Conduits or Constraints? Stakeholders Perspectives on Social Media and the Management of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Taraba State

By

Hajara Umar Sanda, Ph.D.[1] & Tordue Simon Targema

[1]Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University Kano
[2]Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Taraba State University, Jalingo

Abstract

This study examines the utilisation of social media to manage ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State with specific attention to the nature of stories on the platforms on ethno-religious conflicts, how they affect the process of conflict management and the opportunities/threats which the platforms portend to conflict management. Pegged on the Technology Acceptance Model, the study adopts in-depth interview and qualitative content analysis of social media posts as research designs. Population of the study comprises stakeholders engaged in managing ethno-religious conflicts in the state-traditional rulers, religious leaders, leaders of socio-cultural associations and information personnel of security agencies. Eleven respondents have been purposively sampled based on their perceived relevance to conflict management. Findings reveal that social media possess both positive and negative traits in terms of conflict management, and some of the stakeholders utilise them for conflict management while some do not, due largely to their perceptions of the platforms. The study demonstrates that social media have potentials that are vital to conflict management, concomitant with numerous defects, hence, caution must be applied with mitigation strategies adopted while utilizing them to manage conflicts for more impact.

Key words: Social Media, Stakeholders, Conflict Management, Ethno-Religious Conflicts, and Taraba State.

Introduction

The wave of violent conflicts that erupts in Taraba State in recent years is alarming. Although the state has experienced varying degrees of violent conflicts since its creation in August 1991, never has the intensity of the conflicts reached the present status. Today, violent conflicts in Taraba State have become usual occurrences. These violent conflicts take the coloration of ethnic, religious or occupational conflicts. Whichever form they take; the damage to lives and property is usually enormous, as Yuguda and Goni (2013) contends:

> Taraba State provides one of the best examples or case studies of ethno-religious conflicts…it has become a permanent flashpoint of one form of ethno-religious conflict or another. These are characterized by genocidal attacks, maiming and killings of several persons, loss of business investments and properties worth several billions of Naira (p. 1).

Composed of over eighty (80) ethnic groups belonging to several religious sects, Taraba State has, since its creation, remained the most highly multi-ethnic of all the 36 federating states in Nigeria, a fact that makes it volatile, and a consequence of which it has been grappling and trying to cope with the problem of ethnicity on the one hand, and the problem of ethno-religious conflicts on the other (Yuguda and Goni, 2013). It is no exaggeration that hardly a year comes and goes without the state experiencing one form of ethno-religious conflict or the other. For instance, from 2010 to date, Taraba State has experienced among an endless array of other conflicts, the following ethno-religious crises: Tiv vs. Kuteb crisis in Takum 2012, Tiv vs. Fulani crisis in Takum 2012, Wukari (Christian vs. Muslim) crises in 2013 (Yuguda and Goni, 2013), the farmers vs. herders crisis that spread across the central

and southern senatorial zones of the state from 2014-2015 (Adamu and Ben, 2015a; Adamu and Ben, 2015b).

Other recent ethno-religious conflicts in the state include Fulani vs. Tiv crisis in Dan- Anacha 2016, Fulani vs. Karimjo crisis in Ardo-kola and Karim Lamido local government areas 2016/2017, Fulani vs. Mumuye crisis in Lau local government area 2017, farmers vs. herders crisis in Ussa and Takum local government areas 2017; and Fulani vs. Mambila crisis 2017 (see Bivian, Agbese, Ajobe, and Isa, 2017; Ayodele, 2017; Nkom, 2017 and Fulani, 2017). Most recent on the list are the Fulani vs. Yandang crisis in Lau local government 2017/2018, Fulani vs. Kuteb in Ussa 2018 and Tiv vs. Jukun in Wukari 2019 among a myriad of others too many to mention here.

These crises are but outcomes of inter-group relations and cohabitation, and are amplified by underlying structural, systemic and environmental forces such as the competition over resources- land, water and power, lack of tolerance, youth restiveness and harsh economic conditions, climate change and political factors. The effects of these crises have also been adequately documented in academic literature, and they range from socio-politically inclined effects to economic effects (Lucas, Norde, Wanapia, and Lenshie, 2018; Orounye, 2012; Adamu and Ben, 2015a). Since the state is chiefly agrarian and relies almost solely on agriculture as a source of internally generated revenue, the effects of these crises on the socio-economic wellbeing of residents can best be imagined. It is outside the scope of this study, however, to appraise these effects in details.

