

Solution Approach to Newspaper Framing and Ethnic Groups' Conflict Behaviours

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Abstract

The effects of what media frame as news on public behaviours to politics have been discussed extensively in scholarly works, however, the possible solutions in relation to how newspapers framing stimulate conflict frame (behaviours) in ethnic leaders who rheostat the hearts and minds of ethnic groups, are still underexplored. Therefore, series of in-depth interviews on 26 ethnic group leaders were conducted and data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 10 software, to probe into the ethnic group leaders' conflict frames in other to discover the possible solutions to the incessant ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and similar multiethnic and developing societies. The study found that the since the media and ethnic groups attitudes play part in the emergence and escalation of these conflicts, solutions rest mostly in the handling these two helixes. Specifically, the need for government to be proactive in the areas of amenities, empowerment and monitoring is expedient, while newspaper framing along with the ethnic groups' actions need to be ethnic sensitive.

Keywords: newspaper framing, ethnic groups, conflict behaviours, media regulation, audience frames

1. Introduction

Human survival on this planet hinges on how we manage the various features of conflict that emerged through the seemingly incompatible interests, values and hostilities (Jeong, 2008) but which are stimulated by various helixes. Meanwhile, these springboards in most multiethnic societies have been linked to the media and ethnic leaders (McBeath, 1978; Straus, 2007; Wiegenstein, 2014) however, research attention to concretely establish these links is inadequate (Hutchison, 2013). More so, in spite of the grievous dimension that ethnic conflicts is taking across Nigeria, the government seems to lack the dimensions to prevent the impending conflicts as well as putting a stop to the intractable ones. For that reason, Nigeria has been experiencing a situation where longstanding conflicts worsen, and the new ones sprouting (Arbour, 2014). Nigeria government's several steps to find a lasting solutions have not manifested into success thus raising questions about the effectiveness of the mechanisms. Meanwhile, the Structural Conflict Theory has established that what influences conflict in any society goes beyond what we see as the immediate cause (Harry, 2001) which means, in every conflict, though usually unnoticed, there is a helix wrapped in conflict behaviours. This conflict behaviours, which are the mainsprings of most ethnic conflicts, according to Musa and Ferguson (2013), Adisa (2012) are built up in ethnic group leaders through many contributory factors.

In view of the consistent interest of scholars across the globe on conflicts studies generally, it is evident that there is still relative paucity of studies on the roles that ethnic group leaders in conjunction with the role that framing in newspaper play as the helix of these conflicts. Therefore, lasting solutions especially for developing countries have remained few and inadequate. Though, framing provides a fruitful way of understanding how media shape news and people's perceptions of it but the area lacks precision (Reese, Gandy Jr, & Grant, 2001). Therefore, the need for attention towards the examination of ethnic conflict solutions has become imperative more so, that in most of the multiethnic societies, conflicts remain intractable and resolution elusive.

2. Ethnic groups' conflict behaviours

Ethnic groups' conflict behaviors are the concealed or visible constructive or destructive activities cultivate and which have possibilities to inspire ethnic groups into ethno-political conflicts (Best, 2011). Conflict behaviours, which are the mainsprings of most ethnic conflicts, according to Musa and Ferguson (2013), Adisa (2012) are built up in ethnic group leaders through many contributory factors. Based on this, Halirru (2012) calls for investigation to identify the causative factors accountable for development of conflict behaviours of the protagonists of conflict in Nigeria. The same reason informed Otomer and Wehr (2002) statement that once the possible causes of conflict behaviours are identified, it will be possible to explain why a particular conflict exist and it would be easy to prevent it.

This has become an issue because Nigerian has for some times been at the receiving end of an intense upsurge of ethnic groups militias (Agbu, 2004), whose attitudes have been causing turmoil. Presently, there are many militant divisions of ethnic groups who are arms-bearing in Nigeria (Ikuteyijo & Rotimi, 2012). However, justifying the reason for the attitudes of these ethnic groups in Nigeria, Kukah (2003) maintains that ethnic groups and individuals have a tendency to find unconventional means of fashioning a sense of belonging when

the country fails to carry on to serve as a platform for the people to attain their potentials. Because every man will find survival strategies which may include belonging to armed gangs, extreme religions or ethnic groups. As a result they continue to unleash all forms of terror on the state, its citizens and agencies as being witness in Nigeria in recent times.

