Mass Media Agenda and Conflict Resolution in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

Asemah, Ezekiel S.
Department of Mass Communication
Kogi State University, Anyigba
E-mail: asemahezekiel@yahoo.com.

&

Edegoh, Leonard Onyeka
Department of Mass Communication,
Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus
E-mail: godloveslon@yahoo.com.
Tel: +2348062996196

Abstract

The mass media are known to always set agenda for the public to follow; this they do by raising salient issues, occurrences and events, as they happen in the society and bringing them to public glare. The media set agenda of peace, love, unity, etc, just to mention a few. As they raise these salient issues, people begin to think along that line. In recent times, Plateau State, especially Jos, has been characterised by one form of crisis or the other.

This, in turn leads to loss of lives and property. This paper therefore, attempts to examine the relevance of the agenda setting role of the mass media in resolving the lingering crisis in Plateau State. In addition, the paper examines the way and manner the media have been used to manage the crises in Plateau State. The qualitative research method was adopted, employing the focus group discussion. Findings show that the media have a crucial role to play in conflict resolution. Findings further show that the media have not been giving objective reports of the Jos crises and this tends to escalate the crises. Based on the findings, the paper concludes that the extent to which the mass media are used to resolve crisis in Plateau State is minimal and recommends, among others that, the media should be constantly used to preach peace in Plateau State, so as to bring about lasting peace in Plateau State.

Key Words: Conflict, Mass Media, Agenda Setting, Peace and Development

Introduction

The mass media in every society are seen as agents of social change. This is because they carry out certain roles and functions, which help to develop the populace positively. It is generally agreed that the mass media set agenda for the public to follow. Thus, Asemah (2011:39) notes that the media set agenda by raising salient issues in our society, thereby making people to think along that line. The media raise salient issues as they happen in the society, so as to affect people about the issue, either positively or negatively, with a view to brining about social change. This perhaps explains why Grabber (1989:5) argues that:

> Besides calling attention to matters of potential public concern, the media also provide cues to the public about the degree of importance of an issue. Matters covered prominently by the media on the front page, with big headlines and pictures or as a major television or radio features, are likely to be considered most important coverage, even though it is brief and comparatively inconspicuous, lends an aura of significance to most publicised subjects.

Graber's assertion aptly captures the agenda setting function of the mass media in modern societies. As earlier noted, the media set different agenda,

one of which is peace. Without peace, no society will witness social, economic, political, democratic and educational development. Plateau State in the last ten years has witnessed series of conflicts, as a result of disagreement over certain issues. Galadima (2010:142) notes that when political institutions, such as political parties, executive and legislature that are put in place are unable to reconcile differences, there could be violence and crises. Thus, in Plateau State, these disagreements between the different political and religious groups have resulted into crises, leading to loss of many lives and property. It is therefore in line with the foregoing that the paper examines mass media agenda setting function and conflict resolution in Plateau State, especially Jos.

Statement of the Problem

Jos and the entire Plateau State is popularly known to be ''the Home of Peace and Tourism.'' The State which used to be home of peace and tourism has been precipitated to a home of war. This unfortunate incident started in Jos on the 7th of September, 2011 and has persisted, as we still hear of one form of attack and the other in Jos and nearby villages. Right from 7th of September, 2001, several lives and property, worth billions of naira have been lost to crisis. The crises have been attributed to political, economic and ethnic features, with each ethnic group claiming right. The media however, have a crucial role to play in the resolution of this ugly incident that has befallen Plateau State. This is because the media set agenda for the public to follow. It is therefore against this background that the paper investigates the role of the media in the resolution of the crisis in Plateau State.

Objectives of the Study

The paper is generally aimed at finding out the place of agenda setting function of the media in the resolution of Plateau State conflict. Specifically however, the study is aimed at:

a. ascertaining whether the media in Plateau State have been setting agenda of peace;

b. finding out whether the media have been giving objective reports of the Plateau State crisis;

c. ascertaining how the media should be used to resolve the lingering crisis in Jos, Plateau State.

