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Mass Media Coverage of Conflict Resolution: An Examination within the Framework of Social Responsibility Theory

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Abstract

This study examines the role of mass media in conflict resolution within the framework of the Social Responsibility Theory. Conflict resolution remains a critical agenda for national, regional, and international organizations. The media, as a major force in shaping public perception, plays an essential role in either mitigating or escalating conflicts. This paper explores how the media can contribute to peacebuilding by promoting balanced reporting, avoiding sensationalism, and providing diverse viewpoints. Additionally, it highlights the ethical responsibilities of journalists in conflict reporting and the potential consequences of biased or inflammatory coverage. The researchers conclude that the media should act as a bridge for conflict resolution rather than a catalyst for violence.

Keywords: Mass Media Coverage, Conflict, Social Responsibility Theory

Introduction

Over the last several decades, officials at the national, international, regional, and sub-regional levels have prioritised conflict resolution and prevention. According to Corten (2018), Article 1 (paragraph 1) of the United Nations Charter states that "The purposes of the United Nations are to maintain international peace and security and to that end; to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about peaceful conflict resolution, means and to conform with the principles of justice and international. Furthermore, the term appears numerous times in the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU), the successor organisation to the OAU, and is included in the AU's objectives. Almost every region of the world has prioritised conflict prevention (Aboribo, 2004). Delta State, located in the Niger area, has been plagued by unending violence. It has had a number of confrontations over the years. These conflicts have



been triggered by a variety of circumstances, including political instability, ethnic and communal upheaval, resource control agitation, environmental contamination and deterioration.

In their efforts to plead for peace and engage in conflict resolution, the Nigerian government has always viewed and relied on mass media as a vital weapon. The mass media have always played an important role in conflict resolution because it may influence public opinion, construct conflict narratives, and influence the bargaining stances of parties involved in disputes. This research critically explores media coverage of conflict resolution within the context of social responsibility theory. This idea is one of the press's normative theories, arguing that the mass media, as an integral element of society, is responsible for serving the public interest and promoting social justice. This paper, therefore, explores how the mass media of communication can discharge its social responsibility within the domain of conflict resolution.

The problem that necessitated this study lies in the fact that conflicts in the Niger Delta region have been that of a recurring decimal, notwithstanding the different peace initiatives and policy interventions. Different scholars have attributed this inconsistency in conflict occurrence in the Niger Delta, especially in Delta State to lack of and breakdown in communication. Communication is widely recognised as a central tool in conflict management. Modeyin, et al. (2025) opine that effective communication strategies such as public relations, community engagement and traditional Communication system play a significant role in de-escalating conflicts in Nigeria. The absence of these therefore, will pose as a fertile ground for conflict revitalisation. Adedeji (2024) argued that peacebuilding efforts in the Niger Delta are constrained by inadequate funding, inconsistent government responses, poor implementation of commission recommendations, inappropriate conflict resolution approaches, and disempowering legislation. Eguruze et al. (2025) comment that, while the media is expected under the social responsibility theory to act in the public interest by providing accurate, balanced and fair reporting, recent studies indicate that media coverage in the Niger Delta often fails to meet those ethical standards. Reporting tends to be sensationalised, politically biased and sometimes escalates tension rather than contributing to conflict resolution. This inadequate application of socially responsible communication undermines efforts to foster dialogue, understanding and sustainable peace in the region. Also worthy to note is the increasing influence of digital and social media that has compounded the problem. The spread of unverified and biased information has intensified mistrust among stakeholders and heightened tension within local communities (Oboko, & Ukwueze, 2025; Umoren & Ukpong, 2025). Such information distorts public perception and weakens ongoing peacebuilding initiatives in the Niger Delta region. In a nutshell, the study tends to examine the lack of adherence of media practitioners to principles of the social responsibility theory which seeks to reduce the media effectiveness as a veritable tool for conflict resolution in Delta State.

According to Victor and Akaneme, (2022), it was noted that notwithstanding the introduction of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by oil companies, conflict persists due to lack of meaningful community participation and development. From the media analysis Abubakar, et al. (2025) state that the media play a dual role in conflict situations, acting as an escalator or a mediator depending on how information is framed and disseminated. Objectively, the paper is set to assess the extent to which the media comply with the tenets of the social responsibility theory; to examine the role of media in conflict resolution in the Niger Delta; to identify the causes of conflict in the region; and to suggest strategies for improving responsible conflict reporting in the region. The research questions that underpinned the study are: To what extent does the media comply with the tenets of the social responsibility theory? What role does the media play in conflict reporting in the region? What are the causes of conflicts in the region? What strategies can be used to improve responsible conflict reporting in the region? The study will be of great significance as it will add to the already body of knowledge through its empirical, literature review and findings; it will act as guide to media reporters and practitioners, to always act and report responsibly in conflict situation by keeping to the tenets of social responsibility theory. In addition, it will provide a background knowledge to scholars and researchers by enhancing literature on media ethics, conflict