Worthy to note at this point is the fact that there is no formal structure on ground for managing ethno-religious conflicts in the state at the moment, but government and concerned agencies usually rely on the efforts of security agencies and stakeholders- basically, leaders of religious institutions,

traditional rulers, leaders of socio-cultural blocks among other stakeholders to broker peace anytime a violent conflict erupts in the state. This they do through organizing communal dialogues, instituting commissions of enquiry/fact-finding missions, organizing intensive peace advocacy campaigns and sensitizations, and mediating between their subjects and state/governmental agencies among a litany of other responsibilities. Obviously, the prevalence of these crises has left a herculean task on their shoulders in the desperate move to effectively contend the crises which are often times extremely destructive and genocidal in nature.

This study appraises the role of social media in the task of managing ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State from the viewpoint of the stakeholders. The major preoccupation of the study is to examine among other things, the nature of stories on social media platforms on ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State and their impact on the process of managing these conflicts, the extent to which stakeholders utilise the platforms to manage conflicts in the state, and the opportunities/threats which they portend to the process of conflict management in the state. This appraisal is done against the backdrop that although social media have become popular platforms of public discourse in recent times, there exists scanty research documentation on their perception and utilisation by stakeholders engaged in conflict management (*see* Rohwerder, 2015), especially in diverse societies like Taraba state. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

i. Examine the nature of social media stories on ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State;
ii. Explore the opportunities and threats of social media to stakeholders

engaged in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State, and;

iii. Assess the extent to which stakeholders utilise social media to manage ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State.

Literature Review: Social Media Engagement in Conflict Discourse

Social media are indispensable channels of communication and information dissemination in contemporary society. Their application permeates almost all fields of human endeavour such as politics, commerce and industry, education, agriculture, science and technology etc. where they provide discursive platforms for people engaged in those fields. Elegbede (2015:1) shares this view when he states that: "there is a debatable nation that nothing big and relevant happens in Africa today without the influence of the social media." Social media have become the people's media recently, chiefly due to their popularity among members of the general public. Dauda, Abubakar and Lawan (2017) describe them as 'popular culture', given their wider acceptability in the society. This popularity entices stakeholders to imbibe them to keep in touch with the masses, as Adeyanju (2013) acknowledges that:

> The expanded information in public sphere and the quantum of information at the disposal of the citizens are making it imperative for those interested in public opinion to change their strategies at influencing it. Many politicians and governments are now moving fast to imbibe the new media and even the social media to get their messages across to the people. The traditional media are no longer enough to do this (p.201).

The popularity of social media among citizens in Nigeria has made them common sources of information, and over the years, their scope has expanded in a rapidly evolving communication landscape to the extent that they

currently provide a point of convergence to the other channels of communication. Pate (2015:27) acknowledges this trend when he notes that: "with the benefit of convergence, Nigerians can easily access multiple platforms that avail them with enormous information on the country. Almost all the conventional media channels in the country have gone online." What this portends is that a typical social media user can access contents of conventional media platforms via their social media pages or handles as the case may be. Apart from providing a point of convergence, other features of the social media such as interactivity, interconnectivity, immediacy and flexibility all mark them out as veritable sources of information. Thus, the social media have emerged over the years to be the commonest channels of communication for anchoring discussions of a wide array of issues including conflicts that have become frequent occurrences in the country recently. This is in concomitant with a myriad of opportunities and threats that stem from their peculiarities as discussed in the following sections.

Opportunities of social media as channels of communication for conflict management

As noted earlier, social media have strong audience base which facilitate opinion formation (Adeyanju, 2013). This, when effectively utilised, serves the individual interested in moulding public opinion better. Little wonder, politicians court them as formidable channels of reaching out to the masses. With regards to conflict reporting, White (2016:40) acknowledges that courtesy of social media, the world has become more connected and people are closer to the frontlines in recent times, as "battalions of government spin doctors are deployed across the internet" to feed the masses with information in times of conflict. White's position suggests that government agencies engage the social media to execute emotional wars in times of conflicts with the view to woo support and public goodwill. Sacco and Bossio (2015)

discover in their study that social media platforms usually increase the volume of information to the masses during conflict situations. They argue that social media break official barrier to information censorship and allow for plurality of voices in times of conflict:

> The increased number of available voices with different experiences can support interaction between people and the representation of pluralized identities in the media. Furthermore, news narratives do not have to rely on the voices of 'officials' or elites. Thus, social media might help to overcome in part the effects of military and government restriction of information during wartime (p.66).

Sacco and Bossio (2015) who used the Arab Spring as a case study argue further that the immediacy feature of the social media made them potent instruments in the hands of protesters and citizen journalists. Thus, social media became the primary source of breaking news about the protests to the world. Also, the study discovers that the use of social media helped to prevent stereotypes of news subjects. This factor rendered credibility to the reports on the movement. The Arab Spring could not be stereotyped "because people saw the protesters on social media; viewers saw that the protesters were people like them, thus, the content that spread on social media has a positive impact on people who are not directly affected by these events" (p.67).

