

MASS MEDIA AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The peace and unity of any given nation determine the economic and political development of such a nation. The situation in Nigeria with regard to ethno-religious crises is alarming. The colonial government boycotted the due course of legitimisation at its formation and this poses serious consequences for its stability and unity at the present time. It is against this backdrop that the need for effective coverage of ethno-religious crisis is inalienable to the mass media. This study will look into the roles of the media and the fight against ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria, also find out if the activities of the media have helped to reduce or eliminate ethno-religious crisis in the country. The theory adopted in this study was the social responsibility and with regards to the topic, the theory posits that the media (press) must take active part in governance to ensure peace, progress development and national integration

Keywords: Economic and political development, Ethno-religious, Mass Media

INTRODUCTION

Conflict conducted in the name of ethnic and religious solidarity often destroys the state structure, level the entire development process and unleashes destructive violence which can threaten the territorial integrity of a country. The successful hand over from military to civil democratic government on 29th May, 1999, provided the democratic space for expression of previously suppressed identities. A large number of individuals excluded from the political process have chosen the religious stage to act out their ambitions. This study therefore, subsumes religious conflicts in Nigeria; the ethnic nationalities usually involved are predominantly of one religious group - Christianity or Islam. Thus a religious conflict eventually assumes ethnic dimension and vice-versa.

Nigeria has recorded bitter experiences of violent conflicts in various forms and ethno-religious conflicts in particular. Since the early 1980s, ethnic and religious crises have become a re-occurring decimal, especially in northern Nigeria. Amongst the 19 states that constitute Northern Nigeria, there is virtually none that has not witnessed one form of conflict or the other. The spate of violence has been on a steady increase. Some of the conflicts include: Maitatsine crises in Kano, 1980, Zuru 1980, Maiduguri 1982, Yola 1984, Ilorin 1984, Bauchi 1984 and Kano 1984. Others are the crises in Kafanchan 1987, Gure Kahugu 1987, Birnin Kebbi 1990, Katsina 1991, Tafawa Balewa 1991, Kano 1991, Jalingo 1992, Kaduna Polytechnic 1992, Kasuwar Magani (Kaduna) 1994, Kaduna 2000, Jos 2001, Kano 2001, Tafawa Balewa (since 2000) and Nasarawa 2001, Jos 2004, 2008 and 2010. There have also been the Chamba-Kuteb crises in Taraba State 2013, Tiv-Jukun crisis 2013, Bassa-Igbira crisis in Toto 2012, Boko Haram crisis 2011 till date and a host of others. Ikenga Metuh identified three broad types of religious conflicts, namely: intra-religious which occur between different denominations or sects; inter-religious conflicts prevalent between adherents of different religious beliefs, but capable of assuming socio-ethnic dimension; and inter-religious conflicts which though have socio-economic origin end up in the form of religious conflicts. With particular reference to Nigeria, Metuh observes further that most inter-religious conflicts usually developed into inter-ethnic conflicts even where and when they begin as purely religious disagreements. The reverse is also often the case that some socio-ethnic or political conflicts are deflected and fought under the inter-religious banner. Conflicts according to Alemika (2002) are “often categorised in terms of their origin, domain of expression and issues or grievances that are canvassed”. However, such categorization according to him are not mutually exclusive, because issues that are at stake in any conflict may traverse several domains, culture, ethnicity, religion, economy, politics, race and gender. Nonetheless it is better to classify intra-group or inter-group antagonism and aggression as class, political, cultural, racial, ethnic and religious conflicts.

There are many types of social conflicts. However, in practice it is very difficult to isolate which conflicts are primarily provoked by political, ethnic, religious, cultural or economic factors. Experiences from the past have shown that most violent conflicts result from interplay of ethnic, religious, political, socio-economic and cultural differences. Therefore, according to Alemika, “classifying the conflicts as solely religious, economic, ethnic, cultural or political may turn out to be misleading”. This is because ethnicity and religion are two broad concepts that could be treated on their own merits. In Nigeria however, the two concepts are so interwoven to the extent that conflicts between groups in the region tend to be quickly interpreted as ethnic or religious conflicts. This tendency of not establishing the boundary between ethnic, religious, cultural or political issues especially during moments of conflicts and violence has for want of a better

expression been captured by some scholars as “ethno-religious conflicts” (Egwu 4; Alemika 3) or identity conflicts.

