

FOREIGN MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF IPOB AGITATIONS: A STUDY OF FOUR MEDIA OUTLETS WITHIN 2015 – 2017

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Abstract

Today, news of things happening in Nigeria are no longer local as the foreign media maintain constant surveillance of events and report the same to the rest of the world. What these media choose to report and how they decide to present it is believed to have far-reaching implications on how such events or issues are perceived. Therefore, this research was aimed at investigating how the emergence of IPOB and its agitation was represented in the foreign media. Through content analysis, the study evaluated the coverage of IPOB in four foreign media outfits between the period of 2015 to 2017. The study found that IPOB had significant level of coverage in the foreign media especially in BBC and the dominant frame within which the foreign media represented IPOB was that of a secessionist or separatist group. The study therefore recommends that political groups and movements should endeavour to watch the way they engage the media, especially foreign media in order to ensure that the image such media are presenting of them is typical of the image they want to project to a global audience.

Introduction

Countries are often mindful of their representations in the media due to “the power that representation has and the benefits that come from it” (Kisela, 2017). This is also because the global committee of nations form a broader public for each nation and the development of any nation largely depends on her relationship with these other nations. A relationship that is highly dependent on mutual benefits and the perception of one country by the others “to focus on resource mobilization, strengthening global governance and promoting policy coherence” (United Nations, 2015). This is not just centred on a general perception of a country but particularly how specific issues within the country are represented in the media, especially the foreign media. It is crucial for both social and economic development as in some cases the audience’s only source of information is the media.

The media supply information, and at the same time shape people’s learning process about the world, thus mass media have correspondingly large influence on individuals’ picture of the world. In this context, the media become important tools for defining ‘in-group’ identity against ‘out-group’ identity based on representing a series of contrasts and oppositions... By this end, the points of view of others are vital in international relations in terms of construction of allies and enemies of the state. In other words, the media help to construct the reality of international politics (Coban, 2016).

According to BBC (2018), representation is how media texts deal with and present gender, age, ethnicity, national and regional identity, social issues and events to an audience”. It went further to add that media representations “have the power to shape an audience’s knowledge and understanding about these important topics (para.1).

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Media representation is a broad term that entails a constructive media assigned attribute to specific issues or events that may form distinct perception in the minds of the audience - both intended and unintended. It is “one of the primary challenges in telling a complete story in a short time period” (Kidd, 2016, p. 26).

A single story can be portrayed of a society or a group within the society. The predominant frame within which such a group is presented is highly likely to influence or inform people’s perception of such group. Also at certain times it may produce an opposite effect as “the reaction to representation is just as mixed of a bag as its attempts” (Kisela, 2017). So while it may seem like a hit or miss, its success may depend on other factors. Hence it is important to understand how media representation may affect certain groups as different from others by applying a case by case investigation approach. Therefore, we might look at how media representation impact the identity of a group like IPOB in Nigeria instead of applying a blanket approach.

While some of the issues surrounding IPOB’s agitations and government reactions may be apparent to residents of the country, foreign media may depend on second hand information to construct their reports on such issues. Because international key policy makers are readily dependent on reports made on foreign media as a result of their coverage and reach, it becomes imperative to understand the representations of IPOB in foreign media in order to gauge the general perception of IPOB and its struggles.

The study therefore set out to ascertain the extent of coverage of issues relating to IPOB by foreign media; establish the dominant frames within which IPOB is presented in foreign media; ascertain the images of IPOB in foreign media; evaluate various ways of foreign media representations of IPOB.

Mass Media and Conflict Reporting

Mass media is greatly relied upon by a lot of people in forming their views on a vast majority of issues. This is done with the understanding that the media bring closer events that occur elsewhere in a manner that they become real to us. Fields (2005) explains that,

Few people experience first-hand a terrorist attack, most don’t know what it is like to be held in a foreign prison while undergoing a trial for suspected drug trafficking... The reality of those events and our responses to them are experienced vicariously through the word pictures created by journalists and the visual and auditory realism of television reports. The mass media brings simulated reality into our lives and we find ourselves relying on those sources to provide a conceptualized image of the real world (p.3).

Mass media do not just inform the people, they also help in explaining certain issues that affect society, thereby playing a functional role of interpreting issues behind the events they report. In reporting conflict situations, the media is expected to report an objective and thorough account of the events.

