

Analysis of Online Reporting of and Audience Commentaries on the National Grazing Bill in Nigeria

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Abstract

For a long time, successive governments in Nigeria have attempted to enact grazing law or create a legal framework for the establishment of grazing route and grazing reserves. The paper investigated the opinion of the Nigerian masses on the National Grazing Bill given its reportage online. The content analysis research design was used for the study. The population of the study was composed of a total of 45 online reports (excluding PDF documents and scholarly articles/papers) that showed up on the 12 page Google search results under the search command 'Reports in 2016 on National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016' and 163 commentaries that followed each of the selected reports. Purposive and systematic sampling techniques were used to select 10 online reports that had commentaries underneath and 84 commentaries respectively. The units of analysis were headlines, lead and comments. The coding sheet was used as instrument for data collection. The study found from the commentaries that the masses have a highly negative opinion toward the National Grazing Bill. It was then recommended that if lasting solution to the violent clashes between the herdsmen and farmers must be achieved through the National Grazing Bill, strict attention must be paid to opinions of the masses that can be gleaned from their communication activities especially online where people freely express their real positions.

Keywords: Online Reporting, Audience Commentaries, National Grazing Bill, Farmers, Herdsmen, Conflict, Participatory Journalism

Introduction

The series of reactions that characterised reports concerning the introduction of the National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016 is worth giving critical attention. Such reactions among the Nigerian populace were a show of how active Nigerians were and how much they were concerned about the activities of lawmakers. These reactions and accompanying debate dominated the media space especially the online platforms for quite some time. The subject attained such prominence owing to the economic relevance attached to the discourse. In addition, it raised a lot of security concerns due to the incessant farmers-herdsmen crisis in the middle belt region as well as concerns about land use laws. The National Grazing Reserve Bill sought to cede portions of community lands to herdsmen. This would imply dispossessing some land owners of their lands and handing such lands to the herdsmen to graze their cattle (*The Pointer*, 2018).

The Grazing Reserve Bill is capable of truncating national cohesion if we consider the prominence attached to its story and the all-engaging reactions from members of the public. Enlightened reactions and commentaries greeted the discourse from across different audience members in different online platforms. But how much scholarly attention has been given to the public opinion which can be gleaned from the online commentaries on the issue? What is the position of the Nigerian masses concerning ceding portions of lands across the nation to pastoralists for their cattle to graze? Obviously, online reports on the Grazing Reserve Bill made provisions for the audience to react. The media are entrusted with lots of responsibilities, including sampling public opinions of the masses on national issues and sensitive discourses. The commentaries and reactions on such discourses could serve as a pointer to the survival of the issue, in this case, the Grazing Reserve Bill.

Although Kwaja and Adelehin (2017) observe that critical commentaries and reactions on the grazing debate and issues surrounding the social and traditional media could be traced back to November 1, 2017; a cursory Google search showed that even from 2015 comments and reactions had been registered online concerning some Grazing Bill slightly different from that introduced in 2016 (which is the focus of the study). It is on this premise that the paper provides a content analysis of selected online reports and audience commentaries on the 'National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016' in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The call by some Nigerians to abandon any move to pass the National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016 into law in Nigeria was greeted with mixed feelings. This bill which was sponsored by Senator Rabiu Kwankwaso was according

to its sponsors meant to proffer a lasting solution to the agitation and violent conflict between the farmers and Fulani herdsmen. However, given the sensitive nature of the propositions of the bill, a cursory observation reveals that such issue will best be solved by leaning on the opinion of the masses on the issue. Despite the magnitude of representations given in the upper and lower Chambers of the Senate, the direct opinion of the masses which can be gleaned from their communications matters too. Nevertheless, there are also concerns as to the reasons behind opinions expressed in people's interactions or reactions. It is against this background that the paper attempts to analyse online reports and the subsequent commentaries of the Nigerian people on the discourse, to ascertain whether the masses support or are against the Grazing Bill and whether the opinions were mainly premised on the slant of the reports. The problem hence is: what is the opinion of the Nigerian masses on the National Grazing Bill as reported in the online media?

