# Objectivity and Balance in Conflict Reporting: Imperatives for the Niger Delta Press

by

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## Abstract

The press has been found to play a significant role in managing conflict situations in the society. This work examines the surveillance and interpretation function of the press as critical to conflict discourse. It particularly highlights the crucial role of the grassroots media in providing a voice for non-elite segments of the society, and building confidence, hope and a sense of community and communality especially during or after a conflict event, with particular reference to the Niger Delta. Also in focus are the various issues involved in the Niger Delta conflict, noting that the media is engaged in articulating conflict behaviours mainly, instead of engaging in a comprehensive discourse of the various issues in the Niger Delta conflict. More so, the challenges affecting objective discourse of conflict issues in the Niger Delta are highlighted. This work advocates a wholistc approach to conflict discourse to include origin, dynamics, and options for resolution. It also highlights those media structures and practices that need to be established or reinforced to achieve better coverage of conflict in the Niger Delta. These measures, it is hoped, will be beneficial to the cause of resolving the conflict situation in the area.

## Introduction: The Press and Conflict Reporting in the Niger Delta

Conflict, by its very nature, holds a forceful attraction for the mass media. As Owens-Ibie (2002:32) puts it, "the media are naturally attracted to conflict." Conflict is also hard to talk about without engaging the emotions of the discussants. This is due largely to the humanitarian implications, especially when conflict gets violent. Presenting an objective and balanced report therefore becomes a tortuous, almost impossible task. "The principles of reporting are put to sever test when your nation goes to war" (Kate Adie as cited by Allan & Zelizer, 2004:3).

Often, journalism is in a fix, caught between staying true to the principles of reporting and responding adequately to the urgent realities of conflict or war. As Allan and Zelizer (2004:3) have aptly stated: "confronted with the often horrific realities of conflict, any belief that the journalist can remain distant, remote, or unaffected by what is happening 'tends to go out the window' in a hurry".

This cannot be less true of conflict in the Niger Delta. In fact, the establishment of the regional press in the Niger Delta may be part of society's response to the nagging and protracted crisis in the oil-rich area. Although its structure and focus is yet to be ascertained by empirical research, there is an emerging press system in the Niger Delta that is domiciled in the area or elsewhere in the country, but is established to articulate the agitations of the Niger Delta people.

By its very constitution, proprietorship, mode of operation and sustenance, this section of the Nigerian press is akin to being a little sensational, gossipy, and manipulative in the treatment of stories, if only to stay in the market. This is evidenced by their screaming headlines, scandal and gossip stories, and in some cases, pedestrian use of language. Since it is unfashionable in the journalistic turf to report events and issues in such a manner as may be seen to be expressly biased, there is the need to develop measures by which to raise the credibility of the Press in the Niger Delta, define a mode of operation for her and position her to effectively articulate the issues inherent in the Niger Delta debacle.

Among the roles of the mass media in society – surveillance, interpretation, linkage, transmission of values and entertainment (Dominick, 2002: 34), the first two are critical to conflict reporting in the Niger Delta. In its surveillance function, the press plays the role of an observer, which is "a necessary component for enforcing economic, political, cultural and even moral stability" in the polity (Mu'azu, 2002:47). In this role, the media highlight aspects of society – events, people and issues – which they gather as information and report as news.

Although most news information are immediately consumable since they are made up mainly of 'poetic' materials – things that are 'redundant' because they derive from the material culture and are easily comprehensible, there are also abstract issues that pertain to 'argument' or are 'entropic' – complex and requiring interpretation. Hence there is the need for the interpretation function of the mass media, which is fulfilled by editorials, commentaries and opinion articles.

In fulfilling this essential responsibility to society, how does the journalist provide adequate, truthful and objective coverage of a conflict situation without escalating the situation? This paper seeks to distill the sentiments and perspectives of various scholars on the subject and suggests ways of reporting the various shades and emerging trends in the Niger Delta crisis. It is also an effort to define an effective role for the mass media, especially the regional press, as a critical component of interventions towards solving the Niger Delta problem.