The role of the media in shaping public perceptions and opinions about significant political and social issues has long been the subject of much speculation and debate (Fields, 2005; Maeroff, 1998; Spitzer, 1993; Wilson & Wilson, 2001; Wimmer and Dominick, 1991). Consciously or unconsciously, people are often influenced by mass media, such as persuading the masses to use a particular product or indirectly persuaded to support a particular political ideology or political party (Paul, Singh, & John, 2013).

One should not assume from the above “that social control is the only function served by mass communication, but rather that all communication processes have a control function within them, either latent or manifest”(Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 2011). While this assertion may hold some deep

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meaning to some people, it only tends to imply that the media perform a broad range of function within the society such as entertainment, information, creating awareness, education and as diversion but nonetheless as the media perform these functions it also provides subtle influences on the opinion of the masses on the subject it addresses. Thus, leading Cohen (1963), to state that, the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion... It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read” (p. 13).

The idea is that the media does not give you a ready-made decision but by its suggestive interpretation of events one may likely draw up conclusions in line with the message and therefore make their decisions based on such conclusions.

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places and events. The nature of these labels and titles set the tone of the story and can influence how readers view the news story and the individuals or organizations that are the focus of the news item (Fields, 2005). This is such that what was known might tend to seem new or different which may therefore cause the audience to discard their previous knowledge to embrace the new one. As Baran & Davis (2010) put it, people holding views contrary to those dominant in the media are moved to keep those views to themselves for fear of rejection (p. 298). Fields (2005), went further to explain that a journalist’s decision to use labels such as “terrorist”, “insurgent” or “freedom fighter” often reflect a deliberate choice and provides an indication of how the journalist attempts to frame the story (p. 9). This way, the media set a frame

within which we must assess particular issues. This is seen as media representation.

Media Representations

Much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media... Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). Media representation is a reconstruction of events or issues in the media to represent reality. It is the manner and method of presenting issues to the audience. Through representation, the media is able to convey salient messages embedded within the broad topic of issues being presented such that the salient message may even dominate the obvious issue being presented. According to Media hub teacher’s blog (2011),

The term refers to the processes involved as well as to its products. For instance, in relation to the key markers of identity - Class, Age, Gender and Ethnicity (the 'cage' of identity) - representation involves not only how identities are represented (or rather constructed) within the text but also how they are constructed in the processes of production and reception by people whose identities are also differentially marked in relation to such demographic factors.

It can promote peace, patience, tolerance, and understanding, deepen public knowledge about religious traditions and practices, promote dialogue and mutual understanding among different religious traditions and between religious and secular visions of the world, and shape public perceptions of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity (Eid, Nahon-Serfaty, & Ahmed, 2011).

Basically, representation in media does two things. One, it portrays a person or issue in certain perspective. Two, it forces the audience to identify the subject of the media within a particular category of things. ‘In a media saturated world, the distinction

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between reality and media representations becomes blurred or invisible to us.' (McDougall, 2009). This is when representation is properly done. All representations therefore have ideologies behind them. Certain paradigms are encoded into texts and others are left out in order to give a preferred representation (Levi – Strauss, 1958).

Media representation are not always negative. There are times when they highlight the most significant aspect of a subject or issue. While examining the role of representation in movies Kisela (2017) noted that, representation creates relatable and powerful role models and sources of inspiration. What many seem to take for granted is the power of having a role model that you can look up to and relate to (para. 7). By making a character that symbolizes particular quality, one may come to relate with such personality so easily due to their own experience or empathy. Representation also has been used in the movie industry to portray minority groups in ways that have helped eradicate stereotypes. And also by creating strong female protagonists, it tends to highlight the strength of women, instead of portraying them as people who frequently need saving.

When representations are constantly repeated, they have the capacity to intensify such view in the minds of many which may deeply instil a stereotype. For instance, when the masses are repeatedly shown images of women as victims, sexualized, or in domestic roles, they might likely accept those images as normal and will build their beliefs and values on them (Department for communities, 2012). This negative portrayal of women in the media may have significant consequences on the masses which might bring up undesirable effects (Nwaolikpe, 2014)

Such views can grow into a global scale, especially when presented in international media or a mass media considered to be foreign. This can cause certain desired or undesirable response to a country especially in

their time of needs and support. This is seen in countries occupied by rebel groups such as ISIS and the complete difference in the international community's response to the Arab Spring. While the Arab Spring is one widely accepted struggle which led to the change in government in Egypt, the occupation and struggles championed by ISIS has been a subject of global criticism. How the media represent such struggle such as the agitations of IPOB goes a long way in determining global response to such agitations.

