

JOURNALISM PRACTICE AND TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

Issues, Trends and Techniques

"Insurgency, militancy, terrorism, whatever its nomenclature, is an emerging phenomenon, so are attempts to confront it. Media reportage of terrorism can be a challenging and hazardous professional venture. It demands extraordinary skill, circumspection and a spirit of discernment."

- Professor Oludayo Soola, University of Ibadan



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Editors

Journalism Practice and Terrorism in Nigeria

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Contents

Foreword	viii
Contributors	xi
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION	
Chapter 1: The Peril of Journalism Practice and Safety of Journalists <i>Olusola O. Isola and Muyiwa Popoola</i>	3
SECTION 2: EMPIRICAL TRENDS	
Chapter 2: Global Documentation on Infringements on Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists Reporting Terrorism: Imperative for Establishing a Safety Mechanism for Journalists in Nigeria <i>Muyiwa Popoola and Adesina Lukuman Azeez</i>	17
Chapter 3: Tracking Media Coverage of Armed Conflicts Around the Globe: A Critical Appraisal <i>Nduka N. Nwankpa</i>	33
Chapter 4: Terrorism, Boko Haram and the Role of the Media in the Fight Against Insurgency in Nigeria <i>Adeyinka Richard Emmanuel, Abayomi Charles Daramola and Kolawole Amos</i>	42
Chapter 5: Media and Terrorism: An Exposition of Relationship Drives <i>Muyiwa Popoola</i>	62
Chapter 6: Contagion Effects of Journalists' Newsfame of Terrorists on Peoples' Perception of Social Realities: An Explanation of the Convergence of Journalism and Terrorism in Modern Society <i>Adesina Lukuman Azeez and Muyiwa Popoola</i>	77

Chapter 7:	Social Media and Terrorism Reporting in Nigeria <i>James Okolie-Osemene and Rosemary Ifeanyi Okoh</i>	97
Chapter 8:	Media Use by Insurgents and the Application of the Media to Counter Boko Haram <i>Abubakar Mu'azu</i>	108
SECTION 3: PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES		
Chapter 9:	Exploring an Idealistic-Pragmatic Approach in Evolving Strategies for Ethical Conflict Reporting in Nigeria <i>Sharon Adetutu Omotoso and Dolapo Olamiposi Razaq</i>	131
Chapter 10:	When Emotions Run High: An Examination of Journalistic Objectivity in Conflict Situations <i>Nduka N. Nwankpa</i>	152
Chapter 11:	An Exploration of the Role of the Mass Media in Crisis Management <i>Okechukwu Chukwuma, Christian Diri and Emmanuel Oginibo</i>	161
Chapter 12:	Ethical Issues in Covering Violent Conflict Events <i>Omowale Adelabu</i>	181
Chapter 13:	Re-examining Ethical Issues in Covering Conflict and Violent Events <i>Agnes Joe Shaibu and Victor Olusegun Babatunde</i>	195
Chapter 14:	Conflict Sensitive Reporting of Terrorism in Nigeria: A Development Media Imperative <i>Muyiwa Popoola</i>	205

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Re-examining Ethical Issues in Covering Conflict and Violent Events

Agnes Joe Shaibu and Victor Olusegun Babatunde

A journalist should not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such act in the eyes of the public. (NUJ Ethics Code)

INTRODUCTION

Violence is as old as man and it is inevitable in any human environment, although the nature of violence differs from society to society. Violent events range from disasters – natural or man-made, religious and ethnic rivalry, crime, insurgency – to all other forms of tragic occurrences that affect the natural order of the society. Thus, it could be said that there is no known society world over that is not prone to violence. This is however a subject of further intellectual debate.

The media as an institution is an integral arm of the society saddled with the responsibility to inform, educate and entertain the general citizenry in any nation of the world. In the bid to perform their functions, the media often times find it difficult to resist the temptation of reporting

violent events because of its human interest values. Often, journalism is in a fix, caught between staying true to the principles of reporting and responding adequately to the urgent realities of conflict or war (Eti, 2009). To buttress this, Allan and Zelizer (2004:3) rightly stated: “confronted with the often horrific realities of conflict, any belief that the journalist can remain distant, remote, or unaffected by what is happening ‘tends to go out of the window’ in a hurry”. This justifies the views of Eti (2009), that conflict, by its very nature, holds a forceful attraction for the media. The questions then are: How has the media fared in covering violent events? Can the media be blamed for fueling the ambers of war or violent events? What are the ethical issues in covering violent events? These are some of the questions begging for answers in the 21st Century media practice across the world.

The spate of bombings, kidnappings and abductions that has characterised the activities of Boko Haram in the Northern part of Nigeria has brought the issue of terrorism, once thought to be alien, to the searchlight of the media. This is to be expected, as conflict is the bread and butter of journalism. However, the media has been slammed in several quarters for heightening insurgency through its reportage. It has been accused of irresponsible journalism and fuelling, rather than resolving conflicts. According to Pate (2012:62), “the media are rightly or wrongly considered to be part of the forces engaged in the construction and manipulation of the realities in Nigeria”.

