

Nigerian Mass Media Handling of Conflict Situations in the West African Sub-Region

by David O. Edeani*

Abstract

A content analytic study examines the coverage of conflicts within, between, and among nations of the West African sub-region by three of Nigeria's leading national dailies and three major weekly news magazines. The aim of the study was to find out how far the newspapers and news magazines made efforts to contribute toward the resolution of the conflicts, in terms of the extent to which they covered the conflicts, and how they went about presenting their news stories, writing their editorials, and making their commentaries on the conflicts.

The results showed that the dailies and the weekly news magazines made fairly good efforts to report on the conflicts, and that they gave relatively appropriate emphases to conflict stories, and exhibited such other professional standards as balance, constructiveness, and responsibility in story writing and presentation. However, these standards did not apply to all the nations of the sub-region to the same degree, except for emphases and constructiveness. Nigerian conflicts took a large majority of the media's attention in terms of absolute coverage and balance and responsibility in story writing and presentation, as against conflicts in the 15 other West African nations.

*Dr. Edeani is Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria

Place Accordée par les Mass Média aux Situations de Conflits dans la Sous-Region de l'Afrique de l'Ouest

par David O. Edeani

Résumé

Une étude analytique du contenu des trois principaux quotidiens et des plus grandes revues hebdomadaires nigériens examine la place accordée aux conflits entre et au sein des nations de la sous-région de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. L'objectif de l'étude était d'identifier l'ampleur des efforts déployés par les journaux en vue de contribuer à la résolution des conflits. Pour ce faire, l'étude a examiné la fréquence et l'importance des reportages traitant des conflits dans ces journaux et la façon dont les éditoriaux et commentaires y relatifs étaient rédigés. Les résultats ont révélé que les quotidiens tout comme les revues en questions s'étaient tous intéressés, dans une assez grande mesure, aux conflits de la sous-région sur lesquels ils avaient fait de bons reportages et qu'ils avaient accordé une importance assez adéquate aux articles portant sur les conflits tout en faisant montre d'un haut niveau de professionnalisme quant à l'impartialité, l'approche constructive et la responsabilité en matière de rédaction et de présentation des articles. L'on a décelé, cependant, certaines variations au niveau des différentes nations de la région. Ainsi, les conflits nigériens ont capté plus d'attention que ceux qui se sont déroulés dans les pays voisins si l'on considère les reportages en termes absolus ainsi qu'en ce qui concerne l'équilibre et la responsabilité sur le plan de la rédaction et de la présentation des articles.

Néanmoins, on n'a noté aucune différence au niveau de l'importance accordée à ces conflits dans les journaux ou au niveau de l'aspect constructif dans le traitement de ce thème dans les organes de presse cités ci-dessus.

Introduction

Is the role of the press in society, that of the mirror, the conciliator, or the shaper of issues and events in the society? The safest answer is perhaps to say that the press performs all of these functions, and even more, from time to time, depending on the prevailing situation. The press is an important institution in every society, and whichever of these or other roles it finds itself performing at any time matters a great deal in the life of a people. One particular news story, or an editorial, or a personal commentary published in a newspaper could serve as a mirror or reflector of an aspect of the social reality, and at the same time contain some ingredients of motivation, and even of conciliation as well, all of which could combine in some way to affect the level of knowledge, attitudes, and actions of people in determining the course of any event.

In normal times when much of life's processes can be substantially observed in their regularized routines, this power and importance of the press continue to exist unhindered. In crisis situations when the routines have been disrupted and when people's nerves and tempers also are likely to have been frayed, leading to a highly charged social atmosphere, the role of the mass media can easily be very decisive in helping to escalate the crisis or to assuage the tempers and bring the crisis under control (Schramm, 1977). In practically every country in the West African sub-region today, there are spontaneous and long-standing crises or conflicts which if unattended, could jeopardize the corporate existence of the nation, and disturb the stability of the sub-region. What role is the press in the region playing in these festering conflicts?

The purpose of this study is to examine the part which the press in Nigeria has been playing in the efforts to manage the various crises effectively. We will find out how well media have covered the conflicts, where they have failed to act decisively and responsibly, and what they are doing in order to help resolve these conflicts. The coverage referred to here is not only coverage of conflicts as these pertain to other West African countries but also coverage of conflicts within Nigeria itself and between Nigeria and neighbouring nations. This inclusion of "Nigerian conflicts" will enable us to compare the media's handling of those conflicts with their handling of other conflicts in the sub-region. We are specifically interested in the amount of coverage accorded conflict events, the level of prominence given to the stories, and the extent to which the press has undertaken a balanced, constructive, and responsible coverage of the conflicts.

Insights From Previous Research

Even though the press as a social institution has been around for many centuries in most of the advanced industrial nations of the world and for well over one and a-half centuries in the West African sub-region¹, the question as to how the press goes about performing its function of providing information to people continues to be asked with a great deal of interest and anticipation. The question continues to be asked because despite the various constraints, the press usually has the ability to determine what to report, when to report it, how to tailor the information, and where it will be published. This is concrete evidence of the power of the press.