Mass Media and IPOB agitations The Igbos are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They occupy the South East Region of the country and are widely recognised for their entrepreneurial ingenuity. With a population of approximately 40 million, which amounts to 23% of the total Nigerian population estimated at 170 million (Obunike, 2016), Igbos are renowned globally for their zeal and tenacity that they have for business; a unique trait that has distinguished them from others (Eze, 2012).

On July 6, 1967, due to political instability in various parts of the country and manipulated census figures, the counter coup that saw the emergence of mostly northerners in governance Lt. Gen. Odumagwu Ojukwu called for the secession of the Igbos from Nigeria to form the Biafran Republic. This action provoked the federal government led by Gen. Yakubu Gowon. A civil war broke out between Nigeria and the Ojukwu declared Republic of Biafra. As Ross (2012) noted, the 1967-70 civil war threatened to tear apart the young Nigerian nation. Ethnic tensions were high in the mid-1960s. The military had seized power and economic hardship was biting (para. 10). BBC (2017), reported that "more than one million people lost their lives, mostly because of hunger" (para. 20).

About fifty years later new groups emerged under the umbrella of the Biafran agitation for self-government with pockets of protests and conflicts in various parts of the south east.

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Many would argue that that conflict was not born out of religion, but by those disaffected by lack of opportunities and unemployment - precisely the issues that commentators believe are driving the young pro-Biafra protesters (BBC, 2015). Two major groups have emerged since the aborted 1967 Ojukwu-led secession plot – Movement for the Actualization of the State of Biafra (MASSOB) led by Mr. Ralph Onwzurike and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Nnamdi Kanu.

MASSOB was formed around 1999 as a body in pursuit for the actualization of self-government of the Igbo people. On the 26 August, 2004, Ralph Uwazurike called on the Igbo both in the Southeast and the cities across the country to shut down their businesses of which was a success (Ojukwu, 2009) and subsequently in May 2005, it embarked on demonstrations in Canada, France, Germany and Italy (Thompson, Ojukwu, & Nwaorgu, 2016).

From the tone of their mission MASSOB is a non-violent separatist movement fighting for self-determination with membership open to all persons who accepts the goal of Biafra actualization and peaceful means for the realization of this goal (Obianyo, 2007). This movement began to see its gradual decline in 2006 after a series of events that caused the Igbo people to disregard the group as an opportunistic terror organization.

Just as MASSOB was declining IPOB began to emerge. This was informed by the incessant hardship, lack of holistic development in the socio-economic landscape of Nigeria, lack of youth employment, corruption in high offices and economic regression (Thompson, Ojukwu, & Nwaorgu, 2016). They went further to state that, IPOB is a splinter group from the MASSOB, taking on a more propagandist approach for the actualization of Biafra (p. 8). This goal has led the group to employ various strategies to mobilize youth within the south east and Igbos in diaspora to support the actualization of the Republic of Biafra.

However, as Ross (2012), puts it, while those publicly clamouring for independence are a very small minority, it is not hard to find young people who feel they would be better off as a separate nation. This ought to be of great concern to the government of Nigeria (para. 24).

Earlier, just like MASSOB which established a radio station in the US for the purposes of reaching out to Igbos in the diaspora and attracting international attentions (Ojukwu, 2009), IPOB had gone ahead to found its station which is attributed to have given Kanu relative prominence. According to BBC (2017), he was a relatively obscure figure until 2009 when he started Radio Biafra, a station that called for an independent state for the Igbo people and broadcast to Nigeria from London.

While most of the broadcast of Nnamdi Kanu's Radio Biafra can be categorised as outright hate speeches, it nonetheless shows how media representation and framing of issues can shape perceptions as the station was able to garner the needed support of easterners to protest for the release of Nnamdi Kanu by structuring the information in ways that present a different picture from mainstream media for the audience. Thus, reemphasising some theoretical assumptions such as Framing Theory and Social Constructionism Theory.

Framing Theory

This is one of the prominent theories among scholars when examining the manifest contents of media. It attempts to examine how societal issues are presented in the media as this is what most often informs the audiences' construction of social reality. Based in part on Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy—particularly his notion of language games, sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) developed frame analysis to provide a systematic account of how we use expectations to make sense of everyday life situations and the people in them (Baran & Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, 2010).

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The concept of framing was first posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972 (Arowolo O. , 2017). He defined psychological frames as a “spatial and temporary bounding of set of interactive messages” (Bateson, 1972, p. 197) that operates as a form of meta communication (Hallahan, 2008). For Goffman, people are constantly changing their assumptions about people, events and issues as they attempt to make meaning of a complex world. They are adjusting and readjusting their views and expectations as they get more awareness through social interactions and this most often occurs in a subliminal level.

