



## **Deciphering Ethnic Bias in Conflict Reporting in Nigeria: The Cases of *Boko Haram* and Niger Delta Militancy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria's march toward the establishment of a modern industrial/bureaucratic economy, the uneven place of development, the widening chasm between the rich and the poor as well as many forms of political, social and cultural disparities have caused a paroxysm of disputes, conflicts, and crises sometimes violent. These national realities have led analysts and scholars to postulate that the Nigerian press mimics Nigeria's ethnic coloration. Thus, it is said to have Hausa/Fulani press, Yoruba press, Igbo press, etc. To what extent does this impinge on conflict reporting in Nigeria? This paper content analyzes four newspapers in their reportage of the *Boko Haram* crisis and the Niger Delta militancy. *Boko Haram* took the form of widespread destruction security structures of by Moslem fundamentalists alleged to be against Western values. The Niger Delta militancy involved oil theft, hostage taking, and violent destruction of oil/gas infrastructure due to perceived marginalization of the region. The discourse is predicated on Habermas' (1989) ideas of rational, undistorted communication and Westerstahl's (1983) concept of objectivity. The conclusion of the paper is that in spite of the characterization of the Nigerian press as ethnic, ethnic biases in news reportage are subdued.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria is a large, complex, and multi-ethnic society. The peoples that make up Nigeria existed as autonomous and sometimes interacting societies in the pre-colonial times. However, as a fact of colonization, people of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds were brought together. Beyond this, in its attempt to forge both a political and an economic entity,

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coupled with endemic factors such as pervasive poverty, deprivations, neglect, and abuses have spawned frequent cases of disputes, disharmony, and violent conflicts.

After its independence from the British colonial authorities, Nigeria has continued to witness many incidents of religious, ethnic, labour, youth, border, and economic disturbances. There have also been cases of constitutional, electoral, and environmental crises.

Nigeria has a population of about 140 million people. Its main ethnic groups are Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani. However, there are over two hundred other ethnic nationalities speaking more than 200 languages. Ethno-conflicts in Nigeria spares no region. In the east, communities fight one another over farmland rights, fishing areas, or money paid by oil production companies. Gaye (1999) has identified some of the ethnic clashes in Nigeria to include: Ijaw/Urhobo/Itsekiri wars in Warri, Delta State; Ijaw/Ilaje wars in Ondo State; Aguleri/Umuleri war in Anambra State. Others are Ife/Modakeke, Ogoni/Andoni, Shagamu, Zango/Kataf, Jukun/Tiv, Ekid/Ibeno, Ngwa/Ikot Umo Essien, etc.

Apart from ethnic clashes, religious conflicts often erupt in Nigeria with many devastating consequences. Globalsecurity.org (2008) has attempted to catalogue some of the recent cases such as the May 1999 and May 2000 Sharia riots in Kaduna State, 2001 inter-religious clashes in Jos, and similar disturbances in Bauchi, Kano, and so on. These disruptions often lead to thousands of deaths, displacement of persons, and loss of property, farmlands, and communities.

#### **The Niger Delta Crisis**

The Niger Delta crisis is as old as the Nigerian federation. The people of the delta drew attention to the neglect of the region, and the Willink's Commission of 1957 in its report tendered in 1958 recognized the region's difficult terrain and described it as poor, backward, and neglected (Anibueze, 2009).

However, according to Wikipedia (February 21, 2010) the following can be distilled about the conflict in the Niger delta:

- Though the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta have employed numerous skilled and well-paid Nigerians, the greater number of Nigerians particularly the Niger Delta peoples and the far North has become more impoverished since independence.
- In 1992, the Ogonis of the Niger Delta formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) headed by Ken Saro-Wiwa to campaign against environmental degradation occasioned by oil prospecting and production as well as for their ethnic rights.
- In the late 1990's, major oil communities: Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, formed militant groups and warred against one another over land and oil royalty rights.

