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MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF THE KILLING OF ENDSARS PROTESTERS IN LAGOS AMIDST INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

End SARS is a slogan for ban or stop of a particular section of the Nigerian Police units called Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The term is used by the protesters in different cities in Nigeria in the year, 2020 to drive home their anger towards Police brutality which happens to be one of the numerous elements of insecurity in Nigeria. This study was anchored on Development Media Theory which preaches the need for the mass media to assist government in nation building through their reportage which bring about national development. Using a survey research method, the study investigated the mass media audience perception towards the harassment and brutal killing of these protesters in Lekki, Lagos State by the Nigerian uniform armed men who supposed to protect lives. This incident contributed immensely to the growing insecurity concern in Nigeria. Using simple random sampling, 399 copies of well-structured questionnaire of which 380 was retrieved were distributed to respondents who are mass media audience to ascertain the role played by the media in condemning the killing. Findings revealed among others include that the media tackled the ugly incident to a large extent but were apprehensive by insecurity in the country. The researcher concluded that the media could not do enough because of fear of being harassed or killed by the armed uniform which point to the high level of insecurity in the country. The study recommended among others that the media should be brave enough to discharge the constitutional duties without fear of possible harassment.

Keywords: End SARS, Mass Media, Protesters, Insecurity, Audience Perception

Introduction

Police brutality or excessive use of force by law enforcement personnel can be legally defined as a civil rights violation, where law enforcement officers exercise undue force against a subject. The use of torture as an interrogative technique and other wanton abuses of human rights remain some of the major flaws of the Nigeria Police Force which have attracted public odium, opprobrium, and condemnation to the Force. Torture which is described as one of the most extreme forms of violence, resulting to both psychological and physical consequences is sometimes considered as an indispensable interrogation mechanism for gathering strategic intelligence, Huste (2020). Worried by the incessant reports of human rights abuse of the members of the Police Force, the former Inspector-General of Police, Ibrahim Idris, once warned the Special Anti-Robbery Squad operatives against torture and extrajudicial killings, saying “no policeman in the world had the right or authority to kill crime suspects. He admonished the SARS personnel to always respect the right of every Nigerian, noting that this was the way they could change the negative public perception about them. Protests against police brutality previously have arisen in Nigeria, as advocates and researchers have documented extensive evidence of human rights abuses by SARS officers and other NPF personnel. In a 2016 report, Amnesty International asserted that SARS officers routinely committed torture and other abuses against detainees many of whom were arrested arbitrarily, detained incommunicado and forced to “confess” or pay bribes to secure release Gerrity, (2009).

The End SARS protests in 2020 were noteworthy for its capacity, duration and wide spread beyond Nigeria.

Demonstrations began in early October and intensified as celebrities all over the country and beyond expressed support for the protesters, as government crackdown on marchers in mid-October provoked further demonstrations. Many activists deemed the disbanding of SARS on October 11 as inadequate, comparing it to past reforms that broadly failed to curb SARS misconduct. Some also have called for broader governance improvements. As unrest has continued, Governors in several states imposed curfews or banned protests. On October 20, army and police reportedly used live fire to disperse demonstrators in the Lekki and Alausa areas of Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital, killing several and injuring hundreds. Various world leaders criticized the crackdown. On October 22, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo condemned “the use of force by military personnel that fired on unarmed demonstrators in Lagos calling for Nigerian security services to show maximum restraint and respect fundamental rights and for demonstrators to remain peaceful Gerrity, (2009).

However, the way and manner in which the killing of these protesters were covered by the mass media seem so inadequate which prompted the researcher to embark on this study to investigate if the mass media which is the watch dog of the society have done enough in the pursuit of justice to the victims of the Lekki killings by uniform armed men.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is to determine the role of mass media in disseminating information during and after the End SARS protests that resulted in the killing of many protesters. Specifically, the study sort to:

1. Examine if the mass media in Nigeria have the capacity to fight for justice for the End SARS victims
2. Determine whether the mass media did enough coverage during and after the killing of End SARS protesters in Lekki.
3. Evaluate whether the campaign against police brutality spread fast due to mass media involvement

An Overview of End SARS Protests in Nigeria

The 2020 End SARS protests in Nigeria began on October 4, 2020 after a Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) police officer reportedly shot a young Nigerian man in front of the Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State. The video of the incident trended on social media leading to nationwide protests within a few days, (Abati, 2020) in Iwuoha and Aniche (2021). Even though End SARS began to trend on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc., on October 4, 2020 as a form of online protest, it was not until October 8, 2020 that nationwide street protests began across Nigerian cities, eventually assuming a global dimension as the protest rapidly spread to other cities across the world, including London and New York (Abati, 2020). Though these protests were taking place almost at the same time all over the major cities in Nigeria, the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos is considered a major national focal point and epicenter of the End SARS protests as a result of its huge turnout and eventual sad news that took place in that very place.

