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# Communicating violence: the media strategies of Boko Haram

## Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

### Introduction

A grainy video showing about 136 girls, dressed in full-length grey and black hijabs, reciting Qur'anic verses appeared on global television screens on 12 May 2014 (BBC 2014). The following morning the image was splashed across the front pages of many tabloids and broadsheets around the world. It was the first picture of a roughly half of the schoolgirls abducted four weeks earlier by Boko Haram insurgents in north-eastern Nigeria (BBC 2014). It came from a 27-minute video delivered by an emissary of the group to journalists in northern Nigeria, including a correspondent of the *Agence France-Presse* (Smith 2015). The French news agency, from which the global media bought the footage, is one of the media organisations that have been receiving such materials from the group because they have been covering the insurgency for many years. This particular video was produced by the group to prove that they were indeed holding the schoolgirls. A week earlier they had released a 57-minute film showing their leader, Abubakar Shekau, claiming the abduction of the girls and threatening to sell them as 'slaves' (Sahara TV 2014; Smith 2015). It provoked a global outrage – as indeed the abduction itself – but it didn't erase doubts about the group's culpability. The second video did.

The release of these videos – and many more before them – was just one of Boko Haram's methods of drawing public attention to their activities, of showing off their prowess, and of intimidating their enemies. From hawking audio cassettes in street corners to staging headline-grabbing attacks, the Nigerian jihadists have adopted a range of media strategies that both utilise and defy modern public relations logic. But they are not the first jihadi group to employ media to advance their cause. Al-Qaeda, the group they sometimes eulogise and often ape, is well known for its deft deployment of media to spread its ideology (Lynch 2006). And Al-Qaeda's offspring-turned-rival, the so-called Islamic State, has demonstrated an even greater mastery of this, 'using social media and cyber technology to recruit fighters and intimidate enemies' (Farwell 2014: 49). In Africa itself, members of Al-Shabaab – Somalia's extremist group whose militancy extends to Kenya – have used social media so viciously in their insurgency they were dubbed 'Twitter terrorists' (Greenwood 2013).

Employing media strategies to advance organisational goals is nothing new, and entities ranging from business conglomerates to advocacy groups regard it as an integral part of their work. There are also numerous studies showing how different media strategies were – or could be – deployed by organisations as diverse as political parties (Arterton 1984), the intelligence services (Shapiro 2001), the military (Jensen 2011) and environmental groups (Merry 2012) to achieve their objectives. But many scholars argue that media's ideological leanings do also play a role in determining the scope and colour of their coverage of events both elsewhere and in Africa (Maloba 1992; Ibelema 1992). This may perhaps explain why, for instance, the Western media in the 1950s generally demonised the Mau Mau (Maloba 1992) – the Kenyan nationalist movement that fought against British colonialism – but largely gave positive portrayal of Biafra (Jorre 1972; Bamisaiye 1974; Ibelema 1992; Waters 2004) – the entity that sought to secede from Nigeria in the 1960s. It would, of course, be argued that Biafra did employ smart media strategies in its campaign (Jorre 1972) but, as Bamisaiye (1974) argues, the media's entrenched interest too could not be discounted. Western media's current Islamist fixation in their coverage of events is largely responsible for the massive attention they have been giving to jihadi groups. And because the jihadists too seek such attention, for their own purposes, a convergence of a sort has emerged.

