

Challenges of newspaper reportage of the Niger Delta conflict: reporter's perspectives of the insurgency

Ofem, O.O.

*Department of Mass Communication
Cross River University of Technology Calabar, Nigeria
ooferm@yahoo.com*

Abstract

The paper assessed the viewpoints of reporters on the challenges of newspaper reportage of the Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria (2006-2007). The Guardian, The Vanguard and The Niger Delta Newspapers were purposively selected for the study due to both their national and local outlooks in the coverage and reportage of the conflict. In-depth interviews were conducted on two (2) correspondents each from the three (3) selected newspapers making a total of six (6), while four (4) respondents from each of the newspaper making 12 were selected for questionnaire administration. Results obtained identified ownership (41.7%) and media protective interest (33.3%) as the primary challenges faced by the media in the reportage of the Niger Delta conflict. The actions of the Ijaw Youths, militant activities (41.7%), killings (25%) and hostage taking (16.6%) considerably affected the nature of reportage during the heat days or periods of the conflict. Findings from the in-depth interviews showed that the geology (nature of terrain) of the conflict area, issue of trust from the militants and security forces exerted considerable influence on the selected newspapers failure to perform the required effective mediation and intervention role in the conflict.

Keywords: *Niger Delta conflict, newspapers reportage, reporters.*

1. Introduction

The media has contributed a great deal to the development of conflict because conflict remains attractive to the media (Owen-Ibe 2002). The role of the media in conflict has been to communicate conflict events to interested readers. Conflict parties to a large extent find the media a major source of the conflict awareness. The media also serves as a source of the conflict interaction to itself and to a larger audience of the public. The Niger Delta conflict which is the longest resource dispute in Nigeria has taken series of dimensions: from open agitation for resource control by Niger Delta activists to aggression resulting to confrontation between the activists with beneficiaries of the abundant resources of the region as well as those who tend to intervene negatively on the

issues of resource control of the region. The main cause of the conflict in the Niger Delta region is crude oil. Crude oil was first discovered in Oloibiri, a small town of the region in 1958 by British Petroleum.

In the Niger Delta conflict, the Ijaw Youth has become a necessary study, as a basic factor in the militarization and opposition of government and her institutions over oil exploration in the region. The media in its approach to the reportage of the conflict has impacted both positively and negatively on the Niger Delta conflict. As a medium of communication, the media has acted between and in-between disputants considering its interest in the reportage of conflict an unavoidable role which has made the media to be seen as: a mediator, intervener, facilitator and

conflict analyst. Bassey (2007) agreed that media impacts greatly on the Niger Delta conflict. Effective flow of media role in the communication of conflict requires 'objectivity and truth as good qualities of journalism' which Akinnawonu (2006) identified and according to him, "*a wrong word or misconceived message is one of the most common causes of conflict escalation*". The inevitable role of communication and conflict requires the performance of a neutral third party who must act like an unbiased judge and mediator, for the effective performance of the society.

The reliance on the media as a viable tool and instrument of concern for all strata of the society has been laid with series of complaint from both victims of media exploit and those that seem to applaud the existence of the media. Thus, the benefits of media existence are sometimes totally misplaced, leaving public views to the assumption that the media is basically set for itself. Parties to the Niger Delta conflict are in this regards not exempted from this negative view of the press position in conflict reportage by conflict parties. However, reasons for media interest in conflict are sometimes not investigated, thus leaving public's assumptions of media interest as basically economic and not people oriented. On the other hand, the media seems to face series of challenges which it fails to tell the public, again the public requires relevant information on media position in conflict even if her position is privately motivated. This will at the end absolve the media from blame.

