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Resolving Nigeria's '*Boko Haram*' Insurgence: What Role for the Media?

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Abstract

Nigeria has no doubt witnessed and is still witnessing several forms of conflicts in both the North and the Southern divides. One of such devastating insurgence that currently ravaged the peaceful and harmonious living in the country is the present conflicts in the North, involving the Islamic sect group – Boko Haram. The sect (which forbid western education) come to limelight in 2009 after the arrest and subsequent murder of the former leader Late Muhammed Yusuf. Since then however, the group have successfully launched attacks that have claimed lives and properties worth billions of Naira, most of which were attributed to the way and manner in which media handles them. The mass media are blamed in several occasions on inflaming the conflict, particularly regarding the nature of their reportage. The critical question is can Nigerian media play any role in resolving the Boko – Haram insurgence? This form the fulcrum in which this paper revolved.

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1. Introduction

The part of Nigeria referred to today as the North-east was created by the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon in an attempt to restore peace in the country after the Nigerian civil war of 1966- 1969. Until recently, the region was known to be of peace and harmony, rich in trade and farming activities, as well as respect and love for one another. But today, the region is faced with series of challenges which has given rise to conflict, arm struggle and hostage taking.

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Although in the northern region entirely, religious related violence to achieve some political or religious ends are certainly not a new phenomenon, the recent Boko – Haram uprising especially in the North-east has proved beyond reasonable doubt that it is the worse insurgence ever witnessed in the area.

The first involved the Maitatsine or (Yan Tatsine) riot of December 1980, which claimed thousands of lives and set the tones for subsequent riots involving the Mai Tatsine heretical anti-materialists Islamic sect in other North-eastern cities of Nigeria like Maiduguri Bulunkutu, Yola Jimeta and Gombe, followed by the 1987 and 1999 Kafanchan-Kaduna ethno-religious riots which revived the old age tension between the Muslim Hausa-Fulani and non-Muslim community throughout the North and beyond. Other major ones include the Zangon Kataf riots of 1992, the Tafawa Balewa clashes of 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna riots of 2000 and the Jos crises of 2001 in which several hundreds of lives and properties were destroyed (International Ide, 2000, p. 29).

2. Overview of the Boko Haram sect

The sect which is officially known as “Jama’atu Ahli-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal-Jihad”, had orchestrated series of deadly attacks which have left hundreds of lives dead and property destroyed. These attacks which started in July, 2009 when the Nigerian Police started investigating the sect, following reports that it was arming itself, have gone sophisticated with bomb detonation every now and then. The sect which opposes Western education, culture, modern science and democracy was formed in 2002 by late Ustaz Muhammad Yusuf in Maiduguri.

However, the group itself and studies on the group remained inconclusive about its origin. According to some sources, the group have evolved from various efforts by extremists elements dating back to the 1940s though the end of the 1990s that sought to radicalize various segments of northern Nigeria, especially the North-East.

To some other sources, the group started in 1995 as “Sahaba” and was initially led by Lawan Abubakar who later left for the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia for further studies. The late Muhammad Yusuf was said to have taken over the leadership after the departure of Abubakar and indoctrinated the sect with his own teaching which he claimed were based on purity and Shari’ah Law.

Shortly after his takeover, he commenced what many described as “Intensive Membership Mobilization” after his first release from police custody in November, 2008 in Maiduguri. This intensive mobilization recorded a huge success. He allegedly had over 500,000 members before his demise and usually taxed them one Naira, which approximated to 500 Naira daily (Madike, 2011). The *Almajiri* system made this mobilization easy to nip the festering crises in the bud, the late President Umaru Musa ‘Yar’aduwa ordered the deployment of the military to contain those government described as dissidents. After initial resistance, the sect fell to the superior fire power of the military, and Yusuf, the leader was arrested and handed over to the police. Hours later, the police executed Yusuf alongside sponsor Alhaji Buji Foyi, who was the Commissioner for Religious Affairs during the first term of former governor Ali Modu Sharif of Borno State.