In the same vein, Agbu (2004) noted that In Nigeria, this circumstance has taken on the guise of ethnic groups' militia movements purportedly representing and in the hunt to protect their different ethnic interests in a country in which the state is largely perceived as nonchalant to the demands of the ethnic nationalities in the country. The number of these groups grows daily while the government looks on helplessly at a loss on how to handle the problem in a society where individual and group rights need to be upheld, quite apart from the ethnic and political implications. In spite of this, not much attention has been directed at knowing the solutions to the conflict behaviours of the ethnic groups and opinion leaders who have been supposedly influenced by the media framing and more so that many of them are instrumental to the ethnic conflicts' emergence and escalation.

3. Media Frames and Audience Frames

The concept of framing has been one of the most abundant areas in recent research in communication, politics and sociology because framing can clarify and interpret the extent the media affect publics' understanding of politics and issues (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2012). According to Tankard (2001), media framing presents alternative to the old objectivity and bias paradigm that was popular in mass communication research for years, in a way that it helps researchers to understand mass communication effects. Framing is a way to understand conflict (Goffman, 1974). Frames play an important role in creation of "us" and "them" in a conflict situation (Shinar, 2002). Frame analysis is a way to investigate the coverage of conflict (D'Angelo, 2002; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Since it is a useful tool, the theoretical framework of framing will be used to guide this study. This powerful and preventable action of the press has been blamed greatly for inciting the eventual 1994 genocide in Rwanda that claimed over 800,000 lives (Kalyango & Vultee, 2012; Mitchell, 2007). Similarly in several studies, mass media (and other forms of communication) were linked to the escalation of conflicts and later on in the potential de-escalation (Erni, 2009; Leung, 2009; Spencer, 2005).

This incidents confirm the framing postulation that how an issue is described in news story can sway how it is understood by audiences (Van Gorp, 2007). Clarifying the uniqueness of framing further, Entman (1993) maintains that framing has four core functions which are: describing problems, identifying causes, making proper judgments, and then proposing remedies. Framing theory offers the basis for understanding how conflict is reported in newspapers (Carpenter, 2007) because according to de Vreese (2005), de Vreese, Boomgaarden, and Semetko (2011), a frame is an emphasis in salience of various aspects of an issue such as conflict. Also, according to Zhou (2008) scholars use the concept of framing as an instrument to appreciate news as a social construction and social resource. To Shoemaker and Reese (1996) during the framing stages journalists have swaying power because they can focus their stories more on a particular issue while they tone down alternative viewpoints. However, this study was guided by the two concepts of framing: the media frames and dominantly, the audience frames. According to Scheufele (1999) frames need to be considered schemes for both how media present news as well as how the audience comprehend and apply news. Therefore, it becomes important for researchers to distinguish between them in determining the best research methods (Colistra, 2012). Research into audience frames investigates how and to what extent specific media frames influence readers' or viewers' perceptions of certain issues (Tankard, 2001). Goffman (1974) maintained that frames are central categorizing life experiences that give meanings to events that if not would be meaningless. In the same way, Edelman (1993) contended that what is recognized about the nature of the human relation hinges on how the cues received about the world are framed and interpreted. According to Reese (2001) "frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (p. 11). However, Entman (1993) stressed that through framing, some aspects of reality are underscored and emphasized. Therefore, Van Gorp (2009) concluded that framing has serious effects in the field of communication.