- The establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in the year 2000 for the development of social and physical infrastructures, ecological/environmental remediation, and human development; produced only marginal results.
- From 2003, armed groups began to emerge in the Delta region. The combined activities of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) and a host of other fringe and cult groups significantly disrupted Nigeria's oil production capacity. The groups destroyed oil pipelines, blew-up flow stations, kidnapped oil workers for ransom, held expatriate workers hostage, killed Nigerian soldiers, etc.
- In 2009 a full scale military action embarked upon by the government's Joint Task Force (JTF) against the operation of the militants resulted in huge civilian casualties, destruction of properties, and displacement of persons and communities even as militant activities continued.
- To break the stalemate, President Yar'Adua proclaimed an Amnesty lasting 60 days beginning August 6 to October 4, 2009 to allow militants turn in their weapons for personal re-orientation and the development of the region.

### **The Boko Haram Crisis**

According to the Da'wah Coordination Council of Nigeria (DCCN) (2009), the term *Boko Haram* may be interpreted to mean that, "Western secular education is islamically prohibited" (p. 18). The group that upholds this view in Nigeria actually calls itself, "Ahlas-sunnah waal-Jama'a ala Minhaj as Salaf. This means, "People of the way of the Prophet Mahammad and the community of Muslims."

The ideology of the group according to Gusau (2009) can be summed up as follows:

- Western education, brought by non-Muslims was outside the teachings of Prophet Mahammad.
- Western education has a corrupting influence on Muslims and that it is the major factor militating against the implementation of a full Islamic system.
- Gaining employment and receiving wages are associated with Western education and such earnings are prohibited.
- Trading is encouraged but luxurious living is worldly, not divine. To engage in paid employment is therefore denying oneself the time that should be devoted to worship.

Gusua further chronicles the genesis, development, and fall of *Boko Haram* as follows:

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- Malam Muhammad Yusuf, an Islamic preacher adopted the *Boko Haram* ideology sometime in 2002.
- A breakaway faction of the group set up base (“Afganistan”) near Kananma in Yobe State close to the border with Niger Republic. They sought an independent state with own government, territory, and identity. In January 2004, the group attacked a police station near Kananma and Damaturu seizing arms and ammunition. The federal government confronted the group with troops killing and arresting dozens.
- Again, in September 2004, the group attacked the divisional police headquarters in Bama, Borno State, killed policemen and destroyed the station. They also attacked the police headquarters in Gwoza, destroyed property, and carted away arms. Again, the federal government deployed troops and killed 28 members of the group.
- The sect went underground for three years but reappeared in Kano State in May 2007 after the April 2007 presidential elections. The group attacked the Road Safety Commission office and the Panshekara police station, killed 11 policemen and made away with arms.
- In between these attacks, the sect leader, Muhammad Yusuf was often arrested and interrogated by the state security service and later charged to court. The courts however, acquitted him for lack of evidence.
- In June 2009, 17 members of the sect were shot by men of the Borno State Joint Police and military anticrime team following a scuffle because members refused to wear crash helmets while operating motorcycles.
- The crisis took a bloodier dimension from July 25, 2009 when the sect stormed Bauchi, Maiduguri, Yobe, and Kano destroying different police stations, barracks, and killing policemen.
- The federal government mounted a counter insurgency operation using soldiers who bombed the sect leaders’ enclave and also killed Yusuf and hundreds of his group members.

### **The Problem**

We have noted earlier that Nigeria is a country of numerous ethnic groups. Lewis (2007) observes that ethnicity is a central theme in the analysis of Nigerian politics. He also notes that the country’s history of two previously failed democratic regimes, six successful military coups, and a three year devastating civil war which claimed millions of lives were instigated by ethnic rivalries or powered by communal conflicts. Lewis further explains the situation thus:

Since the transition to democratic rule in 1999, ethnic identity and mobilization have been prominent features of the political landscape, more than five hundred incidents of communal violence have occurred throughout the country, in which at least 11,000 people have died. There have been incidents in virtually all regions, with particular concentrations in the oil producing Niger Delta, Muslim-majority states in the Northwest, plural communities in the Middle Belt, Igbo-majority areas in the southeast, and the commercial capital of Lagos (p 1).

