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Revisiting the Role of Media in the Fight against Armed Banditry in Zamfara State, Perspective on the Major Silent Issues

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Abstract

Media has been one of the major actors that are considered critical in the management of armed banditry in Zamfara state since 2008. It has always played the leading roles in terms mediating between the victims, the bandit actors as well as the state authorities. There has been growing concern as to the understanding of the extent and limitations of the media when it comes to coverage and reporting of the armed bandit activities in Zamfara state. While many stakeholders especially those from the government angle tried to misunderstood the validity of the operations of the media, especially on what to report and what not, the media tried to tore in between the borderlines of reporting the acts of banditry as a way conveying the sad feelings of the common people as well as reporting banditry incidences as a means of promoting the bandit actors. It is on this premise that this paper seeks to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the roles played by the media since the beginning of the armed bandit activities in Zamfara state in 2008 and also discuss some critical silent issues as they relates to whether or not media has been on the right track as regard to sticking to the co-media ethics. The paper adopted mixed research methodology of literature review and field interviews with a view to ascertaining facts and subject them to critical evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Media practitioners have been among the critical partners in the fight against armed banditry in Zamfara State since the beginning of the phenomenon in the early 2011. Their role as critical stakeholders has been highly demanding by both the state authorities and indeed the public especially hence they possesses the powers to communicate decisions and decisions instituted by the government toward tackling banditry and restoring peace and also communicate the plights of the people for the public to take action. In the argument of (Shuaibu 2024) “that it was what they reported about government efforts in tackling bandits and their excesses that would help build the confidence of the people the same thing, it was when they reach out to the people government would understand the extent of the problem and take the most appropriate steps in addressing it forthwith.

These dual roles played by the media are not without its practitioners being blamed by both sides of the divides. While government always blamed the media for overblowing armed bandit incidences immediately they occurred a circumstance they sees as threat to the success of the government efforts in addressing the problems citizens on the other hand always blamed the media for underreporting armed bandit attacks

especially when incidences kept occurring without reliable action taken by the government. These plus many other problems made the operation of the media in banditry-dominant places like Zamfara very complex hence each side of the divides wanted the media to play its own bid to satisfy their immediate needs.

Added to this complex trend, the need for the media to be professionally careful in handling briefs that relates to banditry is absolutely necessary hence the code of ethics and media laws guiding criminal reportage are abound to cause the practitioner a prescribed and appropriate sanction. Again the confusion became very visible with the emergence of social media outlets which tends to promote citizen journalism. Report on armed banditry became too complex and confusing since the idea of citizens' journalism started because people unconsciously and without recourse to the rules of ethics guiding information dissemination took to the social media platforms to report banditry incidence as they occurred without mincing the code of ethics guiding the practice (Maradun 2023). It was further argued that conventional media practitioners today picked most of their stories on armed bandit attacks in Zamfara on social media platforms and only followed up with telephone calls physical visitations to verify incidences professionally hence the social



media has become an effective tool for information dissemination. This further pushed the conventional media practitioners to breaking stories about banditry that are short of professional standards (Maradun 2023).

These boundary crises affecting Journalists in banditry reporting remain unresolved up to the moment and continue to expose the complex magnitude of media practice in armed banditry prominent spaces like Zamfara. Not much has been done to understanding this critical concern faced by the journalists especially from the perspective of the public, especially with the proliferation of citizen journalism which make information dissemination almost an everybody's affair. The objective of this paper is to examine the role played by media practitioners in the coverage of armed bandit activities in Zamfara since 2011 and also bring to the public space some of the silent issues that affect media practitioners in armed banditry exposed environment like Zamfara. The paper adopted mixed research methodology of literature review and field interview with a view to ascertaining facts as they related to the subject matter under review.

Historical overview of armed banditry in Zamfara

Zamfara State which is located in the North-West geopolitical zone is one of the states which are affected by the menace of armed banditry for over a decade now. The problem which started as disputes between herders and local farmers over access to land has metamorphosed into a full-blown conflict which is gradually becoming a threat to the regional and national security. Between 2014 and 2019 the conflict has continued to attract global attention. Since 2011, armed bandits in Zamfara have been rampaging communities engaging in violent acts, attacking, abducting, killing, and robbing villagers and travelers along the highways within the state.