4. Methodology

The study adopted qualitative research method with in-depth interview approach in other to adequately probe into the ethnic group leaders' catalyst for conflict frames on ethno-political conflict in Nigeria. The sampling design was based on snowballing method due to the sensitivity of the issue and difficulty of locating the participants (Creswell, 2012; Keyton, 2015). Series of in-depth interviews on 26 ethnic group leaders were conducted and data were analyzed thematically using NVIVO 8 software. Resulting from the interviews was the generation of coding frames which consisted of conceptualizing elements that explained the perspectives and lived experiences of the ethnic group leaders on ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and the role of newspaper framing. Then, subcategories were further developed in other to deepen the probing for rigorous and reliable findings to the question; how do newspaper frames of ethno-political issues stimulate ethnic group leaders' conflict frames?

5. Findings

Apart from the need for government to be proactive, the emerged solutions centered around newspaper framing and ethnic group leaders' conflict behaviour because they are the two most frequent forces that shape, direct and trigger the course of ethnic conflicts in developing societies like Nigeria. Similarly, the emerged solutions also buttressed Straus (2007), McBeath (1978), Wiegenstein (2014) that the two of the most important elements requiring investigation for solutions are media and ethnic group leaders. The findings were categorized and discussed accordingly.



Figure 1: Possible solutions to ethnic conflict

5.1 Functional State

Although, the task of addressing the seed of conflict emanating from the British colonialist amalgamation has been a complex one (Jacob, 2012) but Shittu (2013) viewed that solutions can come if the government should work out feasible strategies, agenda for peace, reach promise with visible ethnic groups, work on the social institutions, provide amenities and build trust and confidence of people in itself. In line with this flow of thought, analysis of the interviews with ethnic group leaders generated the followings (figure 2 below) remedies required of the government which can serve as the possible solutions to ethnic conflicts.

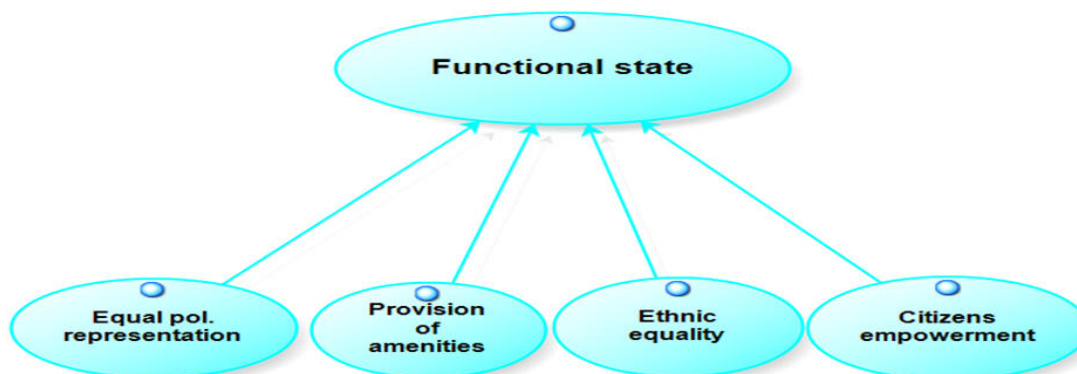


Figure 2: Government responsibility towards solution

5.1.1 Equal Political Representation: Political landscape in Nigeria has turned to do-or-die affair shadowed with violence, assassinations, threats, intimidation, blackmail, etc which are used by mostly to scare some away from active participation in politics (Nwabunkeonye, 2014). Therefore, a lasting solution to this problem as suggested by the majority of the Informants IB7, F3, IJ12, H21, Y24 is to acknowledge that the current federal structure and political arrangements have manifested into deep cracks and demands urgent action to mend it. They perceived one of the immediate step required is for, “political activities to be streamlined by making the political offices less attractive”.

5.1.2 Provision of Amenities: One of the major factors that fuel ethnic conflict across Nigeria has been near lack of amenities for wellbeing of the people. According to Omofonmwan and Odia (2009), most of the communities engulfed in conflicts, especially the Niger Delta, are those lacking in basic amenities. This informed the reasons why Informants, H11, Y15, F19, IJ25 called for government fairness to all in the distribution of amenities especially for minorities.

