Media and Information Literacy as a Tool for Conflict Prevention and Peace-building in Nigeria

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Abstract
The current era of rapid information dissemination, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda often increases tensions, causes hostilities, and deepens societal divides. This conceptual paper explores the complex relationship between media and information literacy (MIL) and conflict, highlighting the ways in which media literacy empowers individuals to critically analyse and evaluate information, resist manipulative narratives, and engage constructively in conflict resolution. By examining existing literature and theoretical frameworks, the study underscores the importance of equipping individuals and communities with the necessary skills to navigate complex media environments, particularly in societies where conflict is prevalent. The study also discusses, among other issues, the role of the media in shaping conflict dynamics and the implications of media literacy deficits on peacebuilding efforts. This paper establishes that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding, discourse, and engagement in conflict situations. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for integrating MIL into educational curricula, public policy, and media governance to promote responsible information consumption and reduce the risks associated with media-induced conflicts.

***Keywords*:** Media and Information Literacy, Conflict, Misinformation, Disinformation, Peace-building

Introduction

In today's digital age, the rapid and often unchecked spread of information, particularly through social media, poses serious challenges to societal harmony. In Nigeria, misinformation, hate speech, and biased media narratives have continued to fuel conflicts, deepen distrust, and undermine social cohesion across ethnic, religious, and political lines. The primary objective of this paper is to present and analyse, discursively, how Media and Information Literacy (MIL) can serve as a critical tool for conflict prevention and peace-building in Nigeria, and to bring out the interconnectedness of the two binary divides. UNESCO (2021) defined MIL as having the knowledge, skills, and attitude to use media and information wisely. Mansoor (2024) revealed that media literacy builds on an understanding of the role of media in society as well as the essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. Media literacy is the ability to access, understand, and create communication in a variety of contexts (Ofcom, 2010 in Lee et al., 2014). Okunna and Omenugha (2012) also viewed media literacy as the ability to sift through and analyse the messages that seek to inform, entertain, and educate us every day through the mass media. This involves critical thinking and asking

pertinent questions about motives, values, money, and other factors that influence media messages and content. All these definitions share common goals critically engaging with media messages and increasing the ability to access, understand, analyse, use, and create media products ethically. Simply put, the essence of Media and Information Literacy is having the skills to find, understand, use, and share information appropriately.

Conflict, on the other hand, arises when people or groups disagree and believe they cannot achieve their goals simultaneously. Deutsch (2011) describes this as a feeling that what one person wants is incompatible with what another person wants. Conflicts can range from small arguments to large-scale wars, and are often exacerbated by misinformation or biased media. In Nigeria, for instance, studies have shown how social media can fuel conflicts. Okoro and Ochonma (2022) observed that manipulated content and hateful language on social media can lead to violence between different ethnic and religious groups. Adeyemo (2023) also demonstrated how biased media can deepen political divisions during elections. Edeani and Edeani (2021) emphasised that media literacy is vital in combating fake news, which is particularly important during sensitive situations such as health crises and insecurity.

Media literacy offers a vast reservoir of learning strategies that can be applied directly in any conflict situation. For example, it helps decode media messages, promotes understanding of the context and motives in which the information was produced, and encourages self-reflection on how media messages impact our emotions. Above all, it leads to a rethinking of our own position whether as participants or observers so we can contribute to building healthy media landscapes that value thorough journalism, the responsible use of information, and the inclusion of voices and perspectives of those who have traditionally been marginalised (Kozlowska-Barrios et al., 2024). These have become increasingly critical, as media literacy is premised on six major principles: media messages are constructed; materials are created and distributed within a commercial environment; media materials are created and distributed within a political environment; mass media present their ideas within the primary genres of entertainment, news, information, education, and advertising; and people are active recipients of media messages (Turow, 2003, cited in Okunna and Omenugha, 2012). Therefore, this paper explores how Media and Information Literacy is useful as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Justifications for the Study

Nigeria continues to grapple with persistent ethno-religious tensions, political polarisation, and social unrest challenges that are increasingly amplified by the unregulated flow of information in the digital age. Social media platforms, in particular, have become hotbeds for misinformation, propaganda, and hate speech, often serving as catalysts for conflict rather than instruments of dialogue. While traditional approaches to conflict resolution have focused on political negotiations and security interventions, there remains a critical gap in addressing the informational and communicative dimensions of conflict. Despite the growing relevance of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in global discussions on peacebuilding, its practical integration into Nigeria's conflict management strategies remains limited and under-researched. Existing studies have primarily explored MIL in the context of education, digital skills, or media regulation, without sufficiently linking it to its potential role in preventing violence, promoting intercultural understanding, and countering divisive narratives.