Goffman used the term frame to refer to a specific set of expectations used to make sense of a social situation at a given point in time (Baran & Davis, Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future, 2010). That is, frames represent how we structure things similar to what the social constructivists regard as typification. Symbolic interaction and social constructionism both argue that the expectations we form about ourselves, other people, and our social world are central to social life (Baran & Davis, Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future, 2010). Some of these expectations are couched in such terms as stereotypes, attitudes, typification schemes, and racial or ethnic bias.

In the media, framing simply refers to how the media in reporting society tries to put issues into packets that help the audience relate with the issues presented. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning (Mass Communication Theory, 2017). Framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic (Arowolo O. , 2017). At the surface, the media put the issue in perspective but at the core they set particular frames within which we can think of what is being presented. Framing therefore entails to draw attention to certain

attributes of the objects of news coverage, as well as to the objects themselves (Mass Communication Theory, 2017).

In media representation, the concept of framing is employed to strategically relate an object or event to something similar either in a natural sense or a symbolic manner to make more meaning in respect to the views or prevailing social environment. As (Baran & Davis, Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future, 2010) put it, “active audience members use the media’s symbols to make sense of their environments and the things in it” (p. 324). They went further to stress that “those definitions have little value unless others share them—that is, unless the symbols also define things for other people in the same way”. Thus, linking the idea of media framing and social constructionism as processes employed in making sense of society through media constructed messages – media representation.

METHOD

In an attempt at evaluating foreign media representation of IPOB agitation in Nigeria, this study adopted the content analytical design method. This is because the study focuses on evaluating the manifest contents of the media – it is focused on media contents rather than media audience and “it is an efficient way to investigate the content of the media, such as the number and types of commercials or advertisements in broadcast or print media” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014, p. 159).

The study population is drawn from all foreign media contents that relate to reportage or any form of representation of IPOB agitation in foreign mass media. That is, any media produced outside Nigeria or by a media establishment that is owned and operated and also circulated by people outside Nigeria. This forms the universe of the contents for this study. Because of the enormous frequency of daily publication and presentation of issues in foreign media coupled with the massive

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circulation of contents through the internet, it becomes very impracticable to arrive at a specific population size. This is one of the significant challenges faced by researchers when conducting research on contents that are foreign especially through online research. As Wimmer & Dominick (2014, p. 183) noted, trying to find an adequate sampling frame for such a study is very challenging. Therefore, to arrive at a specific population that is manageable and representative of the universe of publications, contents from four media establishments will be used in the study.

Due to the difficulty at arriving at a specific population size for this study as also experienced by other online researchers such as Yu, King and Yoon (2010), Hester and Dougal (2007) and Himelboim (2010), the researcher employed a strategy suggested by Wang and Riffe (2010). They noted that a random sample of six days was enough to represent one year of content (Wang & Riffe, 2010) when content analysing electronic news source archives (Connolly-Ahen, Ahern, & Bortree, 2009). This is especially due to the paucity of contents that may have direct relation to the subject of the study within the archive. Therefore, as this study draws contents from four media outfits within a two-year period, the total sample size therefore becomes 48. See calculation below.

Number of media sources – 4

Sample size per year – 6

Number of years – 2

Therefore $4 \times 6 \times 2 = 48$

Giving a total sample size of 48

The sample was drawn from four global media establishments. These media outfits comprise of two broadcast establishments – CNN and BBC – and New York Times and The Post. These were drawn from both the United States and United Kingdom as they report mostly on

global issues and have extensive coverage of the world. They represent diverse range of ideological perspective. Also, they have online repository without restricted access which will enables effective content research. The researcher employed the use of search engines within the website of each news media using related search terms such as IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu and Biafra to filter contents within their archive that relate to the issues under study.

In this study in order to evaluate the type of representation offered by foreign media in reporting IPOB agitation, the following cues will form the unit of analysis – terrorism, violent, insurgent, freedom fighters, oppressive government, self-determination, peaceful struggle, sectional, secessionist group, anti-government and Israel.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data presented here were generated from the contents of the four selected media outfit within the two-year study period, that is 2015 to 2017. Specifically, the data were collected from 48 contents comprising video, audio, pictures and text contents from the online repositories of CNN, BBC, New York Times and the Post which were produced and circulated with the study frame.

Shown in the table below is the distribution of sources of the relevant media contents that contain elements relating to IPOB agitation within the time frame for this study and the frequency at which they were presented in each of the selected media outlets.

