

ROLE OF CONFLICT REPORTING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: The study examined the role of conflict reporting in managing and reducing conflicts in Nigeria. It reviewed historical patterns of conflict and analysed how journalists shaped public understanding through their reporting choices. The paper explained that responsible coverage, built on fact-checking, neutrality, balanced framing, and giving voice to affected groups, helped to reduce tension and support peacebuilding. It also showed that mature and well-trained journalists are better equipped to handle the pressures, risks, and ethical demands of conflict situations. Overall, the study argued that conflict reporting was most effective when journalists adopted human-centred, non-violent approaches that promoted dialogue, protected national security, and strengthened public trust.

Keywords: Conflict Reporting, Journalism, Peacebuilding, Media Ethics, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Understanding conflict reporting, along with other specialized reporting such as beats, environmental, agricultural, sports, health, religion, art, entertainment, business, political, crime, courts, or even peace and war reporting, begins with mastering what reporting is and its basics and principles. In all of these specialized areas in the news reporting business, a reporter must see himself as a hunter. The difference is that the conventional hunter goes after wild animals with his hunting equipment, a cutlass, a gun, and a spare. However, a news story hunter (journalist) arms himself with a biro, a notebook, a typewriter, a camera, but today, a journalist goes out with his iPhone and others.

Reporting, therefore, is the process of giving an account of news events through a medium to an audience. It calls for preparation. Such preparation consists of gathering facts about an event, occasion, or people through careful observation, reasoning, verification, and organizing them into a news story. The process can be completed when the news reporter has given the mass media audience a good idea of what transpired in an event or occasion he covered, monitored, and investigated. How best the reporter prepares depends to a large extent on his ability to recognize who the news source (makers) are quickly. How to go about reaching them, where and when, and what to do with them. This is very important because people make the news. People witness news. People are the sources of news, because news is about people, what they do, what they say or fail to do or say, why, etc.

So, reporting, especially specialized reporting such as conflict reporting, is not child's play. It involves a careful, intelligent, and meticulous process of taking proper account of events that are

newsworthy, fair, balanced, credible, accurate, and would interest the media audience, whether print, broadcast, or social media users. To this understanding, the reporter must understand what news is, what makes news, its values, elements, principles, among other characteristics that qualify a story to become a news story.

Brief Historical Perspective of Conflict in Nigeria

Conflict is like a culture, so it is part of human existence. It must occur when two or more people live together in a family, community, state, region, or nation. Members of these assemblies interact and sometimes misunderstand one another. Conflict is a display of interest, an exhibition of ego or strength, or simply a power tussle. It emerges from a struggle for supremacy over a common goal, wealth, interest, aspiration, or agitation over ruler-ship or leadership. Some scholars believe that conflict is as old as man (Adam, the first man in the Garden of Eden, started having conflict with his wife, Eve).

In Nigeria, before the invasion of the white men, conflicts had started to occur over some everyday matters or interests. Whether a conflict is a communal land dispute, a leadership struggle, ethnic or religious friction, a political, social, or economic imposition, environmental, nepotism, or marginalisation, it is a misunderstanding. It leads to mistrust and to violent or non-violent conflict. No matter whether conflict is violent or non-violent, it serves practical purposes, provided it does not lead to war. Records of conflicts in Nigeria date back to 1180, when an uprising occurred over a tussle over the kingdom of Benin (1180-1197).

Other similar conflicts were: Oyo Empire (1682-1833), Battles (1901-1902), Colonial Nigeria-British Republic (1800-1960), Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967-1970), Ife vs Modakeke land dispute (1849), and Othman Damfodio Holy War (1877-1893). The list of dreadful conflicts that took many lives and destroyed numerous properties in Nigeria includes Land Disputes between: Itsekiri vs. Ijaw, Aguleri vs. Umueri, Onitsha vs. Obosi, Omor vs. Igboekwu, Ajalli vs. Ukpo, Itsekiri vs. Urhobo, Yelwa vs. Shendam, Zango vs. Kataf, Tiv vs. Jukun/Wukari, Herders vs. Farmers at various states in Nigeria, and Okuama vs. Okoloba.

