

Readers' Perception of Newspaper Coverage of Militancy in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated readers' perception of newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Data was generated from a sample of 308 respondents drawn from three different locations across three Nigerian states in the Niger Delta using proportional stratified sampling from a population of 1,856. A 28-item self developed questionnaire was used as the research instrument, while the Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to establish the reliability which stood at 0.81. The results indicate that newspaper reports equipped readers sufficiently in identifying the dominant issues involved in militancy; readers perceived the coverage as satisfactory; there is no significant relationship between newspaper reports and escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta. It was recommended among others that journalists covering militancy should be adequately trained in investigative and interpretative reporting. This is important in order to give the reader all sides to the issue at stake.

Key words: Perception, Newspaper coverage, militancy, Niger Delta, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The Ken Saro-Wiwa (the slain foremost Niger Delta environmental rights activist) era in the age-long Niger Delta struggle for self-determination marked the peaceful phase of what has today turned violent in the Niger Delta struggle to end their oppression in the hands of the Nigerian Government and the international oil companies, particularly Shell. Okonta and Douglas (2001) presented a detailed documentation of the travails of Niger Deltans in the hands of Shell and their collaborators, the Nigerian Government. The harsh realities printed on the 276 pages of that work are so disgusting and nauseating. But those were the pains the region had to bear rather silently.

In his pre-conviction statement to the Justice Auta Tribunal that sentenced him to death by hanging in November 1995, environmental and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa called "... upon the Ogoni people, the peoples of the Niger Delta, and the oppressed minorities of Nigeria to stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for their rights." However, he warned that, "whether the peaceful ways (he) favoured will prevail depends on what the oppressor decide, what signals it sends out to the waiting public" (Okonta & Douglas, 2001, p. 276).

And the “signals” sent out by his execution were well read and understood by the Niger Deltans. His shed blood became a powerful force that sowed the seed of militancy in the Niger Delta as it empowered and emboldened Deltans to rise and fight courageously for their right to self-determination in the Nigerian state.

As O’Neil (2007, p.116) declares in connection with the hanging of Saro-Wiwa, “violence begets violence”. That was how the current surge of violence erupted in the Delta region.

First, it was to retaliate against Saro-Wiwa’s execution, and second, to avenge all injustices inflicted on the people of the region. Many subscribe to this version of the origin of militancy. Government’s high-handedness in dealing with the Niger Delta struggle has also aggravated conflict.

Prior to the Saro-Wiwa revolt, Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, an ex-police inspector; had on February 23, 1966 declared an independent Niger Delta People’s Republic (NDPR). At that momentous occasion, he charged all Niger Deltans to fight for their freedom. His insurrection lasted 12 days before it was quashed.

Even though there had been pockets of militancy in the Niger Delta before 1998, many analysts are of the view that the present day militancy in the region was an aftermath of the infamous Two Million-Man-March held in Abuja in March 1998 to shore up support for General Sani Abacha’s self-succession bid. Youths from all over the federation, including the Niger Delta, were drafted to Abuja to participate in the March. The Niger Delta youths many of whom were in Abuja for the first time saw the enthralling beauties and splendor of the new Federal Capital Territory in contrast to the squalid living conditions in the Niger Delta. They returned home more agitated than ever and their resolve to fight for the restructuring of Nigeria in line with the principles of federalism was strengthened. Never again would they fold their hands and watch their resources carted away to develop other parts of the country while their region continued to suffer neglect and abandonment.

By December that year, the Abuja March, as it were, had begun to bear fruit. Precisely on December 11, over 5000 youths converged in Kaiama, Bayelsa State to issue the historic Kaiama Declaration which many believe gave impetus to the Niger Delta struggle and therefore, signaled the kick-off of organised violent protests in the region.

The declaration, among other things, demanded that “all oil companies’ staff and contractors ... withdraw from Ijo territories by 30 December 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijo area of the Niger Delta” (The Kaiama Declaration, Resolution of December 11, 1998, All-Ijaw Youth Conference). Yet, others say organised militancy in the post military era may have begun around September 2004 when the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) declared an “all-out war” against the Nigerian Government.