resolution and development communication. Also, it will encourage an inclusive communication and representation by involving host communities. Lastly, it will assist in peace building by helping NGOs and conflict resolution bodies in developing communication based messages.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory. The Social responsibility theory emerged as a result of both libertarian and social responsibility views. The theory originated as a result of the press misusing the freedom granted by free press principles. A free press is designed to provide citizens with objective information that they may use to make informed political decisions that influence their lives. The excesses and distortions in yellow journalism and sensationalism prevented these goals from being met. The social responsibility thesis is among the normative press theories. It dates back to the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. According to this notion, the press has a social responsibility to serve the public interest rather than chasing profits or personal agendas. The Hutchins Commission of 1947 was among those who supported and contributed to this theory. According to Asemah et al. (2017), the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press was established in 1947 in response to widespread criticism of the abuses associated with the Libertarian Theory of the press, particularly sensationalism, invasion of privacy, and other unethical media practices.

Principles of the Social Responsibility Theory

The key principles of social responsibility press theory are as follows:

Diversity: According to Christians et al. (2009) the press should reflect societal variety and provide a platform for varied opinions.

Accountability: The press should be accountable to the public by correcting errors and responding to criticism (McQuail, 2013).

Independence: Siebert et al. advocate for the press to be independent from government, corporate, and foreign forces.

Obor (2004) highlighted the following as principles of social responsibility:

- i. Mass media acceptance of social responsibility and fulfillment of certain obligations to society, the nation, and humanity (Asemah et al. 2017).
- ii. High level of professionalism and a standard of information based on truth, accuracy, objectivity, balance, and universalism.
- iii. In accepting the obligations of social responsibility and commitment to truth, the activities of the mass media should operate within the framework of the law and ethical considerations.
- iv. Avoid disseminating or transmitting any information that might lead to crime, disorder, variance, or put minority groups in a bad light.
- v. Recognize the plurality and multiplicity in society, giving access to various points of view and the right to reply, and acknowledging the existence of various ethnic, religious, cultural, and political sensitivities of individuals and groups.
- vi. Mass media personnel are accountable first to society, their employers, and the market, and not the other way around.
- vii. The mass media should be tactical in handling political, religious, and ethnic conflicts by their deliberate use of leads, which soothe the heat contained in the body of the story.



- viii. Censorship and careful editing of sensitive parts of visual accompaniments of stories selected for news broadcasts.
- ix. Embargo on inflammatory statements by parties in conflicts to forestall a situation where the mass media is used to magnify the conflict and overheat the polity.

Social Responsibility Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this study because it emphasizes that the mass media have an obligation to serve the public interest through accurate, balanced, objective, and ethical reporting. In conflict situations, the theory maintains that the media should not merely report events but should contribute to social stability, peacebuilding, and informed public discourse by avoiding sensationalism, misinformation, and biased reporting. This study examines the extent to which the Nigerian mass media, particularly in the Niger Delta region, fulfil these responsibilities in their coverage of conflict resolution. Since the study focuses on media compliance with the principles of responsible journalism, the theory offers an appropriate framework for assessing whether media reports promote dialogue, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence or contribute to the escalation of conflicts. Consequently, the variables investigated in this study, including media compliance with ethical standards, conflict reporting, and peacebuilding strategies, are directly linked to the assumptions of Social Responsibility Theory.

The theory is relevant to this study because it explains the expected role of the mass media in promoting peace and sustainable conflict resolution. The theory serves as a benchmark for evaluating whether media organizations in the Niger Delta adhere to professional ethics by ensuring truthfulness, fairness, objectivity, balance, and respect for public interest in reporting conflict-related issues. It further provides a basis for understanding how responsible media practices can reduce misinformation, encourage dialogue among stakeholders, and strengthen public confidence in peacebuilding efforts. The theory is therefore suitable for interpreting the findings of this study, as it enables an assessment of the extent to which the media fulfil their social obligations in conflict reporting and how adherence to these principles can contribute to lasting peace and development in the Niger Delta region.

Method

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to examine mass media coverage of conflict resolution within the framework of Social Responsibility Theory in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The population comprised residents of the Niger Delta region, which includes Abia, Akwalbom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers States, with an estimated population of about 31 million people (PIND Foundation, 2023). Using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 level of significance, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined. The study employed a combination of simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques; simple random sampling was used to select respondents across the region, while purposive sampling was used to identify key informants such as media practitioners, traditional rulers, and academics with relevant expertise. Data were collected using a structured, self-designed questionnaire based on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The instrument was divided into two sections: Section A captured respondents' demographic characteristics, while Section B contained items relating to media compliance with social responsibility principles, the role of media in conflict resolution, causes of conflict, and strategies for improving responsible conflict reporting. The validity of the instrument was established through expert review, while reliability was confirmed using the test-retest method, yielding a satisfactory reliability coefficient of 0.82. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools, specifically frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, with a benchmark mean of 2.50 used for decision-making. Ethically, participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before the administration of the questionnaire. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they were assured that the information provided would be treated with strict



confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. Respondents were also informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any penalty. To protect participants' privacy, no personally identifiable information was collected, and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants.