Moreover, there is inadequate empirical and theoretical exploration of how MIL can empower citizens especially youths and marginalised communities to critically engage with

media, resist manipulation, and contribute constructively to public discourse. In a context where media is often weaponised to incite division, the lack of MIL infrastructure presents a major vulnerability in the social fabric. This study is therefore motivated by the urgent need to reframe MIL not just as a cognitive skill set, but as a strategic tool for peacebuilding and social cohesion. By bridging the gap between information literacy and conflict prevention, this paper advocates for the institutionalisation of MIL in civic education, media policy, and grassroots initiatives. The study contributes to filling a critical void in both academic literature and practical policy by demonstrating how MIL can be a proactive solution to Nigeria's conflict dynamics, rather than a peripheral concern.

Overview of Conflict in Southeast Nigeria

The Southeast region of Nigeria, while known for its religious diversity, vibrant culture, and entrepreneurial spirit, has unfortunately grappled with a complex tapestry of conflicts. These conflicts, ranging from socio-economic grievances to political agitations, have significantly impacted the region's stability and development. This overview aims to provide a simplified yet academically grounded understanding of these conflict dynamics. At the heart of many conflicts in the Southeast lies a sense of marginalisation and perceived injustice. Historically, the region has experienced feelings of political exclusion and uneven distribution of resources, leading to widespread discontent. This has been exacerbated by the legacy of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which continues to resonate with many in the region.

One prominent area of conflict revolves around the agitation for self-determination. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a pro-Biafra separatist group, has been at the forefront of this movement, advocating for the secession of the Southeast from Nigeria. Their activities, which include protests and sit-at-home orders, have often led to clashes with security forces, resulting in loss of lives and property. Initially, IPOB positioned itself as a non-violent movement, but over time, the government and the public have accused the movement of engaging in violent activities. In fact, the Nigerian government, in September 2017, officially designated IPOB as a terrorist group, citing these alleged violent actions as justification. Nwanguma (2022), in his study, highlighted the human rights implications of the military's response to IPOB's activities, noting the escalation of violence and the need for dialogue.

Furthermore, socio-economic factors play a significant role in fuelling conflict. Youth unemployment, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure have created a breeding ground for frustration and resentment. This has contributed to the rise of criminal activities, including kidnapping and banditry, which have further destabilised the region. Okafor (2023), researching youth restiveness in the Southeast, argued that the lack of economic opportunities drives many young people into criminal gangs. He therefore emphasised the need for government intervention to address these root causes. Land grabbing is another form of conflict in the Southeast. Communities, families, and individuals are all engaged in land grabbing in one way or another. Research has shown that the major form of communal conflict in most parts of Nigeria, particularly in the Southeast, is land or boundary disputes (Mbazor, 2019). Lives and properties have been lost in such land issues, leading to mistrust and bitterness among family members and communities.

Another dimension of conflict in the Southeast is the issue of herder–farmer clashes. While more commonly associated with other regions, these conflicts have also emerged in some parts of the Southeast, leading to tensions between local communities and nomadic herders. These clashes often arise from disputes over land use and grazing rights. Ebisi's (2020) study on the third conflict in Nigeria: *Implications for the Southeast Region*, revealed that there have been persistent attacks on communities in the Southeast, with increased criminal activities such as kidnapping, rape, wanton destruction of farmlands, and loss of lives.

Ibeanu (2021) also examined the broader issue of resource conflicts in Nigeria, noting how climate change and competition for resources exacerbate tensions between different groups, including herders and farmers. It is important to note that these conflicts are interconnected and often reinforce one another. For instance, the feeling of marginalisation can fuel support for separatist movements, while socio-economic grievances can contribute to the rise of criminal activities. Addressing these conflicts requires a multifaceted approach that tackles both the immediate symptoms and the underlying causes. This includes promoting dialogue, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and ensuring respect for human rights. The Southeast region of Nigeria thus faces multi-faceted conflict challenges rooted in historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and political agitations. The rate of violence in the Southeast and the government's inability to end it is taking a great toll on almost every aspect of life, including socio-economic development. The violence/conflicts affect the livelihood of residents who do business in this region. Many are either relocating their businesses to other regions or closing them entirely. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies for conflict resolution and promoting sustainable peace and development in the region.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored on Critical Media Literacy and Communication Accommodation Theory**,** offering a framework to critically analyse media power dynamics, understand how media influences behaviour, and examine how communication patterns contribute to conflict and reconciliation.

