

## Bias and Conflict Reportage in Nigerian Media: The Case of Tivs/Fulani Herdsmen

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**Abstract**

The role of the media is to mediate information between authorities and the public and to do so in a fair manner. The debate is ongoing as to whether the media truly fulfills its core ethics of fairness, objectivity and balance. The perception of media bias exists despite the lack of consensus among communication scholars about it. This gives room for an alternative idea that the media environment is such that people are attracted to outlets that cater to their own sentiments or group interests in news coverage particularly in times of crisis. Where the media falls short of the audience's expectation, there may be perception of bias. The study set out to test whether group affiliation can cause perception of bias in news and if so, what are the possible consequences on the media involved. Respondents in Gwagwalada, Abuja and the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp in Daudu, Benue state of Nigeria, were requested to read and assess a standardized news story published by *ThisDay* newspaper on the killings attributed to Fulani herdsmen of two Catholic priests and many others in Benue state. The result shows low confidence in the media outlet among those who perceived its news story as biased. The paper argues that no matter how objective the media reports may be, partisans with pre-existing notions will expect that the media will be biased against them because they do not perceive it as representative enough of their position. The research suggests though that the media can do more in de-escalation of crisis by refraining from using words and phrases that can stereotype parties in a conflict.

**Keywords:** Media, Society, News, Bias, Democratic election.

**Introduction**

The primary role of the media in the society is to provide the people with information on important issues which can affect the way the citizens think, and the way government reacts to issues. But beyond its traditional role of informing, educating and entertaining, the mass media provides interactive platform between political parties and the electorate in a democratic process to make democratic election possible. Information about the behavior or intentions of others and their expected outcomes are necessary for strategic calculations, and media serve as primary sources of information allowing voters to assess the political climate [1]. The media can also put pressure on government to take specific actions on behalf of the people. Therefore, the quality of coverage provided is of great importance. It should be without bias. However, with all the heat and attention, it incites among activists and ordinary citizens, (media) bias is yet to be defined clearly, let alone receive much serious empirical [2].

The term seems to take on three major meanings. Sometimes, it is applied to news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality (distortion bias), sometimes to news that favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict (content bias), and sometimes to the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content (decision-making bias) [2].

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Generally, bias in the media happens when a news medium's coverage of a story is perceived to be unfair and imbalanced. For this research, the definition of perception is drawn from *Dictionary.com*. [3] As relating to psychology, it is a single unified awareness derived from sensory processes while a stimulus is present. "The social phenomenon known as public perception is the difference between an absolute truth based on facts and a virtual truth shaped by popular opinion, media coverage and/or reputation" [4]. President Donald Trump of the United States of America has an inherent distaste for the U.S. mainstream media because of his perception that they are biased against him. He had constantly voiced his frustration and lack of trust in the media as can be seen in this quote. "More than 90% of Fake News Media coverage of me is negative, with numerous forced retractions of untrue stories. Hence, my use of Social Media, the only way to get the truth out. Much of Mainstream Media has become a joke!" Trump [5]. This is one example of how perception of bias may shape relationship with the media. Readers form opinion from the content of the media. If their perception is negative, it may be difficult for the medium involved to overcome. Hence the necessity for the media to be conscious of what it does that shapes its public reputation.

This study seeks to find out how bias informs perception of the media. Using a *ThisDay* newspaper news story on the killing of two Catholic priests and several other persons by suspected Fulani herdsmen in Benue state, the objective of the research is therefore to determine how bias affects public perception of this news medium. It seeks to find out whether the respondents see the story as biased and if so, whether they merely suffer from hostile media phenomenon perhaps, having already formed an opinion other than the one presented in the story. The study is interested in determining whether what they feel about the story influences the way they relate with the newspaper. The respondents were a random sample of Tiv people from Benue state and Fulanis for the fact that they are likely to perceive the story differently. The newspaper was selected because, with about one million followers on twitter, it is one of the widest circulating newspapers in the country.

