Print Media Framing of the Niger Delta Conflict in Two Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The mass media in Nigeria have played critical roles in the evolution of the country from colonial, military as well as civilian governance .The presence, absence or type of presence that the media have in social upheavals such as conflict influence the outcome of such events. Hence the notion that we live in a media controlled world and our perception of conflict, wars, economic policies are influenced by the media. A major technique that the media use in the portrayal of events is framing, which centres on the choice of words, phrases, literal techniques as well as the influence of placement on audience perception .This study looked at the framing techniques, news formats used, sources of frames as well as influence of ownership on the selected Nigerian Newspapers in the coverage of the Niger Delta, a conflict that is at the very centre of Nigeria's economy. Findings revealed that the selected newspapers used more of thematic frames than episodic frames, while they also preferred news formats to other editorial formats. In addition the newspapers depended mainly on their government and correspondents for frames used in the coverage of the Niger Delta conflict.

Keywords: Framing, frames, mass media, conflict, Niger Delta

Introduction

The mass media are vital to all segments of the population through their functions. Globally the magazines, newspapers, radio, television as well as other media platforms shape social upheavals such as conflict, war, social injustice among others. These functions include education, entertainment, surveillance, agenda setting, status conferral, interpretation and mobilisation (Emmert and Donaghy, 1981; Baran, 1999; Daramola, 2003). In a similar vein, McQuail (2005) posits that the mass media specifically play important roles in peace building and in the resolution of conflicts through their function of information dissemination. He further explains that the mass media have the social responsibility of mobilizing people towards positive change through setting agenda for peace and implementation of policies of conflict resolution. Fallows (1997:9) writing on the power of the media, especially of reporters, notes that:

> Tremendous potential power comes with being a reporter. You have the negative power to say things about other people in public, to which they can never really respond in kind. You have the positive power to expand

other people's understanding of reality by bringing new parts of the world
to their notice.

Empirical works have shown that framing is an inevitable part of media presentation of reports which is about "not what you say but how you say it" (Scheufele& Tewksbury, 2011). In other words, the media use concepts and themes to write news stories and the way they are constructed makes their meaning more salient thus "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audience" (Entman, 1993).This is to say, how issues and events are presented may affect how they are received and perceived by the audience as the news media provide audiences with frames of interpretation through the use of certain concepts and words. Moreover, once an event is chosen as worthy of media coverage, journalists and news handlers choose how to cover it and hence "frame" it for public interpretation.

There is a growing interest in understanding, through empirical data, the link between media and conflict. Hamdink (2008:79) posits that:

> Although there may be doubts about the media's peacemaking
> potentials it can be demonstrated that news media can make matters a
> lot worse and can certainly contribute to the escalation of group
> conflicts into Mass killings. This is especially so when media workers
> become agents for the dissemination of the elimination belief and when
> the media are intentionally used as weapons to incite people to commit
> crimes against humanity.

The argument of Hamdink (2008) is that the media portrayal of a conflict can influence the outcome of such a conflict .Conflicts ranging from socio-political, economic intra-ethnic as well as others are shaped by the presence, type of presence or absence that the media have in conflict situations .Conflicts such as the prolonged Syrian war, Libyan civil war, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Palestine-Israeli crises continue to raise questions on the role the mass media play in such social upheavals. From the findings of various scientific enquiries, documentaries and legal pronouncements on the Second World War; the Gulf War, and the Rwandan genocide, it is clear that the media can play key roles in conflict. Therefore, the presence of the media in conflict situations such as the Niger Delta conflict would showcase some elements of framing which can have effect on the resolution or escalation of the conflict.

