An Analysis of *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* Newspapers Coverage of the Fulani Herdsmen Attacks in Benue State, 2013/2014

By
James AondowaseAshiekpe
Department of Mass Communication
University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria
&
Dike Kingdom
Department of Mass Communication
Federal Polytechnic, Bida, Nigeria

Abstract

This study analyses the extent of coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks on Benue communities between September 2013 and April 2014 by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers from the backdrop of the potential impact of the frames used on public perception and understanding of the crisis. Content analysis was employed as the research design with coding sheets as instrument for data collection. A total of 29 editions of the two papers and 78 news, features and editorials on the attacks were sampled and analysed. The study found that both *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* significantly covered the crisis even though they were divergent in the use of frames. The study found also, that government officials, officials of security agencies, leaders of groups, eyewitnesses and victims of the herdsmen attacks were the dominant sources quoted in the stories on the attacks by the two newspapers, with variation in extent of usage. The human interest, conflict, morality, economic, attribution of responsibility and level of responsibility frames dominantly used in framing of the stories on the attacks. Based on the empirical evidence, the study by way of scholarly exegesis concluded that both papers were influenced by the political, economic and religious interests or ideologies of their ownership in the coverage of the crisis. The study submits that this scenario portends danger to public perception and understanding of the crisis and thus recommends that; the mass media should deal with crisis in such a way as to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned through the nature of coverage. Provision of much information as possible about the roots of the problem to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending the crisis amongst other strategies was also recommended.

Keywords: Mass media; Newspaper Coverage; Framing; Herdsmen Insurgency.

Introduction

Nigeria has over the years been frequently confronted with series of disruptive crisis situations that significantly affects the socioeconomic and political life of the people. Communal and religious crises as well as outbreak of violence from ethnic agitations have claimed the lives of thousands of Nigerians, leaving several others maimed and displaced. The rising wave of Fulani herdsmen insurgency which has launched several attacks across the country, particularly on in Benue, Plateau and Taraba States with scores of people dead, homes, farms/farmlands and other property worth billions of Naira destroyed is one of such disruptive crisis in recent time. While several crises across the country in the past were predicated on aggression arising from contentious issues between warring parties, the Fulani insurgency has a new dimension. It is rather an assault that seems to be predicated on the UsmanDanfodio's old Jihadist doctrine of using violence to intimidate and harass people into conversion or oust and take over the ancestral homes of people whose beliefs and ideologies are divergent or non-confirmative.

Notwithstanding the nature, type or method; a crisis is "an event for which people seek causes and make attributions" (Coombs and Holladay, 2004, p. 97). Consequently, a crisis period is a "time of ambiguity, uncertainty, and struggle to regain control" (Millar and Heath, 2004, p. 247). When hit by a crisis situation such as the Fulani herdsmen attacks on several Benue communities between 2013 and 2012, however, government often makes an effort to minimize the ambiguity by responding to the crisis and the public through appropriate response strategies. At the same time, the public tries to seek information related to the crisis and to evaluate responsibility for the crisis. The more likely people affected or involved in the crisis try to trade blames or attribute responsibility to the other party(s), the stronger the likelihood of them developing a negative image of the other party(s) (Weiner et al., 1987). Thus, as Coombs, (2006a, p.175) notes, "crisis responsibility, the perception that the hard handedness or aggression from the other party is the reason for the crisis or the linchpin" has the capability to escalate or reverberate in other areas. For that reason, understanding how people attribute crisis responsibility is critical for crisis mitigation and management.

This has made the mass media key stakeholders in crisis mitigation and management as what the general public knows about these events and their causes overwhelmingly comes from the mainstream mass media. For this reason, mass media coverage of crisis plays an important role in shaping public opinion about the crisis and indigenous rights.This is because as one of the most trusted vehicles of communication and information dissemination in society, the mass media exercise a significant level of influence on the perception and understanding of crisis situations by members of the public through news frames. The problem however, is that the mass media does not merely cover and mirror events in society as often perceived, but rather filter information through a process called *framing*.

