

Ideological Polarisation in Online News Headlines on Farmers-Herders Clashes in Nigeria

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Abstract

The farmers-herders crisis in Nigeria has become a reoccurring act of man's inhumanity to man. It is therefore not surprising that it has become a constant news piece for the media in Nigeria because a week will hardly go by without a report on farmer-herders crisis in Nigeria. Many research efforts have been carried out on this subject matter, especially on the enormity of losses resulting from the clashes; however, there exist paucity of studies in this area. This study is a critical content analysis of the News Headlines that are related farmers-herders clashes in some selected On-line media. Sixteen texts were purposively selected from online media. The selected data were analysed using Van Dijk's (2012) Principles of Ideological Stances theoretical framework and his theory of socio cognitive functions cited by Ramanathan and Hoon (2015). The study found out that news headlines on farmers-herders conflict were ideologically polarised using ideological stances such as actor description, authority, disclaimer, hyperbole and number game and implication. These discourse strategies were used to convey ideological polarisations in the way news headlines were reported. The study therefore concludes that the way that the media chooses to report the news on this subject matter is very worrisome because they do more than reporting the incident. Their choice of language shows that they are sometimes biased because of their ideological stances. Therefore, readers should endeavour to read through a news piece carefully before taking an opinion because news headlines are sometimes misleading about what the true situation is.

Introduction

The farmer herder crisis has taken the center stage regarding insecurity in Nigeria because of the ruthless and inhuman activities such as murder, rape, maiming and destruction of lives and

property that occur anytime farmers and herders clash. Aljazeera (2008) cited International Crisis Group (ICG) who said that fighting between farmers and herdsmen killed more people in 2018 than Boko Haram (a terrorist group in Nigeria). Adebayo (2018) also reports that farmers-herders crisis has become Nigeria;s gravest security challenge, now claiming far more lives than Boko Haram insurgency. He was also citing ICG. The crisis has increased ethnic, regional and religious polarization in Nigeria.

The conflict is mainly about the collision that often occurs as farmers-herder simply try to practice their ways of life. While the herders try to feed their animals using the pastoral method moving from place to place, they encroach on farmlands, eating up the crops of the farmers. Aljazeera news (2023) avers that communal conflict has resulted in the death hundreds of people in recent years in Nigeria. The death toll in Plateau state and other Middle Belt states in Northern Nigeria has increased. The crisis they claim has taken an ethno-religious outlook because it is often between the Fulani herdsmen who are predominantly Muslims in the north and mostly the Christian populace communities in Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba and Benue States.

Njoku *et al* (2021) opine that a number of suggestions have been made toward solving farmer-herder clash but the solutions are also often misinterpreted and there is no way forward. One of such solutions proffered is ranching and that pastoralist would be convinced to move to ranches and stop open grazing. It has, however, remained a plan on paper because it did not have financial banking and suspicion from host communities have hindered its progress. Therefore, not one of the 119 proposed ranches have been accomplished since its conception. Conflicts between herders-farmers are undeniably enormous and have consequently drawn the attention of the media. The choice of lexical items used in reporting these clashes do not only state facts but they also do other things which are sometime indirect because of their choice of language and manner in which they have chosen to report news

Lexicalisation occurs when a writer is deliberate in the choices of words used to report news with the aim to positively or negatively foreground or suppress an idea. This is often an intentional approach because the writers use lexicalisation to create a desired meaning. Omolabi (2023) avers that lexicalisation is not accidental but it is a deliberate choice of the writer to use words to create certain effects.

Methods and theory

The study is basically a qualitative research and a critical content analysis of on line news headlines that are related to farmers and herders clash in Nigeria. 16 news headlines have been purposively selected from on line media. The study adopts van Dijk's (2012) theory of socio cognitive model and ideological principles cited by Ramanathan Hoon (2015) listed some frameworks which are used to analyse power and structure and ideological elements. These frameworks include; actor description, authority, categorization, comparison, disclaimer, euphemism and so on. The socio cognitive model is very useful in investigating stereotypes, reproduction of ethnic prejudice and power abuse in text creation especially by dominant groups in the society who have access to power, education and wealth. Ideological polarisation is central to this model where by texts are often created to establish the polarities of two groups; 'they' and 'us'. The 'they' being the negative outgroup while the 'us' are the positive ingroup.

Analysis

Actor Description: This is how the text composer has chosen to portray people. They are either portrayed as the positive ingroup or the negative outgroup.

