THEORIZING THE COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR OF CONFLICT AUDIENCE: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

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Abstract
This study aims at developing a theoretical understanding of the communication behavior of conflict audience, using a grounded theory approach. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with (n=49) participants in Nigeria. Data was analysed using a constant comparative approach. The concept “dissemiusers,” which was created by the researcher emerged as a key finding that describes the communication behavior of conflict audiences. The study argues that factors such as lack of trust for the media, media ownership, perception of media bias and lack of adequate security impacts on the ability of journalists to perform their social responsibility roles, thus creating a gap that led to the audience “dissemiusing” information. The study also finds that the availability, accessibility and affordability of mobile phones and social media, aided this form of behavior and has had an impact in escalated the level of conflict. The study recommends training and retraining of journalists in conflict sensitive reporting and the establishment of a monitoring mechanism that could help the audience verify information sources before sharing through social media.

Keywords: Media, Conflict Audience, Communication, Empowerment, Nigeria

Introduction
Jos, the capital city of Plateau State, Nigeria has since 2001, witnessed violent communal and ethnic crises. The intermittent conflict has remained a sore point in Nigeria’s history of armed conflicts, which have spanned over 40 years. Unlike in other parts of Nigeria, the conflict in Plateau State remains one of the most volatile due to incessant violence between Muslims and Christians. Specifically, between 2001 and 2013, the state experienced several incidents of communal clashes in and around Jos city.

Even though there are diverse opinions about underlying causes of the conflict in Plateau State, there is a perception among residents that the media, particularly the state government-owned news media organization, has been a divisive force in the conflict. Rather than unite parties in the conflict, some parties in the conflict believe that the government-owned radio and television stations contributed to the problem tension through their coverage of the issues. This significant for a conflict that has been highly polarized along religious and political lines.

Like in other conflict zones around the world, the role of the media during conflict is well documented. Most of these studies, which are framed from a media effects perspective, suggest a link between negative impact of media on conflict escalation (Bratic, 2006; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2006; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2010; Zyagulius, 2010). These studies have shown that the media have the power to influence the conflict behavior of the audience.
While media and conflict framing research lay more emphasis on media effects arguments, the approach disregards the complexity of the decoding process among conflict audiences. Such research does not consider the communication behavior of conflict audiences and the potential for shaping the information dissemination process. ‘Conflict audiences’ are defined by Bratic (2006) as media audiences who live in conflict environments. They are ‘conflict audiences’ because their behaviors are shaped by both the media and conflict environment in which they are situated. For example, because of the fear and uncertainties that characterize most conflict environments, the need and demand for information increases. As such, in conflict environments like Plateau State where the media system is less diverse, the information need of the audience makes it more likely that individuals will seek out and depend on the media for information.

Even though dependence on the media have the potential of making the audience vulnerable to media influence (DeFleur & Bell-Rokeach), research has also shown that conflict audiences are not passive consumers of media information. They are people who actively and consciously select media content that meet their psychological and situational needs (Slater et al., 2003). Given this complex interaction between the media and the audience in conflict environments, it is important to investigate the communication behavior of conflict audiences in Plateau State and its potential influence in shaping the information dissemination process.

Statement of the Problem
The relationship between armed conflict and the media is well documented in mass communication research. However, most of this research focused on the negative and in some instances, the positive impact of the news media in influencing the attitudes of conflict audiences while downplaying the position of the latter as crucial stakeholders in a communication process. To this end, this study examined the communication behavior of the audience and its potential impact on the information dissemination process in conflict environments.

An expanding body of literature has identified conflict audiences as consisting of “active individuals and groups with specific needs, whose personal attributes largely determines” their behavior (Bratic, 2006, p.5). Only recently have scholars begun to pay attention to how the underlying personal beliefs of individuals influence how they make sense of vast amounts of information they are being confronted with daily. Similarly, researchers have documented the role of individual frames in helping people to interpret and to process information (Ambe-Uva, 2010; Campbell & Docherty, 2004; Kaufman, Elliot & Shumeli, 2003; Scheufele, 1999), but we lack a theory that conceptualizes how they respond to such information. The current study aims at expanding these conversations, pushing beyond analyzing the impact of media, opinion leaders or individual schemas on opinions and attitudes, to investigating the underlying communication behavior of people in conflict situations.