However, the effective role of media in conflict has been limited by both arguments and challenges which have affected the coverage and reportage and subsequent impact on the nature of conflict. Media arguments on effective performance in the reportage of conflict is often hinged on series of challenges, some of which are created by the media itself, while others are either conflict party based or those motivated by ecological factors. The argument of Baum and Tim (2009) with other media practitioners in South Africa that media position in conflict is only to report and not to intervene; and the challenges based on linguistic choices of media houses which are meant to protect the media from blame or their economic interest are therefore media motivated challenges. Several studies like those of Ross (2009) reported some common setbacks on media effective role in conflict intervention and mediation. This study

therefore examined the challenges of newspaper reportage of the Niger Delta conflict using the perspective of the reporters.

2. Materials and methods

The study purposively selected *The Guardian*, *The Vanguard* and *The Niger Delta Newspaper* for the study. These newspapers were selected due to their regional and nationality spread. They were also selected because they widely covered and reported the Niger Delta Conflict from 2006 to 2007. In-depth interview was conducted on two (2) reporters or correspondents each from the three (3) selected newspapers making a total of six (6) to enable the researcher gather data on the challenges encountered by the reporters in their intervention process to the conflict during the period under review. Also, 4 respondents from each of the newspaper were selected for questionnaire administration. In all, 12 respondents were given questionnaire.

The instruments employed by this study were in-depth interviews and questionnaire. In-depth interview was personally carried out with the aid of a tape recorder and a notebook, while the questionnaire was administered to the respective respondents after the essence of the study was explained to them. The in-depth interview covered an assessment of factors that hinder effective performance of media role in conflict intervention. Impediments to conflict reportage could be environmental impediments, conflict parties created impediments and interest based impediments as well as those emanating from the media practitioners or reporters. The in-depth interview basically centred on factors that constitute media reporter's challenges to effective performance in conflict intervention activities. Data obtained from the in-depth interview was analysed using content analysis, while those gathered from the questionnaire were analysed using tables and simple percentages.

3. Impediments on reportage of the Niger Delta conflict (2006-2007)

The contribution of this study to the nature of impediments faced by journalists in the coverage and reportage of the Niger Delta conflict was presented here as responses of various newspapers' reporters. In an interview,

Mr. Anietie Akpan of The Guardian Newspaper said:

“Cutting through the different levels of conflict from 1998-2010 which falls within the period I have worked with The Guardian Newspaper, the major challenges faced in the reportage of the Niger Delta conflict have been the introduction of militancy into the conflict between 2002-2008 which were years of the peak of the conflict. The challenge of been cut across fire in a bid to getting close to the militant’s area of operation for effective information gathering and reportage, remained the major challenge we faced as reporters covering the Niger Delta conflict. Sometimes, even when you get close to the militants, you find it difficult to establish yourself as a journalist because the militants will always suspect you. However, we try to get close to the source, the next challenge after getting close to the militants is the activities of the militants and most instances the military and how they try to counter the militants’ activities. In the territory, everybody is a suspect, sometimes the military also look at the journalist as suspects. So we rather go in disguise or depend more on sources that may not be right. Most instances too, we risk it to get involved to get the right information for the newspaper.”

The challenges narrated by Mr. Anietie are in two folds: the militants and their activities, as well as the security agents and their designed exploited target at catching up with their culprits (the militants). Again the danger of been caught in the act while sneezing for news and that of getting yourself entangled in activities of the armed forces. Mr. Anietie’s experience is one challenge that will invariably keep an efficient journalist away from a beat like that of the militant’s den, were the military and other armed forces sniff around for their prey (the militants), while the journalist suspiciously nose around with his notepads and pen just to gather information from the events that may occur from the encounter. What makes up news is when it is got hot and delivered out of scene. These factors hinder getting the news hot from the scene and its effect on the language of conflict reportage which in the same vein contribute to the development of the conflict. Again it does not support media set ethics for effective news delivery.