Niger Delta Conflict and the Mass Media

The Niger Delta in present day Nigeria is situated in the South-South region and comprises Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, and Akwa-Ibom, Ondo as well as Imo,. Historically, conflict in the Niger Delta region dates back to when Tamuno (2000) refers to as the era of "Gunboat diplomacy". He explained that between the periods of 1850-1890, British colonial officials in the Niger Delta region ruled with gunboats, armed patrols and punitive expeditions, which brought untold hardship to the people. A critical period in the conflict was the declaration of the Niger Delta Republic in 1966 by Isaac

Adaka Boro, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dickson. This declaration led to a battle between the Federal Government forces and the militia forces led by Boro. The emergence of groups such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa was another stage in the Niger Delta conflict. These groups in the height of their campaigns engaged the government and the international community on the plight of the Niger Delta region. However, the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine was a turning point in the Niger Delta Conflict. This is so because as many of the groups that emerged after such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) became more violent in their demands for the development of the region. In addition, the Kaiama Declaration by thousands of Ijaw youths in Kaiama, Bayelsa State in 1998, was pivotal to the Niger Delta conflict. Part of their demands included resource control by host communities and greater representation for natives of the region in governance.

The Niger Delta in Nigeria has been a subject of widespread media coverage across national and international frontiers. Media in Nigeria just as media in other climes in the world use different devices in the quest to present reports or other contents in such a way as to make the public perceive it in predetermined ways. Framing is anchored on the notion that the way the media decide to report an event can have an influence on the way the audience view such issues. Nelson and Kinder (1996) and Nelson, Oxley and Clawson (1997)add that frames influence opinions through highlighting specific values, fact and other considerations endowing them with greater relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternate frame. Hence, this paper examines framing of the Niger Delta conflict by two Nigerian Newspapers: *Nigerian Tribune,* and the *Guardian*.

Research Problem

The Niger Delta is the major crude oil endowed region in Nigeria. The presence of oil has made it susceptible to conflicts which attract the attention of the print media.Most of the studies or works on the Niger Delta such as Tamuno (2000),Simbine, Roberts ,Benjamin, Danjibo, Oladeji ,Tijani & Azubuike(2008) ,Preboye(2005) and Osaghae (2011) centred on environmental, economic, ethnic and political dimensions .In the This study fills a gap in knowledge by examining framing of Niger Delta conflict in two Nigerian newspapers: Nigerian Tribune and the Guardian.The study has the following objectives: to identify the framing techniques used by the selected newspapers; find out the sources of frames used and editorial format used in the framing.

Coverage of events such as conflict one technique that the mass media use is framing. The media draw the public's attention to certain issues and decide what people think about by the way they set agenda or frame issues. The way in which the news is brought, the frame in which the news is presented, is also a choice made by reporters, editors or sometimes owners of media organisations. Frames influence the perception of the news by the audience.

Research Questions

1. Which framing techniques are used by the newspapers in the framing of the Niger Delta conflict?

2.What are the dominant frame sources of frames used by the selected newspaper in the framing of the Niger Delta conflict?

3. What are the   editorial formats used in the framing of the Niger Delta conflict?

Media Framing: A Conceptual Clarification

Media, Frames and Audience

Framing is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. Researchers have defined framing and its effects in various ways (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Nelson, et al 1997; Scheufele, 1999; Entman, 1993; Gorp, 2007). Specifically, Entman (1993: 51) refers to framing as a "Fractured Paradigm". He notes that to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommended for items described. It refers to the placement of emphasis on particular aspects of the object of interest. Merilainen and Vos (2011:4) agree that "framing is directed at the zero-sum game rule, like agenda setting in which the raising of one issue leads to the demise of another.The selective interests of people influence how many issues can be salient at any one time". From this, it is the norm that when framing an issue, the appropriate words that fit the message and the effects that are desired by the frame sponsors should be used. Nelson et al (1997:221) posit that "framing is the process by which communication sources, such as news organizations, define and construct a political issue of public controversy". Tiung (2009) views framing as part of a skill used in producing effects or understanding a certain issue. When an event is presented through a certain frame, it creates for a type of meaning. Framing therefore, refers to mass media capacity in choosing and stressing aspects of a reality or event, till it becomes important. Sometimes, this is done to the extent of affecting public opinions. Gorp (2007:60) adds that:

> The frame is a persuasive invitation, a stimulus, to read a news story in a particular way. So that a specific definition of an event, the causal and treatment responsibility for a societal topic and a moral judgment of a person come more easily across the receiver's mind.