Conceptual Clarification

For us to have a better understanding of the paper there is the need to clarify certain concepts; these are: conflict and agenda setting.

Conflict

There are several definitions of the concept "conflict". Some authors see conflict as beneficial to the society while others see it as harmful to the society. Conflict, according to Obot in Nwosu and Wilson (2004:105), is a severe case of disagreement, usually caused by or resulting in acts of violence. To Wilson (1997:163), conflict is any situation, which results into controversy, struggle, strife or contention and in consequence, brings about a state of incompatibility between humans and a crisis within the society. This implies that conflict or crisis refers to the state when there is a disruption in the natural order of things; it may occur at the intrapersonal and group levels; that is, local, national and international levels. Anyanwu in Nwosu and Wilson (2004: 111) notes that conflict must find expression in a communicable form. Thus, conflict at intrapersonal level has no relevance to a communicator, unless the person expresses the internal conflict in some form, whether verbal or non verbal.

Crisis, according to Asemah (2011:240) characterises the dynamics of human interaction; it is a universal phenomenon that can occurs between individuals, groups and nations. To Gouran, Miller and Wiethoff (1992:189), conflict may be seen as an expressed struggle between at least, two independent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. A conflict can actually change relationships. Friends can become foes as a result of conflict. A Conflict not only can arise between individuals, but also, among countries, political parties and states, as well. Conflicts have negative impact on the lives of the people of a nation. But Burgeoon and Ruffner (1978:483) have a different opinion when they argued that conflict is beneficial to the society. They noted that societies have advanced most when conflict has been recognised as an inevitable and even healthy aspect of human interaction and when the communication process has been valued as a means of managing that conflict.

Agenda Setting

The term ''agenda'' means a list, plan or outline of things to be considered. The concept implies the ability of the media to mentally order the world for

us. Thus, agenda setting is seen as the way the media set the order or importance of current issues, especially in the reportage of news. When we say that the media set agenda for the public, we simply mean that the media, whether electronic or print, have the ability to choose and emphasise certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important (Asemah, 2011).

According to Orewere (2006), agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to influence the level of the public's awareness of issues as opposed to their knowledge about those issues. Langs and Langs, cited in Yaroson and Asemah (2008) posit that the media build up public images of public figures. The media constantly present objects and suggesting what individuals in the society should think about, know about and have feelings about. Research has shown that most of the pictures people store in their heads is based on what they come across in the media. McCombs (n.d), notes that the power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news.

Theoretical Perspective

To have a better understanding of the study, two theoretical frameworks have been chosen. They are the agenda setting theory and the framing theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory states that the news media have a large influence on audiences, in terms of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. Agenda setting theory's main postulate is salience transfer. Salience transfer is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their news media agendas to public agendas. Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors, etc, focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda setting role of the news media. Related to agenda setting is agenda building theory, which explores how an issue comes to the attention of policy makers and media. The media agenda is the set of issues addressed by media sources and the public agenda, which are issues the public consider important. The

agenda setting theory, thus states that issues that receive prominent attention on the national news become the topics that the viewing public considers to be most important.

The theory is relevant to the study in the sense that the media set agenda for the public to follow and have the ability to influence what people think about. Thus, since the media can set agenda for the public to follow, it becomes imperative to use the media to set the agenda of peace in Plateau State, especially Jos

Framing Theory

The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition, but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand, rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. The theory assumes that the media draws the public attention to certain topics, it decides where people think about, the journalists select the topics. This is the original agenda setting 'thought'. Thus, a frame refers to the way media and media gate keepers organise and present the events and issues they cover and the way audiences interpret what they are provided (Asemah, 2011). Framing theory and the concept of framing bias suggests that how something is presented (the frame) influences the choices people make. Communication itself comes with a frame. The elements of the communication frame include: A message, an audience, a messenger, a medium, images, a context and especially, higher-level moral and conceptual frames. The choice of language is, of course, vital, but it is vital because language evokes frames — moral and conceptual frames. Baran and Davis (2009:35) explain that the framing theory examines the idea about how people use expectations to make sense of everyday life. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. This field of meaning can have an effect on the audience's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, by connecting a particular meaning or interpretation on an issue. For example, when journalists select topics that they are going to write about, they are inevitably drawing the audience's attention to a particular topic, which is the original concept behind the agenda setting theory.