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine audience opinion on the National Grazing Bill 2016 through their commentaries on selected online media reports.
- 2) To verify if the audience opinion on the National Grazing Bill 2016 was influenced by the framing or slant of the selected online media reports.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The Inoculation Theory is considered useful in explaining audience commentaries and seeks to clarify their opinion on the National Grazing Reserve Bill. The Inoculation Theory is a model for building resistance to persuasion attempts by exposing people to arguments against their beliefs and giving them counter arguments to refute attacks. Again, the theory offers mechanisms by which communication is used to help people defend their beliefs. The Inoculation Theory was proposed by McGuire, William (a psychologist) in 1961. The goal of the theory is to persuade someone not to be persuaded by another (Miller, 2002; communicationtheory.org, n.d.). The theory provides a means by which certain external position could be resisted especially when such position is in dissonance with an existing belief. The Inoculation Theory which was later expanded by a communication scholar, Michael Pfau and some other communication researchers covered discourses that include political communication, health communication, and other related issues that border on attitude and behavioural change (Miller, 2002).

Proponents and advocates of the Inoculation Theory argue that it suggests that when people form opinions about things, those opinions are hard to change especially

if met with weak opposition throughout time. The theory was further likened to and described as a metaphorical vaccination implying that message recipients become immune to opposing messages trying to change their attitude or beliefs about something. Basically, this theory attempts to either strengthen existing beliefs or/and resist attempts of persuasion. Before attempts would have been made to sell the Grazing Bill to the Nigerian audience, they had their beliefs and attitudes towards herdsmen's free movement and feeding of their cattle across open lands vis-à-vis their commentaries and responses towards the bill. An injection of the National Grazing Bill as well as reports about it into the Nigerian system would either negate Nigerians' existing beliefs or help strengthen the beliefs. The grazing bill itself and the reports about it could be seen as an inoculation message. However, an analysis of the audience commentaries would indicate if the bill supported existing beliefs or was more of entropy.

Conceptual Review

The 2016 National Grazing Bill proposed for an Act of the National Assembly to grant powers to the Federal Government to acquire, allocate and manage lands to be designated as national grazing routes have been viewed by those in the establishment as solution to the protracted fatal clashes between herdsmen and farmers over land resources. The Bill seeks to enact a National Grazing Routes and Reserves Commission which shall have powers to acquire lands in all the 36 States of the Federation for the purpose of Grazing and Ranching. This, according to the sponsors of the bill, will curb incessant conflicts between itinerant herdsmen and farmers and settlers in various parts of Nigeria. The sponsors also believe that this piece of legislation will foster national cohesion and reduce and completely eliminate intra-State conflicts in the nation (Sunday, 2016).

But others view this Bill as granting official and legal backing to what they consider the Fulani campaign of occupation, an agenda they have advanced through the killing of natives and residents of various farming communities, plundering of their farmland and feeding critical farm produce to cows, and effectively occupying plundered communities after forcefully evicting residents of those communities from their places, rendering them homeless or forcing them into government organised Internally Displaced Persons camps (Duru, 2018).

Others who are opposed to the bill believe it empowers the Federal Government to forcefully take land from the original settlers and farmers and reallocate them for herding purposes. This is seen as not only violating the rights of traditional owners/settlers, but capable of exacerbating the already precarious security situation in the country as it relates to farmers/herders relationships (Adim, 2016).

The social media have been agog with expressions of angst over the seeming impotence of the Federal Government in reining in the marauding who go around with sophisticated arms unleashing terror and death on vulnerable citizens without adequate protective response from the government.

Grazing Reserve Bill in Nigeria

For a long time, successive governments in Nigeria have attempted to enact grazing law or create a legal framework for the establishment of grazing route and reserves. This is to among other benefits reduce or eliminate the persistent, and often fatal, conflicts between nomadic herdsman on one hand and farmers and settlers on the other. It is also intended to stabilise nomadic families so that they can access veterinary services and their children can access formal education (Awogbade, 1987; Bello, 2013). Another study has shown that “the Nigerian Grazing Reserve Act of 1964 was passed for the purpose of accessing grazing lands for the pastoralists, thereby encouraging sedentarisation and addressing conflict with a plan to improving productivity and social amenities” (Mohammed, Ismaila and Bibi, 2015, p. 25). Even the Land Use Act of 1978 is believed to have been enacted to put land resources in the purview of Federal and State Governments so that government can have the locus of allocating land for herding purposes – grazing or ranching (Abdulbaqu and Ariemu, 2017; Ahmed-Gamgum, 2018).