However, The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), was a specialized unit of the Nigerian Police Force set up in 1992 to fight all forms of violent crimes such as armed

robbery, kidnapping, banditry, etc; as it was established as a result of the growing number of robberies and theft which constituted the largest category of crimes in the early 1990s, (Nnadozie, 2017). For instance, crime data increased from 244,354 in 1991 to 289,156 in 1993. The formation of the SARS in 1992 contributed to significant crime reduction in the period from 289,156 in 1993 to 241,091 in 1994, and 167,492 in 1999 (Cleen, 2019). According to Iwuoha and Aniche (2021), SARS began to overstep the bounds of its duties by arresting those who are alleged to be involved in non-violent crimes such as financial and economic fraud, which is under the purvey of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). It has also been reported that SARS officers mount illegal roadblocks, conduct unauthorized checks and searches, arrest and detain people without warrant or trial, rape women and extort young Nigerians for driving exotic cars (Kazeem, 2020).

Unfortunately, the activities of these SARS officers as mentioned above contributed to a large extent the insecurity fears of the Nigerian masses base on the fact that those who are charged with the responsibility of protecting lives now consume innocent lives of Nigerian.

Mass Media and Situational Awareness

The mass media is used to disseminate different information of public interest during and after incidents. Martins and Alan (1990), in Dare, Samson and Oluwasanmi (2020), put it that mass media refers to all forms of communication by which opinions, ideas, information, knowledge and entertainment are transmitted to large number of people at the same time. Mass media is described as the fourth realm of the estate that serves as a watchdog and exercise

external vigilance over societal actors to serve as a counterweight to powerful interest, Lansner (2006), in Dare, Samson and Oluwasanmi (2020). This is a reflection of the fact that mass media help to checkmate the activities of not just the government but other government agencies and individuals of influence in the society. The mass media can be crucial in shaping public opinion about conflict even in the most established democracies, independent media demonstrate chauvinistic and jingoistic tendencies in wartime and during internal strife, the media can serve to dampen or fan incendiary situation (Lansner, 2006).

The mass media as key players in the area of security and publicity is a major check against insecurity in a nation. The function of the media is to make public the various occurrences and alert the people on the area that constitute security threat to the system Dare, Samson and Oluwasanmi (2020). The media performs this function through objectivity in their reportage. In his words, Okoye (2002), opines that objectivity demands that the journalist keep himself out of report by not injecting his/her emotions, personal opinions and bias into the news report. Neutrality in journalism brings out the beauty of the report and results in a good sense of judgment by the public. Media practitioners especially reporters usually face herculean task in the midst of conflicts. There have been cases of harassment of journalists and confiscation of their equipment thereby subjecting them into fear and intimidation. For instance, security operatives beat a Channels Television cameraman who attempted to take pictures of a raid on the house of Niger Delta volunteer force leader, Asari Dokubo in Abuja in August 1, 2008 (Human Right

Watch, 2008). As critical as the media role is in conflict situation, the media is hampered in her ability to play its role by harassment of journalists; such as death, torture, official coercion, charges of contempt, sedition and criminal defamation, (Karlson, 2000). Giving credence to the above assertions, Ojo (2003), in Dare, Samson and Oluwasanmi (2020), argued that from empirical data, the mass media has not found it so easy under the current democratic experience since the critical assessment revealed that the travail of mass media under the current arrangement would make one conclude that the past military regimes generally believed to be anti-press should not be castigated since the civilian regime has not fared better. It is left to be seen if this ugly development will get better as time progresses where the media will be free to perform her duties without fear of being molested by anyone.

Nigerian Police Brutality to the Citizens

Nigerians in Nigeria have over the years being subjected into different forms of inhuman treatment from the Nigerian Police with little or no provocations. According to Ogunode (2015), Police brutality, which is the use of torture, violence as an interrogative technique and other wanton abuses of human rights remain some of the major flaws of the Nigeria Police Force. The acts of Nigerian police brutality are against international human rights treaties and the activities of the police as an institution are meant to be guided at the national and international level by conventions, standards, and treaties (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966). Worthy to note are some specific provisions of human rights

which include; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of opinion and expression, the right against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatments, the right to peaceful assembly and the mandate of the dignity of every individual is respected most of all these and more are being abused on almost daily bases by the Police and nothing is being done about it.