After several years of independence, one of the major problems retarding the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria has been the recurrent incidences of ethno-religious crises and the attendant destructive effects. The growing propensity of protracted ethno-religious conflicts is potentially destructive to the extent that if nothing is done it can compromise the corporate existence of the country. So far, there appear to be no singular phenomenon in the history of Nigeria that shows the inability of the various identities to live together peacefully and pursue the goal of development than the regular occurrence of this monster called ethno-religious conflict. What the country is experiencing is a recurring decimal of violence that is deeply rooted in mutual suspicion and hatred among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. The aftermath of these violent crisis and indeed “religious wars” bears destruction, physical and mental devastation, death, deprivation, dislocation of people, destruction of property and massive economic stagnation. In the last three decades alone, Nigeria has witnessed so many incidences of ethno-religiously based violent conflicts that it is difficult to keep proper track of the number. These violent occurrences have resulted in the destruction of lives and property worth several trillions of naira. As a result, many have lost their lives while many more have suffered injuries including permanent disabilities.

The nation’s diversity has continued to threaten its progress and even its existence. This is because of our orientation of non commitment to the ideal of the nation but rather to our various ethno-religious identities. This is reflected in the frequent occurrence of ethno-religious and other violent conflicts that have afflicted the country since independence and particularly in the past three decades.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study will be looked at from the social responsibility theory of the press which clearly states the responsibility the media owes any society within which it operates. The origin of the theory is traced to the Hutchins Commission on freedom of the press, set up in the United States of America in 1947 to reconsider the idea of press freedom as propounded by the Libertarian Theorists.

The social responsibility theory can be summarily defined as the free flow of information with a sense of responsibility. This implies that the media is free to report all sorts of information as far as it is for public good but the media must ensure that the information given out is done with utmost responsibility.

Domick (2000, P.401) stated that the press has the right to criticize government and other institutions, but has the responsibility to preserve the peace, unity and democracy of any society by properly informing and educating the people and by responding to society's needs and interests.

The theory equally explains in a deep way the assigned constitutional watchdogging role of the media. This role empowers the media to monitor the activities of those in government like the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary to ensure good governance and welfare of the society.

Moreover, the theory with regard to the research topic posits that the broadcast media (the press) must take active part in governance to ensure peace, progress development and national integration. The media must ensure that the democratic principles of a nation and rule of law are upheld without deviance by individuals or group(s) irrespective of social status, tribe or religion.

According to Moemeka (1999, P.26) the social responsibility theory postulates and shows the evaluative role the broadcast media should play in this crusading programme and messages against ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria

THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA AND WAYS TO REPORT SENSITIVE ISSUES LIKE ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

The media is generally recognised as a potent instrument of information, education, entertainment and most importantly mobilisation and moulding of public opinion. Most experts are of the opinion that one of the most awesome challenges of our time is the increase power and pervasiveness of the media. That is why the question of compliance with professional standard and ethics has become important globally. The mass media constitute one of the principal locations for the religious propagation and self preservation of religious groups. Based on these positions a critical examination of the role of the media to affirm or negate this proposition in Nigeria is very important. Media as agent of information, education, sensitisation and mobilisation is a key and central aspect of living and socialisation in the country, including religion. The media has always been in a round table discussion with the Federal Executive Council of the Federal Government of Nigeria to proffer solutions and ways to fight against the menace of ethno-religious crisis. Media experts and analysts do offer adequate solutions to reduce or eliminate ethno-religious crisis in the country. Journalists are always seen at the fore front when it comes to covering ethno-religious conflict to ensure timely dissemination of information to the people.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND THE MASS MEDIA