Furthermore, while most studies identify the conflict behavior of the audience (violence) as contributing to the complexity of conflict, to my knowledge, no study has yet conceptualized the pattern of communication behavior of conflict audiences and the consequence in the communication process. Even so, most research on the Plateau State crisis have mostly focused on the structural determinants of the conflict, as well as the role of the media in escalating or deescalating the conflict (Akpan, Erin & Olofu-Adeoye, 2013; Asemah, 2014; Best, 2007; Danfulani, 2006; Ostein, 2009). Thus, this study researched the interaction between the audience, media and conflict in Plateau State by conceptualizing the pattern of communication behavior of conflict audiences. The study also explored whether their communication behavior shaped the information dissemination.

Apart from a theoretical objective, this study seeks to fill a methodological gap. Based on the literature reviewed in this study, the primary approach of most media effects research has been quantitative. Empirical studies have deduced valuable strands of information regarding the cause-and-effect relationship between the media, audience and conflict. Many a quantitative research, for instance, has identified the media as
having an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of the audience during conflict. Such studies do not, however, explain the nature of audience behavior and how it might contribute to the escalation or de-escalation conflict. This study, therefore, opts for an inductive approach using the grounded theory methodology. The goal is to move beyond investigating empirical relationships to a more conceptual rendering of audience behavior. Consequently, the study aims to answer the questions: ‘What pattern of communication behavior do conflict audiences in Plateau State engage?’ ‘How does the behavior shape the information dissemination process?’ These questions guided the researcher’s attempt to respond to the broader theoretical objective of the study

Methodology
The method used in this study is grounded theory. Grounded theory method as an inductive approach for theory development “allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 141). This study employed Straussian grounded theory methodology. The decision to use the methodological approach was taken after the researcher conducted the first phase of data collection. After an initial analysis of the data, the researcher observed that existing theoretical models were limited in the arguments about the role that conflict audiences play in the information dissemination process. Apart from the lack of a suitable framework upon which the overall research would be situated, there was the need to extend the arguments of these existing mass communication models by identifying a substantive theory that will conceptualize the communication behavior of conflict audiences. This grounded theory study is centered on two basic concepts. The first is constant comparison where the researcher simultaneously collected and analyzing the data. The second is theoretical sampling, a process which determined the kind of data collected by the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Sampling Methods
Purposive, snowball sampling methods were used to select participants for the study. Theoretical sampling method was also applied in line with the guidelines for grounded theory methodology. To investigate the communication behavior of conflict audiences in Plateau State, the researcher began with a purposive selection of an open sample, which consisted of individuals who met the following requirements: (i) they are residents of Plateau State; (ii) they experienced the conflict at one time or another.

Snowball sampling method was also effective for “locating rick key informants for the study (Patton, 2002, p.262). Each of the first four participants recruited for the study were asked to recommend people to be interviewed. The researcher went through the names they suggested and drew up a list of potential participants. Those participants were also asked to recommend other participants and “by asking a number of people who else to talk to, the snowball” got “bigger and bigger… and possible sources converge” (Patton, 2002, p.263).

The third approach, theoretical sampling is a “a procedure that “dictates that the researcher chooses participants who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon under study” (Thompson, 2011, p.48). In this study, purposeful selection of participants was used at the beginning of data collection and a theoretical sampling approach was applied when theoretical concepts began to emerge during data analysis. After the first set of interviews and focus group discussions were collected, an iterative data analysis was conducted. Thompson (2011) defined iterative analysis as “a process in which the researcher moves back and forth through the data to find, compare and verify patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions of the phenomena” (p.48).

During data analysis, the researcher narrowed the research focus and sampled key informants whose views helped to provide in-depth understanding of the emerging categories, while testing the validity of the categories and their relationships. The researcher identified and interviewed study participants until theoretical saturation in data was reached. The saturation occurred when, (i) no new or relevant data
regarding a category emerged; (ii). the category was well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, demonstrating variation and (iii). the relationships among categories were well established and validated. In this situation, the researcher collected initial data, which was analysed and questions that emerged from such analysis allowed the researcher to identify subsequent participants of the study. This process involves recruiting participants who have diverse experiences of the phenomenon; this allowed the researcher to explore the various perspectives on the phenomenon being studied (Cho & Lee, 2014).

