

CHANGING IRREDENTIST TENDENCIES IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE SEPARATISTS ACTIVITIES IN THE COUNTRY

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Abstract

This study examined the level of frequency and prominence of media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria, how it promotes irredentism and how media can change the narratives. The researchers used the agenda setting and the social responsibility theories. The researchers used mixed research method: in-depth interview as the method of qualitative data collection and the content analysis as the method of quantitative data collection. The populations were 220 registered journalists in Imo state and, all the editions of Daily Sun newspaper from January, 2021 to June, 2021, which was 159 editions: for in-depth interview and content analysis respectively. The researcher interviewed 5% of the qualitative population - 11 journalists; for the content analysis, using the composite week sampling technique, 24 editions of the selected newspapers were sampled in six months. The study's finding included that media unconsciously place prominence to irredentist movements while trying to carry out its social responsibility. This high level of coverage and prominence of the violent instill fear and fright in members of society. With the level of fear instil and the success takeover of some places, secessionists have high hopes that their plans are working out well; giving them more reason to push harder. The researchers recommend that mass media practitioners especially those operating social media should moderate the level of frequency as well as prominence of media coverage given to the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media Coverage, Irredentism, Secessionists, Changing Narratives, Nigeria

Introduction

Obviously, irredentism (or secession tendencies) has characterized Nigeria for a long time now. According to Achille Mbembe, a good number of these conflicts started not merely because of the need or interest of irredentists or separatists to take back their “ethno-cultural space” which has been overtaken and controlled by a sovereign state; rather, their struggles and agitations are mostly that of having control and being in-charge of the vital resources of these areas. These agitations are becoming rampant within African states. Modern political liberalisation practices and courses of actions seem to create more leverage for and liberally permit separatist and irredentist movements within African states. There are cases and evidences of irredentists and separatists movements in various African states including in Senegal (Casamance), in Cameroon (the Anglophone region), in Angola (the Cabinda enclave), in Namibia (the Caprivi Strip), in Nigeria (the Niger Delta) and in Uganda (northern Uganda). Separatist and irredentist movements are based on ethno-cultural foundations but manifest most often in struggles for resource control (Sama & Johnson-Ross, 2006).

The question that concerns us in the media is the role that media play in promoting or demoting the persistence of the growing irredentists' movements in Nigeria. There are varying opinions regarding the role of the media in the persistent irredentist tendencies in Nigeria. First and foremost, Tusa (1992), cited in Ojo and Adebayo (2013), opines that the media is eligible to be classified as invisible governments. This is because the media has the ability to make or even destroy governments given appropriate conditions. Also, the media can cause war or create conditions for peace; as well as promote development or create difficulties in the way of development. The mass media educate the public on state affairs, disseminate information on the activities of the government – which are most often secretive in third world countries – expose wrongdoing, including corrupt practices that impacts negatively on economic development, and keep the government on its toes, all to ensure “accountability, transparency, probity, and integrity” (Ojo, 2003).

From the foregoing, media wields great influence and power. That is the reason some media practitioners hold the school of thoughts that media participation in growing irredentist tendencies can be likened to negative charges. The more media tries to do good by covering these tendencies, the more it fuels it.

They hold the belief that the media provide the oxygen which terrorism breathes (Karabassi, 2019). As a result of the social responsibility of the media, there are expected to convey to the authorities, the grievances, the needs, the problems, the hopes and aspirations of the people and the responses of the authorities may in turn be conveyed by the media to the people (Ojo & Adebayo, 2013). By trying to inform the masses of the growing cases of irredentism, the media unconsciously places them in prominence. This is the cause of concern for this study.

Statement of the Problem

There are series of stormy separatist agitations in Nigeria, which are triggered by the diversities of the country in terms of ethno-religious as well as socio-political difference accentuated to the desire and struggle for secession. These movements have characterized the country right from her early years as a sovereign country. One of the major secessionist movements in the country is the Biafra separatist movement which led to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war between 1967 and 1970. The declaration of the war as ending without victor or vanquish seemed to signal the end of Biafra movement; but, the Indigenous People of Biafra resurged recently the Biafra movement.

At the instance, mass media platforms began saturated with the coverage of activities of these secessionist groups. The newspaper seems to be one of the media platforms that gave voice and prominence to these movements. As a result of this, some media scholars considered this problematic as they claimed that the media were becoming parties in fueling major conflicts and wars by propagating their ideologies, ventilating their grievances and vilifying their opponents. They frowned at the contribution of the media, whether consciously or unconsciously to fueling these conflicts.