Incidentally, the laws as enacted have not helped in ameliorating crises emanating from the livestock industry. Scholars have identified some factors responsible for the failure of these enactments in achieving the purpose for which proponents and promoters advance them. One factor is that ranching and sendentarisation is not compatible with the cultural lifestyle and orientation of the predominantly Fulani herding ethnic group who are accustomed to a more nomadic disposition (Mohammed, Ismaila and Bibi, 2015; Abdulbaqi and Ariemu, 2017). Also the intense over politicisation of the grazing law by way of skewing discuss along ethnic and tribal lines have affected the evolution of plausible solution to conflicts arising from cattle herding in Nigeria. Political elites have been cited to peddle half-truths so as to advance certain personal political agenda. Besides, there is inherent in the grazing debate agenda that excite or reinforce existing distrust among competing ethnic and tribal divides in the conflict (Ciboh, 2017; Egbas, 2018).

Online Reporting and Participatory Journalism

The mass media have over the years played a crucial role in informing society, mobilising people for social action, deepening democratic participation, preserving cultural ideals, and enhancing community development (Udoakah, 2001; Ayedun-

Aluma, 2011). Although the broadcast media have immense impact in setting political agenda due to its capacity to reach even illiterate audience members, the print media provide a basis for measuring the literacy level of a society and how easily its members can be governed. An illiterate person can access indigenous language radio or television, but may not be able to read the newspaper, even if it was written in the indigenous language.

As a tool for political mobilisation, however, the print media have been found to fall short of being a true representative voice, due mainly to lack of access to the medium, a situation occasioned by pervasive illiteracy. The consequence is that a great majority of 'voices' are shut out of the public sphere, making democratic participation largely elitist. This model of democracy not only undermines citizens' rights to participation in the governance process, it also "underestimates citizens' capacity for informed civic engagement, and overestimates the competence and accountability of political elites" (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p.71). When this occurs, such a democracy is said to be in deficit. An author has described democracy as "public participation in the making of policy; it demands openness and accountability" (Dare, 2000, p. 173). While in advanced democracies the subversion of this ideal may be done by stealth (propaganda and persuasion), in Nigeria, it is done in outright tyranny and with impunity, which are the hallmarks of poor leadership.

Be that as it may, the increase in internet penetration which is almost 50 per cent of the population in Nigeria (NCC, 2018) has also deepened the level of participation in the debates on issues that affect the society through the instrumentality of social media which has made participatory journalism more feasible. Participatory journalism has been defined as "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is "to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires" (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9).

Online reporting is a form of participatory journalism as it fosters a situation where there is little or, as in most instance, no editorial oversight, thus significantly reducing the controlling influence that politicians and big media organisations exert on news content, democratising news access and empowering the alternative voice in political discourse (Zaller, 1999; Soola, 2009). Participatory journalism is valuable as it serves "to challenge mainstream versions of contemporary events by widening discussions and deepening debate" thus creating the quality of interaction that is akin to a "well-attended town hall meeting" (Harrison, 2006, p. 109).

Placing information about the proposed grazing bill of the National Assembly online has provided a level playing field for various parties to express opinion on this

crucial policy matter. Online reporting provides more information and updates on a real-time basis. As new media content, it is citizen-oriented. The audience participates in information generation, dissemination and evaluation. Although subject to abuse, it is also significantly a self-correcting platform such that alternative positions can be advanced to curtail a situation where a few persons reserve the monopoly of controlling public opinion and public policy direction.