There are schools of thought that tried to define the cause root of armed banditry in Zamfara state. As stated earlier, there are those that are of the opinion that, the conflict that resulted to armed banditry is caused by the effects of climate change especially decreasing amount of rainfall on the scarcity of arable land and pasture. The drastic drop in rainfall in most part of Zamfara state resulted into the scarcity of water and looking at the rapid population growth which places too many pressure on the land and fuel intense conflict between pastoralists and farmers whose livelihoods relied fully on the land as a source of survival.

There is another school of thought that is of the opinion that armed banditry is associated with the state failure due to growing rate of corruption, collapse of the state institution, de-industrialization, growing poverty, and culture of impunity that characterized the state. There are other schools of thoughts that are of the views that the porous nature of the North-West sub-region where Zamfara state is located and its attendant effects on the proliferation of small and light weapons contributed significantly to the rapid spread of armed bandit activities in Zamfara state. There is this opinion that also strengthen the belief of many people that because un-

authorized arms have found their ways into the North-West region through the Maghreb following uprisings in the North-Africa and countries of the Sahel including post-Gadafi Libya it became easier for the armed bandits to access deadly weapons of various categories and continue to cause serious harm to the lives of the innocent citizens of the state.

The most secular argument of the elites is that banditry is caused by competition over "gold deposits" pitching those engaged in illicit gold mining against local communities as well as certain big-time mine owners believed to have strong link with the government. Others are also of the opinion that the conflict is spiritually ordained by God almighty. Others are of the opinion that politics and political permutations are the baseline of the whole reasons behind banditry and its growing escalation. They believed that the politics of opposition ANPP in the then 2011 against the ruling PDP was believed to have been the basis of the beginning of the conflict that transformed into armed banditry in the state. There are these allegations that "ANPP allegedly breed these gang of Yan-Ta'adda (political thugs) in defeating Governor Mahmuda Shinkafi of the PDP then with the promise that, they would be compensated. The in-ability of the government of ANPP to fulfill the pledge resulted to their increasing frustration and escalation of the conflict in Zamfara to the level it is.

Former Governor of Zamfara state Abdul'aziz Yari in an interview with the journalists in early 2018, stated that nearly over (500) villages have been invaded by the bandits in eight years, and about (13,000) hectares of land have been devastatingly destroyed. He further stated that (2,835) were killed between 2011 and 2018. From 2011 to 2023, there are over (10,000) armed bandits that are operating in various armed bandit camps in the state. The bandits take advantage of their strengths as well as knowledge of the operational environment to be launching attacks outlying towns, highways, and villages.

The forest nature of the state has increasingly become of added advantage to the bandits. The most popular forests that are known to the people of Zamfara state include Dajin Rugu, Dajin Kamara, Dajin Kunduma, and Sububu forests. The strength of the bandits has influenced the people of the state to shift their loyalty from the state authorities to the informal rules of the armed bandits. For years the bandits targeted conventional security operatives including the army and police as well as the local vigilante groups. Estimate has shown that, between 2021 and 2023 bandits across Zamfara state had launched over twenty-five attacks targeting army and police formations, and over thirty security operatives were killed by the armed (Maryam 2023).

Armed banditry has worsened in Zamfara state as a result of allegations of marginalization, injustice, extortion involving security operatives, judges, lawyers, and village/district heads. There has been wide range of allegations on the site of the formal institutions who are established to protect the people of not doing the right thing. It was alleged "Many a-times when security forces were alerted on an existing security threats by

the bandits they always don't respond on time, and when bandits are arrested and handed over to the security operatives they don't usually bring bandits to justice (Maradun 2023).