## Objectivity as an Imperative in Media Practice and Morality

Like other sociological issues in media practice, the definition of objective journalism is as varied as there are multiple perspectives in social ethics and as plural as there are journalistic orientations. On the latter, Keeble (2005:268) highlights three kinds: Mainstream publications, which include the regular national dailies and weekly magazines that are "owned by major, profit-based companies." Then there is the alternative media, which are "outside the control of the big companies" and are "targeted at specific audiences according to religion, political bias, and so on…often collectively organized and non-profit oriented."

Between these two are the hybrid press – "fascinating publications" that are often "satirical and investigative." Put differently, this section of the media is often critical of 'unfavourable' government policies and programmes and burrows the activities of government and her agents in search of scoops. They combine "elements of both mainstream and alternative media." The Niger Delta Press may be classified in this group. Keeble (2005: 269) goes on to say that news practitioners in these sectors face very different ethical challenges depending on their media and prevailing practice conditions.

However, there are common assumptions about objectivity in journalistic practice. Keeble (2005: 269) states that "ethics tends to draw on universal values such as accuracy, honesty, fairness, respect for privacy, the avoidance of discrimination and conflicts of interest." It is within this milieu of ethical values that we find the subject of objectivity. Digby-Junger (1996: 4) has recorded that in the early days of journalism, back in the 17th century, Benjamin Franklin had observed that "printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the publick (*sic*)." This early provision has largely formed the basis for defining objectivity in journalism.

Pointedly, McQuail (2005: 200) highlights three basic features of objective journalism. One is that it adopts "a position of detachment and neutrality towards the object of reporting." Secondly, there is a lack of partisanship, which he explains as "not taking sides in matters of dispute or showing bias." Thirdly, objectivity "requires strict attachment to accuracy and truth. McQuail (2005: 203) is quick to add that these ideals are "*not* unanimously regarded as…possible to achieve…but in so far as we aim to understand the world we cannot get along without assuming both the possibility and value of objectivity" (researcher's emphasis).

This work shares in that position for the following reason: In his x-ray of Nigeria's political and media history, Igboanusi (2006: 46) highlights how a number of Newspapers fizzled off the news stand because they were unabashed in expressing partisan views. In his words, the political bigwigs of the time "*deliberately* used the press as a major machinery in their mutual propaganda against each other, playing up their people against the others" (researcher's emphasis).

Such use of the media, besides its damaging effect on the credibility of the press, yielded the gory repercussions of the infamous 60's. Instead, Igboanusi (2006:45) advocates for media that is founded on the principles of "truth and objectivity which would make for greater national concord, identity and integration."

## Taxonomy of Conflict in the Niger Delta

It is essential to note that conflict is expected as societies evolve. According to Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2005:13), "Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social change. It is an expression of the heterogeneity of interests, values and beliefs that arise as new formations generated by social change come up against inherited constraints." In his entry, Udomisor (2002:87) defines conflict as the "result of differences in opinion, attitude and behaviour; differences in the philosophical, psychological, sociological, political and economic orientation of the interactors in a given system."

As a dynamic society with a plurality of interests, conflict is expected in the Niger Delta. What is not anticipated is the extent of violence it assumes and the enormous humanitarian effect it leaves on its trails. That is why intense scholastic effort into the causes of conflict and possible intervention by relevant stakeholders, including the mass media, is critical, especially in the Niger Delta.

The agitations in the Niger Delta may be blamed on two causative factors: One is the inability of government to "provide political and economic good" (Auvinen, 1997:177). This failure on the part of government is seen by the governed as "a source of relative deprivation," a concept Auvinen (1997:177) further explains as "the discrepancy between deserved and actual enjoyment of goods and conditions of life." Put more succinctly, a situation where oil-producing communities are left without such basic amenities as portable water, electricity, good roads and quality healthcare is seen as unacceptable.

The second major factor is generally seen as an apparent isolation the Niger Delta in the national political equation; what Auvinen (1997:178) correctly describes as "alienation from the political system" and "ethnic dominance." This factor manifests in the seeming relegation of the area from political participation especially at the presidential level. It is also seen in the perceived imbalance in state and local council creation, which is tilted to favour the northern part of the country.