Framing results from a system of reporting wherein reporters use a particular narrative structure, rely on officials as sources, and invoke public opinion in particular ways that, taken together, serve to marginalize collective actors and their issues. This is not to say that reporters and editors are consciously seeking to delegitimize collective actors, but rather that the process of creating the news often leads to this result. Frames are powerful mechanisms that can help define and solve

problems and shape public opinion (Knight, 1999). In crisis communication, framing analysis can provide crisis managers with useful insights into the appropriate crisis response strategies to minimize the damage. While several studies have been carried out in Nigeria on the role of the mass media in crisis situations, most of the studies have failed to consider how the Nigerian mass media (newspapers in particular) framed the crisis at the outset. However, most people seek information about a crisis and evaluate the cause of the crisis and attribute blame or responsibility for the crisis based on mass media coverage of the crisis. Therefore, it is important to look at how the mass media frame a crisis event, the cause of the crisis, and the actor responsible for it because those frames influence the public's perception and impressions of the crisis (Coombs, 2006b). This study therefore, aims to fill that gap by identifying what kinds of news frames have been used in the coverage of the herdsmen attacks on Benue communities between September 2013 and April 2014 by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers.

Statement of the Problem

The framing theory posits that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations by different people. Framing according to the theory refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue (Cho and Gower, 2006, p. 420). Much of the research on framing Nigeria has focused on mass media coverage of crisis in relation to public policy issues, without special focus on framing of the crisis situations (Pate, 2002; Eti, 2009; Akpoghiran and Otite, 2013). Through careful analysis of news media framing of crisis, Iyengar (1991) developed five frames of individual and organizational (societal/governmental) levels of responsibility in crisis. The frames are the human interest frame, conflict frame, morality frame, economic frame and attribution of responsibility frame. The extent to which these frames were employed by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* in coverage of the herdsmen attacks in Benue is not however known. Against this backdrop, the study assesses and analyses how level of responsibility is covered by the two newspapers across crisis types by applying Iyengar's individual and organizational levels of responsibility frames. Consequently, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent were the Fulani herdsmen attacks on Benue communities covered by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

RQ2. What were the dominant sources of information on the coverage of the herdsmen attacks on Benue communities by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

RQ3. What frames were used in reporting the herdsmen attacks on Benue communities in the coverage by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

The Fulani Attacks on Benue Communities

History has it that the Fulanis and most tribes of the Benue Valley, particularly the Tiv people, have had long standing cordial relationships (Hon, 2001, p. 11), a relationship built on mutuality predicated on animal rearing interests of both ethnic groups. Although the Tiv people engages in large scale animal farming, unlike pastoralists Fulanis who are predominantly nomads, The Tiv people cherish other

forms of agriculture and are more preoccupied with land cultivation. Consequently, the Tiv people cherish their land and the various conflicts that have ever ensued between them and other tribes in the valley has often been on land issues (Hussein, 1998, p. 24). Although the Fulani people are not part of the Benue valley, they migrate seasonally towards the valley and Sothern Nigeria in search of grazing pastures. Like previous skirmishes that has ensued between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Benue arose from the destruction of farm lands by herds of cattle.

There has been series of clashes between herdsmen and farmers across the Federation due issues relating to destruction of crops and farmlands due to the nomadic activities of Fulani herdsmen. As Gbehe (2007, p. 134) observes, while several lives have been lost and property worth billions of Naira destroyed from the herdsmen phenomenon and several frameworks to address the issue devised; government at various levels (federal, state and local) have not been able to address the issue. Suggestions are usually put on the table when such crisis erupts but easily sidelined or discarded with prevalence of calm (Abbas, 2010, p. 334). As such, the issue of adequate provision of grazing reserves to accommodate the interest of herdsmen who are always on the move to secure food and water for their herds or the introduction of modern pasturing techniques that makes cattle rearing a sedentary occupation rather than nomadic to avoid mass movement of herdsmen and cattle, has not been addressed.