Indeed, social media have become major forums for discussing conflicts in contemporary Nigeria recently, evidenced in the fact that the various platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp etc. are usually agog with videos, pictures and stories anytime a violent conflict erupts. The platforms have become the commonest channels of breaking news on conflicts, carrying textual, pictorial and audio-visual messages on conflicts.

Threats of social media as conflict management platforms

Concomitant with these opportunities are numerous challenges that confront the use of social media as means of information dissemination and reception in times of conflicts, with the potential of weighing down or possibly, overshadowing the positive feats that they offer if not properly checked. The major weakness of social media platforms in this regards stems from the fact that they are unregulated free-for-all terrains, hence; facilitate the spread of unreliable contents. Abubakar and Abdulwaheed (2018) articulate this concern when they note that:

> Lack of moderation/regulation is a major concern as far as the new media and conflict discourse in Nigeria are concerned. Professionalism is another serious challenge of the new media in terms of conflict reporting. Citizen journalists, who are not trained in the art of reporting, abuse the platform grossly by presenting one sided version to the stories. Most citizen reporters tell stories from their points of view, and do not care to balance the stories. The consequence of this act is that several gullible minds that rely on the platforms for information and do not fact-check are often mislead to believing the one-sided version of the reports. Closely related to this is the wide-scale spread of deliberate falsehood, mischief and outright lies on the platform to mislead the masses (p. 28).

Academic literature corroborates this worry, as scholars fear that the excessive freedom which characterizes the social media is prone to abuse thereby rendering them dysfunctional to the process of conflict discourse/management. Takwa (2017) observes that:

> The largely unregulated social media whose access is coming closer to the population on a daily basis, thanks to the availability of mobile

> apps and android phones is now an opportunity for people to conceal identities and express sentiments, hate statements, and at times insults that would have been censored in the traditional media outlets. These new media outlets eschew the norms and the ethics of reporting, and have largely contributed to the deepening of societal cleavages. They largely ignored the sensitivities in society (p. 10).

This is the disturbing aspect of social media, over which experts have continued to express worry ever since its various platforms started gaining wider acceptance in the society. Dauda, Abubakar and Lawan (2017:251) corroborate that "in a diverse society like Nigeria, social media is increasingly being deployed as a tool for complicating and fuelling conflict discourses and championing retrogressive courses, especially among its youth population." Similarly, Pate (2015) emphasizes that:

> There are concerns on the inappropriate use of the [social] media to disseminate hate messages, insults, lies and much information that are destructive to the collective spirit of the nation. For instance, terrorists, irredentists and elements poorly educated on the Nigerian nation have circulated false information that others may easily believe (p.27).

These concerns need to be examined carefully. In a society where social media platforms have become popular culture, and with the frequent eruption of violent conflicts every now and then, it is important to investigate the stake which social media has in the management of conflicts. Justifying this quest is the fact that there is an exponential rise in the number of people patronizing the various social media platforms in Taraba State (even though documented evidence seems sketchy due to poor databases). How this impacts the process of conflict management in the state is the concern of this study on one hand. On the other hand is the quest to investigate how stakeholders in the state

perceive and utilise the platforms to manage the ethno-religious conflicts that have become recurrent phenomena in the state.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). TAM is a model that has been developed to explain how individuals accept and subsequently utilise a particular technological device or innovation. Developed by Fred Davis in 1985, the model was crafted from the Theory of Reasoned Action, and shares semblance with other theories of communication such as Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Davis, 1985; Mugo, Njagi, Chemwei and Motanya, 2017). According to Davis (1985), the model assumes that a potential user's overall attitude toward using a given system or technology is hypothesized to be a major determinant of whether or not he actually uses it. Attitude toward use, in turn, is a function of two major beliefs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived ease of use has a causal effect on perceived usefulness.

According to the model, external factors such as design features of a technology have direct influence on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. *Use* in the model refers to an individual's actual direct usage of a given technology in the context of his job. It is a repeated, multiple-act behavioural criterion that is specific with respect to target (specified system), action (actual direct usage) and context (in person's job), and non-specific with respect to time frame (Davis 1985).

Attitude which is also a key component of the model, on the other hand, refers to the degree of evaluative affect that an individual associates with using the target system in his or her job. *Perceived usefulness* is defined in the model as the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance, while *perceived ease of use* is

defined as the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would be free of physical and mental effort (Davis, 1985:26). Davis emphasizes that perceived ease of use has a significant direct effect on perceived usefulness, since, all else being equal, a system which is easier to use will result in increased job performance (i.e., greater usefulness) for the user.