The problem the study addresses is not whether the media is biased because bias, itself even where it exists, may not be an issue unless the perception of it has consequences on the media and the audience. Rather, it is to determine how the perception of bias affects individual's opinion and trust of the news medium. To achieve this, the study, through survey, examines the perception of Tiv and Fulani readers of the *ThisDay* newspaper news story on the issue of the killings by Fulani herdsmen in Benue state. Drawing on Quackenbush's previous study of perception of media bias, this study aims to find out if perception of bias exists even when the content is not inherently biased, and whether it is capable of engendering trust issues. Even though a few studies exist on the media coverage of Fulani herdsmen attacks in Nigeria, this researcher is not aware of any that focuses on the effects of bias on public perception of the media as it concerns the killings attributable to Fulani herdsmen in Benue state. This is the gap the study aims to fill.

This study is important because the media has a profound effect on the public and the media space has continued to evolve with new dynamics. And in this changing media environment, selective media exposure becomes the norm with serious

implications. Therefore, the likelihood of running into news that seems biased has increased exponentially, elevating the impression that bias is pervasive throughout all parts of the media which may put the integrity of the media in jeopardy [6]. There is the need to empirically determine if this is indeed the case and if so, what can be done to remedy it.

## Literature Review

The perception of media bias has existed as far back as the founding of America. In 1807, former American president, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle" (Jefferson 1807, as cited by Eisinger, Veenstra, and [7]. What distinguishes distrust of the media today from the distrust of Jefferson's era is that modern news outlets allegedly aim to be above partisan fray of politics [7]. A national debate about media bias, specifically about ideological content in American journalism, currently saturates the cultural and political landscape [7]. The authors argue that many outspoken conservative television hosts claim that the media in America has a liberal bent when reporting the news, as liberals contend that the American media is inherently conservative. Koehn et al. cited a study by Niven to back up their claim that these passionate assertions of ideological bias in news reporting primarily consist of anecdotes and allegations, without any systematic analysis of data on which conclusions can be made. Therefore, bias in the media has been widely discussed over the years.

The idea that major American news organizations may have political biases or agendas was raised by Goldberg [8]. Weatherly et al. note the argument of Goldberg, a former employee of CBS News, which suggests that the organization had a liberal bias. In their article, *Perceptions of political bias in the headlines of two major news organizations*, the authors point out Goldberg's assertion that most employees at CBS News, including those in decision-making positions, held liberal views that indirectly biased the news coverage of stories because the views played a role in what stories were deemed newsworthy. The media is the watchdog of the society and is the lifeblood of democracy. It enables informed and rational participation by citizens [9]. Under its agenda-setting function, the media is responsible for a major part of what is talked about by the people. This means that the media can choose and emphasize certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important [10]. However, this role has been questioned due to perception of bias in news use. Gil de Zuniga et al., in their article on *Effects of editorial media bias perception and media trust on the use of traditional, citizen, and social media news*, in which they examined the effect of trust in the media and perceived bias on patterns of use, conclude that perceived media bias has a negative effect on all news use [9]. They also believe that media bias is a concept the widespread use of which belies equally widespread disagreement about its meaning, measurement, and impact. Although the concept is debated by scholars and the public alike, opinion often diverges in the meanings ascribed to the term and the conclusions drawn about its nature and prevalence [11]. In his *Theories of media bias*, therefore points out that in academic circles; media bias is referenced more often as a hypothesis to explain patterns of news coverage than as a component of any fully elaborated theory of political communication [11]. However, in discussing

“Objectivity of bias,” the author observes that charges of media bias draw their strength from the widespread assumption that the media should be unbiased or objective particularly in its treatment of politics and public issues. Despite criticism against this, journalism is still usually measured against some standard of dispassionate information-based reportage, which exhibits a concern for fairness, balance, and impartiality [11].

The author suggests:

As a result, bias is frequently conceptualized negatively, as the absence of one or more of these conditions. The term is variously used to refer to distortions of reality, favoritism or one-sidedness in presenting controversies, and closed-minded or partisan attitudes. In the process, it has been treated both as an independent variable in explaining the character of news coverage and a dependent variable to be explained by the news production process (p. 2).

The author also discusses Structural (non-ideological) bias, noting that the debate over bias usually concerns the media’s putative ideological or partisan tilt. However, it is often treated in a much broader context, as any deviation from an objective account of reality. This approach dismisses claims of objectivity as either irrelevant or an impediment to a real understanding of media content. Insofar as news is a specific form of discourse, any of its characteristics can be seen as bias. Such biases are often cast as structural, either to indicate that they are inherent in news or to distinguish them from political or ideological biases [11].

