

Lokoja Residents' Perception of the Promotion of National Unity by the Nigerian Mass Media

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Abstract

This study investigates audience perception of the role of the mass media in promoting national unity in Nigeria. The general objective of the study was to determine the ways through which the Nigerian Mass media can effectively promote peace in a country of ethnic plurality like Nigeria. The study was anchored on the agenda setting theory. Survey research design was adopted while 385 copies of questionnaire were administered to residents of Lokoja. The results showed among others that the media can promote national unity by educating the public to love one another, educating the public to avoid ethnic, religious and political sentiments, promoting tolerance, educating the public on the benefits of national unity, discouraging cultural stereotype and promoting dialogue among Nigerians. The result also showed that the mass media in Nigeria have been working hard to promote national unity. The extent to which the media in Nigeria have achieved this feat of promoting national unity was found to be average. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended amongst others that the Nigerian government should consider the possibility of enacting a supportive act of parliament, mandating all media stations in Nigeria to dedicate at least 50% of their efforts to promoting national unity.

Key words: National Unity; Audience Perception; Mass Media; Role; Kogi State

Introduction

The attainment of national unity is the desire of every nation. Countries of the world seek to achieve complete national unity with the hope that such will translate to national development. National unity is a political construct that reflects the collective spirit and will of a group of people who agree to be part of a particular geographical area as a unit for the purpose of governance and action on behalf of all. But sometimes, the governance does not reflect the spirit and will of the people. Hence we have democracies and dictatorships, and in each, we have governance on behalf of the nation, acting with national unity only in so far as other nations are concerned, but with little or no internal national unity at all (Arise, 2011).

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The issue of how best to resolve the question of unity in Nigeria was first raised in 1957 when the Willink's Commission was set up to address the fears of minorities as Nigeria's nationalist leaders were engaged in negotiations for independence (Aimufua, 2007). There was the fear that unless measures were put in place to protect the minority groups in Nigeria, their welfare could be decided within an independent Nigeria by the whims and caprices of the majority groups. The Commission reports that there was actually fear from the minority that they would be marginalized by the majority. Commenting further on the problem of national unity in Nigeria, Aimufua (2007) writes:

Although the nationalists that fought for independence envisioned a united, stable and prosperous Nigeria, they hardly envisaged the fissiparous tendencies that have continued to overwhelm and threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. The result has been more ethnic cleavages, a 30 month civil war and intermittent military interventions in governance. In order to redress these issues, Nigerian leadership has always given recognition to Nigeria's diversity. However, although the Nigerian constitution aims to promote unity in diversity, the reality of contemporary Nigerian society betrays the tendency of the various entities to go in the opposite direction, thereby jeopardizing that constitutional aim (p. 17).

The above submission clearly depicts the true picture of the quest for national development in Nigeria. Danyi (2014) corroboratively notes that peace has become elusive in Nigeria following the exponential myriad security challenges facing it. In the face of all these, the media have a role to play in promoting unity in Nigeria. For example, section 22 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides for the role of the media thus: "the press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people." The media through their programmes, campaigns and reportage of sensitive issues, can promote national unity in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

For some time now, Nigeria has been facing the problem of national unity, this is evidenced in the secession threat by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the South East, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) in the Niger Delta region, the Boko Haram threat in the North East and the herdsmen – farmers conflict in North Central as well as other land and chieftaincy disputes. This dismal situation has constituted a threat to the unit of the acclaimed Africa's giant. Stake holders are in agreement that the mass media of communication have a role to play in promoting unity and integration in the country. The problem, therefore is, have the media actually lived up to expectation in the area of fostering national unity?

Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the audience perception of the role of mass media in promoting national unity
2. Ascertain the extent to which the mass media in Nigeria have promoted national unity
3. Determine the challenges to the use of mass media for the promotion of national unity in Nigeria.