Other political conflicts are: interstate and intrastate conflicts, civil wars, political assassinations, military coups, mass protests or rebellions, organised crimes such as IPOB, Boko Haram, banditry, kidnapping, etc., Christian – Muslim conflict in the North, Yoruba–Hausa disturbances in Lagos, inter-religious, intra-religious, sectarian, and many other human-ego induced conflicts. The list of conflicts and examples in Nigeria is too extensive to include in this work. Their causes and solutions are not the focus of this study. What is paramount here is how the media reports these conflicts and crises in order to engender peace and mutual trust among the warring parties. The interest of peaceful coexistence in any society should be the top agenda of the mass media.

Conflict Reporting: Definitions and Descriptions

Many media scholars and professionals have written on this area of specialised reporting. Some of these scholars believe that conflict reporting originated from the peace journalism family. Nevertheless, some argue that, instead of conflict reporting emerging from peace journalism, peace

journalism emerged from conflict journalism or reporting. No matter what arguments hold sway, peace journalism is the brainchild of a Norwegian Professor, Johan Galtung, the leader and editor of peace and conflict studies and the Peace Research Journal. According to scholars, peace reporting is the deliberate choice of reporting principles made by reporters and editors to create opportunities for media audiences to consider and embrace non-violent responses to conflict. Therefore, peace journalism (reporting) aims to equip reporters with the necessary toolkits to guide their interventions in conflict resolution, including being conscious of who their sources are and the implications of their news stories when handling peace processes or resolving conflicts that have already erupted. Conflict reporting is the type of reporting that emphasises the interplay between media narratives and public perceptions. So, reporters must be aware of the potential of media coverage to both inform and influence opinion. This is because conflict reporting is a style of reporting that aims to treat stories about conflict with the balance reportage principle. It advocates non-violence and pursues peace.

The Concept of Conflict Reporting

Crises and conflicts are generally recognised as inevitable events in people's lives. They are inherently linked to the relationships among individuals. It is often argued that because human beings are naturally competitive and aggressive, crises and conflicts will always occur among them. Additionally, group structures are never static in any society; there is always ongoing interaction among its members. Sometimes, groups attempt to dominate others due to shifting vested and competing interests. In such situations, groups try to protect their values to ensure survival and advance their goals. Therefore, everyone has a vested interest in the well-being and prosperity of their community or family. As a result, dominant groups, families, or communities tend to engage in competition, rivalry, and conflict over dominance, especially by those with egocentric tendencies. Such resistance often leads to conflicts, crises, or even war.

Some of the human interest resistance areas that often result in conflict and crises are:

1. Land encroachment (Boundary) between states or nations
2. Land disputes within communities
3. Chieftaincy tussle
4. Violation of Agreements
5. Outright neglect of minority groups
6. Imposition of authorities/leaders
7. Attempt to change rules
8. Bad government leads to civil unrest
9. Abuse of power, and many similar developments.

As a result of any of these harmful occurrences, conflict will inevitably gradually erupt, and if not properly managed, it can develop into a situation that costs lives and damages property of the disputing groups or parties. Therefore, the concept of conflict reporting is simply an effort by the media to help prevent, manage, and resolve such tendencies before they spiral out of control. Even if the conflict escalates, the media still has a role in helping to reduce tension and restore normality to the situation.

Take, for example, when conflicts arise between nations due to trade disputes, territorial confusions, resource control, racial discrimination, migration policies, ideological or military domination, or even contractual breaches, the global media is expected to report these conflicts with maturity and according to the highest international standards. The media should not take sides for any reason based on perceived gains, whether immediate or remote. The conflicting nations should ensure that media outlets outside the disputing countries do not escalate tensions or create scenarios that make resolution, management, or understanding of the conflict impossible. The role of the media worldwide, especially in conflict or peace reporting, is to promote peace by publishing stories that advocate non-violence. Promote peace and nonviolent approaches to resolving disputes.

In conflicts at the national or local level, such as state boundary disputes over resource control, the media are viewed as key peace managers because the public expects them to deliver balanced, unbiased, and accurate news stories based on the conflict. Whether the conflict reporter is writing for government or privately owned media, they must not allow themselves to be used for destruction rather than peace-building. Their reports should aim to promote peace and resolve conflicts, whether they occur between two states, two communities, two villages, or even between the government and the people.