From this point of view, it appears that there is something the media can do to play down these conflicts. Can the media be used to prevent and quell these conflicts? What should the media do differently, with particular attention to their coverage and prominence, in order to discourage the persistent and growing irredentist tendencies in the country? Answering this question is the centre of this study's periphery.

Research Questions

The objective of this study is to find out the level of frequency and prominence of media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria, how it promotes irredentism and how media can change the narratives. Based on this, the study seeks to answer the following question

- i. What is the frequency of media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria?
- ii. How prominent is media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria?
- iii. Does the level of frequency of media coverage promote the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria?
- iv. Can the level of prominence of media coverage promote the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria?
- v. Which role can media play in demoting the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Role of Media in Irredentists Tendencies in Nigeria

There are differing viewpoints on the media's role in Nigeria's continuous irredentist ambitions. First of all, according to Tusa (1992), referenced by Ojo and Adebayo (2013), media can be characterized as invisible governments. This is because, under the right circumstances, the media has the power to shape, if not destroy, governments. Additionally, the media has the ability to produce conflict or establish conditions for peace, as well as support or obstruct progress. The media educates the public on state affairs, disseminates information on government activities – which are often secret in third-world countries – exposes wrongdoing, such as corrupt practices that harm economic development, and keeps the government on its toes, all in the name of ensuring "accountability, transparency, probity, and integrity" (Ojo, 2003).

From another perspective, Karabassi (2019), on the media's role in Nigeria's developing irredentist tendencies, believes that the media provides the oxygen that terrorism needs to thrive. As a result of the media's social responsibility, they are expected to express to authorities the people's grievances, wants, difficulties, hopes, and aspirations, and the authorities' responses may then be given to the people by the media (Ojo & Adebayo, 2013). By trying to inform the masses of the growing cases of irredentism, the media unconsciously places prominence on them. With this timely and up-to-date coverage, terrorism and other

forms of irredentist activities continue to receive prominence, thrive and attract public attention.

In the very words of Margaret Thatcher, during a conference with members of the American Bar Association in 1985, “the media provides the oxygen of publicity on which terrorists depend” (Thatcher, 1985 in Ambrosio, 2021, para. 2). This striking supposition holds the media to account on two counts; first, it is either the media are either the best friend of terrorists (Hoffman, 2006) or the media is unconscious providing the enabling motivation needed for terrorists to thrive (Thatcher, 1985 in Ambrosio, 2021). As far as this, quite a lot of scholars, such as Ogbondah and Agbese (2017), have arrived at the conclusion that there is a synergetic chemistry concerning media and terrorism. This group of scholars believes that both tradition and modern media have provided terrorists with a variety of “oxygen” which are essential for them to continuous thriving powerfully.

On the other hand, scholars, such as Michel Wieviorkain 1993, reject this interactive relationship between the two entities (Ambrosio, 2021). Therefore, the relationship between mass media and terrorism has turned into a subject of ongoing discussion among researchers and experts. This is also the case in Nigeria. They are scholars who hold firm the belief that the persistent, continuous and rigorous coverage of terrorism, violence crimes against the unity of the country and irredentist activities is gaining more media attention, hence, its persistence.

Changing the Narratives of Irredentists Activities in Nigeria by Media

The concept of changing narratives is fast gaining prominence in social science studies. According to Fields (2020), changing narrative revolves around actively redirecting the understanding of people about a particular ideology by reframing often unquestioned ideas about a topic. By widening the frame and helping people see how their beliefs can expand to include the new ideas; the conditions are set for the ultimate goal which is a change in definition, policy or mode of operation. Changing the narratives can imply finding new meaning and significant to ideas. In the opinion of Davidson (2016), changing narrative rests on the premise that reality is socially constructed through narrative (stories, reports, descriptions and explanations), and that in order to bring about change in the world, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which the construction of this narratives takes place.

As seen from the previous section, some group of scholars are already spreading the narrative that the media is susceptible to consciously or unconsciously promoting irredentist tendencies in Nigeria. The big question that bugs the media in the light of this presumption is how can the media help in demoting the growing irredentist tendencies in the country? What can the media do to change the narratives of the growing irredentist tendencies in the country? Although these questions appear so simple, providing feasible and practicable answers might pose challenges. Nonetheless, there are a few suggestions the media can look into while trying the change these narratives. It is a wide belief that the media has what it takes to discourage the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria. If the frequency and prominence place by the media on the agitators of these tendencies help it to grow and thrive. Then, it will be common sense to pin point on the periphery that under reporting of these activities will discourage its growth.