Research Setting
Plateau, one of the states in North-Central Nigeria, was selected as the site for this research because of its long history of armed conflict. Although different regions in Nigeria have been affected by conflicts, the large-scale violence in Plateau State is one of the worst in the country. Krause (2011) estimated that over 4,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of violence in 2001. Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas were selected as the appropriate research setting for this study. These areas were also most affected by the crises compared to other local government areas in the state.

Participant Demographics
Data gathered for this study consisted of focus group discussions and interviews. Forty-nine people participated in this study. The participants, Muslims and non-Muslims, included students, civil servants, teachers, and journalists. The study participants aged 19 years and above, were ‘conflict audiences,’ who are resident in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas of Plateau State.

Data Collection
Data was collected using both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The discussions were important as the first step of data collection because group interaction “produces data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Interviews were also useful for collecting information from conflict audience about the conflict in Plateau State, their experiences and perception of the media. The discussions took place in two research sites: Jos North and Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria, areas that were also most affected by the crises compared to other local government areas in the state.

Data Analysis
Transcription began after each interview was conducted. Using grounded approach, data were coded at three levels: (i) open coding-to uncover concepts and categories; (ii) axial coding-to seek for relationship between the categories and (iii) selective coding-the process of identifying patterns, concepts, categories and dimensions and then linking them to develop a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Thompson, 2011). Data analysis also involved development of categories/concept dimensions and the use of a consequential matrix to examine the phenomenon under study, its causes and consequences. The matrix also allowed the researcher to develop explanatory hypothesis as a basis for investigating relationships that could be verified and tested with new data to be collected as the research progressed. Using a guideline suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1998, p.191), the matrix was used by the researcher to:

i. Locate the area or scope of the research project (the phenomenon)
ii. Extend the range of conditions and consequences considered by the researcher.
iii. Make choices about which combination or conditional or consequential factors in the data that might be relevant to the situation.
iv. Trace the intricate web of connection that might exist between contextual factors (structure) and actions/interactions (process).
v. Develop explanatory hypothesis about these relationships that can be verified or modified through further data collection and analysis.
vi. Organize materials and present a more complete and persuasive explanatory account of the phenomenon under investigation.
Through this incursive process, which required continuous modification and refinement of the categories and theoretical statements, the researcher emerged with a substantive grounded theory, which explains the communication behavior of conflict audiences, thus expanding arguments proposed by the individual framing model.

Findings

Core Category: ‘Conflict Audience as “Dissemiusers” of Information’

The key finding of this grounded theory study is the emergence of the core category or concept, “conflict audience as ‘dissemiusers’ of information.” The concept describes the latent communication behavior of conflict audience in Plateau State. It is an abstracted category that emerged from the data. The concept, “dissemiusers” was created by this researcher to describe the communication behavior or information-seeking and sharing information behavior of conflict audience who strategically design, disseminate and use information to promote their conflict agenda. The concept was created by merging two words ‘dissemiusers’ and ‘users.’ Like the communication theory model, “dissemination” of information involves a sender and a receiver. However, unlike the traditional communication process, where the receiver collects the information and provides feedback, the disseminator broadcasts information to different people without necessarily expecting any direct response. The central argument is that dissemination is a potent instrument for mobilization, particularly in the hands of conflict audience.

Peters (2006), argued that dissemination can be a powerful tool of persuasion because “once the seeds are cast, their harvest is never assured...the metaphor of dissemination points to the contingency of all words and deeds, their uncertain consequences, and their governance by probabilities rather than certainties” (p.212). Since the sender may not be able to clarify or restate the intended meaning of the message, the information disseminated might be interpreted in different ways by the receivers. Depending on the environment or circumstances in which the listener is situated, dissemination can affect the interpretation and outcome of the message (Peters, 2006). In this context, this study finds that conflict environment and the media system shape the way people make meaning of the message and its overall outcome on the conflict in Plateau State.

Dissemiusers’: Mobile Phone Technology and Social Media Access

A crucial part of the behavior of dissemiusers is the accessibility and availability of mobile phone technology and social media. Access to mobile phones and social media by the ‘dissemiusers’ provides a personal communication channel that, not only aids the general flow of information among conflict, but also allows individuals and groups to rally support for their positions in the conflict. As ‘users,’ their behaviors were expressed in two ways: one, through “user-to-user interaction,” where individuals interacted with the each other. Secondly, through “user-to-content interaction,” that involved sharing content through SMS, emails and social media interaction (Shao, 2009).

