Escalating or De-Escalating Tool? The Media in the Herder-Farmers' Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract: Since the launch of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 and its evolving national dynamics, a new phase of intra-state conflicts and insurgencies sprang up in varying degrees, putting the nation on the brink of collapse. The most recent and recurring communal violent conflicts are the unending clashes between the herdsmen, popularly known as Fulani and pastoral Farmers. As the conflict remains unresolved, there continues to be a deep-seated mutual enmity that has always led to blatant reprisal attacks in wanton killings and displacement on both parties. Despite the various efforts to resolve the conflict, it continues to intensify. This study, however, examines the escalating dynamics of the age-long inter-communal conflict and how much the media has impacted the escalating and de-escalating status of the conflict. The authors argue that the conflict resolution approaches have so far undermined and overlooked media power in de-escalating the conflict and thus recommend a pragmatic media engagement in terms of employing carefully prepared programmes and campaigns as and alternative resolution mechanism.

Keywords: Media, Herders, Farmers, Conflict, Media Engagement, Conflict Management in Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Genesis of Nigerian Conflicts

Since gaining independence, Nigeria has faced a range of violent and non-violent conflicts that pose severe national security threats, affecting both its society and economy. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, a new wave of intra-state conflicts and insurgencies has emerged, pushing the country toward instability. Beyond occasional electoral violence, there are significant issues including Boko Haram insurgencies in the North, militancy in the Niger Delta, frequent farmers-herders conflicts in the middle-belt and

other regions, kidnappings, banditry, as well as cultism and the separatist movements of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

Currently, one of the most pressing and persistent issues is the violent clashes between herders, particularly the Fulani, and pastoral farmers, especially in the North-east and North-central regions, with occasional attacks in other areas such as the South West. This ongoing conflict has resulted in numerous fatalities, displacements, and socio-economic disruptions. The root causes include socio-cultural differences, population growth, inadequate grazing reserves, uneven resource distribution, institutional weaknesses, and the impact of globalization and digital media. Over the past decade, this conflict has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and deepened ethnic, regional, and religious divisions, undermining national unity, stability, and prosperity.

To stem the tide of this conflict, however, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), has advanced myriads of efforts such as the deployment of substantial security networks, peaceful dialogue amongst groups and setting up of probe panels to manage the recurring communal conflict even though the recommendation of such panels of inquiry were given the needed action plans. Despite these efforts, the inter-communal conflict continues to deepen. The period between 2016 and 2019 saw an unusual upsurge in the conflict as hundreds of people were lost on both sides of the conflicting parties. For instance, in a 2018 Amnesty International report, it was observed that the farmers and herders conflict had gained momentum, especially in 2016, leading to the death of over 3,641 people with innumerable displaced people and communities [1].

2. RELATED WORKS

In [2] explores the importance of objectivity in journalism, particularly within the Niger Delta Press. The paper discusses how objectivity is interpreted and applied differently across various journalistic practices. [2] References Igboanusi's perspective that partisan media undermines press credibility and intensifies political conflicts, advocating for a media approach grounded in truth and objectivity to foster national unity. The paper also highlights the historical roots of objectivity, tracing its origins to early journalism practices, notably those emphasized by Benjamin Franklin, which continue to shape modern journalistic standards.

Both locally and globally, the media plays a crucial role as a primary source of information, shaping public awareness and understanding of significant issues affecting their lives and society. The media undeniably has the power to influence public behavior concerning current issues. Many individuals depend on media outlets to stay informed about events in their immediate surroundings and beyond [3], [4]. [5] Highlight that "mass media have powerful effects when used in well-crafted programs and campaigns that adhere to communication theory and principles." Therefore, the media is essential in promoting de-escalation and peaceful resolution of conflicts, particularly in the modern era where conflict and conflict resolution extend beyond traditional state-focused methods. Media can either suppress or liberate, divide or unite communities, and drive social change [6]. As powerful channels for

promoting peace and preventing crises, the media utilizes information, education, framing, agenda-setting, and other functions to achieve these goals [7].