He also stresses that there is little agreement on the nature and derivation of structural biases, that they may be traced to the effects of the economic marketplace, governmental pressures or regulation, organizational processes, and the professional norms and opinions of individuals who construct the news. Kaid & Stromback observe that although studies have examined bias in the media in many countries, the most concentrated empirical research on the topic has taken place in the United States, reflecting the predominance of empirical social scientific perspectives as well as the historical development of political journalism in the country [11]. In their study, *Conservative and Liberal labeling in major U.S. newspapers* [7], advance the argument that the issue of ideologically biased media need not be relegated to philosophical musings or talk show rants; ideological bias can and should be empirically tested. Therefore, the article tested one theory of ideological bias in national U.S. newspapers; that of labeling of prominent politicians. They specifically tested a hypothesis first articulated by Goldberg [7], who alleges that the label conservative is more frequently used than the label liberal. Noting Goldberg’s stance, the authors maintain that not only is the labeling more common among conservatives, but using the conservative label is a pejorative tag. Journalists who omit the liberal label to describe politicians do so, the authors say, because the media implicitly believe that liberal public officials are in the mainstream and not deserving of a special label. According to the authors, Goldberg contended that this labeling is not conspiratorial but rather because many journalists perceive liberalism as part of the political mainstream. The article attempted to test the first assumption that they observed was routinely asserted by Goldberg and others, namely, that there is a preponderance of conservative labeling

in various U.S. media. They produced a quantitative analysis of ideological labels of politicians and then analyzed newspaper articles qualitatively, seeking to comprehend and explain if any patterns exist, and if so, why. They conclude that among major newspapers over fourteen years, some disproportionate labeling of conservatives exists and that this labeling pattern does not necessarily constitute an implicit or explicit bias, as it appears to be explained by a variety of factors, including the rise of conservatives who entered Congress in 1994 and the increased conservative ideological tenor of the Congress during the past fifteen years [7].

However, in performing its traditional functions, the media can sometimes be seen to deviate from its core principle of objectivity and fairness and instead take side in a dispute. The media often falls short of its ideal, and indeed is regularly accused of partisanship and biased reporting [12]. Some people pick holes in the objectivity claim of the media as they believe the media shows bias in reporting when it fails to cover something because it does not want its audience to know about it, in which case, many people will never get the information; or pay unwarranted measure of attention to something the media wants to promote. But Quackenbush, in his study of *Public perceptions of media bias* observes that the modern media environment is more polarized than ever before with partisan news audiences self-selecting into news channels that cater to their political preferences [13]. While noting the heightened consensus that the majority believes the media is biased, despite a lack of conformity in scholarly research and evidence that points to the underlying causes and factors, Quackenbush also points out that an alternative assumption is that news consumer’s interpersonal factors such as ideology and perceptions of bias cause the notion that the media is biased. Some prior studies narrow this down to the Hostile Media Effect (HME) or Hostile Media Phenomenon (HMP). It is a situation where partisans, whose points of view are not supported by factual presentations of event even when the media does well within the delicate socio-political context in which it operates, think the mass media is biased. In which case, such partisans may have suffered the HME or HMP. That is, even when media coverage of a controversial issue is, by the standards of most individuals, comparatively balanced and objective, people who are highly involved in the issue may see that coverage as unjustly slanted in favor of the opposition [14,15].

In examining biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the 1982 Beirut Massacre, Vallone et al., conclude that charges of media bias may reflect more than self-serving attempts to secure preferential treatment [14]. They got both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans to view identical samples of major network television coverage of the massacre. The respondents rated the programmes and those responsible for them, as being biased against their side. The researchers’ concern was to evaluate the role of hostile media phenomenon which they argue appears to involve the operation of two separate mechanisms. According to the authors, partisans first evaluated the fairness of the media’s sample of facts and arguments differently: considering their own divergent views about the objective merits of each side’s case and their corresponding views about the nature of unbiased coverage. Secondly, the authors posit, partisans reported different perceptions and recollections about

the programme content itself; that is, each group reported more negative references to their side than positive ones.

