

# **Embracing Peace Journalism in Stopping Violence-Provoking News in Nigerian Media**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the need to embrace peace journalism in journalism practice in Nigeria. The major focus of the paper is reorientation for Nigerian media and journalists towards embracing peace journalism and conformity with media laws and journalism ethics in their reporting of inter-communal violence in Northern Nigeria. The primary objective is to stop the violence-provoking culture of news reporting that a section of the Nigeria media specializes in during inter-communal violence in Northern Nigeria. The paper uses Sobowole's (1989) content analysis format to present sampled evidence from the Nigerian media of violations of media laws and ethics by Nigerian media and journalists. Aspects of the literature review come from a collection of instances in which the mass media directly or indirectly instigated more violence, or added fuel to a violent situation in Northern Nigeria. The paper in this context therefore confirms that the mass media, whether in the Northern Nigeria or the South, sometimes instigated conflict through biased reporting, deliberate distortions, criminal partisanship and un-professionalism confounded by influences of tribalism and exploitation of the religious divide to settle political vendetta, tribal grudges or both. Peace journalism and conformity to media laws and ethics are recommended to end this inflammatory practice.

## **1. Introduction**

Journalism and the mass media in Nigeria face criticisms for being corrupt and for also inflaming passions with violence-provoking news during inter-ethnic clashes in Northern Nigeria. Identifying journalism practice with the brown envelope syndrome portrays journalists and the media in Nigeria as having questionable integrity. "Brown envelope" is a common parlance for demanding and taking

bribe or gratification, that is, payment in cash or kind and other favours for news coverage, contrary to the journalism code of ethics which states that news of public interest should not be paid for (item 7 of the Journalism Code of Ethics, 1998). Journalists in Nigeria use different endearing terms such as “golden handshake,” “qua,” “welfare,” or “hospitality” to describe the money or other favours they get for covering and publicizing news of public interest.

Media laws and journalism code of ethics have made the above illegal. Media law accordingly refers to the sets of constitutional provisions guiding and regulating media establishment and operations as well as the practice of journalism. The scope of media law includes violations relating to defamation, libel, slander, invasion of privacy, contempt of court, obscenity, copyright, official secrets acts, sedition and related offences (Daramola, 1999) that are actionable in a court of law. Journalism ethics are agreed upon guidelines for safeguarding the integrity and professionalism of journalism. The Journalism code of ethics in Nigeria consists of the 14-item press code of ethics adopted in 1978 by the Nigeria Guild of Editors, the Nigeria Union of Journalists and the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria. The scope of the journalism code of ethics are editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, respect of privacy, privilege/non-disclosure of sources, decency, refusing reward/gratification, non-glorification of violence, respecting rights of children and minors, national interests, social responsibility and avoiding plagiarism and copy right violation (Daramola, 1999).

Corruption and questionable integrity among journalists in Nigeria is however a lesser problem than violence-provoking news since it is somewhat tolerated, encouraged and mostly abetted. This is because it is a mirror of the society at large and because those who do not challenge it know the plight of the Nigerian journalist and the odds s/he puts up with. Journalism in Nigeria is about the only “profession”, for instance, in which you find people from all walks of life working as journalists simply because they can write, speak and communicate well,, particularly in the English language. Journalism in Nigeria, as such, does not have entry restrictions as in other professions such as medicine or law. However, the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) has, since 1992, adopted measures to ensure that everyone working as a journalist has the prerequisite qualification, either by on-the-job-training or enrolment into the International

Institute of Journalism (IJ) specifically set up for that purpose in all the thirty-six states of the federation including Abuja.

The major problem with journalism practice in Nigeria is the accusations which the media and journalists cannot discredit, that they are responsible for instigating more violence during inter-ethnic clashes by their violence- provoking news reports. This has been documented which senior journalists, lecturers and other concerned individuals. The increasing rate of such inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria, the media's proclivity to sensationalize, exaggerate and inflame passions about it, and the absence of peace journalism are therefore the major focus of this paper.

Peace journalism, according to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), entails "a broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation and giving voice to all parties with empathy and understanding". Peace journalism no doubt exists in Nigeria, but it is only among organizations interested in conflict-resolution, conflict-management and conflict-transformation. True enough, journalists in Nigeria might have also, at one time or another, benefited from training in conflict reporting and conflict-resolution, but there is so far no official endorsement for embracing peace-building in the journalism codes of ethics. This paper therefore makes case for embracing peace journalism in stopping violence-provoking news in Nigerian media. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation Abuja and the Archdiocese of Ibadan who are among the major stakeholders in peace building in Nigeria, have explained the concept of peace journalism under the following subtopics outlined in their document. According to that document, peace journalism entails, but is not limited to the following:

1. Understanding conflict, violence, peace and the power of the media.
2. Tools for conflict analysis
3. Peace journalism models
4. Doing peace journalism work
5. Media as mediator
6. Peace theory