The Mass Media: A Functionalist Perspective

The mass media are those channels through which messages get to a large heterogeneous and scattered audience. Technological advancement has made the concept of the mass media more complex than ever before. Danyi (2014) writes that improvements in technology have broadened the concept and ideology of the mass media. Today, we have what is commonly referred to as the new media. The media of mass communication play a central role in any society irrespective of demographic and psychographic disparity. Without the mass media, there cannot be mass communication.

This again goes to show the centrality of the mass media. The mass media have functions to play in any society irrespective of the political structure, the level of civilization among other variables. The difference may be in the level of operation. (Danyi, 2014) Egbon (2008) situating the mass media within the context of the social responsibility theory outlines the following as their (The media) functions:

1. Serving the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.
2. Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self- government
3. Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising.
4. Providing entertainment
5. Maintaining their own financial self- sufficiency so as to free them from the pressures of special interests.

Another important dimension is the tripartite function of the mass media as outlined by Harold Laswell in 1948 (Onakpa and Onogwu, 2010). These are surveillance function, which is the information function of monitoring and reporting issues from the environment. The second one is the correlation function which is the opinion, editorial or propaganda function. The third function is the cultural transmission function, which entails transmission of a nation's cultural heritage from generation to generation.

Looking at the tripartite function of the mass media, this study argues that the mass media can mount surveillance and capture the security situation confronting the Nigerian society. The media can then through editorials, commentaries and news analysis, present the consequences of the carnage and, in the process, persuade all Nigerians to embrace peace and unity. The media can go a step further by promoting Nigerian's cultural values that abhor suicide, killings and maiming of innocent citizens. Commenting on the role of the media in national unity, Okoro (2011) avers that Nigeria's most critical need, as a pluralistic nation, is the promotion of political sophistication and socio-political integration that will unite all ethnic/tribal groups.

The Nigerian Mass Media and the Burden of National Integration and Unity

The concept of integration and unity, according to Tijani (2005), is wider and it is a process of uniting groups with different backgrounds into one entity bound by common norms, values and interests. Each group or community has its own norms and values. It is not easy have common norms and values for a country. This is even more difficult among communities that are already different in terms of language, religion, economic function, and descent. Tijani goes further to state that the concepts of national integration and unity refer to the uniting of various groups that have different social and cultural backgrounds, into one physical entity.

Integration is a process of uniting groups with different backgrounds into one entity bound by common norms, values and interests. National integration as a form of social nurturing is a process of uniting various societies through a common identity by putting aside major differences but at the same time, not ignoring the original identity of each group. Therefore, national integration is more an abstract process, a coming or binding together that is genuine and time consuming. The unity that exists in the country is founded upon power sharing, a democratic government, sound economy distribution and cultural tolerance. The choice of national identity is one of the beliefs that to create a united society, a new Nigerian identity is formed- with similarities among them. They probably have the same language, values and way of life. This can be achieved through the process of socialization such as the same system of education, using the same language, inter-marriage and practicing the national ideology. What should be nurtured is national consciousness and not ethnic or religious consciousness, this is because if ethnic or religious consciousness are still strong, then national consciousness will remain weak (Arisis, 2011), as every ethnic or religious group member allegiance would be to the group and not to the government of the nation.

Unity connotes a social and political process. Integration is organic and anthropic process. Notionally at least, you have to morph the people together. Integration is deeper, and can be the basis of unity, Nigeria needs both. But we should aim at full integration. Unity will automatically follow. All these may be familiar, but it is the one thing that has eluded Nigeria for over 50 years of her independence. This will continue to elude Nigeria, as witnessed in the last National Conference on which much hope was placed, but which rather became confrontational. The

confrontations intensified, as the “jaw-jaw” kept on intensifying as the Conference progressed. Commenting on the role of the media in promoting national unity, Okoro (2011) writes:

The ability of news sources to objectively analyze and interpret significant issues in Nigeria’s political context has been a subject of tremendous concern since the establishment of newspapers in the country over the past fifty years. The agenda-setting power of the press, which (McCombs, 1981) described as a “by-product of a social interactive process”, is crucial for the development of a society and for the stimulation of intellectual consciousness, particularly in Nigeria that desperately needs the unification of various ethnic communities to work together as citizens of one nation in order to support the struggle for democratic reforms and governance. (p. 550).

