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## News Media and Environmental Policy: The Case of the Niger Delta Crises

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## News Media and Environmental Policy: The Case of the Niger Delta Crises

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**Abstract:** *The article examines the Nigerian media coverage of the devastation and environmental impact of decades of oil spills in the Niger Delta. Using the agenda setting approach as a conceptual framework, the analysis aims to uncover the role played by the media in the environmental policy process. The article begins with a discussion of the modus operandi of various media outlets in reporting the nature and scope of oil spill. This is followed by a review of the national government's effort in managing and reducing the incidents of oil spill on the environment and the affected communities. On the basis of issues identified, the analysis offers some recommendations for all the actors involved in the environmental policy, and concludes by encouraging the media to continually publicize the causes and consequences of oil spill to mobilize the citizens to petition the federal government to enact good regulatory policies to contain environmental degradation of the Delta region.*

**Keywords:** News media, environmental impact, policy process, decades of oils spill, Niger—Delta

### Introduction

The American public and the rest of the world were captivated during the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. According to estimates, nearly five million barrels of oil gushed from BP's well into the Gulf of Mexico (Achenbach and Fahrenthold 2010; Robertson 2010; Froomkin 2010). There is absolutely no question or doubt about the devastation of those few months of spill to the residents of the Gulf coast. Therefore, it is unfathomable what level of devastation decades of oil spills will cause to a nation. This instantly leads to a natural comparison between the Gulf oil spill and the decades of oil spills in such places as Nigeria, more specifically, the Niger Delta region of the country.

While there was relentless coverage of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the ongoing oil spills in places like Nigeria have gone practically unnoticed. The stories of ruptured wells and pipelines are regular occurrences in the Delta region of Nigeria for almost five decades now. Some scholars report that more oil is spilled from the Niger Delta's oil production every year than has been lost during the Summer of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. According to sources (Tigay 2010 and Vidal 2010), and groups like Amnesty International (2009) estimate of oil spills in the Niger Delta regions are over 9 million barrels in the last 50 years. It is widely noted that some of the world's worst oil spills happen in Nigeria, recognized as Africa's main crude oil producer. A country which has earned

the gold medal for its reputation as the nation with the most oil spills in the world. People in the country have lived with decades of oil spill pollutions with no glimpse of hope or any meaningful solution in sight. These decades of oil spills have led to devastation of various Nigerian communities and impoverishment of the masses, ultimately resulting in the current Niger Delta crisis.

The oil conglomerates like Shell and Exxon contend that a high incidence of oil spills is caused by sabotage and vandalism by indigenes stealing crude from the pipelines. On the contrary, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta charge that most oil spills result from faulty, aging pipelines or poor maintenance of the infrastructure by the oil companies. Will the oil companies ever be held accountable or responsible for these rampant spills and attendant pollution which have caused mass destruction of the mangroves, sea, land and human lives?

In this analysis, we examine the Nigerian media coverage of the environmental devastation and the impact of decades of oil spills in the Niger Delta region. It is noteworthy, that the media plays significant role in managing conflict situations in any society. Since one of the powers of the media are comes from its agenda setting impact in any political system, we explore how well are the media are being persuaded to consider declaring the decades of Nigerian oil spills an issue that must be dealt with or a problem that ought to be solved by the government, thereby paving the way for the first stage in the policymaking process. To address the rate of media coverage or lack thereof, we seek answers to the following questions: Who are the gatekeepers of Nigerian media? Who sets the media agenda, and how does the agenda setting theory factor into the media coverage of the Niger Delta environmental crisis?

Moreover, we would explore the role of the Nigerian media and their responsibilities to the citizens of the country. The application of agenda setting theory provides insight into the Nigerian media coverage decisions. *Agenda setting* refers to the idea that there is a strong association between the emphasis that the mass media place on certain issues and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The theory postulates that while the media do not tell viewers how to make decision, they nevertheless influence them by focusing on specific issues while ignoring others. The article begins with a discussion of the modus operandi of various media outlets in reporting the nature and scope of oil spill. This is followed by a review of the national government's effort in managing and reducing the incidents of oil spill on the environment and the affected communities. On the basis of issues identified, the analysis offers some recommendations for all the actors involved in the environmental policy, and concludes by encouraging the media to continually publicize the causes and consequences of oil spill to mobilize the citizens to petition the federal government to enact good regulatory policies to contain environmental degradation of the Delta region.