This has made the competition for land, upon which the socio-economic lives of both the farmers and the herdsmen revolve a source of incessant conflicts with violent outcomes that have claimed several lives in Nigeria. The extension of the competition over land has resounded into another critical issue that is related to land - the phenomenon of indigeneship in Nigeria. The factor of indigeneship confers on individual the right to own land (Ker, 2007). Gbehe (2007) has noted that land in most communities in Nigeria such as among the Tiv people in the Benue valley, is freighted with symbolic meaning. It is sacred and considered as an ancestral and historical sphere of influence, and trespass is often perceived as an affront over their right to existence. Based on this, conflicts over land are usually fierce with massive destructions of lives and properties. Ubuwa (2001, p. 43 notes too that conflicts arose in the Benue Valley as a result of loss of land which the people considered as the basis of their social, economic and spiritual existence. Attempt to discount the people from this ancestral heritage usually resulted in large scale conflict.

While this has been a protracted issue with over a century long history, there seems to be little efforts to address the land issue in Nigeria in a manner that will accommodate the interests of farmers and herdsmen. Narrating the dangerous dimension the situation has been allowed to deteriorate to, Okeke (2014, p. 66) likens the situation to a war and says, even though it is an old age problem, it has escalated in the last decade and has assumed a very deadly dimension. The conflicts occur when Fulani herders move into non-Fulani homelands with their cattle. This usually leads to the destruction of farmers' crops. Thus, the herders provoke their victims to acts of resistance (preventing entry into farms, killing or stealing cattle, or poisoning fields). In response, the herders wage deadly attacks on farming communities. It is thus perhaps for these same or similar reasons that the Fulani herdsmen between 2013 and 2014 waged a deadly war against certain Benue communities.

Mass Media Framing of crisis and Public Perception

Throughout the years, the mass media have become trustworthy sources of information for individuals around the world. The public searches for information about events happening around the world and the mass media is the primary source. The need for information during any time of conflict or crisis is crucial not only for those directly affected but also for those involved and engaged from outside the affected area. The need for information on the Fulani herdsmen attacks in Benue State was therefore no exception. However, while information through the mass media is important in managing crisis situations, framing of the crisis by the news media has direct bearing on how the crisis is perceived. Both in terms of how serious are the crisis, the contending issues and the aggressors, public knowledge, understanding and perception of crisis much depends on information from the mass media. The quality of mass media coverage of crisis, is therefore crucial for responsibility as crisis is conditioned not only by factors related to the crisis itself but also to general attitudes and preferences of the mass media through framing.

It is important to understand the different ways the mass media frame prominent news information. The framing theory explains the mass media's influence on society. Tettah and King (2011) described the framing theory "proposes that how an idea, issue or personality is presented (framed) in the media influence how people think about that issue or personality" (p. 505). Individuals usually believe the media and form opinions based on information received from media sources regardless of whether or not the information is factual. According to Chyi and McCombs (2004), "the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event, consciously or unconsciously, in order to keep the story alive and fresh" (p. 22). It is often the case that various mass media outlets have differing viewpoints on high-profile news stories. According to Heider (1958) in Lowry, Nio and Leitner (2003, p. 64), people's perceptions of and inferences about events are dependent on what information or feature is salient in the environment.

Framing theory suggests that the mass media do even more than create saliency. By selecting what to include and what to exclude from a story, the news media frame a story (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Pan and Kosicki, 1993); that is, the mass media limit or define the story's meaning and thereby shape people's interpretation of that story (Hallahan, 1999). Previous literature has identified a handful of frames that occur commonly in the news, with some studies discussing comprehensively several different types of frames dominantly used in news coverage in different parts of the world. These include conflict, economic consequences, human impact, and morality.

Based on these frames, Iyengar 1991 after analyzing newspapers coverage of crisis in the post-communists states, Europe, America, Asia and Africa identified five news frames in order of predominance: human interest,conflict, morality, economic and attribution of responsibility. Our literature review shall dwell on these frames as the basis for determining the exetent to which such frames were present and or how they were employed by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* in their coverage and reportage on the Fulani herdsmen insurgent attacks on Benue Communities with devastating effects. This is to enable us assess the attributions in terms of how each of the papers perceived and constructed issues associated with the crisis.