From another historical perspective, Owugah (2000) identifies four phases in the evolution of resistance in the Niger Delta. The first phase, according to the author, was between the late 70’s and mid-80’s, a period the Deltans turned to the law courts to seek for adequate compensation for damage arising from oil exploitation. Regrettably the strategy failed to yield the expected results as lawsuits dragged on for so long or damages awarded were so paltry to worth all the legal tussles.

The second phase, the author states, began in the mid-80’s through mid-90’s and produced a more action-oriented struggle manifested in peaceful demonstrations, occupation of flow stations, disruption of work, etc. The oil firms responded by calling in the Nigerian security services, and this resulted in the burning down of villages, looting, rapes, killings, etc.

Between mid-90 and 1998 the resistance entered its third phase which Owugah states saw local communities responding “more forcefully to the use of the military by the oil companies against communities.” These communities resorted to “forceful occupation and shutting down of flow stations, destruction of equipment, kidnapping of workers, seizure of vessels and vehicles, etc” (p. 116).

The fourth phase began on December 11, 1998 with the issuance of the historic Kiama Declaration which called for self-determination and resource control. The author notes that the intended strategy to enforce compliance was to shut down all flow stations and terminals as to halt oil production in the Niger Delta. The Declaration gave December 30, 1998 as the deadline for oil firm to leave the Delta region. As the author concludes, “The peaceful, legal oriented resistance gradually evolved into its current militant phase” in response to state and oil companies’ use of violence to silence local discontent.

And to this, one adds a fifth phase which is the post-amnesty period that began October 5, 2009. This period is marked by unprecedented cases of kidnapping and other violent crimes across the country, especially in the southeast region. Criminal gangs and groups have resorted to hostage taking as a cheap source of economic gain. This position is corroborated by analysts who have described hostage taking as “a low-cost high-yield terror tactic” (cited in Dode, 2007, p.166). The level of insecurity generated by kidnapping is such that no one is secure in Nigeria – not even government officials.

From a wide review of available literature, contemporary writers and researchers on the Nigerian conflict, erroneously labelled the Niger Delta conflict, agree that militancy in the Delta is in response to years of injustice meted out on the region by the Nigerian state. To this injustice was added state aggression against the people.

Prof. Okey Ibeanu, who has studied and written extensively on the crisis in the Niger Delta, identifies four main forms of state aggression which engender conflict in the region: Constant harassment of the leaders of popular movements and organizations; instigating inter-communal conflicts, especially along ethnic, religious and clan lines; instigating internal division of popular organizations; and direct repression using the army and police (2008, p.25). Government use of force was counter-productive; it rather emboldened militants and made them more committed to their cause. Therefore, in search of peace and acting on the recommendation of the Ledum Mitee Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, the President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua government declared amnesty in 2009 for militants in the Niger Delta which has helped reduce tension in the region.

Expectedly, how the mass media cover armed conflicts such as the Niger Delta militancy has continued to attract scholarly attention given that they are often the main sources of information on a given conflict, and this information can influence people's perception of that conflict.

In the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the media were accused of “inadequate and inaccurate reporting” (Steering committee for Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996, p.66). Similarly, the media were criticized for “fanning the flames of ethnic tensions” and for “failing to objectively, present views of the majority” in the Balkan wars that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia (<http://www.usip.org>).

From the foregoing positions, media coverage of armed conflicts, one may conclude has been anything but professional. Yet we do know that how the world's conflicts are presented in the media to a large extent colours public perception of such conflicts and this can shape the response of the international community. This therefore, heightens the need for adequate and responsible coverage of conflicts.

Emanating from the newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta is readers' perception of the coverage. Do readers perceive the newspapers as an impartial third party committed to the cause of peace? In their assessment, can the coverage be adjudged satisfactory? This study therefore investigates readers' perception of newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta, Nigeria.

1.1 Overview of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Lying in the south of the country, the present-day Niger Delta region under Nigeria's political arrangement is made up of nine states, namely, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers and is home to some 28 million people of different languages (Nigerian National Population Census, 2006).