In general terms, there are certain factors which usually condition the press in the performance of its functions. These include the prevailing political systems and political culture, the level of economic strength and independence enjoyed by the press, the ownership structure, and the level of professional education and training of journalists. The nature of the audience, the importance of the event in relation to the interest of the audience, the time of the occurrence of the event, and the status of the particular medium in relation to other media with which it competes for the attention of the audience are also important determinants.

These factors could operate in various combinations to shape the coverage of various kinds of events at various times. However, they are not all of the same level of importance in influencing the coverage of events. For example, while mass media ownership can be very critical in determining the coverage of news events within a country (Sobowale, 1985; Edeani, 1988), it takes a subordinate position to the home country's foreign policy interests, and may in fact play no readily discernible role in the determination of the coverage of foreign news (Pate, 1992; Sobowale, 1987; Mayo and Pasadeos, 1991; Soderlund, 1992; McCoy, 1992). In other words, the operation of these factors is dependent upon the context of the reported event.

In view of Nigeria's leadership position in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), its Afro-centric foreign policy thrust with special concern for the political, economic, and social stability of the sub-region, one would expect that Nigerian mass media coverage of conflicts in the area would reflect these realities. Specifically, the coverage should not be half-hearted but rather conscientious and substantial, and reasonably comparable to coverage of conflicts of similar status within Nigeria.

Also, in accordance with Nigeria's determination to contribute towards the stability of the sub-region, the press's coverage of conflicts

within and between states should be substantially conciliatory rather than divisive in tone. This means that as far as possible, all sides in a conflict are given a fair hearing in a news story or commentary, and that as far as practicable constructive suggestions are made in editorial and commentaries for conflict resolution. It also means that appropriate emphases are accorded conflict stories when they are being published, and that the language used in writing the stories and in casting the headlines avoids any kind of sensational presentation that would tend to escalate the conflict.

In their study of American newspaper handling of conflicts within the United States, Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor (1985) reported that diversity of group interests (what they termed "pluralism"), newspaper type, and newspaper ownership were the critical factors which influenced the coverage of the conflicts they identified in the newspapers studied. Communities with more diversified group interests had their conflicts reported more often in the newspapers than was the case for conflicts that occurred in less pluralistic communities. Daily newspapers reported more conflicts per issue than did weekly newspapers, and newspapers owned by publishers living in the localities involved in the conflicts also reported more conflicts than did those which had their publishers living outside those localities. The pluralism or diversity of interests factor is of great relevance in the West African situation where there are many ethnic, cultural, social, and economic interests within each country fiercely competing with one another for influence.

Dickson (1992) reported that the coverage of the 1983–1987 United States–Nicaraguan conflict by two of America's most influential newspapers—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—focused mainly on the means of achieving stated U.S. foreign policy goals rather than on the appropriateness of the policy itself in helping to resolve the conflict. The papers failed to reflect in their news reports and comments the existing divergence of viewpoints on the conflict and to critically analyze and question the merit of U.S. policy goals, all of which would have contributed substantially toward resolving the conflict.

On the other hand, Leslie (1991) found in his own study of how Mexico's prestige newspaper *El Universal* covered the celebrated Mexican Oil Nationalization Conflict of 1938 (in which the Mexican government took over all United States, British, and Dutch oil companies operating in Mexico) that even though the newspaper closely toed the Mexican government line at the beginning of the conflict when the very popular action of the government generated a great deal of emotional support among the Mexican populace, it quickly regained

its usual independent stance as the conflict progressed. It then at this point began to apply moderate, balanced and constructive examination of issues in its coverage of the conflict. By so doing, the paper contributed meaningfully to the resolution of the conflict.

Much of the literature in international news flow indicates that the coverage of Africa in the world press tends to be relatively scanty and to be preoccupied with sensational and conflict issues, and the Western mass media and the transnational news agencies have usually been castigated for this treatment. However, research also indicates that African mass media often do not do any better in their own coverage of Africa.

In their study of the coverage of the Angolan crisis in its earlier stages by Nigerian newspapers, Nwuneli and Dare (1977) found that the papers were excessively dependent on the transnational news agencies for news of the crisis, that they did little interpretative analyses of news of the conflict, and that much of the news stories were buried in the inside pages of the newspapers with little appearing on the front pages. The volume of the coverage was substantially influenced by Nigeria's diplomatic recognition of Agostinho Neto's MPLA government as the legitimate government of Angola. In other words, there was far less coverage of the Angolan situation by the Nigerian press before the Nigerian recognition of that government was announced.

In another study which examined the Nigerian press coverage of the invasion of Guinea by French military forces in November 1970, Nwuneli (1985) reported that the five newspapers he studied relied heavily for their news of the conflict on the monitoring of Radio Guinea and on stories told by persons who had just been evacuated from the invaded country. To make matters worse, the newspapers paid little attention to the Organization of African Unity headquarters at Addis Ababa and the United Nations in New York where a number of discussions of the invasion were going on. The papers indulged in the presentation of sensational accounts of the crisis, and published no background and interpretative information on the conflicts. This meant that the newspapers failed to enlighten their audiences on the full picture of the invasion and its immediate and wider implications.