Text One

How Nigerian government's failures fuel farmers, herders conflict causing nearly 4000 deaths-
Amnesty International

The actor description has been used to categorise the government as members of the outgroup in a very bad light. These are the victims who would not have died if the federal government had not failed. The choice of the lexical items like; **failures** and **fuel** are deliberate here and very effective in shifting the blame of the crisis to the government. It implies that if they had taken the right action, the crisis would have stopped but instead their inaction is the fuel causing the flame of the crisis to increase and consequently causing the death of nearly 4000 people.

Text Two

Report: Weapons used in farmer-herder conflicts linked to Nigerian security agencies.

The Nigeria security agencies have been presented as the member of the out in this text they have been blamed for unending farmer herder crisis because they are supplying the weapon used for fueling this crisis. The text writer presents the farmer-herders as victims of the nefarious activities of the security agencies. The choice of lexical items such as ‘**weapons** and **linked**’, draws a negative attention to the security agencies who are supposed to be disarming both the farmer and the herdsmen.

Text Three

Be sincere, committed to end farmers, herders conflict in Nigeria- Fulani Herdsmen tell FG

Text there also indicts the federal government as the agent fueling the crisis. This report changes the narrative about the herdsmen who believe that the crisis would have ended if the Federal Government had been sincere. This is interesting because most reportage present the herdsmen as members of the out group who are armed and killing the unarmed farmers. This report is however drawing sympathy toward the herders who say that the Federal Government is insincere in ending the crisis

Authority:

Authority in CDA is used to cite the source of a news item or document when writing to give credibility to news and it also subtly under pins the ideological stance of the writer.

Text Four

Farmer herder conflict: 4000 lives lost in seven years, says ex- minister

14 th February, 2023

Text Five

Climate change fueling farmer-herder clash –Ganduje

Vanguard February 13, 2023

Text Six

Farmer-Herder Conflict Threatening Food, National Security - minister

Daily trust

13th December 2022

Text One

How Nigerian govt's failures fuel farmers-herders conflict causing nearly 4000 deaths- Amnesty International

In all the text listed under authority, the source of the message is given. It is a deliberate strategy used to give credence to the news item. In text four, an ex-minister is cited as the source of the statement. The news headlines do not give the name of the minister but his name this but will be provided in the body of the news. This is however sufficient as authority because the minister represents the government in the specific ministry that he heads and often speaks on behalf of the government. The authority behind any news often makes readers to take the information seriously. In this case, 4000 lives were said to have been lost in the last seven years. Text five cites Ganduje the sitting governor of Kano state as at February 13, 2023 when the news was published. Ganduje a governor in Kano State claims that climate change is major cause of farmer herder clash in Nigeria

Text six also cites a minister as the source of the news. The claim is that farmer-herder conflict is capable of causing shortage of food. The choice of words like 'threat' on food and national security is very strong and capable of causing worry specifically if it is coming from a reliable source. This is the aim that the text writer is seeking to achieve. Text one cites Amnesty International as the source of the information that Nigeria's government failure is fueling farmer herder crisis. This is a very strong allegation against the government and that this failure has caused nearly 4,000 deaths. It is important to mention a source when huge figures are being mentioned. Amnesty international, an international organisation has been cited as the source of this news article. It makes the number death at nearly 4000 credible. The report expresses negative out-group polarization against the government as the report suggests that it is their inaction that has sustained the clashes.

Victimisation

Victimisation strategy is used in van Dijk model of CDA to create polarity by presenting the deeds of the outgroup as negative and the members of the ingroup as victims of the actions of the outgroup. Here are some examples:

Text 1

How Nigerian govt's failures fuels farmers, herders conflict causing nearly 4,000 deaths

Premium Times, December 17, 2018

Text 2 Weapons used in farmer/herder conflicts linked to Nigerian security agencies

The Cable, January 31, 2020

Text 3

Be sincere, committed to end farmers, herders conflict in Nigeria- Fulani Herdsmen tell FG

Daily Post June 24, 2021

In the texts listed above, the Federal Government has been classified as members of the outgroup in text one because of their failures that is fueling herders and farmers conflicts in Nigeria. The consequence of their nonchalance has led to death of nearly 4000 people. These polarization show bias and reflect the ideological stance of the reporter.

Disclaimers:

This is a strategy employed in CDA to ideologically polarise the positive ingroup representation of self while defaming the public image of the out-group

Only my government has implemented a solution to herder-farmer conflict Buhari Channels June 22, 2023

Text Eight

Herder-farmer Conflict: You are a disappointment, pastoralist tells Buhari

Vanguard May 25, 2023

Text Nine

Benue: Police arrest cattle rustlers behind herder/ farmers crisis

The punch 19 April, 2023

In text eight the news writer has used the disclaimer strategy to present president Buhari in a good way. This is not surprising because many have claimed that the farmer –herder crisis escalated during the Buhari administration. Those who hold this view claim that herdsmen are his kinsmen. On the contrary, Buhari is claiming that only his government has implemented a solution to herder farmer conflict. This implies that previous government has not done anything to stop farmer – herder crisis. The choice of the lexical item, ‘only’ and the use of the pronoun ‘my’ separates Buhari’s government from other governments.