While there has been extensive media coverage of the long-standing conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, it remains unclear how much the government and policymakers have utilized media engagement to address and resolve this issue.During conflict situations, people rely on the media for information [8]. At such times, people's picture of any incidence when they cannot get close is usually hinged on what is portrayed in the media. While some reportages have aggravated the situation, others have helped in calming down the situatiom. In Abuja, the Federal Government has displayed a lacklustre approach to handling the conflict, while most media organisations have become so biased in their reportage and coverage of all these clashes. [1], which monitored and analysed media reports on farmers and herders from 2016 to 2018, noted thus:

The Government of Nigeria has failed to comply with its obligation to exercise due diligence, failing both to address the underlying causes of the violence between herders and villagers (farmers) described in this report and stop violence when it did occur, resulting in the death of hundreds of people, the destruction of thousands of homes and extensive harm to people's livelihoods. [1]

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper, therefore, critically examines the escalating dynamics of the age-long inter-communal conflict and how much the media have impacted the escalating or de-escalating status. The study examines how strategically designed media programs and campaigns can be used to resolve the herder-farmer communal clashes in Nigeria.The authors set out to draw on the perspectives and theories on conflict and media. The next part then brought to the fore the background understanding of the causes and impacts of the conflict. The fourth part analyses the role of media in escalating and de-escalating the conflict and the extent to which the government have engaged the media power to resolve the recurrent conflict. The study concludes with the last part.

Media, Conflict and Conflict Resolution: Theory and Praxis

In the post-bipolar global era, the influence of non-state actors, particularly the media, in both conflict and conflict resolution has become increasingly crucial. This shift arises from the evolving nature of conflict, where traditional warfare between states has given way to asymmetric and modern warfare, with states employing low-intensity tactics to compel internal adversaries to surrender. [9] Defines the media as a technological channel that distributes messages or information to the public, encompassing radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, films, computers, and various virtual or social networks. Essentially, it serves as the medium through which mass communication or information dissemination occurs from the source to the general audience.

The media is a powerful tool that can facilitate peaceful coexistence among citizens during conflicts, as well as in the processes of reconciliation and transformation, which are often the most sought-after outcomes of any dispute [10].

Similarly, [11] the media plays a unique role in times of crisis by influencing the course of a conflict situation and therefore induce the public to their understanding and analysis. This resonates with the position of [3] that the media can foster human security and be a valuable tool for peace and conflict management mechanism, which promotes peace messages and strategies that can lead to peaceful co-existence in a given society. In the same manner, the media can exacerbate violence by spreading biased information and swaying public opinion. In conflicts, communication often suffers first, and manipulation or poor dissemination of information can further escalate tensions.

[12] Stated that media can transform conflicts by enabling a swift flow of constructive and accurate content through its informing and educating mandate. He stated further that, since most conflicts erupt as result of differences, the media can transform by also establishing the causal latent issues, reconstructing misunderstandings and advocating for a free consensus among the different parties to the conflict

This study aims to analyze how the media has contributed to escalating the herders-farmers conflict and explore ways it can help de-escalate it. Emphasizing accurate information, diverse perspectives, and sensitive reporting are key measures recommended to mitigate conflicts. It is insinuated that media which reports conflict occurrences in their own countries may be compromised and manipulated to ignite, fuel and incite acrimony on the audience through being partisan and broadcasting hate speech [13].

Drawing from Agenda-setting Theory, [14] noted that the mass media could influence the level of public awareness of issues as opposed to their specific knowledge about those issues. [15] stated that media were persuasive in bringing attention to particular events, issues, and personalities and determining the importance people assign to public interest matters. He further explained that the agenda-setting theory presupposes that the newspapers, television and other news media show how people are aware or not aware, give attention to or ignore, and play up or down specific issues of public interest. The fundamental assumption of agenda setting is the convergence between the importance ascribed to issues publicized in the media by the attendees to those media, and the emphasis given to them by the media [16].

Effective media engagement in developing policies, programs, and conflict resolution efforts can help prevent further destruction of lives and property, as seen in the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. This point has been further bolstered by the duo, [5], who stated that, "mass media have powerful effects if they are used in programmes and campaigns that are carefully prepared according to communication theory and principles." There is a need to unite all stakeholders, policymakers, and government officials through media platforms to facilitate their contributions toward resolving these conflicts.