Lewis concludes that Nigerian political behaviour is propelled by ethnic solidarities. To him, ethnic political parties, clientelism, and social polarization are all connected to powerful communal allegiances. Beyond politics, the Nigerian press is also often thought to be ethnically or religiously polarized between the Hausa/Fulani north and the Yoruba/Ibo south though there are hundreds of minority ethnic groups in both regions. The ownership pattern and geographical location of these presses add to the “ethnic coloration” often attached to the Nigerian press. *Leadership, Daily Trust, New Nigerian* are popular in the north and are owned by northerners and circulate predominantly there. *The Punch, The Guardian, ThisDay, Tribune, Vanguard, Champion*, etc are owned by southerners, and are more popular in the south where they are also located.

Lewis (2007, p 30) has commented that, “traditional modes of ethnic politics in Nigeria stress the competition among the country’s three largest groups: the northern Hausa-Fulani, the south western Yoruba, and the southeastern Igbo. Minority groups of which there are at least 250 are often regarded as being marginal to political competition”. Perhaps this is why the Nigerian press is often characterized as Hausa-Fulani press, Yoruba press, Igbo press, minority press. In view of his, this paper set out to determine if there is significant evidence of ethnic bias in the reportage of the *Boko Haram* and the Niger Delta crises by selected Nigerian newspapers.

### **Research Questions**

The study aimed to provide answers to the following questions:

1. In the coverage of the *Boko Haram* religious conflict in Northern Nigeria, did Nigerian newspapers show significant bias in the reportage of the crisis?
2. In the coverage of the Niger Delta crisis in Southern Nigeria, did Nigerian newspapers show significant bias in the reportage of the crisis?

### **Theoretical Framework**

In trying to decipher ethnic bias in conflict reporting in Nigeria based on the reportage of the *Boko Haram* and the Niger Delta crises, Habermas’ (1989) ideal of rational, undistorted communication and Westertashl’s(1983)

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objectivity concept come into play. According to McQuail (2005) these two concepts have an affinity. In other words, objectivity has close ties with rational, undistorted communication. That is why Romanienko (2010) emphasizes that communication is the universal element driving many epistemological branches of knowledge. He adds that whether an analysis focuses on contracts, political exchange, business dialogue, or other structural elements of the system – world; distorted communication permeates all these activities and has damaging consequences for the operation of human agency.

To ensure rational, undistorted communication, objectivity as notes McQuail, is a form of media practice and a particular attitude to the task of information collection, processing, and dissemination. Its main feature is the adoption of a position of detachment and neutrality towards the object of reporting. Another feature is a lack of partisanship: not taking sides in matters of dispute or showing bias. The third feature demands a strict attachment to accuracy and other truth indices namely relevance and completeness.

The above-stated position aptly approximates Westerstahl's (1983) component criteria of objectivity as McQuail (2005) captures it. In it, objectivity is hinged on two prongs - factuality and impartiality. Factuality on its part covers the notions of truth, relevance and informativeness while impartiality covers the notions of balance and neutrality.

### **Method**

Daily newspapers were monitored for two weeks: July 25 to August 7, 2009 and headlines, leads and conclusion were studied. The four newspapers content analyzed were *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* which are north-based papers, and *The Punch* and *The Guardian*, south-based papers. Analyzed content had to relate with the *Boko Haram* religious upheaval in Northern Nigeria and the Niger Delta crisis in southern Nigeria. The period of the religious crisis coincided with a portion of the period in which amnesty was granted Niger Delta militants by the Nigerian government. The parameters for analyzing both crises were:

1. Format of presentation – were the crises presented as news, features, editorial, or opinion?
2. Prominence accorded the crises – was it high, average, or low?
3. Direction of reportage – was the coverage supportive of, antagonistic to, or neutral to the crises?

### **RESULTS**

Altogether, 86 stories dealt with the Niger Delta crisis while 190 stories related to the *Boko Haram* crisis for the two week period. Of the 86 Niger

Delta crisis stories, there were 66 news stories, four feature stories, one editorial and 15 opinion articles. News was the dominant format of presenting Niger Delta crisis. *The Punch* and *The Guardian* the two southern based papers had 43 percent, and 27 percent respectively. *Leadership* and *Daily Trust*: the two northern papers had 19 percent and nine percent of news respectively. It means that the southern papers carried more news about the Niger Delta crisis.

