

In search of a solution: Nigerian newspaper coverage of peace initiatives in a time of national crisis

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Abstract

The study analyzed Nigerian newspaper coverage of various stakeholders' peace initiatives to resolve the Niger Delta crisis of 2006 to 2009. Four purposively selected dailies: the THISDAY, The Guardian, the Vanguard and The Sun published between January 1, 2006 and October 4, 2009 were content analyzed. The population was 5,532 issues from where a sample of 553 was systematically selected. Coding was by two independent coders and the inter-coder reliability stood at 0.77 using Scott's pi. index. The pattern of coverage indicated that the peace initiatives of local leaders (39.47 %) were the most covered, followed by the peace initiatives of the Federal Government of Nigeria/ Oil firms (23.44 %). This was followed by peace efforts of other stakeholders (27%) and NGOs (10.09 %). The result could imply that local leaders in the Niger Delta were more concerned about the crisis and wanted it quickly resolved, hence initiated more peace efforts than the Federal Government / Oil Firms widely believed to have aggravated the crisis. On individual newspaper coverage, the Vanguard paid the most attention to peace efforts by various stakeholders (31.16 %), followed by the THISDAY (27.60 %). Both papers provided more than half of the coverage of peace initiatives. More studies are needed to establish whether the newspapers overlooked some peace efforts of the Federal Government / Oil firms.

Keywords: Newspaper Coverage, National Crisis, Niger Delta, Peace Initiatives

Background to the study

Our world has become a world of crises. Every day, one form of crisis or the other erupts in different parts of the world. Depending on its magnitude, it can become a world media event in a matter of minutes. Journalists and their crews from different and competing media organizations will show up at the scene. This has always induced pack journalism, a situation in which several journalists from competing media organizations simultaneously cover a particular news event. In determining the news worthiness of a crisis, two main criteria are applied. The most important is impact in terms of death and injuries; the second, the extent of property damage [1]. Given the news worthiness of crises, whether national or global, they often assume a prominent position among media fares. In certain cases, regular programming on TV and the radio are suspended to accommodate round-the-clock crisis coverage. This is understandable. In a crisis situation, people are apprehensive and tension is heightened. For instance, people are concerned about the fate of their loved ones in a crisis-engulfed region. They always rely on the mass media as the most important sources of

information, and the media must stand up to this task.

Harping on the partnership between the government and the media during the outbreak of crises or disasters, Holton (1985, p. 6) writes [2]:

“The fundamental responsibility of all governments is assuring the safety and well-being of its (their) citizens. That mission cannot be carried out in an information vacuum. The citizens must know if and when he is in danger, and if and when the danger has passed. And he has a right to know about the fate of his neighbors.” The media provide the coupling link between the people and their government on the one hand, and disaster victims – dead or alive – and their loved ones on the other. Media coverage is important for several reasons. First, it is important to raise global exposure to the crisis and to ensure that victims get early assistance. Media coverage can also help attract international assistance, especially where local efforts are inadequate to contain the crisis. Covering peace efforts gives hope to victims and residents of crises-infested regions. In certain situations, however, the media could get overwhelmed by the pressure to keep the people informed in a timely and comprehensive manner, especially in violent conflicts, given the speed with which events unfold. When this is the case, inaccuracies slip

into media reports.

In search of a solution to a given crisis, stakeholders' peace initiatives are an integral part of the peace process. And the media must cover these efforts with every sense of duty and responsibility. Newspapers as part of the media are expected to report on these peace initiatives to end a given crisis. They often do this through news, feature articles, interviews, editorials, columns, opinions and sundry editorial matters. Nwankpa (2015a) reports that between 2006 and 2009, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria was embroiled in violence as a result of restive youths' agitation for resource control. They ventilated their anger on the state through killings, kidnapping of expatriate oil workers, blowing up of oil infrastructure, oil bunkering, hijacking of oil vessels and car bombings. The resulting security crisis led to a drastic cut in Nigeria's oil revenue as oil TNCs operating in the region were forced to shut down and withdraw core personnel [3]. Aaron and George (2010) conclude that the cost of the crisis was phenomenal in terms of loss of lives and revenue, security spending and environmental pollution [4]. The background to the crisis has been well-documented in [5]. As was reported, Nigerian newspapers gave a significant coverage to the crisis [5]. This may have helped in setting the right agenda and mediating in the crisis. The present study revisits that crisis with the aim of investigating Nigerian newspaper coverage of peace initiatives to resolve it.

Media, crises and peace efforts

Crisis is bad news. Bad news is good news for the media, so the media have great relish for covering disaster be it local or international. It is not therefore surprising that they are significant sources of news. In fact, one study by Gans estimated that 25% of all new stories involve natural disasters, technological hazards, or civil disturbances [1]. One reason advanced for this is that disasters or crises have the attributes of a good fiction such as drama, conflict, problems, solutions and rising and fall action. After all, news reports are called "stories." For TV, crises present additional advantage of great attention-grabbing. Another reason given why so much media attention is accorded disasters or crises, especially by TV is because they are generally easy to cover. As Wenger (1985, p. 3) observes, "All it takes is a film crew or tool, a public shelter where victims can be photographed, a few shouts of rising water, destroyed homes or trailers, some high turf, and an authority figure to interview and you have one minute and thirty seconds of dynamite, visual coverage [6]." Because several conflicts occur in remote parts of the world and have complicated histories, how the international community view them will depend to a large extent on how the media present and explain the conflict. That's media's power to structure issues. Yet, we do know that several conflicts in remote parts of the world have received little or no attention at all in the global media.