## Methodology

This chapter unveils Boko Haram's media strategies and examines their efficacies and deficiencies. The data was drawn from interviews with journalists and people who had had direct contacts with the insurgents, analysis of the group's audio and video contents, author's personal reflections, and library and online research. Twenty-two journalists who have covered the Boko Haram crisis for local and/or international media were interviewed – 13 of them face-to-face in the Nigerian cities of Yola, Maiduguri and Abuja and the rest on telephone from London. Nineteen of the interviews were conducted between 11 August 2014 and 15 July 2015 specifically for this research. The rest had earlier been conducted (between June 2009 and January 2012) for another research project concerning Boko Haram, part of the primary data of which was relevant for this study. Three people who had had close contact with Boko Haram founder, Muhammad Yusuf – two were his former students while the third person had studied Islamic education with him – were also interviewed between 11

August 2014 and 6 April 2015. Two former friends of a suspected Boko Haram bomb-maker, Abdulrasheed Abubakar – who was arrested in 2009 (BBC 2009) – were separately interviewed in Yola in October 2009. Boko Haram’s audio and video messages (seven of those they uploaded directly to YouTube and their Twitter account @Al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, and five of those they sent to journalists via emissaries) were also gathered and analysed. This chapter also draws from my own personal reflections on reporting about the group between July 2009 and January 2015 since I have covered the insurgency myself as a journalist working for both the BBC World Service and Nigeria’s Media Trust, two of the media organisations that have given the crisis comprehensive coverage.

## Boko Haram background

To understand Boko Haram media strategies, it is essential to know the group itself. First, the name Boko Haram – meaning ‘Western education is prohibited’ – is not the group’s real name; its members actually detest it. They call themselves *Jama’atu Ahlus Sunna lid Da’awatu wal-Jihad* (approximately ‘Movement for the Propagation and Enthronement of Righteous Deeds’). It is an extremist Islamic sect which claims to be rooted in Salafism (Meijer 2009). Founded by Muhammad Yusuf in north-eastern Nigeria around 2002 (Herskovits 2012), Boko Haram began as a peaceful movement before liaisons with politicians and encounters with security operatives turned it into a violent outfit blamed for the most dreadful attacks in the country (Abubakar 2012; Amnesty International 2015). It became a full-fledged insurgent group after the killing of its founder by the police in July 2009 following an uprising in which more than 800 people, mostly its members, were killed (Smith 2015). The remaining members went underground and resurfaced a year later under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau, with deadly attacks including bombing of schools, churches, mosques and markets as well as kidnapping for ransoms – and for sexual enslavement. They also engaged in bank robberies, cattle rustling and plundering of towns and villages to raise funds for their campaigns in Nigeria and in neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Although it was their abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 that gave them global notoriety, they committed far worse crimes such as individual beheadings and mass executions (Amnesty International 2015). They also seized swathes of territory in north-eastern Nigeria, which they declared as their caliphate. By January 2015 they were controlling a territory the size of Belgium, on which they imposed their own version of Islamic law, beheading suspected spies and stoning to death those they convicted

of adultery (Amnesty International 2015). But a multinational force comprising Chadian, Nigerian and Cameroonian troops along with the Nigerian military fought back and retook the territory. By September 2015 the insurgency has claimed an estimated 20,000 lives and displaced over two million people. Researchers have linked the emergence of Boko Haram – variously – to Nigeria’s endemic corruption, youth unemployment, chronic poverty, poor governance, incompetent security services, the rise of jihadi ideology in response to the West’s war on terror, British colonial legacy and a lack of proper education (Abubakar 2012; Herskovits 2012; Smith 2015). With an estimated force of 15,000 fighters (Amnesty International 2015), Boko Haram derived its power through the use of brutal force, but it also craved for soft power. So, although it did not spare journalists and media houses in its brutal attacks (Abubakar 2012; Smith 2015), it relentlessly sought their attention using diverse means.

## Media strategies

Seeking publicity has always been on Boko Haram’s priority list. So significant is propaganda to the group that it is, in fact, an integral part of its original name. *Da’awatu* – Arabic for propagation – is a key component of *Jama’atu Ahlus Sunna lid **Da’awatu** wal-Jihad*; and as such enormous resources were devoted to it. Long before gaining strength, Boko Haram had established its ‘Public Awareness Department’ which handled matters ranging from propaganda to recruitment of members. Interviews with those close to its founder and journalists revealed that the group had established this department before the commencement of its insurgency. It also had an official spokesman variously known as Abul Qaqa or Abu Darda or Abu Zaid – all are pseudonyms and at times they all called themselves Abul Qaqa (Idris 2012) – who ran the media arm. The spokesman was a senior member of the group’s *Shura* (Supreme Council) and was very close to its leader (Idris 2012).

