

Nigerian Newspaper Coverage of Militancy in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

The study analyzed Nigerian newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Content analysis was used to generate data for the study. Four purposively selected Nigerian national dailies: *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, *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. The units of analysis for the study include straight news, feature article, editorial opinion, interview, and letter to the editor that made reference to militancy in the Niger Delta. Coding was by two independent coders based on frequency, prominence, portrayal of militancy, format of presentation, and language of reports. The results showed that Nigerian Newspapers covered militancy in the Niger Delta in a fair, balanced and responsible manner, even though there were a few instances when confrontational languages slipped into reports. It also found that the dailies accorded low prominence to reports on militancy in the Niger Delta and did not endorse militancy as the preferred option for resolving the conflict in the region. Rather, they advocated a peaceful resolution of the conflict as is evident in the high score (77.88%) of the use of conciliatory tone in their reports. On the downside, the preponderance of straight news indicated that not much of conflict analysis and interpretative reporting was done in the coverage to help readers grasp thoroughly the dominant issues involved in militancy. The conclusion is that by presenting a balanced coverage, the dailies have helped in setting the right agenda and mediating in the conflict. This may have contributed in some degree to the management of the problem of militancy in this region. Accordingly, it is recommended, among others, that reporters and editors should include more of feature articles, editorials, and interviews with conflict experts, victims, and local residents in their coverage. This will help create proper understanding of the issues at stake in order to facilitate early conflict resolution.

1.0 Background to the study

The conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta was a burning issue between 2006 and 2009. Around the globe, it attracted serious attention from environmentalists, human rights activists, and fair trade advocates. The trial and hanging, in 1995, of environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Ogoni kinsmen further drew tremendous global attention to it. The global outcry and condemnation that followed was unprecedented. The world, as it were, was roused into sudden realization of the seriousness of the silent but systemic environmental and economic war being waged by the Nigerian state and the oil transnational corporations (TNC's) against the minorities of the Delta region.

At the heart of the conflict in the Niger Delta is the control of the vast crude oil deposits in the region. Legally, oil bearing communities have no control over the oil and gas reserves in their territory (The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Clause 44). The Petroleum Act of 1969, Clause 1 states explicitly: "the entire ownership and control of all petroleum in, under or upon any lands to which this section applies shall be vested in the state".

What the Nigerian laws were silent on, however, was how to share the inevitable devastating consequences that accompany oil exploration. It is not surprising therefore that Niger Delta whose lands houses Nigeria's vast oil and gas reserves are the direct victims of the serious environmental hazards associated with oil exploration. As the 2006 international study of the region confirms, "The damage from operation is chronic and cumulative, and has acted synergistically with other sources of environmental stress to result in a severe impaired coastal ecosystem and compromised the livelihoods and health of the region's impoverished residents" (Niger Delta natural Resources Damage Assessment and Restoration Project Scoping Report, May 2006). Yet the report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 declares that "man's environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights even the right to life itself". All these seem not to be part of the major concerns of the oil operators and the Nigerian Government who are satisfied so long as oil flows uninterrupted.

This neglect and insensitivity have made life a harrowing experience in the Niger Delta, even the Amnesty International, AI, (2009) study of the region had acknowledge this situation further giving credence to the high level of poverty and general neglect of the region.

Contrasted with their striking poverty and the dehumanizing conditions of living is the enormous wealth generated by the oil in their land for the Nigerian state. It is estimated that Nigeria has earned \$600 billion from oil since the 1960's (Wurthmann, 2006). The report of the Niger Delta Technical Committee (November 2008, p.102) shows that "the oil and gas sector represents 97 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange revenues and contributes 79.5 percent of government revenue". In return, the Delta region "has become one of the world's starkest and most disturbing examples of the "resource curse" (AI, 2009, p.9).

All these natural blessings and man-made curses have angered the Niger Deltans. To register their displeasure, they organized non-violent protests after attempts to get justice from the law courts failed (Owugah, 2009). Owugah blames the Nigerian government for the violent phase of the conflict. Many scholars have corroborated Owugah's position. For example, Ibeanu and Luckham (2006, p.73) have argued that "the Federal Government itself has aggravated conflicts (in the Delta) through its needlessly violent responses" in a number of towns in the region, and one recent case is the May 2009 mass killing by the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) of hundreds of people in several communities of the Gbaramatu kingdom in Delta State in search of militants JTF said were behind the death of 11 soldiers.

Agitation for resource control snowballed into armed conflict manifested in killings, kidnapping, oil bunkering, bombing of oil installations, car bombs and general atmosphere of insecurity in the Niger Delta. A survey conducted in the region between September 2006 and April 2007 by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey (SAS) found that, "militancy has grown in the Delta in response to the continued lack of attention (by the government) to the basic needs of the population" (p.16). Even with the Amnesty declared in 2009 for militants in Niger Delta by Nigeria's late President Umaru Yar'Adua, the relative peace in the region is still fragile and kidnapping for ransom is far from over. A Nigerian daily reported that between 2006 and 2009 over 350 persons were kidnapped in Nigeria with over ₦6 billion paid as ransom to kidnappers (*THISDAY*, May 20, 2009, p.21).

Similarly, a Nigerian magazine reported a loss of about ₦8.84 trillion oil revenue and over 1000 deaths to militancy between 2006 and 2008 (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009, p.12-21). Yet, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) declares that, "Niger Delta militants are not criminals, but freedom fighters who have over the years given their time, money, energy, liberty and lives towards ensuring that the Niger Delta people receive a fair treatment from oil companies and government for their God-given resources" (*The Nation*, March 18, 2010, p.15).

