COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING FARMERS/HERDERS' CONFLICT IN OYO STATE

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are neither constructive nor disruptive, but the ways they are handled make them either positive or negative. The farmers/herders' conflict between crop farmers and cattle breeders has reached unprecedented levels, with the enormity of destruction to lives and properties. Considering that effective communication techniques are viable in preventing and scaling down conflict, this study seeks to examine the decentralized nature of the media as a support mechanism to physical advocacy in conflict resolution. It seeks to analyse the use of social media by the government in dousing farmers/herders' conflict, and its implication for good governance. The expansion of the media as an agent of communication through which government engages its citizens from its traditional forms to digitalized media has become personalized today with the proliferation of social media. This has created diverse and multiple platforms for government to disseminate and, on the other hand, receive immediate feedbacks that facilitates instant response and action. Adopting a qualitative method, data is obtained through secondary sources, and content analysed. Through discourse analysis of government responses of the executive leadership of Oyo state on Twitter, the study revealed that the government values the importance of social media as a dispute resolution technique, especially on volatile issues such as the farmers/herders' conflict, which in most instances takes on ethnic and religious undertone. Though some farmers and herders may not engage in tweeting, since most of them are usually illiterate and may not bother to take on sophisticated sections on their gadgets. However, considering the unlimited reach of social media and that conflicts of this nature are usually escalated by other groups on social media, the importance of social media as a support strategy for resolving conflict is apt. On the way forward, it recommends that upward communication through social media with appropriate channels of response will facilitate feedback information that will douse the conflict and help promote good governance.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Communication Strategies, social media, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of information is changing rapidly. Dissemination and control of information is no longer linear, as it has diffused to different segments and individuals in the society. Conflict is an inevitable part of every human society, and the way conflict issues are communicated and reacted to goes a long way to determining the impact of such conflicts. Zeitzoff (2017) argues that compared to conventional weaponry, modern communication technologies have a more indirect impact on conflict. Information dissemination is influenced by new technologies in particular, which is important for leaders and parties to the conflict. Gilboa (2009) stresses that people may obtain news from various sources, up-to-date information on events and processes, and various points of view thanks to the internet and social media. Additionally, it enables previously unheard-of levels of interaction, from straightforward talk-back to blogs and the posting of text, images, and videos on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook etc. Modern cell phones and social media have sparked the creation of "citizen journalists," who are able to instantly report on occurrences in their homes and on their streets to the entire world.

In today's digital age, the flow and exchange of information are crucial to maintaining a holistic public order, especially in a plural and diverse society like Nigeria. Awosusi and Ogbuleke (2019) assert that the peace or lack thereof in a society is dependent on the control and management of information. Zeitzoff (2017) avers that social media is increasingly playing an important role in conflict and contentious politics, used by politicians, leaders, insurgents, and protestors as a tool for communication. He defines social media as sites for networking and electronic communication that enable users to follow and exchange ideas with others in an online community and share information (text, photographs, videos, etc.) Facebook, Twitter, Snap Chat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn are popular social networking platforms. There are currently more over 300 million active Twitter users and over 1.8 billion active Facebook users, respectively. This number is anticipated to rise as more than 50% of the world's population has access to the Internet (mostly through mobile devices) and as the developing countries and Africa experience rapid economic growth (Zeitzoff, 2017).

Zeitzoff (2018) posits that information technology advances have altered the path of conflict in history by changing the way leaders communicate to their armed forces, interested audiences, and even the monitoring of events. Social media and other new media platforms have been used to hold governments accountable, bring individuals together to protest, coordinate relief operations, empower citizens, give the knowledge to calm tensions and establish understanding bridges across borders in some circumstances (Rohwerder,

2015). The ubiquity of these tools and their accessibility, particularly amongst urban and people in the rural areas, has increased its potential as a tool in conflict situations to capture in real-time the occurrence of the conflict, which is usually lacking in traditional media, and to get a clear picture and design appropriate conflict de-escalating measures.

Uzuegbunam and Omenugha (2018) affirms that communication experts have continued to argue that communication and the power of the media are viable solutions for resolving conflicts in situations such as Nigeria. In the same vein, Schoemaker and Stremlau (2014) assert that because a networked population has more access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and a better ability to take collective action, social media leads to social change. However, given that our mainstream media's blight is epitomized by ethical concerns of ownership and governmental control, the extent to which these traditional media can continue to contribute to engendering peace and violence-free Nigeria effectively has remained dubious. Asides from the institutional factors that constrict traditional Nigerian media from effectively checking and reporting on farmer/herder conflict, its lack of immediate, interactive, and open communication flow limits its effectiveness in managing conflicts.