After the death of Yusuf, the group has continued its attacks; in fact the insurgence has gone critical and indeed assumed a very dangerous dimension. From the time the group was formed to the present day, it has carried lots of successful attacks most of which were bomb blasts which have left lots of people dead and property destroyed. Some of these deadly attacks include the following:

- January 2010: 4 persons killed in an attack at Dala Alem deri ward in Maiduguri Metropolis, Borno State.
- September, 7, 2010: the group freed over 700 inmates from a prison in Bauchi State.
- January 28, 2011: the group killed Borno State candidate of the All Nigeria people Party (ANPP) Mr Modu Fannami Gubio, his brother, 4 police officers and 2 year old boy.
- March 3rd, 2011: Three people were killed and 21 injured by an explosive device thrown from a car at an election rally near Nigeria’s capital Abuja.
- April 1, 2011: the sect attacked a police station in Dutsen Tanshi, Bauchi.
- April 7, 2011: An explosive hits a polling booth at Unguwar Doki, Maiduguri, injuring more than 10 people.
- April 8, 2011: Bomb explosion at INEC office Suleja, kills 11.
- April 9, 2011: a polling centre in Maiduguri was bombed.
- April 15, 2011: The Maiduguri INEC office was bombed and several people were shot in a separate incident on the same day.
- April 20, 2011: The sect killed a Muslim cleric and ambushed several police officers in Maiduguri.
- April 21, 2011: Two suspected bomb makers died in a blast in Kaduna.
- April 22, 2011: The group freed 14 prisoners during a jail break in Yola.
- April 25, 2011: Three bomb blasts rip through a hotel and a motor park in Maiduguri killing at least two persons.
- May 29, 2011: The sect claimed a series of bombings in Northern Nigeria that killed 15 persons

- June 17, 2011: The group's suicide bomber bombed the police force head quarters in Abuja killing many people.
- June 26, 2011: The sect bombed a beer garden in Maiduguri killing about 25 people.
- June 27, 2011: Another bombing in Maiduguri attributed to the group killed 2 girls and wounded 3 custom officials.
- July 3, 2011: Another bombing in a beer garden in Maiduguri killed about 20 people.
- July 10, 2011: A bombing at the All Christian Fellowship Church in Suleja, Niger State, killed 38 people.
- August 12, 2011: A prominent Muslim cleric, Liman Bana was shot dead in Maiduguri.
- August 26, 2011: The UN headquarters in Abuja was blown up by a suicide car bomber, leaving at least 21 dead and dozens injured.
- October 16, 2011: A prominent politician Modu Bintubu was killed outside of his home in Maiduguri.
- October 22, 2011: The group slew Alhaji Zakari Isah a Nigerian Television Authority journalist, claiming that he was the government informant.
- November 5, 2011: A series of coordinated attacks in Borno and Yobe States primarily around Damaturu killed at least 67 people, leaving a new police headquarters in ruins, and government offices burned.
- November 11, 2011: explosion in Bauchi left 5 people injured.
- December 8, 2011: Bomb blast at market in Kaduna claimed 15.
- December 25, 2011: Bomb explosion at St. Theresa Catholic Church Madalla, Niger State killed 43 people and injured many.
- January 20, 2012: multiple bomb explosions in Kano Metropolis left 186 persons dead.
- January 22, 2012: Bomb explosions at Yalwan Tudu Bauchi left 11 dead, et cetera (Vanguard 2011, December 10 and January 23).

With these attacks Nigeria was recently ranked 19 “Most at risk” country from terrorist attacks in the world. According to a survey released in August, 2011 by UK based Global Analyst – Maplecroft,, with this ranking, the country is now among the countries that are at an “Extreme risk” from terrorist attacks. Nigeria's current status is attributed mainly to the uprising militia sect (Bakare, 2011). Several attempts made by the government to stop this group from carrying out deadly attacks on the Nigerian Nation have not produced any result. The deployment of military personnel and police to flash points of Yobe, Maiduguri, Bauchi, Niger and Abuja, has made the situation worse as the group has become so sophisticated. Several panels set up by the government have equally not helped matters. In line with this therefore, what role can the media play since other institution seemed to have failed?