Just like the agenda setting theory, the framing theory is also relevant to the study; relevant in the sense that it can be used to also set the agenda of peace in Plateau State.

Literature Review

Mass Communication plays an important role in our society; its purpose is to inform the public about current and past events. Mass communication is defined as the process whereby professional communicators use technological devices to share messages over great distances, to influence large audiences. Within this process, the media, which can be a newspaper, a book, radio, television, etc, takes control of the information we see or hear. The media then use gate keeping and agenda setting to control our access to news, information and entertainment (Wilson:2004 14). The media set agenda of social change in every modern society. According to Asemah (2009:11), through the media of mass communication, the community members can be bound together. John (1997:6) noted that the mass media bind communities together, by giving messages that become a shared experience. The media play an important role in integrating the members of the society, thus, in times of conflicts, whether religious, ethnic or political, the media of mass communication can be used to preach peaceful coexistence, thereby, bringing about peace. Commenting on the role of the media in conflict resolution, Obot, in Nwosu and Wilson (2004:105) notes that:

> In resolving conflict in modern societies, the media, to a great extent, provide rendezvous for all the interest groups or the aggrieved parties to sit and express their minds on issues in contention. This would be possible by providing and guaranteeing every citizen, easy access to media facilities. All the groups in conflict have to be represented in news and other programmes in which issues in conflict are discussed. The fact that divergent views are represented in the news and discussion programmes, usually goes a long way to calming frayed nerves. Thus, the mass media should go beyond reporting eruption of conflict, to investigating and reporting remote and immediate causes of the crises.

The above assertion by Obot aptly captures the relationship between mass media and conflict resolution. Meaning that the extent to which the media can be used to promote peace in modern societies cannot be overemphasised. Asemah (2011:49) notes that whenever there is crisis in any community, the media are quickly employed to preach oneness, unity and emphasise the need

to leave in peace and harmony. In the same vein, Ndolo (2005), says that the media gain insight into circumstances of others, they identify with others and gain a sense of belonging, thus, they are so useful in times of crisis. According to Okunna, (1999), integration has automatically become a function of mass communication, which is of particular importance in our society (modern) whereby, ethnic, religious, political and other diversities divide people, both nationally and internationally. The mass media, according to Okunna provide messages, which people from different groups and nations, require in order to know understand and appreciate each other.

Free and critical media plays a central role in democracies by constituting the main source of information, which provides the society with knowledge and a variety of experiences. It also serves as a forum for public debate, conception and development of opinions. The media are viewed as a source of power that influence, control and promote new standards in the society and reinforce the existing ones. Media are thus, the principal agents for societal development, democracy and good governance and a crucial element in areas of conflict. It can be suggested that media are both a friend and a foe to a peace process. Media can foster human security and there is evidence that media can reinforce motives for fuelling wars. They can be instruments for peace and conflict management, which promotes messages and strategies that can lead to peaceful agreements and tolerant behaviour in a given society. Media can also be a weapon of violence that propagate biased information and manipulate societies or groups in conflict with divisive ideologies and harmful actions. Thus, the media have become pervasive and extremely influential in attitudes towards conflict. The role of media in conflict has increased its place in public attention (Forsberg, 2006). There are efforts to promote the use of media to facilitate conflict resolution and peace media. Peace media can be defined as the use of radio, television and print media to promote peace, to disseminate truthful information or alternate viewpoints that could turn public sentiments towards peaceful resolution of conflict or to counter ''hate radio''. Peace media workers are supposed to be balanced and unbiased when describing the parties involved in the conflict, but not neutral and passively observant when it comes to depicting peaceful means as the only acceptable way of resolving conflicts. Media in many ways can contribute to reshaping the course of events in a peaceful direction. For instance, media can stress the advantages of peace building, promote individuals and groups involved in peace initiatives and balance the views of the actors.

