



Selected Newspapers Coverage of Herdsmen and Farmers Clashes in Nigeria in 2024

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Abstract

Violent spates of the longstanding conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria have become amplified and persistent in recent times and these have naturally elicited media focus. The media, ordinarily, are a major player during periods of conflict as they can influence the direction of a conflict situation and the public's understanding and interpretation of conflict issues. Using the content analysis research method, this study examined coverage patterns of the herders-farmers conflict by four Nigerian national newspapers (*The Punch, The Tribune, The Nation and Vanguard*) between 23rd January 2024 and 23rd April 2024. The newspapers indicated herders as the principal perpetrators of violence, framing the herders-farmers conflict as criminal attacks by herders on farming communities. The newspapers in their publications were mainly critical of the Nigerian government's level of intervention in the herders-farmers conflict. Findings from the study showed that prominence was given to farmers-herders clashes by the selected Nigerian Newspapers. It was recommended among others that media organisations in Nigeria should invest more in the regular training of journalists in the area of conflict reporting, with emphasis on conflict-sensitive reporting and peace journalism.

Key Words: Newspapers, Coverage, Herders-Farmers, Clashes, Nigeria

Introduction

Internal conflict has been a recurring narrative in Nigeria before and since her independence in 1960. The conflict between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers is foremost in contemporary Nigeria. The fundamental cause of the conflict lies in the sense of entitlement by farmers in invading people's farms for the grazing benefit of their cattle. Feuds between the two groups are often predicated on accusations of acts of intentional deprivation or criminality against each other. Herders accuse farmers or members of the host community of having stolen or poisoned their cattle. Farming communities, on the other hand, accuse herders of allowing their cattle to stray into their farmlands to feed on and destroy growing crops. These accusations or actual deeds tend to stir violent attacks and reprisals. Over 3000 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced in Benue and Kaduna state alone between 2014 and 2020 (Nedozie, 2021).

Situating the role of the news media in the context of this conflict is critical. The media are a major player during periods of conflict. Through their surveillance function, the media are responsible for



surveying society and gathering and disseminating information that is of significance to the public. For its news value, conflict is of particular consideration in the media. Tumbler (2009 p.396) argues that journalists emphasize violence and conflict to produce and increase the value of “a commodity that is supposed to generate profit”. Nevertheless, it is expected that the media’s social responsibility to the public should compel a commitment to minimise confusion and contribute to social order during conflict situations (Daramola, 2005). The media’s selection of what becomes reported as news and framing issues related to a conflict tend to shape public perception and opinion about the problems. Agenda set through media reporting can directly or indirectly determine a conflict situation's course. In conflict reportage, the media can play negative and positive roles to the extent of being an instigator or enhancer of the conflict status quo. On the one hand, the output of the media can incite or escalate conflict, and, on the other hand, the media can facilitate the mitigation or even the resolution of a conflict situation.

Farmland and grazing route encroachment readily incites clashes between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria. Farmers confront herders when cattle stray into their farmlands and destroy their crops. Abass (2012) avers that over 60 per cent of reported cases of the herders-farmers conflict occur during the dry season. Olayoku (2014) affirms that, resultant of the incursion of livestock on farmlands, clashes between nomadic herdsmen and sedentary farmers in the country assume greater intensity during planting and harvest periods. Herdsmen also feel aggrieved when they discover that portions of land that had hitherto served them as grazing routes have been taken over by farmers for cultivation. As a nomadic group, herdsmen are outsiders in any farming community where they temporarily settle. Hence, they are considered the “landless group” by the community farmers (“the landed group”) who claim the right to land use and ownership (Shettima & Tar, 2008). Desertification and drought in Northern Nigeria, as Abugu and Onuba (2015) point out, are the major reasons Fulani herders are forced to migrate down to the southern part of the country to provide foliage and fresh water for their cattle. Attacks by herdsmen have also been viewed as deliberate ethnic cleansing in some quarters (SBM Intelligence, 2016). Abass (2012) aptly observes that the fusion of religion, politics and ethnicity has made the herders-farmers conflict susceptible to manipulation and rendered resolution a difficult venture.

The proliferation of firearms is another major factor engendering violence in the herders-farmers conflict. Notably, 92 per cent of killings perpetrated by herdsmen in 2014 were using firearms (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2015). Omilusi (2016) avers that the possession of firearms by herdsmen easily goad them into feats of infuriation and violence whenever they are involved in altercations with farmers; transforming them thereby into brutal killers. Akinnaso (2016) maintains that disarming herdsmen in Nigeria is the basic countermeasure that must be affected if any lasting resolution to the conflict is to be achieved.