### **The Media and Poor Coverage of Decades of Oil Spills in Niger Delta**

Nigerian media are known for being a little sentimental and manipulative in their mode of reporting or covering crisis especially the public-owned media. The news varies from the public media to independent media with their different mode of reporting, operation, and management. This is evidenced with their screaming headlines, scandals and, in some cases, poor use of language, which

leads to inadequate information that might not warrant any governmental action for policy making (Eti 2009). Among the roles played by the mass media in society include—interpretation, linkage, transmission of values and entertainment (cf. Eti 2009, 2) surveillance, interpretation and transmission of values are of utmost importance in reporting crisis such as the oil spills which the media has given very poor coverage in the past decades. The fact is that this has resulted in no governmental policy and these continuous oil spills have been turned to an acceptable norm in the Niger Delta.

The surveillance function of the mass media states that the press plays the role of an observer, which is “a necessary component for enforcing economic, political, cultural and even moral stability” in the polity (cf. Eti 2007, 2). In this role, the media highlight aspects of society events, people and issues—which they gather as information and report as news. With the above definition, it can be said that the media coverage of the decades of oil spill has not amounted to any meaningful policy on how to protect the environment or show the preparedness the oil companies in preventing subsequent occurrences. It is a known fact that Nigerian public and the rest of the world would only know what the government of the day presents before them as oil spills, and these interplays on the type of news the public media would transmit to the citizens that would suit the government.

In light of the countless number of oil spills in the Niger Delta that go unreported, the media can almost be accused of being in collaboration with or are in the pockets of both the Nigerian government and oil corporations. The hopelessness being felt by inhabitants of the Delta region can be aptly captured in the words of Nnimo Basse, Nigerian head of *Friends of the Earth International*, “we see frantic efforts made to stop the Gulf spill in the US, but in Nigeria oil companies largely ignore their spills, cover them up and destroy people’s livelihood and the environments...” Another inhabitant of Niger Delta, Ben Ikari of Ogoni further opined, “If the gulf accident has happened in Nigeria neither the government nor the oil company would have paid much attention. This kind of spill happens all the time in the Delta” (Vidal 2010). Thus, suggesting the media’s failure in one of its primary responsibilities—surveillance, by informing the citizens of their chosen government’s callous disregard for their welfare, which is a sad indictment of the so-called fourth estate in Nigeria, indeed Africa. To this end, the media has either not played its role or has played a manipulative news coverage at best.

The Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON) is responsible for coordinating the activities of the radio and television broadcasting in Nigeria with its objectives being to serve as an advisory body to the federal and state governments, to encourage and sustain greater co-operation and collaboration among the broadcasting organisation, as well as regulate and monitor professional standards. Based on the BON’s objectives to monitor professional standards, oil spills over the past decades in the Niger Delta have not received adequate coverage. The disheartening effect of the media’s shoddy coverage of Niger Delta oil spills have not spurred a reasoned governmental environmental policy making compared with the media coverage of the Gulf oil spill in 2010 and the resultant United States, governmental policy and action.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this analysis is agenda-setting theory. It is a social scientific theory introduced in the 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. The theory is based on the ideology that mass media have the ability to set the public agenda by focusing on the issues and personalities of importance. The theory postulates that while the media do not tell viewers how to make a decision, they nevertheless influence them by focusing on specific issues while ignoring others. The basic tenet of agenda-setting theory is that the news media have a strong influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. Agenda-setting theory therefore is the creation of the public awareness and concern of salient issues by the mass audiences.