The group insists that it is fighting "a war of emancipation and not for self-aggrandisement ..." (*The Nation*, October 21, 2007, p.8). But for Bolaji Akinyemi, Nigeria's former Foreign Affairs Minister, the crisis in the Niger Delta, region "is more than an environmental issue; it is a combination of all these as it is now further compounded by becoming part of the struggle for a true federal and fiscal structure" (*Newswatch*, August 13, 2007, p.15).

Given the role of the press as purveyors of information, reports of militancy in the Niger Delta were printed almost on daily basis in the Nigerian press within the study period (2006 – 2009). Through them, readers were kept abreast of the violent activities of Niger Delta militants (who some prefer to call revolutionary or freedom fighters) under the umbrella of MEND that arose in early 2006 and announced its arrival with the kidnapping of four expatriate oil-workers from a Shell flow station in Bayelsa, 11 January, 2006 (SAS, 2007).

It has, therefore, become pertinent to examine the quantity and quality of coverage accorded militancy in Nigerian newspapers within the period under investigation to establish whether newspaper coverage enabled readers to understand the dominant issues involved in militancy, for as Gjelten (1998, p.15) remarks, "if conflicts are to be prevented or settled they must first be understood". This entails adequate coverage in a context that gives meaning to issues using more of feature articles, editorials, and interviews with conflict experts, victims and local residents to help readers grasp thoroughly the issues at stake in order to facilitate early conflict resolution. In sum, the knot the study sought to untie is: What was the nature of Nigerian newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta? Do the newspapers act as agent of escalation or de-escalation of militancy through their coverage? This is the crux of the matter.

2.0 Research Questions

The following questions are raised in the study:

1. What is the frequency of reports on militancy in Nigerian newspaper?
2. How do the newspapers portray militancy in the Niger Delta?
3. What is the prominence accorded reports on militancy in the newspapers studied?
4. In what formats is militancy reported in Nigerian newspaper?
5. Did newspapers report on militancy in a language that was capable of escalating it?

3.0 Conceptual Framework

3.1 Manifestations of Militancy in the Niger Delta

▪ Kidnapping

Kidnapping has been described as a very cheap source of generating terror on the perceived opponent. It is a common law offence requiring "that one person takes and carries another person or a minor away by force or

fraud, without the consent of the person taken; and without lawful excuse” (cited in *Newswatch*, July, 26, 2010, p.18).

Kidnapping is said to have begun in Nigeria in the 1990’s (Chatham House, 2006) but by February 2007, it had become a “booming business” (BBC, 2007) in the Niger Delta earning for Nigeria in 2008 the sixth position among the 10 worst countries in the world where people could be easily kidnapped (*Newswatch*, July 26, 2010, p. 17). In the Niger Delta, many believe that it is a tool in the hands of militants to attract global attention to the Niger Delta struggle for justice, resource control and self-determination as established by a 2007 Small Arms Survey: “Groups in the Niger Delta have used the kidnapping of international oil workers to raise international attention regarding the plight of those living in the Delta, the environmental damage caused by oil spills and the oil industry and the demand for more local ownership of the extraction of natural resources” (p. 69).

Yet the *Newswatch* report cited above points out that kidnapping, “initially a tool of ideological struggle has since become a major business enterprise” because of the ransoms the kidnapers are reportedly paid to secure the release of victims. It has become so lucrative in Nigeria “that a number of criminal groups appear to have taken on the task in order simply to make money” (SAS, p. 69) thereby desecrating the Niger Delta struggle. Now, even minors are kidnapped for ransom.

MEND’s spokesperson Gbomo Jomo is well aware that every genuine struggle must have its corrupt version as criminal minded people are likely to hide in the guise of the struggle to prosecute their selfish agenda:

In any struggle, there are bound to be several versions as seen through the eyes of different participants. Some are fighting for a car, some for pride, some for job or even food to eat; the more ambitious with the hope that they may someday be governors or local government chairmen, legislators, etc in new states. This is normal (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2006, p.7).

This was actually the case in Aba (Abia State) where kidnapers and criminal gangs sacked the entire city forcing schools, banks, and other businesses to close shop in 2010.

Even though accurate figures on the number of kidnap cases are not available, a Nigerian daily reported that between 2006 and 2009 over 350 people were kidnapped in Nigeria with over ₦6 billion paid as ransom to kidnapers (*THISDAY*, May 20, 2009, p. 21). Also, according to a 2010 *Newswatch* report, in 2006 alone, 72 foreigners and 56 Nigerians were kidnapped. Fifty-seven foreigners and 10 Nigerians were held by kidnapers while at least 15 people were killed between January and March, 2007 (July 26, 2010, p.17).

This compelled many Western countries to raise security alarm warning their nationals to leave the region or reduce their movement. Many foreign-owned oil and construction companies fled the region especially during the study period citing security concerns. Julius Berger, for instance, has pulled out of Rivers State thereby worsening the unemployment situation in the state as well as in Nigeria.

Given the grave concerns for hostage’s safety, kidnapers have been able to draw global attention to themselves especially through media coverage because each case is “usually sensationalised in such a way that it would attract media worldwide, creating panic and fear in the families and home countries of the hostages.” As Ramachandran (2006) observes, “By reaching out to a global audience, militants have been able to amplify many times over the terror generated by a single incident of kidnapping...” (cited in Dode, 2007, p.166). And Niger Delta militants have exploited this technique to good advantage by posting brazen warnings as well as pictures of hostages in their custody on the Internet. In many cases, they have sent e-mail messages to journalists and media houses about their exploits and next line of action.

MEND formed in early 2006 remains prominent among armed groups in the Niger Delta and has claimed responsibility for a number of hostage-takings, attacks on oil installations and deadly armed clashes with the Nigerian security forces. MEND’s early attacks included the kidnapping of four expatriate oil-workers from a Shell flow station in Bayelsa State, 11 January, 2006. Kidnapping for ransom has proved a veritable source of funding for militants fighting in the Delta region.