Bosomptra (1989), in his comparison of *The Times* of London, England, and the *Daily Graphic* of Accra, Ghana, in their coverage of African news, reported that the *Graphic* also relied heavily on the transnational news agencies for its news stories, published very short stories on Africa, "most of which took the form of news tit-bits", just as much as *The Times* did. They both published positive and negative stories on Africa with about the same frequency. In a relatively recent study, Pate (1992) found, on the other hand, that Nigerian newspapers

made deliberate attempts to emphasize positive news about Africa, and gave more coverage to Africa than to any other region of the world in line with Nigeria's special foreign policy attention to Africa.

In sum, this literature review indicates that the mass media coverage of foreign affairs, including conflicts of various kinds, is heavily affected by the home country's influence and interests as expressed in its foreign policy. The transnational news agencies play a dominant role in the supply of foreign news and other information that is published in Third World mass media, including those of African states. In general terms, foreign coverage, including coverage of conflicts, tends to be less than adequate in frequency and volume, to emphasize sensational and negative news, and to lack meaningful background and interpretation. However, when a mass medium is sufficiently strong economically to assert its independence, the tendency is for it to apply moderation, balance, and constructive analyses of events as a contribution to the resolution of conflicts.

How have the Nigerian mass media been performing in their coverage of conflict situations in West Africa, bearing in mind that they exist in what is perhaps the most extensive, the most dynamic, and possibly also the strongest, press system in the sub-region? The results of this study will hopefully provide the answer.

Research Questions and Definitions of Terms

The questions presented below are informed by the literature reviewed here and by the status of the Nigerian mass media in West Africa, and hence the kind of role they are expected to play in the well-being of the sub-region.

1. To what extent have the Nigerian mass media covered the conflicts within and between countries in the West African sub-region?
2. What kind of emphasis have the mass media accorded the conflicts in their news presentations and comments?
3. To what extent have the Nigerian mass media made an effort to ensure that news and other materials they published on the conflicts have been balanced?
4. Have the mass media been constructive in their news analyses, commentaries, and editorials on the conflicts?
5. Have they been responsible in their presentations of all kinds of information on the conflicts?
6. How have the Nigerian mass media performed in their coverage of conflicts in Nigeria as compared to conflicts in other West African countries, in terms of absolute coverage, emphasis, balance,

constructiveness, and responsibility?

It is clear from these questions that the key concepts or terms in this study are conflict, absolute coverage, emphasis, balanced coverage, constructive coverage, and responsible coverage. By conscientiously covering the various conflicts, giving them appropriate emphases in their publications, ensuring that the stories are as far as possible sufficiently balanced, and that they are meaningfully constructive and responsible in the writing and presentation of stories on the conflicts, the Nigerian mass media would be demonstrating their leadership role in the management of the conflicts. Not only would the press be helping to set the agenda of issues pertaining to the conflicts, but, as Coser (1956) and Leslie (1991) have argued, it would also be contributing to the resolution of the conflicts through its balanced coverage. According to Coser (1956), "movement toward resolution of conflict is evidenced when statements of opposing sectors appear in the press in a balanced way".²

The key terms used in the study are defined as follows:

Conflict: The term conflict as used in this study means contest or dispute involving two or more interests or parties. Contest is included only when it results in a clash, dispute, or violence. In order to qualify for inclusion in this study, a conflict must be sufficiently serious to threaten the peace and stability of a whole country or the whole sub-region. Thus, incessant local clashes arising from boundary disputes are not included here in this definition, but religious and political flare-ups which have long-lasting attitudinal and cultural origins and are capable of escalating fast and far beyond their original locations are included. The variable "conflict" is measured in frequencies.

Coverage: This is the publication of news, editorials, and commentaries. News includes news analyses and photo essays while commentaries include cartoons and other relevant illustrations, coverage being measured in frequencies.

Emphasis: Page placement and story length define the term "emphasis" in this study.

Balanced Coverage: Coverage is regarded as balanced when all the sides involved in a conflict are given a hearing in the story. A side is said to have received a hearing not only when it has been physically interviewed but also when a point favourable to its own interests has been included in a story. Measurement is in frequency.

Constructive Coverage: Coverage is constructive when a definite or implied plausible suggestion is made for the resolution of a conflict, having regard to the argument presented and the prevailing situation. This is measured in frequency.

Responsible Coverage: A responsible coverage exhibits evidence of fairness, courage, moderation, and the absence of sensationalism. This is the mark of a truly independent and socially responsible medium of mass communication, a medium which is strongly committed to the well-being of its society and does not play up to the transient popular emotions for the purpose of making quick money. The variable is measured in frequency.

Method

This is a content analysis study of three Nigerian daily newspapers and three weekly news magazines in their coverage of conflict events in West Africa. The newspapers are *Daily Times*, *National Concord*, and *The Guardian*, three of Nigeria's strongest and most influential national dailies; and the news magazines are *African Concord*, *Newswatch*, and *The African Guardian*, which also are among the leading weekly news magazines in the country. The three newspapers are all tabloids and based in Lagos, the commercial and mass media capital of the country. Lagos also was, until December 2, 1991, the political capital of Nigeria.³ The three news magazines are based in Lagos as well.

These three newspapers and the three news magazines were selected on the basis of the fact that they are elite daily newspapers and weekly magazines which are regarded as leaders of the print media in the country and thus are expected to reflect this leadership in the coverage of conflicts. They are all privately owned publications, except for *Daily Times*, which is 60%-owned by the federal government while private Nigerian investors own the remaining 40%. The selection of the publications was not based on ownership because ownership was not regarded as critical in the present study, as the literature reviewed above indicates.