The mass media most times thrive on conflict, because conflict attracts readers, viewers and listeners to the media. According to Akin, “the greater the conflict the greater the audience, which are imperatives to the financial success of media outlets”. Bearing this in mind, therefore, the prime news value of the media is conflict or disorder, negative events. Good news stories receive less media attention than bad news. A familiar adage in journalism is “bad news is good news and usually good news is no news”, unless it happens to the most powerful. The media coverage is also event driven. In other words, the outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts receive more immediate coverage than ongoing reconciliation efforts or the building of the economy which may take many years to achieve. In his article, Joses Yoroms examines the role of the mass media and conflict management from the perspective of political economy. Like many scholars of conflicts, he states that conflict is an inevitable process in all societies.

Buttressing the position of Marx, Yoroms has stressed that “in every society the ideas of the ruling class are the ideas of the society” and as such media objectivity remains problematic and difficult to attain. Although Yoroms acknowledges the difficulty of media objectivity, he argues that one has to apply “the right standard of significance, because conflict is more pervasive once the media reports are based on imagination”. According to Yoroms therefore, the media can be partial and therefore, “the likelihood for it to reconfigure peace or conflict in the society is apparent” and that once the media fail to be objective it can lead to the escalation of conflicts. The importance of the mass media in conflict management has been stressed by Sam Egwu in his study on “Ethnic and Religious Violence” (2001). According to him, the vital role of the civil society and mass media in generating awareness, perception, fears and anxiety cannot be over-emphasized. He, therefore, states that the mass media are major actors in the arena of conflicts management and should not be ignored in the study of ethno-religious conflicts. Cyril Imo, argues that in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, there are different forms of diversity and that due to the nature of religion, operating the media in a multi-religious situation tends to be more challenging and problematic. He states further that the interactions between the media and religion are more delicate than those between the media and other forms of plurality. This to him is because “by the nature of religion, it has to do with matters of life and death”.

In her article on the roles and responsibilities of the mass media in conflict management, Ruth Dul stresses the vital role of the mass media in conflict management. The media she asserts have the power, control and influence on their consuming public. According to her, though media objectivity is desired, it is difficult to attain because “media practitioners are human being who

have their own convictions, principles and minds of their own". Dul argues therefore, that media objectivity is usually affected by ownership, economic interests, religious affiliation and cultural factors. This, she attests further, can only be overcome through re-orientation of practitioners, training on conflict management and provisions of adequate funding for media houses.

In another contribution on this issue, Pauline Lere, dwells specifically on the role of the media in the "Mob Cartoon" riots of 2001." Like other scholars, she avers that ethno-religious conflicts are more frequent and devastating than other conflicts and that "to say that the media reports of religious crises cause religious tensions around the world is an understatement".

As a solution to this, he advocates for the government among other things to "check the publication of private media, the proliferation of quack media houses," and that government should also give free hand to its media houses while ensuring that they adhere to their professional ethics.

Abubakar Muazu and Joses Yoroms article on media and conflict management in Nigeria covers between 1999 and 2009. The work highlights the negative effects and the role of the mass media in conflict management. According to them, because of the very nature of conflicts which encompass both manifest and hidden causes, it does not lend itself to easy solutions. As a result of this, they argue that there is an urgent need for informed and responsible management of conflict. The mass media, they maintain, are therefore, important factor in conflict management in any given society. In terms of media role in the escalation or de-escalation of conflicts, Muazu and Yoroms consider whether the factors of ownership, location, ethnic, religious or regional affiliation affect the way the mass media cover conflicts. They conclude by asserting that "...the media cannot be divorced from the realities of their environment when considered against social, economic and political structures. Since the media do not operate in a vacuum, they cannot be free from the many forces in the society".

Mustapha Umar's work on the broadcast media and conflict covers the period between 1999 and 2003. He states that the broadcast media in the North East Areas during this period was wholly owned by the state governments and federal government and this hampers objective reporting as the respective state governments in their attempt to suppress conflicts lost the people confidence in them and the conflict parties eventually relied on foreign media. In the same vein John Galadima and Rasheed Olaniyi in their article on the mass media and conflicts in Plateau State (2001-2002) argue that since the mass media are closely linked to the structure of power in society, they are not in the position to be neutral in conflict situation. Apart from that, they also observe that in times of conflicts, journalists themselves are victims and refugees of the conflicts. Media houses were also not spared and this they argue hampers objective reportage of conflicts.