Critical Media Literacy

Critical Media Literacy refers to the ability to analyse, assess, and evaluate media in a critical manner (Hannah B, 2025). Butler A. (2021), in his work *Defining Critical Media Literacy*, noted that critical media literacy encourages analysis of dominant ideologies and interrogation of the means of media production. Rooted in social justice, this theory explores the "behind-the-scenes" of media ownership, production, and message distribution (Kellner & Share, 2007). Butler (2021) emphasised that critical media literacy entails an inquiry into power particularly the power of media industries and how they determine the stories and messages presented to audiences.

Critical media literacy requires us to look beyond the surface of what we see and hear in the media. It's about understanding that media content is created by individuals or institutions with specific goals and biases. From the perspective of media power dynamics, media outlets especially in conflict zones possess significant influence in shaping public opinion. They determine what stories to tell, how to tell them, and whose voices are amplified or silenced. This power can be used to reinforce existing inequalities or promote inclusivity. For example, a news outlet may consistently portray a particular ethnic group negatively, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice. Critical media literacy helps audiences recognise these dynamics by prompting questions such as: Who owns this media? What are their interests? Whose voices are missing? It also highlights how media influences behaviour. Continuous exposure to violent or hateful content may desensitise individuals or even influence them to adopt aggressive behaviour. Critical media literacy empowers audiences to interrogate these media constructions and resist negative influences.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) examines how people adjust their communication styles during interactions. In conflict zones, individuals often engage in "divergence," wherein they emphasise their differences and use language that reinforces group boundaries. This divergence can cause miscommunication and escalate tensions. For example, during conflict, media outlets may use derogatory language to describe opposing groups,

dehumanising them and hindering reconciliation. Conversely, "convergence" refers to adjusting communication to align with others, thereby promoting mutual understanding. CAT suggests that how we speak whether to unite or divide can impact peacebuilding efforts.

Simply put, Critical Media Literacy teaches us to critically evaluate media content and understand the motives behind it, while Communication Accommodation Theory reminds us that our manner of communication can either build bridges or erect barriers. Applying these theories to this study, media literacy becomes a powerful toolbox especially in a diverse society like Nigeria. It equips individuals with the tools to challenge harmful media content, recognise power dynamics, and engage in constructive communication that fosters peace and understanding. When citizens understand that media is not always neutral and that communication styles matter, a more peaceful and inclusive society can be built.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive thematic approach, relying primarily on a critical review and synthesis of existing literature to explore the relationship between Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and conflict management within the Nigerian context. The aim was to identify key themes, trends, and research gaps relevant to the role of MIL in mitigating conflict and promoting social cohesion. The literature reviewed for this study was selected based on the core themes of Media and Information Literacy, conflict management, misinformation, and peacebuilding/social cohesion. Inclusion criteria focused on empirical or theoretical works with a primary focus on Nigeria, or where applicable other developing countries with similar media and socio-political landscapes. Sources included peer-reviewed academic articles and credible institutional reports (e.g., from UNESCO and others), with an emphasis on publications from 2010 to 2024, particularly more recent studies (2020–2024) to capture emerging trends related to social media and digital literacy. The selected literature was discursively analysed. This methodology allowed for a grounded, well-informed discussion of MIL as a conceptual and practical framework for addressing contemporary conflict challenges in Nigeria. Patterns and gaps in the literature were also noted to highlight areas in need of further empirical exploration, especially within the Nigerian context.

Discussion

The Role of Media and Information in Conflict Zones

In areas experiencing conflict, media and information play a highly complex and often critical role. They can either fuel the flames of violence or act as a bridge towards peace. The media have two major roles to play in times of conflict, as noted earlier. Either the media take an active part in the conflict and contribute to increased violence, or they remain independent and detached from the conflict, thereby contributing to its resolution and curbing violence. Whichever role the media play in conflict situations depends on their relationship with the actors involved and the degree of independence they maintain from power structures in society. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for anyone involved in conflict resolution and peace-building.

Firstly, media can act as a powerful tool for spreading propaganda and misinformation. In conflict zones, where trust is often fragile, biased or false information can quickly escalate tensions. For example, inflammatory language or manipulated images can incite violence against specific groups. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where social media has been used to spread hate speech and fuel ethno-religious conflicts. Studies have highlighted this issue. Usman (2023) examined how social media misinformation contributed to escalating violence during recent communal clashes in parts of Northern Nigeria. Similarly, Iroha and Adebayo (2022) analysed how online platforms were used to disseminate propaganda during political conflicts, demonstrating the power of digital media in manipulating public opinion. Likewise, Manuwa (2024), in his study on the role of communication in conflict escalation and

resolution during electioneering in Nigeria, found that mass media play a crucial role in either escalating or de-escalating electoral violence. Manuwa further noted that how conflicts are reported and portrayed by the media can either inflame tensions or help facilitate peaceful resolutions.