As the Niger Delta Development Master Plan indicates, a main feature of the structure of the population of the Delta region is its significant level of young people with over 62% of the population below the age of 30 years. The plan further reveals that adults in the age range of 30-69 years constitute only 36%, while those aged 70 years and above make up 2% of the population (*THISDAY*, May 18, 2007, p. 5). Hence, the region has an active population of young people who are predominantly unemployed.

The region covers a surface area of about 112,110 square kilometers and constitutes about 12% of Nigeria's land mass. It is one of the 10 most important wetland and costal marine ecosystems in the world and has basically three major physical divisions: the freshwater zone, the mangrove swamps and the coastal sand ridge zone.

Deltans are predominantly fishermen and farmers, and so depend heavily on the environment for survival. A 2002 World Bank report indicates that as much as 60 percent of the poorest in the region obtain their income from environmental resources; 42 percent of the households derive their income from a single resource, while 71 percent were dependent on one or two resources (*THISDAY*, Feb. 7, 2006, p. 20). Now these people can no longer survive on their environment as their means of livelihood has been destroyed by oil exploration.

Blessed with abundant oil and gas reserves, the region has become the world's most threatened human ecosystem due to government's neglect and oil exploration activities of oil transnational corporations (TNCs) in partnership with the Nigerian Federal Government. It powers the Nigeria economy and accounts for over 70% of Nigeria's known gas and oil reserves. Life is said to be hell in Niger Delta region as the environment is heavily polluted by the activities of oil firms which operate with utter disregard for the health of the people. A majority of Deltans live in grinding and excruciating poverty in the midst of the enormous wealth generated from the oil in their land.

Adverse living conditions have kept life expectancy in the Niger Delta at 45 years compared to the national average of 47 years (UNPO, 2008).

The unacceptable standards of living and long years of injustices "have hardened the resolve of those living in the region to agitate for change, and increased popular support for those groups fighting for a better deal" (Hazen & Horner, 2007, p. 16). The increased wave of militancy in the region has become a source of intense concern for the Nigerian government and the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are to: determine the extent to which newspaper reports equipped readers in identifying the dominant issues involved in militancy; determine readers' perception of newspaper reports on militancy in the Niger Delta.

3. Research Questions

The following questions were raised in the study:

1. To what extent do newspaper reports equip readers to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy?
2. How do readers perceive newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta?

4. Hypotheses

Two alternative hypotheses were put forward in the study.

H₁: There is a relationship between newspaper reports and the escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta.

H₂: There is a relationship between newspaper portrayal of militancy and its perception by readers.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Media Coverage of Armed Conflicts

Conflict is a characteristic of every human society and the mass media are often the conduits for transmitting it. Several studies in the domain of media coverage of armed conflicts have documented both positive and ignoble roles the media played in their coverage. While some have commended the media for their important contributions to peace efforts, others have accused the media of exacerbating conflicts (Nwankpa, 2015).

For instance, in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, a steering committee that evaluated international response to the crisis faulted the media: "Inadequate and inaccurate reporting by international media on the genocide itself contributed to international indifference and inaction" (Steering Committee for Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996, p. 66). The Committee did acknowledge, however, that the international media helped generate worldwide humanitarian relief support for refugees.

Gorretti (2007) focused on media coverage of the conflict in Northern Uganda. The study, which analysed how two Uganda's national dailies, *The New Vision* (government-owned) and *The Monitor* (an independent, private paper) applied peace journalism in their coverage of the conflict for three years (1988, 2000 and 2003), established that, through disclosures in the reports, the media played a major role in promoting transparency and holding the government and other institutions accountable. The study underlined the media's contributions to strengthening the observance of human rights, especially through reports on the situations of children and women in Northern Uganda and the conditions in the Internally Displaced Persons camps. The media were also credited with helping to raise public awareness of various issues related to the conflict.

In a more recent study of Nigerian newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta, Nwankpa (2011) found the coverage to be "fair, balanced and responsible ..." (p. viii) although there were a few instances of confrontational wording of reports. The results also showed that the dailies accorded low prominence to reports on militancy and did not endorse militancy, but rather advocated a peaceful resolution of the conflict as is evident in the high score (77.88%) of the use of conciliatory tone in their reports.

