dynamic, and those participating in a conflict react to events, statements, rumours, and news reports. These things feed into a conflict in positive or negative ways. Rumours, often untrue, can start a murderous revenge attack on innocent civilians. A political leader's statement can launch a new assault on a state or nation whether that is what he expects to happen or not. A news report can spark a mass exodus and a refugee crisis, it can help alter the balance of power, or it can inflame a conflict in dramatic ways by increasing levels of tension or provoking even greater violence.

Conflict sensitive reporting is a design for the media to nurture peace in conflict situation (Bello and Ayodele, 2018). Popoola (2014) asserts that conflict sensitive journalism now has taken center stage in conflict reporting. Consequently, the Nigerian media can embrace conflict sensitive reporting by encouraging the coverage of only aspects of conflicts that foster peace and discarding issues in conflict that may promote violence and further escalate the conflict. Jimoh (2014) postulates that the idea of conflict sensitive journalism is traced to Howard (2003) in a debate about the merits and demerits of peace journalism. Peace journalism as a concept was originally proposed by Johan Galtung when he distinguished between war-oriented and peace-oriented journalism (See table 1).

Peace/Conflict Journalism	War/Violence Journalism
I. Peace/Conflict Oriented Explore conflict formation x parties, y goals, z issues, general 'win, win' orientation Open space, open time, cause and outcomes anywhere, also in history/culture Making conflicts transparent Giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding See conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity. Humanization of all sides; more so the worse the weapons Proactive: prevention before any violence/war occurs Focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture)	I. War/Violence Oriented Focus on conflict arena, 2 parties, 1 goal (win), war general zero-sum orientation Closed space, closed time; causes and exists in arena, who threw the first stone Making wars opaque/secret 'Us-them' journalism, propaganda, voice, for 'us' See 'them' as the problem, focus on who prevails in war. Dehumanization of 'them'; more so the worse the weapon Reactive: waiting for violence before reporting Focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage)

II. Truth Oriented Expose untruths on all sides/uncover all cover-ups	II. Propaganda Oriented Expose ‘their’ untruths/help ‘our’ cover-ups/lies
III. People Oriented Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged, children, giving voice to voiceless Give name to all evil doers. Focus on people peace-makers	III. Elite Oriented Focus on ‘our’ suffering on able-bodied elite males, being their mouthpiece Give name to their evil doers Focus on elite peace-makers
IV. Solution Oriented Peace = non- violence + creativity Highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation	V. Victory Oriented Peace = victory + ceasefire Conceal peace initiative, before victory is at hand. Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society. Leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again

Adapted from McGoldrick and Lynch (2000)

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts agenda setting theory as appropriate framework. The struggle for media space by antagonists and protagonists in a conflict is mainly to influence public opinion and ultimately public policy. This is achieved through the media’s power to set agenda and frames of understanding (Oso, 2017). Agenda-Setting Theory was developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw. The theory emphasizes media coverage of topics deemed important by media gatekeepers. The core idea of the agenda setting theory is that the media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the media perceive as the main issues. The media make us to think about certain issues, they make us think or feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society. It is not different in the case of conflict reporting. People react to media content and in most cases result in creating crises or fueling the existing crises. As mentioned above during the year 2000 crisis in Kaduna, the media reported that virtually all the Igbos in Kaduna had been killed and this made the Igbos in Aba and Onitsha to begin to attack the northerners in an attempt to revenge.

Nigerian Media and Conflict Sensitive Reporting

The media do not just provide information about issues they report, but the way such issues are presented could influence what readers, viewers or listeners think about the issues (Oso, 2017). The Nigerian media have been indicted on inciting conflicts and applauded for introducing approaches to manage conflict through their reports. The paramount casualty in any conflict situation is often the nature of communication among the conflict actors. Perhaps, that is why conflict is commonly referred to as “breakdown in communication”. Ordinary statements from the actors are interpreted within the context of the conflict and this has the potential of accelerating the problem. It can, therefore, be assumed that when third parties, like the media intervene wrongly, they can easily contribute to the escalation of the problem based on what they say and how they say them. The media, in the eyes of the public are the forerunner of accurate, factual and correct perspective of events; hence the people reliance on them (Pate and Dauda, 2015).

Media reports are regarded as critical factors in escalating or reducing tensions. The patterns of media reports in Nigeria, with specific reference to crises are capable of setting the entire nation on fire. The fact still remains that people are more interested in bad news than the good ones. Ironically, the media use this as an advantage and/or opportunity to exaggerate stories in order to sell their papers in the case of newspapers and magazines and provocative images or video clips on television to sustain viewership and patronage. Omenugha cited in Auwal (2015a) observes that “in crises situations, headlines are sensationalized to make sales in the Nigerian media.” The author exemplifies thus: “Boko Haram strikes Kano, killing two Igbo businessmen.” Another example cited in Auwal (2015b) revealed that during the year 2000 crisis in Kaduna, the media reported that virtually all the Igbo in Kaduna have been killed and this made the Igbo in Aba and Onitsha to begin to attack all the northerners in an attempt to revenge.

Another recent sensitive conflict report is that of a popular online newspaper *Premium Times*. The newspaper had headline on one of the crises in Plateau State which reads: “killing of nearly 100 people in Plateau retaliatory – Meyetti Allah.” The paper reported that the violence that erupted in 11 villages in some local governments in Plateau State was retaliation by the herders whose cattle were killed. *Premium Times* quoted Ciroma as saying: “These attacks are retaliatory. As much as I don’t support the killing of human being, the truth must be told that those who carried out the attacks must be on revenge mission” (NAN, 2018). The aforementioned are clear evidence on how Nigerian media report sensitive conflict issues.