Furthermore, the media can be used to dehumanise the "enemy." This creates an environment where violence is perceived as justified, making peaceful solutions more difficult to achieve. Such targeted media usage is common across many global conflict zones, and Nigeria is no exception. However, media can also play a positive role in conflict zones. They can provide accurate and timely information, helping people understand what is happening and make informed decisions. This is especially important for humanitarian aid, as media can help direct resources to those most in need. NGOs working in conflict areas must also develop their own information strategies. In such regions, where security is fragile, the presence of various NGOs with different means of identification can create confusion and distrust. People need to understand what an NGO aims to achieve and what they can realistically expect in terms of assistance. This builds acceptance, trust, and legitimacy, improving the physical safety of humanitarian workers.

Moreover, media can serve as a platform for dialogue and reconciliation. By giving voice to different sides of a conflict, media can help bridge divides and promote understanding among communities. For instance, community radio stations can play a vital role in facilitating dialogue between conflicting groups. In Nigeria, radio broadcasts aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation have shown promise. Abubakar (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of community radio in disseminating peace messages and fostering dialogue in conflict-affected regions. Community radio helps to reach people from diverse backgrounds directly, allowing their personal experiences and lives to be more accurately represented than through foreign media. Beyond community radio, other platforms especially social media have become instrumental in disseminating information, mobilising communities, and advocating for peace. In Nigeria, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are used to organise events, promote causes, and even counter divisive narratives. However, these same platforms are also used to spread messages that can escalate conflict. Thus, there is a need for conflict-sensitive or peace journalism. These examples underscore the media's power to ease tensions before they spiral out of control. By providing credible information and reaching broad audiences, the media contribute to conflict management and the promotion of democratic values.

Additionally, investigative journalism can expose human rights abuses and hold perpetrators accountable. This helps prevent further violence and promotes justice. In Nigeria, investigative journalists have played a crucial role in exposing corruption and human rights violations, even in conflict-affected areas, thereby enhancing accountability and transparency. Journalists may be considered allies of human rights defenders because of their commitment to ethical reporting and addressing important societal issues in ways that can benefit all parties (Berry, 2008).

In essence, media and information in conflict zones are double-edged swords. They can incite violence and spread misinformation, but they can also promote peace and understanding. The key lies in fostering responsible and ethical media practices and empowering people with media and information literacy skills. These skills help individuals navigate the complex information landscape, make informed decisions, and ultimately contribute to building a more peaceful and stable society.

Fostering Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in Conflict Areas through MIL

In conflict areas marked by cultural and religious divides, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) can serve as a powerful tool for promoting understanding and dialogue. It can help bridge the gaps that often lead to conflict and foster a more harmonious coexistence. One

of the key ways MIL achieves this is by equipping individuals with the skills to critically analyse media representations of different cultural and religious groups. Often, media narratives perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices, leading to mistrust and hostility. MIL education helps people recognise these biases and develop a more nuanced understanding of diverse perspectives. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where religious and ethnic identities are often intertwined with conflict. Studies have highlighted the prevalence of biased media narratives in fuelling intergroup tensions. Ibrahim (2022) examined the role of religious bias in media reporting of conflicts in Northern Nigeria, demonstrating how skewed representations can exacerbate existing divisions.

Furthermore, MIL empowers individuals to access and evaluate information from diverse sources. Within the various conflicting issues in the Nigerian context, individuals are better equipped to critically assess media messages, enabling them to identify bias, propaganda, and misinformation that often fuel conflict. In conflict zones, where information is frequently manipulated for propaganda purposes, this skill is vital in distinguishing credible information from manipulated or false content. MIL allows people to seek out alternative viewpoints and challenge dominant narratives, fostering a more balanced understanding of the situation. For example, access to diverse online sources and community radio can provide platforms for different voices to be heard, promoting inclusivity and dialogue. Eze (2023), in his work, discussed the importance of using diverse media platforms to promote interreligious dialogue in conflict-prone areas of Nigeria.