It is a reality that the media do not give equal attention to the world's conflicts. Some reasons advanced for this unfortunate situation include the high cost of news gathering in remote regions, geopolitical and economic priorities of the West (Harris, 2004), the distance between the conflict theatre and the world's major news hubs as well as issues of accessibility and the safety of journalists

But Hawkins (2002, p. 230) argues that "by ignoring massive conflicts, the media contribute to the absence of government initiatives, or, at the very least, a place on the policy agenda."

Victims of such conflicts ignored by the media may remain largely unattended to as it will be difficult to attract the attention of the international community. Besides, the conflict may last longer, especially where local efforts are inadequate to contain it.

5.2 Peace journalism in conflict situations

Conflict is a form of communication which results from incompatible human interest. Depending on how conflict is handled, it could turn violent, in which case parties involved apply violence to achieve an end. In conflict reportage, Kempf (2003) points out that "journalists always have two options: either to take sides and to incite one party against the other, or to play the role of moderating third party in order to improve communication between them and contribute to constructive conflict transformation" (p.83). Peace journalism assumes this critical role of a third party by allowing for the rivaling sides to get to know one another, to uphold understanding and empathy, to focus on certainty and to emphasize truth-oriented, people orientated and solution-orientated journalism to expedite peace" (Peleg, 2006, p.1).

The Peace journalism model as Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) have proposed creates opportunities for society to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict. It uses the tools of conflict analysis and transformation to enable fair and accurate reporting. The journalist who adopts this model, covers armed conflict and violence but in a more indepth, comprehensive and holistic manner.

The peace journalism model (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005) originally formulated by Johan Galtung makes certain distinctions between peace journalism and the regular or war-oriented journalism as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distinctions between peace journalism and war journalism

	War/Violence Journalism	Engendered Journalism	Peace/Conflict Journalism
i.	War/Violence-Oriented	i. Peace/Conflict-Oriented	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on conflict arena: 2 parties, 1 goal, (win), war, general zero – sum orientation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores conflict formation, X parties, Y goals, Z issues, general win-win orientation. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on mostly male resource persons - Military Head of State, government, police as source of information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores how women and men of all parties are affected and included in win-win orientation. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closed space, closed time, causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open space, open time, causes and outcome anywhere, also in history and culture. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making war opaque/secret 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making conflict transparent 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Us-them” journalism, propaganda, voice for “us”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving voice to all parties, empathy, understanding. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees “them” as the problem, focuses on who prevails in war. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See conflict/war as problem, focuses on creativity. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reactive: waiting for violence before reporting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive: before violence occurs, focuses on initiatives including those coming from the women. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses only on the visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure, marginalization of women and children). 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portrays women and children as helpless victims (see what “they” did to “our” women and children) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portrays women as active contributors in conflict transformation and peace building. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dehumanizes “them” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanizes all sides 	
ii.	Propaganda –oriented	ii. Truth-Oriented	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposes “their” untruths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposes untruth on all sides 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps “our” cover-ups/lies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncovers all cover-ups. 	
iii.	Elite-oriented	iii. People-Oriented	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on “our” suffering: an able bodied elite males being their mouthpiece 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on suffering all over-on women, aged and children; giving voice to the voiceless. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives name to their evil-doers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives names to all evil-doers. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on elite peacemakers, mostly Men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on people-peacemakers, heroes of non-violence, including women 	
Iv	Victory-Oriented	iv. Solution-Oriented	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace=victory+ceasefire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace=nonviolence+creativity 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceals peace initiative, before victory is on hand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights peace initiatives, also to prevent more wars. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on treaty, institution, the controlled society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on structures, culture, the peaceful society. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aftermath: leaving for another war, returns if the old flares again. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aftermath: resolution reconstruction, reconciliation (includes women’s needs and participation peacebuilding. 	

Source: Isis International and Min-WoW (2007)

Its proponents call on journalists covering conflicts to develop the skills of conflict analysis. This is possible through training and it would enable journalists to properly unravel conflicts, its stages, identify who the stakeholders are, and what their different perspectives are, their positions, interests, needs and fears in order to send reports that help readers gain proper understanding of the roots of the conflict and the issues involved in it.