Doty similarly argues that media consumers perceive hostile media bias with varied intensity in response to a neutral media report concerning an issue about which they have formed an opinion that is different from other opinions introduced in this report [16]. Drawing on findings from social psychology research in group behavior, the author asserts that media consumers perceive a stronger media bias when the media focus on group conflicts that evoke the consumers' group identity and prompt them to react as group members rather than as individuals. In their study of group allegiances and perceptions of media bias, got Muslims and Christians in Indonesia to read an article describing inter-religious conflict [17]. They attributed the article either to a Muslim newspaper, a Christian newspaper, or an unidentified newspaper and the results indicated the hostile media perception only among high identifiers. According to their findings, there was also some evidence for the predicted role of newspaper religion in influencing perceptions of bias as the article was seen to be biased in favor of Muslims when attributed to a Muslim newspaper and biased in favor of Christians when attributed to a Christian newspaper as well as intermediate when the newspaper was not identified. The authors believe that the effect of newspaper religion was mediated by prior beliefs of bias, which tallies with the argument of hostile media phenomenon. But Antoniadis disproved the notion that Muslims may perceive balanced media coverage on sensitive or controversial issues to be biased against them by conducting an experiment in Qatar asking both Muslim and non-Muslim participants to evaluate an Al-Jazeera news clip on the controversy generated from the publication of cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammed by Denmark's largest newspaper [18]. To check how media branding affected perception, the researcher replaced Al-Jazeera logo with CNN for half of the participants. He reported no difference in the assessment of the CNN clip by Muslims but found that the participants who considered CNN to be biased were more likely to assess the report as biased.

Quackenbush wonders therefore whether more specifically, is media bias a matter of perception where individuals form such perceptions based on their own prior beliefs [13]. Or is the actual content of information presented by the media biased? While Ariyanto, Hornesey & Gallois agree that there is media bias, they are however of the opinion that group alliance may color perception and how people view the integrity of the media [17].

They argue:

There is no doubt that media bias can be real; in all sorts of overt and subtle ways, media can prejudice one argument over another. However, in terms of how people feel about the integrity of media coverage, the extent to which the coverage is objectively biased is less important than people's perceptions of whether it is biased. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that perceptions of bias are influenced by a range of factors that do not relate to the content of the media coverage, but rather are embedded in the intergroup context within which the issue is played out.

The foregoing establishes alternative views on media bias and therefore its effects. If the media is biased, what effects does it have on the consumers? If the media is not biased, it may

necessarily mean that the consumer is the problem. But for Park [19], it should be noted that some people's anger with the media is merely a symptom of a larger and complex problem arising from the lack of trust. The trust that is essential for the media to continue functioning as the watchdog of the government has corroded to an alarming point, he argues in his study of *Media Bias: How the bias affects public perceptions of the media and what can be done to further prevent erosion of media-public relationship*. DellaVigna and Kaplan, in their study, *The political impact of media bias*, argue that the effect of media bias depends on how the audience processes the information presented by the media [20]. Drawing on Bray and Kreps, the authors posit that if the audience is aware of the media bias and filters it from the information, distortions in reporting are unlikely to have large effects on voter beliefs.

Rational viewers, knowing the exact extent of the bias, realize that bad news often is not reported and good news often is exaggerated. If the viewers have a good sense of the degree of the media source's bias, they will take into account the bias and discount the news about the candidate. They will not on average be persuaded by the biased news source [20].

In contrast to this, Druckman, in his study of *The impact of media bias: How editorial slant affects voters*, found out that news outlets make many choices in covering campaigns and they highlight certain issues, frame events in particular ways, as well as portray candidates in varying lights which, he argues, affect voters [21]. He submits that, for example, voters often base their candidate evaluations on the issues emphasized in the news (priming), and they form their opinions about events in ways that correspond with how the news frames those events (framing).

As previously stated in this study, some media audience members see the same story differently depending on their partisan disposition. Doty (2005) alludes to this in a study of *Hostile media effect: A state of the art review* [16] where she relies on to back up the assertion that the perception of media bias affects two fundamental features that characterize the relationship between the public and the media: the public's trust and the media's influence. Citing Schmitt *et al*, she propounds that people who are susceptible to HME view media content as unfair and inaccurate. "This perception undermines trust in the media, which, in turn, correlates with a decrease in the media's influence [16]. Also drawing on Tsfati, Doty advances the argument that when people do not trust the media; they tend to reject the notion of public opinion created by the media, noting that by contrast, when people regard the media as credible, the media exerts considerable power over the former's perception of public opinion. This means people who trust the media are inclined to consistently converge with the media's position [1].