MIL also encourages the development of communication skills that are essential for constructive dialogue. These include active listening, empathy, and the ability to express oneself respectfully. By fostering such skills, MIL creates an environment in which people from different backgrounds can engage in meaningful conversations and build bridges of understanding. This is crucial for addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering reconciliation. Community-based MIL programmes, for example, can provide safe spaces for dialogue and promote intercultural exchange. Nwoye and Adekola (2021) explored the effectiveness of community-based interventions in promoting interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, highlighting the role of communication skills in fostering understanding. Moreover, MIL promotes ethical media production, which is crucial for countering hate speech and misinformation. By teaching individuals to create and share information responsibly, MIL helps establish a more positive and inclusive media environment. This, in turn, reduces the spread of inflammatory content and encourages narratives of peace and coexistence.

In essence, MIL provides the tools and skills necessary to navigate the complex information landscape of conflict zones and promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue. By empowering individuals to critically analyse media, access diverse information, communicate effectively, and produce ethical content, MIL contributes to building a more peaceful and harmonious society.

Raising Media and Information Literate Citizens to Combat Conflict

In today's world, where information spreads rapidly especially online raising citizens who are skilled in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is crucial for preventing and managing conflicts. MIL is more than knowing how to use technology; it is about understanding how media and information function and using them responsibly. A key aspect of MIL is teaching people how to critically evaluate information. This includes being able to distinguish between reliable sources and misleading ones. In conflict situations, false information can quickly escalate tensions. By teaching people to question what they see and hear, we can help prevent the spread of harmful rumours and propaganda. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where misinformation has frequently fuelled intercommunal violence.

For instance, Olaniyi (2023) examined how misinformation on social media contributed to the escalation of farmer-herder conflicts, highlighting the need for critical evaluation skills.

Furthermore, MIL empowers citizens to understand how media can be biased. Media outlets often have their own perspectives, which influence how they report events. Recognising these biases allows people to form their own informed opinions, rather than being swayed by one-sided narratives. This is vital in conflict zones, where media can be used to manipulate public opinion. Adebayo and Oladimeji (2022) studied the role of partisan media in exacerbating political conflicts in Nigeria, demonstrating how biased reporting can deepen societal divisions.

Another crucial component of MIL is promoting ethical media production and sharing. This involves teaching people to create and disseminate information responsibly, avoiding hate speech and misinformation. By encouraging ethical practices, we can foster a more positive and inclusive media environment, which can help reduce tensions and promote understanding. For example, teaching young people to create responsible social media content can help counter the spread of harmful messages. Nwosu (2021) explored the impact of digital literacy programmes on promoting responsible online behaviour among Nigerian youth, emphasising the importance of ethical content creation. Moreover, MIL fosters the ability to engage in constructive dialogue. Teaching people how to listen actively, express themselves respectfully, and understand different perspectives enables them to participate meaningfully in resolving conflicts. Community-based MIL programmes can provide platforms where people from diverse backgrounds come together and build bridges of understanding. Uche and Okonkwo (2023) investigated the effectiveness of community-based MIL interventions in promoting interfaith dialogue in conflict-affected communities, showing how facilitated discussions foster empathy and reconciliation.

In essence, raising media and information literate citizens is a proactive approach to combating conflict. By equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information, understand media biases, produce ethical content, and engage in meaningful dialogue, we can build a more resilient and peaceful society. This is especially important in a diverse and complex country like Nigeria, where effective communication and mutual understanding are vital for sustaining social harmony.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the critical intersection between Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and conflict dynamics in Nigeria, emphasising the role of MIL in mitigating the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and biased narratives that often exacerbate societal divisions. Through a conceptual review of literature, the study has shown that MIL equips individuals with the cognitive and ethical tools needed to critically engage with media, thereby reducing the likelihood of media-induced conflicts. The Nigerian context, marked by ethno-religious tensions and political polarisation, highlights the urgency of leveraging MIL as a strategic framework for conflict prevention. The findings call for a reconceptualisation of MIL beyond its educational utility to its function as a peacebuilding mechanism. While this paper offers a theoretical foundation, future empirical research is needed to assess the practical impact of MIL initiatives in conflict-prone communities. Ultimately, this study contributes to the academic discourse by framing MIL as an essential component in addressing modern conflict drivers, particularly in digitally connected and socially fragmented societies like Nigeria.

This paper recommends the promotion of inter-cultural exchange and the fostering of critical thinking skills; the strengthening of media regulatory frameworks to address the spread of misinformation and hate speech, while safeguarding freedom of expression; and support for initiatives that promote ethical media production and responsible information sharing,

particularly among youths and marginalised communities. It is also paramount to foster collaboration between government agencies, civil society organisations, and media institutions to develop and implement sustainable MIL strategies. This paper serves as a call to action, urging stakeholders to recognise and harness the transformative power of MIL in the pursuit of a more harmonious and stable society.

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