Peace journalists do not subscribe to the use of such epithets as “Killers”, “Judaists”, “Zionists”, “Occupiers”, “Settlers”, “Insurgents”, “Terrorists”, “Rebels”, “Fanatics”, or “Enemies”. Howard (2003) believes these terms are emotional and such “words take sides, make the other seem impossible to negotiate with” (p.16). These terms as Peleg (2006) observes, serve no purpose but fuelling conflict, and, for terrorism, peaceful journalism would avoid the exhibitionism usually associated with its publicity. Howard wants warring factions to be called “what they call themselves” (p.16). This demonstrates the neutrality of the reporter.

In line with the tenets of peace journalism, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2004) urges journalists in conflict situation to work towards promoting cross-community dialogue, with a view to building bridges across confrontational lines, identifying areas of agreement rather than discord and highlighting positive, often non-official developments on the ground. It is this kind of reporting that reduces hostilities. In this way, the media become facilitators of positive change, rather than mere disinterested professional observer/reporter (Howard, 2002).

Reporting conflict through the lenses of peace journalism can help generate the consensus needed for building a culture of peace. The responsibility lies with reporters and editors to implement peace journalism.

6. Theoretical Framework

Two theories are imperative to this study. They are Agenda-setting theory and Perception theory.

Agenda-setting holds that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society (Folarin, 1998, p. 68). Agenda setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

Even though opinion is divided among mass communication scholars as to the right nomenclature to ascribe to the agenda-setting concept, scholars such as McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Wright (1986) would rather describe it as a hypothesis, while others like Balnaves, Donald and Shoesmith (2009) argue that it is both “a hypothesis and theory” (p. 65). Yet the agenda-setting function of the mass media rests on the assumption that, “The amount of attention the mass media give to social issues leads people to believe that these are important, whether or not the media influence people’s opinion on them (Wright, 1986, p. 155).

From early works (Lippmann, 1992; Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it was established “that there is an important relationship between media reports and people’s ranking of public issues” (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 280). From these works, it was found that the mass media force attention to certain issues in society by the prominence they confer on such issues.

A more recent work now considers agenda-building “as a more apt term than “agenda-setting” (Lang & Lang, 1983, pp.58-59). Lang and Lang define agenda building as a “collective process in which media, government, and the citizenry reciprocally influence one another (pp.58-59). This is especially true, given the interaction among media, agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda (LittleJohn & Foss, 2008). In particular, agenda-building presumes that the “media can profoundly affect how a society (or nation or culture) determines what are its important concerns and therefore can mobilize its various institutions toward meeting them” (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 281).

Drawing from the preceding analyses, journalists decide what to report and how to report what. Therefore, how the newspapers choose to frame militancy can result in the papers acting either as catalyst to escalation or de-escalation. They can either magnify the importance of an actor’s behaviour, giving positive connotations, or vice-versa.

There is ample empirical data that demonstrates that the way an issue is framed by the mass media affects how the public perceives and interprets the issue and who they think is responsible for fixing problems (Severin & Tankard, 2001; Ronenberry & Vicker, 2009, Onyekosor & Nwankpa, 2014). Responsible conflict reportage would, therefore, demand that newspaper frame the issues involved in such a way that they become more amenable to management.

Perception theory according to Folarin (1998) holds that people pay attention to media messages and interpret them in line with their interests, belief, values and experience. The study of perception, Folarin (1998) observes, actually leads to the discovery of selectivity process. Onyekosor and Nwankpa (2014) state that “each of us tends to perceive and then decode mass communication messages in the light of our previous experiences and current dispositions - our needs, mood and memories” (p. 3). The way readers perceive newspaper reports on militancy in the Niger Delta depends on how they perceive the role of the media in conflict situations.

7. Research Method

Survey research design was chosen for the study. The population comprises the academic staff of three tertiary institutions located in three Nigerian states in the Niger Delta: Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers. These states were among the major flashpoints within the study period 2006 – 2009. The institutions are – Niger Delta University (NDU), Bayelsa State; Delta State University (DELSU), Delta State, and Rivers State University of Science and Technology (RUST), Rivers State. These are major representative locations of literate publics for newspaper readership in these states in the Niger Delta. Besides, academics are experts in diverse disciplines; they are arguably the most, informed, the most critical and the most analytic segment of any society. Therefore, their authoritative views on any issue are among the most informed.