Reporting conflict becomes more problematic when it involves the imposition of unwanted leaders trying to change rules by any government or group, or when a government aims to suppress the voice of near “helpless” individuals who resist such rule changes. In many cases, the majority always has its say, while the minority also has a voice. In such situations, the media should amplify the will of the people and not allow itself to be manipulated. However, regardless of how conflicts erupt and are managed, one thing is certain: conflict theorists and scholars agree that conflicts are not always negative. Some conflicts are necessary means of achieving change and transforming an oppressive social order. To these scholars, conflicts serve a positive social function, as they may be the only way for exploited or deprived groups to assert their rights. Violence or threats of violence may often be essential to creating stability and maintaining peace in society.

Both violent and non-violent conflicts can serve as means to achieve peace, stability, good governance, enhanced cooperation, peaceful coexistence, development, and strong relationships between host communities and the companies operating within them. By nature, conflict can be violent or non-violent, fundamental or accidental, manageable or even unmanageable. It can also take other forms, such as intra-group, inter-group, dynamic, developmental, or revolutionary. Regardless of the form or shape of the conflict, the media have important roles to play in reporting it.

Roles of Media in Conflict Management and Peace Building Process

Understanding the word “conflict” is the first step in knowing what the media can do about it. Can the media help escalate it or work to reduce it? Media refers to the means of mass communication, including various forms and platforms that spread information, news, entertainment, and other content to a large audience. With this understanding of what media is and its role in conflict resolution, management, and mitigation, rather than escalation, the following points are relevant:

1. **To understand and identify human interests and views in conflicting situations:** The primary duty of the media during conflict or crisis is to thoroughly understand and recognize the interests and perspectives of those involved. Without full understanding and knowledge of the people, media reports may miss their mark. These individuals are the main sources of the news to be reported. Interview them without any hidden agendas, remove bias during the interview, and be careful when editing the story so as not to harm any party or individual.
2. **Careful management of the media-source relationship:** As a conflict reporting journalist, your challenging task is to maintain a cordial relationship with your already identified source. Managing such conflicting interest groups can only be achieved by building trust. Once the source trusts the journalist, they will always be willing to provide vital information that can help resolve the conflict. Conversely, without trust, the source cannot have any further dealings with the reporter. If your source views you as their potential enemy, your life could be in danger. Therefore, in conflict reporting, the journalist should strive to be impartial, stay distant from the story, and be fair to all parties involved. Maintain neutrality.
3. **Understand the genesis of the conflict:** A thorough understanding of the root causes of the conflict or crisis by the journalist is essential for unbiased reporting. It requires in-depth research and independent investigation to determine why the conflict occurred. Without careful private investigation into the cause of the conflict behind the reportage, the journalist may fail in their duty to present balanced coverage. Try to investigate the cause of the conflict and do not rely solely on hearsay, as unconfirmed sources can mislead you and cause you to report false information that could escalate the conflict. Therefore, studying the origins of the misunderstanding and conflict is crucial for better management of the reporting process.
4. **Give voice to the voiceless victims of the conflict:** In every conflict, there are victims and even potential victims within the crisis community or environment. These victims were often ignored because their voices, whether in compliance or distress, frequently fail to attract attention from authorities who may be trying to conceal the truth. In such situations, the only way for these neglected members of the warring parties to be heard is through the press. As a conflict reporter, reach out to these vital members of the conflicting parties to uncover the real story. Although information from the powerful can be misleading, analyse such conflicting data carefully, and as a trained journalist, determine which is genuine and trustworthy. Collaborate with these overlooked community members to create a balanced news story. Building trust with your sources is essential when reporting on crises, conflicts, and risks.
5. **Always preach peace with your stories:** Peace is essential to society, and every member, including the media, must promote peace in daily conversations and reports. People need information both to foster peace and to ignite or stop conflicts. Therefore, peace journalism involves the deliberate choices reporters and editors make to foster orderliness, tranquillity, normality, and peace in society. The media must be socially responsible and report the truth accurately within the appropriate context of societal events to support the peace-building process. This is because the most reliable factor in peacebuilding is the media, which plays a vital role by providing an unbiased platform for people to express their views on contentious issues. Media should exercise caution to avoid amplifying opinions that could escalate conflicts. Opinions shared personally via media must be clearly distinguished from official media viewpoints to ensure clarity. Ultimately, the media should not allow its

platform to be used to escalate crises but should instead encourage opinions that promote peace.