And media reports have shown that state governments in the Niger Delta are often involved in negotiations with militants to secure the release of hostages, especially foreign nationals. Many have argued that state governments in the Niger Delta “have working relationships” (SAS, 2007, p. 71) with militants and this explains governments’ preference to negotiate the release of hostages with militants instead of applying force. The Small Arms Survey further indicated that although some hostages have been harmed, those who died or got injured “did so during rescue attempts by the Nigerian military or at the time of the kidnapping” and “not as a result of intentional shooting” (p. 69) by militants.

▪ **Vandalism of Oil Facilities/Oil bunkering**

Vandalism of oil facilities often precedes oil bunkering as the former paves way for militants to siphon off oil. Between 2006 and 2010, sabotage/vandalism, government sources claimed, caused 1,486 (45%) of the 3,203 reported cases of oil spillage in Nigeria. Reports indicate that oil bunkering in Nigeria is an organised business involving the militants, NNPC officials, Nigerian security forces, top government officials and their

foreign collaborators. A 2002 report of the special security committee in oil-producing areas submitted to the Nigerian government (cited by the ICG, 2006, p. 8) uncovered “a cartel or mafia” who “run a network of agents to steal crude oil and finished products from pipelines in the Niger Delta region.”

Udofia (2010) gave a graphic detail of how illegal bunkering is effected:

Investigation has revealed that most of the people caught in the act of vandalism are errand boys to wealthy petroleum product marketers who survey grounds for the NNPC experts. They (the errand boys) help them to dig out the pipelines before the skilled engineers move in to open the pipes... welding machines are used to open the pipelines, the pumping machines and valves are for pumping of petrol from the pipelines into the tankers used for the operations... Once the valves are fixed and the engineers are notified, they would increase the pressure thereby increasing the volume of petrol pumped into tankers. Each operation fetches about one million Naira to the engineers at the pumping station (pp. 75-6).

Militant leaders insist that oil bunkering would not have been possible without the involvement of the Nigerian law enforcement agents. They reveal that military personnel provide escorts to ships and tanker trucks transporting siphoned oil or allow them to pass established checkpoints (ICG, 2006; SAS, 2007). The siphoned oil is often escorted outside Nigeria’s borders from where it is moved to buyers in different countries.

In 2004, industry experts, the ICG noted, had estimated that Nigeria lost anywhere from 70,000 to 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) to oil bunkering, the equivalent output of a small oil producing country. In a December 2005 report, the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force calculated that a loss of just 70,000 barrels a day at a price of \$60 a barrel “would generate over \$1.5 billion per year – ample resources to fund arms trafficking, buy political influence, or both” (cited in ICG, 2006, p. 8).

At the heat of the crisis, the Nigerian Government said it was losing 1 million bpd of crude oil to militancy in the Niger Delta. This translates to ₦8.7 billion daily going by \$60 pb, while a daily loss of 200 million scf of gas was being recorded, according to figures released by the Nigerian Gas Company in 2009 (*Daily Sun*, May 25, 2009, p. 38).

Illegal oil bunkering has been described as a lucrative enterprise, providing an estimated USD 1–4 billion per year (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007). Both the International Crisis Group and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey show that oil bunkering is a key source of funds for militants. It provides the needed funds to purchase more deadly weapons and in some cases oil is exchanged by militants directly for weapons (Davis, Von, Kemedi & Drennan, 2006; BBC, 2007).

Oil bunkering has a relatively young history when compared with the age of Nigeria’s oil industry. Even though it has been on for years, the ICG disclosed that; “it was first recognised publicly as a major problem in the late 1990s” (p. 9). As ICG points out, it was Chris Finlayson, then managing director of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) that announced to journalists in 2003 that Shell had before now tolerated small-scale theft of crude by impoverished locals but that the present large scale operation bore little resemblance to the activities of “disaffected youths”, suggesting that it has become an organised business.

To siphon crude, pipelines are often vandalised. It is estimated that there are over 7,000 km of pipelines, 600 oil fields and 5,000 oil wells in the Niger Delta (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007). May 8, 2007, MEND attacked and destroyed three major oil pipelines belonging to the Nigerian Agip Company in Bayelsa State. In an e-mail to newsmen in Yenagoa, the group said, “Today (May 8) at 0100 hours Nigerian time (0000GMT) fighters of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta attacked and destroyed three major pipelines in Bayelsa State of the Niger Delta” (*THISDAY*, May 9, 2007, p. 3). MEND threatened to blow up more pipelines between May 8 and May 29 when former President Obasanjo was due to hand over power. It was estimated that the nation incurred a loss of 170,000 bpd from that incident alone.

Again, December 19, 2009, MEND claimed 35 of its fighters using five boats, assault rifles rocket launchers and heavy calibre machine guns unleashed a warning strike at 2 a.m. on major Shell/Chevron pipelines in Abonema, Rivers State (*Weekly Star*, 22 – 31 Dec., 2009, p. 5). The Rivers State Government and JTF denied the attacks.

In the first half of 2006, Udofia (2010) put the figures of pipelines vandalised at 2,059 while in 2008 product losses incurred through vandalism was 397,600 metric tons or ₦10.121 billion. A more reliable statistics is provided by the Ledum Mitee Technical Committee on the Niger Delta. According to their 2008 report, when gunmen believed to be militants attacked an oil facility belonging to SPDC, offshore EA field in Rivers State January 11, 2006 and kidnapped four expatriate oil workers, the country lost 120,000 bpd to the incident and another loss of 100,000 bpd the same day to a similar attack on a major crude oil pipeline in the Forcados, Nigeria. The report also indicates that January 16, 2007 militants attacked an oil vessel near the Bonny Island, Rivers State. Nigeria lost 187, 000 bpd. The attack caused a major spill March 6, 2007 at a pipeline feeding the Bonny export terminal, which resulted in a loss of 150,000 bpd.