Similarly, Peace Journalism as a paradigm is anchored on the role of the media in fostering and advancing peace in society. Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report and about how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict [17]. [18] suggested the fact that peace journalism has availed the journalists the platform to run away from the 'blame game' and bias reportage to a more serious reporting that gives room for all stakeholders who open up questions for dialogue and debate rather than closing down discussion through marginalising, demonising and silencing others. The basis of peace journalism is that the same way media can be used negatively to aggravate the tensions between the two sides of

the conflict – farmers and herders – they can equally be used to foster peace [19], [17] . The media can spark off and de-escalate any conflict depending on how it is engaged per time. Thus, media can transmute a conflictual situation to enhance mutual understanding.

Herders-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria: Dynamics, Causes and Impacts

The current socio-political challenges facing Nigeria are clear consequences of the Berlin Conference of the late 19th century, when African territories were divided among European nations. The people were made to believe they are one, but not the same. However, this colonially inherited 'one, but not the same' syndrome petered out flagrantly during the early years of Nigeria independence as regionalism, nepotism, ethnicism, and favouritism heralded the national polity. This is to say, that the issues, conflicts, insurgencies and terrorism by the religious extremists that are gravely impacting Nigeria national lives today have their roots in the country's colonial occupation.

The Herders-Farmers conflict has today taken a violent phase with rising casualties and displaced people, especially in Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Kogi, Adamawa, and others. The conflict is primarily driven by the country's declining economy and global climate changes, which have increased agricultural activity and pushed Fulani herders southward, resulting in clashes with farmers. A 2018 report notes that Fulani herdsmen and farmers communal conflicts have claimed over 3,700 Nigerians in attacks across the country, excluding the wounded and kidnapped [20].

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, either escalating or de-escalating conflicts. In the herders-farmers conflict, the media has largely contributed to escalating tensions by portraying the attacks and involved parties negatively. But, so far, the respective media outlets-Newspapers, Television stations, even social media and blog sites, have tagged them: killers; encroachers; murderer; gunmen; abductors; attackers, and invaders, among other frightful and dreadful names, which have built up sentiment and vendetta in the farmers, even the general public against the Fulani herders. In effect, any slight skirmish between the herders and farmers goes violent, with spill-over effects on the farmers' community.

The conflict's widespread killings, property destruction, and displacement are causing significant emotional and psychological trauma to individuals, while also affecting national stability and economies. For instance, between 2012 and 2014, Benue state, the most hit state of the conflict, is said to have lost over 95 billion Naira to Fulani herders' attack on the state [21].

Media Engagement in the Herders-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria

The engagement of the media in negotiating and resolving the protracted conflict between farmers and the herders is worth unpacking. According to [22], peace actors had harnessed media outlets in many conflicting countries to disseminate messages and programming that promote peaceful co-existence and development or raise awareness of solutions to divisive issues. On media power, [6] believes that the media could serve to repress, liberate, unite, fragment society, and promote and hold back desired change. Similarly, [23] pointed out the power of the media as it can reach and create participation in the opinion-building process for wider audience, thereby shaping the course of an ethno-political conflict. The media

influences public perception by shaping thoughts through frequent reporting, headlines, images, and layouts in various formats. This section explores how the media has engaged with the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria.

Media as an Escalating Tool
The media has established a culture of fear through a vast array of threats which shapes a negative perception of risk among members of the news audience, creating a sense of helplessness especially in conflictual situations [2], [24]. News coverage of conflicts by both government and private media often focuses heavily on violent incidents, leading to exaggerated portrayals, insufficient story investigation, intentional misrepresentation, creation of stereotypes, inflammatory language, and government censorship. In the case of the Herders-Farmers Conflict, the media has consciously and unconsciously spiralled the conflict through their reportage. A look at some of the Punch Newspaper captions, as stated below, further affirms this argument:

"Tension hits Nasarawa town as herdsmen share kolanuts [25]"
"Tension in Makurdi over planned attack by suspected Hausa/Fulani herdsmen [26]"
"Anxiety as displaced herdsmen make Nasarawa new home [27]".

An examination of the three headlines captured by Punch newspaper above shows that these types of reportage have already stimulated fear and anxiety in the minds of the readers and by extension, the inhabitants of the villages so mentioned or captioned in these headlines. The Headline, "Tension hits Nasarawa town as herdsmen share kolanuts [25]" is an anxiety-creating reportage. Such reportage could be stirring conflict instead of dousing it. The second caption, "Tension in Makurdi over a planned attack by suspected Hausa/Fulani herdsmen [26]" by the same newspaper on a different date, was also written to create psychological trepidation in the minds of the people, escalating what would not have ordinarily resulted in any serious conflict. While some of these reporters give sensational titles so that their papers could sell, they fail to consider the tragic and devastating effects on Makurdi and the nation. Similarly, the caption, "Anxiety as displaced herdsmen make Nasarawa new home [27]" is still not different from the two discussed above as it follows the same reporting style and pattern. The word 'anxiety' was purposely used to create a psychological imbalance in the readers' minds thereby exacerbating the fragile relationship between the herders and the farmers.