But how this coverage is done is of immense concern to all stakeholders. Media's role in conflicts will continue to be a subject of interest to society. Conflicts or crises affect everyone in one way or the other. Nwankpa (2015b) provides a comprehensive documentation and analyses of how the world's major conflicts have been

covered in the media [7]. In conflict situations the media are expected to provide accurate information. Media offering of accurate information can help save lives. This requires a reliable, pluralistic, and independent media, which can help clarify issues and help the public understand the issues at stake. The reliable and pluralistic media must be independent. Nwankpa (2015b, p.156) argues that, "An independent media is a great asset in peace efforts, since media credibility in times of crises can help douse hostility. [7]" In the same vein, Howard (2003, p. 14) insists that, "No single media outlet can do enough. It takes many media outlets to ensure that competing points of view and different reports are brought to the public's attention. [8]" Communication is key in all conflict-resolution efforts. The media must constantly monitor all on-going peace efforts and keep citizens informed in ways that inspire hope. This requires conflict analysis skills. This can help journalists to understand the issues at stake, positions of various stakeholders, get their facts right and choose their words carefully [9].

As the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict points out [10]:

"A great challenge for the media is to report conflicts in ways that engender constructive public consideration of possibilities for avoiding violence. The media can stimulate new ideas and appropriate approaches to problems by involving independent experts in their presentations who can also help ensure factual, accurate reporting. The media should develop standards of conduct in crisis coverage that include giving adequate attention to serious efforts under way to defuse and resolve conflicts, even as they give full international exposure to the violence itself." One of the requirements for resolving crisis is adequate media coverage in a context that gives meaning to issues, including ongoing serious peace efforts. This, according to Nwankpa and Onyekosor (2015), entails using more of interpretative feature articles, editorials, and interviews with conflict experts, victims and local residents [5]. Inaccurate reporting, for whatever reason, can create misperception and destroy confidence in the peace process. As Nwankpa (2015c, p.156) warns, "The distortions which result when journalists take sides can mislead the public and further erode the public trust, and can hinder peace efforts [11]."

Materials and Methods

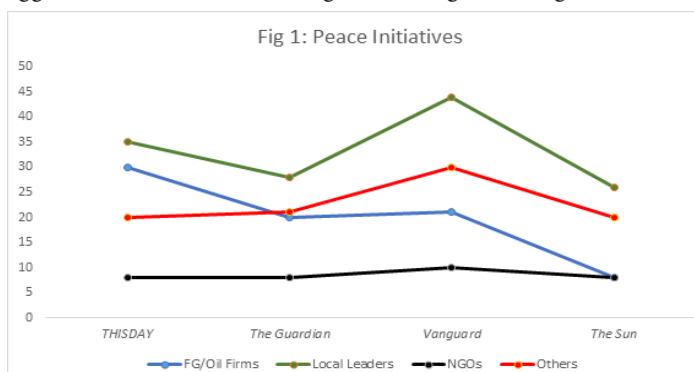
Content analysis was employed in the study. Content analysis was used to gauge Nigerian newspaper coverage of peace efforts by various stakeholders to resolve the Niger Delta crisis, including the Federal Government of Nigeria (FG)/Oil firms' local leaders, NGOs, etc. Four newspapers were purposively selected based on the following criteria: national spread; consistency of coverage of the Niger Delta crisis, and consistency on the newsstand. They are the *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, the *Vanguard* and *The Sun*. Within the study period, the total editions of the four dailies published and circulated totaled 5,532. The study covers a period of four years, spanning from January 1, 2006 to October 4, 2009, the day the period of grace provided by the Nigerian government for Niger Delta militants to embrace government's offer of amnesty elapsed. The systematic sampling technique was used in selecting the editions of

each newspaper to be studied. It is a sampling procedure in which every nth subject or unit is selected from the population.

From January 1, 2006 to October 4, 2009, the total editions of the four dailies published were 5,532. However, 10% of this population was studied, and this amounted to 553 issues. Approximately, each of the four newspapers yielded 138 issues of the sample. A skip interval of 10 was adopted, which was obtained by dividing the population (5,532) by the sample size (553). Using the skip interval of 10, an issue was picked using the calendar for the years studied. To introduce randomness into the selection process, the starting point was often varied across the different months in each year. The units of analysis for the study are straight news, feature article, editorial, opinion, interview, advertorial, and letter to the editor that made reference to peace initiatives to resolve the crisis in the Niger Delta. Coding was by two independent coders and the inter-coder reliability was 0.77 using Scott's pi. index.