In the first nine months of 2008, the report further shows that Nigeria lost an estimated revenue of about ₦2.97 trillion or \$20.7 billion to attacks on oil installations resulting in shutdowns and spillages. This figure is different from another estimated ₦430 billion or \$3 billion lost to oil bunkering within the first seven months of 2008. This puts the total losses within this period at ₦3.4 trillion or \$23.7 billion (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009, pp.12-21).

The ICG earlier cited had accused Nigeria's Federal Government of indirectly encouraging "violence in the Niger Delta by rewarding those who pose the greatest threats to oil facilities with juicy oil contracts and government positions" and ignoring those who abide by the rules (p. 1). However, oil bunkering has been at a price as many have lost their lives in the process following fire outbreaks from ruptured oil pipelines. Farmland have been destroyed and water polluted by oil spills from vandalised pipelines.

In March 2007, the Federal Government responded with the establishment of a committee to assess the problem of oil pipelines vandalism and recommend measures to check the menace. The committee's job included assessing the frequency and causes of sabotaged pipelines, identifying those areas most prone to sabotage and those involved in the damage, and recommending measures for reducing sabotage (*Nigeria First*, 2007). The committee's report is yet to be made public and it is unclear whether it beat its one month deadline.

▪ **Killings, Hijackings, Car Bombs, and other Militant Acts**

Militancy in the Niger Delta has taken on various forms and violence underlines its varied manifestations in the region. Official statistics puts the number of deaths from militant-related activities at 1000 in the period under study while car bombing appears to be the latest addition to the violence in the region.

The JTF, the special security force set up in 2003 by the Obasanjo government to maintain peace in the region was drawn in a series of gun battles with militants during the study period, with varying casualty figures on both sides. While the study focuses on militants, JTF, the instrument of State aggression in the region (within the study period) has contributed to the killing of innocent civilians, and one prominent case is the May 2009 air, land and water raids on Gbaramatu Kingdom in Delta State that resulted in destruction of houses and property and deaths of hundreds of residents, according to the Amnesty International in a statement entitled "Nigeria: Unlawful killings/displacement/access to medical care" published in *The Nation* of Friday, May 22, 2009, pages 2-3.

In January 2006 when militants attacked Shell Benisede Pumping Station, 22 persons including 16 soldiers were feared dead prompting SPDC to withdraw some 330 workers. The incident forced a 10% fall in Nigeria's oil production. In a latter attack that same month, armed militants launched a bloody assault on the operational base of Agip in Port Harcourt, killed nine persons (eight police officers and a civilian) and carted away ₦5 million (*The Beacon*, Jan. 27 – Feb. 2, 2006, back page and page 3).

May 4, 2007, a Saipem site in Rivers State was attacked, causing shut-in production. During the incident several oil workers were wounded and Nigeria lost 42, 000 bpd. The same month, on the 11th, protesters occupied the Bomu pipeline (Rivers State) forcing SPDC to shut-in production feeding the Bonny Light export terminals.

Militants again blew off two Agip oil rigs in the Forcados, Delta State, April 8, 2008. Eleven soldiers were reportedly killed while 120,000 bpd was lost (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009). The attacks on Agip did not abate as Agip vessels were bombed April 13 that year. Ten naval officers and some militants died in that incident. Again, over 100 deaths occurred when MEND struck SPDC's Bonga facilities on deep offshore oil fields in Rivers June 19, 2008.

Militants have also employed hijacking as a tactic. Wednesday, May 13, 2009, MV Spirit, a dense tanker chartered by the NNPC and a cargo vessel were hijacked by suspected militants believed to belong to the dreaded "Camp 5" in Delta State. In an e-mail to Reuters, MEND threatened that, "Effective 0000 hrs on Saturday, 6 May, 2009, the entire Niger Delta will be declared a no-fly zone to helicopters and float planes operating on behalf of oil companies" (*THISDAY*, May 15, 2009, p.7). This was perceived as a terror tactic because at the expiration of the deadline, helicopters and float planes owned by oil firms still flew across the region.

Friday, June 12, 2009, MEND claimed it had used its Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) to raze Otunana flow station belonging to Chevron Nigeria Tuesday, June 9. JTF dismissed the claim, rather describing the fire as an accident. MEND warned oil workers in the Niger Delta to evacuate the entire region, stating that, "Our mission is to destroy the facilities that are being used to generate funds to buy bombs to destroy our already traumatised communities and the killing of soldiers becomes necessary only in self-defense" (*The Nation*, June 13, 2009, pp.1, 5). The paper reported on the same date that a shoot-out between militants and JTF in Bayelsa State resulted in the death of at least seven persons, including an Ijaw traditional chief.

MEND launched two car bombings in April 2006. These bombings were believed to be the first in Nigeria: One killed many civilians outside a military barracks in Port Harcourt and the other exploded in a queue of petroleum tanker trucks outside a refinery in Warri (ICG, 2006). In March 2010, MEND planted car bombs near the venue of the Post Amnesty Summit organised by *Vanguard* Newspapers in collaboration with the Delta

State Government. Three persons were reportedly killed while many were injured (*The Nation*, March 18, 2010, p. 18). Relative peace has returned to the region following the amnesty declared for militants by former President Yar'Adua who died May, 2010.

3.2 Interpretative Reporting in Conflict situations

Gjelten (1998, p.15) makes the point that, "If conflicts are to be prevented or settled they must first be understood." This informed position canvassed by Gjelten will be elusive without interpretative reporting, which has been variously described as taking "the reader behind the scenes of the day's action," relating "the news to the reader's own framework and experience," helping the reader "make sense out of the facts," putting "meaning into the news" (cited in MacDougall, 1977, p.161). Ohaja (2005) summed up these various views on news interpretation as "adding illumination, depth and contextual analysis to salient issues ... in the news" (p. 23).