Another newspaper, Vanguard, like Punch Newspaper, also continues the same style of writing that always escalates crises between the nomadic herdsmen and farmers. On the March 12 2020, the headlines below were written:
"Herdsmen have taken over our Communities [28]"
"Herdsmen slit throat of Vigilante group member in Ondo [29]"
The first title, "Herdsmen have taken over our Communities [28]" is a cry by farmers calling for help. Of course, the caption has already presented the villagers as helpless and therefore need help. Similarly, the caption, "Herdsmen slit throat of Vigilante group member in Ondo [29]" creates horror and disgusting picture in the hearts of the readers especially with these

two words: slit throat. It depicts a situation where an animal is laid down and the throat being cut. This type of writing will always lead to the heightening of conflicts through reprisals.

The Television Portrayals of the Conflict

Many television channels have been inundated with crisis-escalating words and expressions in their reportage and coverage. In most cases, horrendous images are shown to support their intentions. One of such example is illustrated below:

TVC News on June 11 2020 with the Caption – Herders| Farmers Clash: Gov Ortom Calls for Review of Ecowas Protocol

On June 11 2020, Yori Folarin with Mayowa Okunato anchored a programme with the caption – HERDERS|FARMERS CLASH: GOV ORTOM CALLS FOR REVIEW OF ECOWAS PROTOCOL having Terver Akase, (the former Benue State's Governor Ortom's media spokesperson) in which they discussed extensively on the conflict between the farmers and the herders. As one listens to the programme one hears such expressions as: "influx of armed herdsmen give them all sorts of grieves[30]", "…armed cattle herdsmen…[30]", "Herders have vehemently vowed never to obey the anti-open grazing laws[30]", "Miyetti Allah Kautahure have vowed…[30]", "Marauding herdsmen have killed sixty people[30]" , " They have made real their (herders) threats[30]" etc. The program displayed images of burnt houses and displaced individuals, highlighting the conflict's impact. It is clear that name-calling and negative portrayals of herders hinder conflict resolution and undermine efforts to promote peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers.

The Social Media Portrayal

Social media platforms like online news sites, tweets, and Instagram have further intensified the conflict between farmers and herders. Sensational headlines on these platforms often escalate existing tensions between the two groups, generating fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. This aligns with the view expressed in [10], which argues that media reporting on domestic conflicts can be biased and manipulated, potentially inciting anger and fueling division through partisanship and hate speech.

According to [31], biased media reporting and research often focus on criticizing farmers while neglecting the perspectives and losses of pastoralists, leading to an incomplete and skewed portrayal of the conflicts.

Get smarter responses, upload files and images, and more.Similarly, [32] noted that: 'Reports on Herdsmen-farmers conflicts are more violent, specific and narrowed featuring words like 'killers' herdsmen', 'gun-carrying herdsmen', 'Jihadist herdsmen', 'greedy farmers', 'intolerable farmers' etc. are divisive, stereotypical and conflict inciting. Careful selection of words and phrases in reporting is crucial to avoid inciting reprisals. Nigerian media have been criticized for failing to practice peace-oriented journalism, as their coverage of conflicts, both locally and globally, has often been sensationalist, which exacerbates tensions and promotes conflict[32]. It is equally observed the level of reportage and coverages that were veiled with ethnic sentiments by some of the media which have always tended to escalate the Herder-Farmer crises.