Frames are therefore communication systems that aid a sender of media messages to package media content in ways that align with their opinions. Baran and Davis (2003) explain that the expectations we form about ourselves, other people and our social world are one of the basic elements of social life. Some of these expectations are stereotypes, attitudes, racial and ethnic bias. These expectations form the basis of audience frames or individual frames – these serve as the lens through which media contents, social interactions, human relationship among others, are viewed.

Schmitz, Filipone, and Edelman (2003:385) assert that "framing is a process through which a communication source defines and constructs a public issue or controversy and can have significant consequences for how people view and understand an issue". The way a social issue is cast can have significant effect on how one responds to it. For example, abortion receives different reactions from the audience, depending on whether it is framed in terms of immorality, saving lives or killing. Scheufele (1999:118) adds that:

> Framing is a process of selective control over media content or public communication. Framing defines how a certain piece of media message or rhetoric is packaged, so as to allow specific political or social movement or organization to present their own view or aspect of reality.

Framing thus provides a platform for political or other groups to present their views on given issues. For example, when government in Nigeria plans to remove subsidy on petroleum products, it always frames the issue as the "need to stop smuggling" or "funding of other sectors" as the reasons for the hike. On its part, the Nigeria Labour Congress uses "high cost of living" or "workers welfare", to oppose the move. What parties in conflict situation do is to push their frames in strong terms, to attract the attention of diverse segments of the society.

Empirical Studies on Media Framing of Conflicts

Iyengar (1990) studied the framing of a political issue and discovered through experiment and survey evidence that opinion about who or what is responsible for poverty varied considerably, depending on how poverty was framed. For instance, thematic frame promoted societal responsibility, while the use of episodic frame promoted individual responsibility. Moller (2008) in a study on the framing of Wealth and Poverty in the American media implicated the media as a key driver of excessive consumerism among Americans. The American media from the findings of Moller (2008) used frames that supported excessive lending, which to a large extent led many Americans into debt and the world into economic recession, experienced around 2011-2013.

Edy and Meirick's (2007) study on how the United States media framed the war in Afghanistan found out that the way the U.S media earlier framed the September eleven attack, had an impact on their support of the war in Afghanistan. The results showed the complexity of the framing phenomenon 2and suggested the need for better measure of how the audience perceives media frames. The American media had framed the September eleven attack as an 'enemy attack', like a war against America from Islamic extremists. Therefore, in framing the invasion of Afghanistan, the media supported the move, with frames that talked about the need to capture or kill the enemies of America or those who are a threat to global peace.

O'regan's (2007) study of Irish Media Coverage of the Israeli –Palestine conflict. Some of the formats used in the report were non-prominent, had news report formats and

were placed inside or back pages of the selected newspapers. O'regan's study found that the amount of news items on conflicts topic was more than the news items covering peace or international diplomatic issues. It also found that each of the newspapers sourced its news from indigenous sources, including Israeli-based or domestic papers; as such Palestinian topics were lowest. The study discovered that the newspapers acted as sites of contest for these frames, instead of just propagating the frames of either side.The listed empirical studies point in the same direction that the media are powerful in shaping the outcome or perception the audience have of conflicts.

Theoretical Framework.

Framing is anchored on the idea that the way an issue is presented in the mass media can have an influence on audience perception of such issues. Framing happens when the manner events are reported in the media has an impact on how they are understood by the audience. Mass media content producers decide where and what to place emphasis on in a story by the choice of phrases, images, positioning as well as content type to be used. The framing theory focuses on which topics or issues are selected for coverage by the news media. It looks at the particular ways those issues are presented. McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997) suggest that framing can be referred to as second level agenda setting in relation to the impact of salience of media coverage on audience interpretation of news stories.