It was unfortunate that the growing spate of armed banditry has reached its peak hence the bandits had over the years developed the wing to be notifying villagers in Zamfara when they want to launch attack and sometime they impose illegal fund raising on farmers seeking to gain access to their farms. The weakness on the site of the conventional fight against banditry in Zamfara state has become so alarming that despite the claims made by the government on the investment made in the name of fighting banditry for close to a decade now. Former Governor of Zamfara state Abdulaziz Yari Abubakar had once claimed that "Zamfara state government had invested the sum of (N17billion) funding the military operations against the armed banditry. The army for instance stated that between January and April 2019 it has launched various operations in Zamfara among which includes Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Diran Mikiya, and Operation Puff Adder. But in the opinion of many citizens, these operations and deployments made do not change the dynamics hence the number of attacks are increasing and the casualties are multiplying.

In general terms the weakness of the state authorities in tackling insecurity resulted to the growing spate of complex informal security structures in Zamfara state. The emergence of vigilante groups (Yan-Sakai) and many other informal security outfits has demonstrated the continued failure of the conventional measures put in place to end armed banditry and restore peace in Zamfara. These groups of bandits operate in a competitive mode freely in the name of vigilante operation.

Media in the Wake of Armed Banditry in Zamfara State

By the beginning of the year 2011 when armed banditry started, media become central to reporting the incidents of armed banditry as they occurred and sometimes with an in-depth analysis in trying to explain the main cause of the problem. Not until when the popular bandit leader Mr Isshe was brutally murdered by some members of the organized vigilante, many people do not understand the dynamics of the problem. Media since that time has been central to reporting armed banditry incidents as they occurred. At a point especially between 2012 and 2014, reports on armed banditry became almost a daily thing by both print and broadcast media outfits because of the complexity of the situation (Maradun 2024). Since that time, one cannot read national daily newspaper in Nigeria, watch a television or listen to a radio station especially those that are internationally based such as the BBC and VOA Hausa services without having one or more than a story on armed banditry as it relates to Zamfara state (Maradun 2024).

These reports on armed bandit activities in Zamfara in the arguments of (Zaidu 2020) are true reflections of those that favor either the bandits whenever they carried out their operations or the victim communities that came under attacks or rather the reactions of the government or state authorities on the measures instituted to restore sanity. This analogy of balance reportage continue to sustain the relevance of the media in the banditry-dominated space like Zamfara state even though to some certain extent, government actors had always seen some selected media outfits as being vires and favorable to the bandit actors in terms of promoting their heinous activities.

Table 1: Reports of Armed Bandit Attacks as Reported by Various Media Outlets

S/No	Incident and Location	Month/Year	News Outlet (s)
1	Zamfara Attack: 3000 people killed, 2000 homes destroyed -Official	August 2018	Premium Times
2	Bandits Kill Four, Abduct Several Others in Zamfara	March 2021	Channels TV
3	Dozens Killed in Clashes Between Nigerian Villagers and Bandits'	Feb 2021	Aljazeera
4	Residents Flee Zamfara Communities After Bandits Abduct 110	November 2023	Punch Newspaper
5	Air-force Neutralizes over 100 Bandits in Zamfara	October 2023	Vanguard Newspaper
6	Bandits Issue 7-Day Ultimatum on Abducted Zamfara Varsity Students	December 2024	The Cable News
7	Just In: Again, Bandits Attack Zamfara Town, Abduct Emir's Son	June 2023	Leadership Newspaper
8	Zamfara Gov. Sympathizes with Zurmi People Over Bandits' Attack	December 2023	People's Daily Newspaper

9	Banditry in Zamfara: A heavy Price for Peace	July 2023	ICIR News Channel
10	Zamfara Police Debunk Reports of Bandit Attack on Shinkafi Station	September 2021	Daily Post
11	Zamfara Lawmakers Laments Incessant Bandits' Attack on Constituents	December 2023	This Day Newspaper
12	At least 200 Villagers Killed by Bandits in North-West Nigeria	January 2022	The Guardian Newspaper
13	Insecurity: Zamfara Desperate Measures Against Banditry	July 2022	BusinessDay NG
14	Zamfara: Bandits Invade Police Headquarters, Kill Officer Six Others	February 2024	Daily Trust Newspaper
15	Armed Kills 18 in Nigeria's Zamfara State	October 2021	Reuters
16	Armed Bandits Kills 15 at Mosque in North-west Nigeria-Residents Say	September 2022	Voice of America
17	Armed Bandit Attack Community in Zamfara, Kills Civilian and Military Soldier	March 2021	Thunder Blowers