On these factors hang other issues like resource control, on-shore-off-shore dichotomy, fiscal federalism, environmental degradation through gas flaring and unmitigated oil spillages which have affected both water and land resources, massive unemployment for the teeming youth in the area, inequitable distribution of national wealth which manifests in the crisis of federal allocation and derivation formula.

Conflict then stems from the constant disagreement between the Niger Delta people and the Nigerian government on these values which all revolve around economic and political empowerment, both of which are considered to be mutually enhancing. In other words, there seems to be a strong correlation between political power and access to the nation's resources. Put differently, access to political power may be directly proportional to economic empowerment. Udomisor (2002:87) has it that "politics in developing democracies is the very essence of existence and survival," a situation which he adds "generates conflict too frequently."

It is apt to note that over 70% of nation's earning potential is attributable to the oil of the Niger Delta. ANEEJ (2006:7) states that three of the states in the region, namely Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers account for about 75% of oil output and over 50% of federal revenue. There is however a stiff contest between the federal government and the people of the region for the control of this resource.

Incidentally, the lack of compromise on these issues has created the scenario of a myriad of conflict behaviours of enormous violent dimension. These conflict behaviours include Sea piracy (ceasing of oil-laden vessels), kidnapping, pipeline and flow-station terrorism, and other acts that are intended to sabotage the Nation's capacity to function as a big player in the international oil market. Others are robbery and political thuggery, which are not peculiar to the Niger Delta, but have heightened as a result of the general atmosphere of tension in the area. So we see the emergence of a culture of violence and insecurity, which has formed the fulcrum of media discourse on the Niger Delta.

## Between Conflict Issues and Conflict Behaviour

Giving the history-on-the-run nature of the news media, conflict discourse is often not exhaustive. This is because reporting does not capture the entire life circle of a particular conflict situation. The process of approaching conflict from this wholistic perspective is what Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2005:13) call "conflict mapping." They cited Wehr (1979) who describes conflict mapping as an "understanding of the origins, nature, dynamics and possibilities for resolution of the conflict."

Sadly, conflict reporting is not so encompassing. It rather focuses on conflict behaviours. Pate (2002:141) corroborates this point when he stated that the press is wont to "writing incomplete stories that do not cover sources, options and resolutions. Instead, they concentrate on conflict behaviour: 'who is doing what to whom with what effect'". In a recent inter-religious uprising in Bauchi State, the FRCN presented the following report:

> The Bauchi State Governor, Mr Issa Yuguda has announced a dusk to dawn curfew in the state capital. This follows an inter-religious uprising that has seen about 10 Christians dead and at least 5 churches burnt. Gov Yuguda has warned that law enforcement agents have been mandated to deal ruthlessly with anyone found disrupting the peace in that state.

That is all there was of that report. On the second day, there was a sketchier update on the story. This researcher monitored that incident for a more exhaustive treatment, but there was none. In the example above, 'a religious uprising sees 10 persons dead.' In response, 'the governor declares a dusk to dawn curfew on the state.' *C'est finir*. This is characteristic of conflict reporting in Nigeria, a situation that may be attributed to a number of factors that will be treated latter in this paper. In a similar fashion, media discourse on conflict in the Niger Delta is reduced to a portrayal of conflict behaviours.

Consequently, the images presented of the agitations in the Niger Delta in the mainstream press are dominantly of rascality, criminality, and bestiality (note the descent).  In response, there is military clampdown characterized by arrests, incarceration, killings in extra-judicial fashion, and instances where military raids bring whole communities to rubble. That is the predominant image in the media

## Factors Affecting Objective Discourse of Conflict Issues

At the level of policy, the media is expected to report objectively. But a number of factors militate against the attainment of this moral goal. This section highlights some of them that are relevant to this work:

First, the very nature of conflict constitutes a bane to objective reporting. Conflict, especially when it gets violent, affects the editor's judgment of news value. Violent conflict has an inherent capacity to invade the newsroom. And as earlier noted, that which ultimately gets into print is the manifest behaviours of the participants in the conflict. Niblock (2005: 75) has noted that the selection of one story against another is determined by the "intrinsic newsworthiness of the story" and that is a function of "just how eye-catching and attention-grabbing the event depicted will be on the page".