As a watchdog, the media should give credit where it is due and criticism where appropriate. Acting as watchdog, the media should bark as an early warning when there is potential danger. By heeding the early warnings and sounding the alarm, the media could act as a powerful tool in conflict management and prevention. All conflicts start as misunderstanding or tension between and among a group. If not quickly recognised for what it is or its potential, it can in time, explode to engulf a larger section of the community or nation. The African media can play a vital role in defusing tension, reducing and containing conflicts. It can do so by being deeply aware of the fragility of their countries' social fabric, of the efforts being expended at unifying their countries, the weaknesses and strengths of governing impoverished, developing countries. By gaining in-depth knowledge of their own countries, people and culture, then and only then, are journalists in a position to use their skills, knowledge and experience positively and in the public good. In our mission to inform and educate, we must stop to think of our roots. African values, customs and traditions, so as to be better able to situate ourselves to report objectively, professionally and knowledgeably on the issues affecting our societies. A journalist, in this case, can be seen as a public servant with a public service to perform (Onadipe and Lord, n.d).

Many advocates of conflict prevention are convinced that the media can play a critical role in defusing tensions and forging peace. But most media representatives are opposed to becoming actors in the developments they have to cover. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for them to be won over to the cause of conflict prevention (Hans van de Veen, n.d). What role can the media play in helping to prevent conflicts from escalating? Potentially, a big one! They agree that both conflict mediators and journalists, but they disagree on how.

Galadima, in Pate (2002) notes that the journalist needs to be aware of the fact that reports of crisis have the tendency to either escalate or diminish the crisis. The reports of crisis generate reaction from different people within and outside the place where the crisis is taking place or has taken place. The reports generate discussions from people of the same tribe, religion, profession, etc, thus, if the report does not go down well with such people, it causes more confusion. According to Galadima, the reaction is often a show of solidarity which is normal with group membership. He notes that it is the best method of protecting or promoting group interests and relevance. The reactions may therefore be negative, positive, violent or non-violent,

spontaneous or piecemeal, sudden or gradual, all depending on the nature of the crisis. The journalist must be so meticulous in the stories that have to do with crisis. The essence of this carefulness is to avoid being accused of taking sides, inflaming the crisis or posing as a security threat to the nation.

This is to avoid being judged by the law. The journalists must report stories accurately and factually during crisis. The journalist should not be happy about occurrence of crisis in any given society to the extent of turning it to a money making venture. The journalist should not capitalise on crisis, especially the one that affects people directly, to sell their stories and make money. Avoid showing stories with gory pictures during crisis. By gory pictures, we mean pictures or photographs of beheaded persons, burnt persons, etc. More so, the journalist should not mention names of persons affected by the crisis.

The journalist must be very careful when dealing with the parties involved in the crisis. This is because, as noted by Galadima in Pate (2002:61), every party to a crisis would always want to use the media to promote its interest at the expense of their opponents. The journalist must also be conscious of the media laws governing media reports on crisis and crises; every crisis has security implications. More so, the journalist must be conscious of the ethics of his profession.

Methodology

A focus group discussion (FGD) was used to collect data for the study. The residents of Jos North Local Government Area constituted the population of the study. The rationale of the selection was based on urban centeredness. The study made use of the stratified and purposively sampling. The respondents were first grouped into strata for the FGD, discussants were then purposively selected, because only those who were interested in the subject matter of investigation and were willing to be part of the discussion groups were selected. A total of five (5) discussion groups were held.

Procedure and Instrument for Data Collection

Discussants in groups, ranging from ten (10) to twelve (12) were first adequately briefed on the purpose of the research and the focus group discussion process. They were also trained in focus group discussion process. Then the moderator, using FGD discussion guide and a tape recorder, asked guided questions while allowing discussants to discuss freely. The moderator only interjected, either to keep the discussion on track, to

further explore a fresh angle, to pose a new question or to suggest a new dimension to the topic of discussion. One of the moderators took written notes to compliments the tape recorded data. A 10-item discussion guide was used to moderate the discussants. The instrument was written in English, which is the dominant language of the people.