Sources: As Compiled by the Author, 2024

In fact it was these waves of media reports that influenced critical stakeholders including the academia and Centers for Research from within and outside the country to come up with series of intellectual seminars and conferences to help the government understand the real issues around armed banditry and how it can be tackled for peace to be restored in Zamfara and North-west region by extension. Not only holding intellectual conferences and seminars but series of recommendations were passed on to the government and its actors for decision-making. Whether appropriate actions are instituted or not that is an issue of continuous debate but what is most important is that the media has triggered the discussions through its constant reports on the major banditry incidences in Zamfara State. Below are some of the National and International Conferences organized to debate the causes and solutions to armed banditry emanating from various media reports on banditry in Zamfara state and other neighboring states of the North-West?

Table 11: Conferences Organized on How to End Armed Banditry Emanating from Various Media Reports.

S/No	Conferences/Seminars	Year	Host
1	I am a Bandit, (Decade of Research in Zamfara State Bandit Den	One-Day Seminar on Understanding the Shadow Actors in Armed Banditry in Zamfara state	Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto
2	Insurgency, Armed Banditry, and Ethno-religious Conflict in North Central Nigeria	National Conference Organized by Department of History & International Studies, Federal University Lokoja	Lokoja 2021
3	Combating Kidnapping and Banditry in Nigeria: Roles of Space Technologies and ICTS' Security Establishment and the State	11 th National Conference & Annual General Meeting of Nigerian Institute of Space Engineers	Abuja 2021
4	North-West in the Wake of Armed Bandit Activities	International Conference on State and Security Organized by the Nigerian Defense Academy	Kaduna 2020
5	Fighting the Menace of Armed Banditry in Zamfara	National Conference Organized by the Department of Political Science, Federal University Gusau	Zamfara 2021
6	Tackling Security Challenges for Sustainable Democracy and Development in Nigeria	Center for Peace Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto	Sokoto 2022



7	In Search of Enduring Solution to Rural Banditry and Other Security Challenges in the North-West Zone of Nigeria	2 days Virtual Conference Organized by Center for Peace Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto	Sokoto 2024
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Source: As Compiled by the Author 2024

Assessment of the Silent Issues in the Coverage of Armed Banditry in Zamfara State

Except those in the media practice, not many understand what the practitioners undergoes in trying to keep to the demands by both sides of the divides regarding reports on armed banditry in Zamfara since the phenomenon started. People only reads the reports as they were reported on various media platforms, sometimes pass their comments positive or negative, and move on. In the opinion of (Abubakar 2023), it may take a journalist 24 hours to develop three or four paragraphs verified and certified report on armed bandit attacks. Sometimes getting information from the victims is not always the problem but having the right authorities to speak to the findings made by the journalist is always the main issue. This is couple with the pressure on the journalist by his editorial team to as quickly as possible break the story for his media to become the lead in terms of meeting the timeliness component of the report. In trying to mend this fence, a lot more issues arises and these constitutes the conglomeration of the silent issues journalist had been battling with in trying to report armed bandit activities in Zamfara state.

(i) Defining the boundary between, Love for Peace, Humanity, and Aiding Banditry

It has been a subject of continued debate among stakeholders as to what a journalist or a media practitioner should do whenever there is armed bandit attack in Zamfara state. While the government and its agents expected a media practitioner to lower down from reporting armed bandit activities as they occurred in the interest of not igniting fear and tension and sustaining peace, the victim community always want to reach out to the media for them to be able to voice out their experience for the authorities to come to their rescue. In the views of (Samir 2019) "If you choses to take the path of the government and be selective of what to report simply in order not to project the state as a danger zone for the outsiders the community will tag you as their enemy or rather pro-government who is not showing concern to their plight". He added that "they would also project you as enemy of humanity because in their own assessment they would assume you are not after their suffering". He added, "if you opted to go for the victim community and choses to report every bit of the armed bandit attack that occurred in Zamfara State, the government will tag you as enemy of peace or someone who is always sending a danger signal about the state of Zamfara to the larger world". This development in the opinion of (Ismail 2019) has continued to labeled journalists and media practitioners into two groups namely "Pro-government" and "Anti-government".