Agenda-setting approach is set to rediscover the power of the media, by shifting focus to a new target: the effect of media on people's perceptions. This basic theoretical issue addressed by scholars (e.g., Lippmann 1922; McComb and Shaw 1993). Theory was based on the belief that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agenda to the public agenda (Eco-Outreach Report 2005, 11). Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media, for example, on political communication systems (Eco-Outreach Report 2005, 11)

Nigerian media have continued to cover the oil spills in the Niger Delta for the past five decades and have not been able to create adequate public awareness, either because the media had not considered the decades of oil spills newsworthy or that it has not resulted in any concrete policy to protect the environment, save the communities that have been devastated by the spills, and improve the lives of the citizen that have been affected. It is obvious that the foreign media, and groups like Amnesty International, give more coverage to oil companies' violations in the Niger Delta than the Nigerian media. However when the Nigerian media report the oil crises, they basically focus more on the militant groups, oil bunkering, and other illegal acts by the citizens than the environmental and human devastations of oil spills. Thus seemingly placing blame on the victims rather than the perpetrators.

## **The Problem: The Curse of Black Gold**

Nigeria struck gold in 1956, bringing great prosperity to the country with proven oil reserve of 35.2 billion barrels in 2005, and the nation planned for expansion to 40 barrels in 2010. The Nigerian economy is heavily dependent on earnings from the oil sector, which provides 20 percent of the GDP, 95 percent of the foreign exchange earnings, and about 65 percent of budgetary revenues (Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 4). It is now the largest oil producer in Africa and the tenth largest in the world (CIA 2010). However experts estimate that there has been about 13 million barrels of oil spills in the Niger Delta since the oil exploration began in the 1958. "The nation now suffers the curse of the black gold. Nigeria is poorer than ever, violence is rampant, and the waters run black" (Stokes 2009).

In fact, Nigeria has been suffering the negative environmental consequences of oil development since its discovery in the 1950s. This oil development and growth, combined with the nation's population growth and lack of enforcement of environmental regulations has led to

substantial damage to Nigeria's communities and the environment, especially in the Niger Delta region (Nwilo and Badejo 2007). As though the oil spill devastations are not enough, the Niger Delta where the oil resources ("black gold") are extracted from has been trapped in an unquantifiable environmental damage and insecurity (Omotola 2006, 4). This has resulted in different forms of protests, both peaceful and violent, from the oil-producing communities. While the government and oil companies have responded in certain ways, such responses have not been able to adequately redress the endemic grievances of the Niger Delta people (cf. Omotola 2006, 4). In most cases, the responses have in fact exacerbated the violent conflagration that has enveloped the region over the years (Omotola 2006, 4). This has increased radicalism and militant activities with evidence of kidnapping of oil company staff, and the closing down of refinery in the quest for resource control. With these terrifying contradictions in the Niger Delta, a recent publication described the Niger Delta region as possibly "the next Gulf" (cf. Omotola 2006, 6).

### **The Effect of Oil Spill in the Niger Delta**

The negative effects of oil spill on the environment cannot be measured. It kills plants and animals in the estuarine zone when it settles on beaches and as well kills organisms that live there, organisms such as crabs are affected. Oil poisons algae, disrupts major food chains and decreases the yield of edible crustaceans. It impaired birds from flying when affected by the oil spill, thus making the birds more vulnerable to cold. Oil endangers fish hatcheries in coastal waters and as well contaminates the flesh of commercially valuable fish. In the Niger Delta environment, large areas of the mangrove ecosystem have been destroyed. The mangrove was once a source of both fuel woods for the indigenous people and a habitat for the area's biodiversity, but is now unable to survive the oil toxicity of its habitat (Nwilo and Badejo 2007).

Oil spills in the Niger Delta have become a regular occurrence, and the resultant degradation of the surrounding environment has caused significant tension between the people living in the region and the multinational oil companies operating there. It is only in the past decade that environmental groups, the federal government of Nigeria, and the foreign oil companies operating in the Niger Delta began to take steps to mitigate the impacts. Large areas of the mangrove ecosystem have also been destroyed. The mangrove forest was in the past a major source of wood for the indigenous people. In some places it is no longer in a healthy state to sustain this use (Nwilo and Badejo 2007). Consequently, this growing neglect of the environment by the oil corporations and the successive governments has forced the people to assume that the only thing the government cares about is to maximize profit at the detriment of the environment and well-being of the people (Eco-Outreach Report 2011).