The case of Oyo state

The crisis that besets the southwest and Oyo state, caused by the migratory push of herders into various communities in the region in search for viable lands to feed their livestock has increased the potentialities for conflict of ethnic and economic cadences. This relatively new phenomenon in the southwest thus poses a challenge to the government of the various states, specifically in the management of the conflict through dialogue. Dialogue as a tool of conflict mediation requires collaborative, responsive and open communication platforms, which the new media outlets offer. (Hagen *et al*., 2020) affirm that the surge in the use of social media by political actors has been visible over recent years as their strategic value in politics and electioneering has been well documented. However, it has been widely suggested that public agencies underutilize social media by focusing on limited, one-way communications to push information out to citizens rather than engaging the public in collaborative, multidirectional communication. This underutilization might result in missed chances to transmit important information to vulnerable publics and mediate effectively in conflict situations

The primary social media tool, which this study focuses on, is the Twitter platform. Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to share their thoughts and happenings with anybody who follows them. Individual accounts, communication, relationships, and time are all available on Twitter, making it ideal for reenacting historical events.

Followers of Twitter reenactments get real-time updates when historical figures in the reenactment "communicate" by sending tweets, or Twitter messages, about what is going on. The 140-character messages are sent as close to the time and day of the actual event as feasible, and they are written in the present tense to give the impression that they are occurring in real-time (Jensen, Caswell, Ball, and Duffin n.d).

In the face of the persistent clash between farmers and herders over land in Oyo state, and the volatility of ethnic resentment that fuels this crisis, it becomes imperative to adopt a fluid and responsive communication channel to manage and resolve these conflicts. This is particularly so, because most of the conflicts that emanate between herders and farmers are escalated through social media, thereby leading to reprisal attacks and extension of the conflicts even in locations without direct contact to the initial conflict (Kabir, 2021). Nigeria's multiethnic and religious dimension further exacerbates these conflicts (Baderinwa, 2019), as most herders are from the Fulani extraction and farmers from the indigenous settlement. The vast technological and digital platforms that exist in today's world at the disposal of government and its relevant agencies makes it imperative for enhanced communication processes. New media differs vastly in scope and utility compared with the traditional forms of media communication used by the government in the past. The interactivity, digital, virtual, and other characteristics of new media make it a suitable option for effectively managing conflicts. Communication strategies have expanded beyond the tentacles of traditional media. Opeyemi (2020) posits that the past decades have positioned social media as the central channel of communication enhanced by flexibility and easy connectivity. The proliferation of social media channels offers a myriad of opportunities for government to manage and effectively control its population, especially in times of crisis and security glitches that require quick and responsive solutions.

The position of this paper is to highlight the importance of adopting a "flexible, interactive, and multidirectional" channel of communication in de-escalating and managing the conflicts between farmers and herders in Oyo state Nigeria. While the importance of one-on-one advocacy, mediation and negotiation cannot be de-emphasized as conflict resolution tool, the paper argues that the social media which is a major channel for blowing conflicts of this nature out of proportion is a convenient platform for managing the conflict and reducing its effect. Thus, relevant examples of where it fits and how this channel of communication has proven effective in dosing and resolving conflicts in the region are explored in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The spatial scope of this paper is Oyo state Nigeria. Though herders/farmers clashes are rife in almost all states of the Nigerian federation, the choice of Oyo state is however premised on the incessant crisis between herders and farmers that informed the non-state intervention of Chief Sunday Igboho. The study adopts a qualitative method by observing the content of social media post of selected individuals. Data for this study would be mainly gathered from primary and secondary sources and would be largely qualitative. Primary data for this study will be derived from content overview of social media posts on the Twitter Platform of the governor of Oyo state, analysed by semantic of conflict and resolution reflecting responses to farmer/herders' conflict and time series analysis to highlight the frequency of interval responses to farmers herders/conflict in his state. Secondary sources would include journal articles, texts and newspapers. The chief executive officer of the state who is the governor and the frequency of tweets addressing the issues of farmer/herders' conflict within his jurisdiction determined the sampling procedure adopted for the study. The sample size is Oyo state, and this is necessitated by the proactiveness of the governor who has the sole duty of ensuring security of lives and property and safety of his citizens. His persistent use of social media for quick and effective communication in times of conflict justifies the use of Oyo state.