In addition, Mr. Emmanuel Uyai gave his account on the challenges he faced at the creeks with the militants in his effort to cover event of the conflict. According to him:

“The Niger Delta region has a difficult terrain, where water and the creeks make it difficult to navigate. In order to have asses to the militants, and if you want to work with the Navy or the Police, you may just be taken out just to achieve their aim. For instance, they could take you out to the people they want to arrest based on their side of the story, while sometimes they may not be willing to take you out. For the militants, to talk to a journalist, it could take you a long time, because first you have to make a lot of contacts, just to be sure the person you are talking to is the right person. The fake person can tell you a lot of fake lies and so to get to the real militant you must follow him up, go after him with incentives like I will do this or that or I won’t do this or that. Assure him you are not carrying a camera or other objects that will send his image or voice out. These challenges could impair the journalist story line as basic facts are lost to the difficulties or challenges in gathering the story.”

Another challenge identified by Mr. Victor Young of *The Guardian* was that concerning the corporate set rules and the consequences of breaking these rules. When Mr. Victor Young was asked what the consequences of a deviation from the set media approach for the reportage of the conflict in newspaper was, he said that:

“There are series of interests in news gathering and reporting. Most of the interests border on ownership for instance the Vanguard owned by a Niger Delta man will not release a publication that will neither affect the paper nor the region. The newspaper must be protective of its existence and survival of its region. Therefore, news gathering and reportage must include the protective measure of both the newspaper and the region. This is often reflected in the newspaper headline and body content. This pattern of news reportage goes through all the newspapers. The Nation newspaper, The Guardian, Tribune, The Nigerian Chronicle as well as all other Nigerian newspapers will always be cautious in the reportage of negative angles of stories against their establishments. This strategy is to protect the corporate existence of the newspaper and not to keep the paper out of operation. These are

also some of the corporate protective principles of the newspapers. The language in reportage here is also tailored at this protection, for instance in the reportage of the Dasuki's case, the Vanguard may say, 'Jonathan freed from Dasuki's list' while the Nation may say 'Jonathan yet to be named' and the Punch could report that 'Dasuki's list inconclusive', this completely expresses the interest of the various newspapers. In the same vein, as series of issues could be shielded or cautiously reported by both Vanguard and the Guardian in their coverage of government issues during the Jonathan Government so will the many negative conflict issues of the present government be protected by newspapers like; the Nation, Tribune and other newspapers that tend to derive interest from the government. There are series of interests that go with the language of news reportage."

Further examination into the factor that border on media corporate impediment was also presented in Table 1. Factors like ownership,

protective interest of the media, the reporter's private interest and incompetence, all are embedded in the reporter's limitations or impediments reporters. The results in Table 1 showed that, 5 respondents out of the 6 respondents representing 83.3% of the total respondents maintained that ownership remained the highest in the newspapers failure to maintain its set media ethical codes in conflict reportage. This therefore shows that ownership has control in the nature of conflict reportage and choice of language by reporters in conflict situation. The viewpoints of respondents on this regards suggests there are series of interest in news gathering and reporting, and that a good number of the interests border on ownership. As a media protective factor, Mr. Vincent concluded that, "Language in news reportage here is also tailored at protection. For instance, in the reportage of the Dasuki's case, the Vanguard may say, 'Jonathan freed from Dasuki's list' while the Nation may say 'Jonathan yet to be named' and so on. This approach of reportage completely portrays the interest of the various newspapers."

Table 1. Media corporate values as factors for deviation from media ethical principle

Variables	Number of respondents	%
Ownership	5	41.7
Media protective interest	4	33.3
Reporter's interest	2	16.7
Incompetence	1	8.3
Total	12	100

These words therefore represent the media ethical principles that control the reporter's communication structure. Anietie Akpan of the Guardian also maintained that, "When you fail to identify the actual person or group of person that perform an act under coverage, these words must be used." According to Mr. Nicolas, The Niger Delta News correspondent in Bayelsa state, such words were, "Structured and are seen as an in-house style of the newspaper which every reporter must not deviate from in order to maintain the objectivity principle of the newspaper and set ethical standard of the newspaper he represents."

