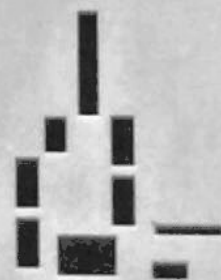
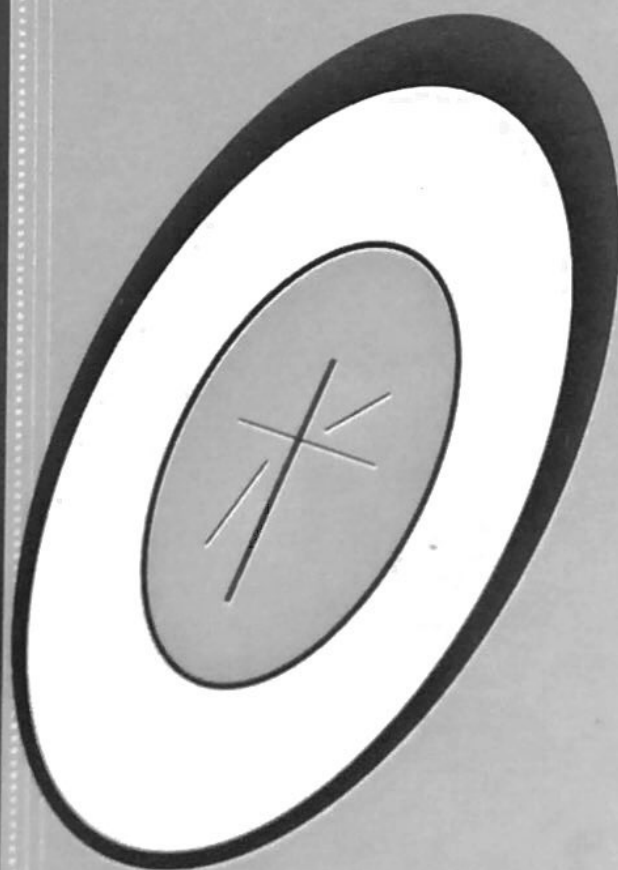


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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Abdulbaqi, Saudat S.** is a doctoral scholar at the Department of Communication, University Utara, Malaysia.
2. **Alemoh, Thomas A.** lecturers in the Department of Mass Communication, Kwararafa University, Wukari, Taraba State.
3. **Anorue, Luke I.** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
4. **Batta, Herbert E. Ph.D.** is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo
5. **Egwa, Rilwanu** is a lecturer in the Department of Languages, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi.
6. **Isiaka, Babalola** is a lecturer in the Department of Agricultural Education, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Otto/Ijanikin, Lagos.
7. **Josiah, Ubong E. Ph.D.** is of the Department of English, University of Uyo, Uyo.
8. **Konkwo, Dede E. J.** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri.
9. **Mustapha, Lambe K.** is a doctoral student at the Department of Communication, International University, Malaysia.
10. **Ngomsor, Blessed** is of the Department of Mass Communication, Well Spring University, Benin, Edo State.
11. **Nwabueze, Chinenye Ph. D** lectures at the Department of Mass Communication, Anambra State University, Igbariam.

12. **Nwammuo, Angela Nkiru Ph.D.** lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus.
13. **Obayi, Martin P.** is a Ph.D student in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, nsukka.
14. **Ogbiti, Clara A.** is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State.
15. **Okorie, Nelson** lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State.
16. **Onosu, James E.** lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State.
17. **Onyebuchi, E. Alexander** is a doctoral student in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
18. **Oyedepo, Tunji** is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State.
19. **Semiu, Bello** is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Crescent University, Abeokuta, Ogun State.
20. **Ugwonno, Chinedu** is a staff of City Hill Communications, Awada, Onitsha
21. **Umolu, Paul** lectures in the Department of Mass Communication Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi.
22. **Usaini, Suleimanu** of the Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State.