5.1.3 Ethnic Equality: Nigeria is expected to be a country where all men are born equal and all ethnic groups have access to the same opportunities without any form of discrimination. However, preventable conflict behavior and avoidable conflicts emanated from inequality treatment have stimulated deep-rooted hatred among the ethnic group leaders and political class which should lead the populace. The predominant perceptions towards a lasting solution offered by Informants Y22, IJ20, F3, the principal actors in most of the ethnic conflicts in Nigeria is that government both at the state and federal levels... have to ensure that nobody and no ethnic group is denied what is due to it.

5.1.4 Citizen Empowerment: Poverty is violence and structural violence kills faster than bullets, for this reason it is very important as part of solution to incessant conflict to pay attention to the multifaceted links between poverty and violence (Moser, & Holland, 1997). The same reason why Shittu (2013) advocates for attention and empowerment of the People of Niger-Delta who have for long been in conflict with the government due to deprivation and poverty caused by environmental pollution from oil exploration. Similarly, the masses in the Northern region who have become instrument for conflict due to poverty and the south-west and south-east in order to curb the menace of militancy. In line with this, most of the Informants Y17, IJ20, H21 stressed that if government plan adequately for the citizens, there is high hope that peace will reign.

5.2 Professionalism in news reporting

Quality as well as professionalism of media reporting are fundamental elements in a conflict situation. This is essential because according to Ibrahim, Kee and Chwee (2012) the media, most importantly newspapers have the potential to correct false impression, reduce tensions and at the same time can cause fear and anxiety in the society. Therefore, based on the analysis of this study, the followings (figure 3) emerged as solutions that can come from newspaper news reporting.



Figure 3: Professionalism in news reporting as solution to ethnic conflicts

5.2.1 Proactive reporting: Media may play critical roles in the prevention and management of conflict, as well as deliberately or inadvertently driving conflict. However, one of the positive roles that newspaper can play is by being proactive in promoting peace and security may include changing attitudes and conflict behaviours; providing early warning of divisive issues or instability; mitigating conflict through balanced reporting; promoting reconciliation (Candan & Reeve, 2012). Therefore, the ethnic leaders interviewed offered series of advised for the media to promote peace among which the Informant IJ20 noted:

What I think the newspapers should do often, as done in developed country, is to truly serve as the watch dog of the society by exposing all, ethnic groups, politicians and even government that are planning to create divisive relation among us (Inf. IJ20).

5.2.2 Ethnic Sensitive: To be ethnic insensitive is to act like the infamous media in Rwanda that triggered ethnic conflict which resulted to 1994 genocide (Somerville, 2011). Therefore, according to Rugar (2012) Journalism of diversity, particularly coverage of ethnicity, requires support for common values and understanding to counter the spread of ignorance, intolerance, and hatred which lead to discrimination and social tension. Similar perspectives were echoed by the Informants majority of whom recommended that media should promote the ideals and unity among ethnic groups and not emphasizing the differences and likely cause of conflict.

5.2.3 Balance Reporting: It is essential that newspapers, along with other media, are challenged to be fair, balance and accurate. According to Bassil (2014) conflict coverage by the media is not just about “reporting facts” but also is about “what” to report and “how” to report, which signifies selection and responsibility and therefore, high standards of ethics and principles. In view of this therefore, it is essential that newspapers, along with other media, are challenged to be fair, balance and accurate. According to Bassil (2014) conflict coverage by the media is not just about “reporting facts” but also is about “what” to report and “how” to report, which

signifies selection and responsibility and therefore, high standards of ethics and principles.

Meanwhile, ethnic group leaders have also offered suggestions to media on the solution to unprofessional manner of reporting conflict. For instance, Informants F19 and IB23 respectively said “as for newspapers, they should be balance in their stories and be considerate, be fair and balance to all”. On how this would be achieved, Informant IJ14 advised that the media should, “stop promoting the interest of some ethnic groups at the expense of others”.

5.3 Government Regulation

Government, at whatever level, has been described as a vital organ of conflict regulation and mediation because it is the only structure capable of marshalling enough legitimacy, resources and power to effectively manage conflicts (Onwuzuruigbo, 2009). Meanwhile, the recurrent conflicts in Nigeria have called for re-examination of the strategies for their handling. In views of this, and as part of the solutions to ethnic conflicts, the need for government to be pro-active by regulating the activities of media, ethnic groups and ownership of newspapers in Nigeria emerged as shown in the model below.