Similarly, Anietie of The Guardian newspaper stated that there is no way you will not experience challenges, even when you try as much as possible to satisfy all sides. Emmanuel of the Niger Delta New also confirmed that, "However you report, one party will feel you are against them, the Police will feel you are writing in support of the

militants, while the militants will also feel you are against them."

Emmanuel Uyai of The Guardian continued by saying that:

"In the case of the Niger Delta conflict, the militants as parties to the conflict have their share of action toward the media as forces (the Police, the Navy and other uniform organisations) representing the government. Militants and corporate representatives as well as members of the forces representing government are parties to the conflict challenge newspapers publication."

According to Emmanuel, even news gathering procedures are challenged. For instance, he said that those in the forces always pose a challenge when reporters seek to interview arrested militants, as the officials will normally ask the reporter, why the reporters

have not gone to interview the militants when they were planning to carry out the operation. They will even go ahead to ask if that was patriotic. The militants, Emmanuel said, could even send you strange calls that could make you withdraw from following up a story. Anietie and Emmanuel maintained that it is not the issue of being challenged, but that a reporter could get killed in the process of covering a story. Emmanuel further said that:

“Sometimes, the militants become so excited that they get ready to talk to reporters, while in most cases they could turn violent, trying to push the blame of the situation and suffering to the journalist. They level allegations on us that we are the cause of the conflict situation that journalist also help to escalate the conflict through their reportage.”

Emmanuel said that when militants want journalists to report some of their escapees, they will prefer issues that will expose their antics and nefarious activities to be skipped even if they have effects on the civilians. However, their actions he said do not affect their reportage. Though, militants may complain when it comes to reported fact especially when it affects the public since our primary responsibility is to go out to protect the society which is our course in developmental journalism.

The basic challenge faced by journalist in their coverage and reportage of conflict is the difference they (journalist) hold with the conflict parties. Thus, reportage of conflict at most instances does not favor the position of conflict parties, which most instances result in reactions and agitations against the media. However, Canda and Reeves (2012) listed various impediments in conflict reporting which they saw as challenges to good media practice in conflict-affected countries of the world. Some of these impediments include: distribution and access cost, financial stability and dependence on foreign aids, technical sustainability,

maintenance of professional journalistic standards, representation of women and their interest, intimidation of journalist and sources through threats, violence or litigation and political patronage and interference. According to Mr. Kelvin Ebirione, a respondent of *The Vanguard Newspaper*, the challenges faced by journalist in the effective coverage and reportage of Ijaw Youth insurgency of the Niger Delta conflict is that of difficult terrain and the attitude of the militants toward journalists. According to him:

“The Niger Delta region has a difficult terrain, where water and the creeks make it difficult to navigate, to have asses to the militants, and if you want to work with the Navy or the Police, you may just be taken out just to achieve their aim. For instance, they could take you out to the people they want to arrest based on their side of the story. While sometimes, they may not be willing to take you out. For the militants, it is always difficult for them to talk due to lack of trust.”

4. Challenges posed by the Ijaw Youth against media effective coverage

The result in Table 2 shows that a larger percentage (41.7%) of the respondents agreed that militancy remained the greatest challenge posed by the Ijaw Youths to the coverage and effective reportage of the Ijaw Youth insurgency in the Niger Delta conflict. This was followed by all forms of killing which was the second highest threat on the conflict reportage with 25%. Hostage taking came next with 16.7% of the respondent mentioning it as a challenge on their reportage of the conflict. The results further showed that attacks on media men as well as threats and warnings were the least challenges posed by the Ijaw Youths on media coverage and reportage of the conflict.