Statement of Problem

The level of violence and economic cost of clashes between herders and farmers pose a major national security concern for Nigeria. The six geopolitical zones in the country have, in varying degrees, suffered loss of lives and property as well as displacements due to the herders-farmers conflict. Violent feuds between herders and farmers also have a direct impact on food security. It is estimated that Nigeria



accrues an annual loss of 13.7 billion dollars in potential revenues as a result of the conflict (Mercy Corp, 2015). Furthermore, attacks by herders, according to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, have now assumed the notoriety of terrorism (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2022).

Scholars have studied and analysed the herders-farmers conflict mostly from agrarian, environmental, socio-economic and ethnoreligious perspectives to identify the causes, complexities and effects of the conflict (Adisa & Adekunle, 2010; Abugu & Onuba, 2015; Adelokun, *et al* 2015; Blench, 2003, 2010; Genyi, 2014). There is, however, a dearth of empirical literature on the role of the mass media in this conflict. Non-reportage or under-reportage of certain conflicts by the media could be inimical to the mitigation and resolution of such conflicts. The significance the public attaches to conflict situations and their processing of cognate issues are greatly hinged on the extent and patterns of media coverage. Based on the foregoing, examining Nigeria's media coverage of the herders-farmers conflict, thus, becomes imperative.

Objectives

1. To determine the dominant news frames adopted by the selected newspapers in reporting the conflict between herders and farmers;
2. To determine the direction of selected national newspapers' publications towards the intervention policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the herders-farmers conflict; and
3. To determine the level of prominence given to the conflict between herders and farmers in the selected newspapers.

Research Questions

1. What are the dominant news frames adopted by the selected newspapers in reporting the conflict between herders and farmers?
2. What is the direction of the selected newspapers' publications towards the intervention policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the conflict between herders and farmers?
3. What is the level of prominence given to the conflict between herders and farmers in the selected newspapers?

Literature Review

Media and Conflict Reporting

It has been established that effective information and communication processes are prerequisites for development. In this regard, Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) note that communication and information flows are indispensable to development projects and they help in building and sustaining a robust civil society needed for the creation of vibrant economies which then make social security attainable. Thus, the role of the media in conflict has ravaged societies to provide a forum for peace conflict and management, without which development will continue to elude such a society. Olomjobi and Ajilore (2018) observe that although conflict is rampant, the media are often selective in their reportage of it. They further explain that reporters do not give equal focus to conflict situations some may enjoy full reportage and favourable framing, while others are suppressed and unfavourably framed.

Oginibo (2015), while highlighting the importance of the media in conflict management, emphasised that the media should provide a forum or channel for all the contending parties to sit and air their views



on the issues in dispute. The media can also downplay a conflict by giving it minimal coverage such that it does not feature in the public agenda at any level, be it local, national or international. The media can thus play negative and positive roles in conflict reportage and framing. In other words, media content can provoke or worsen conflict. It can also contribute to dousing the flames of conflict (Ohaja, 2021).

However, studies on media portrayal of farmer-herder clashes in Nigeria showed that many media do more of straight news reporting on the issue. For instance, in a study of four national newspapers, Okeke, (2018) found that the straight news genre far outstripped all other forms of editorial matter garnering 81% of the content of the papers on the conflicts. In a similar study of how two national newspapers covered the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria, Gever and Essien (2017) also found that the papers used mostly straight news (64.5%), covered the conflict as it occurred without doing follow-up reports on the victims and placed most of the stories on the inside pages (71.3%). Another study on newspaper reportage of conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that specifically examined oil-induced conflicts found that the “media focus on issues of conflict when they are most visible” or alluring, relying on breaking news and doing little investigation or interpretation to deepen understanding, build trust and enhance the chances for peace (Akanni, 2017, p. 169).

Meanwhile, what makes the matter of farmer-herder conflicts worse is that many of the Fulani fighting for grazing rights in the country are not Nigerians. Omitola and Fakoya (2023) contend that communities in Nigeria have been infiltrated by people from neighbouring countries and beyond in West and Central Africa seeking better living conditions. Such countries include Niger, Chad and Mali. Some of these foreigners have fighting experience from wars in the Sahel and Central Africa. They have also been exposed to terrorism and see the opportunities to practise it in Nigeria.