According to the Department of Petroleum Resources, between 1976 and 1996 a total of 4,647 incidents resulted in the spill of approximately 2,369,470 barrels of oil into the environment. Of this quantity, an estimated 1,820,410.5 barrels 77 percent were lost to the environment (cf. Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 5). From 1997 to 2001 Nigeria recorded a total of 2,097 oils spill incidents. The heaviest recorded spills so far were in 1979 and 1980 with a net volume of 694,147.13 barrels and 600,511.02 barrels respectively (cf. Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 5). Thousands of barrels of oil have

been spilt into the environment through the oil pipelines and tanks in the country. This spillage is as a result of lack of regular maintenance of the pipelines and storage tanks. Some of these facilities have been in use for decades without replacement (Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 5).

The environment had been damaged to the extent that even when there has been no recent spill, an oily sheen can be seen on the water that the people living in many villages near oil installations use for drinking and washing. In April 1997, samples taken from water used for drinking and washing by local villagers were analyzed in the United States. A sample from Luawii, in Ogoni, where there had been no oil production for four years, had 18 ppm of hydrocarbons in the water, 360 times the level allowed in drinking water in the European Union (EU). A sample from Ukepeide, Ikwerre, contained 34 ppm, 680 times the EU standard (cf. Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 7).

### **Oil Spill Management Policy and Effort for Reducing its Incidents in Nigeria**

The Nigerian government has passed several laws regarding the management of oil spill incidents at national levels, while the nation had signed international agreements and polices guiding oil spill incidents as well. The following are the laws and policies:

#### *Oil Pollution Act (OPA) of 1990*

The Oil Pollution Act was passed in 1990, charged with responsibility for the improvement of oil spill prevention and response. The Act provides guidance for government and industry on oil spill prevention, mitigation, cleanup and liability. The bulk of OPA 1990 provisions targets at reducing the number of spills and the quantity of oil spilled. OPA 1990 also created a comprehensive scheme to ensure that sufficient financial resources are available to clean up a spill and to compensate persons damaged by a spill. Furthermore, the OPA also mandates enhancements to the national response system, and development of Area Contingency Plans (Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 7).

#### *National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) 2006*

In 2000, the Nigerian government established the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan in compliance with the International Convention on Oil Pollution. Its objective on intensifying efforts towards compliance monitoring and enforcement of oil and gas regulations and standards led to the passage into law of the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) in 2006. NOSDRA has its vision statement to create, nurture and sustain a zero tolerance on oil spill incident in Nigeria environment. NOSDRA is also charged with the responsibility to restore and preserve the environment by ensuring the best oil field, storage and transmission practices in exploration, production and use of oil in the quest to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria.

#### *The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)*

To reduce impoverishment and promote a sustainable development in the Niger Delta, the Federal Government passed into law the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000. NDDC was established with the mission to facilitate rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful.

The Act, among other things, established a Commission to carry out the following tasks:

- a. Cause the Niger Delta area to be surveyed in order to ascertain measures, which are necessary to promote its physical and socio-economic development;
- b. Prepare plans and schemes designed to promote the physical development of the Niger Delta area;
- c. Identify factors inhibiting the development of the Niger Delta and assist the member states in the formation and implementation of policies to ensure sound and efficient management of the resources of the Niger Delta;
- d. Assess and report on any project funded or carried out in the Niger Delta area by oil and gas producing companies and any other company including non-governmental organisations and ensure that funds released for such projects are properly utilised;
- e. Tackle ecological and environmental problems that arise from the exploration of oil in the Niger Delta area; and
- f. Liaise with the various oil mineral and gas prospecting and producing companies on all matters of pollution prevention and control.

It is noteworthy, to mention that items (e) and (f) provide strategy on how to combat the negative effect of oil exploration and production on the environment.