For the newspapers, the third week of July and August 1992 and the first week of February and March 1993 were selected, and all copies of all the three papers for the seven days of each week—a total of 84 copies—were content analyzed. For the news magazines, these same four months of 1992 and 1993 and additionally October and November of 1991 were chosen, and the issues of the magazines for all the four weeks of each month—a total of 72 issues—were content analyzed. Thus, a grand total of 156 copies of the daily newspapers and the weekly news magazines were used in the study. The weekly news magazines were "over-sampled" purposely to increase their copies up to a level that would be close to those of the newspapers. The limited time within which this study had to be accomplished precluded the inclusion of radio and television tapes in the analysis.

The unit of analysis is the whole story in the form of news, editorial, or commentary analyzed in terms of the variables defined above. The coding of content was done by this researcher and one other person, who coded the same three copies of the newspapers and three of the news magazines in turn for the purpose of checking for reliability of coding. The inter-coder agreement obtained was 79%.

Findings

A total of 263 published stories on conflicts were identified in the study as those qualified to be included in accordance with the definition of the term "conflict" above. Stories on Nigerian conflicts, by which were meant conflicts within Nigeria and between Nigeria and non-ECOWAS member-states—such as the frequent border disputes and skirmishes with the Republic of Cameroon—topped the list, with a hefty 65% of the total. On the other hand, Senegalese and Benin Republic conflicts with 2% each were the least reported on by the newspapers and magazines studied (See Table 1). Many of the Nigerian conflicts included the various religious riots in the northern part of the country, a series of violent political clashes, the Ogoni crisis, and several nation-wide strikes by workers.

Surprisingly, the Liberian crisis wasn't even the second most frequently reported conflict by the newspapers and magazines, but rather the Togolese crises, dominated by Eyadema-engineered or backed frequent disputes and clashes with several groups in that country. The relatively low attention to the Liberian conflict during the period covered by this study is a surprise in view of Nigeria's heavy and long-standing involvement through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the peace-keeping effort in that country.

The first question for investigation in the study (Question 1) deals with the extent to which the mass media in Nigeria have covered these conflicts. As we have seen (Table 1), the national dailies and weekly news magazines used in this study concentrated the bulk of their attention on Nigeria, and also paid some fairly good attention to conflicts in Togo and Liberia, and covered such conflicts in other West African nations far less frequently. Most of the stories of conflicts published were news (68%), the least were editorials (3%), and *The Guardian* dominated all the other media in all categories of content published, accounting for 46% of the whole—news, editorials, and commentaries (Table 2).

Table 1. Frequency of published conflict stories by country of origin.

Origin	Conflict reports			
	Newspapers	Magazines	Total	
Nigerian conflicts	106	64	170	(65%)
Togolese conflicts	30	3	36	(14%)
Liberian conflicts	12	10	22	(8%)
Ghanaian conflicts	3	6	9	(3%)
Other conflicts*	6	2	8	(3%)
Bilateral conflicts**	3	4	7	(3%)
Benin conflicts	2	4	6	(2%)
Senegalese conflicts	2	3	5	(2%)
	164	99	263	(100%)

* Other conflicts were also isolated ones in such other nations as Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali.

** Bilateral conflicts were described as involving two or more countries in the sub-region.

Table 2. Frequencies of absolute coverage of conflicts in terms of news, editorials and commentaries.

Medium	News		Editorial		Commentary	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	12	7	2	1	1	1(9%)
National Concorde	13	5	0	0	0	0(7%)
The Guardian	41	36	5	1	32	7(46%)
African Concorde	12	7	—	—	2	3(9%)
Newswatch	16	13	—	—	10	1(15%)
African Guardian (13%)	11	6	—	—	13	5
	105	74	7	2	58	17(99%)

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 167.57$, $p < .001$

Nigeria vs. Others: $\chi^2 = 8.77$, $p < .02$

Newspapers vs. Magazines: $\chi^2 = 1.83$, NS

Note: The percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

In other words, even though the Nigerian media paid very limited attention to conflicts in the West African sub-region outside Nigeria, the bulk of their published conflict stories is made up of news, and they published very few editorials⁴ on such conflicts. The dominance

of news and also the dominance of Nigeria in the overall conflict coverage in the sub-region are clearly shown in the results of statistical analyses of the data presented in Table 2. The results indicate that the performance of the newspapers did not differ from that of the magazines.

Question 2 concerns the level of emphasis the Nigerian mass media have accorded the various conflicts in West Africa in the presentations of their news, editorials, and other comments. Page placements of stories and the column inches were the two measures used in the operationalization of the variable "emphasis". The results of data analyses in respect of Question 2 are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Both the newspapers and the newsmagazines carried relatively few conflict stories on their front pages and published most of the materials in their inside pages (Table 3). The newspapers also published some conflict items on their back pages.⁵ Only an average of 17% of all materials were given front page coverage by the newspapers and the magazines, while the very large majority of 77% were published in the inside pages. This big difference is reflected in the results of the statistical tests applied on the data and presented at the bottom of Table 3. The results also indicate that the level of emphasis given to Nigerian conflicts in terms of page placement of stories did not differ from the emphasis given to conflicts in other nations of the sub-region. Also, the newspapers did not differ from the magazines in their assignments of conflict stories to their front and inside pages.