Methodology

The content analysis research design was used for the study. Content analysis as the name implies involves the study of content or texts. According to Prasad (cited in Cookey and Ohiagu, 2017) content analysis design allows for the studying of the content of messages with reference to the intentions, meanings and contexts that the messages bear. The suitability of the design for the study stems from the study's use of online reports concerning the 'National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016' and commentaries that follow to determine the opinions of those who posted comments on the reports and if the opinions are the results of the framing/slant of the reports.

The population of the study was composed of a total of 45 online reports (excluding PDF documents and scholarly articles/papers) that showed up on the 12 pages Google search results under the search command 'Reports in 2016 on National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016' and 163 commentaries that followed each of the selected reports. In other words, there are two sets of population- the 45 online reports on the above bill posted and commented on in 2016 and the 163 commentaries that followed the selected reports. The year 2016 was selected because it is the year that Senator Rabiun Musa Kwankwaso introduced the 'National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016' to the National Assembly. Only online reports with commentaries underneath were purposively selected to give us a sample size of 10 reports. Using the systematic sampling technique, a sample of 84 commentaries was selected. This was done by selecting every third comment posted beginning from the first comment, meaning from every three comments, two were selected (the first and the third).

Units of Analysis and Content Categories

The units of analysis for the study are the headlines and leads of the newspaper reports and readers' commentaries (comments). The content categories are:

- 1. Opinions on Grazing Bill:** Audience opinions based on their comments on reports concerning the National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016 are categorized as follows:
 - **Positive Opinion:** All commentaries showing support for the Grazing Bill,

- attacking reports condemning the Bill.
- **Negative Opinion:** All commentaries not in support of Grazing Bill, accepting negative reports concerning the Bill.
- **Mixed Opinions:** All commentaries that may support or not support the Grazing Laws but include other alternatives or includes some consequences that should be considered, comments showing advantages and disadvantages of the Bill
- **Neutral:** All commentaries displaying apathy towards the Grazing Laws or indicating no stand.

2. **Framing/Slant of Reports:** The slant or framing of the online reports are categorised as follows:

- **Positive Framing/Slant:** All reports that appear to consider only or more of the benefits of the Grazing Bill
- **Negative Framing/Slant:** All reports that appear to consider only or more of the disadvantages of the Grazing Bill
- **Balanced Reports:** All reports that consider both negative and positive sides of the Grazing Bill, appear neutral or states what the Bill says as it is.

3. **Slant-Opinion Link:** Categories here show links between the content categories or slant of online reports' and 'opinions on Grazing Bill'-

- **Positive Slant-Positive Opinion Link:** This entails a report with positive slant and positive commentaries underneath.
- **Positive Slant-Negative Opinion Link:** This entails a report with positive slant and negative commentaries underneath.
- **Negative Slant-Negative Opinion Link:** This entails a report with negative slant and negative commentaries underneath.
- **Negative Slant-Positive Opinion Link:** This entails a report with negative slant and positive commentaries underneath.
- **Negative Slant-Neutral Link:** This entails a report with negative slant and commentaries showing apathy or no stand underneath.
- **Negative Slant-Mixed Opinion Link:** This entails a report with negative slant and commentaries showing mixed opinion (as defined above).
- **Balanced Slant-Negative Opinion Link:** This entails a balanced report with negative commentaries underneath.
- **Balanced Slant-Positive Opinion Link:** This entails a balanced report with positive commentaries underneath.

The instrument used for the content analysis is the coding sheet which

underwent a reliability test and obtained a reliability score of 0.85.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Audience opinion on the National Grazing Bill 2016 through their commentaries on selected online reports

Opinions	Frequency	(%)
Positive	15	18
Negative	61	73
Mixed	1	1
Neutral	7	8
Total	84	100

Table 1 shows that majority of the online audience members (73%) displayed a negative opinion towards the Grazing Bill while only one person displayed a mixed opinion.

Table 2: Slant of selected online reports on the National Grazing Bill 2016

Slant	Frequency	(%)
Positive	0	0
Negative	8	80
Balanced/neutral	2	20
Total	10	100

Table 2 shows that while 80% of the online reports selected had a negative slant, 20% (2) exhibited balanced reporting and none of the report had a positive slant.