Added to this also, one may argue that the media practitioners that work at the state-owned media outlets suffered the worst hence their experience has to always do with siding the

government and abandoning the victims. (Ismail 2019) argued, "even though as trained media professionals working with the state-owned media example Zamfara Radio, they cannot air a report about attacks or killings even as they occurred in their presence and because the editorial policy is a "censored one", media reports coming from state own media outlets on armed bandit activities always come on the side of what the government has done or is doing to restore sanity not necessarily report what the victims are undergoing during as a result of the attack. This development continue to create boundary disputes between media stories as they are released or aired by different outlets, especially those control by the state government, and also give the people the conscience to choose which story to believe with.

(ii) Conflict in Confirming Casualty Figures After Armed Bandit Attack

Another critical issue that is affecting media practitioners reporting armed bandit activities in Zamfara is the difficulty of confirmation of casualty figures after an attack is launched. This phenomenon has always been a source of concern, especially in some selective bandit attacks that came with heavy casualties. (Ismail 2019) argued, "when the attack on Yargaladima which resulted to the killing of over (400) people took place journalists that accompanied the former Governor of Zamfara Abdulaziz Yari then found themselves in dilemma hence the census of the dead bodies they have made was out-rightly denied by the security agencies at the burial ground". He added "while I counted over two hundred dead bodies the police commissioner present in partnership with the other heads of security agencies addresses the media practitioners and insisted that they are only going to confirm seventy persons killed". The confusion left every journalist present to resort to seeking guidance from the editorial editorial policies of his media outlets. International media outlets such as BBC, VOA, Radio France International, and rest reported that over 200 people were killed while other national dailies reported 300, 400, and rest. State-owned control media such as Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), Radio Nigeria Pride FM, Zamfara Radio and Television Services restricted their news reports to 70 casualty figures as confirmed by the state security heads including the Police Commissioner. This development tried to create conflict of credibility among the public in their choice of which story to believe out of the varieties that were reported by the witnessing journalists.

(iii) Attempt by the Government to Discredit Data Collated from the Field by Media Practitioners

This is another dynamic but conflicting silent issue about media reporting of armed banditry in Zamfara State. Sometimes government and its agencies deliberately deployed tactics to discredit some reports aired or published by some media outlets about armed banditry in Zamfara. (Abubakar



2024) argued, When the BBC released its investigative documentary on “Bandit war-lord of Zamfara” many agents of the government who understood the dynamics taken by the BBC in trying to reach out to these bandits and listen to their grievances deliberately created a war of tongue with the BBC by simply trying to discredit the content and message contained in their released video and instead tried to blame the International media outlets for using their global popularity to sale banditry as a criminal activity. In another dynamic argument to this (Maradun 2024) stated “the article written by Mrs Kadiria Ahmed after the BBC documentary for instance had only succeeded in blindfolding the powers that be in trying to understand what the BBC is intending to achieve in their documentary. He added “the message contained in that video or rather documentary is enough to guide the government in understanding the cause root of the banditry and its multiplicity of dynamism but because of some political reasons they diverted the attention of the state authorities from listening to the real issues as testified by the various actors in that documentary and instead tried to discredit the BBC from being a reputable media organization and a critical stakeholder in fighting armed banditry in Nigeria.