Given the complexities of conflict, there is a heightened need for interpretative reporting to help the reader make sense out of the series of interconnected issues involved, the claims and counter claims of the parties and the hidden agendas of the aggrieved parties, which are seldom covered in drab deadpan reporting. This demands contextual analysis, which Ohaja (2005) argues cogently would help "the reader to properly locate the event/issue in context or in the overall scheme of things as no event occurs in a vacuum" (p. 37). This is the task before the media in covering conflicts – it should recognise "the particular event as one of a series with both a cause and an effect" and the awareness (in conflict reportage) that "an item of news is not an isolated incident but one inevitably linked to a chain of other issues" (MacDougall, 1977, p.12).

Echoing interpretative reporting, Pate (2002) provides the following guide for newspapers and magazines in their conflict reportage:

- coherent presentation of facts of the basic elements and information required for knowing and understanding the subject being reported;
- a context and background that provide connections to the past and concurrent issues at stake, personalities involved and events occurring;
- more systematic information gathering, making the best use of many diverse sources of information and in enough depth to enhance understanding (pp. 138-9).

In the Niger Delta, for instance, the conflict in the region has centred on the negative impacts of the oil industry on the environment and means of livelihood, mismanagement of oil revenue since independence, corruption, failure to redistribute oil wealth, the utter lack of development in the Delta, failure of oil wealth to be translated into better living conditions for Deltans, State aggression in the region and lately, resource control. These issues are intertwined and complex. Without in-depth reporting, the readers cannot understand the issues involved in the conflict. When this is the case, people are bound to misrepresent the conflict, finding a lasting solution can be elusive and the conflict will continue to take a toll on the nation.

It is important as Eti (2009) advocates, "to frame the issues involved in conflict in such a way that they become more susceptible to management." As the author notes:

The way to achieve this is to undertake a wholistic (and in-depth, dispassionate) approach to conflict discourse and not just scanty reportage of conflict behaviours exhibited by the parties involved. A wholistic approach will include origin, dynamics, and options for resolution. Such an approach will be more beneficial to the course of resolving the conflict (p.102).

Gjelten, a war correspondent, warns that "stories that pander to emotion and offer no insight or analysis titillate but do not explain and may even distort what has happened" (1998, p.16). Journalists must put more effort into explanation in conflict reporting and avoid oversimplification of issues and distortions. It must be acknowledged that it is difficult for journalists to obtain accurate information in times of violent conflict due to the dangers involved and because each side to the conflict wants to portray the enemy side as evil, journalists may find themselves at the mercy of rumour and propaganda; yet the position of the Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) is instructive when conflict breaks out:

Accuracy in reporting facts is the first responsibility of the media. Where facts are disputed, the discrepancies should be pointed out and the sources questioned. Presenting several versions of incidents and using multiple sources of information is an inalienable part of credible reporting (cited in Thakurta, 2009, p. 95).

In this way, journalists can keep their credibility intact, no matter the strain and pressure exerted on them in the discharge of their sacred duties.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

Two theories are imperative in this study. They are: the Frustration – Aggression Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory.

The Frustration – Aggression Theory stems from the pioneering work of John Dollard (a psychologist) and his associates in 1939 and was expanded by such scholars as Leonard Berkowitz (1963) and Aubrey Yates (1962). It focused on aggression resulting from inability to fulfill needs. The main thesis of this theory hinges on

the “want-get-ratio” (Feierabends, 1969, cited in Faleti, 2006, p.47) and the difference between “expected need satisfaction” and “actual need satisfaction” (Davies, 1962, p.6) i.e. the discrepancy between what people feel they want or deserve and what they actually get.

When what people get falls short of their expectations, frustration sets in. The tendency is for such frustrated folks to vent their anger on those they consider responsible for their deprivation. Gurr (1970) advocated this position this way: “the greater the discrepancy, however marginal between what is sought and what seems attainable, the greater will be the chances that anger and violence will result” (p.24).

Onyekosor (2014, p.51) in his contribution to media violence states, that “whether the person actually engages in aggressive actions will depend in part on his or her learning history, interpretations of the event and individual way of responding to frustration. He went further to add, “it also depends on the presence of aggression eliciting stimuli in the environment” (p.51).

As this theory demonstrates, aggression does not just erupt as a natural reason or instinct as realists and biological theorists assume, but it results from frustration and situations where the legitimate desires of an individual are denied either directly or by indirect consequences of the way society is organized, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person to express his or her anger through violence. This violence is usually targeted at those such an individual deems responsible or people who are directly related to them.

This is the situation in Niger Delta today where aggrieved youths after many years of waiting in vain for a fair share of the oil wealth generated from their land have taken up arms against the state and those they consider as state collaborators. They vandalize oil pipelines, kidnap for ransom and for political bargaining as a way of giving expression to their anger and frustration towards those they hold responsible directly or indirectly for the suffering of the Niger Delta region.

The social responsibility theory on the other hand is a synthesis of the ideas espoused by the Hutchins commission on press freedom set up in the U.S. in 1942, following public disenchantment with the libertarian press theory, which turned out to serve the interests and tastes of the socially dominant class. A main feature of the theory is its emphasis that the media “be responsible for fostering productive and creative ‘Great Communities’.” To achieve this, the media are to give more attention to cultural pluralism, “by becoming the voice of all the people – not just elite groups (Baran & Davis, 2009, p.144).

The theory imposes a greater burden on the media to serve public interest. It thus provides some guidance on how this can be achieved as summarized in its basic tenets by McQuail (2005, p.172).

- The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust.
- New media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and balanced.
- The media should be free, but self-regulated.
- The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct; and
- Under some circumstance, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.