The entire study of mass communication is based on the notion that the media has significant effects, yet there is little agreement on the nature and extent of these assumed effects [22]. But to understand all this requires empirical study which this research aims to contribute to. There's a kind of self-fulfilling perception to it, that once people see something they don't like, they notice things that reinforce the belief that there's bias in the media as a whole [6]. Quackenbush agrees that from a democratic point of view, this trend of selective exposure can have unfortunate

implications because political accountability is in question [13]. He submits that if the news media cannot effectively give out its message to the consumer without the news consumer assuming it is biased then the likelihood of that individual receiving the full message is undermined. Quackenbush believes that if citizens are increasingly polarized with respect to the news information they receive, as well as seeing public affairs through an ideological filter then, the democratic process is hindered [13]. However, as Park notes, their anger with the media is merely a symptom of a larger and complex problem arising from the lack of trust [19].

In determining the effect of bias on the perception of the media by the public, this research ventures to explore the coverage of the Fulani herdsmen attacks in Benue state, north central Nigeria, which led to the slaughter of many Tivs. Conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in this part of Nigeria have become too perennial, thus constituting a threat to the unity and progress of the centenarian-country [23]. Every year, tens of people lose their lives in gruesome manner while valuable property including houses and farmlands are destroyed. People are rendered internally displaced and are left to deal with situation of lack of necessities.

Adisa [24] maintains in his study of the herdsmen methodology:

For a long time, the Nigerian state has been under siege by Fulani herdsmen terrorists operating under a predictable pattern of reconnaissance, attack and withdrawal, leading to many deaths and social dislocations. Since January 2016, there has been documented deaths of approximately 1000 Nigerians from across the middle belt, the South-south, and Southeastern parts of the country from these coordinated Fulani herdsmen attacks. The Fulani herdsmen are credited with destabilizing the city of Jos, a once tourist destination [24].

Shehu cited a *Punch* newspaper report of 2016, which shows that in December 2015 no fewer than 22 persons were reportedly killed when suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked Kwata in Jos South Local government area of Plateau state [23]. In February 2016, suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked a village in Agatu, Benue state, reportedly killing at least 300 persons in an incident described as the worst ever witnessed in the series of attacks by Fulani herdsmen. Drawing on the *Pivot's* editorial of April 10, 2014, Celestine paints the situation in Benue thus: "Fulani militia...unleash terror, havoc and destruction on the farm yields in Benue. The wanton destruction of human lives, farmlands and agricultural produce is gradually having a toll on the food security". Several factors have been attributed to these seemingly endless conflicts including climatic and environmental change, depletion in natural resources in the extreme Northern parts of the country as well as even political, ethnic and religious reasons [4].

Drawing on several past studies Shehu speaks of the following factors as responsible for the violence between herdsmen and farmers:

Climate change, the migration further south, the expansion of farming on pastures, the invasion of farmlands by cattle, assault on non-Fulani women by herdsmen, blockage of stock routes and water points, freshwater scarcity, burning of rangelands, cattle theft, inadequate animal health care and disease control,

overgrazing on fallow lands, defecation on streams and roads by cattle, ineffective coping strategies, ethnic stereotyping, and the breakdown of conflict intervention mechanisms are usually identified as the root causes of such violence [23].

But beyond the fact that the clashes between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers arise from the difficult condition of getting pasture, such crises are given fillip by the prospect of the herdsmen losing their animals as the Fulani believes that life is worthless without his cattle. According to Shehu, to Fulani, lives can be sacrificed if their cattle can be at risk. "In the same vein, farmers cannot fold their hands and allow their farm produce be eaten up by the herdsmen's cattle" [23]. Media coverage of these crises has been scrutinized in some prior studies, some of which have come out with the verdict of bias in favor of one party in the crisis or the other. Media, scholars have criticized the disproportionate, sectional, sensational reportage of the herdsmen and Fulani crises devoid, in the main, of the element of objectivity and conflict management [4]. This may create perception challenges for the media involved because, as Adamu points out, "public perception of media coverage delineates what view they have on the issues that are covered by the media in an attempt to keep the public abreast of current events". Sipocz argues along this line as he notes that audience perception of media outlets and news sources is critical to success of the media industry. The importance of public perceptions is often underscored by the phrase, perception is reality [25].