Zilman(1994:2) explains that professional journalists "structure experience for us filtering out many of the complexities of the environment and offering polished, perhaps even literary version, in which a few objects and selected attribute are highlighted". Therefore, through the style of presentation, the media are divided between objectivity and persuasion, which is highlighted during the process of filtering stories. Framing of events in the media allows the media to structure a socio-economic,political and other reality for the readers. Zilman (1994) citing Lippman notes that it is the media that sketch most of the pictures people have in their heads. In essence, the way we perceive events is as represented by the media. For instance, the portrayal of the Niger Delta in the print media to a large extent affects how someone who reads such stories would view the region.

Framing is based on what Scheufele (1991) refers to as "prospect theory", which means that words used to represent events usually affect how receivers or audiences evaluate such content or news. Researchers, including Gamson and Modigliani (1989), Nelson et al (1997), Scheufele (1999), have over the years defined framing and its effects in many ways. The media sometimes select or reports news and present them in a way that would lead the readers to view reality in the way it is presented by the media. In relations to the Niger Delta conflict, the media can decide to present the inhabitants of the region as solely responsible for the regular oil spillage and downplay the parts played by the Federal Government and the Oil companies operating in the area. By this, the media can present a causal interpretation of the oil spills which puts the blame on the inhabitants. Similarly, the media can play up other causative factors such as political,

governmental, ethnic as well as regional aspects that contribute to the Niger Delta conflict.

Method

This study is a content analysis of two newspapers .The newspapers were selected out of a universe of 362 newspaper titles (Nigerian Press Council, 2017). These include *Nigerian Tribune,* and the *Guardian* Newspapers. They were purposively selected because they are listed among the top 10 newspapers with the highest circulation and for their sustained publication during the period that this study covered(Answer Africa, n.d) .The starting point of the period of this study was December 1998, when the Kaiama Declaration was made by Ijaw youths to June 2002. These dates are significant because the Kaiama Declaration in the view of some observers of the Niger Delta conflict marked a major turning point for the natives of the region in their quest for self-actualization, resource control and justice. The selected months in years 1999, 2000 and 2002 witnessed events that further raised questions about print media framing of the Niger Delta conflict.

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) view a purposive sample as a subject selected on the basis of specific characteristics or qualities that eliminate those that fail to meet these criteria. This researcher chose to use purposive sample because many studies on media and conflict including Avraham (2003), Segvic (2005) and Tiung (2009) used purposive sampling in selecting respondents or content to be measured. Therefore, the issues or dates selected included only those editions that contained stories on specific crisis point during the period of the Niger Delta conflict that this study covered.

The researcher identified some specific events and dates that were content analyzed from the 3-year enquiry into the conflict. These including the Kaiama Declaration and the following:

1. **December 1998** - More than 5,000 Ijaw youth gather in the ancient Kaiama town, Bayelsa State, proclaiming the Kaiama Declaration.

2. **January 1999-**Opia and Ikeyan villages of Delta state are razed in circumstanceslinkingan American oil giant and Nigerian soldiers.

3. **November 1999-**Odi, an oil bearing community in Bayelsa state is razed to the ground by Nigerian Military troops and about 2,500 persons are massacred.

4. **June 2000-**Niger Delta Development Commission is established.

5. **July 2002**- Itsekiri women protest the excruciating socio-economic condition in the Delta region.

- Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri in Delta state put ethnic rivalry aside to protest for better living condition for communities.

Drawing from the selected crises points which covered five months this study analyzed 152 editions each of the two selected newspapers making a total of 304

newspapers. Data gathered from the content were analyzed using simple percentages and frequency distribution**.**

The unit of analysis therefore generated data to answer the research questions. In this study, media content, such as news stories, features, advertorials, editorials, cartoons, opinionated essaysand photographs on the Niger Delta Conflict were examined. The content analytical categories frame type, framing condition, editorial formats, dominant frame sources, slant of stories and media function.

Findings

Research Question 1: Which framing techniques were used by the newspapers in the framing of the Niger Delta conflict?