3. Reporting conflict/ insurgency in the media

In reporting fundamental events such as insurgency, adequacy of coverage is no doubt demanded. Thus, the media owe the public an expedient responsibility not just to report such developments, but to adequately give such account. Adequacy here means the volume of coverage to an issue. Insurgencies, terrorism and other forms of conflicts are very devastating developments that easily attract adequate media coverage globally. In post-colonial Nigeria we have witnessed war and other forms of ethno-religious conflicts which research findings have shown that they receive adequate media attention. Bola (2010, p. 83) affirmed the above when he revealed in his study that conflicts in Nigeria have consistently received maximum media coverage. Timiebi (2010) agreed with the findings of Bola when he revealed in his study that the Niger-Delta crisis was adequately covered by the Nigerian mass media, particularly the broadcast media. Remi (2010) also agreed with Bola and Timiebi when he also found out from his study that the media gave adequate coverage to Jos crises.

Apart from adequacy of coverage, timeliness is also another fundamental criterion for news worthiness. For any news (especially hard news) to make the desired impact, timeliness is the core demand, it is a yardstick among others which is always employed to access the worthiness of an event. Giving credence to the above assertion, Okunna (1999, p. 46) affirmed that the quality of newness is the most fundamental criterion for determining what should qualify as news. Therefore, the principle of timeliness is no doubt very necessary when reporting events, especially insurgencies or conflicts. The Nigerian Broadcasting Code also stated that: In calling attention to crisis timely basic information shall be provided to assist the public and facilitate rescue and other forms of help. In so doing, the practitioners shall be protected by the commission.

The above assertion is therefore an obvious attestation to the necessity of timeliness in conflict reportage. In fact, it is very correct to state here that timeliness is the social responsibility which places a demand on the media to give timely account of event. Rather, timely account is seriously expected of the media. Ozoh (2000, p. 2) opined that:

“News is often regarded as perishable commodity. Therefore, it must be timely if it is to have value. This is in the sense that if an account of event is not rendered as soon as it happened, such an account may become stale later on. In essence therefore, one of the principle consideration in deciding on the news worthiness or not of an event is

whether an account of such event at the given time is timely- Television and Radio excel in this regard.”

More so, Ngwu (2000, p. 38) opined that “We regard news as a perishable commodity. As such, it must be timely in order to have value. This is in the sense that you render an account of event as soon as it happened. In other words, the account must have recent. If the account is not timely, the news becomes stale.” In Nigeria scholars have contended that the media have not been timely in their reportage of conflicts. Afolabi (2010, p. 63) lend credence to the above assertion when he unveiled in his study that the Nigerian media have not fared well in timely reportage of insurgences.

Another core responsibility of the media is the surveillance function. Here, the media are expected to bring to the consciousness of the public impending dangers. This function places a demand on the media to cover, analyze and report significant developments within and outside a given society. Lasswell (1984) in Odigbo (2003, p. 178) opines that “The (mass media) watch over, guard and alert society on impending problems and often proffer the way forward.”

Studies have shown that the Nigerian media have not fared well in this regard. Okpara (2010) unveiled in his study that the Nigerian media are yet to effectively play the surveillance function of the media in their reportage of conflicts. He contended that this led to the unabated conflicts in Nigeria. Okali (2011) lends support to the above findings when unveiled in his study that the Nigerian media have not done well in discharging their surveillance role, particularly in the Boko-Haram crisis. In reporting daily occurrences, including the outbreak of conflicts, the media despite the ownership pattern are generally expected to display a real sense of objectivity. They must ensure balance and fairness in their reports; this implies that their report must be free from bias. To guarantee this, all parties involved must be given equal attention. Stories must not be one-sided. Facts must be separated from opinions.