The study also finds that the availability, accessibility and affordability of mobile phones, the Internet, particularly social media in Nigeria facilitated this pattern of behavior. Most study participants also said the inability of the traditional media to provide necessary information prompted audience members to seek alternative channels of communication. Access to the Internet, social networking sites, and affordable cell phone technology empowered people to seek out information outside of traditional media sources. It also allowed them to produce and disseminate their own information. The study also found that the behavior of “dissemiusers,” were shaped by institutional and social structures in the Nigerian society.

To further investigate the nature of this behavior, the researcher used a conditional/consequential matrix to determine causes and consequences. The matrix also allowed the researcher to develop explanatory hypothesis as a basis for investigating relationships that could be verified and tested with new data to be collected as the research progressed. Using the matrix, four theoretical questions guided the researcher:
1. Why do conflict audiences engage in “dissemiusing” behavior? (causal conditions)
2. How does access to mobile communication technology and social media facilitate this behavior? (intervening condition)
3. How does this behavior impact on the communication process? (consequence)

In response to these questions, the data collected in this study found that behavior of “dissemiusers,” were shaped by the institutional and social structures in the Nigerian society. The findings show among other things, growing distrust for mainstream media, media ownership, media bias, lack of investigative journalism as some of the predisposing factors for this kind of behavior. These are discussed below. Similarly, the table below provides relevant quotations drawn from the interviews and focus group discussions with participants.

a. Distrust for Mainstream Media
Findings show that most study participants expressed deep distrust for the media for the state government-owned. The lack of trust stemmed from the personal beliefs of people, as well as the tendency to associate some media organizations with certain religious agendas. For example, while most Muslim participants associated the state government-owned media with an “indigene-Christian” agenda, non-Muslim participants identified international media organizations, such as Aljazeera, as promoting an Islamic agenda.

b. Media Ownership
One of the major reasons for the distrust for media is the concept of media ownership. Participants linked distrust for the news media to ownership. This is important because the government at both the Federal and State levels in the country own most of the television and radio stations.

c. Perception of Media Bias
Findings of the study also showed there is a perception among participants that some journalists in Plateau State were not only biased, they also promoted an ethnic/political agenda by marginalizing and excluding some groups in the conflict. This created distrust and created an information vacuum, which individuals in the conflict attempted to fill.

d. Lack of Security
Most journalists interviewed for the study cited lack of adequate security during the conflict in Plateau State as a major challenge. The segregation of most residential quarters in Jos North and Jos South Local Government areas along religious lines has great consequence for the security of journalists since, as there are currently “no-go” areas for people, depending on the religion they profess. This implication is that the inability of journalists to efficiently perform their duties created an information gap, which conflict audience are stepped in to fill.

Table 1: Categories and Quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust for media</td>
<td>“The local media tend to exclude some voices from their stories, so it is one-sided most times”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“When the media fails you, you turn to the people you trust the most, people that will not fail you!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of media bias</td>
<td>“Media contributed to the negative ways people responded”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Instead of calming the situation, the local media sometimes fueled the violence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media ownership</td>
<td>“The state government-owned station was seen by many people as supporting and funding an agenda”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of security

- “Imagine as a Christian, you cannot dare going into a place in Anwan-Rogo or Gangare to report on anything going on. It is like a death warrant. Same for a Muslim journalist, going to a place like Angwa Rukuba or Tudun Wada is like inviting disaster for you”

Consequences of Cell phones and Social Media Use

The study finds that despite the benefits of cell phones and the Internet in providing alternative communication sources, some “dissemiusers” took advantage of unrestricted access to cell phones and the Internet to ‘intentionally’ incite other people to commit acts of violence. The implication is that fake news and rumours major sources of information. Through information sharing, ‘dissemiusers’ provided an alternative information platform that met the growing demand for information among conflict audience in Plateau State. While understandably, they filled an information vacuum, having unrestricted access to and control over information allowed people to send out unverifiable and sometimes, inciting information. Conflict audiences as “dissemiusers” thus played an important role in the information dissemination process. They engaged in a form of behavior that empowered them to shape and sometimes, dictate the information dissemination process.