TAM stimulates serious research attention among the academic community over the years. This increasing research attention results in modifications of the model, giving rise to updated versions of the model such as TAM2 and TAM3; the later which some scholars prefer to term the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Typical to studies using TAM as analytical framework is the quest to associate the application or use of information and communication technologies to their perceived benefits or usefulness/relevance and the ease of use which they offer to users. It is against this backdrop that the model provides a useful framework to underscore the perception and utilisation of social media by stakeholders engaged in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State.

Method of Study

This study adopted mixed methods approach. In-depth interview and qualitative content analysis of Facebook posts were employed as methods of data collection. In-depth interview allowed for intimate engagement with purposively selected respondents who were perceived to have considerable degree of experience on the process of managing ethno-religious conflicts in the state. The study population comprised typically: traditional rulers, religious leaders, leaders of socio-cultural associations and public relations personnel of security agencies in the state. The precise number of people within these capacities is unknown due to the heterogeneous nature of the

state, and the absence of a database containing their records. Eleven (11) respondents were sampled purposively due to their perceived versatility on the subject matter. The diversity of the state in terms of ethnic and religious affiliations was considered while selecting the study sample, with emphasis on socio-cultural groups that recorded higher frequency of violent conflicts in the state within the last decade.

Summarily, the study sample comprised of three traditional rulers (one each from the three senatorial zones that make up the state), representatives of the Muslim Council and Christian Association of Nigeria (3 in all, two Christians and one Muslim), Police Public Relations Officer and the Public Relations Officer of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps in the state, and three (3) leaders of socio-cultural associations in the state- Miyettti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (Fulani), Tiv Cultural and Social Association, and Mambila Progressive Cultural Association. To ensure anonymity of responses, the code- IDI-Resp. (in-depth interview respondent) was used to refer to participants in the course of the discussion. Thus, we have IDI-Resp. 1-11 referring to the eleven respondents that participated in the study accordingly.

Findings and Discussion

Data from the field interviews sessions are discussed in this section in relation to the research objectives as follows:

Objective One: Nature of Social Media Stories and their Impact on the Management of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Taraba State

Data in the study has revealed that social media have two faces in terms of conflict management. These faces are the positive and negative traits of the platforms.

Positive Aspect of Social Media Stories in Relation to Conflict Management

Participants acknowledge the positive feats which social media offer to the process of conflict management in the state. One of the issues that have earned the platforms commendation of participants is the fact that they have expanded the frontiers of communication among the masses generally, and in terms of conflict reporting specifically. A participant noted that:

> Through social media, information dissemination is much faster than it used to be before. Nowadays, news go around in the speed of light. Before you know it, what has happened in a very remote place becomes widespread news, national and international. What in those days would have taken quite a while before you get to know about it. So I think at that level, one is happy that our growth in technology is increasing by the day and is helping because information is important in life (IDI-Resp.6).

Respondents contended that social media empower citizens to report events that happen even in remote areas with much ease. Another positive aspect of social media as advanced by participants is their ability to provide alternative voices in times of conflict. This way, participants feel social media have broken the hegemony that characterize the mainstream media outfits. Social media break this hegemony, and enable for true decentralization of the media space, leading to pluralism and diversity of views, voices and opinions.

Respondents also noted the ability of social media to enable users raise alarm on impending conflict eruptions and attacks. The contention here is that social media facilitate proactive reportage of conflicts- reporting conflicts at the latent stage before they degenerate to physical violence, thereby alerting concerned agencies to step in and nib the conflicts in the bud. Another

positive dimension of social media in terms of conflict management is that they facilitate peace advocacy, and help stakeholders propagate the messages of peaceful coexistence and harmony among conflicting parties. Hash tags and profiles are provided to enable for peace advocacy in times of conflict. Social media also help to publicize peace advocacy movements among the general public.

Negative Aspect of Social Media in Relation to Conflict Management

In spite of the positive feats which social media are renowned for, respondents decried the negative traits which they harbour in terms of conflict management. These defects stem basically from the porous nature of the platforms that allow unfiltered contents to float freely online. Aside this weakness, respondents noted that social media users eschew the acclaimed values of journalism, and subject the platforms to quite a number of abuses. Consequently, deliberate spread of falsehood, sensationalism; manipulation of facts and distortion of reality take the centre stage, with damaging effects on the struggle to efficiently manage ethno-religious conflicts by stakeholders. A respondent contended that:

> Social media stories have exacerbated religious conflicts in the state…apart from the rumors carried on the platforms, lots of unconfirmed stories are found on the new media because of the porous gatekeeping process …The social media lack basic managerial skills of gatekeeping, thereby leaving the door open for whatsoever posting without any penalty attached to any hate post or incisive statement (IDI-Resp.7).