6. **Application of balanced news framing approaches:** News framing is crucial in specialised reporting, especially in conflict and crisis coverage. Framing refers to the idea that the assumptions behind the presentation, emphasis, and selection of stories are often more important than straightforward news reporting. The concept is that media should focus attention on specific aspects of an event and place them within a broader context of meaning. When reporting conflicts, the media must aim to frame stories in a way that persuades the audience of the value of a particular perspective, much like setting an agenda for further discussion. In fact, the main goal of news framing is to create a compelling composition that guides the audience's focus toward the subject matter. By doing this, the media highlights certain elements of perceived reality, making them more noticeable and simplifying the message to motivate people and garner support for the message being conveyed. Regardless of the framing approach, it should aim to foster peace in the minds of members of conflicting parties.
7. **Let truth and facts be your watchwords:** In conflict reporting, truth based on facts instils in journalists an awareness that enables them to pursue non-violent outcomes through creative approaches to handling conflict reports. Truth and facts should guide reporters to focus on people, especially conflict victims, in their coverage. These two words must remind the media to always stay neutral and simply set the agenda for peace in every conflict situation. Presenting truth and facts to the public can encourage them to adopt a non-violent approach, emphasising dialogue for bargaining and negotiation toward mutual reconciliation and peaceful resolution. Relevant and concerned individuals are more likely to speak out when they see truth grounded in facts reported by the media, especially mainstream outlets. Traditional media like broadcast and newspapers should strive to counter unsubstantiated and baseless reports on social media by presenting the truth based solely on verifiable facts. Reporting on conflicts and crises with evidence and factual accuracy can help change the harmful and inflammatory narratives spreading through social media. Therefore, neutral media in conflict and crisis reporting must consistently present facts and promote truth; this is the only way to achieve lasting peace.
8. **Neutrality and Professionalism:** Conflict and crisis situations are unstable and critical times, or states of affairs in which a decisive change is imminent, requiring neutrality and professionalism from the media. Neutrality stems from maturity, while professionalism results from proper training and extensive experience. Therefore, conflict reporting is not suitable for inexperienced or immature journalists, who cannot maintain neutrality or professionalism in their coverage. Instead, experienced and truly professional reporters and editors should be assigned to cover conflicts, crises, war, and peace reporting. These highly skilled journalists can uphold professionalism, detach themselves from personal biases, and remain neutral.
9. **Effective information management in National Security:** Protection of national security is a crucial role of the media in any nation. Therefore, information management plays a key part in the national security framework because it functions as an early warning system by identifying threats and sharing information that supports proactive responses to emerging dangers. Effective and responsible information management by the media is vital for garnering public support and mobilization toward national security efforts. Information

must be collected from credible and reliable sources and quickly managed to prevent threats, protect critical infrastructure, and avoid conflicts, crises, or even war. In managing national security, the media acts as a vital link between the military and the public. It should keep the public informed about military actions aimed at securing the nation and preventing conflicts by responsibly relaying important security information in an accessible way. The media should provide accurate and balanced reporting to help the public understand security measures without compromising operational security. It should avoid creating unnecessary fear or panic among the people, especially when it is unwarranted. The media should uphold the principle that "security is everybody's business" and strive to present reports that promote dialogue rather than conflict or war because conflict threatens national security.

- 10. Avoidance of hate speech:** Media should always avoid hate speech, especially in conflict reporting, because conflict is a "danger threat-laden situation" that can be catastrophic if not handled properly. Refrain from using hate speech in print or broadcast statements, comments, or opinions. Hate speech refers to language intended to degrade a person or group based on their race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, belief system, specific interest, or opinion on a current issue. The media should promote respectful language instead of abusive language, which can escalate conflicts. Scholars believe that offensive words can harm people just as much as physical blows. Never allow your media platform to be used to promote hate speech; instead, focus on respectful contributions that can reduce tension, encourage dialogue, and promote peace.
- 11. Balancing government view with conflict victims' view:** Media must strive to balance the government's view with that of the victims of any conflict, so as not to alienate either the mediating authorities or the actual victims of the conflict or crisis. The media should avoid solely praising government actions taken during crises or conflicts without also sharing stories from the communities or people who are the real victims. When the media singles out only the government's opinion in their conflict stories, it often ends up fueling the crisis. Additionally, conflict reporters should seek the honest opinions of the affected communities or individuals involved in the conflict rather than focusing solely on the government's perspective. Hearing only the government's side can make affected communities and people more worried and annoyed, especially regarding their lives, property, children, future, ancestral land, and mineral resources. Victims of conflict would appreciate media coverage that reflects their own views and balances them with the government's. The media should consistently promote peace in discussions about conflicts and related issues.
- 12. Distancing the media owners' interest in conflict reportage:** Conflict reporters and editors must, as a matter of professionalism, distance their reportage from the interests of their media owners, whether private or government, especially if the media owner belongs to one of the conflicting parties. Reporters employed by such media organisations should not allow themselves to be used by their employer, who might present a one-sided view and want their employees (reporters) to echo these wrong views. Although it might be difficult, specialised and seasoned reporters must always frame their news stories with a balanced and unbiased approach, regardless of whose views should be echoed or slanted, in order to serve the interests of their media audience. Even though it should be unbecoming of any media owner to expect journalists working in his media organisation to listen to him on all matters, such as conflicts and crises, journalists must stand their ground in adhering to