As discussed above, this study acknowledges key arguments of media effect models that identify the media as playing a critical role in shaping public opinion and attitudes, particularly during conflict. While the models provide a lens through which the relationship between the media and audience can be understood, it can be implied that media effect models stand like two legs in a three-legged stool structure. As reflected in the core category of this study or key finding, conflict audiences as “dissemiusers” engage in a form of communication behavior that empowers them to shape and sometimes, dictate the information dissemination process. Therefore, by introducing a grounded theory as the third leg of the structure, we can expand the conversation and advance understanding about the nature of information sourcing and dissemination behavior of conflict audiences. We are also able to identify the potential role of the behavior in shaping both the media and conflict environment.

Toward a Grounded Theory of Audience Empowerment

The findings of this study can be summarized into a substantive grounded theory, “Grounded Theory of Audience Empowerment.” It is illustrated in the Figure 1 below as “Conflict Model of Audience Empowerment.” The theory and model, which was generated using Atlas-ti qualitative data management and analysis software, is generated around the core category “conflict audiences as ‘dissemiusers’ of information,” attempts to identify and explain, contextually, the latent communication behavior of conflict audiences in Jos, Plateau State. The model is a theoretical conceptualization of the core category that emerged in this study.

The model presents a schematic conceptualization of the relationship between the audience, the media and conflict environment, which constitute categories or theoretical constructs that make up the theory. The presentation of the audience empowerment theory is divided into four parts: The theoretical construct, “audience empowerment,” “media environment,” “conflict environment” and “access to new communication technology.” These parts represent the key conceptual components of the theory.

Theoretical Construct: Audience Empowerment

The findings of this study acknowledge the arguments of media models in shaping individuals at different stages of conflict (Reuben, 2006). This substantive theory expands the conversation by conceptualizing the latent communication behavior of conflict audiences and the possible impact on the effect on the communication process. The theoretical construct “audience empowerment” presented in this theory,
describes a process through audiences (re) gain control over the communication process, particularly in conflict zones where there is a potential for dominant media sources to silence minority voices. At the core of the empowerment model is the concept of power; the power that conflict audiences must “correct” what they might view as negative perceptions about them created by the news media or other parties in the conflict. The model suggests that individuals as “dissemiusers,” diffuse power over the information dissemination process and over other people in a conflict situation. This means empowering themselves to control when and how they disseminate information, to ‘influence’ other people and ‘invoke’ a response (conflict behavior).

Explanatory Variables
Audience empowerment theory identifies the communication behavior of “dissemiusers” as being by three explanatory variables: (1) the conflict environment in which the audience is situated; (2) the media environment/system; (3) accessibility, availability and affordability of communication technology. Each of the three variables is discussed below.

The Conflict Environment
The conflict environment in this context includes the underlying causes of a conflict and how that shapes the perception of people about the news media, other individuals and groups, as well as their conflict behaviors. The assumption here is that the conflict environment shapes how people interact respond to the news media coverage of conflict and the different conflict issues. It also shapes how they interact with each other.

The Media System (Environment)
Although conflict environments create a need and demand for information, the media system, could make it potentially difficult for the media to perform this function. Findings of this study strongly suggests that these factors, particularly state government intervention in ownership and control of the media, the lack of development in journalistic professionalism, unethical journalism practice are institutional and social structures that make it difficult for journalists in the state to effectively perform their duties, thus creating an information vacuum that ‘dissemiusers’ attempt to fill. Conflict audiences are thus empowered to serve as alternative communication sources. While previous research has shown that the lack of information at any stage of a conflict makes the audience vulnerable to manipulation, this study also finds that in some conflict environments, like Plateau State, that relationship is not necessarily linear. The data shows, in some instances, audience members can resist perceived manipulation of the media, particularly when they have access to alternative communication channels. For some conflict audiences in Plateau State, such access also positioned them in a situation to become “influencers” of other people and, in some instances, the media. However, as this study has found, such “influence” can have intended or unintended on the information dissemination process and the intractability of conflict.