Toeing the same path, another respondent said: “people have been using the social media to incite communal crises and spread negative propaganda…

inciting people to fight against each other" (IDI-Resp.10). Respondents accused social media of heightening tension during conflict situations:

> It will end up creating more tension instead of dowsing it, especially if the news that is passed around is not true. So it will rather heighten the tension and then the process of resolution will become long and tedious… once that news is passed across, no matter the best of intentions, the process of resolution becomes tedious and slowed down (IDI-Resp.6).

The issue of exaggerating crisis reports on the platforms also plays up, where respondents lament that the platforms are used to exaggerate conflicts and overblow them beyond proportion. Participants frown at the use of social media by ethnic and religious zealots to demonize other people, religious or ethnic groups. Sensationalism is another issue that participants observe, has the power to diminish the potentials of social media in conflict management. A respondent observed thus:

> Look at the present crises in Benue State, look at the way people are exaggerating it, look at the way they are giving bold faces of headlines that did not carry the real thing that is happening, look at the way people sensationalize the crisis at the Mambilla Plateau…(IDI-Resp.10).

The issue of gruesome pictures of violence is also raised by respondents, where they decried the predominance of horrible pictures of murdered/wounded people in communal crises on the platforms. A respondent noted that although some people can accommodate the gory pictures, some people get emotional at their sight, and can be incited to carry arms in retaliation, leading to the breakdown of law and order, and hence, more bloodshed. Participants cite the wide scale circulation of such pictures arising

from the numerous ethno-religious conflicts both within the state and beyond as causes for serious concern. Below is one of the most widely circulated pictures of murdered victims of ethno-religious conflicts in Katibu, Lau Local Government Area of Taraba State.



Plate 1: *Picture of mass burial of communal clash victims in Lau LGA that went viral on social media in 2018.*

Respondents also observed that the use of unrepresentative pictures in reporting conflicts is a prevalent trend on the platforms, as sometimes the videos, pictures or audio clips that are used on conflict stories are doctored to suit the mischievous purpose of the publisher. A respondent blamed some:

> Bad elements that don't want peace, and go online to post unreliable facts, images, and in fact, sometimes images of some certain things that happen elsewhere, they do bring them and post on social media, and tag them as something happening within their area… Let me give you an instance with the recent crises in Gembu, where a lot of pictures were posted, some people even tried to play online videos,

> describing the act as a genocide mission perpetrated by some people. This brought misunderstanding, and we had to come in and inform the general public to make sure they verify the information they post out so that we can have a peaceful society (IDI-Resp.3).

Objective Two: Opportunities and Threats of Social Media for Managing Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Taraba State

Evidence in the study has established that social media offer several opportunities to stakeholders engaged in managing ethno-religious conflicts in the state. These cut across ease and speed in passing information to the masses, raising alarm on conflict eruption and breakdown of law and order, provision of avenue to correct wrong information, provision of avenue for peace advocacy and mobilization of the masses to conduct themselves peacefully among other benefits. A respondent noted that:

> The advantage of it is that as soon as something happens, immediately, people will post it. We will see it all over the country, including those that will solve the problem… It makes it very quickly for you to know what is happening and helps to create awareness on the outbreak of conflicts (IDI-Resp.8).

Another respondent extended this further when he noted that social media posts alert concerned authorities on the outbreak of conflict. According to him:

> We derive a lot of benefits from the platforms because they provide us with the avenue where we can quickly reach out to the government of the day, despite the abuses. Some of the government officials are on the social media and follow the issues to their root causes. Let me give you an instance, when the crisis in Katibu, Lau Local Government

> Area happened, we saw it on the social media. Within a short period of time, many of the users started calling us to confirm whether it is true. We told them it is true. Even when an incident is being exaggerated, we use to confirm and feed our subjects with the accurate facts about the situation (IDI-Resp.2).

Thus, social media connect leaders with their subjects, and enhance interactions between leaders and subjects in times of emergencies. Still on enhanced interaction with subjects, a respondent rated social media high in providing the avenue to reach out to the masses and interact with them on vital security issues. According to him:

> We derive so many benefits from using social media because at times, people don't actually follow our activities because they don't have time to be following around and checking some of our achievements. So through the use of the social media, we post our achievements. If we parade suspects, recover arms and apprehend offenders etc., we compile all those things and post on the social media. And some people who find it difficult again to come face-to-face and share reliable information, intelligence information with us, use the same social media to feed us with information (IDI-Resp.3).