Human interest frame

This frame "brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem" (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). In crisis situations, the frame stimulates the psychological pulse of people, which ultimately leads them to a more negative attitude toward the crisis. Cho and Gower (2006) showed that the human interest frame influenced participants' emotional response, and that it was a significant predictor of blame and responsibility in a transgression crisis.

Conflict frame

The conflict frame is used in such away as to reflect conflict and disagreement among individuals, groups, or organizations. Findings of a study conducted by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) reveal that, the conflict frame is the second most common frame that could be found in news reports on crisis events, and the more serious the newspaper, the more the conflict frame is in evident.

Morality frame

According to Iyengar (1991), this frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of morals, social prescriptions, and religious tenets. Neuman et al. (1992) found that the morality frame was commonly used by journalists indirectly through quotations or inference, rather than directly because of the journalistic norm of objectivity.

Economic frame

This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, groups, organizations, or countries. Neuman et al. (1992) identified it as a common frame in the news. The wide impact of an event is an important news value, and economic consequences are often considerable (Graber, 1993).

Attribution of responsibility frame

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, p. 96) defines this frame as "a way of attributing responsibility for [a] cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group" Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that the attribution of responsibility frame was most commonly used in serious newspapers.

Level of responsibility frame: individual vs. organizational

Iyengar (1991) identified two distinct news frames dealing with issues: the episodic news frame (focusing on certain individuals or specific events) and the thematic news frame (placing issues and events in general context at the societal or governmental level). At the same time, the mass media can present problems and their solutions as either an individual's or society's responsibility. The problem of the Fulani insurgency, for example, may be presented as an individual problem of the affected communities with an individual solution rather than as a societal problem requiring a societal response.

It is evident from these frames that a frame in a communication organizes everyday reality by providing meaning to an unfolding strip of events that may

otherwise not be understood within a given context. Therefore, in as much as the mass media may have its limitations, the power of the mass media to focus public attention on a few key public issues, through framing cannot be underestimated. This is because not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the mass media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news through the framing process. Through framing, newspapers provide a host of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news and provide perspectives, from which people should reason, analyze issues and sometimes react.

Method

The study adopted the content analysis method to investigate *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers news coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks crisis events in Benue state between September 2013 and April 2014. The study quantified and analyzed news frames of the articles related to the coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks crisis events in Benue state between September 2013 and April 2014 by the two newspapers. These two newspapers have been recognized as the most vibrant elite newspapers in Northern Nigeria and are large national circulation newspapers. Also *Daily Trust* owned by a Northern Muslim and *Leadership* is owned by a Northern Christian; implying that the religious backgrounds of their ownership may influence their news frames on the attacks.

This is because the Fulani herdsmen are predominantly Muslims while the Benue communities attacked where predominantly Christian. However, given that both papers have Northern origin, it is expected that both will be objective in their coverage of the attacks. News articles published in these two newspapers on the attacks were collected through an electronic database search in the homepage of the papers. Although the study period is September 2013 and April 2014, only editions that contained stories on the attacks were studied. A total of 29 editions (*Daily Trust* = 11 and *Leadership* = 18) and 78 news articles, feature articles and editorials (*Daily Trust* = 27 and *Leadership* = 51) on the attacks were found and analyzed during the study period, September 2013 and April 2014. The coding category and unit of analysis were three - news articles, feature articles and editorials. The coding instrument consisted of the name of the newspaper, type of article (news or feature) the five news frames, and level of responsibility frame. Two well-trained coders analyzed all articles. Each coder coded the articles independently. For the inter-coder reliability test, two coders coded 30 articles that were randomly selected. Using Holsti's method, the inter-coder reliability was 0.87.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Results were obtained by analyzing the coded data from the sample frames of the two newspapers during the study period. The results presented below addresses the three research questions raised to investigate the extent and nature of coverage given to the Fulani herdsmen attacks on the Benue communities by the two newspapers.