Empirical Reviews

Okeke, Okwumba, Ezeah and Gever (2019) opined in their study that aggressive agitations for the secession of South-East from Nigeria is one of the crisis situations that has persevered, even after the civil war. The researchers analysed the manifest content of four newspapers – The Vanguard, The Punch, The Guardian and This Day from June 1st 2015 to June 1st 2018. Their result showed that most of the newspapers examined cited official sources. It was also found that less attention was paid to causes of the agitations as well as solutions. The implications of these results on the frustration aggression and media framing theories are also explored.

Also, Eze (2019) conducted a research to examine how selected newspapers framed the Biafran agitation from January, 2016 to December, 2017 – a period which recorded a spike in the activities of Biafran agitators who called for a referendum to carve out the Republic of Biafra. Findings also show that media correspondents were the primary frame source for stories on the renewed Biafra agitation. The print media perceived the agitation mainly from human rights crisis where the agitators are deprived of the freedom to protest and are de-humanised by the Nigerian security operatives; and questioned the government over human rights abuses.

Odi and Ngene (2017) examined how the Nigerian media reported Biafra and Boko Haram, and how peace journalism approach can be adopted to improve media performance in this regard. Using desk review, descriptive survey, content analysis and personal interview methods, the study found that the Nigerian media adopted war journalism approach in reporting Biafra agitation and Boko Haram, amidst influencing factors.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories were used for this study. First the agenda setting theory, which was formally developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 American presidential election, believes that the media can make any societal issue an agenda for discussion by repeatedly reporting and talking about it. While it is the media's social responsibility to set an agenda for people to talk about and interact with, when the mass media have reason to believe without a doubt that the message and updates given about a particular idea are harmful to society, they gradually withdraw their attention from coverage of the issues.

Propounded in 1956 by Fred Siebert (Johnson, Layefa & Taiwo, 2016), the social responsibility theory used in this study explains the responsibilities and duty of journalists and the press to serve the public interest and always be concerned about the welfare and safety of the people by providing an accurate, ample, and intellectual account of the day's events. The media is under a social obligation to be gate keepers. As gatekeepers, they are to censor information that gets to society. With this social function, it can under report irredentist tendencies in order to discourage its growth.

This study uses the agenda setting to explain the level of prominence the media gives to irredentist tendencies in Nigeria which is believed to lead to its persistence. It uses the social responsibility theory to explain the need for the media to put the safety of society before its coverage of issues that are detrimental to society.

Research Method

The study used the mixed method of research. The researcher used in-depth interview as the method for qualitative data collection and content analysis as the method for quantitative data collection. The population of this study comprised all registered journalists in Imo state. According to Obayi and Onyebuchi in 2019, the number of registered journalists is 220. On the other hand, the content analysis universe comprised all the editions of Daily Sun newspaper from January, 2021 to June, 2021. That is 159 editions.

The researcher interviewed 5% of the total population. This is because in interview the small the size of the sample the better. Therefore, 11 journalists were an ideal sample for the study. The journalists for this study were purposively sampled based on their knowledge of the matter as well as their availability to participant in the interview. For the content analysis, using the composite week sampling technique as proposed by Wimmer and Dominick (2011), 1 edition of the paper was randomly picked to represent each week. This equaled to 24 editions in six months. In-depth interview data was collected using the interview guide. While the structured coding sheet and guide by Ukpong (2021) was used for collecting data for content analysis. The researcher used face validity to ensure that the instruments were valid enough to generate the desired data. To ensure inter-coders reliability one edition from each month was coded to check the intercoder reliability which was then tested using Cohen's Kappa statistics which showed 0.90 level of agreement.

The unit of analysis was news and feature stories. Variables measured were frequency and prominence of coverage. Prominence was measured using placement in the newspaper – front page rating highest, followed by back page, then centre spread and inside pages rated least (Obayi, Anorue & Onyebuchi, 2016). The interviewing session and coding session were done by the lead researcher with the help of two other researchers within a period of one week and two days, excluding Sunday. Data generated from content analysis were analysed using table distributions and frequency, as well as, calculation of percentages. The thematic analysis and explanation building technique was used to present and interpret the qualitative data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Presentation of Content Analysis Data

Table 1: Frequency of media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria

Irredentists/ Secessionist Groups	Frequency	Percentages
Banditry	82	25
Oduduwa Republic	57	18
IPOB	101	32
Other secessionist issues	78	25
Total	318	100

(Source: Field work, 2021)

Table 1 showed that regardless of the fact that banditry (18%), which is promoted by the Fulani herders, Boko Haram and other violent agitations in the north part of the country, has been in brutal operation for years now;

IPOB was the most covered (32%) secessionist movement from in the country.