Newspapers Framing of Herdsmen-Farmers’ Conflicts in Nigeria

Bamidele (2012) notes that the duty of media during conflict or conflicting situations is to provide independent and trustworthy information which can contribute to the process of reconstruction and reconciliation. This is akin to the observation of Nwankpa (2015) that the role of the media during conflict is to embrace objectivity and ethical reporting. Consequently, Omotoso and Rasaan (2020) identify some ethical conflict reporting guidelines for the media to adopt in conflict management which are, the media should see it as a duty to promote conflict-sensitive reporting; The media should pre-consider the effect of their reportage of certain conflict stories to avert escalation; The media should reflect on what other objective is expected to be achieved in the reporting of a conflict and whether the answer is not to avoid harm triumphing over good as is unethical; The media should consider if their conflict reporting approach could stand the test of time and become a rule of thumb and the media should remember that its sustenance cannot and should not be built on conflict sustenance.

Adelabu (2015) enumerates five major points for media to consider in conflict reporting and management which include: always treating the victim (s) of the conflicts with dignity and respect; respecting the views of their sources; self-identify while reporting conflict; respect for all the parties involved in the conflict; fairness without taking position or side in any conflict while reporting it. Chukwuma, *et al* (2015) enumerated the importance of media in conflict management. They emphasised



that, in resolving conflict, the media should provide a platform for all the interest groups or aggrieved parties to sit and express their minds on issues in contention. They further assert that media have the power to promote awareness of the culture, social habits, traditions, attitudes and hopes of the diverse people that make up the community. They should feel a sense of belonging in societal affairs. Through this, arbitration and compromise will be achieved. In other words, the process of peacebuilding entails the media being used in the earliest stage as interventionists.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher relies on Framing and Social Responsibility theories which serve as the foundation for the study. Moreover, theories are maps of realities. This implies that they help to give explanations as to why things occur the way they do (Baghestan & Akoje, 2019). The media framing theory can be said to have derived its theoretical base from the precedent domain of the agenda-setting theory. The media framing theory is predicated on the thesis that the media, and more specifically journalists, give their own interpretations to news stories through the angle they choose to write or tell the news stories from; which in turn influences how the public understand, interpret and form opinions about social issues. The media frame events or issues through selection and salience. According to Entman (1993), the media engage in framing by selecting “certain facets of a perceived reality and making them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation” (cited in Knudsen, 2014, p. 209). The importance given certain facets of an issue by the media tends to set or alter the narrative of public discourse. Indeed, the media’s framing of news plays a significant role in the process “by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Meanwhile, the media audience-members are more likely to be influenced by frames that resonate with their cultural schemas (Entman, 2009).

The framing theory also espouses the conjecture that news framing by the media tends to be informed by the manner in which news sources present issues to journalists. As information sources, public actors strategically push for issues to be framed in the media in line with their own agenda and message-construct to journalists (Bruggemann, 2014; Gorp, 2007). The media framing theory is relevant to this study based on the assumption that the media’s framing of news influences how the media audience would interpret social issues. It then follows that there is bound to be an interaction between how the Nigerian press frames the herders-farmers conflict and the way the Nigerian public come to understand and interpret the conflict and perceive the conflicting parties.

On the other hand, the social responsibility theory is one of the normative theories of the press, popularised by Frederick Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956. The major thrust of the theory is that the media, while being free, are to be regulated to ensure that public interest is given priority and pursued by the media for the good of the society. Baran and Davis (2012) note that service to the public is the guiding canon for the media under the social responsibility theory, even when this might result in profit reduction. The media are to pursue cultural pluralism by giving equal opportunity to all strata of the public to express their views. Elite groups are not to be unduly favoured and minority groups are to be consciously given a voice by the media.



The postulation of the theory that requires the media to report information truthfully, objectively and accurately is germane to this study because the manner in which the Nigerian media present information about the conflict between herders and farmers in the country could determine the direction of the conflict. For the resolution or management of a conflict situation such as the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria to be effected, it may well require that the press gives balanced access to the conflicting parties and other conflict stakeholders to express their grievances and views, as well as ensure they watchdog the government on its level of intervention in the conflict.

Methodology

Content analysis research method was adopted for this study. Four Nigerian national newspapers, namely, *The Punch*, *The Nation*, *The Tribune* and *Vanguard* were purposively selected. The reason these papers were chosen was because (1) they have national spread (2) they offer an in-depth analysis (either in general or specific case studies) regarding the issues of farmers-herders conflict. The timeframe for this study spanned a period of 3 month; between 23rd January, 2024 and 23rd April, 2024. The three month period chosen is to determine possible fluctuations in the prominence and direction of news by the selected mainstream media outlets. The accessible population of this study encompassed the entire 99 texts drawn from *The Punch*, *The Tribune*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard* published during the 3-month period.