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Nigerian Press and the Niger Delta Agitations

**Lambe K. Mustapha
&
Saudat S. Abdulbaqi**

Abstract

One of the critical issues engaging the attention of Nigeria is the Niger Delta agitation. Aside from the region being the natural holder of the resources that form the financial vertebrae of the nation, the agitation, resulting from over-exploitation of the resources without corresponding returns, has turned the Niger Delta to a newsmaker of all time. In discharging their duties as socially responsible institutions, development partners, cultural industry, the media face dilemmas in the quest to play their part, particularly given the multiple and differing expectations of stakeholders. Balancing the varying needs of being the societal watchdog, government's ideology promoter and successful business not only sparks conflict, but is challenging. While journalism requires making all issues common knowledge, government favours moderation and cooperation and business wants returns on investment. These mean that

practitioners should, at times, sacrifice and compromise to attain a balance - a breach of social responsibility philosophy. Giving the glorious past that Nigerian press has recorded, therefore, the institution should raise the issues of Niger Delta to the realm that can guarantee justice and fairness. Through robust people-centred journalism, this article believes, the Nigerian press can commence mobilisation and agitation for the much needed good governance that provides people's current needs without jeopardising the future of the next generation.

Introduction

One of the most critical issues affecting the Nigerian nation is the Niger Delta crisis. This crisis commands the attentions of all the operatives in Nigeria. Government, academia, civil society, the press, to mention but a few, have cast their lots to attending to this with little, if any, result. The issue becomes polemical because of the strategic importance of the region to the nation vis-à-vis the poor prognosis that any altercation in the region portends for the entire globe. The centrality of petro-chemical resources that reside in the Niger Delta or the industrial and domestic life of virtually every nation and people of the world explains the importance of the region.

Lying deep in the earth of Niger Delta region are hydrocarbons that produce petroleum oil, the *lubricant* of the contemporary industrial structure that sustains the world. From cooking gas to automobile gasoline, waxes, asphalts and other items made from petro-chemicals such as adhesives, paint, deodorants, compact disc, etc, petroleum oil has become one of the most used substances the world over. "Every day, many

people use a number of the over 4,000 oil-derived products or items that shape modern life" (*Awake!* 2003, p. 13). Therefore, a continuous crisis in a region that contributes enormously to the fuelling of the world could not be dismissed or handled lightly.

However, much as petroleum oil brings joy and improvement to mankind, it equally has the capacity to wreak havoc, through the devastation of the environment which contributes to the escalation of the disequilibrium of the global ecosystem. The negative side of petroleum engagement makes the Niger Delta of Nigeria a volatile region that attracts the attention of all, particularly the press which main function is to disseminate information that is of interest based on strict rules popularly refers to as news judgement criteria in the journalistic parlance. And because the Niger Delta crisis satisfies the news value of prominence, proximity, human interest, conflict, integration as Folarin (2005) outlines, it follows that the Nigerian press has the professional responsibility to act. Therefore, this article reviews the roles and constraints of the Nigerian press in the handling of the Niger Delta crisis and prescribes the path to a balancing act in the midst of different stakeholders' expectation of the institution.

The Press

It is because of the pervasive nature of newspapers that people tend to see the word "press" as newspaper and by extension those whose functions are to produce them. The press covers the print sector of the mass media, notably the newspapers, magazines and periodicals (Aliagan, 2006). So powerful is the press in all societies that Edmund Burke in the late 18th Century England coined the term "Fourth Estate", which refers to the political power possessed by the press, on a par with the other three "estates" of power of the British realm: the Lord, Church and Commons (McQuail, 2000).

In America, the press is referred to as the fourth branch of government... coming after the executive, the legislature and the judiciary (Akinfeleye, 2003). Although, the term press today is used synonymously with mass media, the vehicles for dissemination of information to wide, heterogeneous and anonymous audience, scattered in far-flung locations, it shall be construed, for the purpose of this discourse, to be the print genre of the mass media.

Niger Delta

Defining Niger Delta has remained a huge task among politicians and scholars alike. The delineation of the region according to Onuoha (2008) into the core and the periphery, with the core being Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta states and the inclusion of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Edo, Imo and Ondo States. Though this essay is not aiming at creating any segregation, emphasis is placed more on the parts of the region with greater eco-system problems that have remained the catalyst for the crisis in the region.

Agitation

According to Webster's New World College Dictionary, agitation means (1) ...violent motion or stirring, (2) emotional disturbances or excitement, (3) discussion meant to stir up people and produce change. Given the debilitating state of the region, resulting from resource exploitation and *insensitivity* of government and oil prospecting companies to the plights of the Niger Deltans, this article defines agitation as a conflict which in the words of Lulofs and Cahn (2000, p. 11), "is a part of human life that can create harmful disturbances or be the sources of authentic social innovation."