Table 1: Framing Techniques used in the coverage of the Niger Delta conflict

Frame Type	Guardian News Paper	Tribune Newspaper	Total (%)
Episodic	32(50.7%)	31(49.2%)	63(100%)
Thematic	19(67.8%)	9(32.1%)	28(100%)
Total	51	40	**91**

Table 1 shows that the selected newspapers used more of episodic frames in the coverage of the Niger Delta conflict with 63 of the 91 reports using episodic frames, while only 28 of the reports used thematic frames .Drawing from the concept of episodic or thematic frames, it is apparent that the readers mostly got individual event idea or meaning to the more complex Niger Delta conflict.

Episodic frames are centred on specific case or events. According to Bruce (2014) they reduce a big series of life events to specific episodes or case studies. On the other hand, thematic news frames look at events through a broader spectrum with attention to trends, causes, context and other determinants such as environment and history. Therefore, reporters as well as editors engage news frames to present media content in such a way as to make the readers think about issues in particular ways.

Table 2: Framing Condition/ Dominant Frames

Framing condition/ Dominant frame	Guardian News Paper	Tribune Newspaper	Total (%)
Economic frame	7(70%)	3(30%)	10(100%)
Political frame	2 (15.4%)	11 (84.6%)	13(100%)
Ethnic frame	4(23.5%)	13 (76.5%)	17(100%)
Militant/Separationist	12 (70.6%)	5 (29.4%)	17(100%)
Justice/HumanRights	16 (55.2%)	13 (44.8%)	29(100%)
Environmental	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Total	**42**	**46**	**88**

When using frames the mass media reporters or editors use various approaches engaging particular conditions or dominant frame. Findings reveal that the selected newspapers mostly portray stories justice/human rights frames(29),perhaps reflecting the fact that the media viewed the Niger Delta conflict as rising issues that border on the rights of the indigenes of the region to agitate for a better deal in the control and distribution of oil resources. This was followed by ethnic frame as well as political frames with 17 stories each. To some extent the selected newspapers used economic (13), political (11) and environmental frames (2) as framing conditions. To various degrees the media used the selected framing conditions to influence how the readers and other stakeholders viewed the Niger Delta conflict.

Research Question 2: What were the dominant frame sources used by the selected newspapers in the framing of the Niger Delta Conflict?

Table 3: Dominant Frame Sources used in the Coverage of the Niger Delta conflict

Dominant Frame Sources	Guardian News Paper	Tribune Newspaper	Total
Government	8 (47.1%)	9 (52.9%)	17 (100%)
Oil Companies	-	-	-
Own Correspondents	29 (53.7%)	25 (46.3%)	54 (100%)
Foreign Agencies	-	-	-
Local Media	2 (100%)	-	2 (100%)
Niger Delta Comm.	6 (35%)	11 (64.7%)	17 (100%)
Other Sources	11 (64.7%)	6 (35%)	17 (100%)
Total	**56**	**51**	**107**

Findings from Table 3 showed that the dominant frame sources used by the selected newspapers were own correspondents (54),followed by Niger Delta communities (17),Government sources(17) and other sources(17).Those listed as other sources include public affairs analysts, commentators and others. Traditionally, the media depend on their correspondents for reports. However as this findings revealed that the media in the case of the Niger Delta also depended on government,Niger Delta communities and other sources. This can be traced to the peculiarity of the Niger Delta conflict that at the height of the crisis did not allow reporters or correspondents to travel to the creeks and other volatile areas of regions.

Research Question 3: Which Editorial Formats were used in the Framing of the Niger Delta Conflict?

