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AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF MEDIA REPORTING OF SEPARATIST AND SECTARIAN AGITATIONS IN NIGERIA

For some time now, Nigeria has faced the threat of secession from different groups. Each of the groups feels that the country is not representing their interest. In particular, most of the groups feel that the interest of their people has not been properly represented in terms of power sharing. Nigeria operates a democratic system of government with three tiers namely the executive, the judiciary and the legislature. The country also has six geo-political zones for the purposes of power sharing. The zones are North East, North West North, North Central South East, South West and South-South. The 36 states of the federation are, therefore, groups into the various zones with unequal number of states. For example, the North East has six states, the North West has seven, the North Central has six the same as South-South and South-West. However, the South-East has only five states. The unequal number of states among the geo-political zones has serious implications for power sharing in the country. For example, each state has three elected senators and a number of house of representative members depending on the population of the state. What this means is that the South-East has less number of senators and House of Representative members. Their counterparts from North-West is likely is likely to have the highest number of representatives. Zones like North Central, North East, South-West and South-South will have equal number of Senators but the number of House of Representatives may differ depending on the population. This unequal representation could have implications on the promotion of bills and policies and motions in the National Assembly that address issues that affect the welfare of each of the people of each geo-political zones. The mere thinking that South-East is outnumbered in the National Assembly could also make people of the zone to view almost every government programme and policy with suspicion. People of the area may be thinking that the government at the centre does not represent their interest. They may also be thinking that the country does not mean well for them. All these could provide fertile ground for agitations to fester. This partly explains why the country has faced agitations from people from South-East who have over the years sought to separate from Nigeria. Such agitations have also been reported in the media. This paper investigates audience perception of this reporting. The study sought answers to four research questions. Survey research was adopted for the study. A total of 384 respondents were recruited for the study. The questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. The data generated were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. It was found that most of the respondents studied reported high frequency of exposure to media reports on secession agitations. The result also showed that the media of exposure were radio, TV, and newspapers. The sample studied perceived media reports on secession agitations as supporting such actions. The result also showed a significant relationship between exposure to media reports on secession and public perception. The researchers recommend, among others, that the Nigerian Union of journalists should step up their monitoring mechanism to ensure that media reports do not compromise national unity.

Keywords: Mass media; audience; perception; separatism; sectarianism; conflict reporting; nation-building.

Introduction

The theatre of socio-economic and political struggles among and within nations, groups and individuals has shifted to the media. In this scenario, media activities and products lack harmony and tend to pursue different goals in line with their ownership. Thus, the media coverage of separatist and sectarian activities in this era of hypermedia has become an even greater concern. The era ushered in a simple and swift access to information and dissemination. Antagonists and perpetrators of oppressive, exploitative, exclusive, and evil activities in the public sphere are all players in the packaging and dissemination of information (*Adora, 2010*).

Through the media, the latest happenings within and

outside people's environment are made known. The framing of these happenings and the mixed messages, which the mass media send out to consumers on daily basis under this era of media democratisation are perceived differently and also exert different impacts. This paper explores this experience in Nigeria with specific focus on separatist and sectarian movements' activities.

As a sovereign country, Nigeria has continued to experience conflict prone separatist and sectarian agitations or struggles since the 1967/1970failed Biafran secession campaign. Some of the prominent separatist and sectarian groups include Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Boko Haram Islamic State Movement (BKISM), Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Middle Belt Federation (MBF0, and Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) among others. Some of these groups can be regarded as self-determined groups, separatists, nationalists, civil rights, and indigenous peoples' rights groups.

Nigeria's socio-political and religious configuration predisposes the country to ethno-religious rivalry that has culminated in the desire and struggle for secession at different times by different ethnic nationalities. These struggles orchestrated the emergence of many national but ethnic prone media/dailies. This is because the media is often used by these groups and even government to propagate their preferred ideologies, 'ventilate their grievances and vilify their opponents'. The goal of these media outfits is to secure mass support, thereby making the media to either propagate messages of intolerance or disinformation or support the status quo or serving as instruments of conflict resolution if their information or messages are perceived to be reliable and represent diverse views (*el-Nawawy & Powers, 2008*). It therefore holds that audience perception of the media is structured or determined by the character of media productions or messages.