Guided by this theory, Nigeria newspapers should present truthful, accurate, fair and objective reports on militancy in the Niger Delta. As purveyors of information, Nigerian Newspapers should understand their position is one of public trust and should not betray public confidence by engaging in unethical reporting. Acting in a responsible manner, they should exercise due restraint and caution in their reportage bearing in mind that careless wording of reports can inflame passion and escalate conflict. Thus newspapers should become an impartial third party committed to restoring peace. Only an accurate account of each side’s claims and interests would be reported in a context that gives them meaning.

5.0 Research Method

5.1 Procedure

Content analysis research design was used in this study. Klinger (2004) defines content analysis as “a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables” (cited in Wimmer & Dominick 2006, p.150). Content analysis can be undertaken with any written material, from documents to interview transcriptions, from media products to personal interviews. Content analysis was used to assess the coverage of militancy in Nigerian newspapers. It ensured the study and analyses of newspaper coverage of militancy in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner.

The population comprises all newspapers published in Nigeria. Four newspapers were purposively selected based on the following criteria: national spread; consistency of coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta; and consistency on the newsstand. The newspapers are – *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *The Sun*. 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. Militancy peaked in the Niger Delta region within this period. Within the study period, the total editions of the four dailies published and circulated total 5,532. The systematic sampling technique was used in selecting the editions of each newspaper to be studied. It is a sampling procedure in which every subject or unit is selected from the population. Ten percent of the population was studied and it 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 (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 militancy in the Niger Delta. Coding was by two independent coders based on the parameters of frequency, prominence, portrayal of militancy, form of presentation, sources, balance, language/ tone, and peace effort.

6.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collection instrument was the code sheet. The code sheet was used to code and analyse the coverage of militancy by four Nigerian national dailies: *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Sun*.

Table 1: Frequency of Reports on Militancy

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>THISDAY</i>	159	27.60
<i>The Guardian</i>	146	25.35
<i>Vanguard</i>	171	29.69
<i>The Sun</i>	100	17.36
Total	576	100

Table 1, shows that between January 1, 2006 and October the four dailies printed a total of 576 items on militancy in Niger Delta. *The Vanguard* gave the highest coverage to militancy, with 171 (29.69%) stories, followed by *THISDAY* that did 159 (27.60%) items. *The Guardian* and *The Sun* trailed behind with 146 (25.35%) stories and 100 (17.36%) stories respectively. It is evident from Table 3 that the papers gave a reasonable attention to militancy in Niger Delta. Table 2 displays the portrayal of militancy.

Table 2: Portrayal of Militancy in the Niger Delta

Newspaper	Portrayal variables				Total	
	Positive (%)	N	Negative (%)	N	Neutral (%)	N
<i>THISDAY</i>	12(23.53)		24(24.49)		123(28.81)	159(27.60)
<i>The Guardian</i>	12(23.53)		19(19.39)		115(26.93)	146(25.35)
<i>Vanguard</i>	13(25.49)		25(25.51)		133(31.15)	171(29.69)
<i>The Sun</i>	14(27.45)		30(30.61)		56(13.11)	100(17.36)
	51(8.85)		98(17.01)		427(74.13)	576(100)

Portrayal was classified into three perspectives: Positive – editorial matters that gave subtle or explicit support for militancy in the Niger Delta; negative - editorial matters that condemned militancy; neutral – items that were equivocal or merely recounted a source’s opinion on militancy without expressing a definite stand on it.

In Table 2, of the 576 stories on militancy in the four dailies, 427 (74.13%) were neutral; 98 (17.01%) were negative. The four papers gave a positive portrayal of militancy in only 51 (8.85%) stories. At an individual level, it is evident from the Table that *The Sun* portrayed militancy most positively and negatively than the other three newspapers, while the *Vanguard* took the most detached position in its reportage. *THISDAY* and *The Guardian* trailed behind the *Vanguard* in negative portrayal of militancy as indicated in their 12 stories respectively as against the *Vanguard*’s 13.

In denouncing militancy, the *Vanguard* placed second behind *The Sun*. *THISDAY* and *The Guardian* followed closely in the third and fourth places respectively. In sum, the papers studied remained highly neutral by as much as 74.13% in their coverage of militancy, thus offering a balanced view of the issues involved.

Again the papers gave more negative than positive portrayal of militancy in the margin of 17.10% to 8.85%, an indication that they do not endorse militancy as the preferred option for resolving the conflict in the Niger Delta. Table 3 rates the prominence of militancy.

Table 3: Prominence of Reports on Militancy

Newspaper	Prominence Variables				Total	
	High (%)	N	Medium (%)	Low (%)	N	N (%)
<i>THISDAY</i>	34(20.48)	8(44.44)	117(29.85)	159(27.60)		
<i>The Guardian</i>	69(41.57)	6(33.33)	71(18.11)	146(25.35)		
<i>Vanguard</i>	40(24.10)	2(11.11)	129(32.91)	171(29.69)		
<i>The Sun</i>	23(13.86)	2(11.11)	75(19.13)	100(17.36)		
	166(28.82)	18(3.13)	392(68.05)	576(100)		

Table 3 rates the prominence the four newspapers accorded reports on militancy. The parameters used in gauging prominence were high, for editorial matters on militancy that appeared on the front, back and editorial pages. Medium, for those carried in supplements, special sections and pull outs; while low rated stories were tucked away in the inside pages. Given these criteria, therefore, more than two-third of the 576 stories carried by the four papers received low prominence, by as much as 68.05%. Stories that attracted high prominence stood at 28.82%, while those with medium prominence accounted for 3.13% of all stories published.