The total population of this study is 1,858. The components of the population are as follows: NDU, 726; DELSU 587, and RUST, 545 respectively. The sample of population was derived through a mathematical and representative formula called the Yaro Yamene. Okwandu (2004, p.130) recommends this formula for researchers in determining the sample size from a given population. The Yaro Yamene’s formula is:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(\ell)^2}$$

- Where n = sample size sought
- N = population size
- ℓ = level of significance (0.05)

Using the above formula, the sample size was determined as 330.

To determine the respondents, the proportional stratified sampling was used. This was done in proportion to the population of each strata using the formula:

$$\frac{n}{N} \times \frac{S}{1}$$

- Where n = Population of each strata
- N = Total population
- S = Total sample size

Table 2 details the sample size.

Table 2: Sample size of each component of the population

Institution	Population	Sample size
NDU	726	129
DELSU	587	104
RUST	545	97
Total	1,858	330

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. The readers’ perception of newspaper coverage of militancy questionnaire (REPENCOMQ) was developed by the researchers. It contains twenty-eight items divided into sections A, B and C. Section A contains four items on the demographic variables of the respondents and section B has four closed-ended items on thematic variables on newspaper readership and coverage. Section C has twenty items on thematic variables on readers’ perception of the coverage on a 5-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (UD), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagreed (SD).

To establish the reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire was administered to 20 academic staff of the Rivers State College of Arts and Science which was not part of the main study. The administration was done once and the scores obtained were used to establish the reliability coefficient using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha method, which stood at 0.81 and this value was considered an acceptable reliability for the study.

The administration of the questionnaire which was done between March and April, 2011 was based on the sample size drawn from each component of the study population. A copy of the questionnaire was administered to the academic staff that could be reached in each of the select universities in the three Niger Delta states of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers.

The responses and opinions of the respondents were analyzed using frequency tables and simple percentages. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) analysis was done on hypotheses one and two using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 15). All hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

8. Data Analysis

Out of the 330 copies of the questionnaire that were administered, 314 were returned, while 308 respondents following their “yes” response to item 5 formed the final sample size. Item 5 (Did you read Nigerian newspaper reports on militancy in the Niger Delta?) was specifically included to screen out respondents who said “No”.

Table 3 presents respondents’ demographic variables.

Table 3: Demographic variables

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	246	79.87
Female	62	20.13
Total	308	100
20-30	25	8.12
31-40	76	24.68
42-52	143	46.43
53-63	60	19.43
Above 63	4	1.30
Total	308	100

Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Bachelor’s Degree	19	6.17
Master’s Degree	104	33.77
PhD	185	60.06
Total	308	100

Rank	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below senior Lecturer	181	58.77
Senior Lecturer and above	127	41.23
Total	308	100

Table 3 indicates that of the 308 respondents sampled, 246 (79.87%) were males, while 62 (20.13%) were females. It further shows that a majority of the respondents, 143 (46.43%) were in the 42-52 age bracket; 76 (24.68%) respondents fell within the 31 to 40 age range; 60 (19.48%) respondents were aged between 53 and 63; 25 (8.12%) were in the 20-30 age group, while 4 (1.30%) respondents were above 63 years.

It can be gleaned from Table 2 also that over half of the respondents representing 60.06% were holders of the PhD degree; 33.77% had master’s degree, while 6.17% were bachelors’ degree holders. It is evident from the educational qualification that the respondents were sufficiently educated. As regards their academic rank, 181 (58.77%) were below senior lecturers, while 127 (41.23%) have attained the rank of senior lecturers and above.

Table 4: Extent newspaper reports enable readers to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy

Extent	Frequency	Percentage (%)
To a very great extent	95	30.84
To a great extent	157	50.97
Can't say	11	3.57
To a little extent	37	12.01
To a very little extent	8	2.60
Total	308	100

Information was sought on the extent to which newspaper reports enable readers to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy. As indicated in Table 4, of the 308 respondents, above half, constituting 50.97% said newspapers reports enable them to a great extent to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy; 30.84% said it was to a very great extent, while newspaper reports enhanced by a little extent, 12.01% of the respondents' ability to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy.