Waisbord (2002:202) has added that by such value judgment, the news media establishes a "culture of fear" which they perpetuate by portraying "a vast array of threats." Hence, such value judgment of news is not beneficial to effective solution-oriented conflict discourse because it leaves out important perspectives that could lead to conflict resolution giving priority to gory behavioural aspects. Such portrayal presents and shapes a negative perception of risk among members of the news audience, and creates a sense of helplessness when it does not cover aspects the communicate hope and a solution.

Further, in the attempt to manage and control news flow and win public opinion, the forces involved in a conflict engage in the 'embedding' of reporters. Although the term may have originated in 1982 during the Falklands conflict involving the British Task Force, 'embedding' was perfected during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. "Embedding was a deliberate plan by the US Department of Defense…for journalists to be 'situated' within various parts of the military" (Tumber, 2004: 190). With embedding, objectivity is highly compromised as reported by Morrison and Tumber (1988) cited in Tumber (2004: 193):

> The journalists not only merely observed their subjects, but lived their lives and shared their experiences, *and those experiences were of such emotional intensity that the form of prose which the journalists use to take the reader into that experience – the 'I was there' form – provided not only a window to the reader, but also a door for partiality irrespective of any desire to remain the detached professional outsider (*emphasis added*).*

Similarly, the manner in which journalist from private media organizations are 'embedded' in the entourage of the political office holders sure has the potentiality of compromising objectivity and balance in conflict discourse. Independence may therefore be an invaluable tool in the practice of journalism.

Another factor that limits the practice of objective journalism in covering the Niger Delta is the challenge of geography. Due to the cost implication of entering into the creeks, journalists are constrained to complete the story from the city angle leaving out crucial on-the-scene aspects. And that is why they will quickly jump at an opportunity to mount a Helicopter and be flown to any of the villages when 'embedded' in the entourage of a political office holder, a situation that heavily compromises the independence of the journalist.

Also crucial to the practice of objective journalism is the factor of time. Journalism by nature is a profession constrained for time. The often crushing demand to beat deadlines makes it impossible for the local practitioner to treat conflict stories exhaustively. More so, as Tunstall (2002: 228) has stated, "a revolution in the quantity, spread and sophistication of fast agency news means that today's journalist, and not least political journalists, now have a radically different core supply of hard news."

The implications of this are two-fold: first, much of what comes in from the wires are materials that represent the dominant voice. The local journalist may therefore be swimming against the tide to find materials from a local angle so as to create the balance. The second implication is that news agencies may provide hard news content of such enormous volume as may drown the less-dominant voice in the arena of public discourse.

More so, - and this is easily the most critical challenge a journalist faces in conflict discourse – another form of 'embedding' and identity formation in crisis situation is when the journalist is part of the subject of conflict discourse. How does a journalist stay detached when the land that is hit by oil-spillage is his? Or when his roof gets leaking from acid rain that is the direct impact of environmental pollution, a situation caused by the activities of the oil industry?  Tumber (2004: 201) has observed that when it comes to objective reporting, correspondents face criticism in two ways:

> By following the tradition of detached reporting, journalists are censured and condemned for their dispassionate stance often in the form of accusations of a lack of patriotism and for eschewing the perceived national interest. At the same time, the 'journalism of attachment,' the human, emotional face of war corresponding has been criticized for opening the door to mistaken accounts of the conflicts, and for being 'self-righteous' and 'moralizing'.

Another factor that affects objective engagement in conflict discourse is the prevailing culture of corruption and patronage. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm as cited by Agbese (2006:17) posted the long sustained view that "the media takes on the forms and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates." Udomisor (2002: 91) calls it the 'environmental factor.' He reasons that a poor democratic structure characterized by bribery, looting and embezzlement of public funds, a situation that media practitioners are sufficiently acquainted with and are effectively positioned to participate in, will have a telling effect on the practice of objective journalism. This is so because the press is only a reflection of the society in which it operates. Under such an environment, objective discourse is compromised.