Adamu on her part, examined public perception of the media coverage of the 2016 herdsmen and farmers conflict in Bokokos Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria and most of her respondents felt that most media reports of the Fulani herdsmen and farmers were lopsided against the side other than their group [4]. Ciboh interrogated framing of the herdsmen and farmers conflict in Nigeria and concludes that media reporting of especially inter-group conflicts has been associated with unprofessional acts of sensationalism, lack of considerations of context, accuracy and fairness, balance and completeness, integrity and responsibility [26]. According to him, many find press reports on issues, particularly ethnic conflicts, distorted and colored with ethnic prejudice which he claims, now divides the Nigerian press into a north-south press. Shehu espouses the same view as he notes that the framing of herdsmen/farmers conflict by most Nigerian Newspapers is "arguably characterized by regional and partisan coloration [23]. Ahmadu and Ayuba, in their study of group solidarity in conflict between farmers and Fulani pastoralists seem to lend weight to this assertion as they conclude that the use of group solidarity by both pastoralists and farmers contributed in aggravating the conflict into a wider dimension beyond individual pastoralist-farmer conflict to a communal conflict [27]. Mostly, actors in this conflict came from varied ethnic, regional and religious divides and that shapes the frames of the media, as its workers are never exonerated from partisanship in the reportage of ethnic and religious-driven conflicts". According to the researcher, one of the most notorious conflicts being ethnically colored by the media is herdsmen/farmers conflict. He believes that Fulanis have been stereotyped, that even when only a few of them may be involved in attacks, the entire Fulani race had been adjudged guilty in media narrative. "Fulaniphobia is an angle of saliency that surfaces in the framing of the ongoing conflict between the herdsmen and farmers by some

Nigeria's newspapers". The forgoing arguments suggest media bias and provide the motivation for this paper to explore the effects of such phenomenon on the perception of media coverage of the killings in Benue state.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the concept of media bias, "that curiously under theorized staple of public discourse about the media" as well as the theory of agenda setting and their relationships with the mass media, mass media owners, journalists and their perceived impacts on their audience [2]. The theoretical underpinning of the research is the Agenda Setting Theory. "An agenda is a list of things to be considered or acted upon" Dominick [10]. Dominick propounds that when we say the media has an impact on agenda setting, we mean that it can choose and emphasize certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important. McQuail, sees agenda setting as a process of media influence (intended or unintended) by which the relative importance of news events, issues or personages in the public mind are affected by the order of presentation (or relative salience) in news reports [22]. The theory describes the ability of the media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda. This is a role that has been questioned because of the perception of bias in news use.

## Methodology

The purpose of this research is to find out whether people perceive coverage of issue sensitive to them to be biased against them and how that may affect their perception of the media. To determine these, the researcher went to the field and through a purposive sampling under non-probability sampling technique, requested some participants of Tiv and Fulani origins selected in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja and the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp in Daudu, Guma Local Government Area of Benue state, to read a news story and take a short survey. The two tribes were chosen because they were the ones at loggerheads in the deadly herdsmen/farmers crisis in Benue state which has generated controversy not just between the Tivs of Benue state and resident Fulanis but around Nigeria and beyond. Purposive sample was adopted because the participants were selected for specific characteristics of having group affiliation to either Tiv or Fulani tribe and those who failed to meet this criterion were eliminated [28]. The selection was so because, in the opinion of the researcher, they are representatives of the entire population of Tivs and Fulanis under study (Moti, 2005). The Gwagwalada Area Council was chosen because it is in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) home to all tribes in Nigeria and both tribes under study are adequately present there. The Council has an area of 1,043 square kilometers and a population of 157,770 at the 2006 census. Daudu IDPs camp was selected because it hosts Tiv victims of the Fulani herdsmen attacks. The population of IDPs in Daudu is 20,000 according to Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA). Both Gwagwalada and Daudu bring the total population under study to 177,770.