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights without discrimination, (Leonard 2021). In support of the foregoing, Fall (2012), in Nzirim and Nwakanma (2022), opined that police officers should not use more force than is necessary to maintain control of an incident, carry out an arrest or protect the public and/or themselves from imminent danger. It is true that the Law gives Police officers immunity from litigation as long as they perform within the ambit of law. However, when they work outside the bounds of this authority, they can be held accountable for their actions (Amnesty international, 2021). It is regrettable to observe that the Nigerian Police on numerous incidents acted beyond their bounds thereby contributing to a large extent the insecurity issues Nigeria as a nation is witnessing today. In the views of the Global G.L.O.W team (2020), often police officers abuse their power by using force beyond the limit permissible by law, infringing on the rights of innocent civilians and causing a lot of harm and pain to people. Concerning this, the violations of human

rights by police only make the already challenging task of law enforcement more difficult. This is so because when the law enforcer becomes the lawbreaker, the result is an assault on human dignity, the law itself and all institutions of public authority, (Ewang, 2021). In fact, any nation with high rates of killings by police, there is usually a combination of factors such as inadequate laws, insecurity or conflict, entrenched impunity and that we make bold to claim as the case in Nigeria today based on numerous glaring factors.

Development Media Theory

This media theory emphasis the need for the media to help the government of the day in building the nation by disseminating information that will help the citizens, including the security agents to be conscious of actions that will help the political class to bring about national development both in economy, security and otherwise. Hera (2018), argues that until a nation is well established and her economic and security development well underway, media must be supportive rather than critical of government. The mass media should not tear apart government efforts to promote development, rather assist government in implementing policies that will contribute to nation building.

Research Methodology

This study adopted survey method to investigate the Mass Media Audience Perception of Endsars Protesters Shooting in Lagos amidst insecurity in Nigeria. The population of this study was the residents of Owerri Municipal which is 127,213 according to national population commission. The Taro Yamane sample size formula $[n = N/1+N (e)^2]$ was used to determine the sample size using the above

stated population figure to arrive at the sample size of 399. The sampling technique used in this study was the simple random sampling since it allows for random selection of respondents from the entire population. Structured questionnaire copies were distributed to respondents in Owerri metropolis. The total number of questionnaire copies administered was 399.

However, the number of questionnaire copies duly completed and returned was 380, amounting to 95% of the original size and that served as the sample size for this study while descriptive statistics involving tables, percentage distributions and frequency patterns were used to analyze the outcome of the responses.

Findings and Discussion

Table I: Do Mass Media in Nigeria Have the Capacity to Fight for Justice for the Endsars Victims?

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Yes | 127 | 33 |
| No | 215 | 57 |
| Not sure | 38 | 10 |
| Total | 380 | 100 |

Result from table 1 above shows that more than one-third 57% of the audience of mass media in Owerri Municipal disapproved the assertion that mass media in Nigeria have the capacity to fight for justice of the victims of Lekki End SARS protest in Lagos. This revelation validated the opinion of Ojo (2003), in Dare, Samson and Oluwasanmi (2020), that the mass media has not found it so easy under the current democratic experience since the critical assessment revealed that the travail of mass media under the current arrangement would make one conclude that the past military regimes

generally believed to be anti- press should not be castigated since the civilian regime has not fared better. Less than one-third of the respondents or 33% were in affirmation that the media have the capacity to fight for justice of the Lekki End SARS protest while as little as 10% could not say if the mass media in Nigeria have such capacity. It implies that the Media which should act as the watch dog of the society has no capacity to do so because of bad leadership in the country.

Table 2: Did Mass Media Did Enough Coverage During and After the Killing of Endsars Protesters in Lekki

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Strongly agreed | 106 | 28 |
| Agreed | 142 | 37 |
| Can't say | 29 | 8 |

| | | |
|--------------------|------------|------------|
| Strongly disagreed | 54 | 14 |
| Disagreed | 49 | 13 |
| Total | 380 | 100 |

Result from the analyzed data above in table 2, shows that almost two-third of the entire respondents accepted that Mass Media did enough coverage during and after the killing of Endsars protesters in Lekki as 28% and 37%, strongly agreed and agreed respectively to the above posed question, an insignificant number of respondents amounting to 8% were mute while 14% strongly disagree, 13% followed suite and were non placed. It means that those who held a positive answer were more than those with negative one with a wide margin of

38%. It implies that more respondents believe that Mass Media did enough coverage during and after the killing of Endsars protesters in Lekki and this result opposed the assertion of Karlson (2000), in which he stated that “as critical as the media role is in conflict situation, the media is hampered in her ability to play its role by harassment of journalists; such as death, torture, official coercion, charges of contempt, sedition and criminal defamation”, (Karlson, 2000).