Results

The study explored coverage of various conflict-resolution efforts by actors, including the Federal Government (FG)/Oil firms, local leaders, NGOs, etc. Table 1 presents the coverage of peace initiatives by various stakeholders. This information is presented graphically in Figure 1. As shown in Table 1, peace initiatives by local leaders in the Niger Delta were the most reported (39.47%), followed by those of the Federal Government/oil firms (23.44%). The coverage of peace efforts by other actors took 27%, while those of NGOs scored 10.09%. The result could imply that local leaders in the Niger Delta were more concerned about the conflict and wanted it quickly resolved, hence they made more peace efforts than the Federal Government/oil firms that are widely believed to have aggravated the crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria [12, 13].



Restoration of peace in conflict-torn regions seems to be of great

concern to many individuals and organizations that efforts are often made to bring about an early resolution of such conflicts. Given the constitutional responsibility placed on governments to maintain law and order, it is often expected that they should lead the way in the search for peace when conflict breaks out. But results of the content analysis seem to point to the contrary. The pattern of coverage of peace initiatives by various stakeholders does suggest that local leaders in the Niger Delta and others may have made more efforts at resolving the conflict in the Niger Delta than the FG/oil firms.

Some studies on media coverage of conflict have often come out with results indicating that journalists often utilize government sources more than other sources given the restriction often placed on movement by government security forces, and the desire by the government to manage information flow in ways that favors itself [14, 15, 16]. Besides, given the billions of oil revenue at the disposal of the Nigerian Federal Government and oil firms, they can afford with relative ease to place in the media, stories promoting their peace initiatives. Therefore, reporting more of peace efforts by local leaders and others seems not to suggest that journalists covering the conflict in the Niger Delta had more access to these actors than the government side. Several questions are bound to arise: Does it mean that local leaders were more concerned by the conflict and wanted it quickly resolved, hence took more peace initiatives to resolve the conflict? Did the newspapers overlook some peace efforts by the government/ oil firms? etc. These are issues that call for more research.

In search of peace and acting on the recommendation of the Ledum Mitee Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, the President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua federal government declared amnesty in 2009 for militants in the Niger Delta. This measure appears to have calmed frayed nerves to a great extent, and has restored a semblance of peace to the region, although other forms of criminality have continued to thrive in the Delta region.

From Table 2, (see Figure 2 also) the *Vanguard* paid the most attention to peace efforts by various stakeholders to resolve the crisis (31.16%), followed by the *THISDAY* (27.60%). Both dailies provided over half of the total coverage of peace efforts.

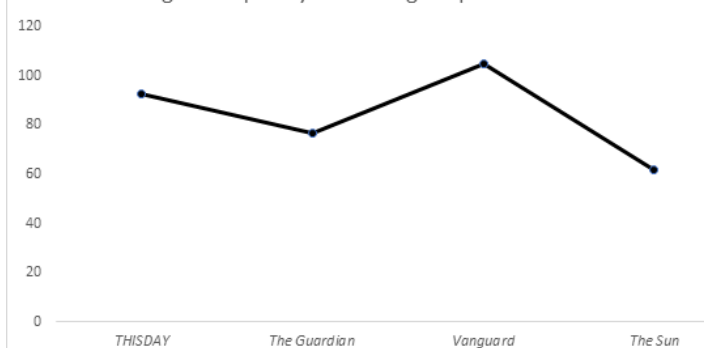
Table 1: Peace initiatives

Newspaper	FG/Oil Firms N (%)	Local Leaders N (%)	NGOs N (%)	Others N (%)	Total N (%)
THISDAY	30 (37.97)	35 (26.32)	8 (23.53)	20 (21.98)	93 (27.60)
The Guardian	20 (25.32)	28 (21.05)	8 (23.53)	21 (23.08)	77 (22.85)
Vanguard	21 (26.58)	44 (33.08)	10 (29.41)	30 (32.97)	105 (31.16)
The Sun	8 (10.13)	26 (19.55)	8 (23.53)	20 (21.98)	62 (18.40)
	79 (23.44)	133 (39.47)	34 (10.09)	91 (27.00)	337 (100)

Table 2: Frequency of coverage of peace initiatives

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage (%)
THISDAY	93	27.60
The Guardian	77	22.85
Vanguard	105	31.16
The Sun	62	18.40
Total	337	100

Fig 2: Frequency of coverage of peace Initiatives



Conclusion

Zartman (1995) concludes that internal conflicts are often more complex and difficult to resolve than inter-state conflicts [17]. The Niger Delta crisis being an internal conflict demands adequate media coverage, especially stakeholders' peace initiatives to diffuse and resolve it. In the search for peace, the media must continue to give full international exposure to crises bedeviling nations, while ensuring factual accurate reporting. Among other benefits, reporting on peace efforts to resolve crisis gives hope to victims and residents of crisis-torn enclaves. And life is worth living to the extent that there is hope of a better tomorrow. The Vanguard is therefore commended for giving the most attention to stakeholders' peace initiatives to resolve the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria between 2006 and 2009.

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