Table 1: Sources of contents and frequencies

Source	Frequency	Percentage
BBC	18	37.5
CNN	15	31.3
New York Times	9	18.8
The Times of London	6	12.5
TOTAL	48	100

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IPOB has had significant level of coverage in American and European media as the table above shows. From this table, we see that majority of the contents relating to IPOB agitations were presented by BBC while The Times had just 12.5 percent of the total number of contents relating to the study. From this table we can also see that the broadcast media, that is BBC and CNN have more coverage of such issues than the print media.

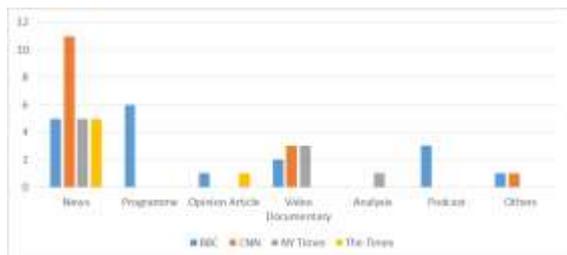


Figure 1: Content Categories for all the media outfits

From the chart above we see that majority (26) of the media contents that convey issues relating to IPOB agitation within the time frame in the selected media sources came as news while others came as programmes and short video documentaries. The issues were mostly conveyed as news and CNN had the highest number (11) of news presented on issues relating to IPOB.

To ascertain the dominant frames that form the contests within which activities of the group was presented, the media messages were analysed for the dominant words or slants. That is, the recurring terms that pervaded all forms of media reports on IPOB.

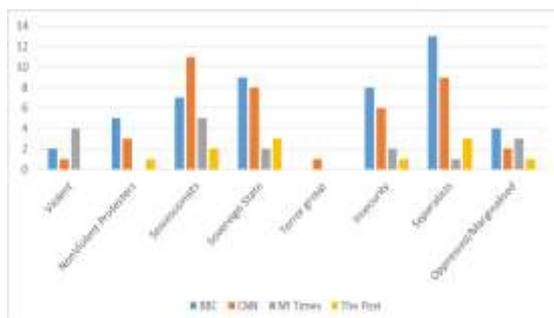


Figure 8: Dominant frames used in the representation of IPOB agitation

From the figure above we can infer that IPOB and its agitation were represented within a wide frame. However, the most dominant frames were Separatists and secessionists. That is, the picture painted of the group through the words used in reporting them and their struggle in foreign media was predominantly that of a separatist group seeking to achieve a sovereign state. They were also widely referred to as a secessionist group. While these terms may connote a group with the aim of trying to leave a country in order to achieve self-determination and independence from Nigeria, the mother country, it however does not suggest an extremist or violent group. More so, the words violent and terror were the most unlikely terms used in referring to the group as both words - terror group and violent - were the least recurrent frames from the data gathered.

Going further to explore the slant of the reports presented in foreign media, the following can be inferred. This was assessed through the story direction, that is, the prevalent tone expressed in each of the editorial contents of the media used in this study.

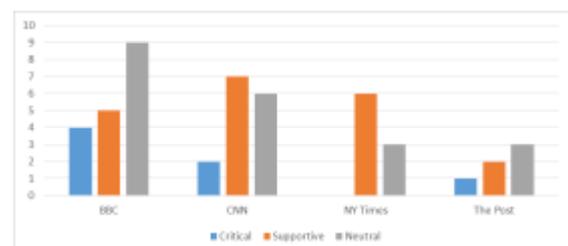


Figure 10: Story direction

From the chart presented above, it can be seen that generally the figures show that the media maintain some form of neutrality in their reportage of the IPOB agitation. The media in America, that is CNN and New York Times are largely supportive in the nature of their presentation of IPOB and the Biafra struggles.

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This is in contrast with the European media which are mostly neutral as the graph shows.

SUMMARY

From the findings, it was noted that IPOB agitation got significant media coverage within the two-year period under study and BBC like other media in Europe gave it the most noteworthy coverage. Often the stories were presented using simple yet straight to the point expressions thereby portraying a deliberate aim at objectivity. Also, the study shows that the predominant frame with which the group was presented were that of separatists and secessionist.

5.2 CONCLUSION

From the study, it can be inferred that the media in Europe had the most significant level of coverage of the IPOB agitation and through the general framing of the issues relating to the group, the media were able to create an image of a secessionist group of IPOB. This, one will agree can go a long way in influencing public perception or acceptance of the group. More so, that through repeated representation of the group in such guise the media sets the agenda for which people can discuss about them and create a frame around which such discussion is centred.

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