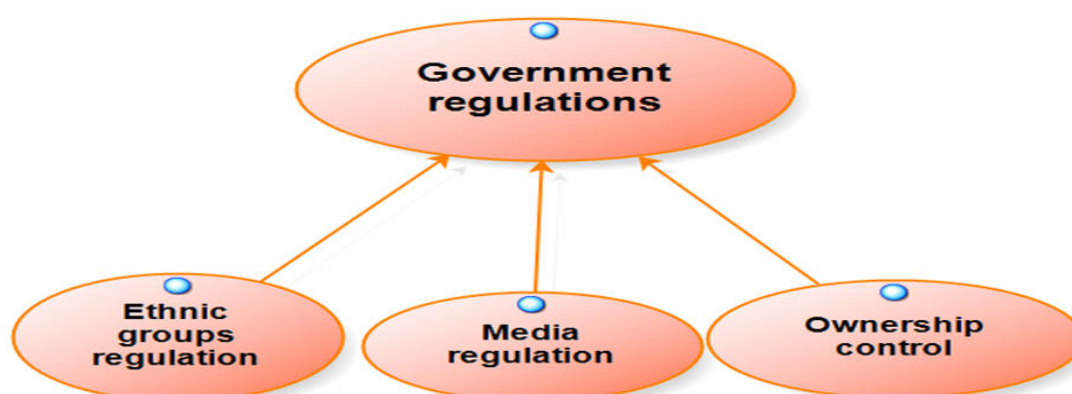


Figure 4: Regulating conflict actors as a solution

5.3.1 Ethnic groups' regulation: Several arguments and justifications have been advanced for the increase of the phenomenon of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Adetiba (2012) for instance said that the proliferation of ethnic groups which have become one of the challenge for Nigeria was due to the aggressive pursuit of the principle of self-determination which was equally stimulated by the imperfections of Nigeria's Federal System. Along with this is the increase in the availability of small arms. It has been estimated that there are currently about 3 million small arms and light weapons in the country; almost 80 per cent of which were acquired illegally and are in unauthorized, private hands (Isa, 2005). Arising from these problems, some of the leaders of the ethnic groups themselves have called for the need for proactive regulation and control by the government. For instance, offering his suggestion like most others, Informant Y17 said “all ethnic leaders should be made to register with the government for monitoring and for other benefits. This is necessary in other to prevent all dick and harry as ethnic leaders”.

5.3.2 Media Regulation/self-regulation: Media self-regulation in the society is described as the combination of standards, ethics, application of the appropriate codes of behaviour that are necessary to support the freedom of expression and the process of how those behaviours will be monitored or held to account (Puddephat, 2011). Regulation is imperative because anyone in the media is probable of being bias in what is presented as news. However, rather than government regulation, some scholars (Douglas, 1995) have called for absolute self-regulation, while some have advocated for full government regulation. Government regulation of the media would mean a government instituting form of law or rules that will control, alter or influence media behaviour while self-regulation means that the industry or profession rather than the government is doing the regulation (Campbell, 1999). In line with this and as part of solutions to the ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, ethnic group leaders suggested media regulation as a solution. For instance, Informant IJ 12, declared that “Newspapers play a great role in ethnic conflict in the sense that call for reexamination of their role”. Similarly, Informant H10 noted that “the newspapers should be checked for their recklessness on issues concerning ethnic groups”.

5.3.3 Ownership Control: Further than playing its main role of informing, educating and entertaining the readers, the press has remained a chief propaganda tool for use and abuse by proprietors, political and government elites, as well as people of influence in society (Adesoji, & Alimi, 2012). This and many other negative influence of the press have motivated calls for control and regulation of the activities of their owners. Regulations of ownership are formal and enforced instructions about the structure, conduct, interest and content of the media. Examples include limits on monopoly ownership or media cross-ownership. In line with this therefore, solution by

government regulation emerged from the interview. Informant IB23 for instance stressed that "... newspapers ownership should be controlled by the government because some corrupt people are just establishing newspapers to protect their interest and cover their loots". Stating reason for call for government intervention, Informant Y17 disclosed that "the media ownership structure and style should be looked into to prevent media from pandering to whatever that concern the owner".