Table 3: Slant Opinion Link

Slant -Opinion Link	Frequency	(%)
Positive Slant - Positive Opinion Link	0	0
Positive Slant - Negative Opinion Link	0	0
Negative Slant - Negative Opinion Link	52	61.9
Negative Slant - Positive Opinion Link	20	23.8
Negative Slant - Mixed Opinion Link	1	1.2
Negative Slant - Neutral Link	7	8.3
Negative Slant - Mixed Opinion Link	1	1.2
Balanced Slant - Positive Opinion Link	0	0
Balanced Slant - Negative Opinion Link	2	2.4
Balanced Slant - Mixed Opinion Link	0	0
B alanced Slant - Neutral Link	1	1.2
Total	84	100

Table 3 shows that reports with negative slant attracted more (61.95) negative commentaries (opinion) towards the Grazing Bill, though the negative reports also attracted 23.8% positive commentaries and 8.3% neutral commentaries while reports categorized as balanced attracted 2.4% negative opinion.

Discussion

The commentaries of the Nigerian masses online have shown that they have a highly negative opinion toward the National Grazing Bill. Scholars like Ciboh (2017) and Egbas (2018) observed that the grazing debate has agenda that excite or reinforce existing distrust among competing ethnic and tribal divides in the conflicts that the said bill plans to tackle. Mohammed, Ismaila and Bibi (2015) as well as Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) also found that one factor that have mitigated the successful implementation of grazing bills and laws of the past, is the incompatibility of the cultural lifestyle and orientation of the predominantly Fulani herding ethnic group with initiatives such as ranching and sendentarisation.

The factors mentioned above are embedded in the online commentaries showing negative opinions concerning the National Grazing Bill. This means that the negative opinion toward the bill is not just the result of non-herding ethnic groups' dislike of the land poaching initiative embedded in the bill but also the result of existing belief or way of life. The Inoculation Theory upholds the supposition that certain external position could be resisted especially when such position is in dissonance with an existing belief. Nevertheless, there could be more reasons behind the audience negative opinion concerning the grazing bill.

Majority of the selected online reports concerning the National Grazing Bill had a negative slant. In other words, most of the online reports appeared to consider only or more of the disadvantages of the Grazing Bill with many giving it ethnic, economic, political, and legal colourations. These colourations are factors that are debatable given the sensitive nature of circumstances surrounding the re-introduction of the gazing bill as the 'National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016 by Senator Rabiun Kwankwaso. Part of the main findings of the current study is that majority of the online reports with negative slant attracted more negative commentaries (opinion) towards the Grazing Bill. Only a few of the negative reports attracted some positive commentaries and a much lesser number of neutral commentaries. Nevertheless, a few reports that appeared to be balanced also attracted negative commentaries.

Going by what we have above, we can agree that online reporting as a form of participatory journalism helps in reducing the controlling influence that politicians and big media organisations exert on news content. Yet, online reportage can have an inoculation effect by the slant given to stories. So we can hypothesise here that a negative report of an issue can help an active audience look back to see how well such a report expresses its pre-existing negative attitude toward the reported issues thereby shielding itself against whatever reasoning sponsors of the idea may be trying to sell.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the placement of reports about the National Grazing Bill online has provided a level playing field for various parties to express opinion on this crucial policy matter. Ideas gleaned from the Inoculation Theory place the grazing bill itself and the reports about it as inoculation messages. Online reports concerning the National Grazing Bill, found to have mostly negative slant, appear to have helped the audience members build resistance to the bill which can be categorised as a persuasion attempt. These online reports appear to have been able to do this by exposing the audience to arguments (in the bill) that are against their beliefs and by giving them counter arguments to refute attacks and persuasion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. If communication discourses are to assist the current National Grazing Bill make any head way in helping ameliorate the violent clashes between herdsmen and farmers, then they must be more objective, representing all sides to the story, possible advantages and disadvantages.
2. If a lasting solution to the violent clashes between the herdsmen and farmers/settlers must be achieved through the National Grazing Bill, strict attention must be paid to opinions of the masses that can be gleaned from their communication activities especially online where people freely express their real positions.

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