Accessibility, Availability and Affordability (3As) of New Communication Technology
Conflict model of audience empowerment is presented as a mediating effect model. Accessibility, availability and affordability of mobile phones and internet are presented as intervening variables. These factors explain the relationship between the media, conflict environment, and the communication behavior of audience members during conflict. The theory suggests that, while the media and conflict structures that shape how conflict audiences, as ‘dissemiusers’ interpret and process information, access to new communication technologies empowers them to control how they seek for and share information. This study identified the media, conflict environment, and access to new communication technology as being symbolically connected in six ways:

1. In conflict environments, like Plateau State, where there is a deep-seated distrust for the media, the communication technologies provide an alternative communication platform where the information needs of conflict audiences can be met.
2. The access to also gives conflict audiences a wider audience and opportunity to fill an information gap caused by the ‘perceived’ inability of news media (journalists) to provide much needed information during conflict
3. Some conflict audiences who perceive their voices as being silenced by the news media have the power to ensure that their voices are now heard.
4. Access to these channels of communication allows for the production, use, or dissemination of information aimed at ‘self-preservation’ or ‘attack as defensive communication’ strategies adopted by some conflict audiences.
5. Cell phones and social media access empowered the audience to have unrestricted control over information.
6. Unrestricted access to and dissemination of information among conflict audiences has the potential for misuse with consequences for misinformation and violence escalation.

It should be noted that the “theory of audience empowerment” is a substantive grounded theory that was developed inductively to explain a phenomenon (communication behavior of conflict audiences in Plateau State). This researcher did not set out to obtain empirical substantiation for the hypotheses. Rather, the goal of this study, like other grounded theory studies, is to abstract concepts and integrate them into a theory that explains underlying communication behavior of conflict audiences (Glaser, 2004). This researcher acknowledges that the core concept generated in the study ‘conflict audiences as “dissemiusers” of information’ may have different meanings for different people. In grounded theory methodology, the “…categories presented in the final theory are conceptual rather than descriptive, meaning that they can account for much variation in the data” (Breckenridge, 2012, p.14). Since the focus of this study is on conceptualization, the researcher acknowledges the modifiability of the theory. This suggests the possibility that the final theory presented in this study can be revised and/or modified when exposed to new data.

Discussion
As presented in the findings and illustrated above in the grounded theory of audience empowerment, the media and conflict environments play a critical role in shaping the behavior of conflict audiences. Most significant to this finding, is the role of mobile technology and social media in shaping the communication behaviors of conflict audience, which the researcher abstracts as “dissemiusers.”
The Internet has not only changed the way Nigerians are interacting, it has also revolutionized how they are interacting with each other and discussing national issues. The 2014 statistics show that there are over 67,101,452 Internet users in Nigeria, representing about 37.59 percent Internet penetration in the country. The perceived anonymity that the Web provides has emboldened Nigerians to express themselves, often without fear of arrest or intimidation (Emmanuel, 2015). Social networking and micro-blogging sites like Facebook and Twitter are also changing the dynamics of information sourcing and dissemination among citizens and challenging the dominant roles of the mostly government-owned traditional media outlets in monopolizing and controlling information. By providing alternative information and communication platforms, social media are also empowering citizens to shape new public discourse in the country.

The proliferation of cell phone technology in Nigeria as in other countries in Africa has made all this possible. The rate growth of mobile phone subscription in the continent is faster than any other continent in the world (Tortora & Rheault, 2014). With over 732 million mobile phone subscribers by 2012, Africa continent has a yearly cell phone growth rate of 20 percent (Pierskalla & Hollenbaugh, 2013). In Nigeria, the Internet subscriber data released by the Nigerian Communications Commission shows as at August 2015, there are over 151 million active subscribers on the Global system for Mobile Communications (GSM) networks. This figure is instructive if we consider that the 2006 census population in Nigeria data puts the national population at 140 million people. With poor Internet infrastructure, Internet-enabled mobile phones provide the most popular access to the Internet. A 2015 Ericsson Consumer Summary report indicates that 84 percent of smart phones in Nigeria have Internet access (African Telecom Outlook, 2014). Like the Internet, Web 2.0 introduces a platform for social networking. Social networking sites such as Facebook attracts more than 7.1 million daily users in Nigeria (Emmanuel, 2015).

Although media audience in the country seek information from other traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, the Web provides an alternative means of information sourcing and dissemination for Nigerians. This changing communication landscape is significant for Nigeria. Against the backdrop of the country’s history of repression during military rule and limited freedom for the media, the Internet and social media presents citizens with an opportunity to express their opinions without fear or intimidation. Most participants interviewed for this study said access to their cell phones and social media applications and platforms allowed them to receive real time information, videos, and pictures about the conflict as it unfolded in different parts of Plateau State.