The news story was taken from *ThisDay* newspaper coverage of Fulani herdsmen killings in Benue state. *ThisDay* newspaper was chosen for this study for what the newspaper says about itself. Founded on January 22, 1995, it has offices in 36 states of Nigeria, the Federal Capital Territory and around the world. It

says on its Twitter profile that it is Nigeria's most authoritative news media available on all platforms for the political, business, professional and diplomatic elite and broader middle classes while serving as the meeting point of new ideas, culture and technology for the aspirational and millennial. The newspaper describes itself as a public trust dedicated to the pursuit of truth and reason covering a range of issues from breaking news to politics, business, the markets, the arts, sports and community to the crossroads of people and society.

A total number of 384 sample size was picked from a population of 177,770 to be administered questionnaires following *The Research Advisors' Sample Size Table* [29]. The sample size has a Confidence level of 95% and a Margin of Error of 5.0%. One hundred and ninety-two persons of Tiv origin were chosen for the survey; 150 from Gwagwalada and 42 which is 11% of 384 was from Daudu IDPs camp because the 20,000 population of Daudu is 11% of the total population of this study. This was balanced off with 192 Fulanis surveyed in Gwagwalada. As indicated previously only persons from the two tribes were selected for the sake of homogeneity in group affiliation of the parties in the crisis. The questionnaires were administered on individuals in different places in Gwagwalada Area Council including the two campuses of the University of Abuja, offices, and recreation centers among others as well as Daudu's IDPs camp.

The survey asked closed-ended questions of "yes" and "no" where the respondents agree or disagree with the questions posed. Closed-ended questions were used because "they provide greater uniformity in responses and the answers are easy to quantify" Wimmer and Dominick [28]. The survey was made up of the following parts: the news story, assessment of the neutrality of the story, fair representation of the warring factions, trust in *This Day* newspaper, and information on tribe and information. This study has limitations of time, resources and obviously not a perfect undertaking but should provide grounds for future research into this controversial development in the annals of Nigeria.

## Findings and Discussion

As had been stated in the foregoing, the objective of this study is to determine how bias affects individual's perception of the news medium. The result of the survey conducted shows that for the first question in which the respondents were asked to assess the neutrality of the *ThisDay* news story, 260 or 68% of the respondents said it was biased and 120 or 32% said it was not biased. But out of this, the number of Tivs who said it was biased was just 63 or 33% of Tivs surveyed as against 192 or 100% of Fulanis who said the story was biased. That is, no single Fulani agreed that the story was fair. The number of Tivs who said it was not biased was 130 which amounted to 67% of the number of Tivs surveyed. For the second question which inquired about adequate representation of the voice of Fulani herders in the news story, a total of 104 or 27.3% of the respondents said "yes" while 276 or 72.6% said the voice of Fulani herders was not adequately represented. In this, 102 or 53.3% of Tiv respondents said Fulani herders' voice was well represented while 90 or 46.6% of them said the voice of Fulani herders was not well represented. One hundred percent of the 192 Fulanis surveyed said Fulani herders' voice was not well represented. When the question was asked

regarding the adequate representation of the voice of Tivs in the story, a total of 318 or 83.6% answered in the affirmative while 62 or 16.3% said it was not well represented. Of the total number that said “yes,” 130 or 68.4% Tivs. agreed that their voice was well captured in the story while 60 Tiv respondents or 31.5% said it was not well represented. But 176 or 92.6% of the Fulanis surveyed said the voice of Tivs was adequately reflected in the story. Only 13 or 7.3% of Fulani thought the voice of Tivs was not well represented. For the fourth question that sought to know whether respondents would distrust *ThisDay* newspaper because of the story should they believe it was biased, a total of 195 or 51.3% said they do not trust the medium while a total of 185 or 48.6% said they still trust it. A total of 156 or 82.2% of Tivs said they trust the newspaper while 34 or 17.8% of Tivs said they do not trust the newspaper because of the story bias. On the contrary, a total of 161 or 85.7% of Fulanis said they do not trust the newspaper because of the bias of the news story. But 29 or 14.2% of Fulanis said the story will not make them to distrust *ThisDay* newspaper. This result of the survey is presented in the Table 1.