## Cassette radicalisation

Boko Haram’s mediated engagement with the public began with the use of what Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1994) call ‘small media’: audio cassettes and leaflets. Specifically, they started with the recording and selling of their leaders’ sermons in audio cassettes – reminiscent of the way Ayatollah Khomeini’s cassettes were used to mobilise Iranians for the 1979 revolution against the Shah (Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi

1994). In Boko Haram's case the sermons and speeches of its founder Muhammad Yusuf – and sometimes those of his deputies, Shekau and Muhammad Nur, the suspected mastermind of the August 2011 UN building bombing in Nigeria's capital Abuja (Smith 2015) – would be recorded in audio cassettes and sold in street corners mainly to their followers but also to the general public, as their sermons were popular due to their condemnation of alleged corrupt practices and injustice in Nigeria. As Smith (2015) notes, Yusuf was a charismatic leader and talented orator whose sermons many people, including non-Muslims, could easily relate to. The role of the small media in the daily lives of Nigerians has been well documented by Larkin (2008) who argues that they were deeply entrenched into the country's cultural, political and economic landscapes. Boko Haram utilised them effectively. 'They started with audio cassettes in the early 2000s before moving to CDs when CDs became more popular,' recalled Ahmed Mari, a reporter of the Lagos-based *Champion* newspaper who has covered the group for over seven years. Some of the sermons have since been digitalised and uploaded on YouTube (Yusuf 2011).

## Mainstream media relations

As his sermons brought him into public arena, the Boko Haram founder began to attract the attention of the mainstream media. Soon, his speeches, often made at Muslim youth conferences, were being aired at the local broadcast stations in Borno State. They were, however, stopped when his criticisms of the government became unbearable to the authorities, according to journalists and people close to him. And when his group attracted strong scrutiny from security agencies, especially in the middle of 2009, a dispute between them ensued, drawing journalists' attention. It was then that the group began to hold news briefings at its headquarters in Maiduguri. Journalists who attended those briefings said the group's founder would first complain about alleged harassment of his followers by security operatives and then denounce Western culture and express his desire to turn Nigeria into a Salafist state. Yusuf also granted many interviews to journalists around that period. In one of them, he told a BBC stringer that Western education 'spoils the belief in one God' (Boyle 2009). Bilkisu Babangida, a BBC Hausa Service reporter who had done interviews with him and some of his lieutenants, said Yusuf would talk calmly but firmly emphasising his points.

Boko Haram's most open interactions with journalists happened from mid-June 2009 to the end of July 2009 when its members were in violent confrontations with the police and the

army. At that time Yusuf spoke frequently with journalists threatening retaliations over the killings of his followers (Smith 2015). When the clashes culminated into the July 2009 uprising leading to the death of over 800 people including Yusuf himself and his father-in-law Baba Fugu Mohammed – both of whom were killed in police custody (Abubakar 2012; Smith 2015) – the group went underground, ending its open relationship with the mainstream media.