Theoretical framework- *Techno Optimism*

Techno optimism hinges on the assertion that technology plays a key role in good prevailing over bad. Techno-optimism comes in both stronger and lesser varieties. The strongest forms of techno-optimism assert that technology is both necessary and sufficient to ensure that the good outweighs the bad by a wide margin; the weakest forms assert that technology is both necessary and sufficient to ensure that we cross the preponderance threshold by a narrow margin. These two extremes are separated by moderate positions (Danaher, 2022)

Kidd and McIntosh (2016) see techno-optimism as an approach that emphasizes social media technologies' potential to solve social problems. They emphasize that the magnitude of such concerns varies significantly, covering both global challenges such as climate change and proportionately more minor problems, such as encouraging participation in the democratic process, or the case of this study, resolving clashes between herders and farmers in Oyo state. McLennan (n.d) posits that this optimism is based on the notion that internet networking and social media offer a dis-intermediated and participatory environment for a wide range of actors to interact and collaborate. Leveraging on social media for communication in farmer/herder crisis by the government creates opportunities to succinctly address firsthand and in-person without misinterpretation, the appropriate course of action and thus mediating between the parties to the conflict to help prevent the degeneration of the conflict into a full-blown crisis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Like so many governors, who have taken to social media to communicate with their audience, Seyi Makinde has been one of the political figures on the Twitter platform who disseminate and engage the audience on issues of governance in Oyo state. With Retweets and mentions as the most common way to for tweeter users to respond and communicate with one another (Conover *et al.*, 2011), the results and analysis of this study will be done using the retweets and mentions on governor Makinde's Tweets.

Retweets are a type of endorsement that allows users to rebroadcast content created by other users, thereby increasing the content's visibility. Mentions have a different purpose since they allow people to directly address a specific user via the public feed or refer to someone in the third person. These two modes of communication serve different and complementary roles on Twitter, and together they serve as the primary tools for direct, public, user-to-user contact.

The content of the tweets by Governor Seyi Makinde included; acknowledgement of the occurrence of a clash, deployment of security agencies to the sight of the clash, assurance of citizens of appropriate government response to prevent retaliatory clashes in other areas, collaboration with northern governors to resolve the triggers of the clash, and dissemination of proactive measures to prevent future clashes. Due to the widespread use and dependence on mobile devices, social media has emerged as an essential medium for quick real-time communication during a crisis. In the case of Oyo state, the leadership of Governor Seyi Makinde, and his social media activities particularly in response to the crisis in his state reveals that his usage of social media channels through his handle was instrumental in the minimization of altercations in the state. Using the Sasa ethnic clash as an example, the governor was able to provide an immediate response via his social media handles, as particularly observed on his Twitter page, to notify the citizens of the conflict in the area and, more importantly, calm the tensions of the parties involved, with state agencies deployed immediately to resolve the situation.

With the frequency of farmers/herders' clashes in Oyo state, it became expedient for him as the executive leader and chief security officer of the state to engage citizens within the conflict arena and those outside on measures being taken to intercede and resolve the conflict. This approach proved quite effective especially in deepening citizen confidence and trust in the management process of the

farmers/herders' conflict in the state helping to prevent a full-blown crisis.

Fig 1: Few extracts of tweets relating to violent clashes in Oyo state.

Table 1: Governor Seyi Makinde's use of Twitter social media in response to farmers/ herders' conflict in Oyo state and citizens interactions

S/N	Date of Tweet	Likes parties to conflict	Comments by parties to conflict.
1	January 8, 2021	1.5k	119
2	January 20, 2021	1.2k	225
3	January 25, 2021	2.6k	450
4	January 27, 2021	3.3k	338
5	January 27, 2021	2.3k	311
6	January 31, 2021	1k	68
7	February 1, 2021	468	37
8	February 1, 2021	993	57
9	February 1, 2021	1.1k	125
10	February 2, 2021	384	43
11	February 14, 2021	875	166
.12	February 15, 2021	828	78
13	February 15, 2021	1.2k	156
14	February 16, 2021	1k	78
15	February 23, 2021	904	217
16	March 8, 2021	1.2	198
17	June 6, 2021	222	17

On this Twitter handle from February 14 to 16th, all his tweets were in response to the clash, which acknowledged the situation, followed by an assessment of the damages, a state broadcast to reassure the citizens of safety and also images of visiting northern governors to the state to ensure a collaborative response to the crisis. His proactive response enabled using social media was praised by some civil society groups who claimed that his honesty, proactiveness, and integrity was vital to the resolution of the situation (The Guardian, 2021)

In another highlighted circumstance from the table above, using social media as a veritable means of communication to manage conflicts, in the aftermath of the Fulani invasion and killing of residents in the Ibarapa region of Oyo state, the governor, in his usual fashion, took to his social media pages on January 20 to immediately broadcast the state's response to the conflict. This was followed by daily communication through his media handles with a total of 14 tweets from January 20 to January 27, 2021, addressing the residents of the area to leave the course of action to the state's security agencies while embracing peace that justice would be served accordingly. These two cases in Oyo state show that the social media channel of communication, through and by the governor himself, was instrumental in preventing an escalation that could result in crisis in the state. Citizen reaction to his prompt communications was also essential in the entrenchment of peace and stability in the affected communities, due to the calmness of knowing that the head of the state had committed resources to resolving conflicts in the affected areas.