Findings/Discussion

Findings reveal that the media in Plateau State have been setting agenda of peace. Majority of the discussants identified the Nigerian Television Authority, Jos Network Centre and the Plateau State Radio and Television Corporation, as the major electronic media that have been in the fore-front for the promotion of peaceful co-existence among the different ethnic groups in Plateau State. Radio was identified as the major medium through which the discussants heard about the message of peaceful co-existence. This, according to the discussant, is attributable to the fact that radio can reach the grassroot level. Thus, it is pertinent to use radio to set agenda of peace in Plateau State. This is also consistent with the literature review, where it was established that the media have a crucial role to play in the promotion of peace in any modern society.

Discussants' views were sought on whether the media have been objective in reporting the series of crises in Plateau State. The discussion revealed that the media have not been objective and thus, key have not been fair. Objectivity is the ability of the media practitioners to detach themselves completely from what they are reporting. But in the case of Jos crises, the journalist often reports to favour his religion, ethnicity, etc. Thus, you see that the media become polarised in terms of reportage during crisis in Plateau State. This finding is consistent with Galadima, in Pate (2002) who argues that some of the reasons why journalists become bias during conflicts reportage, among others, may be: religion, ethnicity, ownership interest, unprofessionalism, etc. Let us briefly explain these factors, as captured by Galadima, cited in Asemah (2011):

i. Religion

When you have crisis between two different religious groups, you are likely to favour the religion you belong to with your stories. Hardly will you find a Muslim reporter favouring the Christians with his report or the Christian journalist favouring the Muslims with his reports during crisis. This means that religion can make a reporter to be biased. The reporters are also members

of these religions and naturally, they are bound to write in favour of the group or religion they belong to.

ii. Ethnicity

Crisis occurs between people of different ethnic groups. The journalist is also bound to write in favour of his own ethnic group. For example, if the crisis is between the Igbos and Yorubas, the Igbo journalist will write to favour his ethnic group while the Yoruba journalist will also write to favour his ethnic group.

iii. Reliance On The Group Leader For Information

When crisis happens, the journalist may not be able to get first hand information thereby, relying on the leaders of the group, either religious group or ethnic group. The leader may not give the correct version of the event and this may make the reporter to give incorrect reports.

iv. Ownership Interest

The media owner may dictate what the journalist should report about the crisis. And the journalist who does not want to be sacked will comply with the dictates and directives of the owner. This mostly happens where the interests of the owner are affected.

v. Regionality

The journalist will write to favour his region (section) when there is crisis. This explains why the media in the West promote the interest of the Westerners while those in the North always promote the interests of the Northerners.

vi. Special Liking for One Party of the Crisis

It is very natural and human that people have special liking for certain people and hate others. When dealing with two people or parties, you may like one than the other. Journalists are also human beings, so, they favour some people during crisis with their reports to the detriment of others.

vii. Unprofessionalism

Most crisis reports are biased because, most journalists who act as crisis reporters are not trained in the field of journalism. They therefore, do not know the essentials of crisis reporting.

The discussants reveal that the media, especially the print, have used sensational pictures to show the crisis in Plateau State and this has gone a long way in aggravating the crisis in Plateau State. More so, this sensational act of reporting, normally leads to reprisal attack. One of the discussants cited example with the Police Commissioner in Plateau State (during the 2010, January crisis) who stated in one of the television stations, that the crisis was sparked off when a group of Muslim youths went to attack a church in Nasarawa area of Jos, Plateau State. These comments were very sensational and it was what actually led to the spread of the crisis, leading to loss of lives and much property worth millions of naira.

There is a saying that "the pen is mightier than the sword". Maina (2010) notes that the media deliver messages in form of news, advertorials, editorials and/or opinion sampling. In doing this, the audience becomes informed and forms opinions on events or issues. This places the media in pivotal position in times of conflict. The media could damper or escalate it. Concerning the Jos crisis, this shows signs of partisanship and lopsidedness in geographical location and religious affiliations, which is often unhealthy and normally leads to more crisis. This lopsidedness appears to manifest in more recent conflicts, with the stories and editorials, clearly show that the media are divided along ethno-regional and religious lines. There was clearly over-sensationalism of events by the media. This viperous tone used in some of the features, articles and responses reflect the partisan role of the media in times of conflict. This is very dangerous and it negates the principles of neutrality and objectivity in the media profession.