From the responses generated, newspaper reports scored (81.81%) in enabling readers to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy. The survey result thus indicates that newspaper reports may have helped readers make sense out of the intertwined and complex issues involved in militancy, such as the negative impacts of the oil industry on the environment and means of livelihood, mismanagement of oil revenue since Nigeria's independence in 1960, corruption, failure to redistribute oil wealth, the utter lack of development in the Delta, failure of oil wealth to be translated into better living conditions for Deltans, state aggression in the region and lately, resource control

Table 5: Readers' perception of newspaper coverage of militancy

Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very satisfactory	72	23.38
Satisfactory	171	55.52
No opinion	14	4.55
Unsatisfactory	46	14.94
Very unsatisfactory	5	1.62
Total	308	100

Table 5 summarizes readers' perception of newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta. It indicates that over half, representing 55.52% of the readers adjudged the coverage to be satisfactory. Seventy-two respondents representing 23.38% rated the coverage as very satisfactory. On the downside, 46 respondents, representing 14.94%, perceived the coverage as unsatisfactory. Those that held no opinion on the coverage represented a meagre 4.55% of the respondents.

The analysis shows that an overwhelming majority of the respondents adjudged the coverage to be satisfactory by as high as 78.90%. Given the result, it can be concluded, therefore that the newspapers acted in a responsible manner in their coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta.

9. Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between newspaper reports and escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta.

Table 6: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient analysis of the relationship between newspaper reports and escalation of militancy in the Niger delta

Variables	Σx	Σ^2	Σxy	Df	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
	Σy	Σy^2					$p < .05$
Newspaper reports	4.716	74.254	64.327	306	0.001	0.195	NS
Escalation of militancy	4.201	63.183					

NS = Not sig. at P<.05 alpha level; N = 308

As shown in Table 5, the calculated r-value of 0.001 is less than the critical r-value of 0.195 at 0.05 alpha level with 306 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between newspaper report and escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta is accepted.

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between newspaper portrayal of militancy and its perception by readers.

Table 7: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient of the relationship between newspaper portrayal of militancy and its perception by readers

Variables	Σx	Σx^2	Σxy	Df	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
	Σy	Σy^2					p < .05
Portrayal of militancy	5.459	99.415	92.577	306	0.316	0.195	*
Perception of militancy	5.178	89.468					

*Sig. at p<.05 alpha level; N = 308

Data presented in Table 7 indicates that the calculated r-value of 0.316 is greater than the critical r-value of 0.195 at 0.05 alpha level with 306 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between newspaper portrayal of militancy and its perception by readers is discarded and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Readers' perception of militancy relates significantly to its portrayal in the press. This may be an indication that depending on how the press portrays a given conflict, readers' perception may be influenced accordingly.

10. Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions raised and the hypotheses tested.

Research Question One: To what extent do newspaper reports equip readers in identifying the dominant issues involve in militancy?

The answer to the question was generated from data in Table 4. The Table indicates that newspaper reports equipped readers by as much as 81.81% in identifying the dominant issues involved in militancy. From the result, one can conclude that newspapers equipped readers adequately through their coverage to identify the dominant issues involved in militancy.

To sustain this effort newspaper reporters should and are expected to do a reasonable level of conflict analysis, interpretative and investigative reporting in order to get to the underlying factors that brought on and sustained militancy. All these would translate into in-depth coverage in a context that gives more meaning to the issues at stake.

This is in line with the assertion by Gjelten (1998, p.15) that "if conflicts are to be prevented or settle they must first be understood". This informed position canvassed by Gjelten will be elusive without interpretative reporting, which has been variously described as taking "The reader behind the scenes of the day's action" ; relating "the news to the reader's own framework and experience; " helping the reader "make sense out of the facts; " putting "meaning into the news" (cited in McDougall, 1977, p.161).