## Guerrilla media strategy

Going underground did not quench Boko Haram's thirst for publicity, but its members knew that it would be fatal to approach journalists openly, and so they devised a guerrilla media relations strategy. This consisted of using anonymous mobile phone lines to deliver messages to journalists, emailing materials to media houses using fake addresses, and organising teleconferences from secret locations. The first sign that they had resorted to using this strategy emerged shortly after Yusuf's death. A video recording of his interrogation by the army after his arrest was emailed to some journalists and media houses. This was followed by a video of his corpse after his killing by the police. It was unclear who exactly sent the videos because while some journalists said it originated from a policeman and was shared by a journalist, others said it was shared by Boko Haram members. 'It is hard to know who the original senders were, but they had all the trappings of Boko Haram,' one of the journalists who received them but preferred to remain anonymous said. A few weeks later a video of the execution of many Boko Haram members by the police in Maiduguri was also being circulated. It later found its way to Al-Jazeera, which aired it in February 2010 (Al-Jazeera 2010). For several months after that nothing was heard from Boko Haram until some audio and video clips of Yusuf's successor Shekau, who was thought to have been killed in the July 2009 uprising, began to circulate. And by the end of December 2010 another video, this time showing Shekau claiming responsibility for a bomb attack in the north-central city of Jos on that year's Christmas Eve, was also circulating (Smith 2015), removing any doubt about Boko Haram's return and their guerrilla media strategy.

The group then added a teleconferencing technique using mobile phones. In this, its spokesman – Abul Qaqa or Abu Zaid or Abu Darda (all pseudonyms) – would call journalists from an undisclosed location with a concealed phone number, urge them to gather in one place and hold a mobile phone news conference. Journalists who attended these conferences

in Maiduguri revealed that they would gather and listen to his briefing, ask him questions and write their reports based on the veracity of his claims. Hamza Idris, the Maiduguri Bureau Chief of the Abuja-based *Daily Trust* newspaper who had attended many of them, said: ‘In most cases, there would be few of us, correspondents of national newspapers and stringers for international media organisations, but our colleagues who weren’t there would also pick the stories from us.’ These teleconferences often took place when the group wanted to claim responsibility for certain attacks or issue warnings against the government. The technique worked well for several months until the Nigerian secret police tracked down and killed one of the spokesmen in Kano and arrested another in Kaduna in February 2012 (Idris 2012).

## Direct dropping strategy

When the teleconferencing technique died with the disappearance of the spokesmen, Boko Haram leaders devised other means of reaching the media. They now focused on producing audio and video messages which they would then distribute discreetly to journalists. They would also produce leaflets and drop them in places where journalists and other people would see. The leaflets often contain warnings to the public against supporting the government’s anti-insurgency campaign or seeking public support for the group or claiming responsibility for carrying out attacks or justifying them. Many journalists interviewed said the insurgents also dropped their leaflets in the areas they raided. One of such incidents happened when the group raided Gombe city on 14 February 2015, the day Nigeria’s presidential election was originally scheduled to be held before it was delayed by six weeks due to the insurgency. They dropped their leaflets, warning people against participating in the election (Vanguard 2015).

However, it was their distribution of videos to journalists that became their most potent propaganda tool. They would produce videos – containing speeches of their leader, showcasing their ‘successes’ (often seizing of towns and weapons) and displaying their brand of punishments including beheadings and mass executions – and give them to journalists via emissaries. Journalists who had received those videos disclosed that the insurgents were initially sending them on CDs but later advanced to memory sticks. It was through this method that the video of the abducted schoolgirls reached the global media (Sahara Reporters 2014; Smith 2015). Of course, it was the act of the abduction itself that primarily provided the story and the accompanying publicity – partly enhanced by Bring Back Our Girls campaign (Smith 2015) – but it was the release of the video that took them to new levels.



Indeed, even the kidnapping itself and the group's other acts of savagery were all part of its overall publicity-seeking strategy. As Lynch (2006: 50) aptly observes in the case of 'Al-Qaeda the organization' becoming 'indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda the media phenomenon', Boko Haram the organisation could hardly be distinguished from Boko Haram the media phenomenon.

Despite the efficacy of the videos-dropping technique, however, it too was disrupted by security agents who also reportedly arrested 'a team of cameramen believed to be handling media matters for Boko Haram' (Soriwei 2014). But they have not destroyed the group's media relations skills.