The result suggests that sharp difference exists between Tivs and Fulanis in the way they perceived the neutrality of this standardized newspaper article based on their prior beliefs [13,17]. While the Fulanis saw the story as biased against their people who are the herders, the majority of Tivs were of the view that the story is neutral. Significantly, 100% of Fulani saw the story as biased. This may be explained by the fact that they never expected the media to show sympathy for the herders to whom many deaths around the country had been attributed and perhaps already stereotyped by the media. More so, a newspaper published in the southern part of the country. It is therefore possible that Fulanis believed they have no chance of being fairly reported in a medium such as that and could therefore have hostile attitude towards it. This is consistent with prior studies on hostile media phenomenon. However, 33% of Tivs surveyed agreed that the story was jaded against Fulani. This position may be explained by the fact that one of the settings where the survey was carried out was not in Tiv land where the killings occurred and therefore, some of the Tiv respondents were liberal as they had not been in the direct line of fire of the rampaging Fulani herdsmen. The news story under review, without editorializing, reported the incident as it happened, complete with the opinion of victims and the reaction of the authorities. It may be seen by neutrals as having satisfied the core ingredients of fairness and objectivity. But publishing, for instance, a phrase such as “it has been the goal of the Fulani jihadists to conquer Benue and

Tiv people who have resisted their advance into the Middle Belt and the Eastern part of Nigeria since 1804” even though they are quotes from the subjects, may be offensive to the Fulanis who may consequently exhibit a hostile reception towards the medium. This is also consistent with the perception “of the value and integrity of their group. For this reason, neutral or balanced reporting is seen to be biased against their group because it does not reflect the partisan’s own distorted world view” [17]. On the other hand, the majority of the Tivs likely felt comfortable with the news story and *ThisDay* newspaper because the story seems to agree with their worldview. This study therefore affirms that in intergroup conflicts, people have the tendency to see standardized media report that is not in tune with their pre-existing beliefs as biased against their own group and may, consequently, lose confidence in the medium involved.

## Conclusion

The study extends the research on hostile media effect by presenting evidence in the Nigerian context rather than what previous studies have done. But its outcome also demonstrates the dilemma the media in whatever setting often faces in the coverage of conflicts and controversial events. It confirms the assertion that bias has effect on public perception on the media, but this perception may relate to the prior dispositions and worldview of the affected groups. Therefore, no matter how objective the media reports may be such group members expect that the media will be biased against them because they do not perceive reports as representative enough of their position. This breeds mistrust in the media and lessen its influence, a condition which is difficult to overcome. It is the opinion of this researcher that education is the key to ameliorating this situation. There is the need for constant enlightenment through the use of political, religious and opinion leaders who wield considerable influence among the contending groups. Despite this, the media must be deliberate in its effort to reduce the areas that heighten suspicion and tension in their coverage of conflicts. This not being a perfect study, more research is needed to ascertain the validity or limitations of group affiliations in the perception of media bias.

## Recommendations

This study argues that people’s perception of the media can be negatively affected where media content does not fulfill their expectations especially in a contest between two distinctive groups. To mitigate the effects of perception of bias on the media, the study makes the following recommendations.

- In reporting intergroup conflicts, the media should play

**Table 1:** Result of the survey.

1. Is the story biased?	Yes	260 (68%) of total respondents	No	120 (32%) of total respondents
Tivs that said ‘Yes’		63 (33%)		130 (67%)
Fulanis that said ‘Yes’		192 (100%)		Nil
2. Fulanis voice well represent-ed?	Yes	104 (27.3%) of total respondents	No	276 (72.6%) of total respondents
Tivs that said yes		130 (68.4%)		60 (31.5%)
Fulanis that said yes		Nil		192 (100%)
3. Is Tivs voice well represented?	Yes	318 (83.6%) of total respondents	No	62 (16.3%) of total respondents
Tivs that said ‘Yes’		130 (68.4%)		60 (31.5)
Fulanis that said ‘Yes’		176 (92.6%)		13 (7.3%)
4. Do you distrust <i>ThisDay</i> if biased?	Yes	192 (51.4%) of total respondents	No	185 (48.6%) of total respondents
Tivs that said ‘Yes’		34 (17.8%)		156 (82.2%)
Fulanis that said ‘Yes’		161 (85.7%)		29 (14.3%)

down negative phrases that may stereotype any of the sides involved.

- The media should provide adequate representation to the parties in the conflict for necessary balance and trust building.
- The media must not try to exploit the misfortune of victims of conflicts for its own gains through sensational claims designed to attract audience attention.
- The media must highlight issues that deescalate rather than inflame passions in a conflict situation for early resolution.
- The media should be conscious of what it does that shapes its public reputation.

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