Putting himself out through constant communication rather than reports by press operators was important in ensuring that the

aggrieved party had complete trust in the government through his open communication strategy facilitated using social media.

It therefore shows that leveraging on social media channels particularly twitter allows the elected representative of the state to communicate in person without the influence of second- or third-party channels, which could dilute the government's credibility in resolving the issues. Also, on the part of the citizens, the influence of social media on disputes may be both good and detrimental. Social media aids in the dissemination of conflict-related information, and the intention behind the dissemination on the part of citizens could be for being positive or harmful purposes. However, in instances as demonstrated above, where the leadership of the state has promptly addressed the issues it takes away the possibility of miscommunication, which is a major trigger to large-scale conflicts in human societies. In a positive light, social media also helps regular citizens contact directly with police enforcement whenever there are security concerns arising from the farmer-herder crisis, as feedback is instantaneous. (Ann, 2020)

Evidently, as more citizens spend much time on social media channels, the government can adopt this medium to disseminate information to the public, especially to parties of various conflicts, not necessarily parties by association, but parties by geographical proximity to the sight of conflict, results of which transmutes to dousing grievances in the contested locations. Which guarantees an instantaneous response to aggrieved issues for peaceful coexistence?

The synthesis of the preceding discussion can thus be aptly summed as

➢ The audience of the government is now on social media because of the widespread dependence on mobile devices, which makes it (social media) an essential medium for communication by the government during a crisis.
➢ Governors Makinde has regularly in situations of conflict utilized this medium to mitigate disaster.

In the cases of the Sasa ethnic conflict, Fulani invasion of Ibarapa, and other famer/herders clash in Oyo state, social media has helped to

➢ Acknowledge the crisis and instantly respond to the clashes
➢ Disseminate and properly frame first-hand information to reduce public confusion and lessen the influence of conflagratory persons.
➢ Display statesmanship and collaboration, showing that the government was in control and building trust by attaching a face/personality to actions being taken to resolve the issues.

All of these is done with the speed of a button, as against traditional media processing.

CONCLUSION

As aforementioned, conflict themselves are not constructive or destructive, but the way they are handled determines how it turns out. This is particularly true in the case of Oyo state under the leadership of the governor, who found a viable and veritable means through social media communication to respond to conflicts promptly and assertively within the state. This was particularly effective, evident in the relative peace that obtained in the affected regions, in the aftermath of clashes. Until date, there has been little or no recorded cases of farmer/herders' clash in any part of Oyo state, and this can be partially attributed to the provocativeness of the governor through effective communication, and the devotion of required resources to mitigate tension. Conflict in today's digital age is largely regulated by the scale and kind of information around it. Proactive measures to contain and direct information flow, especially one that establishes confidence through response from the appropriate quarters of the state goes a long way in determining the outcome of any conflict. Social media platforms particularly offer governments of various states, the benefit of speaking to the public on conflict issues, in a manner that transcends empathy, concern and willingness to resolve and manage these volatile issues before it magnifies into intractable conflicts with severe consequences. While parties to the conflict may not directly be connected to social media, but the propensity for the conflict to escalate through social media misrepresentation becomes limited through effective communication strategies by the government. As reflected in Oyo state, the governor communicated through his twitter handle on the occurrence of farmer/herders' clashes in the state, which had the consequence of guaranteeing citizen trust and the trust of the parties to the conflict that the government was in absolute control and managing appropriately, the conflict at hand.

Thus, this paper therefore recommends that governments of various states and agencies involved in conflict resolution and dispute management have social media channels of communication to support traditional conflict resolution systems, facilitate quick response to sites of conflict and thus provide appropriate means of resolving it. The geographical proximity of technology savvy individuals around the sites of the conflict will also facilitate the reign of peace, through confidence in the communication system and the rapid responses to and from the relevant institutions. This would help provide real time response, which is important in preventing the degeneration of conflict into crisis especially retaliatory attacks.

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