Almost every issue in Nigeria has been politicized since 1983. This has, in effect, vitiated the activities of the press in relation to its constitutional role, as spelt out in chapter two of the Nigerian constitution (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). So more than ever before in Nigeria’s history, some issues have become so sensitive that they have made the question of national integration a major cause for concern.

Review of Related Studies

Asemah (2013) carried out a research on “*Public Perception of Mass Media Framing of Terrorism in Nigeria: Implications for National Unity.*” The objectives of the study, among others, were to find out, from the respondents’ perspectives, the extent to which mass media frame terrorism in Nigeria; the reasons why media are interested in reporting terrorism in Nigeria; the factor responsible for terrorism in Nigeria and whether media framing of terrorism in Nigeria has any influence on national unity.

Findings show that the extent to which the media cover terrorism in Nigeria is very great (73%). Media framing of terrorism activities in Nigeria was reported to be on the high side. Findings also show that media framing of terrorisms in Nigeria is capable of causing national disunity and this is because the media have effect on the people. The researcher identified the reasons why the mass media pay attention to terrorism to include fighting competition, encouraging large audience and whipping up sentiments. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that media framing of terrorism is capable of negatively affecting national unity. The researcher recommends, among others, that the mass media must be careful in the way and manner in which they report terrorism. This study is related to the current one because it investigated how media coverage of terrorism influences national unity. Since the current study also seeks to address issues of national unity, the two studies became relevant.

Similarly, Danyi (2014) investigated the role of the media in combating insurgency and promoting national unity in Nigeria. Survey design was adopted. Findings of the study show that for the media to promote national unity in its coverage of national security, it must honestly discourage stereotypes and regionalization in the face of security challenges. It also showed that

the media can do this by presenting the security challenges in the country as a national problem, avoid identifying a particular religion as the cause of Nigeria's security problem, avoid identifying people of a particular region as terrorists and avoid the use of words that tend to project a particular ethnic group or tribe in bad light.

Although this outline shows that the media can promote national unity in the face of insecurity, little or no attention is paid to the factors that can make or mar this process; the current study will investigate this. Ogwo (2015) carried out a research on "*Newspaper reportage of security issues in Nigeria.*" The study adopted content analysis method and studied two prominent newspapers (The Vanguard and Daily Trust). The study discovered that both newspapers reported security issues but the placement of such news affected its impact on the audience. Therefore, the study recommended that security issues be placed in front pages and accompanied with pictures to help the audience to understand the issues very well.

Likewise Emmanuel (2017) investigated the press coverage of ethno-religious crisis in Southern Kaduna. Two newspapers' were purposively selected for the study and content analysis was employed. Findings showed that the prominence accorded to the crisis was very low. The study recommended that the press should be involved more in investigative reporting and give more prominence to ethno religious crisis because of its strong negative consequences on national unity.

All the above mentioned studies are interested in media reportage of issues that can endanger national unity. Although none is inclined to audience perception, they are related to this very study because all of them examine the role of media in promoting and achieving national unity and integration through peaceful coexistence.

Theoretical Framework

This study hinges on the Agenda Setting Theory. The theory posits that the media determine what issues to be considered most important in the society. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972/1973. The theory is important because it is a media effect theory. Folarin (1998) remarks that the agenda-setting theory implies that the media predetermine what issues the audience can think about. The scholar adds that the media do this through factors like frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or timing on radio and television among others.

Agenda setting theory has been criticized by many scholars who argue that the media do not actually set agenda for the public. Nwodu (2007, p. 50) posits that: "media do not chronologically list a number of agenda for members of the public to discuss; they merely report events for public consumption and have no control over the use the public makes out of the reports."

This theory, nevertheless, gives an insight into the role of the media in making the unity of Nigeria an issue of public agenda so that the entire public will discuss it and work towards its attainment.