5.4 Mutual Interest

As part of the solution to ethnic conflict, there is a need for ethnic groups to have far-reaching attitudes and understanding of how their actions would assist and serve the mutual interest of societies (Adelegan, 2015). Unlike the current ethnic elites and leaders, the past leaders such as Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Tafawa Balewa were more concerned about mutual interest. Therefore, to sustain peace and harmony in the society, both government and ethnic group leaders have to be mindful of others' interest as well as respect other people's interest in all their actions and inactions. Based on the perspectives of ethnic group leaders, the following sub-themes: mutual tolerance, mutual trust and skeptic of newspaper stories emerged as the solutions.

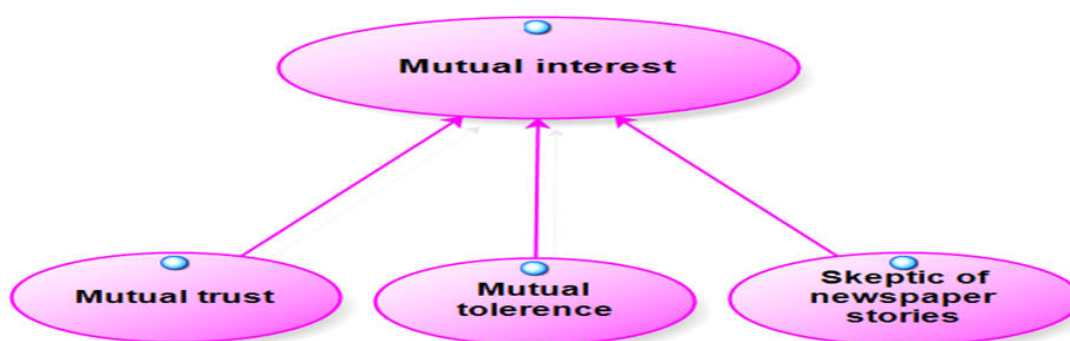


Figure 5: Solving ethnic conflict through mutual interest

5.4.1 Mutual Trust: Mutual trust is a necessary pre-condition for the creation of societal benefits such as peace and harmony (Putnam, 2000). Among ethnic groups and people in any society generally, Post (2011) similarly stressed that mutual trust is a driving force for development and peaceful living. However, the problem of acrimonious existence among the diverse ethnic groups and interests in Nigeria has made the country prone to incessant conflicts. Nigeria is a greatly divided country and this separation is complemented with serious suspicion, distrust, and hatred among its diverse people. The depth and dimension of this mistrust according to Olufemi (2005) are what informed the emergence and popularity of ethnic militias such as the Arewa People's Congress (APC), Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Bakassi Boys, Ijaw Youths Congress and sundry militant organizations canvassing competing ethnic claims. In spite the differences therefore, the Informants Y16, IB23, F3 noted that "If we trust each other, we will tolerate each other". And that "what we need in Nigeria for peace to rain among ethnic groups is mutual understanding and trust" and "then also very important for us to achieve harmony and peace, we should trust each other.

5.4.2 Mutual Tolerance: To achieve peace in any society with multiethnic groups, it will always require shaping and developing attitudes of tolerance, respect and understanding towards others. This informed the reason why tolerance is widely considered as an indispensable communal value for guaranteeing the cohesion of plural societies. Therefore, as long as behaviors and practices of intolerance as well as social exclusion are not discouraged and checked, social cohesion in society will be threatened (Knauth, 2011). As part of the ways to avoid conflict and achieve peace in Nigeria, ethnic group leaders have identified lack of mutual tolerance as one of the basis for conflict and therefore offered various suggestions. For instance, Informant F26, indicated that, "This behaviour of not accepting people from other ethnic group is one of the cause of our problem. We should tolerate others who do business and study in our domain, improve on our tolerance for other ethnic groups". Similarly, Informants F2, Y16 and IJ12 agreed that "Nigeria will have peace the moment we stop been selfish...So we should tolerate each other even in our differences".