In text eight, the disclaimer strategy removes the blame from the herders that they are not the problem. It topicalises Herder-Farmer conflict and presents Buhari as a disappointment. The word, disappointment is overtly stated with the intent of foregrounding it. It could mean a number of things like;

The pastoralist do not actually see Buhari as one of them

That Buhari did not protect their interest as their kinsman

That Buhari has failed in the promises he made to them

Text nine is also another example of disclaimer strategy because most news report on farmer – herder crisis in Benue often presents the herders as the killers who often invade a community while the farmers are asleep and wreck havoc on them killing them in large numbers. This is the reason why many have criticised the nomenclature called, farmer –herders crisis as a poor description of the real situation because there is no crisis but that they just kill unarmed farmers. Many have suggested that they should be described as killer herdsmen. In this text the blame shifts to cattle rustlers. The cause of the crisis in Beune state according to the police are the arrested cattle rustlers who often fueled farmer herder crisis as they stole cattle owned by the herders. The rustlers are now the negative out group while the farmers and the herders are presented in a positive light.

Hyperbole/ Number Game:

This is a discourse strategy used to convey ideological polarization between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The use of numbers is very helpful with hyperboles because it highlights the enormity of the negativity being talked about.

Text Ten

Dozens dead in farmer herder violence in Nigeria food basket

TRT world April, 2003

Text 11

Farmer herder conflict Benue records 5,138 death in 87 months Daily Trust 14 th March, 2023

Text 12

Nigeria losing 5.04 annually to herder farmer conflict NLT repost Nigeria tribune may 3, 2022

Text 13

Farmer herder crisis over 300,000 displaced, 1,868 deaths recorded in 3 years- Report

All these text have used hyperboles to draw attention to the devastation caused by the crisis between the Farmers and herders crisis. Text ten talks about the death of dozens text eleven says 5,138 died in 87 months, text twelve says Nigeria loses 5,04 trillion annually and text thirteen says over 300,000 people are displaced and 1,868 have died in 3 years . These number game and the choice of words like, ‘ dozens, over and large number’ in describing deaths, displacement and losses as a result of the herders and farmers crisis is hyperbolism .

Implication

Implicit meaning allows a writer to mean more than what is said. This is when one mean more than what is said or written.

Text Fourteen

Soldier killed while mediating in herder farmer clash

Premium Times October 6, 2022

Text Fifteen

Dons say women, children most affected by farmer herder clashes punch 25 th June 2022

Text Sixteen

Hunger looms as herders/ farmers crisis worsens Dairy Post

May 7, 2023

Text fourteen reports that a soldier had been killed while mediating in Farmer herder clash. This piece of information could be understood as an unfortunate incident where a security agent lost his life but other meanings that could be derived are:

That the conflict is so severe that even security personnel become victims

That the case of the unarmed civilian is worse if a soldier could be killed

The choice lexical item revealing that the death of a soldier occurred while trying to keep peace between herders and farmers is deliberate. It draws attention to the enormity of the crisis

Text fifteen above reports that women and children are the most affected in the clash between herders and farmers. This could have a number of meanings;

That they are mostly killed

That the family unit is the most affected by these clashes

That they often lose the father figure to these clashes

The emphasis on women and children is an attempt to expound the negative influence of the clash on the family.

Text the sixteen which is the last text says, hunger looms as herder and farmer crisis worsens this also has a number of possible meanings such as;

The crisis has caused food scarcity.

Farmers are unable to cultivate crops as a result of the crisis.

The government has to be proactive in its attempt to end this crisis because food shortage is inevitable.

Findings and Conclusion

The farmers-herders clashes have been going on for a while and the blame game that accompanies it too has been on for a while. This has made it possible for news writers to shift blame on the major actors ranging from the Federal Government, to the herders, farmers and the security personnel. This is convenient to do when writers use ideological discursive strategies like; actor description, authority, disclaimer, hyperbole and implication as was prominent in this study. There is a constant polarization between the positive ingroup and the negative outgroup. The analysis also reveals the preponderance of deliberate lexicalisation in the news reports as the writers are very selective in the words that are used so as to do many things like, show bias, foreground certain items, disclaim and affirm certain things in most cases it creates polarities between the two groups.

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