Table 2. Table on nature of Ijaw Youth activities challenging effective media coverage

Variables	Number of respondents	Percent
Hostage takings	2	16.7
Killings	3	25.0
Attacks on media men	1	8.3
Threats and warnings	1	8.3
Militant activities	5	41.7
Total	12	100

To complement the findings in Table 2, Mr Godspower Okpewere of the Guardian said:

“Though these challenges were not leveled directly on the journalists, yet the fear of the militants was the beginning of caution in the choice of word towards the reportage of the Niger Delta conflict. Other challenges like killing, kidnappings, threats and warning sent via phone calls and confrontations stemmed from the fact that the militants were deadly and as a journalist you must be guarded not to become a pry to them.”

Similarly, Mr Emmanuel Akpan of the Vanguard further said that, *“The years between 2002-2008 were periods the conflict got to its peak, the basic challenge then was the same fear created within the entire region by the militants, this he said hindered effective coverage of the conflict in the region.”* Mr Simon Ezaka of the Guardian added that, *“Sometimes even when you get close to them, you find it difficult to establish yourself as a journalist because militants are always suspicious’. In fact the point is that, in the territory, everybody is a suspect.”*

In addition, Mr Okpewere noted that, *“The military looked at the journalist as suspects. As such, they rather disguised themselves or depended more on sources that may not be right or at most instances he said journalists risked by being involved in order to get the right information for the newspaper.”* Furthermore, Mr Peter Oweriem of the Niger Delta News opined that, *“The militants could use the territory and adopt escapades as their antics to evade media coverage of their activities.”*

5. Discussion

The study found that the failure of the media to perform effective mediation role was discovered to be hinged on media impediment encountered in the process of the coverage and reportage of conflict. These impediments at the end affect media use of language which at most instances either help to ignite or initiate conflict. Ross's (2009) work on conflict sensitive reporting, is therefore in line with his aimed at identifying the rudiment in media conflict management approach that could create a friendly environment for media coverage and reportage of conflict. The failure of newspapers mediation role in effective coverage and reportage of the Ijaw Youth insurgency of the Niger Delta

conflict can therefore not be hinged completely on the reporter's created impediments but all the instruments of media control and security of the region. However the media could take up conflict mediation role as an oversight function of the media receiving all the relevant training required in that direction, to enable the media build the friendly environment required to carry on effective media functions in conflict intervention.

Though Bassey (2007) identified conflict mediation by the media as the process of delivering constant enlightenment to the public and conflict parties, he also saw media conflict intervention role as the process of giving favour to the direction of stories by the media. Fourie (2012) also noted that, the nature of newspapers reportage, whether it's informative educative or entertaining, is a means of intervention to issues in discourse. Owen-Ibe (2002) on his part thought that, a good level of attractiveness to conflict by the media is a great contribution to conflict intervention that could go a long way to affect conflict positively. Mediation into conflict necessitates conflict positive response that will lead to peace. The target of the media is to inform, educate and entertain while they still meddle into conflict, this passive approach to conflict management cannot work especially in violent conflict situations like those of the Niger Delta conflict. The Media requires good amount of conflict mediation tool to be able to function effectively in the process of news coverage and reportage, conflict intervention and mediation.

The argument that, the press was only meant to inform, entertain on educate but not to intervene into conflict which was the argument put up by Baumann in 1990 with a group of South African journalists when the journalist were called to carry up a mediation approach in a conflict, remain the conception media practitioners not only in South Africa but Nigeria too has. That also is the reason media coverage and reportage of conflict is only taken up passively by the media. The newspapers allocates a number of pages to conflict stories basically as news items, only with basis of satisfying media role to inform and educate the public on the position of the conflict but fail in seeking ways of the conflict management and resolution. Dickson (1992) who reported on the coverage of the 1983-1987 United States-

Nicaragua conflict by two most influential newspapers: The New York Times and The Washington Post, maintained that, the focused of the newspapers in the reportage of the conflict was on how US could use most of the conflict issues as a means of achieving US foreign policy rather than on the appropriateness of using US policies to resolve the conflict.