5.4.3 Skeptic of Newspaper Stories: Skepticism is an approach that is usually adopted in evaluating a claim when there is lack of trust between two or more individual or organizations. Meanwhile, in many societies, there has been an increasing subjective mood of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream news media (Tsfati, 2003). Skepticism of media is apparent, for instance, in the sentiment that journalists have let down their professional requirements and presented slanted, imprecise, or inadequate information (Tsfati, & Peri, 2006). In the coverage of conflict also, newspapers inaccuracies and obvious slanting have increased the perception of mistrust which is

turning to skepticism. The realization that being cynical about newspapers' stories is a solution to reducing their impacts on the behavior of ethnic groups towards conflict was also expressed by most of the ethnic group leaders. Informants 8 and 26, for instance, advised other ethnic leaders to be skeptical about newspapers news stories for reasons which they categorized as bias and inaccuracies.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In view of the fact that the media, most importantly newspapers, have the prospective to correct false impression, reduce tensions and at the same time can cause fear and anxiety in the society then the approach to framing of conflict issues calls for concern. More so that investigations have revealed that the underlying forces of violent conflict such as, its context, instigation, emergence and resolution are unfortunately not much understood nor professionally reported by most journalists, all which gave rise to the accusation that the news media is part of the problem of conflict. Therefore, for media being proactive in form of the echo chamber function can be an important and efficient prevention from the likely sources of conflict within society. But unfortunately, it has been observed with dismay that media show less attention to latent conflict conditions until the conflict emerged and escalated.

Also, the concern about the need for media to be ethnic sensitive in their framing are due to unethical and insensitive coverage on ethnic differences which have brought up the burning question of whether journalists have done more harm than good when covering events and issues that touch upon ethnicity. Rather than promoting conflict, the media have a strong potential role in playing a reconciliatory and conflict management if properly managed. Media have tremendous power in setting cultural guidelines and in shaping ethnic and political discourse in the society. However, the rate at which media and particularly newspapers present ethnic news has been instrumental to some ethnic conflicts. That is why Lynch (2008) listed five best principles to adopt while reporting conflict as: 1) assessment of the backgrounds and contexts of conflict formation of all the sides involved in the conflict, not just two sides as most of the mainstream media usually portray; 2) giving voice to the views of all rival groups; 3) proposing creative ideas for conflict resolution, development, peacemaking and peacekeeping; 4) exposing lies, covering-up attempts and culprits on all sides, and revealing excesses committed by, and suffering inflicted on peoples of all parties; and 5) paying attention to peace stories and post-war developments.

Another emerged issue was the newspaper ownership in Nigeria which mostly serves political ends and interest of the proprietors rather than mostly public interest. Therefore, to check the unrestrained behavior of newspapers especially in the area of ethnic differences promotion, it is important to probe deeper into newspaper ownership influence as well as the strategies to regulate them.

Another dimension to the problem of ethnic conflict which becomes imperative for the government to be proactive about in other to achieve solution is the emergence of ethnic groups in Nigeria. So, the government need to strengthen watch on both the media and ethnic group proliferation. Though, media self-regulation is more flexible than government regulation because it is easier for a professional association to modify rules in reaction to changing situations than for a government agency to modify its rules. Therefore, it is recommended that media self-regulation but with strengthened government monitoring be considered as expedient measure to check the excesses of the media.

Similarly, to achieve peace through mutual interest as suggested by the informants, various mechanisms that have been implemented in Nigeria at different periods in the past must be revived and strengthened. Examples of these are the policy of Amalgamation and Nigerianization, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme and Unity Schools which aimed at integrating Nigerian youth and all citizens. In the same vein, the problem of state or place of origin, ethnicity, religion, and tribalism which have combined to create barriers to development must be deemphasized as part of lasting solutions.

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