(iv) Sponsored Counter-Reports

Another silent issue that is bedeviling media practitioners reporting armed bandit activities in Zamfara State is the tactics deployed by the government and its agents in sponsoring counter-reports against credible media stories on armed banditry incidents. (Salim 2024) argued, “sometimes agents of the government who may not feel good for a certain media reports on armed bandit attacks in Zamfara bought pages of Newspaper or radio airtime and begin to sponsor baseless counter-attacks against some media reports without being mindful of the facts that people affected by these incidences of banditry have the choice of which propaganda to listen to. Most of these counter-attacks came without facts, figures, and indeed credibility but because government agents believed they are determined to please the powers that be they resorted to deploying all sorts of propaganda simply to suite their political interest.

Tagging/ Labeling Some Media Practitioners as Enemies of the State

Some government agents since the beginning of this armed bandit activities developed the idea of tagging some media practitioners as enemies of the government. But the most fundamental question one need to ask is that: which code of ethics of the practice have they breached for them to be tagged as enemies of the government? the answer is none. (Maradun 2024) argued, “Politicians cleverly developed the habit of tagging certain media houses in Zamfara as enemies of the government simply because they have always choses to report incidences of banditry as they happened without mincing what the authority said or rather feel. He added “you remember in 2022 when Matawalle the former Governor ordered the attack on the online media outlet Thunder Blowers simply because they have taken exception to the state censorship on banditry reporting” He added also “you could remember at a time in 2023 the same Governor Matawalle ordered for the closure of

several media houses whom he tagged as ‘Enemies of his government’.

(v) Hazard of the Social Media Reports

One of the silent issues that affect media practitioners in banditry reporting is the manner citizen’s journalism take precedence above the conventional practice. Sometimes, citizens took to their android phones and break stories of armed bandit attacks without any professional consideration. When these stories are broken and the stories came with dust, people including those in the government make generic condemnation of journalists without recourse to making disparity between professional journalists and those practicing citizen’s form of journalism. In the argument of (Abubakar 2024) even the conventional journalists picked most of these story items on the social media platforms and use their professional sense of judgment to verify them”. He added “because of the demand of the “timeliness”, and to avoid given chance for the social media to take lead in most of these sensitive stories about armed banditry certain protocols that are supposed to be carefully observed by the professional journalists are not followed strictly.

Way Forward

To help address the crises caused by these and many other silent issues not captured, this paper recommended the following:

- That, government of Zamfara should redefine its thought about media practitioners and the way they handle reports on armed bandit activities in Zamfara. Even though journalists can made mistakes in the course of their practice, that does not mean everything they reported is to cause injury to the government. As partners in the fight against armed banditry, government should always welcome their thought and work in synergy with them to provide a lasting solution to this decade of armed bandit terror in the state.
- The, government of Zamfara should deploy the tactics of using these media reports as steps toward building its intelligent network as majority of the news stories on armed banditry as reported by both social and conventional media outfits represent a true reflection of the cause, dynamics, and consequences of the conflict as it occurs.
- That, government of Zamfara should deploy another strategy of confirming banditry incidences when contacted by the journalists and also desist from waging war of tongue with the journalists over casualty figures or victims of the attack hence every live wasted through armed bandit terror shall matters more to the government.
- That, government of Zamfara should desist from labeling media houses or practitioners as enemies of the government because their role covers the two sides of the divides. They are meant to work for both the government and governed.
- That, government of Zamfara state through its information managers should lower their passion for

ensorship of stories especially those that affects armed bandit terror so that the confidence of the people on the credibility of the reports state owned media outlets can be rebuild.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, one must come to the conclusion that the role of the media practitioners in the coverage of armed bandit activities in Zamfara is not only enormous and critical, but very dynamic in nature. While the government expected serious cooperation from these people in terms restricting unwanted banditry reports especially those with heavy casualties the public on the other hand required the media more to be able to voice their feelings about their security conditions. Playing in between these two demands have always become complex situation for the media practitioners as many might have suffers the consequences of not favoring one of the actors.

There is no doubt to the fact that government need to cut down its speed and rebuild its perception of the media practitioners when it comes to armed banditry reporting. This will help enough in mending the fences and also strengthening the relationship between the government and media in trying to save the common people from the devastating effects of armed bandit brutalities.

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