The media itself has experienced its own share of the activities of Boko Haram, having being targets of violent attacks and harassments. Journalists had received several threats from the sect for mis-quoting people who claimed to be its spokesmen. In October 2014, there were claims and counter-claims on the purported ceasefire pact brokered between the sect and the Nigerian government in the media. Weeks later, the sect’s leader refuted the claim, alleging that no negotiation took place after all.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

A brief explanation of the key concepts in this chapter is very important.

Conflict

An understanding of conflict is germane to knowing how to report it. Laue (2002) cited in Pate (2012:59) describes conflict as “an escalated competition at any system level between groups whose aim is to gain advantage in the area of power, resources, interest, and needs and at least one of the groups believes that this dimension of the relationship is mutually incompatible”. Howard (2004:6) also explains conflict as “a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share”. Perceived differences, if not managed properly, can degenerate into violent conflicts.

Ethics

Ethics is defined as the branch of philosophy which deals with judgment as to the rightness or wrongness, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of an actions. Webster Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines ethics as the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation. Ethics can also be defined as a normative science of conduct which is concerned with the right thing to do (NOUN, 2008).

Violence

The World Health Organization (2002:4) defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation”.

Covering Violent Events

Many reasons could be adduced to the swift penchant of media

practitioners in covering violent events. Roshier (1981) cited in Kumar (1999:18) noted that:

The selectivity of crime in the news-media and/or the reason why some criminal events are chosen in preference to others, may directly relate to the unusual as well as unique nature and/or seriousness of the crime, its whimsical circumstances, such as humorous, ironic, bizarre, sentimental and dramatic circumstances surprisingly invoking feelings of outrage and/or sympathy, or the involvement of a famous or high ranking/status person.

This view often serves as a good defense for coverage of violent events by media practitioners in Nigeria and other nations of the world without considering the effects of their reportage on the audience. Commenting on the effects of the mass media coverage of violent events on the audience, Asogwa, Iyere and Attah (2012:175) noted that:

Critically, the positive and negative effects of the many messages the mass media send out about crime and terrorism on daily basis to consumers are not often given top priority. What seems to matter to mass media practitioners is to write or broadcast the latest happenings under the philosophy that the people have the right to know what is happening within and outside their environment.

Therefore, it could be said that media practitioners sometimes downplay journalistic ethics during the discharge of their professional duties. Onadipe and Lord, in Asemah and Edegoh (2012:120) wrote that "as a watchdog, the media should give credit where it is due and criticism where appropriate". Acting as watchdog, the media should bark as an early warning when there is potential danger. By heeding the early warnings and sounding the alarm, the media could act as a powerful tool in conflict management and prevention. All conflicts start as misunderstanding or tension between and among groups. If not quickly recognised for what it is or its potential, conflict can in time explode to engulf a larger section of the community or nation. The African media can play a vital role in defusing tension, reducing

and containing conflicts. It can do so by being deeply aware of the fragility of their countries' social fabric, of the efforts being expended at unifying their countries, the weaknesses and strengths of governing impoverished, developing countries (Asemah and Edegoh, 2012).

Galadima (2002) notes that the journalist needs to be aware of the fact that his reports of crisis have the tendency to either escalate or diminish the crisis. The reports of crisis generate reaction from different people within and outside the place where the crisis is taking place or has taken place. He added that media reports could generate discussions from people of the same or different tribes, religions, professions, etc; thus, if the report does not go down well with such people, it can cause more confusion.

Conflict sensitive journalism, assuming the dominant paradigm role in reporting conflict situations emphasises not only on what to say, but also how to say it as against peace journalism which advocates only for peace, thereby sacrificing one of journalism's cardinal principle of objectivity in reporting conflicts. This stance has often been the subject of criticism. Popoola (2014:14) clearly explains why conflict-sensitive journalism has assumed centre stage in conflict reporting: "peace journalism only encourages coverage of only aspects of conflicts that foster peace and discarding issues in a conflict that may promote violence and escalation of conflict." However, reporting all issues in conflicts is relevant to understanding such situations and in the long run, fosters reconciliation or resolution of conflict. Albeit, for conflict sensitive journalism, reporting the facts accurately and impartially is not enough; it must be responsible. We must take care in our choice and use of words. Hence, duty calls on media practitioners to be socially responsible and abide by the ethical obligations required of them when covering violent events so as to contribute their own quota in nation building.

ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

"Ethics" can be defined as a system or code of moral values that provide rules and standards of conduct. The three primary ethical principles that should guide all inquiries involving human beings

according to WHO (2007:7) are as follows:

- (1) Respect for persons, which relates to respecting the autonomy and self-determination of participants, and protecting those who lack autonomy, including by providing security from harm or abuse.
- (2) Beneficence, a duty to safeguard the welfare of people/communities involved, which includes minimising risks and assuring that benefits outweigh risks.
- (3) Justice, a duty to distribute benefits and burdens fairly.

In emergency settings, dependency, loss of autonomy, breakdown of community/social systems and ongoing security threats are the norm. Sexual violence inquiries in these settings for instance, must therefore take special care to understand how best to meet the obligations contained in these principles (WHO, 2007). This obviously agrees with the journalistic code of conduct which states that journalists should not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such act in the eyes of the public. Also, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2003:6) gave the following tips for covering traumatic events in the community:

- (1) Understand that your coverage of a traumatic event will have an impact on your readership, viewers or listeners. Remember that the tone of your coverage may reflect the tone of the community's reaction to it. Thus, you should establish policies that affect your coverage.
- (2) Write stories about the victims' lives and their effect on your community. These are short stories about the victims, their favourite hobbies, what made them special, and the ripple effect of their lives. In many cases, victims' relatives want to talk when they realise that the reporter is writing these types of stories.
- (3) Provide forums on what people are thinking, especially words

of encouragement. Offer lists for ways people can help and how they have helped.

- (4) Find ways people are helping, including acts of kindness, and report on them throughout the recovery process. This may provide hope for the community.
- (5) Constantly ask these questions: What does the public need to know and how much coverage is too much? When does a medium become infatuated with a story when the public is not? A community is much more than a mass killing or disaster. The coverage must reflect that.

Journalists have been found to face unusual challenges when covering violent or mass tragedies. They face the possibility of being a first responder to a violent event. They interact with victims dealing with extraordinary grief. Journalists who cover any “blood-and-guts” beat often build a needed and appropriate professional wall between themselves and the survivors and other witnesses they interview. But after reporters talk with people who have suffered great loss, the same wall may impede the need of journalists to react to their own exposure to tragedy (Dart Center, 2003).

Since the media is the looking glass through which we make meanings of our world, it then behooves it to be sensitive and socially responsible in its reportage. As Walter Lipmann puts it, ‘the pictures in our heads’ readily come from what we see or get from the mass media. Therefore, the onus lies on the media to mirror the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria constructively, towards its resolution. Thus, in reporting terrorism in Nigeria, Howard (2004:16) prescribes the checklists for conflict-sensitive journalism:

- (1) Avoid reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find other affected interests and include their stories, opinions and goals.
- (2) Avoid defining the conflict by always quoting the leaders who make familiar demands. Go beyond the elites. Report the words of ordinary people who may voice the opinions

shared by many.

- (3) Avoid only reporting what divides the sides in conflict. Ask the opposing sides questions which may reveal common ground. Report on interests or goals which they may share.
- (4) Avoid always focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side. Treat all sides' suffering as equally newsworthy.
- (5) Avoid words like 'devastated', 'tragedy' and 'terrorised' to describe what has been done to one group. These kinds of words put the reporter on one side. Do not use them yourself. Only quote someone else who uses these words.
- (6) Avoid emotional and imprecise words . . . Massacre is the deliberate killing of innocent, unarmed civilians. Soldiers and policemen are not massacred. Genocide means killing an entire people. Do not minimise suffering, but use strong language carefully.
- (7) Avoid words like 'terrorist', 'extremist' or 'fanatic'. These words take sides and make the other side seem impossible to negotiate with; call people what they call themselves.
- (8) Avoid making an opinion into a fact. If someone claims something, state their name, so it is their opinion and not your fact.
- (9) Avoid waiting for leaders on one side to offer solutions. Explore peace ideas wherever they come from. Put these ideas to the leaders and report their response.

Therefore, it is mandatory for journalists to steer clear of any form of prejudices in their day-to-day reportage of violent and tragic events. This is by ensuring that all parties involved in such events are accorded equal treatment in spite of their religious, ethnic or social affiliations.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discourse, it is pertinent to state that the 21st century media practitioner is ethically and morally bound to be socially responsible in the day-to-day discharge of his professional obligations.

This will to an appreciable extent help in maintaining the social order of our society and keeping the sanctity of the pen-pushing profession in the public glare. It will also help in restoring public confidence in the journalistic career.

Conflict does not end by itself; certain things must take place, key to which is communication. This is where journalists come in. In as much as they cannot wish away conflicts, and as Howard (2004:8) puts it, professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. Rather, their concern is to present accurate and impartial news, thereby reducing conflict. Reporting terrorism activities through accurate, impartial and unbiased practice, coupled with the tenets of conflict-sensitive journalism can, in the long run, resolve it.

To this end, it is the duty of every journalist to ensure that he/she does not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such act in the eyes of the public.

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