In terms of story length as a measure of emphasis, the newspapers tended to publish more conflict stories in the range of 1–20 inches in length, while the news magazines tended to do the opposite by publishing more stories in the range of 21 inches and above (Table 4). This difference holds, irrespective of whether the conflict covered was a Nigerian conflict or a conflict that existed in any other country in the area.

The issue which question 3 addresses is the extent of balance reflected in the media's coverage of conflicts. The data show that when considered together, the newspapers and the news magazines published as many balanced conflict stories (42%) as they did unbalanced ones (40%). However, when the two types of media are examined separately, the newspapers are seen to be publishing more balanced conflict stories (46%) over unbalanced ones (33%), while the news magazines are doing the opposite—publishing less balanced stories (36%) and far more unbalanced ones (51%). In other words, the newspapers make an effort to ensure that the conflict stories they publish are balanced, and usually publish such balanced stories more frequently than the unbalanced ones. The news magazines, on

the other hand, are yet to take that step, for a majority of their conflict stories are still based on the accounts of only one side in conflict situations. The data reflecting these differences, and the relatively small number of stories that were judged to be relevant to neither balance nor imbalance (18%), are presented in Table 5.

Table 3. Percentage emphases assigned stories in page placements

Medium	Front page		Back page		Inside pages	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	17%	4%	17%	0%	29%	33%
National Concorde	33	6	6	0	33	22
The Guardian	7	4	5	4	52	28
African Concorde	8	4	—	—	54	33
Newswatch	7	0	—	—	55	37
African Guardian	9	3	—	—	60	29

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 200.57$, $p < .001$

Nigeria vs Others: $\chi^2 = 1.78$, NS

Newspapers vs Magazines: $\chi^2 = 2.62$, NS.

Table 4. Percentage emphases assigned stories in column inches

Medium	1–10 inches		11–20 inches		21–30 inches		Over 30 inches	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	4%	25%	37%	8%	17%	4%	4%	0%
National Concorde	17	6	28	17	6	0	22	6
The Guardian	7	13	24	11	15	8	18	4
African Concorde	0	4	0	0	50	33	4	8
Newswatch	0	10	12	12	40	17	7	0
African Guardian	23	3	17	6	20	11	9	11

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 8.24$, $p < .05$

Nigeria vs Others: $\chi^2 = 5.17$, NS

Newspapers vs Magazines: $\chi^2 = 19.97$, $p < .001$.

Table 5. Extent of balance accorded stories in frequencies

Medium	Balance		Imbalance		Neither	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	6	0	4	7	5	2
National Concorde	5	3	8	1	0	1
The Guardian	42	19	24	10	12	15
African Concorde	10	3	3	7	0	1
Newswatch	10	2	11	8	4	5
African Guardian	6	5	17	4	1	2
	79 (30%)32 (12%)		67 (26%)37 (14%)		22 (8%)26 (10%)	

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 27.20$, $p < .001$

Nigeria vs Others: $\chi^2 = 7.75$, $p < .05$

Newspapers vs Magazines: $\chi^2 = 6.96$, $p < .05$.

Question 4 seeks to find out the extent to which the media have been constructive in reporting conflicts, i.e., whether as far as necessary and feasible they have tried to make objective analyses of issues and posit concrete suggestions for the resolution of the conflicts. Stories which contained constructive suggestions accounted for 26% of all contents of both newspapers and magazines, those that contained no such suggestions represented 27% of the total content, while stories which were adjudged to be irrelevant to both constructiveness and non-constructiveness constituted the remaining 47%.

Table 6. Frequency of constructiveness in story writing

Medium	Constructiveness		Non-constructiveness		Neither	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	2	1	2	5	12	2
National Concorde	4	3	3	1	4	3
The Guardian	24	4	21	8	35	30
African Concorde	6	3	2	5	5	3
Newswatch	11	2	9	5	5	8
African Guardian	5	3	7	4	13	3
	52 (20%) 16 (6%)		44 (17%)28 (11%)		74 (28%)49 (18%)	

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 21.45$, $p < .001$

Nigeria vs Others: $\chi^2 = 5.60$, NS

Newspapers vs Magazines: $\chi^2 = 0.05$, NS.

Table 7. Frequency of responsibility in coverage

Medium	Responsibility		Non-responsibility		Neither	
	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others	Nigeria	Others
Daily Times	14	3	1	5	0	1
National Concorde	11	5	2	0	0	0
The Guardian	74	31	3	3	1	10
African Concorde	10	4	3	6	0	1
Newswatch	20	9	4	2	1	4
African Guardian	22	7	0	2	2	2
	151 (57%)	59 (22%)	13 (5%)	18 (7%)	4 (2%)	18 (7%)

Whole sub-region: $\chi^2 = 256.51$, $p < .001$

Nigeria vs Others: $\chi^2 = 8.14$, $p < .01$

Newspapers vs Magazines: $\chi^2 = 3.17$, NS.