Theoretical Framework

The Nigerian press has been reacting maximally to the unfolding political, economic and social challenges confronting the various cleavages in the country (Aliagan, 2006). It opens the window through which the people can view events and happenings in their societies. According to Madubuike (1999, p. 227) "... people do not only get factual information about public affairs and what is happening in the world from the mass media; they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue by the emphasis placed on it by the *print media*" (emphasis intended). This is what has come to be known as Agenda-setting Theory.

Citing Bernard Cohen, one of the scholars who provided the conceptual foundation of Agenda-setting theory, Baran and Davis (2003, p. 311), submit that, "The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". In related terms, the work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) gave great impetus to the power of the media in setting public and policy agenda. This was succinctly captured in their great seminal paper, *Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*:

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in the news story and its position....
(McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

So enormous is the capacity of the press that there is minimal part of human life in which the press cannot intervene in.

It is thus essential for the press to be conscious of the responsibilities imposed on it by such power. Hence, journalists subject themselves to self censorship in the performance of their duties. Complementing agenda-setting theory in the social construction of reality for the audience is the theory of gatekeeping, which undergirds the ability of journalists to filter information that eventually gets to the audience. It is practically impossible for journalists to publish all they know on a particular subject due to limited space and time, hence the voluntary censorship. One of the ways of achieving voluntary censorship is gatekeeping.

The concept of gatekeeping crept into mass communication literature in 1949 when psychologist Kurt Lewin, used the term to describe the filtering processes that allow certain people in the production of media content to accept some events as newsworthy and hence fit for publication or broadcast while rejecting others (M'Bayo, 2006). Therefore, "...news tends to be presented in a way which hides the process of selection and construction which all news media go through" (Taylor and Willis, 2004, p. 130, citing Schlesinger *et al.*). The role the press is playing and can play in the lingering Niger Delta agitation is, therefore, within the prism, of the gatekeeping and agenda-setting powers. Hence, the two theories form the theoretical platform for this discourse.

The Niger Delta Question

Citing Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), *Awake!* (2003, p.11) states that, "oil is not an ordinary product but a 'strategic asset.'" Little wonder the oil-belt of Niger Delta is strategic to the nation's development. Discovered in 1956 at Oloibiri, a village in the present day Bayelsa State, commercial exploitation began in 1958. The epoch-making event happened when Nigeria was a true federation; hence 50% of

funds generated were given to the then Eastern Region, based on the derivation principle of revenue allocation.

In 1957, the Niger Delta communities and other minority ethnic groups complained of neglect and marginalisation in infrastructural development and political appointments and thus called for state creation. The federal government responded with the establishment of the Willink's Commission that recommended the establishment of a federal board – the Niger Delta Development Board, to address the problems.

The incursion of the military into the nation's polity was the building blocks for the then incipient conflict in the region, firstly via the establishment of petroleum decree of 1969 that repudiated the 50% derivation and instituted fiscal centralism into Nigeria, and also through the Land Tenure Act of 1978 that conferred land ownership first on the federal government. This goes with whatever resource that the land bears.

In the 1970s, the oil-boom that led to the radical development of many urban centres in Nigeria left the Niger Delta environmentally devastated with attendant impoverishment of its people. This set the stage for the agitation that has now become a recurring episode, particularly because of neglect of the region by the government at the federal level that engineered massive exploitation of petroleum resources. One of General Gowon's advisers, Mr Philip Asiodu made an inflammatory remark that the people of the Niger Delta could do nothing to change the state of affairs because they were numerically insignificant in the Nigerian scheme of things (Okonta, 2003). Such a caustic statement, coupled with potentially unsustainable exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta, and the grossly divisive nature of distribution of its largesse (Onuoha, 2008, p. 266) precipitated community conflicts, sporadic attacks against oil installations and kidnapping of oil company staff in the Niger Delta in a scale hitherto unheard of in Nigeria's short history (Adedjoja, 2004).

The following disturbing statistics from Onuoha (2008) poignantly captures the suffering of the Niger Deltans in the midst of plenty and partly explains the reason for the violence: The region is a major source of oil; houses over 600 oil fields, over 100 flow stations, over 1500 producing wells; accounts for 80% of government revenue and 95% of foreign exchange earnings; but enjoys only 13% revenue exclusively allocated to oil producing states.