Apparently, social media aid the respondent in discharging his official duties as they bother on maintaining law and order, and securing the lives and property of residents in the state. The interesting part of it is that social media avail the masses the opportunity to lodge genuine complains which, according to him, are duly accessed, and if need be, acted upon:

> Even yesterday, somebody wrote a letter. He called it 'an open letter to the Commissioner of Police' in respect to security measures that needed to be adopted so that we can be able to curtail some pockets of

> *gangsterism* being perpetrated by some youths. We were able to see it, we got it printed out and we actually liked it because it made us know what is expected of us and the recommendations for the general public with regard to our activities. So in as much as it has a bad side as I told you, we are equally benefiting from it, as such, we encourage people to keep on giving us their own views through social media so that we can be able to perform our duties as expected (IDI-Resp.3).

Another opportunity which the platforms offer to stakeholders is the avenue to counteract false information and clear misconceptions in times of conflict. A respondent noted that:

> I use the social media to counter any negative impression on the same platforms. For instance, I was able to post particular information on the social media to counter what an opponent wrote criticizing some of our stakeholders negatively, and calling them negative names. In order to wipe off this impression from the public, we countered it through the same social media (IDI-Resp.10).

In spite of the opportunities that social media offer to stakeholders involved in the process of conflict management in the state, the platforms possess certain attributes that complicate the task of conflict management as well. Some of these practices have been already discussed previously under the negative aspect of social media in terms of managing ethno-religious conflicts. Briefly, these practices include publishing of false and misleading information about ethno-religious conflicts, using gruesome and horrible pictures of victims to complement stories of ethno-religious conflicts, using old pictures/video/audio clips to complement stories on current conflicts, or sometimes, pictures of what happened in other parts of the country, making highly incisive statements on the platforms to pitch one ethnic group or religion against the

other among several other ill practices as discussed in the previous sections. These practices, as earlier discussed, thrive on the platforms due principally to their porous and unregulated nature, and portend adverse consequences on the struggle to effectively mitigate ethno-religious conflicts in the state.

Objective Three: Utilisation of Social Media by Stakeholders to Manage Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Taraba State

Evidence in the study indicates that some of the stakeholders that participate in the study utilise social media to manage ethno-religious conflicts in the state, while some do not. This utilisation, in line with the assumptions of the Technology Acceptance Model, is due to the perceived benefits and ease of use of the platforms. The reverse equally is the case with participants that do not utilise the platforms. Among the institutions that utilise the platforms to manage ethno-religious conflicts in the state include the Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps and all the representatives of socio-cultural groups that participated in the study. A respondent who admitted using the platforms for conflict management confirmed that:

> In as much as the masses are using the various social media platforms, we thought it is necessary to also reach out to the general public through the same social media. In this regard, the Taraba Command has its own Facebook page tagged *NPF Taraba Command* that we use to post our own updates to enlighten the general public, tell them what they are expected to do, and even give our numbers there so that they can easily get across to us and feed us back on the posts… So we have been using social media platforms. We also have accounts on the other platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp and what have you to aid our activities. We use these platforms to enhance our interactions with the masses in the state (IDI-Resp.3).

Similar is the situation with the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps that has a functional Facebook page- *The Defender* which they use to pass information to the masses, dispel rumour and caution the masses against impending danger. Social media platforms are utilised by leaders of the socio-cultural groups interviewed for the purpose of conflict management. A respondent confirmed that:

> On our part, been the cattle breeders association leaders, we have a forum where we have some of the social media users sending messages of peace and what we can achieve under a peaceful atmosphere with our neighbours and what we stand to lose if we do not stay in peace with our neighbours (IDI-Resp.2).

He mentioned these Facebook groups to include among others: *Miyetti Allah Youth Forum, Kautal Fulbe* and *Miyetti Alllah Catil Bridas Association of Nigeria.* The Mambilla Progressive Cultural Association has similar platforms such as *The Workable Mambilla Cultural Group* and *The Mambilla History* which they utilise to manage conflicts among other purposes. Similarly, the Tiv Cultural and Social Association have two Facebook pages that they use for the same purpose- *Tiv Cultural and Social Association Taraba State* and *Taraba Tiv Youth for Justice.* Other institutions such as the Muslim Council and Mutum-Biyu Traditional Council admitted using social media for the purpose of conflict management as well. They maintain that social media are trending; hence, it is expedient to imbibe them to disseminate information and tap into their opportunities to mitigate conflicts in the state.



Plate 2: *Screenshot of post on the NPF Facebook page in Taraba State*



Plate 3*: Screenshot of post on the Miyetti Allah Facebook page in Taraba State*

On the other side of the divide are stakeholders and institutions that do not utilise social media for the purpose of conflict management. Evidence indicates that such institutions are sceptical of imbibing the platforms, given, perhaps, the abuses that they have been subjected to. A respondent stated that:

> CAN Taraba State does not operate any social media be it Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter except Email. We take proactive measures and with God on our side we are able to manage crises which would have caused more havoc … Social media stories are based on prodded and most of the audience are passive and gullible to accept every bit of social media stories, so therefore, CAN Taraba State chapter don't rely on social media to solve any problem, rather, we implore the use of telephone and electronic media (television and radio) (IDI-Resp.7).