The frequency scores by the newspapers and magazines on these three categories of the variable are presented in Table 6. The data distribution shows that the single dominant category was the "neither" (the irrelevant set of stories) category, and that constructive and non-constructive stories were published by all the newspapers and magazines at virtually the same frequency, irrespective of whether the stories pertained to Nigerian conflicts or to other conflicts in the sub-region. The clearcut difference occasioned by the "neither" category is, therefore, responsible for the chi-square statistical result presented under the "whole sub-region" note at the bottom of Table 6. In other words, the average level of constructiveness found in conflict stories published by these newspapers and magazines was very low.

Question 5 addresses the issue of responsibility in conflict reporting. To what extent have the Nigerian mass media shown real professional responsibility in writing and presenting information on conflict situations? The data used in answering this question are presented in Table 7. Out of a total of 263 conflict stories published by the newspapers and magazines, 210 (80%) were written and published in a responsible manner, and only 12% of the stories were found to be non-responsible or sensational in tone, as reflected in their texts or their headlines or both. *The Guardian* alone published a total of 105 (50%) of the responsible stories, clearly demonstrating its unchallenged leadership position among the elite newspapers of the country as a "big-hearted" and very socially responsible newspaper of record. In general the newspapers as a group did not perform any differently from the way the news magazines performed in the extent of responsibility exhibited in their conflict coverage.

How the mass media coverage of Nigerian conflicts compare with their coverage of other conflicts in West Africa is the issue raised in question 6. That comparison is in terms of absolute coverage, emphasis, balance, constructiveness, and responsibility—all the factors considered in the other five questions. Both categories of media devote more than one-half of their conflict coverage in the West African sub-region to Nigerian conflicts, ensure that their Nigerian conflict stories are balanced more often than is the case for stories of other conflicts in the region, and exercise professional responsibility more frequently in reporting and presenting Nigerian conflicts than they do in handling other conflicts. On the other hand, they have handled conflicts in Nigeria in practically the same way they have handled conflicts in other West African nations in terms of story emphasis and constructiveness in story writing.

Discussion

The observed statistically significant differences in the media's handling of Nigerian conflicts as compared to their handling of other West African conflicts are explained by the fact that Nigeria is the home-base of the media, and thus conflicts in the country and between the country and other nations have a more direct and sometimes more immediate implication for their own existence and operation than is the case for other conflicts. Since the vast majority of their reporters and editors are located in Nigeria, they can very readily identify crisis situations and cover them promptly and effectively. Most of the parties involved in conflicts within the country are accessible for interview in order to achieve story balance. Considering the closeness of Nigerian conflicts and the Nigerian audience, the media cannot but be more circumspect in ensuring that responsibility in the coverage of Nigerian conflicts is optimized.

However, as elite publications which are expected to understand the importance to Nigeria of peace and stability in the West African sub-region and the interests of their Nigerian audience to keep abreast of events in the area, these newspapers and magazines should be doing a much better job in their coverage of conflicts in the various nations. They need to have more of their own resident correspondents in each country. Right now, they have very few and do a lot of their coverage of the sub-region right from Lagos, usually "with agency reports".

The issue of story emphasis is usually a function of many factors, among which are the perceived importance of the particular story and the availability of other important stories. The front pages of newspapers

and magazines are used to attract attention to what editors perceive are the most important stories, with the hope of persuading readers to buy copies of the publications. In this respect, only very few stories in every issue of a newspaper or magazine ever make the front page. In the present study, 14% of conflict stories on the average appeared on the front pages, and all the publications shared in giving this level of emphasis to both Nigerian and other conflicts, except Newswatch which did not publish any non-Nigerian conflict on its front cover during the period of the study.

This result indicates that the newspapers and magazines sufficiently appreciated the importance of the conflicts they covered. This is consistent with previous research (Shapiro and Schofield, 1986) which indicates that influential newspapers with a wider audience tend to accord front page treatment to events occurring far beyond their immediate locations.

With respect to story length as a measure of emphasis, the news magazines published longer conflict stories than did the newspapers, indicating that the news magazines have more time than the daily newspapers to research and write conflict stories. Stories of many of the conflicts identified, such as the Liberian fighting, the Congolese clashes, and the Kano riot in Nigeria, each occupied several pages of the news magazines and contained a massive array of facts which could not have been gathered in a hurry in the way daily newspaper information is gathered.

The finding that the three newspapers, outstandingly led by *The Guardian*, published balanced conflict stories more frequently than did the three news magazines again attests to the broad perspective and fair-mindedness which are usually known to be the stock-in-trade of elite newspapers the world over. These are newspapers which strive, as John Merrill (1968) puts it, "to deal with serious discussion, to value truth and balance, and to present news interpreted in a responsible way". This description of elite papers has been confirmed by research. For example, in their study of how 21 American newspapers covered controversial issues, Lacy, Fico, and Simon (1991) reported that "prestige newspapers are more likely to cover both sides of community controversy with better balanced news" (p. 363). However, the gap between the levels of balanced coverage of the two types of media was not very great, and the two need to improve on their performances in this area.

Even though a relatively large percentage (47%) of conflict stories published by the newspapers and the news magazines constituted those which did not lend themselves to either constructive or non-constructive treatment—the "neither" category—these two sets of media

had the opportunity to write and present the remaining 53% of the stories constructively, but unfortunately they did not. They were able to present only 26% constructively. This was a serious failing on their part, explained perhaps by their heavy reliance on news agency reports, especially in respect of conflicts in countries other than Nigeria. For non-constructive reporting of Nigerian conflicts, some other explanations will have to be found, which may well include lack of experience by the very young reporters who are often assigned to cover such conflicts.