## The Niger Delta Press and Objectivity in Conflict Discourse

Contemporary societies, especially those in the developing countries, cannot downplay the significance of the mass media in creating social cohesion in the polity. Manoff's (1997:2) insight in this regard is deep:

It is clear that, taken together, mass media technologies, institutions, professionals, norms and practices constitute one of the fundamental forces now shaping the lives of individuals and the fate of peoples and nations. To be sure, media influence is not evenly distributed in space or time and varies with circumstance. But, overall, media influence is significant, and increasingly so, and as a result the media constitute a major human resource whose potential to help prevent and moderate social violence begs to be discussed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, mobilized.

In fulfilling this critical role, the media needs to avoid the risk of oversimplification of conflict by classifying opposing views into the two extremes of good or bad, inferior or superior (McCormick, 2004: 5). The mass media should approach conflict discourse with the understanding that there are far more than two sides to every story. Hence McCormick (2004: 7) warns against representing "the image of conflict as a two-sided tug of war," but rather as the image of a "prism with many facets that are at once interconnected and distinct and also change with the angle of light and the angle of the viewer."

A graphic example of oversimplification is seen in the handling of the American war on terrorism. As it turned out, it was a dangerous decision the Bush administration took in assuming that the appropriate response to the threat of terrorism was to unleash maximum military might in the very homeland of the terrorist. Obviously, the American government did not anticipate the huge cost it has incurred – the lives lost, and the foreign policy crisis it has suffered as a result of the war (Moeller, 2004:74).

As part of strategies at capturing these multiple angles and facets to a conflict situation, Frohardt and Temin (2003: 3) suggest plurality of media outlets, "because with greater competition in the media it is increasingly unlikely that one or a small number of media outlets will have the capacity to dominate [conflict discourse]." They suggest further that "the degree of plurality applies not only to the number of outlets, but [also] to the number of divergent voices emanating from those outlets." It should be a case of more media, more voices. This must however be without prejudice to the gate-keeping function of the editor and the strengthening of institutional structures that are charged with the responsibility to regulate media access and content. Such interventions will help to curtail individuals, groups and agencies that manipulate the media to cause more damage in conflict situations (Mannof, 1997:8; Galadima, 2002:67).

It is appropriate at this juncture to state that the Niger Delta Press on its own is inadequate in articulating the voice of the Niger Delta. Frohardt and Temin (2003:3) have noted that a multitude of media outlets all espousing similar messages do not constitute plurality. Hence the Niger Delta press should have a challenger, another press system with an alternative voice. Here the national press system and international media organizations have a significant role to play.

Apart from providing a variety of resources for local media workers, external media networks are in good stead to serve as umpire when internal stakeholders are embroiled in conflict. More so, international networks are there to stand in solidarity with local journalists who are working under repressive regimes, calling global attention to their plight and helping to attract relief for them (Frohardt and Temin, 2003: 11).

Meanwhile, the grassroots media, as the Niger Delta Press may be classified, has a critical role to play in sustaining the peace in a community by simply being a 'voice' for the 'voiceless'. The local media function as rallying points for the people. They help in creating a sense of community, a sense of *espirit-de-corps*, a sense of shared identity (especially in suffering), a sense of shared purpose and shared destiny. McQuail (2005:439) explains this as *affiliation*, a concept that refers to the dynamics of social relations in which people want to be socially close to people with whom they share the same physical space. This is equally applicable to people who share the same cultural, political and economic circumstance.   As Bajraktari and Parajon (2007:3) put it:

> [the] local media plays a different role in conflict prevention. Often, local media can contribute to peace merely by restoring levels of trust and self-worth in a population on the brink of or emerging from violence…Where the media can occupy space in the grassroots of civil society there is potential for healing and community building. Such activity not only rebuilds societies after conflict, but also prevents against future resurgence of violence.