Perception describes the views that people hold about media reports. When the media cover and report stories about an issue, audience members who are exposed to such stories may form perception. They may develop views concerning what they think of such media reports. Schacter (*2011*) says that perception is the interpretation attached to cognitions. He adds that perception describes the, identification, arrangement and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment.

The agitation for the creation of Biafra could be traced as far back as the 1970s when army personnel disagreed with the Nigerian government under the leadership of the then Military ruler, General Yakubu Gowon. The disagreement was could not be addressed and this led to a civil that lasted between 1967-1973. Even after the civil war, issues that led to the civil war have not been completely resolved. People from South-East Nigeria still feel that the current federal system in Nigeria does not favour. The other side of the story is that these agitations come and fade out based on perception about the administration. For example, during the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan from South-South Nigeria, there was little or no noise about separation. People from South-East Nigeria are mostly favourably disposed to Jonathan. They perceived him as one of them even though he is from South-South Nigeria. At some point, the name Azikiwe was added to Jonathan's name to project him as an Igbo man deserving of the support and cooperation of people from the area. The point is that throughout the time of Jonathan in office, he enjoyed the support of people from South-East

Geo-political zone. However, the situation changed as IPOB has intensified efforts for the attainment of sovereign State of Biafra because of alleged injustice against the zone by President Muhammadu Buhari of Hausa/ Fulani extraction. It is important to recall ere that during the 2015 presidential election that produced Buhari as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, changed many things. Voting pattern also showed that South-East voters mainly voted for Goodluck Jonathan. The results of the presidential election as released by the Independent National Electoral Commission showed that the South-East which is made up of five states namely Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo all voted for Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (*INEC, 2015*). The same thing happened during the 2019 general election. These agitations have featured prominently in the media. This paper therefore public perception of media reportage of secession agitation in Nigeria.

The Problem

Over the years, agitations for separation from Nigeria has continued to form part of national discourse. Different parts of Nigeria have expressed dissatisfaction over certain issues in Nigeria, hence seek to break away and form their republics. These agitations span from south- east Nigerian to South-South and to Middle belt. The media in Nigeria have also responded to these agitations by reporting them. Although scholars (*e.g., Samuel, 2016; Obaje, 2017*) have examined how the media report such agitations, less attention has been paid to how the audience perceive such report. This has created a gap that needs to be filled. A study of public perception of media reportage of secession agitations is important because it could offer insight into what the public feel about such reports as well as the possibility that they will support such agitations or not.

Research Question

This paper seeks answers to the following questions:
1. What is the frequency of exposure to media reports on separatist agitations?
2. Through which media do the public get exposed to reports on separatist agitations?
3. What is public perception of media position on separatist agitations in Nigeria?
4. What is the relationship between media coverage of separatist agitations and public perception about such agitations?

The Media and Public Perception

The media perform incontrovertible and essential roles in the management of the public sphere of life and people's co-existence. They are vital societal agent providing information on every aspect of human activities at individual, group, national and international levels. They provide information updates, give direction that enables the public to make judgments and perceptions on issues, and drive public opinion in a manner that produces desired effects within the society or among the audience (*McCombs, 2005*).

In addition to their socialization function, providing education, and entertainment, Pool (*1990*) observes that the media provide the interconnection platform for citizens and their government and among themselves thereby enhancing transparency, democratisation and participation in governance. According to Mortensen and Serritzlew (*2004*), "the media are important for understanding the political agenda and the framing of decisions about special [or sensational] issues, but 'normal' politics and the broader policy priorities [or governmental issues] are largely

unaffected". Barber (*1996*) also notes that the media is an instruments of propaganda used to manipulate and foist preferred values on the public, legitimise regimes and their policies. All these depend on the ability and power of the media to appeal to the minds or perception of the public or their audience. In most cases, the public tend to favour media organizations and their news coverage and dissemination if their contents are consistent with the publics' preconceived convictions and beliefs (*Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006*).

According to Feldman (*1999, p. 12*), perception is defined as "the sorting out, interpretation, analysis and integration of stimuli involving our sense organs and brain". Similar to this conceptualisation, Lahlry (*1991*) views perception as the process by which people interpret sensory data. It is therefore the first stage in the process of forming an opinion over any issue and is highly influenced by previous experiences, expectations, and the general impression. Other factors in people's perceptual environment like sounds, colours, shapes and textures equally influence the process. Consequently, perception is the interpretation of stimuli influenced by earlier or previous experience, exposure or any other interaction.