All over the world virtually the entire broadcasting code and journalism ethics emphasize objectivity in news reportage. In Nigeria for instance, Code 3 (33) of the Broadcasting Code states that “All sides to any issue of public interest shall be equitably presented to ensure fairness”. Also, the code 2 (i) of the code of ethics for Nigerian journalists affirmed the above when it states that “The public has the right to know. Factual, accurate, balance and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis for earning public trust and confidence.” Unfair and unbalanced journalism is capable of eroding away public confidence in the reporter or the media organization. (Udoudo & Bassy, 2001, p. 43)

In Nigeria, it is very expedient to ask how the media have fared in upholding objectivity, particularly during conflicts. Ademola and Okeke (2011, p. 14) confirmed in their studies that the Nigerian media have been biased in reporting crises in Nigeria. Oputa (2011, p. 67) also unveiled in his study that objectivity was not observed in the media coverage of the Niger-Delta crises. Lawrence (2011, p. 99) equally revealed in his study that Nigerian media particularly the broadcast media have been biased in their reportage of the Boko-Haram insurgence.

4. Role of the media in resolving Boko-Haram insurgence

The media whether traditional or modern have over the years been seen as agents of change. Certainly not always positive or always negative but alternate from one to the other. Human beings on the other hand crave for change, preferably a continuous positive change. But this is quite impossible because the human condition by nature makes this unattainable.

In essence, there is break down of order, not only within one’s self, but outside stretching towards one’s immediate environment and beyond. When this happens, there is a breakdown of the process of smooth flow of information from one source to another. This breakdown of information flow usually arises because one of the parties sees itself as deliberately disadvantaged or imagines itself disadvantaged irrespective of the true state of affairs (Anyanwa, 2004: 110).

In most cases one sees his belief system or religion as superior to that of others. Because of human nature in him, he tries to prove this, which usually results to a serious conflict. All these boil down to perception as Brody (1987:73) cited in Nwafor (2011:32) puts it, “Human beings perceptions are their realities when they believed they are ill-treated, they behave accordingly, even when reality is quite different.”

This perception whether real or not usually arises as a result of inadequate information or the absence of information at all which is the catalyst to conflicts. In other words the mass media can both generate and solve conflicts; the former through inciting coverage, inadequate reporting, non reporting at all etc., the latter can be through objective and balanced reportage, adequate and non sensational reportage as well as surveillance reportage

(Anyanwa, 2004).

In the case of current security challenges orchestrated by the Boko_Haram sect, the mass media can play an effective role in resolving crises through adequate coverage. The surveillance function of the media must be effectively played to warn people on an impending danger. Thus, through effective reportage, those perpetuating the crises can have their perception changed, and peace loving Nigerians can equally have their security consciousness. Over the years journalism such as newspaper and other forms of media practice has succeeded in making itself indispensable to modern society. Focusing on these roles, Momoh (1987:53) believed that a duty is imposed on the press to ensure that the political objectives of Nigeria are achieved in accordance with the motto which is "Unity and faith, peace and progress". Stressing this point further, Macebuh (1087:07) said that "We tend to be too pretentious in our conception of our role in the society." He further asserted that the press can never properly claim to be discharging any significant role if it fails to consistently describe, if not denounce the countless ways in which the pursuit of wealth corrupts the polity and compromise the future.

However it is pertinent to say that one of the basic ethics of media and communication practice is to promote peace at all times. That, however is not to say that peace is the absence of conflict, but the fact that press has a responsibility to society. Moreover, certain obligations to society should be accepted as a sacrosanct and must be fulfilled by the press. These obligations are to be fulfilled mainly through setting high professional standard of truth, accuracy, objectivity and balanced information in the discharge of their duties.

In this regard, it has been argued by the communication scholars that mass media should be self regulating within the framework of law and established institution. Mac Quail (1987) argued that the society and a public have a right to expect high standard of performance from the media and intervention can be justified to secure the public goods since journalists should be accountable to society.