RQ1. To what extent were the Fulani herdsmen attacks on Benue communities covered by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

Data collected from the sample frames in response to research question one which sought ascertain the extent of coverage of the herdsmen attacks by the two newspapers, is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Extent of *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* coverage of the attacks

Type of Article	Daily Trust	Leadership	Total
News	18 (66.6%)	32 (62.7%)	**50 (64.1%)**
Features	8 (29.6%)	17 (33.3%)	**25 (32%)**
Editorials	1 (3.8%)	2 (3.9%)	**3 (3.9%)**
Total	**27 (34.6%)**	**51 (6 5.4%)**	**78 (100%)**

Source: *Daily Trust & Leadership Content, 2013/2014*

Table 1 shows the extent of reportage in terms of types of newspaper articles based on the units of analysis. Data contained in the table shows that for both *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers, news stories have an overwhelming dominance over other reports on the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State with 18 (66.6%) articles for *Daily Trust* and 32 (62.7%) articles for *Leadership*. This collectively accounts for 50 (64.1%) articles out of the total 78 articles drawn from the sample frames for analysis. The table shows too that *Daily Trust* had 8 (29.6%) feature articles, while *Leadership* had 17 (33.3%) feature articles. This accounts for a total of 25 (32%) feature articles from the sample. Expectedly, editorials are the least articles accounting for 3 (3.9%) of the total articles sampled. The break down shows that *Daily Trust* had 1 (3.8%) editorial and *Leadership* had 2 (3.9%) editorials.

The entire 29 editions of the two newspapers generated a total of 271 articles, implying that the news, features and editorials on the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State accounted for 28.8% of the stories. Given that the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State was one among the many crises covered by the two newspapers during the period, it implies that the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State was significantly covered by the two newspapers. Significance of this data to the study is that despite the overwhelming dominance of the Boko Haram crisis and its adjoining political controversies that seemingly dominates mass media content in Nigeria, the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State was given significant coverage by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers. This answers research question one to the effect that the extent to which the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State was covered by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers has been evidently established.

RQ2. What were the dominant sources of information on the coverage of the herdsmen attacks on Benue communities by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

This research tracked the various individuals or groups who were quoted in the articles analyzed. The table below reflects the percentage of different groups or individuals quoted in the articles.

Table 2: Dominant sources of Information used by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* in coverage of the attacks

Type of Source	Daily Trust	Leadership	Total
Government official	4 (14.8%)	14 (27.4%)	18 (23.2%)
Security official	5 (18.5%)	17 (33.3%)	22 (28.2%)
Group leader	7 (25.9%)	6 (11.7%)	13 (16.6%)
Eyewitness account	3 (5.8%)	6 (11.7%)	9 (11.5%)
Victims	8 (29.6%)	8 (15.9%)	16 (20.5%)
Total	27 (34.6%)	51 (6 5.4%)	78 (100%)

Source: *Daily Trust & Leadership Content, 2013/2014*

Data contained in table two shows that government officials, officials of security agencies, leaders of groups, eyewitnesses and victims of the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State were the sources quoted in the news, features and editorials on the attacks in the two newspapers. The table shows that government officials constituted 4 (14.8%) of the sources cited by *Daily Trust* and 14 (27.4%) sources cited by *Leadership* in their reports on the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State. Also, officials of security agencies were used in 5 (18.5%) reports by *Daily Trust* while *Leadership* used officials of security agencies as sources in 17 (33.3%) reports on the attacks. The data reveals too, that group leaders constituted 7 (25.9%) of the sources for *Daily Trust* and group leaders constituted 6 (11.7%) of the sources for *Leadership*. Eyewitness account were used as sources in 3 (5.8%) reports by *Daily Trust, and* used as sources in 6 (11.7%) reports by *Leadership*. The victims of the attacks were quoted as sources in 8 (29.6%) reports by *Daily Trust* and also as sources in 8 (15.9%)reports by *Leadership*.