Severin (*2001*) identified several psychological factors such as cultural expectations, past experience, moods, motivations, needs and attitudes as major determinant of people's perception. Further the author argues that individuals react differently to the same media content due to the process of decoding or processing such information. In addition, Turner and West (*2007*) observe that being exposed to selective content on media might play a very important role in determining people's perceptions towards any issue.

Media coverage of Separatist and Sectarian Movements in Nigeria

In a review of Boko Haram coverage in the media, Samuel (*2016*) and Obaje (*2017*) observe that straight news was predominant in the coverage and that the contents were highly inflammatory in terms of their attacks, targets, and impacts. A pictorial study of the activities of the same group as presented by the media by Sabo and Salisu (*2017*) reveals horrible themes that characterise most of the pictures (61.4%) that suggest genocide and religious jihad. This is also inflammatory.

A study of the activities of Boko Haram by Chioma and Ojomo (*2015*) as covered and/or framed in the YouTube webcast channels of Cable Network News (CNN), Aljazeera, and Channels Television reveals high professionalism and critical approach in their discourse. However, it must be noted that these Channels were mostly foreign, which implies that certain national factors are intervening in Nigerian media coverage of the sect's activities that render it inflammatory.

Similarly, on the activities of MASSOB, Duruji (*2009*) and Ibeano, Orji, and Iwuamadi (*2016*) found that media representation of its activities are dominantly framed in lies, propaganda, and divisiveness. Most of the themes are not investigated while actual activities of the group are mal-reported due to political and ethnic interests. However, in this study, the researcher attempted to examine public perception of media coverage of separatist agitations in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted mediatisation theory as its framework of analysis. The focus of the theory is on the influence media exert on a variety of social phenomena. According to some of its protagonists such as Strömbäck

(*2007*), Cottle (*2006*), Schulz (*2004*), and Thompson (*1995*), the theory views the media as an autonomous institution with its own logic which other social institutions have to assimilate or accept. Through this, the media coordinate the activities of social institutions and their mutual interaction, and there from alter or harmonise their original values (*Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999*). The framework is therefore concerned with 'changing the inner workings of other social entities and their mutual relationships' (*Hernes, 1978: 181*).

The applicability and relevance of the theory to this study lies in its ability to highlight and investigate the ability of the media to influence and/or change audience views or perception of social issues. It pays fundamental attention to formatting of communication or media messages (i.e. style, content and language) and its impacts on individual perception and behaviour. Therefore, the theory provides relevant guide for assessing the audience perception of media products on separatists' and sectarian activities in Nigeria.

Methodology

This paper applied a cross-sectional survey of to carry out the research. The study was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. The target population of this study was all the residents of Enugu State. The total number of residents of Enugu State which the National Bureau of Statistics (*2012*) projected from the 2006 National population figure up to 2016 is 4,411,119.

The sample size for this study was made up of 384 residents of Enugu State, Nigeria. The researcher made use of the Cochran formula to derive the sample size. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to sample residents of Enugu metropolis. The choice of purposive sample was to ensure that only respondents who reported daily exposure to traditional media like radio, TV, newspapers and magazines were sampled. The paper adopts a five-point Likert scale structured questionnaire as instrument for collecting data from a sample of 1200 respondents randomly selected from markets, churches, schools, and public service. 200 copies of the questionnaire were administered in each of the six study areas. Multi stage sampling, whereby stratified and simple random sampling techniques were adopted in selecting the respondents. The questionnaires were administered and retrieved by six research assistants within six weeks. Secondary and complementary data was generated from books, journals, conference and workshop papers located in public and private libraries, and the internet.

The research instrument was validated by experts in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences University of Nigeria, Nigeria, in order to guarantee the relevance of the contents of the instrument used for data collection. Further, a test-retest method was carried out within an interval of two weeks in Nsukka Enugu State and Afikpo in Ebonyi-State to test its reliability. The analysis of the reliability coefficient of the research instrument was estimated to be 0.95 using Cronbach's Alpha technique. The data generated during the research was analysed using simple percentage

Results

Out of the 384 copies of the questionnaire that were administered to the respondents, 361 copies representing 94%. This suggests that the response rate was high. The sample was 55% male and 45% female. The mean age of the respondents was 45 (range 24 and 41 years). The sample was 51% Christians and 49% Muslims.