Prior to the violent alternative to call attention to Niger Delta situations, the region had been an oasis of peace and tranquility, inhabited by a contented and law abiding people (Okonta, 2002). Since government had been handling their problems with levity, the people particularly from the 1990s decided to take their fate in their hands, using whatever methods. For instance, late Kenule Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), a group peopled by intellectuals, developed the popular Ogoni Bill of Rights which was the precursor of many agitations being witnessed in the current time.

Not long ago, a retinue of organisations referred to as freedom fighters pervaded the entire landscape of the Niger Delta: Niger Delta People Volunteer Force, (NDPVF), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF), Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta (COMA), Martyrs Brigade, to mention but a few. These groups and others used legitimate grievances such as poverty, environmental destruction and government corruption to justify increasing attacks on government and oil industry targets (International Crisis Group, 2006).

In response to the violent but justifiable agitation of the Niger Deltans, the government of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida in the 1990s created Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). Though drenched

with funds to improve the infrastructure and people of the region for better, the Commission achieved only a little. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), set-up by the civilian regime of Olusegun Obasanjo produced minimal result. The inability of the government and the oil companies to respond to the yearnings and aspirations of the Niger Deltans, and the paradox that surrounded their existence was, according to Onuoha (2008) instrumental to the violent agitation:

Logically, the prevalence of poverty and deprivation amidst plenty in the region was to cause so much bitterness and rancour. The local people whose environment is being destroyed and plundered as a result of oil exploitation have to resist the continued environmental degradation given that their survival and security are inextricably dependent on the sustainability of the environment (p. 267).

The big question, therefore, is: who among the actors is to accept responsibility in the Niger Delta debacle? Neither government nor the oil prospecting companies is accepting the fault. Rather, it has been a case of buck passing. The federal government accuses the leaders of the region whom it says collect enormous funds that are being diverted to personal use. The people of Niger Delta however, do not agree, for they believe their excruciating situation was a result of grand conspiracy between government and the oil majors. Comfortable as the federal government might have felt, particularly regarding fund channelisation, the terrain of the Niger Delta remains a perfect alibi for minimal returns as it is reputed that it will take more funds to execute projects in the Niger Delta compared to other

parts of the nation. The dialectics raised by these two conflicting positions, therefore, can be located in the complexity of oil issue that transcends even the nation's geographical frontiers. This position finds agreement in Okonta's (2003) submission:

The present crisis in the Niger Delta can be better understood as a long-drawn out historical process, itself propelled and animated by complex, international, economic and political forces and which local inhabitants have been trying to comprehend, resist, or turn to their advantage these past years with varying degrees of success and failure.

The complexity of oil politics has thus necessitated moderation from all the actors involved. It is essential, in view of obvious downtrodden life of the Niger Deltans, to evolve concrete measures to address the issues of development for the region in particular and the nation in general. The press, therefore, has great roles to play in calling attention of all to a holistic solution to the Niger Delta crisis.

The Press in the Niger Delta Crisis

Given its roles in the nationalistic movements and demilitarisation of the nation's polity, the Nigerian press was reputed to be one of the most vibrant on the continent. Whether in pre-independence or post independence era, Nigerian newspapers have played an active role in the society, relaying news of politics and political strife and stimulating discussion and thinking on a variety of matters of public interest and importance (Omu, 1978).

However, the nature of the Niger Delta agitation, when situated within development, philosophical orientation expected

of the press by the government; objectivity and fairness demanded by journalistic ethics, and the need for profit orientation as a business, puts the practitioners in a dilemma. This is made complex by the political economy of the operating environment. This is why Taylor and Willis (2004) submit that, the clash between the idea of professionalism within the field of journalism and the ideal of impartiality, and the so called responsible position journalists were continually being asked to pursue reveal a basic contradiction.

Taking a cue from Harold Lasswell's functionalist paradigm, Nigerian press performs surveillance, correlation and transmission roles in conjunction with Charles Wright's entertainment role in the society. However, according to Herman (2002), journalists tend to accept the dominant ideologies of their society, which enter into news work as implicit value judgments or premises about facts that are debatable and rest on value judgement. Amidst these contradictions, the press needs to rise to the responsibility of balancing the society through engineering of social structure that would be fair to all as doing something to the contrary could lead to enormous cost. Hence, Akinfeleye (2003) conclude that:

The press can remain the real FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM if it adheres strictly to its professional code of ethics at all times. But otherwise, the press will and can do a lot of irredeemable damage to the corporate existence of the society it serves and thereby may transform from being the Fourth Estate of the Realm into the Fourth Estate of the Wreck. In addition, it may wreck the society it serves (p. 25).