Given the complexities of conflict, there is a heightened need for interpretative reporting to help the reader make sense out of the series of interconnected issues involved, the claims and counterclaims of the parties and the hidden agenda of aggrieved parties, which are seldom covered in drab deadpan reporting. This demands contextual analysis, which Ohaja (2005) argues cogently would help "... the reader to properly locate the event/issues in context or in the overall scheme of things as no event occurs in a vacuum" (p.37). This is the task before the media in covering conflicts. It should recognize "the particular event as one of a series with both a cause and an effect" and the awareness (in conflict reportage) that "an item of news is not an isolated incident but one inevitably linked to a chain of other issues" (McDougall, 1977, p. 12)

It can be concluded therefore from the analysis of readers' responses, that newspapers to a large extent equipped their readers in identifying the dominant issues involved in militancy. This is an indication that the press fulfilled its primary roles of information and education.

Research Question Two: How do readers perceive newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta?

The results in Table 5 provide the answer to the question. As the Table clearly shows, more than a half (55.52%) of the readers perceive the coverage as satisfactory; 23.38% adjudged the coverage to be very satisfactory, while 14.95% rated the coverage as unsatisfactory.

The scores for very satisfactory and satisfactory total 78.90%, while those of unsatisfactory and very unsatisfactory amount to 16.56%. Readers who expressed no opinion scored only 14.94%. Given this result, readers' perception of the coverage is significantly satisfactory. This is supported by the test result of null hypothesis one which showed no significant relationship between newspaper reports and the escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta.

The present result varies from what Orhewere and Kur (2004) found from their study on the audience perception of the role of the mass media in the coverage of the 2001 Tiv-Jukun ethnic conflict in Nigeria. Their result indicated that the audience perceived the coverage as "unbalanced, inaccurate and biased" (p. 62). An IMS-led study on media coverage of the Darfur conflict in Sudanese and non-Sudanese media indicates that "interviewed media representatives expressed dissatisfaction" (p. 43) with the coverage. It is likely that the respondents' perception of the coverage may have been influenced by the portrayal of the conflict in the various media analyzed in that study. In the present work, result of null hypothesis two indicates that readers' perception of militancy relates significantly to its portrayal in the press.

11. Summary of Findings

The study was conducted to investigate readers' perception of Nigerian newspaper coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta. It was guided by two specific objectives and two hypotheses. The survey method was used, while the questionnaire was applied as instrument for data collection. Data gathered was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics was simple percentages which were used to analyse the research questions. Inferential statistical analysis involving the use of Pearson Product Moment Coefficient analysis was done on the hypotheses, which were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

From the data analysis and discussion of findings, the following results emerged.

1. The dailies equipped readers adequately (81.81%) in identifying the dominant issues involved in militancy.
2. More than a half of the respondents perceived the coverage of militancy as satisfactory.
3. There is no significant relationship between newspaper reports and escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta.
4. Newspaper portrayal of militancy has a significant relationship to its perception by newspaper readers in the Niger Delta.

The study puts forward some hypotheses. They have the potential of translating into theories if they are confirmed by further empirical enquiries. The work identifies them as "Media Coverage and Conflict Perception Hypotheses" which states as follows:

1. Audience perception of any conflict is shaped by the media's portrayal of the conflict.
2. Wrong perception of media content can result in wrong judgment of media performance in conflict situations.

It is expected that scholars and researchers in the field of media and conflict studies will carry out further empirical investigations to uphold or refute these hypotheses. In this way, what we know in the realm of media and conflict studies will continue to expand.

11. Recommendations

Giving the findings and conclusions reached, the following recommendations are put forward.

1. There is need in conflict reportage to incorporate a wide range of sources (as much as is humanly possible). This will provide a platform for the rivaling sides to communicate with each other in order to enhance conflict resolution.
2. Conflict sensitive journalism should be developed and taught in journalism schools, mass communication departments and journalism-related fields in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This will enhance a better understanding of the dynamics of conflict by journalists and engender a more responsible reporting of conflicts by the news media.
3. Journalists covering conflicts should be adequately trained in investigative and interpretative journalism. This is important in order to give the readers all sides of the issue at stake.

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