Coding sheet and coding manual were used in gathering data from sampled newspapers. The coding manual was subjected to face and construct validity. Using Kappa inter-coder reliability test, the instrument was deemed to be reliable with 0.96 coefficient result, representing 96% agreement between two independent coders. News reports, features, news analyses and editorials formed the units of analysis for this study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 99 contents on the herders-farmers conflict were published in the four selected newspapers between 23rd January 2024 and 23rd April 2024. *The Nation* gave the highest coverage to the conflict with 32 reports (32.2%), followed by *The Punch* with reports 28 (28.3%), while *The Tribune* had 21 reports (21.2%) and *The Vanguard* had reports with 18(18.2%). The table below shows the distribution of newspapers:

Table No. 1- Names of Newspapers & Type of text

		Type of text			Total
		News	Report	Opinion/Editorial/Analyses	
The Nation	Count	1	24	7	32
	% within Name of News Paper	3.1%	75.0%	21.9%	100.0%
	% within Type of text	100.0%	32.9%	28.0%	32.3%
	% of Total	1.0%	24.2%	7.1%	32.3%
The Punch	Count	0	21	7	28



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	% within Name of News Paper	.0%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
	% within Type of text	.0%	28.8%	28.0%	28.3%
	% of Total	.0%	21.2%	7.1%	28.3%
The Tribune	Count	0	16	5	21
	% within Name of News Paper	.0%	76.2%	23.8%	100.0%
	% within Type of text	.0%	21.9%	20.0%	21.2%
	% of Total	.0%	16.2%	5.1%	21.2%
The Vanguard	Count	0	12	6	18
	% within Name of News Paper	.0%	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	% within Type of text	.0%	16.4%	24.0%	18.2%
	% of Total	.0%	12.1%	6.1%	18.2%
Total	Count	1	73	25	99
	% within Name of News Paper	1.0%	73.7%	25.3%	100.0%
	% within Type of text	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	1.0%	73.7%	25.3%	100.0%

Field Study, 5th April, 2004

Table No.1-The issue of the text

	Frequency	Percent
Valid Illegal Grazing by herders	66	66.7
Herders are terrorists	13	13.1
Tributes to dead farmers	3	3.0
Concerned Nigerians call for dialogue	10	10.1
Security clampdown on perpetrator of violence	7	7.1
Total	99	100.0

Field Study, 5th April, 2004

According to Table No.1, 66.7% of the whole text was from illegal activities of herders, 13.1% were from Herders are terrorists, 10. 1% was from concerned Nigerians call for dialogue. The rest can be seen



in the table.

Table No 2-The direction of the text

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Critical	78	78.8
	Passive	8	8.1
	Supportive	13	13.1
	Total	99	100.0

Field Study, 5th April, 2004

Table No. 2 reveals that the direction of the texts across the selected newspapers was prevalently critical with (n=78, 78.8.4%) in reaction to the interventionist policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the herders-farmers conflict. Comparatively, the four newspapers were far less supportive (n=13, 13.1%) and passive (n=8, 8.1%) in their reaction to the texts. This implies that the Nigerian government was deemed by the selected newspapers not to have done enough in resolving the herders-farmers conflict.

Table No. 3-Prominence of the News

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Front page	65	65.7
	Back page	1	1.0
	Inside page	33	33.3
	Total	99	100.0

Field Study, 5th April, 2004

According to table No. 3, 65.7% on the variable “Prominence of the News” were from Front page, 33.3% were from “inside page” The rest can be seen in the table.

Discussion of Findings

From the entire 99 editions of *The Punch*, *The Nation*, *The Tribune* and *Vanguard* published between 23rd January, 2024 and 23rd April 2024, 99 contents on the conflict between herders and farmers were identified and analysed. *The Nation* gave the highest coverage to the conflict with 32 reports (32.2%), followed by *The Punch* with reports 28 (28.3%), while *The Tribune* had 21 reports (21.2%) and *The Vanguard* had 18 with (18.2%). It can be inferred that *The Nation* gave more attention to the conflict than *The Tribune*, *The Vanguard* and *The Punch*.