Though the press holds a fundamental position in positive societal engineering, performing its role is not easy. In taking decision on what should be reflected on the pages of newspapers, Folarin (2005), extensively explores factors that impinge on editorial performance. The factors include timing, ownership pattern, management policy, perceived needs and preferences of the audience, editor's perception of reality, views held by editor's colleagues, influence of advertisers, legal consideration, professional ethics, ideological perspectives and political orientation. Critically examined, the above factors show that the media contents are not at all times altruistic. In this case, Taylor and Willis (2004) hold that, media representations either exaggerate or minimise the 'fact' of social reality in ways which serve the interests of the socially dominant. The treatment of Niger Delta agitation, therefore, cannot be an exception, hence the polarisation of the press into pro-Niger Delta and anti-Niger Delta, based on the coverage assigned to the Niger Delta cause and the slant adopted. A very important consideration is the judgment values that undergird news selection in this era of commoditised press.

Niger Delta Crises and News Commodification

In a capitalist economy, a corporation's chance of survival and growth depends ultimately on its ability to maintain and increase its profits (Murdock and Golding, 1979). As a business, the media industry must compete to make profit, or at least stay afloat. This business orientation, in which the Nigerian press is a victim, no doubt affects its performance in reporting issues and events. As a region whose very existence and every activity therein passes new judgement criteria all the time, the press will see beyond its watchdog role and consider other news worthy events as marketable products. The survival instinct posed by the political economy of the press operation, therefore, has potential

for the press to downplay or overplay issues in newspaper reporting. Expressing this dispirited concern, Shiller (2002, p. 84) note that:

Survival for them (the press) requires finding and defining interesting news, focusing attention on news that has word-of-mouth potential (so as to broaden their audience), and, whenever possible, defining an ongoing story that encourages their audience to be steady customers.

Following global trends, the Nigerian press has been subsumed in the nation's corporate system by way of ownership and sources of funds to survive. According to Herman (2002, p. 62), "where the mainstream media are privately owned and are funded almost entirely by commercial advertisers... the media themselves are members of and participate in the market". This prevailing circumstance, perhaps, was responsible for Aliagan's (2006, p. 94) concern that: "Being a human institution, the press is vulnerable as it is susceptible to the whims ... of the political and business class which provide the enabling legal framework for its operation and finances for its sustenance."

In essence, the press that is supposedly impartial has become a tool in the hands of various interests whose aspirations it pursues, at times, to the detriment of the larger society. This thus results in a major lacunae between societal expectations of the press and the situation of journalists in the real operating environment. And this is why wholesale consumption of news can sometimes be inimical, particularly to the uncritical audience.

The Press and Words

As a mediator in this complex world and processor of words for the understanding of the common citizen, the press performs great roles in the society. It is because of the national and global interests as well as volatility of oil politics, that reporting Niger Delta crisis calls for caution. Not only is oil essential to modern life but it is also deeply rooted in the very heart of politics and the special interest of a few powerful people (*Awake!*, 2003). Therefore, handling the ravaging occurrences caused by oil exploration by the press could be politicised. This is more important in societies where the press is held with ambivalence; were people love to hate the press. The third U. S. President and author of the declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, for instance, chronicled the consequence of untrusted press: “the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; in as much as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehood and error” (In Johnson, 1992).

Jefferson made the awe-inspiring statement on the importance of the press in the society some two decades earlier when he stated that, “...were it left for me to choose whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I shall not hesitate a moment to choose the latter” (in Akinfeleye, 2003). This conundrum about the importance of the press, its responsibility as well as the public respect for the institution can, therefore, be attributed to the side of the prism from which the press is being viewed.

However, the enormity of power naturally and constitutionally reposed on the press calls for moderation, because their stock-in-trade, “words”, are powerful. Words have power to make and mar; to build and destroy; to instigate or mitigate and to cause or solve problems. Johnson (1992) was right

when he stated that, "words can kill and can also enlighten, comfort, uplift and inspire". Since the Nigerian press is known to be the 'people's parliament' tracing its path to its great past is more essential as the nation advances its democracy.