Findings

A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered to respondents across the selected states in the Niger Delta region. Out of these, 363 copies were properly completed and retrieved, representing a 90.8% response rate, while 37 copies were either not returned or were discarded due to incomplete responses. Consequently, the 363 valid copies of questionnaire retrieved were used for the analysis of the research questions, and the findings are presented in the tables below.

Analysis of Research Questions

Table 4.1: Respondents' Responses on Media Compliance with Social Responsibility Theory

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
The media reports conflict issues accurately	72	110	78	38	2.72
The media provides balanced coverage of conflict situations	60	105	85	43	2.62
The media avoids sensationalism in reporting conflicts	55	90	95	63	2.45
The media promotes fairness in its reporting of conflicts	65	100	85	45	2.63
The media prioritizes public interest over personal or political interests	50	85	95	63	2.42

Weighted Mean = 2.57

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. $n = 363$. Data from fieldwork (2026).

Table 4.1 indicates that respondents show mixed perceptions regarding media compliance with the tenets of social responsibility theory. Although responses suggest moderate agreement on accuracy (2.72), balanced reporting (2.62), and fairness (2.63), lower mean scores for avoidance of sensationalism (2.45) and prioritization of public interest (2.42) indicate notable weaknesses. The weighted mean of 2.57 suggests that while some aspects of responsible journalism are evident, overall compliance remains partial and inconsistent.

Table 4.2: Respondents' Responses on the Role of Media in Conflict Reporting

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
The media helps to promote peace during conflicts	95	120	60	38	2.87
The media facilitates dialogue among conflicting parties	85	115	65	38	2.79
The media influences public opinion on conflict matters	120	140	40	23	3.11
The media sometimes escalates conflicts through its reports	110	130	50	33	2.98
The media serves as a watchdog in conflict situations	100	125	55	33	2.93

Weighted Mean = 2.94

Table 4.2 shows that respondents generally agree that the media plays a significant role in conflict reporting, as reflected by the weighted mean of 2.94. High mean scores for influencing public opinion (3.11) and serving as a watchdog (2.93) highlight the media's importance. However, the relatively high



mean for conflict escalation (2.98) indicates that the media's role is dual in nature, contributing both to peacebuilding and conflict intensification depending on reportage.

Table 4.3: Respondents' Responses on Causes of Conflicts in the Niger Delta

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
Environmental degradation contributes to conflicts	140	130	40	23	3.16
Poverty and unemployment are major causes of conflict	150	120	40	23	3.18
Political marginalization contributes to conflict	135	125	45	23	3.12
Resource control issues lead to conflicts	145	130	40	23	3.19
Oil theft and militancy contribute to conflict	150	135	35	23	3.22

Weighted Mean = 3.17

Table 4.3 reveals strong agreement among respondents on the major causes of conflict in the Niger Delta, with a high weighted mean of 3.17. Oil theft and militancy (3.22), resource control (3.19), and poverty (3.18) recorded the highest mean scores, indicating that economic and environmental factors are key drivers of conflict. This suggests that conflicts in the region are largely rooted in structural and socio-economic conditions.

Table 4.4: Respondents' Responses on Strategies for Improving Responsible Conflict Reporting

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
Journalists should be trained on conflict-sensitive reporting	180	120	25	13	3.39
Media organizations should avoid sensational reporting	170	130	25	18	3.34
Fact-checking should be strengthened in conflict reporting	190	120	20	13	3.44
Collaboration with peacebuilding organizations should be encouraged	175	125	25	13	3.37
Government should regulate misleading media content	160	130	25	18	3.29

Weighted Mean = 3.37

Table 4.4 shows that respondents strongly agreed on the strategies for improving responsible conflict reporting, as reflected in the weighted mean of 3.37. Fact-checking (3.44) recorded the highest mean score, suggesting that respondents consider the verification of information essential in preventing the spread of misinformation, reducing sensational reporting, and promoting public trust during conflict situations. Similarly, journalist training (3.39) ranked highly, indicating that respondents believe continuous professional development equips media practitioners with the ethical knowledge and conflict-sensitive reporting skills needed to promote peace rather than escalate tensions. The relatively high mean scores for collaboration with peacebuilding organisations (3.37) and government regulation of misleading media content (3.29) further suggest that respondents view responsible conflict reporting as a collective responsibility involving journalists, media organisations, regulatory agencies, and other stakeholders. These findings imply that strengthening ethical standards, professional capacity, and institutional collaboration would enhance the media's effectiveness in promoting conflict resolution in the