In this wise, grassroots media also assumes a cathartic role.  Here, the media provides a vent by which parties engaged in conflict expel pent-up emotion. Folarin (1998:30) highlights the frustration generated among non-dominant (non-elite) groups in society when the mass media is concentrated in the hands dominant groups and advances only elite interests. The grassroots media (earlier identified in this work as the hybrid of the mainstream and alternative media) provide opportunity for increased media access to advance the interest of dissenting voices in society. This way, they help to dispel frustration, create a platform for dialogue and an environment for effective management of conflict.

Another part the Niger Delta media could play in contributing to lasting peace in the region is to re-frame the issues at stake in the conflict. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2005:230) have noted that "conflicts are defined by the [differing] positions parties take on issues". They therefore suggest that when the actors in a conflict change their positions, it could lead to changes in interests and goals, which would in turn lead to a transformation of the context and structure of the conflict. In this lies a critical task for the media.

Furthermore, media persons who are engaged in conflict discourse must approach their duty with a sense of self-censorship. This is in spite of political pressure from the actors in the conflict and market imperatives of the commercial media system which requires that at the end of the day, the organization must balance it budget (Lee, et al., 2004: 1). By self-censorship, it is assumed that journalists have a sense of morality by which they are guided in carrying out their duty in such a way as pursue only the good of society and not its harm.

Albeit, objectivity and fairness cannot be subjected to individual journalists' idiosyncratic interpretations; media morality then must be subjected to the principle of public justification which holds that "the reasons one uses have to be reasons that others would accept as valid" (Lee, et al., 2004: 6). In their practice therefore, society must attest to the exhaustiveness of journalists' treatment of conflict issues, the medium notwithstanding.

Again in practice, journalists have been criticized for their "tendency to merely juxtapose two competing claims without making any effort to look for the truth behind the claims" (Lee, et al., 2004: 7). Providing insight into the concept of truth, McQuail (2005:200) has noted that although truth and its value vary according the issue and context mentioned, people are unanimous in their interest to have information that can be depended on from trusted sources. He therefore presents truth as that quality or value ascribed to an information because it "matches the reality of experience." The kind of journalism practice that is based on truth has credibility, which will make the public to always refer to it as a dependable source of information.

Udomisor (2002:87) highlights the fact that in building their sources, reporters are likely to meet "personalities with manipulative tendencies". In that circumstance, the reporter needs deep insight and tact in articulating conflict issues. While objectivity requires the presentation of the views of two opposing argument, the pursuit of truth should take priority.


## Conclusion

Objective journalism has its different realms of applicability. Lee, et al (2004:9) outlines the realms as sphere of consensus, sphere of legitimate controversy and sphere of deviance, all three of which are likely to exist in a democratic society. Within the sphere of consensus fall those issues on which there is general agreement. For instance, because there is a high degree of consensus on humanity's right to life, many people would recoil on hearing about ritual killing. That puts the issue in the sphere of consensus.

But the subject of whether states should control the resources that emanate from them, or it should be controlled from the center in a federal state, is an issue that falls in the sphere of legitimate controversy. Meanwhile, anyone who says that those who do not share in their religious persuasion do not have the right to life are apparently operating in the sphere of deviance. Most terrorist organizations may be operating within this sphere.

Lee, et al (2004:9) argue that "objectivity applies only to issues existing within the sphere of legitimate controversy." They decry the situation where the sphere of legitimate controversy is narrowed and reduced to the exclusive preserve of the political elite within the state. The virtue of a democracy is that there is a considerable measure of access to the public space and freedom to participate in public discourse. Hence, there should be considerable expansion in the sphere of legitimate controversy relative to the level of maturity of the democracy in question.

Equally important is the need to frame the issues involved in conflict in such a way that they become more susceptible to management. The way to achieve this is to undertake a wholistic approach to conflict discourse and not just scanty reportage of conflict behaviours exhibited by the parties involved. A wholist approach will include origin, dynamics, and options for resolution. Such an approach will be more beneficial to the course of resolving the conflict situation.

Ultimately, the goal of conflict discourse in the media should be to provide early warning signals, especially when conflict has the potential of assuming a violent dimension. And as Galadima (2002:62) counsels, where there is violence already, the media should help to de-escalate rather than increase the risk potential of the situation.

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