Table 3: Did The Campaign Against Police Brutality Spread Fast Due to Mass Media Involvement

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| True | 296 | 78 |
| False | 67 | 18 |
| Undecided | 17 | 4 |
| Total | 380 | 100 |

The obtained result from table 3 above shows that more than two-third of the respondents or 78% said the campaign against Police brutality spread fast due to Mass Media involvement, while less than one-fifth of 18% opposed the statement. A little as 4% of the entire respondents were unsure. The difference between those who believed that the campaign against Police brutality spread fast due to Mass Media involvement and those who declined amounted to 60%. The significance of this result points to the fact that the Media in Nigeria are always ready to discharge her constitutional duties if only government can assure them of free and secured

environment. No wonder the Human Right Watch (2008), observed that the media practitioners especially reporters usually face herculean task in the midst of conflicts. There have been cases of harassment of journalists and confiscation of their equipment thereby subjecting them into fear and intimidation, for instance, security operatives beat a Channels Television cameraman who attempted to take pictures of a raid on the house of Niger Delta volunteer force leader, Asari Dokubo in Abuja in August 1, 2008’, (Human Right Watch, 2008).

Summary

The survey research method was used in this study to determine how the audience of Mass Media reacted to the level of media coverage of the victims of EndSARS protest in Lekki. A total of 380 valid respondents were used to provide answers to the three posed research questions in the study, using a well-structured questionnaire for the qualitative study and analyses. The summaries of the study were made as follows:

1. The Mass Media had a good coverage and reportage of the unlawful shooting at the EndSARS protesters at Lekki toll gate in Lagos. The message got to the audience as it created awareness of the unfortunate incident, through different platforms of social media and mainstream media but had no capacity to dig deep by a way of fighting for justice for the victims of the protest because of fear of possible harassment and threat to life. This finding satisfied the requirements of the first objective set for the study, which was to examine if the mass media in Nigeria have the capacity to fight for justice for the Endsars victims.
2. The study found that the ugly incident that happened on the 20th October, 2020 had enough media coverage as different mass media organizations carried the news both radio, television, newspapers and magazine, not leaving the online media behind. This finding satisfied the second objective set for the study which enquired to know whether the mass media did enough coverage during and after the killing of Endsars protesters in Lekki.
3. It was found that the constant harassment of citizens by the Police, even torture and sometimes killing of innocent citizens were made known through the mass media but they could not take any bold step to call to an end of such Police brutality as the Forth Estate of the realm. In fact, it was the masses who decided to take the bull by the horn as they took to street in protest after the ugly incident that happened on the 4th of October, 2020 at Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State. This finding satisfied the third and last objective set for the study.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the research exercise has it that the provision of information through the Mass Media created awareness about Police brutality. It is the information that got the attention of the public regarding the excesses of the Police to the Nigerians. However, it is the persistent or continuous harassment and unlawful killing of citizens that led to the protest which was aimed at registering the displeasure of the masses towards the Police brutality. Instead of this bold step from the public to bring positive change, it resulted into further killing of the innocent and none of the perpetrators of this dastardly act was brought to book up till now which goes to show the level of lawlessness in the country, no wonder Ewang, (2021), stated clearly that any nation with high rates of killings by police, there is usually a combination of factors such as inadequate laws, insecurity or conflict and entrenched impunity. This insecurity caused by the Police brutality to Nigerians, unfortunately, our media houses being the watch dog of the nation have no capacity to deal with because of fear of being killed.

Recommendations

The need for resolving Police brutality vis-à-vis, insecurity in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, the researcher recommended the following:

1. Government should provide enabling environment for free Press (Mass Media), although, there is nowhere in the world where the Press is absolutely free but it is very important that the Press receive the necessary support to discharge her duties without fear of being harassed.
2. The Nigerian Police Force should engage her personnel in constant training and retraining to meet International standard practices of Police and the public in discharging her duties as the idea of changing just name like from SARS to another name without changing the mindset of the personnel through adequate training will not yield desired result.
3. The Media should brace up to the challenge of modern day journalistic practices where a journalist is more concern in being the first to report an accurate and verified news account without fear of being harassed by anyone, so long as he/she is working in accordance of the law. The idea of going for envelopes and not for accurate news event is seriously affecting the image of the Nigerian Press, thereby giving room for constant harassment.

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