Our finding here confirmed that Omoera's decision to award a pass to the media in its intervention role to conflict was not professional. This is because Omoera's award was only based on his assessments of the reportage of the conflict carried out by the newspapers not considering all previous related conflict events not covered. Nwagbara (2010) too did not go ahead to explain how the media facilitated mediation and intervention processes that necessitated the amnesty programme, he only went ahead to score the media on the success of the amnesty pronouncement. Our identification of the failure of media conflict mediation role is therefore based on the media approach to conflict reportage which negates media initiation of dialogue between disputants, which is also a relevant process to getting the truth from conflict parties. The press has also trivialized the use of 'I witness account' which also necessitated the adoption of in-house languages in media houses to make up for media truancy in news coverage.

Series of factors apart from those listed above are responsible for media conflict mediation failure. Dickson (1992) confirmed our assumption before that media failure in their conflict mediation roles are 'interest driven'. Another attribute to the failure in media conflict mediation role is, 'the fear to receive blame', media practitioners at all instances avoid blames, the avoidance of blame by both media establishments and their agents, contribute greatly to the approaches adopted by the media in their reportage of conflict. Issues in conflict are products of the blame act; protracted

conflicts are blame driven and blame builds the dispute. Therefore conflict interveners as well as the media must accept blame to effectively intervene in conflict.

6. Conclusion

The study has identified ownership and media protective interest as primary challenges faced by the media in the reportage of the Niger Delta conflict. Others include nature of the terrain which is unfriendly and unfavourable and the issue of trust from the militants and security forces. All these challenges exert considerable influence on media failure to perform effective mediation role in their intervention to the Niger Delta conflict. The study also found militant activities, killing of all kinds and hostage taking as the challenges posed by the Ijaw Youth against media effective coverage of the Niger Delta conflicts. These instilled fears in the media men or journalists and contributed considerably to the nature of reportage during the heat periods of the conflict. The activities and false accusation by the security forces contributed heavily to the nature of reportage. The loss of trust on the media by security agents including the Police contributed greatly to the newspaper's ineffective information gathering from main sources at the scene of the conflict. The militants on their part became a major threat to the divulging of information, thus failing to create room for media conflict intervention process. These impediments at the end affect media use of language which at most instances either help to ignite conflict or aggravate the existing one. In order to re-position the media for effective conflict coverage and reportage, media practitioners must be sensitive in their intervention approaches by organizing town hall meetings in conflicting and conflict prone areas to educate conflict parties on media position in conflict, to avoid conflict parties' misconception of media conflict intervention approaches.

References

- Akinnawonu, B.M. 2006. The methods of conflict resolution in peace and conflict studies: an introductory text, S. Amuseghan, T. Obamuyi and K. Ogen (eds.), 178-185. Akure: Stebak.
- Bassey, C.O. 2007. The nexus of conflict and development crises in Africa. Celestine Bassey and Oshita Oshita (eds), *Conflict Resolution, Identity Crisis and Development in Africa*. Lagos: Malt House Press Ltd.
- Baum, M. and Tim G. 2009. *War Stories: the Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Canda, Z. and Reeves, R. 2012. *Working With Media to Prevent Conflict: Cluster Synthesis Report*. Initiative for Peace Building, UK.
- Dickson, S.H. 1992. Press and U.S. policy towards Nicaragua, 1983-1987: a study of The New York Times and The Washington Post. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69 (3): 562.
- Fourie, P.J. 2012. *Media Studies, Media History, Media and Society*. Cape Town: Juta and co. Ltd.
- Nwagbara, U. 2010. The Nigerian press, the public sphere and sustainable development: engineering the post amnesty deal in the Niger Delta. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 12 (3): 11-27.
- Owen-Ibe, N. 2002. Socio-cultural considerations in conflict reporting in Nigeria. Pate U.A. (ed), *Introduction to Conflict Reporting in Nigeria*. Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 30-44.
- Ross, H. 2009. *Conflict Sensitive Reports: State of the Art, a Course for Journalist and Journalism Educator*. UNESCO.