Obviously, the perception of the participant above affects his, and by extension, his institution's disposition to social media as a tool for conflict management in the state. Another respondent shared this sentiment, and equally expressed fears on the abuses that have come to characterize the platforms when he stated that:

> I have made it personally an issue especially with my clergy to never be part of those who are rumour mongers, who spread false information. So if you are using the social media, please use it responsibly, for what is true and you are sure it is authentic … As a diocese, we have our media outfit- the Catholic media outfit which we use only to propagate the Christian faith, the Catholic faith on radio, on television and on print media (IDI-Resp.6).

Another respondent disclosed that a Facebook page belonging to the traditional council (which he represents) was opened, but the abuses it was subjected to, forced him to shut down the group. He stated that politicians and

other ethnic and religious bigots hijacked the group, and within a short period of time, it became chaotic and overheated, and the best thing to do under the circumstance was to shut it down. Yet, another respondent revealed that plans are on ground to ensure that all the traditional councils in the state have their social media platforms that will enhance their communication with subjects, most especially, in times of conflict:

> We are thinking of devising measures to make traditional councils visible on the social media, whether collectively or individually, as Emirate Councils or Chiefdoms, to have our own platforms/websites, so that at the end, one will know that such a story is coming out from either Muri Emirate Council, or from Wukari Traditional Council, or from Sardauna Traditional Council. I think if traditional institutions will adopt this measure, it will minimize the negative effects they have at the moment in the state … (but for now), as far as we are concerned, we have no platforms on the social media to counter or balance any information or misinformation that people share on the various platforms (IDI-Resp.9).

The effort to ensure visibility of traditional institutions on social media will be worthwhile in many ways if actualized. Apart from enhancing the voices of those traditional institutions, it will also increase the volume of healthy information in the public sphere, as Pate (2015, p.33) recommends that "knowledgeable people and institutions are encouraged to feature on the social media to provide multiple credible opinions and facts that can challenge some of the lies and stereotypes spread on the social media." Gambo (2018) also emphasizes the need for stakeholders to imbibe the social media for effectively managing conflicts in the country when he states that: "I encourage good people to engage bad people on the social media so as to counter the misinformation that trends on the platforms".

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that social media offer great opportunities for conflict management, and are quite instrumental to the process of peace building. The process of conflict management can be enhanced if the numerous potentials of the platforms are harnessed and effectively deployed, cautious of the various limitations which they also harbour. Perhaps, handling the social media conundrum is one of the most crucial tasks of stakeholders engaged in contemporary conflict management. This study concludes that a strategic, purposeful and careful utilisation of the platforms by stakeholders will benefit the process of conflict management significantly, specifically in the aspects of disseminating information, countering falsehood and mischiefs, generating intelligence reports and spearheading peace-building advocacies among other benefits. Efforts to incorporate the platforms in the process of conflict management must, however, as a matter of expedience, take into consideration their numerous deficiencies that stem from their porous, free-for-all and unregulated nature and device adequate measures of mitigating them accordingly. It is imperative to submit that for social media to effectively complement the process of conflict management in the state, geo-specific issues and peculiar cultural sensitivities must be acknowledged and mainstreamed into the process for more impact.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and foregoing discussion, the study recommends as follows:

i. Stakeholders should imbibe the social media platforms for conflict management in the state to enable them reach out effectively to the masses with information that would facilitate the process;

ii. Orientation and/or sensitization of individuals on the effects of using the social media negatively on society must be intensified to orient the masses on the implications of abusing the platforms in times of conflict;

iii. Fact-checking is highly recommended. This will enable individual consumers of social media contents to differentiate between factual and fake news on the platforms;

iv. Finally, it is pertinent that social media users conduct themselves responsibly and use the platforms in such a way that they would help to build a peaceful society.

References

Abubakar, U, I. and Abdulwaheed, S. (2018). New media and conflict management in a pluralistic Nigeria: A perspective on the opportunities and threats of the platforms. *TSU Journal of Communication and Media Studies, 1* (1), 19-33.