The data indicates that government officials, officials of security agencies and leaders of groups were quoted as sources more than eyewitnesses and victims of the attacks by *Leadership* newspaper, while *Daily Trust* quoted victimsand group leaders as sources more than government officials, officials of security agencies and eyewitnesses. This shows a divergence in the two newspapers in their sources of information. The data signifies that *Daily Trust* seemed to be on the ground more than *Leadership* newspaper during the crisis, however, the over reliance on group leaders and victims as sources implies that *Daily Trust* may be misled into projecting an agenda they know nothing about or may be lured into projecting the interest of one party in the crisis over the other. Although government officials and security agencies are often accused of downplaying information, particularly casualty figures during a crisis, they and eyewitnesses often seem to have access to more credible information and facts. Notwithstanding, data contained in table 2 answers research question two valuably since the dominant sources of information on the herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State have been ascertained.

RQ3. What frames were used in reporting the herdsmen attacks on Benue communities in the coverage by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers?

The frame clusters used by the two newspapers in their coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks on Benue communities was determined using the five key

crisis frames analyzed in the literature review, the data collected through the coding sheets is presented in table 3.

Table 3: The Frames used by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers in coverage of the attacks

Type of Frame Used	Daily Trust	Leadership	Total
Human interest frame	5 (18.5%)	11 (21.5%)	**16 (20.5%)**
Conflict frame	4 (14.8%)	5 (9.8%)	**9 (11.5%)**
Morality frame	2 (7.4%)	13 (25.4%)	**15 (19.2%)**
Economic frame	5 (18.5%)	8 (15.9%)	**13 (16.6%)**
Attribution of responsibility frame	9 (33.4%)	5 (9.8%)	**14 (17.9%)**
Level of responsibility frame	2 (7.4%)	9 (17.6%)	**11 (14.3%)**
Total	**27 (34.6%)**	**51 (6 5.4%)**	**78 (100%)**

Source: *Daily Trust & Leadership Content, 2013/2014*

The table shows that the attribution of responsibility frame was dominant among the reports on the crisis in *Daily Trust* while the morality frame was the most dominant in the reports *Leadership*. The use of the human interest and economic frames was the next most dominant in *Daily Trust*'s reports on the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State. For *Leadership* newspaper, the morality frame was trailed by the human interest and level of responsibility frames; while the economic and attribution of responsibility frames were less emphasized by *Leadership*. In *Daily Trust*, the morality and level of responsibility frames were the least emphasized.

This table reveals that the two newspapers also differed in their coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State as shown in their usage of the frames. While most of the articles in *Daily Trust* viewed the crisis as an affront on the rights to nomadic lives of the herdsmen, the articles in *Leadership* viewed the herdsmen as aggressors with external sponsors on a mission to orchestrate an agenda of annihilation against non-Muslims. It is evident from the editorials of both papers on the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State and related issues that *Daily Trust* in spite of its neutral stance in majority of the articles sampled, it is a bit sympathetic to the herdsmen and would want the public to view the consequence from the economic angle and inability of government to guarantee the rights of nomads. *Leadership* on the other hand seems to be sympathetic to the Benue communities attacked by the herdsmen and would want the public to look and the moral and human interest perspective.

The information implies that despite been newspapers from the Northern region of the country, the two newspapers were playing to religious sentiments that shroud their ownership. Thus, it can be argued that none of the two papers were neutral in their coverage and reportage on the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State. Significance of the table and the information contained in it to the study is however, that, it has effectively answered research question three by providing information on the frames that were used in the coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State.

Discussion of Findings

The mass media inevitably play a key role in conflicts and crisis because of their choice of which "experts" (parties to the crisis, government officials, officials of security agencies, leaders of groups and other stakeholders) to listen to and tell their story. This influences public perception and the definitions of dangers, culpability or responsibility, aggression and hence the political agenda behind the crisis by the general public. The mass media's decision on who is allowed to define a problem, or whether the problem is mentioned at all through the nature of frames used in the coverage and reportage of the crisis, has important consequences, on the management of the crisis. If the selection and use of the frames is done in line with journalistic standards, the mass media become a key ally but if selection and use of the frames is not controlled in a democratic way, the media may be an impediment (El-Nawawy and Shawn, 2010, p. 64).