Findings from the study showed that coverage of the herders and farmers’ conflict by the selected newspapers was more frequent between 23rd January 2024 and 23rd April 2024, although only three months were considered for this study. On 23 January 2024, suspected Fulani herders killed at least 30 people and burned and ransacked schools, places of worship, and houses in Kwahaslalek village, Mangu, Benue State. In a related development, on 16th April 2024, some suspected Fulani herders attacked three



villages in the Senge/Yengev council ward in Gwer-West LGA of Benue State. The villages include Tse-Kperiyisa, Tse-Adaa and Tse-Agbakwa. About 7 dead bodies were discovered after the attack on farmers. Many were injured and seven (9) people were hospitalised. Similarly, on 23 January 2024, suspected Fulani herders killed at least 30 people and burned and ransacked schools, places of worship, and houses in Kwahaslalek village, Mangu, Plateau State. On 6th February 2024, Farmers and fishermen at Okordia, Zarama clans in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, and Beneku Community, in Ndokwa East Local Government Area, Delta State, raised the alarm that Fulani herders have continued to make their flesh crawl, as they destroy their plants and farmlands with reckless abandon. According to the report, in 2023, the marauding herders shot dead two prominent indigenes, Alexander Diri and Bob Wilson, for having the boldness to tell them to move their cows away from their farmlands.

The first objective was to identify the issues that shaped the selected Newspapers. The majority of the four newspaper reports indicated and portrayed herders as perpetrators of violence. Words such as “gunmen”, “marauders”, and “militia” were often used to describe herders and their activities were frequently framed as “killings”, “attacks”, “invasion”, “atrocities”, “menace”. Reports by the four newspapers frequently linked them to mass killings, arson, abduction, terrorism, robbery and destruction of farmlands in farming communities. It was also common to find the identity stereotype of herders as “armed Fulani herdsman” or “gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsman” in the newspapers. On the other hand, there were instances when farmers attacked herders, but farmers were hardly blamed by the selected Newspapers. These findings imply that the newspapers’ audience and the Nigerian public at large are more likely to see a situation of monopolised violence where herders are perceived as the aggressors.

The second objective was to evaluate the direction of selected national newspapers towards the interventionist policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the herders-farmers conflict. The direction of the texts was measured using *critical*, *supportive*, *passive* and *neutral* as the yardstick. Table 2 reveals that the direction of the texts across the selected newspapers was prevalently critical with (n=78, 78.8.4%) in reaction to the interventionist policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the herders-farmers conflict. Comparatively, the four newspapers were far less supportive (n=13, 13.1%) and passive (n=8, 8.1%) in reaction to the interventionist policies and actions of the Nigerian government on the herders-farmers conflict. This implies that the Nigerian government was deemed by the selected newspapers not to have done enough in resolving the herders-farmers conflict.

The third objective is about the prominence given to the conflict. Statistics from frequency table No.3 show that. 65.7% on the variable “Prominence of the News” were from the Front page, and 33.3% were from the inside page.” This is a clear indication of the fact that prominence was given to the herders-farmers conflict in 2024 in Nigeria by Nigeria’s media.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the selected national newspapers gave considerable attention to the coverage of the herders-farmers conflict. By indicating herders as the principal perpetrators of violence, the selected national newspapers framed the herders-farmers conflict more as criminal attacks by herders *on* farming communities and less as the dualistic conflict *between* herders and farmers. The selected newspapers, through their reportage, overwhelmingly gave a critical



assessment of the Nigerian government's actions and policies as regards the herders-farmers conflict; pointing out that the government grossly lagged in its duty to intervene in the conflict after the establishment of the Ministry of Livestock Development. The newspapers mooted and demanded from the government alternate responses that could help bring lasting solutions to the herders-farmers conflict. This study concludes, therefore, that the selected national newspapers discharged their watchdog duty effectively, thereby serving the interest of the public.

Recommendations

This study hereby recommends the following:

1. Media organisations in Nigeria should invest more in the regular training of journalists in the area of conflict reporting, with particular emphasis on conflict-sensitive reporting and peace journalism. This is important if the media are to play constructive roles in shaping the direction of conflict situations, including the herders-farmers conflict.
2. The administration of Former President Muhammadu Buhari has been criticised for its seeming docile response to the conflict. It is expedient for the government of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu to accord proper attention to the conflict as security priorities by the Nigerian State.
3. The Livestock Ministry should ensure the sensitisation of herders and farmers on how peaceful relations can be fostered for their benefit.
4. The government should not hesitate to punish perpetrators of violence as farmers-herders co-exist in the society.

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