Looking at the placement of stories in each of the four dailies, Table 5 indicates that *The Guardian* accorded the highest prominence to reports on militancy followed by *THISDAY*, the *Vanguard*, and *The Sun* in descending order. More than two-third of the *Vanguard*'s, *THISDAY*'s and *The Sun*'s coverage of militancy appeared in the inside pages. Table 4 presents the format of newspaper reports on militancy.

Table 4: Formats of reports on militancy

Newspaper	Format Variables							Total	
	Straight news	Feature	Editorial	Opinion	Interview	Advertorial	Letter	N	(%)
<i>THISDAY</i>	119 (28.81)	14 (27.45)	3 (18.75)	7 (41.18)	6 (15.38)	3 (25.00)	7 (25.00)	159	(27.60)
<i>The Guardian</i>	109 (26.39)	16 (31.37)	3 (18.75)	2 (11.76)	10 (25.64)	3 (25.00)	3 (10.71)	146	(25.35)
<i>Vanguard</i>	113 (27.36)	17 (33.33)	5 (31.25)	4 (23.53)	12 (30.77)	6 (50.00)	14 (50.00)	171	(29.69)
<i>The Sun</i>	72 (17.43)	4 (7.84)	5 (31.25)	4 (23.53)	11 (28.21)	0 (0.00)	4 (14.29)	100	(17.36)
	413 (71.70)	51 (8.85)	16 (2.78)	17 (2.95)	39 (6.77)	12 (2.08)	28 (4.86)	576	(100)

Table 4 indicates that of a total of 576 articles carried by the four dailies, 413 (71.70%) were straight news reports; 51 (8.85%) stories appeared as feature articles, and interviews were done 39 (6.77%) times. The papers published opinions on militancy 17 (2.95%) times while editorials were done on 16 (2.78%) occasions. Readers' letters were published 28 (4.86%) times while advertorials scored lowest as a format of presentation of issues on militancy. All the papers presented more than two-third of their reports on militancy in the straight news format. This result shows that much of the newspaper coverage of militancy was done by journalists, as it was presented in news stories and feature articles. The implication is that journalists were largely accountable for newspaper reports on militancy. Table 5 displays language variables.

Table 5: Language of Reports on Militancy

Newspaper	Language Variables			Total	
	Confrontational (%)	N	Bias (%)	Conciliatory (%)	N (%)
<i>THISDAY</i>	3(15.79)	15(28.85)	71(28.40)	89(27.73)	
<i>The Guardian</i>	3(15.79)	11(21.15)	47(18.80)	61(19.00)	
<i>Vanguard</i>	5(26.32)	17(32.69)	81(32.40)	103(32.09)	
<i>The Sun</i>	8(42.11)	9(17.31)	51(20.40)	68(21.18)	
	19(5.92)	52(16.20)	250(77.88)	321(100)	

To determine the language of reports on militancy in the four newspapers three constructs were used: confrontational, biased and conciliatory. Confrontational articles took the stance that there was a "zero-sum"

conflict going on and used negative, emotionally charged words such as criminals, terrorists, separatists, rebels, etc, which tend to escalate rather than de-escalate the crisis to describe militants.

Therefore as shown in Table 5, the papers reported on militancy more in a manner that engenders peace as is evident in 77.88% score of the use of conciliatory language. Biased reports were circulated 52(16.20%) times, and confrontational languages slipped into the papers 19(5.92%) times within the period under investigation.

7.0 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the five research questions raised.

7.1 Research Question One: What is the frequency of reports on militancy in Nigerian newspaper?

The answer is found in Table 1 which presents the frequency of reports on militancy. The data contained in the Table clearly demonstrates the four dailies: *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Sun* printed a total of 576 stories on militancy within the study period.

This number is considered significant given that there were other issues in the polity at the time which also received press coverage. Thus, the newspapers registered militancy on public and policy agenda. This may have contributed to the search for a peaceful management of the conflict which resulted in the amnesty declared for Niger Delta militants in June 2009 by the Nigerian government, and other forms of assistance the Nigerian government received both locally and internationally to deal with the crisis.

The frequency of reports on militancy helped draw global awareness to militancy and increased its salience among the public, thus confirming the media's agenda setting function (Griffin, 2000; DeFleur, 2010). As McCombs and Shaw (1977) note, "The notion of the agenda-setting function of the mass media is a relational concept specifying a strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and salience of these topics to the individuals in the audience" (p. 12).

7.2 Research Question Two: How do the newspapers portray militancy in the Niger Delta?

Table 2 supplies data which helps to answer this research question. Results show that 74.13% of stories were neutral. In other words, the stories were equivocal or merely recounted source's opinion on militancy without expressing a definite stand on it. Stories which gave a negative portrayal to militancy (editorial matters that condemned militancy) accounted for 17.01% and only a paltry 8.85% depicted militancy as positive, that is, gave subtle or explicit support for militancy.

The preponderance of neutral stories suggests that the newspapers offered a balanced view of the issues involved in the conflict. From the results, the prominence of negative portrayal over positive portrayal implies that the dailies do not endorse militancy as the preferred option for resolving the conflict in the Niger Delta. The dailies thus chose "to play the role of moderating third party in order to improve communication" among the stakeholders and "contribute to constructive conflict transformation" (Kempf, 2003, p. 83).

However, while maintaining neutrality in reporting conflicts, it is equally important as Howard (2002) warns that journalists should not be mere disinterested professional observers/reporters. Part of their sacred duty to society is to exercise their professional judgment on what to report and how to report what in the interest of peace.

7.3 Research Question Three: What is the prominence accorded reports on militancy in the newspapers studied?

Results presented in Table 3 reveal that reports on militancy were accorded low prominence in the newspapers studied. A majority of the stories by as high as 68.05% were tucked away in the inside pages labeled Low prominence in the study. This figure represents over two-third of all editorial matters published on militancy. Stories that attracted high prominence, that is, those carried on the front, back and editorial pages accounted for 28.82%, while those carried in supplements, special sections, and pull outs described as medium in the study were insignificant 3.13%.