In order to make any meaningful suggestions for the resolution of a sensitive and often complex conflict situation, a journalist needs to be sufficiently experienced and knowledgeable to understand the economic, cultural, political, and sometimes religious under-currents fuelling the conflict. Of course, the situation may be so fluid that no definite suggestion for resolution need be attempted in a story simply because none is called for in the circumstance.

The very high percentage (80%) of responsible stories published by the newspapers and the news magazines put together was a good reflection of the professional orientation of the publications. They are all serious or quality publications, except for the Saturday edition of the *Concord—Weekend Concord*—which is usually rather sprightly, and even gaudy, as compared to all the other editions of the paper. It was thus no surprise as well that the newspapers did not differ from the news magazines, for they are both in the same class—publications which usually strive hard to avoid sensationalization.

However, these publications were not even-handed in their exercise of responsibility. While as high as 90% of their Nigerian conflict stories were written and presented responsibly and only 8% had any tinge of sensationalism, it was only 6% of such stories from the other West African nations that evidenced responsible treatment, while up to 19% had some elements of sensationalism in them. This treatment of non-Nigerian conflicts may be explained by a limited understanding and appreciation of the issues involved in the conflicts. Another explanation may simply be the attempt to "brighten up" the stories in order to attract the interest of Nigerian readers to them. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the newspapers and the news magazines need to improve on the level of their responsible coverage of conflicts in West African countries outside Nigeria.

In sum, the coverage of conflict situations in West African nations outside Nigeria by these newspapers and news magazines does not sufficiently reflect Nigeria's special foreign policy attention to these nations within the ECOWAS sub-regional grouping. A good reflection of that policy emphasis would have shown little difference between

press coverage of Nigerian conflicts and coverage of other conflicts in the sub-region. There is no difference in terms of story emphasis and constructiveness in story writing and presentation, but the same thing cannot be said of absolute coverage, story balance, and professional responsibility in story writing and presentation. Thus, the results of this study are to some extent consistent with Nwuneli's (1985) and Nwosu's (1987)⁶ in terms of absolute coverage and professional responsibility in the treatment of non-Nigerian conflicts.

Conclusion

The inescapable conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the present study is that the Nigerian press does make an effort to report on conflict situations in the West African sub-region, but that the absolute amount of coverage and the quality of reporting need substantial improvement. To some extent, the press serves as a mirror reflecting the charged economic, social, political, and cultural atmospheres of the people's relationships. It also tries to act as a motivator of the people to rise above their differences, and even as a conciliator for the warring parties. In the process, the press appears to contribute somewhat to the shaping of the kind of society that exists in the sub-region. Specifically, Nigerian newspapers and news magazines do a good job of according front page attention to conflict events that deserve such prominent attention, and the newspapers in particular also do a good job of ensuring that as far as possible, all sides in a conflict are given a hearing in their stories. The news magazines do a fairly good job here as well, but not quite as good as the daily newspapers. Balance in press coverage of crises and disputes goes a long way toward convincing disputants and observers alike of fair and equitable treatment by the press, a conviction which may well play some role in the resolution of disputes. Thus the Nigerian press should strive even harder to improve on its performance in this area.

Equally as important as balance in the resolution of conflicts are constructiveness and responsibility in press coverage. While the newspapers and the news magazines did a splendid job of reporting Nigerian conflicts responsibly 90% of the time, they were able to accord the same responsible treatment to non-Nigerian conflicts only 65% of the time, and this means that they need to work harder to improve on the quality of their coverage of non-Nigerian conflicts in this regard.

The very low level of constructiveness (average of 26% across the board) in their coverage of conflict events in the West African sub-region also demands a concerted effort to improve upon this rather

poor performance. This in effect is a challenge to the Nigerian press to realize that it is not enough to dissect a conflict and criticise the contending parties in an editorial or commentary; it is also very important to be able to proffer well-informed and plausible suggestions for the resolution of the conflict.

Finally, by giving 65% of their conflict coverage to Nigerian conflicts alone while devoting only 35% to conflicts in the remaining ECOWAS member-nations, the Nigerian newspapers and news magazines leave themselves open to a legitimate charge of palpable neglect of their professional responsibility. This is more so when it is realized that there were far more conflict events in less than one-half of these 15 other nations than there were in Nigeria during the period of the press coverage.

This performance readily calls to mind the performance of Western mass media which have been charged with paying little attention to news events in the Third World. Whereas the Western media are usually accused of focusing on conflicts and other negative events, the Nigerian press is being criticized for reporting far less conflicts in other West African nations than they have been reporting Nigerian conflicts. It would be interesting in a future study to compare the press's conflict coverage with their coverage of other events in the sub-region.

There are obvious limitations of the present study due to the exclusion of radio and television and of the medium-level dailies and magazines. These omissions can be included in future studies, which could compare conflict coverage with the coverage of non-conflict events, and even examine foreign coverage generally as well and not merely coverage of the West African sub-region.