Concerning the 190 stories on the *Boko Haram* crisis, 108 stories were news stories, there were 13 features, three editorials, and 66 opinion articles. News and opinion articles were the dominant formats. For news, the *Punch* and *The Guardian* had 16 percent and 18 percent respectively. Both papers are southern dailies. On the other hand, the northern papers: *Leadership* and *Daily Trust* had 26 percent and 37 percent of news respectively. The results show that the northern papers reported more news of the *Boko Haram* crisis than the southern papers. Regarding opinion articles, *The Punch* had nine percent while *The Guardian* had 12 percent. On the other hand, *Leadership* had 30 percent and *Daily Trust* 48 percent of opinion articles. Again, the northern papers carried a lot more opinion articles on the *Boko Haram* crisis than southern papers.

In terms of prominence accorded the Niger Delta crisis in the analyzed papers, 12 of the 86 stories were given high prominence (front page display), four were given medium prominence (back page display) 70 stories received low prominence (inside pages). Generally speaking, neither the southern nor the northern papers gave high or medium prominence to the Niger Delta crisis.

Relating to prominence accorded the *Boko Haram* crisis, of the 190 stories, 32 stories received high prominence, and 13 stories were given medium prominence, while 145 stories were accorded low prominence. The study shows that both southern and northern papers generally tucked the *Boko Haram* crisis stories in the inside pages.

As it pertains to the direction of reportage of the Niger Delta crisis, of the 86 stories, none was supportive of the crisis, 13 stories were against the crisis while 73 stories were neutral. Results show that neither the northern-based papers nor the southern-based papers reflected ethnic bias in the coverage of the Niger Delta issues.

Concerning the direction of reportage of *Boko Haram* crisis, of the 190 stories, one was supportive of the crisis, 55 stories stood against the crisis, while 134 were neutral. The data indicate that for both northern and southern papers, none showed ethnic bias in the reportage of the *Boko Haram* crisis.

### **Comment**

The study showed that in presenting the Niger Delta crisis, news constituted 76 percent, features (4%), editorial (1%) and opinion (17%). In respect of the *Boko Haram* crisis, news constituted 56 percent, features (6%), editorial (1%), and opinion (34%). What we can infer from this is that, the papers generally

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shied away from features, editorials, and opinion articles although the northern papers did better at expressing opinion on the *Boko Haram* crisis. Very importantly, proximity to the news event may help explain why the southern newspapers tend to cover more of the Niger Delta crisis while the northern papers tend to cover more of the *Boko Haram* crisis.

Traditionally, news is objective, factual, balanced, and neutral. Newspapers may use editorials and opinion articles to reflect their biases. Newspapers may also show bias by hiding away stories in inside pages or displaying them prominently in the front and back pages. The study indicates no particular bias as all the papers mostly displayed their stories in the inside pages irrespective of issue or their geographical location.

The study therefore showed no significant ethnic bias in the reportage of both the Niger Delta and the *Boko Haram* crises. An overwhelming number of stories were either against the crises or expressed neutral stance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that in the coverage of the *Boko Haram* religious crisis as well as the Niger Delta militancy crisis, the four Nigerian newspapers studied did not show ethnic bias whether they were based in the north or south of Nigeria. The study showed a preponderant use of the news format in the coverage of the crises and; news stories, when written in the journalistic tradition are not amenable to ethnic or other biases. It can therefore be surmised that in spite of the characterization of the Nigerian press as ethnic, based principally on patterns of ownership and geographical location, the characterization hardly held true in the reportage of the *Boko Haram* and the Niger Delta crises. In private discourses, ethnic sentiments may be raised freely among Nigerians but the Nigerian press tends to refrain from expressing deep ethnic stereotypes, prejudices, and biases on the pages of newspapers in keeping with Habermas' (1989) and Westerstahl's (1983) theories of objectivity.

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