However, Maikaba (2006) proposed some ways through which the mass media could ensure attainment of peace and resolution of crises and conflicts in the society. These ways include:

- Issuing reminders on mechanisms of peaceful resolutions: During conflicts, the mass media is expected to issue reminders on how best to achieve peace. The media should assume the role of arbitrators and mediators, trying to settle the differences and reach a compromise.
- Objective coverage and reporting: The media can ensure a resolution to conflict by being objective in its coverage. In this way, the parties to a dispute may be willing to adhere to solutions to the problems that are proposed by the media.
- Suggesting new alternatives: In case of deadlock negotiations, the media should provide new alternatives on how best to solve the conflict.
- Conferring status on mediators: the prestige media people usually confer on negotiators of local, national or international levels is a factor in the success or otherwise of resolving conflicts.
- Generation of consensus: The media could help in resolving conflict by generating a consensus which the parties to the dispute might adopt to find a settlement to the conflict.
- Influencing the mode of government, the entities and the public: This one of the greatest media contributory roles during conflict. By influencing the opinion and views of government and other important parties, the resolution could be achieved easily/
- Aside from the above, the media and military should not operate in disarray giving confusing information to the public which are later confirmed to be misleading as in the recent case of the military through its spokesperson Christopher Kolade informed the media that more than 70% of the Chibok abducted girls were recovered. It was later found to be untrue; and subsequently the information provoked public feeling. The media must cooperate with military officials in managing and synthesizing correct information on military operation during insurgencies. There must always be careful efforts by the media to down play the news value of immediacy at the expense taking time to verify information given by military and police officials

5. Recommendations

In view of the discussions above, the following recommendations have been made, which are vital to not only the media practice, but also to resolution of crises in the North-Eastern region in particular and the Nigerian nation in general:

- The media should ensure that the feelings of the people are properly reported irrespective of the feelings of the government and economic interest of the owners.
- While it is important to put into consideration the interest of the owners of the various media houses, such interests should not over ride the ethics of the profession and the general national interest.
- Similarly, the media should dedicate attention to reporting conflict and insurgencies especially as it relates to using such reports to create peace rather than aggravate the situation.
- The media must work in collaboration with stakeholders in the North to ensure that government policies directed at curbing the conflicts are properly implemented.
- The media should refrain from giving any particular segment preference above the other.
- Media should give emphasis on information that neutralize friction and clear the ignorance and misconceptions which breed the Boko Haram insurgency.

6. Conclusion

It is argued that because of their scope and reach, the mass media could have undoubtedly provided a platform that elaborate debate about these conflicts to regional, national and international levels. Scholars in the field of communication and even the practitioners have agreed that the media in many cases helped to escalate conflicts rather than deescalating them. One of the causes of this was attributed to poor understanding of the issue by the journalists and the carelessness in cross checking facts and figures about the conflict situation (Ya'u, 2008).

Thus, some of the factors that can be identified as influencing the reportage of conflict and insurgence by the Nigerian media include: additional leaning, ownership influence, low technical skills, lack of access to information, identification with regional bias, political influence, economic patronage, religious and ethnic biases, lack of investigative journalism, inadequate equipment and other operational tools.

Sensitivity to cultural differences and values become an important issue for consideration. There is a feeling that the press in particular is not showing respect for plural nature of the Nigerian cultural environment. However, in time of peace, people depend on the media as their source of information, but they depend on the media more in times of conflict. Also, the rumor mills are more active in times of conflict than in peace time. These two scenarios underscore the role of the media in conflict and peace management. Conflict is an indication of disagreement and the media handling it will go a long way in explaining the situation to resolve the conflict or aggravate the situation. It is the duty of the media to ensure the authenticity of the information being disseminated and convince the audience of the reality of the messages. The media has been seen or suspected of being involved in propaganda which in turn erodes its credibility.

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