standard media practices and rules, always observing professionalism in the discharge of their duties.

Comparing Conflict Reporting with Other Similar Specialised News Reporting

There are a whole lot of specialised areas that require trained specialists to handle their reporting. Some of these areas include security, crisis, war, peace, risk, disaster, environmental, innovation, energy, crime, others are political, entertainment, arts, health, science and technology, sports, judiciary, legislature, business/financial, agricultural, space, information communication technology (ICT), and many others. There are many, and demand careful reportage approaches to fully bring out their specialities in meanings and contributions to mass media functions. Specialised reporting is a craft that has to be learnt over time, either from many years of working experience as a beat reporter or training in two or more disciplines, one of which must be a mass communication or media-related course.

A reporter, for example, who has been trained as a lawyer and a journalist, can excel as a judiciary correspondent. Any journalist who has obtained additional certification or risk management training can effectively report in those specialised areas. Still, a reporter with substantial experience in covering and reporting on a specific area or discipline can become a proficient specialised reporter. Therefore, specialised reporting is a form of mass media reporting that focuses attention and interest on a particular aspect of news, designed to attract the media audience to that specific area of reporting. It also involves the craft of in-depth reporting on a particular issue, sector, organisation, or institution over time. Consequently, a specialised reporter should be capable of reporting:

1. **Peace Reporting:** A journalist acts as a third party between conflicting parties. Therefore, peace reporting involves using journalism to promote peace and reduce tensions between disputing groups or individuals. It always advocates for more balanced reporting by considering the causes of conflicts and simultaneously encouraging solutions. The media adopts a peace-oriented approach as a valuable contribution toward peacefully ending crises or disputes.
2. **Crisis Reporting:** The process of covering and reporting breaking news involves events that pose significant danger, distress, or trauma requiring immediate attention from the proper authorities, including journalists. It is a form of disseminating news, especially about emergencies, disasters, and unforeseen events that threaten lives, property, institutions, or society as a whole. Whenever crises occur, such as hunger, poor governance, political unrest, religious conflicts, or natural and human-made disasters, media coverage is crucial to inform the public and help find solutions for both immediate relief and restoring normalcy in the future.
3. **Risk Reporting:** This is the process of using media coverage to monitor identified risks or threats in an organisation, community, or nation. This type of specialised reporting allows journalists to track risks connected to or potentially affecting an organisation or society. Although risky for reporters covering outbreaks, the goal is to communicate real-time risk data to different stakeholders to enable urgent and necessary action. The term “risk” refers to the potential for deadly consequences faced by journalists covering outbreaks such as COVID-19, Bird Flu, and other infectious diseases that require media coverage.

In all these special media interventions to save lives and property, their functions add up to achieving peace and healthy coexistence. Media should collaborate with other stakeholders' efforts to end conflicts, crises, and wars, and to mitigate risks at all times.

Conclusion

Conflict reporting, as part of a specialised and advanced reporting family, belongs to the peace journalism group, which consistently tests reporters' ability and knowledge in restoring peace, understanding, and cooperation among warring members of society. A conflict reporter must assume the roles of conflict manager, peace builder, and advocate. This is because, without peace, society is in a state of war, crisis, or conflict, and there can be no unity, development, or human coexistence. The study concludes that conflict reporting should be entrusted to mature, intelligent, experienced journalists who have a human face. Inexperienced reporters should not handle it, as they might use their reports to cause more harm and disunity among conflicting parties.

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