The media have a crucial role to play in setting the agenda of peace in Plateau State and to do this effectively, there has to be objective reporting. The media practitioners must learn how to remove themselves from the stories that they are reporting and report objectively. One other area that needs to be touched is the area of sensationalism. The media must not sensationalise, it motivates the parties in a crisis or conflict to carry out more havoc. The duty of the media in crisis situation is to set the agenda of peace so that the conflict should be resolved.

When the researcher sought to establish how the media should report crisis and set agenda of peace in Plateau and in Jos in particular, the discussants were quick to state that the media can use these techniques to set agenda for peace in Jos and its environs: editorials, feature, commentaries, news, and investigative journalism. And more so, the media must be objective and

refrain from sensationalism, so as to be able to set agenda of peace in Jos and the entire Plateau State.   In any crisis situation, the role of the media is so crucial. Information is regarded as a critical factor in escalating or reducing the tension. If information is not disseminated carefully about the crises to the populace, it may portend negative consequences for the nation in question. This is because, the media based on their reports in times of crises, can set the whole nation on fire. This is where the social responsibility of the journalist needs to be tested. Thus, Sankore (2001:15) notes that:

> Nothing defines the character of a media establishment more sharply than any crisis that pitches nation against nation, or one section of the society against another. In times of crisis, the responsibility of the media is manifest tenfold by the society's demand for more news, information and analysis and therefore, its increase capacity to influence debate and shape public opinion. Every word written or spoken by the media is a potential matchet, bullet or bomb, in the hands and minds of the perpetrators and victims of the crisis. This raises serious questions on what should be the role of the media in time of war and crisis. The ethical, moral and professional obligation is to provide the public with accurate and balance reporting that does not distort or suppress information.

Sankore's ascertain simply implies that the journalist should be socially responsible when reporting crisis. The journalist should not escalate the crisis based on his report. The journalist should be an intermediary; you think of a way of reducing or quelling the crisis with your reports. Mu'azu in Pate (2002:5) however, recommends the following guiding principles to crisis and conflict reporting:

- verify the accuracy of information from all sources;

- give opportunity to all concerned persons (victims, aggressors, especially the voiceless, the poor, the weak) to be heard;

- endeavour to identify news sources and avoid shielding sources with weasel and elusive phrase;

- do not misrepresent or distort headlines, pictures and video clips just to pander to audience appetite for crisis;

- respect the cultural values of persons in a crisis situation;

- do not stereotype individuals and groups by gender, religion, ethnicity, geography or disability;

- promote open exchange of views;

- do not mislead by re-enacting crisis situations with potentials for escalation;

- do not pander to prominent interests, maintain good tastes;

- show sensibility to persons affected by the crisis in interviews and in using photographs; and

- admit mistakes and make amends.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper examines the role of the media in setting agenda of peace in Plateau State, especially Jos. It also examines the way the media have handled the series of crises that have befallen Plateau State in recent times. Based on the findings and discussions, the paper concludes that the media have a crucial role to play in setting agenda of peace, which will bring about conflict resolution in Plateau State, but the extent to which the media are used to preach in Plateau State is minimal.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and discussions, the paper recommends that:

a. The media should be constantly used to preach peace in Plateau State so as to bring about lasting peace in the State. The electronic and print media must be regularly used to preach peaceful co-existence among the different ethnic groups in Plateau State.

b. There is the need for the media to be objective when reporting crisis. Journalists should endeavour to detach themselves from stories that they report to the public. Objective reporting is the basis for sound journalism.

c. The media should pay more attention to peace journalism in Plateau State and in Nigeria at large. This will create the perception of oneness, unity and love, among the different segment of the society.

d. Journalists should endeavour to avoid sensationalism as this causes more crises in the society. Sensationalism causes more crises, thus, print and electronic media should avoid sensationalism and embrace peace journalism.

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