Media as a De-escalating Tool

On the other hand, not only is the media a potent tool that can be used to de-escalate the herder-farmer conflict but can also be used to set up other media platforms where necessary stakeholders and the parties involved in the conflict can interact to foster a peaceful resolution through dialogue. In most fragile and conflict-ridden countries, the media have been employed by peace-building actors to broadcast messages and programmes that promote peaceful synchronicity and advancement, or raise awareness of solutions to discordant issues [22]. Thus, some dailies and social media captions and news reports were intended for de-escalation of the farmer-herder conflict. Some of these are briefly discussed below:

FG opens radio station to reach herdsmen [33]

"Factcheck: These photos of Armed Herders were not taken in Nigeria. [34]"
"Nigeria: Livestock reforms is key to solving farmer-herder conflict [35]"

Recent report in one of the Nigerian dailies [33], published that, "FG opens radio station to reach herdsmen [33]". A Farmers-Herders Forum could be established on radio to facilitate dialogue between the conflicting parties and stakeholders to address and resolve the ongoing crises. Additionally, the online media platform HUMANGLE, known for verifying social media news to help de-escalate farmer-herder conflicts, has reported on this issue, "Factcheck: These photos of Armed Herders were not taken in Nigeria [34]" The reporter, [34], divulged that, "photos often used by local media organisations to represent criminal herders in Nigeria have been found to have roots in Kenya, South Sudan and Tanzania." He lamentably pointed out that there had been barrage of misleading information on the conflicts. The reporter further revealed that most of the pictures posted were taken in other African countries. He debunked the photo posted on Twitter by @saharareporter on February 11, 2021. He further exposed that that picture was attached to a post on Twitter, which had since been circulated over 230 times and liked by over 220 individuals on the platform.
[35], made an online report with the caption, "Nigeria: Livestock reforms is key to solving farmer-herder conflict [35]". The writers, [35] stated that, "Land disputes between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers occurred sporadically in Nigeria's past, and relations between the two groups were largely amicable. [35]" They, however, decried the recent turn of events as incessant conflicts between the farmers and cattle rearers had led to the loss of lives. They attributed the reasons to climatic changes, overpopulation and other things. The reporters also believed that livestock reforms such as public grazing reserves and ranching should be the solution. Thus, engaging media in de-escalating, negotiating and resolving the long-standing crisis between farmers and herders is worth stressing so that there will be peaceful co-existence between these two warring parties – farmers and herders.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Impact of Media on Conflict Escalation:
The study shows that media reporting has significantly worsened the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. Sensationalism and biased coverage, such as provocative headlines and imagery,

have intensified tensions between the groups. For instance, headlines like "Tension hits Nasarawa town as herdsmen share kolanuts" and "Herders slit throat of Vigilante group member in Ondo" exacerbate fears and mistrust, fostering a hostile environment that often leads to more violence and retaliation.

2. Media as a De-escalation Tool:

The study also highlights the media's potential for positive impact on conflict resolution. It cites successful examples like the Federal Government's radio station for herdsmen and fact-checking initiatives to counter misinformation. The study suggests creating dialogue platforms, such as farmer-herder forums, to enhance communication and understanding. By offering balanced reporting, promoting peace-building messages, and facilitating constructive dialogues, the media can contribute to de-escalating conflicts.

3. Government and Media Engagement:

The research reveals a gap in how the Nigerian government and policymakers utilize media for conflict resolution. While there have been efforts like deploying security forces and starting dialogues, media strategies to de-escalate the conflict are underused. The study advocates for a more strategic approach, recommending the creation of comprehensive media programs that tackle the root causes of the conflict and support peaceful negotiations.

Recommendations

The study recommends several actions to better utilize media in resolving the herders-farmers conflict:

Promote Balanced Reporting: Media outlets should avoid sensationalism and strive for objective reporting that does not inflame tensions.

Engage in Peace Journalism: Emphasize peace journalism principles to report conflicts in a manner that encourages dialogue and understanding rather than division.

Develop Media Programs: Establish media platforms, such as talk shows and forums, where all stakeholders can discuss and address the issues contributing to the conflict.

Fact-Checking and Misinformation Control: Implement robust fact-checking mechanisms to prevent the spread of false information that could exacerbate the conflict.

We believe that by adopting these measures, media can transition from being a tool of conflict escalation to a facilitator of peace and reconciliation.

5. CONCLUSION

The worsening conflict is partly due to biased media coverage and the Federal Government's lack of effective media engagement. To address this, there is an urgent need for federal and state governments to establish media platforms for dialogue among stakeholders involved in the herder-farmer clashes. This could include talk shows, forums, panel discussions, and local-language news. Additionally, a thorough analysis of the conflict's causes is needed, along with input from stakeholders and experts, to develop targeted communication strategies and intervention plans using multimedia channels.

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