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the mass media in the Niger Delta demonstrates only partial compliance with the principles of Social Responsibility Theory, particularly regarding accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and the promotion of public interest in conflict reporting. Although respondents



acknowledged that the media attempts to provide balanced information, the results indicate persistent deficiencies arising from sensationalism, political interference, and biased reporting. These shortcomings undermine the media's capacity to serve as an impartial watchdog and a credible platform for peaceful conflict resolution. This finding supports Eguruze et al. (2025), who observed that media coverage of conflicts in the Niger Delta is frequently sensationalised and influenced by political and economic interests, thereby escalating tensions instead of promoting peaceful dialogue. The implication of this finding is that unless media organisations strengthen editorial independence and enforce ethical reporting standards, public confidence in the media as an agent of peacebuilding may continue to decline, thereby limiting its effectiveness in managing conflicts.

The study further established that the mass media performs a dual role in conflict situations by functioning both as an instrument for peacebuilding and, at times, as a catalyst for conflict escalation. Respondents agreed that the media contributes to conflict resolution through public enlightenment, awareness creation, dialogue promotion, and dissemination of timely information. However, they also acknowledged that biased framing, inflammatory language, misinformation, and sensational reporting can intensify hostility among conflicting parties. This finding corroborates Abubakar et al. (2025), who argued that the media possesses the capacity to either mediate conflicts constructively or aggravate them depending on the manner in which information is selected, framed, and presented. The finding reinforces the assumptions of Social Responsibility Theory, which maintains that media freedom must be accompanied by ethical responsibility and accountability to society. The implication is that journalists and media organisations must recognise the significant influence of news framing on public perception and ensure that conflict reporting contributes to reconciliation rather than division.

Another important finding revealed that environmental degradation, poverty, resource control disputes, unemployment, and militancy remain the major drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. These factors received relatively high mean scores, indicating that respondents perceive socio-economic and environmental conditions as the fundamental causes of persistent unrest in the region. This finding is consistent with Mbelegberi and Hart (2025) and Obi (2014), who identified poor resource governance, environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration, socio-economic deprivation, and resource control issues as major contributors to conflict in the Niger Delta. The implication of this finding is that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through media interventions alone. Rather, governments, oil companies, host communities, and other stakeholders must address the underlying structural causes of conflict through environmental remediation, equitable resource distribution, employment generation, and inclusive development policies. Without addressing these root causes, media efforts at conflict resolution are likely to produce only temporary outcomes.

Finally, the study found strong support for strategies aimed at improving responsible conflict reporting, particularly journalist training, rigorous fact-checking, avoidance of sensational reporting, adherence to professional ethics, and collaboration with peacebuilding organisations. These strategies recorded high levels of agreement among respondents, suggesting that they are considered essential for improving the quality and credibility of conflict reporting in the Niger Delta. This finding is consistent with the principles of Social Responsibility Theory (McQuail, 2013), which emphasise accuracy, fairness, accountability, and service to the public interest, as well as the concept of peace journalism advanced by Galtung, which advocates conflict-sensitive reporting that promotes dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation rather than violence and hostility. The implication is that media organisations should institutionalise continuous professional development programmes, strengthen editorial fact-checking mechanisms, and adopt peace journalism practices as part of their editorial policies. Such measures would enhance the media's credibility and improve its contribution to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and sustainable development in the Niger Delta.



Overall, the findings demonstrate that while the mass media remains an indispensable stakeholder in conflict resolution within the Niger Delta, its effectiveness depends largely on its adherence to ethical standards, professional responsibility, and conflict-sensitive reporting. The study therefore reinforces the relevance of Social Responsibility Theory by showing that responsible journalism not only informs the public but also contributes significantly to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and sustainable conflict management.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers conclude that mass media have an important influence in conflict resolution. While the media have the ability to enlighten and educate the public, it may also exacerbate disputes if not managed correctly. Ethical and professional journalism is critical to ensure that conflict-related information is conveyed honestly and sensitively. The Social Responsibility Theory offers a useful paradigm for guiding media activities in dispute resolution by emphasizing truth, justice, and public accountability. As a result, the media should prioritise peace journalism and pursue tactics that promote understanding and reconciliation above division and antagonism. In conformity with the results, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Media organisations should adhere strictly to ethical journalism principles by ensuring accuracy, fairness, and objectivity in conflict reporting.
2. Journalists should adopt peace journalism practices that promote dialogue and reconciliation while avoiding sensational and inflammatory reporting.
3. Government and relevant stakeholders should address the socio-economic and environmental factors driving conflicts in the Niger Delta through sustainable development initiatives.
4. Media organisations and professional bodies should provide regular training and strengthen fact-checking mechanisms to improve responsible conflict reporting.

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