Table 2 Prominence of media coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria

Irredentists/ Secessionist Group	Placement of story				
	Front page (%)	Back page (%)	Centre spread (%)	Inside page (%)	Total (%)
Banditry	52 (63)	0 (0)	0 (0)	30 (37)	82 (100)
Oduduwa Republic	17 (30)	2 (4)	0 (0)	38 (66)	57 (100)
IPOB	49 (48)	12 (12)	4 (4)	36 (36)	101 (100)
Other secessionist issues	10 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	68 (87)	78 (100)
Total	130 (41)	12 (4)	4 (1)	172 (54)	318 (100)

(Source: Field work, 2021)

On the general level of prominence given to irredentist movements and secessionists groups, table 2 showed that the level of prominence was moderate with almost half of the coverage appearing on the front pages of the selected newspapers (41%). This level of prominence is sufficient enough to promote the activities of these groups. On an individual assessment, banditry received the most prominent coverage. IPOB is the next most prominently coverage irredentist movement in the country.

Presentation of In-depth Interview Data

Influence of the frequency and prominence of media coverage on the promotion of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria

In response to whether the frequency of media coverage promotes growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria, Respondent 1 said:

It is a truism that the media is the heart beat of irredentist movement in Nigeria. I am saying this because you know that it is the media that give wide coverage to the issues. This is not only happening in Nigeria, even, (stammers) all over the world. The more the media covers this people, they will see it that the world is seeing them at such they will do more.

In a similar opinion, Respondent 11 agrees that the media give wide coverage to these activities which may be responsible for its wide spread; adding however, that the media is merely doing its job of informing society. In his words:

When it comes to media coverage of self-determination grievances... hmmm.... It is a very difficult issue to discuss. You know, the media has the duty of telling the people what is happening around them as it is happening. You don't expect the media to keep quiet when these things are happening. But, it is also negative because when media report and talk about these people the media sets the agenda for them to thrive. This is well the problem lies.

In addition to the foregoing, Respondent 7 expresses concern, not on the appropriate coverage of these movements, but, on the over-reporting and sensationalising of these reports. The respondent opines that:

Hmm. I will say that... that... ordinarily, it is part of the responsibility of the media to report virtually everything that happens within their locality – whether it is irredentist or not. But, in... in... the case of what we are seeing in Nigeria, it has always been reported. Sometimes, (delays) you know, over reported (emphaseses). Emm. Sometimes over-reported. Like the issue of IPOB agitation in the recent times

in the south east region. It is very very (emphasises) clear that the media play a prominent role by giving them too much coverage – both locally and internationally.

Respondent 8 give a concrete summary. She said:

When you talk about irredentist movement... IPOB... Boko Haram... Oduduwa... name them, you will always see the handwriting of the media in escalating it. The media tries to bring it to the fore. Take Boko Haram for example, you will always see that when these people act out their nefarious activities, they drop it on the media. And the media is always they to blow it in the bid of trying to make people know what is happening. The social media is a chief culprit here.

According to the fourth Respondent,

It is very clear that there is this wide (pauses) wider media coverage and reportage on irredentist activities and movements in Nigeria. There is clear (stops)... the media promotes it very well. The media promotes it. Just like recently... what happened? The issues of the spokesperson of IPOB, Emma Powerful, who Channels Television granted interview... a telephone interview, after that the government wanted to clamp down on channels. They fined Channels 5 million or so. But, there was this public uproar... these agitations against the government but in support of Channels action of allowing the leader of an irredentist group to be heard. That is what is happening. Whether you like it or not, the media remains the heart of irredentist movement across the world... not only in Nigeria... across the world

Without ado, Respondent 10 hurriedly agreed that the level of frequency and prominence given to irredentists by the media promote it.

(Hurriedly) Yes! Yes! That is what it does. It does promote it. The prominence it gets is what promotes it. It is the frequency and prominence that these guys get that makes them think that what they are pursuing is becoming a reality so they have to push harder. These agitations, these movements... ooooo... because of the prominence they receives from the media gives them hope that one day... like secessionist groups... that they will have their country. So, it is through the media... in need through the media... that they draw their strength from.

Media's role in changing the narratives and demoting the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria

After sharing the sentiments of other respondents that the media is aiding the escalation of irredentism in Nigeria, Respondent 2 clearly observes that the activities of the media in covering the irredentists does not only give them prominent, it also instills fear in the mind of the masses. According to him,

It is commonplace now in Nigeria that whenever issues like that of IPOB comes up the media is always handy to report. When Boko Haram carries out their activities the media is always handy to report. When the army is engaged in a shootout with banditry or when the bandits kidnap or apprehend someone it is floated everyone on our media. This does not only give these agitators prominence. These media activities are often times instilling fear in the people. People are scared. People are afraid of visiting such areas. But if media will play down on those things definitely people... emm... emm. those outside the shores of Nigeria, even within Nigeria will not know the carnage happening in those areas. They will not at all (drags the all). When these people notice that they are not being reported. They would be discouraged.