Table 1: Frequency of exposure to media stories on separatist agitation

S/N	Item	Frequency	%
1	Very frequent	189	52
2	Moderate	108	30
3	Low exposure	64	18
4	**Total**	**361**	**100**

The result from the table above sought to ascertain the frequency of exposure to media stories on separatist agitations in Nigeria. It was found that most of the respondents reported high frequency of exposure to stories on separatist agitations in Nigeria. This suggests that the sample was the appropriate set of people to form perception regarding such stories.

Table 2: Media of exposure to separatist agitations

S/N	Item	mean	SD	Decision
1	TV	3.3	.99	Accepted
2	Newspapers	3.1	.89	Accepted
3	Magazine	1.3	.67	Rejected
4	Radio	2.9	.66	Accepted

The result in table three above was computed to ascertain the media through which respondents get exposed to reports on separatist agitations. It was found that most of the respondents reported that they are exposed to media reports on separatist agitations through the radio, TV, and newspapers. Magazine was found not have been a source of information about the issue. The television was found to have had the highest mean score.

Table 3: Public perception of media position on Separatist agitations

S/N	Item	Frequency	%
1	Media stories are in favour of separatist agitations	143	40
2	Media stories are against of separatist agitations	112	31
3	Media stories are neutral of separatist agitations	106	29
4	Total	361	100

The results in table two above sought to ascertain public perception of media coverage of separatist agitations in Nigeria. It was found that most of the respondents were of the voews that media stories promote separatist agitations. This implies that the respondents were of the view that instead of promoting Nigeria's unity, the media promote division.

Table 4: The relationship between exposure and perception about separatist agitations

	Item	ρ_{XY}	p. value	Decision
1	Media coverage of separatist agitations	.885**	0.001	Sig
2	Such agitations is justified	.981**	0.001	Sig
3	The agitations are not justified	.921**	0.001	Sig
4	The agitations have political under tunes	.860**	0.001	Sig
5	The agitations have religious under tunes	.731**	0.001	Sig
6	The agitations have ethnic under tunes	.951**	0.001	Sig

The result of table one above sought to ascertain the relationship between media coverage of separatist agitations and public perceptions of such agitations. The outcome of the study revealed that a significant relationship exists between media coverage and public perceptions of separatist agitations.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, the researcher examined public perception of media coverage of separatist agitations in Nigeria. Four research questions guided the study. The result of the study showed that most of the respondents sampled reported high exposure to media reports on separatist agitations. We also found that media channels like radio, TV and newspapers serve as sources of information on separatist agitations in Nigeria. It was also found that that the public perceived the media as promoting such agitations instead of suggesting ways of addressing them. This result is consistent with that of Samuel (*2016*), Obaje (*2017*) Sabo and Salisu (*2017*) whose different studies suggest that the media report of agitations do not contribute in resolving the issue. Rather, the media fuel such agitations. Also, it was found that a significant relationship exists between coverage of separatist agitations and public perception about such agitations. In other words, public perceptions of media separatist agitations was based media coverage. This result is consistent with that of previous scholars (*e.g. Barber, 1996; McCombs & Maxwell, 2005*) who reported that media reports significantly influence public perceptions about issues. The result of this study confirms the postulations of the mediatisation theory which argues that media messages significantly exert influence on the audience. Therefore, the result of this study has contributed to our understanding of the mediatisation hypothesis by showing how media stories about conflict influence public perception of same. Based on the results of this study, the researchers argues that the media play essential role in determining how the general public view separatist agitations and the possibility that they will support such agitations or not. This result has reinforced earlier believe that people hold concerning the power of the media in shaping public opinion. What this means is that media practitioners have to exercise caution in dealing reporting separatist.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper investigated audience perception of media reporting of separatist and sectarian movements in Nigeria. Based on the result of this study, the researcher concludes that the general public perceive media reportage of such agitations as largely in favour of such agitations. The researchers also concludes that media reportage of separatist agitations significantly influence the way members of the public perceive such agitations. This result has made theoretical, practical and scholarly contributions. Theoretically, the results have contribute to our understanding of the mediatisation theory by showing how media reports influence public perception. In practical terms, the results of this study could be beneficial to journalists in reporting separatist agitations. It could also be useful for policy advocacy regarding media management and control. This study adds to other existing literature on media effect. The researcher also forecasts that the problem of agitations for separation may continue in Nigeria if serious issues bordering on perceived injustice are not addressed. This also means that the media in Nigeria must actively be involved in educating the general

public on the need to avoid violent protests and agitations. The following recommendations are made:

1. The Nigerian Union of Journalists should step up their monitoring mechanisms of journalists covering separatist agitations. This is essential because inappropriate report on such agitations could be inimical to national security.