Methodology

Survey research design was adopted for this study. Survey was considered because it is the most appropriate method in behavioral studies. According to Sobowale (2008, p. 27), “the survey technique is the most commonly used by behavioural scientists and it involves drawing up a set of questions on various aspects of the subject which selected members of a population are to react to.” This study was conducted in Lokoja, Kogi State; the researchers purposively selected Lokoja because it is the seat of most media houses in Kogi State. The population was made up of all the residents of the area. The total population of the area is 324,323 (NPC, 2006). Multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted for the study. First, the researchers purposively selected Lokoja as the area of study. At the second stage of the sampling, the researchers divided Lokoja into Lokoja urban and Lokoja rural. The decision to divide the area based on this criterion was because the researcher needed learned respondents.

Sample Size

In determining the sample size for this study, the Australian calculator as provided by the National Statistical service was found useful. The calculation yielded the following:

Determining Sample Size

Confidence Level:	95%
Population Size:	324,323
Proportion:	0.5
Confidence Interval:	0.05
Upper	0.55000
Lower:	0.45000
Standard Error	0.02551
Relative Standard Error	5.10
Sample Size:	385

By this calculator, the sample size for this study is 385

Results

Out of the 385 copies of the questionnaire administered, 355(92%) were found useful. Thus the analysis was based on the 355 copies of the questionnaire returned and found useful.

Table 1: Responses on the mass media promoting national Unity

Scale	VHE(5)	HE(4)	AV(3)	LE(2)	VLE(1)	TOTAL	X	REMARK
The mass media in Nigeria have been trying to promote national unity	116	112	45	40	42	355	3.5	High extent
If not for the media, problem of national unity would have been worst.	104	122	38	46	45	355	3.5	High extent
Media report/programmes in Nigeria have effectively promoted national unity	93	106	52	69	35	355	3.4	Average
Media reports/programmes in Nigeria have helped in combating ethnicity	116	113	51	37	38	355	3.8	High extent

Source: Field Survey, 2018

It should be noted that the mean scores of 4.5-5.00 were considered as very high, 3.50-4.49 were considered as high extent (VHE), 2.50-3.49 were considered as average (AV) 1.50-2.49 were considered as low extent (LE) while the mean score of 0.50-1.49 were considered very low extent (VLE). Based on this scaling method, table II shows that the mass media in Nigeria have been trying to a high extent to promote national unity in the country.

The media in Nigeria have also helped to a high extent by salvaging the situation in Nigeria from degenerating. The extent to which the media in Nigeria have been promoting national unity is average. The table also shows that media reports/programmes in Nigeria have helped to a high extent in combating ethnicity.

Table 2: What are the ways through which the media can promote national unity in Nigeria?

Scale	SA(5)	A(4)	U(3)	SD(2)	D(1)	Total	X	Decision
Educating the public to love one another	118	111	44	40	42	355	3.6 ≈ 4	Accepted
Educating the public to avoid ethnic, religious and political sentiments	108	121	37	45	45	355	3.5≈ 4	Accepted
Promoting tolerance	92	110	51	68	34	355	3.4	Accepted
Educating the public on the benefits of national unity	115	117	50	36	37	355	3.3	Accepted
Discouraging cultural stereotype	111	118	51	37	38	355	3.6≈4	Accepted
Promoting dialogue	113	119	49	38	36	355	3.6≈4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2018

The table above shows that the ways through which the media can promote national unity in Nigeria are educating the public to love one another, educating the public to avoid ethnic, religious and political sentiments, promoting tolerance, educating the public on the benefits of national unity, discouraging cultural stereotype and promoting dialogue.

TABLE 3: What are the challenges in the use of mass media for promotion of National Unity in Nigeria?

Scale	SA(5)	A(4)	U(3)	SD(2)	D(1)	Total	X	Decision
Existing press laws	114	112	45	41	43	355	3.9≈4	Accepted
Ownership factor	105	123	38	47	44	355	3.5≈4	Accepted
Remuneration of journalists	94	105	52	63	36	355	3.4	Accepted
Level of adherence to ethnical guide	116	118	52	32	38	355	3.6≈4	Accepted
Consciousness of social responsibility	112	119	52	38	34	355	3.6≈4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Result from the table above shows that the factors that can limit the ability of the media from effectively promoting national unity are existing press laws, ownership factor, and remuneration of journalists, level of adherence to ethical guide and consciousness of social responsibility.