**Availability and Affordability**

Apart from accessibility, the availability and affordability of cell phones and the Internet in Nigeria also play a crucial role in shaping the communication landscape. The possibility becomes more evident “given the combination of Nigeria’s relatively young population (around a third are between 15-34), discovery of the Internet using feature phones, introduction of flexi data tariffs designed for the mobile Internet on prepay” (GSMA Intelligence, 2014). Operators of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in Nigeria provide affordable basic phones and Internet-enabled devices for their customers. Information culled from the Website of MTN, a leading mobile operator in the country shows that the company is settling smartphones with prices ranging between 8000 naira and 18,000 naira. The influx of cheap and sometimes substandard phones also makes it possible that the average Nigeria can afford to own a cheap “smartphone. Handset manufacturers in China are capitalizing on the high rate of poverty to export substandard products in the country. A 2014 Nigeria Communications Week report indicates that about 1 million fake cell phones were imported into Nigeria. The phones were valued at 2.7 billion naira. About 250 million counterfeit cell phones are sold in Nigeria annually (Olukotun, 2012). Even though fixed broadband remains unaffordable for most of, many of Nigerians, the Internet penetration rate through mobile services is on the rise. GSM operators in the country are increasingly making it possible for subscribers to afford data plans on the different networks (GSMA Intelligence, 2014).
While, the growth of mobile phone communication, Internet penetration through mobile devices and current usage levels has made communication more effective, it has not been without disadvantages. It is important to note that, for a country like Nigeria with a long history of military rule, where the press freedom was restricted, and a media system that is democratic, yet regulated, unrestricted access to information and opportunities for free speech seems to give Nigerians a sense of ‘liberation. The lack of legislation over the Internet and mobile phone networks in the Nigeria has also created challenges for a country that is grappling with serious security challenges. Thus, the use of cell phones and social media by individual to incite violence has also had serious corollaries for conflict environments like Plateau State.

The key finding of this study thus, contributes to the body research that investigates the intersection between cell phone technology and violent collective action. For example, current research has focused more on investigating the impact of new communication technology on economic development and political collective action has shown that the spread of cell phone technology in Africa has improved access to use and spread of information, provided income-generating opportunities through the creation of new jobs, and improved communication (Abraham, 2007; Aker, Ksoll, & Lybbert 2012). While the availability and accessibility of cell phones has been good for Africa, some scholars argue that the technology also presents consequences for the continent, “which is host to many active or simmering conflicts (Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2014, p.208).

While this study did not set out to identify a correlation between cell phone/ social access and violence action, the findings suggest that the communication behavior of ‘dissemiusers’ has the potential of inciting violence. Apart from empowering conflict audience to seek out and disseminate information through other channels outside the traditional media, unrestricted access to cell phones and the Internet can make it possible for individuals to disseminate information that can potentially incite violence. This is more likely in conflict environments like Plateau State, where existing distrust made it difficult for the media to perform their social responsibilities to the people. Access to mobile phones and the internet makes widespread dissemination of information in conflict environments more likely, than was previously thought. As this study shows, such access is becoming a game changer, particularly in conflict environments that have less diverse media and poor infrastructure. The behavior of ‘dissemiusers’ therefore allows ‘minority’ voices in the conflict to be heard.

**Recommendations and Conclusion**
Several recommendations exist for both theory and practice: the study presents two key recommendations. First, the concept of “dissemiusers” introduced by the researcher provides a natural guide for future research. Results of this study indicate that access to cell phones and social media increased the probability of violence. However, since the findings only imply an association between the two, further studies, applying other methodologies, can test empirical relationships between access to cell phones/ social media, conflict audience and conflict escalation. Second, the study finds that the failure of journalists in Plateau State to effectively perform their duties in conflict situations created an information vacuum that conflict audiences stepped in to fill, the study recommends training and retraining of journalists in conflict sensitive reporting as an important step to restore confidence among the audience. There is also need for the establishment of a monitoring mechanism that could help the audience verify information sources before sharing through social media.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the behavior of “dissemiusers” is causing a power shift from the traditional media to individual audience members, this creating the new breed of “influencers,” particularly in conflict situations; the power they can exert in the information dissemination process and the potential impact on conflict escalation or de-escalation.
References