Adamu, A. and Ben A. (2015a). Violent conflict in divided societies: The case study of violent conflict in Taraba State (2013 – 2015). *Nigeria Conflict and Security Analysis Network (NCSAN)* Working Paper No. 2, Abuja, Nigeria. A research commissioned by World Watch Research, Open Doors International, Netherlands

Adamu, A. and Ben A. (2015b). "Migration and violent conflict in divided societies: Non- Boko Haram violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria." *Nigeria Conflict and Security Analysis Network (NCSAN)* Working Paper No. 1, Abuja, Nigeria. A research Commissioned by World Watch Research, Open Doors International, Netherlands

Adeyanju A.M. (2013). Mass Media and Public Opinion: Formation, Process and Uses. In U. Pate, C. Nwabueze and I. Idiong (eds.). *Politics, culture and the Media in Nigeria* (pp. 183-204). Ibadan: Stirling Horden publishers.

Alemoh, T. A. and Ishima, L. (2013). Social media: An emerging conundrum? *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities, 2*(2), 236-253.

Ayodele, W. (2017, May 7). Taraba killings: death toll hits 18 as herdsmen kill 5 in fresh attacks. *This Day Newspaper.*

Bivian, N., Agbese, A., Ajobe, A. T., and Isa, M. (2017, May 20). States on edge over 'killer herders'. *Daily Trust.* Retrieved from https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/states- on-edge-over-killer- herders/198470.html

Davis, F. D. (1985). *A technology acceptance model for empirically testing new end-user information systems: theory and results*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Accessed from Research gates.

Dauda, S., Abubakar, A.A. and Lawan, A.K. (2017). Discursive devices, social media and conflict discourse in Nigeria. In U. Pate and L. Oso (Eds.), *Multiculturalism, diversity and reporting conflict in Nigeria.* (pp. 250-271). Ibadan: Evans Brothers Publishers Limited.

Elegbede, T. (2015). Social media and governance in Africa. Retrieved online from www.punch.com/i-punch/social-media-and-governance-in-africa/.Accessed on 15/5/2015

Fulani, I. D. (2017, Jan. 7). Fresh violence erupts in Taraba, 10 killed. *Premium Times Nigeria.* www.google.com.ng/amp/www.premiumtimes.ng,com/news/headlines /222147-fresh- violence-erupts-in-taraba-10-killed-2.html/amp accessed on 24-01-2017

Gambo, D. (2018). Towards a broader communication strategy for communicating the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Paper presented at the "Session Open Guest Lecture" organised by the Faculty of Communication, Bayero University Kano, 6th September.

Gambura, I. P. and Apuke, O. D. (2018). Two sides of a coin: Explicating the place of social media in crisis management. *Journal of Media Critiques, 4*(13), 23-38.

Lucas, J. M., Norde, A. B., Wanapia, N. I. and Lenshie, N. E. (2018). Traditional communication and conflict management advocacy in

Taraba State: A prescriptive approach. *TSU journal of communication and media studies, 1*(1), 1-18.

Mugo, D. G., Njagi, K., Chemwei, B. & Motanya, J. O. (2017). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its application to the utilisation of mobile learning technologies. *British Journal of Mathematics & Computer Science 20*(4), 1-8.

Nkom, J. (2016, Dec. 19). 18 killed in Taraba Tiv, Fulani clash. *Vanguard.* Retrieved from http://www.google.com.ng/amp/www.vanguardngr.com/2016/18-killed-in-taraba-tiv- fulani-clash/amp/ accessed on 24-7-2017

Oruonye, E.D. (2012). The socio-economic impact of land resource conflict in Taraba State: A case study of Kona – Minda crisis in Northern Taraba. *International Journal of Environmental Sciences, 1*(2), 46-49.

Pate, U. (2015). *Issues in media and national integration*. Lagos: Lagos State University School of Communication.

Rohwerder, B. (2015). *Social media and conflict management in post-conflict and fragile contexts* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1184). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

Sacco, V., Bossio, D. (2015). Using social media in the news reporting of war and conflict: opportunities and challenges. *The journal of media innovations, 2*(1), pp. 59-76.

Suntai, D. I., Targema, T. S. (2017). New Media and Democracy in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Opportunities and Threats in the Terrain. *Brazilian Journal of African Studies, 2*(4), 198-209.

Takwa, Z. S. (2017). An overview on multiculturalism, diversity and reporting of conflict in Nigeria. In U. Pate and L. Oso (Eds.), *Multiculturalism, diversity and reporting conflict in Nigeria.* (pp. 8-21). Ibadan: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited.

White, A. (2016). Ethical choices when journalists go to war. In D. Fabijanic, C. Spahr and V. Zlatarsky (Eds). *Conflict Reporting in the Smartphone Era: from Budget Constraints to Information Warfare,* pp.40-50. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Yuguda, M. A and Goni, I. (2013). Ethno-religious conflict in Taraba State and its implications on socioeconomic, political and educational

development of youths. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews, 4* (3), 149 – 155.