The low prominence accorded reports on militancy as found from the present study contrasts sharply with what was found from Ikpe's (2000) study which focused on the role of communication in the management of the 1993 conflict between the Academic Staff Union of Universities and the Federal Government of Nigeria. It was found from the study that Nigerian newspapers accorded a high prominence to reports on the conflict. The prominence of the conflict in the *Daily Times* (Nigeria) and *The Guardian* (Nigeria) was 85.5% and 63% respectively.

The present result may be an indication that the dailies did not want to overheat the polity by according high visibility to militancy reports given the tensed atmosphere incessant cases of kidnapping had generated. Again, giving high prominence to reports on militancy could mean glamorising militants. Militants would be emboldened to escalate violence. Inadvertently, the dailies could be depicting the impotence of government and security forces to combat militancy.

Thus the dailies acted in a responsible manner by helping to stifle Niger Delta militants of the "oxygen of publicity" on which terrorism thrives. In this way, they contributed to reducing the spread of fear and panic

often associated with acts of terror, thereby helping to stabilise society and to save lives. By refusing to accord a high prominence to acts of militancy, the Nigerian press has acted in line with the social responsibility theory, which requires that it serve public interest.

7.4 Research Question Four: In what formats is militancy reported in Nigerian newspaper?

Formats represent the journalistic genre in which editorial matters on militancy were presented in the dailies. In the study, seven categories were identified and coded as can be seen in Table 4 which provides the answer for our research question. From the Table, 71.70% of the reports on militancy occurred as straight news. Feature articles took 8.85% while interviews represent 6.77% of the formats used. Editorials, Opinions, Advertorials and Letters-to-the editor appeared once in a long while such that they made up only 12.67%.

The result brings to the fore once more that newspaper is by tradition a carrier of straight news. Yet this has serious implications for equipping readers in identifying the predominant issues involved in militancy. Straight news does not answer the questions of “how” and “why” – what interpretative and investigative journalism does – and may therefore fail to present issues in sufficient depth to illuminate meaning.

Besides, the present results establish that the press did not do much of conflict analysis, which would have aided the public more to understand the roots of militancy in the Niger Delta. As many people agree, without a proper understanding of conflict it will be difficult to proffer the right solution (Gjelten, 1998; Best, 2007). If the press had done much in terms of conflict analysis, there would have been more of feature articles, editorials, and interviews.

An earlier study by Goretti (2007) of two Uganda newspaper coverage of the conflict in Northern Uganda also showed that the predominant format of presentation of reports was in news format. News stories constituted 77%; feature took 13%, while opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries, and letters made up 9%. The result is further corroborated by the findings of a 2009 IMS-led study on media coverage of the Darfur conflict in Sudanese and non-Sudanese media in which news reports formed 59.3% of the mode of coverage in the print media.

7.5 Research Question Five: Did newspapers report on militancy in a language that was capable of escalating it?

Language used in the coverage was analysed and grouped into three categories: confrontational, biased and conciliatory. The use of confrontational and biased tone was considered negative and as such capable of escalating militancy in the Niger Delta region, while conciliatory wording of reports was deemed positive and capable of dousing hostilities in the region, for as the Holy Bible notes, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words cause quarrels” (*The Living Bible*, Prov. 15:1). This alludes to the strong effect word choice can have on any situation.

Based on Table 5, the use of conciliatory language scored 77.88% while confrontational and bias language scored 22.12% in the coverage of militancy. From the result, it is evident that the Nigerian press covered militancy in the Niger Delta more in a manner that engenders peace. Yet there is evidence to suggest that some reports were couched in a language that was capable of escalating militancy. Words are powerful; they can prevent or douse hostilities and even exacerbate it. Even though the dailies scored high in their attempt to contribute positively towards the restoration of peace in the Niger Delta by couching most of their reports in a conciliatory tone, the few instances confrontational and biased language slipped into reports were capable of escalating militancy in the Niger Delta. This calls for increased constructive vigilance on the part of reporters and editors, two main media gatekeepers. The results notwithstanding, the Nigerian press performed better than the outcome of Goretti (2007) study in which the use of confrontational language was 41% and 22% in two Ugandan newspaper coverage of the conflict in Northern Uganda.

8 Conclusions

Based on the above findings, the following conclusions are reached.

1. By presenting a balanced coverage, the newspapers have helped in setting the right agenda and mediating in the conflict. This may have contributed in some degree to the management of the problem of militancy.
2. Given the adequate coverage of militancy, the press helped to raise global awareness of militancy in the Niger Delta.
3. By according low prominence to reports on militancy, the press contributed to reducing the spread of fear and panic often associated with acts of terror, thereby helping to stabilise society and to save lives.
4. Professionally speaking, the preponderance of the straight news format in presentation of reports on militancy means that it will be difficult for newspapers to get to the roots of the violence in the Niger Delta. Reports may not sufficiently equip readers to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy.
5. Journalists are largely responsible for what readers get to learn about militancy in the Niger Delta. Depending on the way they portray militancy, readers’ perception will be shaped accordingly.

9 Recommendations

Given the findings and conclusions reached, three key recommendations are put forward.

1. To get to the roots of the causes of militancy, reporters and editors should include more of feature articles, editorials and interviews with conflict experts, victims, and local residents in their coverage. This will help create proper understanding of the issues at stake in order to facilitate early resolution of the conflict.
2. The use of confrontational language to describe any of the parties in a skirmish should be dropped. Such words tend to escalate rather than douse hostilities.
3. Conflict sensitive journalism should be developed and taught in journalism schools, mass communication departments and journalism-related fields in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This will enhance a better understanding of the dynamics of conflict by journalists and engender a more responsible reporting of conflict situations in the news media.

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