Table 4: Responses on the perception of respondents on the promotion of National Unity by Nigerian Mass Media

Scale	SA(4)	A(3)	U(2)	D(1)	TOTAL
Very effective	250	100	4	-1	355
Effective	200	148	5	2	355
Less effective	10	5	1	339	355
Not effective	-	4	1	350	355

Source: Field Survey, 2018

It is very clear from the above that a vast majority of the respondents agreed that the media have been very effective in their role of promoting national unity in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The result of this study shows that the media can promote national unity by educating the public to love one another, educating the public on the benefits of national unity, discouraging cultural stereotype and promoting dialogue. The result of the study shows that through awareness creation, the mass media in Nigeria can promote national unity.

The result further shows that the media in Nigeria have a role to play in promoting national unity, which is in line with the agenda setting theory adopted in this study. The theory among others posits that the media determine which issues to consider as important and which not to. What this means is that, if the media make the issue of national unity an important one through headline cast, frequency of reportage, then the audience will give top most attention to it. This is more so that there is significant relationship between frequency of reportage and the agenda setting function of the mass media. The result of this study has implication on the social responsibility function of the media. It means the media must carry out their social responsibility to the Nigeria society in the area of national unity.

The result of this study further shows that the mass media in Nigeria have been trying to a high extent to promote national unity in the country. Also, media reports in Nigeria have helped to a high extent in combating ethnicity as can be seen in table I. The result of this study is in sharp contrast with that of Asemah (2013) which reported that media reportage has divided the country

rather than unite it. Based on this result, the researchers maintain that but for the media, the situation in Nigeria would have degenerated to the point of absurdity. Nigeria has many ethnic groups with different languages and dialects; this has made it difficult to achieve national unity. Aimufua (2007) paints the picture thus:

The issue of national integration and unity has occupied the apex of national discourse in Nigeria since it secured political independence from Britain in 1960. The Nigerian state's solution to this fundamental issue is rooted in its basic constitutional principle which espouses "unity within diversity." As the Nigerian nation is made up of over 250 ethnic and nationality groups, the issue has always been how to make a "Nigeria" out of these Nigerians (p. 1).

Based on the result of this study and with regards to the agenda setting theory of the media, the researchers note that if the mass media are consistent in preaching national unity, success in that regard will be recorded. The result still shows that the factors that can enhance or limit the effort of the media in effectively promoting national unity are existing press laws, ownership factor, remuneration of journalists, and level of adherence to ethical guide and consciousness of social responsibility. The result further indicates the factors that can determine how effective the media can promote national unity. The implication of this situation is that for the mass media to effectively set agenda on national unity, certain factors must be addressed. The journalists need to have a free hand to operate without external interference to maintain objectivity and avoid ethnic bigotry. The laws must be press friendly among others. In addition, Table IV shows explicitly that the audience sees the media as very effective in performing their role of promoting national unity.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Based on the result of this study, the researchers conclude that the media in Nigeria have so far tried in their social responsibility of promoting national unity in Nigeria. The researchers, however, conclude that there is room for improvement on the part of the media in a bid to promote national unity in Nigeria. Consequently, the researchers make the following recommendations.

1. Media owners should create a conducive working environment for media practitioners to operate so that there can be corresponding improvements in the manner the media play their social responsibility role in promoting national unity.
2. Media practitioners should be guided by the ethics of their profession in their conducts and gauge them (their activities) on the basis of whether they are promoting national unity or not.
3. Media stations and their workers should improve on their efforts at promoting national unity in Nigeria through reports and programme contents.

4. Regulatory agencies should wake up to their responsibility of monitoring media practitioners using national unity as an important indicator to determine performance.
5. If possible, the government should provide a supportive legislation mandating all media stations in Nigeria to dedicate at least, 50% of their efforts to national unity.

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