Media Political Economy

It has been observed that news reports largely reflect the worldviews of powerful interests (McLeod and Detenber 1999). The power wielders in a society are mainly the economically privileged. They are also those who are likely to invest in the media which they generally use to preserve the existing social order (Ake 1981). As business people, they also expect profit from

their investments. Seminal political economy theorists, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels articulate this point in their classic work:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 67)

Influential scholars of the political economy of the media, Herman and Chomsky (1988), through their propaganda model (PM), argue that the mainstream media generally skew their content to induce the public into agreeing with the self-serving policies of their powerful promoters. The model suggests that there are five political economic filters (size/integrated ownership and profit motive, advertising, sourcing, flak and finally, anti-communism) through which news passes before being presented in the mainstream media (Meribe, 2017).

The political economy of the media also deals with the effects of consumption on media structure and content. The media generally sell their content to the audience with the hope of making profit from the transaction. A large audience is likely to attract more advertising revenue, given that it (the audience) will in turn be sold to the advertisers as potential consumers of their products. Hence it has been observed by Napoli (2004) that the news media operate in a dual product market place:

That is, media firms often simultaneously market one product (content) to one set of consumers (audiences) and another product (audiences or, more specifically, audience attention) to a different set of consumers (advertisers)...That these two product markets are inter-related should be quite clear from the fact that the consumers in one product market (audiences) are essentially the product in the other product market (p. 5).

Media political economy is a critical approach that focuses on the relationship between economic structure, the dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of the media (McQuail, 2005). McQuail further argued that media political economy directs research attention to the empirical analysis of the structure of ownership and control of the media and to the way the media market forces operate.

Political Economy of Conflict Sensitive Reporting in Nigeria

According to Ahmed (2016), media in themselves are big business in pursuit of profit, if they are to survive and prosper. In this respect, some journalists who are involved in sensitive conflict reporting may also see the positive incentives that are derived from such reporting, such as the career recognition and, at times, prestige that may be accompanied. This is because journalists are so intrigued with sensitive conflict; this often results in them reporting. It is adrenalin-pumping for both the journalists and the audiences who have been conditioned to expect this

kind of reporting to justify their patronage. Conflict reporting treats news as a commodity something that has to sell.

Pate, cited in Auwal (2015) asserts that conflict sells. Thus, with the drive for profit by private media and the commercialization policy in government owned outfits, our media organizations “find ready raw material” in conflict. Pate further argues that in their desire to sell copies and attract viewers and listeners, they trample upon all journalistic ethics through “colourful, unique and unexpected” stories, which may have negative consequences on the society. As a principal revenue generating strategy for the media, it will be difficult to convince journalists to focus on events that have not reached the point of explosion. Such events would have to be remarkable. In view of this, Lynch (2012) argued that objective news has three conventions in particular that also predispose it towards war journalism as the dominant form. They are: a bias in favour of event over process; a bias in favour of official sources; and a bias in favour of dualism.

There is, of course, an economic dimension to consider. The economic interest of the media would dictate an emphasis on event over process. Process is obviously more time consuming to report on than event. Also, getting information from official sources is less complex than seeking out possible view points from all stakeholders in the conflict, just as dualism is easier to deal with than pursuing different groups’ perspectives and interests involved in the conflict. As Lynch (2012, p.63) concludes, “the media are thus constrained to confine reports of conflict to violent events and ... this can lead or leave violence to appear, by default, as the only colourable solution.”

Based on the fact available one can argue that political economy interest in one way or the other shapes conflict sensitive reporting in Nigeria, both in print and broadcast media sequences as they record high patronage in reporting and sensationalising conflict.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some conceptual and theoretical issues on political economy of sensitive conflict reporting. Based on the discussion, it is evident that the media instigate and sustain conflicts in Nigeria. No doubt, media organizations and their practitioners by so doing, violate the laws and ethics of journalism. In spite of the negative effects of the mass media on the lives of individuals and the country at large, especially in conflict situations, the media also facilitate and promote peace-building efforts in Nigeria. In crises situations, the roles of the mass media have been found to be very crucial.

The mass media are, therefore, powerful institutions in the society. Journalists can help parties to better understand conflict through careful analysis, considering the conflict from different angles and showing how it affects different people. There is a tendency among journalists to simply report on what is happening, but this does not help our readers, listeners and viewers to really understand what is actually going on. In reporting on conflict journalists need to be able to

analyse what is happening and to draw on their own analysis in posing the kinds of questions that will help people understand what is going on and why (UNESCO, 2012).

Recommendations

In order to ensure that the mass media or journalists are more effective in reporting conflicts, building and promoting peace in the Nigerian society, the paper has made the following recommendations:

1. There is an urgent need to develop training programs which not only teach writing skills but develop critical and analytical abilities of journalists.
2. Media workers reporting in conflict situations can bring other perspectives by training in Peace Journalism which promotes alternative methods such as mediation and co-operation.
3. Nigerian press must rise above petty reporting and face the challenges of constructive and balanced reporting especially during crises or conflicts periods.
4. The press, however, should not support evil or help to perpetuate it and should therefore always take a stand against it. This must be done “professionally,” “ethically,” “objectively,” and “cautiously.”

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