The fourth respondent adds to the idea of media coverage and prominence of irredentist movement instilling fear too. He said that, “the media plays a very pivotal role in ensuring that people get information and they promote it in such a way that sometimes instilling fears in the populace. That is it!”

Respondent 3, Respondent 9, Respondent 6 and Respondent 5 have a very similar opinion as to what the media can do to discourage these activities and change the narratives. They solicit for ignoring and under-reporting some irredentist movements that have negative effects on the society and the greater good of the

general masses. “The best thing to do is to ignore some of the activities of these irredentists when it is not necessarily beneficial to society as at the time being” (Respondent 5).

Respondent 3 shared a personal experience, thus:

I remember that the spokesperson of IPOB sends me avalanche of messages... you know... so, for me, I try as a practicing journalists to select the few I can report and leave other because I look at it that if I continue to report all those things it will jeopardize or national unity. It is going to be very very catastrophic when it comes to national unity. But there are some journalists that the organization they work for are not properly regulated; especially the social media journalists and citizen journalists; whatever they see they report not looking at the magnitude or what it will cost the nation.

According to Respondent 9,

Over prominence given by the media to irredentism is greatly affecting the oneness and unity of the Nigerian state. As a result of this, if the level of prominence given to these issues are reduce deliberately by the media, some of these shabby agitations and rising agitations will die off gradually because people are no longer paying attention or hearing of their activities. They will gradually fade away. Then, the appropriate ones will be also sorted out by the government without anyone hearing of it. If this can be properly designed and put in place, I think it will help in reducing the growing irredentism in the country and globally.

Findings

This study made the following findings: First, IPOB was the most covered (32%) secessionist movement from in the country. Secondly, in addition to the fact that the level of prominence of irredentist movements was moderate with almost half of the coverage appearing on the front pages of the selected newspapers, IPOB was the second most prominently coverage irredentist movement in the country, after banditry.

The researchers found that the more the media covered irredentist, they notice that the world is seeing them at such they will do more. Also, media prominent and frequent coverage of these movement make sets the agenda for them to thrive; and often times instill fear in the people. It was determined that if the level of prominence given to these issues are reduce deliberately by the media, some of these shabby agitations and rising agitations will die off gradually because people are no longer paying attention or hearing of their activities.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, and even globally, the media have been accused and condemned of assisting in the escalation of growing irredentism. Arguments from respondents that participated in this study clearly point to the fact that while media tried to carry out its social responsibility of informing the populace of the activities of irredentist groups and secessionist movement that it unconsciously set the agenda for people to consider these movements as important issues to be discussed. The high level of coverage and prominence of the violent that comes with these movements instilled fear and fright among the members of society, who started to avoid these territories for the irredentists. With the level of fear instill and the success takeover of some places, as it is the case for the Boko Haram secessionist; they, according to the journalists interviewed, might have high hopes that their plans are working out well - the more reason for them to push harder.

This is level of over-reporting and over prominence especially over the social media becomes a very challenging issue as it leads to the growth and promotion of these movements. In order to discourage these movements, the participants of the study suggest a sort of reverse agenda setting. Instead of the media to set the agenda for these movements, the media is advised to propose policies that will moderate its coverage. This presents a model for a crisis-oriented agenda setting, where media is expected to retrieve its coverage of issues that started with the goodwill of the people but suddenly turns brutal and violent. This deliberate ignoring or under-reporting according to the finding of the study will lead to the gradually diminishing returning of the positive or promotional agenda set for the movement when it was initially beneficial.

Recommendations

From the findings made from this study, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- i. Mass media practitioners especially operating social media so moderate the level of frequency since it has been realized that this has the tendency to promote irredentism.
- ii. Also, editors as well as journalists should be very cautious in attributing prominence, in terms of placement on front pages, to the coverage of growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria because it has been very promotional.
- iii. Since high level of frequency and prominence of media coverage promote the growing irredentist tendencies in Nigeria, mass media houses and professionals should get acquainted with and adhere to ethical guidelines regulating the coverage of issues that can affect national unity and integration.
- iv. In addition, there should be a tuning of the agenda setting theory to handle a situation when activities began with public interest and changes course along the way. It will allow journalists from following up stories that have lost track of societal benefits and public goodwill.
- v. Next, media gatekeepers should deliberately reduce the reporting of some of these shabby agitations and rising agitations; this will make them die off gradually because people are no longer paying attention or hearing of their activities.

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