Table 4: Editorial Formats used in the Framing of the Niger Delta conflict

Content Format	Guardian Newspaper	Tribune Newspaper	Total (%)
News Reports	29 (50%)	29 (50%)	58 (100%)
Editorials	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)
Features/Commentaries/Opinionated Essay	17 (65.4%)	9 (34.6%)	26 (100%)
Letter to the Editor	2 (66.6%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (100%)
Adverts/Advertorials	-	-	-
Cartoons	-	-	-
Photographs	2 (100%)	-	2 (100%)
Special Reports	-	-	-
Speeches/Interviews	3 (100%)	-	3 (100%)
Others	-	-	-
Total	**54**	**42**	**96**

Findings presented on Table 4 show that the highest editorial format used by the selected newspaper was News report (58), followed by Features/commentaries and opinionated (26).Other formats such editorials were used only (4) times, letter –to-the – editor (3) times, speeches (3) times and photographs (2)times. It is apparent from the selected newspapers preferred News reports to other editorial formats. This agrees with data on Table 1 that showed that the newspapers used more of episodic frames than thematic frames, because news reports are usually hinged on episodic frames. Consequently, the media did not give detailed analysis on the trend, context and historical background to the Niger Delta conflict.

Table 5: Page Placement of Reports on Niger Delta in the Selected Newspapers

page Placement	Guardian Newspaper	Tribune Newspaper	Total	
Front Page	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.6%)	12	100%
Back Page	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	12	100%
Editorial Page	1 (11.1%)	4 (88.8%)	5	100%
Inside Page	36 (64.3%)	20 (35.7%)	56	100%
Opinion Page	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6	100%
Other Pages	-	7 (100%)	7	100%
Total	**53**	**45**	**98**	

Table 5 shows that the newspapers placed most of the stories on the Niger Delta conflict on the inside passages with 56 items while only 12 stories were placed on the front page and back pages. Opinion pages had 6 items editorial page had 5 items, while

other pages had 7 reports. The reflection from the finding is that the media did not give maximum prominence to the Niger Delta conflict.

Discussion

The findings from this study on print media framing of the Niger Delta conflict showed that the period had very minimal prominence as most of the reports were tucked into the inside pages of the newspapers. Expectedly, the editorial format preferred most by the newspapers was news reports. This preference for news formats agreed with the study by O'regan (2007) that showed the media prefer use of news formats in the coverage of conflicts. Therefore, it was also glaring that the newspapers used more of episodic frames than thematic frames because the former focuses on immediate, direct and timely framing of events, while the latter gives more detail and background to reports. This agrees with Iyengar's (1990) study that the choice of either episodic or thematic frames by the media can influence the views that the audience have of a conflict. The dominant frame sources used were correspondents or reporters from the newspapers as well as Government sources. The implication of this is that the frames engaged in the reportage of the Niger Delta conflict were chosen or framed mainly by the media and government sources. In addition, the selected newspapers also depended on Niger Delta communities as well as other sources like Public Affairs Analysts for frames used in reporting the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

The presence or absences of the mass media as well as the frames they choose in the representation of conflicts go a long way in influencing the escalation or de-escalation of the conflict. In the same vein, the frames that the media engage to report conflicts and other social upheavals can affect what the readers and other stakeholders think about a particular event. The media in Nigeria should select frames that would aid in the resolution of a conflict or its de-escalation, rather than one that would further fan the embers of strife among the various interest groups in a conflict such as that in the Niger Delta. The media should strive to rise above using mainly news items in the reportage of conflicts to the use of editorials, features and other formats that would further create for better understanding of the underlying factors in a conflict.

Clear from the findings was the realities that most of the reports in selected newspapers were placed on the inside pages of the newspaper used for this study. This is reflective of the fact that the media did not give adequate prominence to the Niger Delta conflict. A situation that strikes at the very heart of Nigeria's revenue base should get more front page reports in order to draw the attention of stakeholders in the conflict .One of the editors interviewed in the process of gathering data for this study had explained that their own news outfit did not have a stake in the Niger Delta conflict hence the level of prominence that was given to the coverage of the conflict. It was also discovered that the newspapers depended mainly on their own correspondents and government sources for reports as well as the frames used in describing the Niger Delta conflict.

Consequently, what the readers mostly know of the real state of things in the oil-rich region is as packaged by the media.

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