## The online drive

Blocked from delivering their videos to the mainstream media, the insurgents, like Al-Shabaab in East Africa (Greenwood 2013), turned to the online media for their propaganda. They would now upload their messages directly on YouTube (AFP 2015). They also launched an Arabic-language Twitter account *Al-Urwah al-Wuthqa* on 18 January 2015 and began to upload their messages on it (BBC Monitoring 2015). The account was promptly promoted by 'media operatives' linked to the so-called Islamic State, fuelling speculation of collaboration between the two groups (BBC Monitoring 2015). This was reinforced in March 2015 when Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group (Callimachi 2015) and later renamed itself *Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah* – (Islamic State's) West Africa Province (ISWAP). A significant change in both the content and form of the Boko Haram propaganda was also conspicuous. The grainy 'amateurish footage' the group used to produce gave way to slick and expertly produced content featuring 'music, graphics and slow motion shots' (AFP 2015).

Significantly, Boko Haram's new-found ability to bypass the mainstream media did not steer them away from journalists. They kept contacting journalists and directing them to their contents whenever they uploaded them. 'They still alert us to where their new releases are,' said AFP Northern Nigerian correspondent Aminu Abubakar who regularly received their tapes. 'It is much safer for us now. The original system of direct delivery was very dangerous. You never know who will harm you first: Boko Haram or security personnel.' But the group's online drive too was not without trouble. Its Twitter account was suspended many

times and YouTube regularly removed its videos (AFP 2015; BBC Monitoring 2015). In most cases, however, before the account would be suspended or the videos removed, the uploaded content would be picked by journalists and the message would reach the public – if deemed newsworthy.

## Conclusion

From being an obscure Salafi sect stuck in north-eastern Nigeria to becoming a media phenomenon hitting international headlines, Boko Haram has undergone quite a rapid transformation within few years. Its media relations skills – rudimentary though some of them were – may have played a part here, but in reality most of this was as much the result of the group's unfettered barbarity as it was the consequence of the changes taking place in our complex media environment. The advancement of communication technology, the Western media's obsession with jihadi-related stories and the fluid nature of the Nigerian media landscape did unwittingly aid Boko Haram's publicity drive. On many occasions it was the militants – not the media or the Nigerian authorities – who seemed to be dictating the news agenda of many media outlets. They were achieving this not necessarily by skilful manipulation of the media, but mainly by the depths of their depravity.

The global media's passion for covering dramatic events partly facilitated this. As Maloba (1992: 60) has argued, the 'media in the West looks at Africa as an area of peripheral interest and only reports those stories that are dramatic and graphic'. And so a combination of Boko Haram's media strategies and international media's approach to African news coverage has helped produce an image of Nigeria as a nation ravaged by jihadists' barbarism. Stories, such as those of the schoolgirls' abductions and of teenage girls being used as suicide bombers, seemed to dominate the coverage – with the Boko Haram's jihadi tag giving the stories a stronger appeal to sell to global audiences. The focus was on the series of atrocities being committed by the militants but not on the context in which they were able to do so. Nigeria's complex historical and socio-economic milieus that bred and sustained the insurgency were often ignored. The local media didn't fare better, as colonial legacy, lack of capacity (both human and material) and imitation mentality led them sometimes to regurgitate the content of the international media.

However, to be fair to both the local and international media, although historically jihadi insurgency is not a new phenomenon in West Africa, this one seemed to have caught them unawares. Worse still, it was being carried out by a group that combined dynamism with unscrupulousness. Boko Haram insurgents demonstrated exceptional abilities to adapt to changing scenarios and to adopt techniques suitable to them – albeit for a warped ideological intent. The speed with which they graduated from producing crude audio cassettes to manning Twitter accounts loaded with slick videos (even if with outside help), the extent to which they maintained relationships with the media, and the manner with which they surmounted various obstacles to reach the wider public have indicated the level of their capabilities. Studying them has not only provided some insights into the inner workings of the group itself and offered opportunities for designing preventative measures, but it has also enhanced our understanding of media's relationship with an African jihadi insurgency.

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