2. The is the need for the Nigerian Press Council to come up with stringent measures that will guide against media reports on separatist agitations that could be dangerous to the corporate existence of Nigeria. Such measures could include expulsion of defaulting journalists or prosecution of both.

3. Further studies should be conducted in other parts of Nigeria to give room of generalisation.

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СПРИЙНЯТТЯ АУДИТОРІЄЮ ЗАСОБІВ МАСОВОЇ ІНФОРМАЦІЇ ПРО СЕПАРАТИСТСЬКІ ТА СЕКТАНТСЬКІ АГІТАЦІЇ В НІГЕРІЇ

В історії Федеративної Республіки Нігерії, починаючи від отримання цією країною незалежності в 1960 році, неодноразово мали місце спроби порушення державної цілісності. Кожна з сепаратистських груп, від яких виходила така загроза, стверджувала, що федеративний уряд не представляє її інтересів. Зокрема більшість груп вважають, що інтерес їх представників недостатньо репрезентований при розподілі влади. У Нігерії діє демократична система управління з трьома гілками влади: законодавчої, виконавчої, судової. У країні є шість геополітичних зон для розподілу влади. Зони - Північний Схід, Північно-Західна Північ, Північно-Центральний Південний Схід, Південний Захід та Південь-Південь. Отже, 36 суб'єктів федерації є групами з різних зон з неоднаковою кількістю штатів. Зокрема, Північний Схід має шість суб'єктів, Північний Захід - сім, Північно-Центральна зона - шість, так само, як Південь-Південь і Південний Захід. Однак Південний Схід має лише п'ять суб'єктів федерації. Нерівна кількість суб'єктів у геополітичних зонах спричиняє серйозні проблеми при розподілі влади в країні. Кожен суб'єкт федерації має трьох обраних сенаторів і ряд палат представницьких членів залежно від населення регіону. Це означає, що на Південному Сході менша кількість сенаторів та членів Палати представників. Їхні колеги з Північного Заходу мають найбільшу кількість представників. Такі зони, як Північно-Центральна, Північний Схід, Південний Захід та Південь-Південь матимуть однакову кількість сенаторів, але кількість Палати представників може відрізнятися залежно від кількості населення. Нерівномірне представництво впливає на просування законопроектів та пропозицій у Національній Асамблеї, які стосуються соціальних питань у кожній з геополітичних зон. Саме теза про те, що Південний Схід недостатньо представлений у Національній Асамблеї, може змусити людей цього регіону з підозрою ставитися до будь-яких урядових програм. Населення регіону може вважати, що федеральна влада не захищає їх інтереси, а отже країна як така їм не потрібна. Усе це створює плідне підґрунтя для спекуляцій і частково пояснює, чому країна стикається з агітацією сепаратистів Південного Сходу, які тривалий час прагнуть відокремитись від Нігерії. Про такі агітації повідомлялося також у ЗМІ. У статті досліджується сприйняття аудиторією такої інформації. Авторами було проведене опитування 384 респондентів, а також проаналізовано дані описової та аналітичної статистики. Було встановлено, що більшість опитаних респондентів повідомили про високу частоту згадування в ЗМІ агітації за відокремлення. Результат також показав, що основними медіа-каналами їх розповсюдження були радіо, телебачення та преса. Респонденти сприймали повідомлення ЗМІ про агітацію сецесії як підтримку таких дій. Було також встановлено зв'язок між сепаратистськими повідомленнями медіа та сприйняттям цих ідей громадськістю. Серед практичних рекомендацій дослідники вказують на необхідність активізації механізму моніторингу змісту сепаратистських агітацій Нігерійським союзом журналістів задля мінімізації загроз національній єдності країни.

Ключові слова: медіа; аудиторія; сприйняття; сепаратизм; сектантство; повідомлення про конфлікти; розбудова нації.