Using content analysis Galadima and Olaniyi sampled the Punch, the Trust, the Nigeria Standard, This Day and the Champion Newspapers as well as the Newswatch, the Tell, The News and The Week magazines in their study.

In their findings, the authors concluded that the mass media examined in these instances were not objective. These newspapers and magazines were biased in their coverage of casualties and management of the conflicts. This is so because according to them, “ethnic, political and religious identities and sentiments always prevent the media from being objective and neutral”.

FUNCTIONS OF THE MASS MEDIA AND ETHICS OF REPORTAGE

The mass media considered as the fourth estate and the watchdog of the society in liberal societies exist to perform the functions of information sourcing and dissemination, educational promotion, surveillance, entertainment, social enlightenment and mobilization. These functions distinguish the media as an important institution in the society. As a result, how the media perform these functions is very important to the wellbeing of the society. The function of the mass media in the society can also be seen from political, religious, economic and social perspectives. In the political sphere, the mass media is central to the success of democracy and good governance. In religious sphere, the media can be useful in the propagation of the ideals and messages of various religions. In the economic sphere, mass media can perform functions in the areas of economic policy and growth, economic empowerment, tourism, business and investment. And in the social sphere, the mass media role covers social issues such as corruption, criminal violence, violent conflicts, population control, education, and other social vices.

When the mass media perform their functions professionally, truthfully, in fairness and in the interest of justice, the society will benefit. On the other hand where the media practitioners become selfish in pursuance of personal gains, the society suffers. William Davis echoes this when he writes that: The operation of a modern industrial democracy requires that those who purvey information provide information that is, in fact, not a judgmental distortion of reality and fact, but as accurate as humanly possible or else a society can quickly, with the permissiveness of modern media, be thrown off balance.

The responsibility of the mass media is to narrate the facts as they are, impartially, accurately and responsibly in order to help the readers and viewers create an informed public opinion. Journalism is a public service profession as such reporting can be done relatively easier when a society is at peace. The real challenge however, for reporting accurately, impartially and responsibly is when a society is in violent conflict. This is because during a violent conflict, the mass media has an additional social responsibility regarding what to report, what not to report, and how to report. This additional responsibility is very crucial because by the very nature of

conflict which is usually multi-dimensional in nature and manifestation, it demands proper understanding and analysis to avoid escalation. The attendant danger of inappropriate and inaccurate reportage during conflict cannot be overemphasized. As a result, lack of social responsibility on the part of the media may escalate conflict and cause more harm to the larger society. It is for this reason that the media function of reporting violent conflict involves much more than what is required of the media at times of peace.

Considered as the fourth estate, the mass media provide checks and balances on the activities of the three arms of government. As agenda-setters, the media influences issues on public policy; as gatekeepers, they decide what information gets to the public and as watchdog the mass media represent the interests of the people against powerful interests. The media determine the issues found on the public agenda, influence the direction of foreign policy and economic growth and they can also check the excesses of leaders. In internal conflict situations, the media as an instrument of peace should contribute to nation-building and according to Kamilindi Thomas it is equally capable of fuelling divisiveness, hatred and violence as in the case of “hate media” in Rwanda. However, to be able to understand the role of the mass media in the ethno-religious conflicts that have plagued Nigeria during the period under study (1980 - 2011), there is need to examine the general ethics guiding media profession and the specific ethics for conflict reporting. Media ethics are the application and evaluation of the principles and norms that guide the practice of journalism, with special attention to the most important problems in the field. These ethics are: principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability as these apply to the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public.

EFFECT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS ON MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

The mass media faces a lot of problems during ethno-religious conflicts as media professionals and members of their families are exposed to various intimidations and violence. In times of conflicts, media professionals are not safe as they have no place to run to in the discharge of their duties.