This position is affirmed by the evidence from the findings of the contents of *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers that the Nigerian mass media can also be an ally or an impediment to crisis management given the nature of the frames the use in coverage of the crisis. The analysis reveals that the two newspapers though gave extensive coverage to the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State, their impact was minimal. The two newspapers did not cover the pre-violence phase of the crisis which would have given them a better understanding of the issues.

While this might seem an indictment, Hanitzsch (2004, p. 486) observes that the mass media often fail to cover the pre-violence stage of a crisis for three reasons. First, the mass media usually fail to take an interest in conflicts before violence breaks and a large number of people are killed. Second, governments tend to ignore calls for preventive action when mass media coverage does occur. Thirdly, the mass media are often accused of pessimism at such stages or castigated of incitements through their reports, and they choose to stay clear.

Consequently, at the violence stage, the news coverage becomes determined by such factors as the journalist's knowledge, predefined news formats, deadlines, the authority of sources, and the possibility of obtaining good pictures. They thus become self-referential to such a degree that the newsworthiness of a story may be a selffulfilling prophecy through sensationalism. According to Cottle (2008, p. 854), sensationalism is used by the mass media as an instrument to gain attention and prompt emotion from audiences and enables a story to generate a certain level of interest through use of language or graphics that are thrilling and shocking. This is the framing function of the mass media and could perhaps explain the nature of coverage and kind of frames used by *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers in their coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State.

Conclusion

Based on evidence from the content analysis, this study concludes that both *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers gave substantial coverage to the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State while reflecting the religious, political and economic interests of those behind their existence. However, the mass media's presence at the centre of society impacts the way in which the public perceives and interprets events, as such there could result the distortion of truth if the mass media do not live up to their social responsibility.

It is thus the position of this study that crises should rather necessitate journalists, more than ever, to justify their existence rather than showcase their weakness. Therefore, the mass media must harkens to its role has representing shared beliefs, understandings, and emotions, whether in celebration or in crisis situations in order to maintain society through time. Although crisis usually disrupts the mass media's standard schedule by an unplanned events, it the responsibility of journalists while these stories part from normal media routines, they should not be viewed as a transgression of journalistic norms, but rather reinforce the legitimacy of journalists as central actors in the mediation of truth through kinds of frames used.

Recommendations

This study found that the two newspapers displayed a form of coverage that communicated a certain shared perspective on the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State through their frames. Through focusing on the human interest, conflict, morality, economic, attribution of responsibility and level of responsibility frames, their representation of crisis articulated a hegemonic discourse that was prejudicial to the interests of the groups in the crisis. It also denoted the varied points of view held by the newspapers, which were rooted in the different political beliefs, cultural assumptions, and institutional practices - in short, the ideological positions of their origins. It is therefore recommended that:

1. While the existence of conflict has been recognized as an inevitable part of human interaction; the question for the mass media should not be how to prevent it, but rather how to deal with it in such a way as to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned through the nature of coverage.

2. Audience members usually try to get more information from the mass media to enhance their understanding, particularly during times of crisis, it is therefore, the responsibility of the mass media to provide as much information as possible about the roots of the problem and to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending it.

3. Nigerian mass media institutions and journalists must understand that interethnic crisis such as the Fulani herdsmen attacks on communities in Benue State are always intertwined with a range of causal factors - political, economic, and social that could lead to prolongation of the crisis. Journalists should therefore be savvy and not allow themselves to be used by the forces at play in the crisis such as politics and narrow religious or communal interests.

4. Lack of contextual reporting of crisis by newspapers can only exacerbates the misunderstanding among the general public. The mass media should therefore, serve as the bridge by examining and explaining the underlying causes of the crisis in a manner that would help to inform and educate the public.

5. To overly emphasize either of the parties in the crisis as the aggressor without clearly explaining their political, economic, and social motivations in the crisis is to distort the *why*, the *how*, and the *what* that actually took place. The Nigerian mass media must therefore, never fail to reconcile the polarised views held by members of the public about a crisis by providing adequate interpretations to the crisis. The media should also enable actors and mediators recognize opportunities for dialogue, negotiation and consensus through a more informed and subtle

coverage of a crisis and the frames emphasized and selection of sources should reflect the different positions on key issues.

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