#### *Petroleum Related Laws and Regulations*

A law is required for effective management of the environment. The basis of any law is to provide regulations and guidelines, and as ensure compliance by the people and organisations that it covers. The Nigerian government has the following relevant national laws and international agreements:

- a. Endangered Species Decree Cap 108 LFN 1990;
- b. Federal Environmental protection Agency Act Cap 131 LFN 1990;
- c. Harmful Waste Cap 165 LFN 1990;
- d. Petroleum (Drilling and Production) Regulations, 1969;
- e. Mineral Oil (Safety) Regulations, 1963;
- f. International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1971;
- g. Convention on the Prevention of Marine pollution Damage, 1972;
- h. African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1968; and
- i. International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for the Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1971.

#### *The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) decree No 86 of 1992*

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) decree No 86 of 1992 was promulgated to protect and sustain the ecosystem. The law makes the development of an EIA compulsory for any major project that may have adverse effects on the environment (cf. Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 9). It sought to assess the or potential environmental impacts of proposed activities, including their direct or indirect, cumulative, short term and long term effects, and to identify the measures available to mitigate



adverse environmental impacts of proposed activities, and assessment of those measures (cf. Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 9). The implementation of EIAs objectives is done by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, and the state environmental protection agencies.

#### *Oil Trajectory and Fate Models for Oil Spill Disaster Monitoring*

Oil spill simulation model is used in oil response and contingency planning and as a tool in oil fate and impact assessment (Nwilo and Badejo 2007; Rossouw 1998). Oil spillage can also be treated or removed by natural means, mechanical systems, absorbents, burning, gelling, sinking and dispersion. Oil spillage can be removed by natural means through the process of evaporation, photochemical oxidation and dispersions (Nwilo and Badejo 2007; Wardley-Smith 1977).

#### *Environmental Sensitive Index (ESI) Mapping*

ESI maps are base maps that show the sensitivity of given locations or areas to a particular stress factor, such as exposure to petroleum products on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being most sensitive (Nwilo and Badejo 2007, 11). The maps may contain physical and geomorphic features (e.g., shorelines), biological and socioeconomic features such as agricultural fields. Some ESI maps contain features of particular interest to oil spill planning and response, such as the recommended positions of booms or skimmers. The sensitivity of a given feature to a stress factor may be indicated by the color given the symbol or pattern used to represent it (Nwilo and Badejo 2007). Standards for the development of the environmental sensitivity index maps for the Niger Delta have been developed by the Environmental Systems Research Institute. These standards are used by all the oil companies to prepare ESI maps for their areas of operations in Nigeria (Nwilo and Badejo, 2007).

### **Recommendations**

On the basis of issues identified in this analysis, we offer the following recommendation:

- Collaborations between oil industries, government agencies, research centres and universities;
- Better, modern infrastructures for oil production;
- Implementation of developmental programs;
- Reduce unemployment rates for the citizens;
- Accountability and penalties for all parties involved in oil spills and environmental devastations;
- Corporate social responsibility by oil companies;
- Educate the communities in the Niger Delta of the dangers of oil spills; and
- Transparency in oil revenues and distributions

### **Conclusion**

Niger Delta has continued to suffer the negative environmental consequences that emanate from oil development and production since 1956 when oil was discovered in Nigeria. Devastation and complete neglect of the environment and the inhabitants thereon have become a norm on the rule and

governance of Nigerian past administrations. It is evident, that the media avoid contentious news that affects the environmental right in the Niger Delta or report such information in an uncontroversial viewpoint to avoid governmental attack of their activities. The media focus more on the militants than the cause of action that led to emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta.

“A major reason why \$400 billion in oil revenue over the last four decades hasn’t translated into anything meaningful is simply corruption. Since independence leaders have stolen or wasted more than \$380 billion” (Foster 2007). The impacts of oil spill on environments in Niger Delta are devastating which implies that the media should always disseminate a great deal of such information to the general public to achieve an optimal agenda action. In view of this, the Nigerian media are encouraged to increase their public awareness of the problem (through social responsibility), and as well mobilize the citizens to petition the federal government (through social action) so that good regulatory policies will be enacted to address the frequent oil spill. In addition, the existing laws should be enforced to ensure compliance. Any failure by the federal government to enforce these laws should be questioned by the citizens and held accountable for such failure. The mass media have to intensify their watchdog role for a more sustainable environment and eco-friendly society. In summary, a strong federal government involvement in finding solutions to the Niger Delta crisis is required.

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