Re-enacting the Past Glory

The contributions of the Nigerian press to every facet of the nation's life remains indelible. For a press that challenged the supposedly powerful colonialists, displayed the might of the pen over that of the gun in the draconian era of military dictatorship, winning the battle for civility in a democratic dispensation could not be more fatal. The press should therefore re-enact its act of doggedness to resolve the Niger Delta crisis.

In achieving this tall order, the press can resort to a combination of investigative journalism, advocacy journalism and revolutionary journalism. The idea of using reason to identify and promote better and more acceptable societies has powerfully moved people in the past and continues to do so now (Sen, 1999). Hence, a logical approach should be adopted in handling all issues surrounding the development or otherwise of the Niger Delta region. In a similar vein, the issue of corruption should be brought to the open because of its lethal effect on public policies and its potential to place underhand activities above productive pursuits.

Though aware of its traditional and constitutional responsibilities, the press should stop at nothing to move the nation forward. As part of the argument on the need of the press to be steadfast in the battle towards egalitarianism, Obilade (1999, p. 243) notes that:

The press should not treat lightly its roles on legal, economic, political and cultural development. It should seek the truth diligently and uphold it. It

should exhibit integrity. It should readily welcome criticism. It should serve the government and the general community. It ought to avoid manipulation of news. It should maintain high professional standard (citing Klaidman and Beauchamp, 1987).

The above models the multi-faceted responsibilities of the press to its stakeholders. For several years, Nigerian journalists have gone through stages of rebelling against foreign domination and internal dictatorship. They may... still have to rebel against leaders who do not have true national interests at heart... (Hester, 1987). Therefore, what is needed is not a plethora of newspapers that Nigeria can be proud of today, but vibrant ones that can give meaning to the nation's attainment of true democracy, where every issue can be resolved via dialogue rather than violence. Nigeria needs a press system that can mobilise people to the realm of civic competence, thus imbuing them with a sense of civility, nationalism and patriotism. This state of maturity if attained will create a public sphere where issues could be discussed and addressed in a manner devoid of rancour.

The Nigerian press has championed the march towards civility in the past and no doubt can do, and should do, it again. The starting point for this rebirth can be the avoidance of the following seven deadly sins of journalism as enunciated by Johnson (1992): distortion - deliberate or inadvertent, worshiping false image, theft of privacy, murder of character, exploitation of sex, poisoning the minds of children and abuse of power. To tread a different path from these sins, journalists must have unhindered access to facts that can assist their work. This is why the Freedom of Information Bill recently passed becomes relevant.

Having fought several causes to logical conclusions in the

past, the press should introspect and come back full circle to take its rightful position as the people's parliament. To achieve this, it should rally academics, organised labour, student bodies and other critical stakeholders to take up the gauntlet once again to bequeath Nigeria a befitting status as the true giant of Africa. With the incorporation of civic journalism philosophy into its operation, the press can stimulate civic renaissance that will do our democracy a lot of good. This would in the long run guarantee a fair deal for all and sundry. In the light of this, journalists should place more emphasis on social responsibility orientation, which challenges media professionals' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities (Baran and Davis, 2003).

Conclusion

We have attempted to explore the Niger Delta polemics and the implications for the corporate survival of the nation. We also X-rayed the dilemmas confronting journalists on the field, resulting from value expectations of different stakeholders and the great lacunae between ethical requirements and the realities of the operating environment. The truth is that the press is not independent of the larger society and operates in concert with other institutions. Therefore, achieving a great deal of success depends on striking a fine balance between the press and other institutions. This remains necessary for optimal press performance on the one hand and press-induced mobilisation of every stratum of the society for its advancement on the other.

The pressure posed by the three government expectations of press for development (from the government prism), impartiality and ethical pressure on field journalists and the political economy of the press operating environment and their impact on objective reporting has been critically examined. We are equally setting agenda for the press on mechanisms that can return the much needed potency to the Fourth Estate. Through our

prescription of investigative journalism, advocacy journalism and revolutionary journalism, the press can be positioned to redeem the Niger Delta situation, especially against the backdrop of its previous success in the nation's quest for self rule and democratic norms.

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