The importance of the present study is that it has provided an insight into the level and quality of coverage of conflict situations in West Africa by the leading Nigerian newspapers and news magazines which are expected to set the standard of performance for the press in the nation. As some of the literature reviewed in the study indicates, the elite press sets the agenda for the rest of the press to follow, and the newspapers and news magazines used in the study and others in their class must take this leadership responsibility more seriously by improving on the frequency and quality of their coverage in the entire West African sub-region. The Nigerian press must participate effectively in the development of an African Information and Communication Order that is better than the system now in force, for which the Western press is criticized in the New World Information and Communication Order debate. The African order needs to ensure not only free and balanced flow but also constructive and responsible flow across the board.

Notes

1. Apart from the official colonial government publications, *The Royal Gazette* and *Sierra Leone Advertiser* and *The Royal Gold Coast Gazette*, first published in 1801 and 1822 respectively, the first known West African newspaper was *The Liberian Herald*, published by Charles L. Force, an American Negro printer, around 1826. See Rosalynde Ainslie, *The Press in West Africa: Communications Past and Present*, New York: Walker and Company, 1967, pp. 21-22; and Henry B. Cole, ed., "The Press in Liberia," in Committee on Inter-African Relations, *Report on the Press in West Africa*, Ibadan: University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960, pp. 57-72.
2. The statement attributed to Coser here is taken from Michael Leslie, "Conflict Resolution and the Prestige Press: *El Universal* and the Mexican Oil Crisis, 1938", *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 68, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 1991, pp. 224-229.
3. The seat of the country's federal government was formally moved from Lagos to Abuja on December 12, 1991 when President Ibrahim B. Babangida moved his office and official residence to the new federal capital.
4. None of the three news magazines carries editorials. *The African Concord* has its "Covering Note" and *NewsWatch* its "From the Editorial Suite", but none of these is an editorial column in the true sense of the term. Rather, each is usually a light-hearted introduction to a leading story in an edition, including some nice words of praise for the editorial staff person who has husbanded the production of that lead story.
5. The news magazines usually devote their back pages to display advertisements which yield them handsome revenue.
6. Nwosu's study deals with the coverage of the Angolan crisis by three American and three British elite newspapers between 1974 and 1976. The results of the study showed, among other things, that the six newspapers under-reported the crisis, buried the stories of the crisis in their inside pages, and neglected the peace or settlement aspects of the crisis. See Ikechukwu E. Nwosu, "Foreign Media Coverage of African Liberation Struggles: A Content Analytical Case Study of the Angolan Crisis," *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1987, pp. 76-103.

References

- Bosompra, Kwadwo. (1989). "African News in the World Press: Comparative Content Analysis of a North and a South Newspaper," *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 58-69.
- Dickson, Sandra H. (1992). "Press and U. S. Policy Toward Nicaragua, 1983-1987: A study of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*". *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3, pp. 562-571.
- Donohue, George A., Clarice N. Olien, and Phillip J. Tichenor. (1985). "Reporting Conflict by Pluralism, Newspaper Type and Ownership".

- Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 489-499, 507.
- Edeani, David O. (1988). "Value Orientations in Press Coverage of a National Mobilization Campaign". *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 65-84.
- Lacy, Stephen, Frederick Fico, and Todd F. Simon. (1991). "Fairness and Balance in the Prestige Press" *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 363-370.
- Leslie, Michael. (1991). "Conflict Resolution and the Prestige Press: 'El Universal' and the Mexican Oil Crisis, 1938". *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 68, Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 224-229.
- Mayo, Charles and Yorgo Pasadeos. (1991). "Changes in the International Focus of U. S. Magazines, 1964-1988". *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 509-514.
- McCoy, Tom. (1992). "The New York Times' Coverage of El Salvador". *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 67-84.
- Merrill, John C. (1968). *The Elite Press: Great Newspapers of the World*, New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1968, p. 3.
- Nwosu, Ikechukwu E. (1987). "Foreign Media Coverage of African Liberation Struggles: A Content Analytical Case Study of the Angolan Crisis". *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 2, No.1, 1987, pp. 76-103.
- Nwuneli, Onuora and Olatunji Dare. (1977). "The Coverage of Angolan Crisis in the Nigerian Press". *Unilag Communication Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 20-23.
- Nwuneli, Onuora. (1985). "The Invasion of Guinea and the Nigerian Press". In Onuora E. Nwuneli, ed., *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers. pp. 73-85.
- Pate, Umaru A. (1992). "Reporting African Countries in the Nigerian Press: Perspectives in International News". *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 59-70.
- Schramm, Wilbur. (1977). "Communication in Crisis". In Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, ed., *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, Revised Edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 525-553.
- Shapiro, Mitchell E. and Lemuel B. Schofield. (1986). "How Proximity, Circulation and Geographical Distribution Influenced Coverage of Miami's Overtown Disturbance". *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 55-61.
- Sobowale, Idowu. (1985). "Influence of Ownership on Nigerian Newspaper Coverage (of) National Issues". In Onuora Nwuneli, ed., *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, pp. 94-103.
- Sobowale, Idowu. (1987). "Image of the World Through the Eyes of Five Nigerian Newspapers". *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 52-65.
- Soderlund, Walter. (1992). "Canadian and U.S. Coverage of Latin American Elections". *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 48-66.