During the period under study, some media professionals were killed or internally displaced with members of their family. This situation adversely affected the work environment of the journalists, their psychology and output in the discharge of their duties. During ethno-religious conflicts, the economic situation of media organizations are precarious because the infrastructure upon which the media depends - reliable power supply, transport network, equipment are likely to be destroyed or damaged. This of course affects the performance of the mass media adversely. Also, during ethno-religious conflicts, newspapers and news magazine

organizations loss huge revenue sources when they could not sell their copies due to government seizure or insecurity which compels newspaper vendors to abandon their duty posts. This too is capable of driving media organizations out of business. Another area ethno-religious conflicts especially insurgency affects the media is the area of intimidation and destruction of media establishments. A typical case in point was when on 26th April, 2012 Boko Haram bombed some media houses for under reporting them. According to the report: Boko Haram on Thursday explained that its grouse with This Day over alleged misrepresentation of its position and perceived bias led to the bomb attacks on its offices in Abuja and Kaduna....Suspected Boko Haram members bombed This Day's Abuja office as well as the complex housing This Day, the Sun and the Moment newspapers in Kaduna, leaving a number of people dead and many more injured. The sect also known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad said in an interview with a website, premium timesng.com, that it was targeting Nigerian and foreign journalists (Madunagu). In their attempt to intimidate and cow the media Boko Haram boasted further that: It is not only This Day that has been engaged in negative media campaign, fictional stories and constantly promoting fake stories by the JTF to give an impression that they are making headway against us; yet there is no time the media investigated further as an objective and responsible bystander in this war. But the sins of This Day are more.... "They once insulted the Prophet Mohammed in 2001 and we have not forgotten"... (Vanguard).

The Nigerian media since these series of bomb explosions have been operating under a very dangerous environment. Most of them have removed their sign boards and have gone underground in their operations. This has adversely affected the psychology and morale of the media professionals who have to be more careful in carrying out their duties to the society.

Another major area that ethno-religious conflicts affect the mass media is free access of media professionals to the areas of conflicts, mobility and safety during conflict situations in discharging their duties and reasonable access to official information. If all these requirements are denied, then obviously media professionals cannot do their jobs. If access to official information and access to the conflict areas are made possible, the quality of news coverage is again heavily dependent on the honesty and cooperation of official sources.

CONCLUSION

Not only that, the prolonged ethno-religious conflicts that have plagued this country for over three decades, but have adversely exposed the fact that the media professionals were mostly influenced by their ethnic and religious divides. Their professional ethics were jettisoned in favour of parochial, ethnic, religious, ideological, political and commercial interests. The rise of religious sentiments and the urge to defend "one's religion" has coloured the way news about

religious crises are reported in the Nigerian mass media. During ethno-religious conflicts in the country, the news that one reads in newspapers and magazines, listens to over the radio and on television are as varied as the state of faith of the reporters. In order to properly propagate, articulate and defend their religious views, many religious organizations in some instances establish their own media outfits. Therefore, from these few examples, it is clear that in as much as the mass media influence conflicts situations, conflict in turn do affect media operations adversely. Once the media practitioners are able to understand various issues and intricacies of ethno-religious conflicts, they will engage in objective and responsible reportage for a peaceful society which will lead to national development. Therefore, peaceful co-existence among adherents of various religions in Nigeria, especially Muslims and Christians, can best be promoted by the mass media for national development. National development on the other hand cannot take place in the face of incessant ethno-religious conflicts with their attendant destruction of lives and property.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of what is happening in our society, the study suggests that:

- The society, especially the mass media should carry out their functions responsibly towards a peaceful society.
- The media should be objective and open without attaching personal bias while carrying out their duties.
- Inappropriate and inaccurate reportage during conflict should be avoided.
- Mass media executives and members of the press should work hand in hand with the government to maintain peace and stability in the country.
- Government should use the media to sensitise and educate the people on the dangers of ethno-religious conflicts to national development.

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