On peace building, Schrawange (2007) explains that it entails undertaking programmes designed to address the causes of conflict and the grievances of the past and to promote long time stability and justice. The main actor in this approach is the civil society and the media. The major thrust of Schrawange's perspective on peace building is that the media, being part of civil society, can contribute to building peace by going beyond the simplistic explanations of conflict. In peace building, the media, according to Schrawange, should:

1. avoid reducing the number of actors to two
2. avoid reducing attitudes to good versus evil
3. avoid dehumanization and demonization of one individual or group
4. avoid personifying the conflict
5. avoid reducing explanatory factors to one

Embracing peace journalism is therefore necessary in stopping violence-provoking news in Nigerian media. The word embracing is meant to be understood not only as the taking up, taking on or the acceptance of, but as a practical activity related to implementation of peace journalism.

Wimmer and Dominick (2003:8-9) explained that the major rationale for embracing was that the task in scientific research (as in peace journalism) is to determine which data collection method can most appropriately provide answers to specific questions (which in this case is stopping violence-provoking news). Doki (2008) explains that embracing can accordingly be understood as the capacity and extent to which transformation takes place from a natural, original state into a different new other by establishing functional relationships with both the natural origin of the thing embraced and the new state into which the embracing takes place. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2000) explained the word embracing simply as the ability to include after accepting so as to be suitable or successful in a new and different situation. By this process, this paper attempts to provide reasons for changing the passion-inflaming, violence-provoking news reporting in Nigerian media to peace journalism that builds bridges, reconciles communities and restores hope, brother/sisterliness and harmonious coexistence among any warring community in Northern

Nigeria.

In this paper, we present instances in which the mass media directly or indirectly instigated conflict, or added fuel to a conflict situation. We focus our attention on mass media and violent conflict in northern Nigeria. To support our recommendation that Media adopt peace journalism to stop violence-provoking news in Nigeria media, we present findings on the issue by senior journalists, lecturers and concerned individuals. These findings serve to confirm that the mass media, whether in the northern part of Nigeria or the south, sometimes instigated conflict through biased reporting, deliberate distortions, criminal partisanship and un-professionalism. We establish linkages between mass media and conflict instigation with tribalism-cum-religious bias and rivalry for political, economic and often territorial domination, and show contradictions that have to be resolved when the media and the journalist deliberately violate the media laws and ethics upon which professionalism is built and from which a solution is to be found. We conclude by presenting a theoretical framework of action for use in sensitizing journalists and the media towards working according to principles and ethics of media practice

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This paper recommends the 'Social Learning Theory' (propounded by Albert Bandura, 1977: 94) as a theoretical framework for retraining of journalists towards abiding by social responsibility and principles and ethics of media practice. The theory is generally a theory of learning that can be applied to other areas of mass media effects. The Social Learning Theory is supported by the 'Value Change Theory' (propounded by Melvin Defleur and Steve Ball-Rokeach, 1975). The value change theory, according to Folarin (2005), employs the technique of comparative feedback to induce attitudinal and behaviour change. The two theories are used as the basis on which media practice instigating conflict can be remodelled. Relevance of the theories are explained according to Folarin's (2005) explanations, meaning and applicability of the theories to learning and awareness on the need for value change among journalists and the media towards working according to principles, ethics, law of media practice and civic responsibilities.

Applicability of the Social Learning Theory can be understood from

Folarin's explanation that the Social Learning Theory, as the name implies, refers to the potential of the mass media for social learning through imitation, modeling and imbibing of the desired phenomena to be learned as portrayed in the mass media. Value Change Theory is used to support the Social Learning Theory because the theory can be used to employ comparative feed-back to induce the desired attitudinal and behaviour change among journalists and the media.

### **3. Methodology**

Content analysis is used to present instances in which the mass media, directly or indirectly, instigated conflict or added fuel to a conflict situation. Content analysis, according to Sobowole (1983), focuses on manifest content of given communication messages. These, in the case of this study, are the presentation of findings on the issue by senior journalists, lecturers and concerned individuals.

Populations of this study therefore are the chosen media. The instruments are the content of given messages from the selected media. Quantification technique is Sobowole's five-point scale of Attention, Favourability, Neutrality, Unfavourability and Intensity. Unit of Analysis is the number of media, their names and issues selected, which is conflict-instigating content. The unit of observation used is news, features, editorials, columns and or opinion/commentary. The sample used in this study is given content of media message are drawn based on location, ownership and established identity of the media based on the coverage slant they give to conflict in the North by attention or blackout, neutrality or favourability, or unfavourability and intensity.

### **4. Mass Media News Provoking Violence in Northern Nigeria**

Northern Nigeria has been embroiled in violent inter-communal conflict over the years. Here and there, images are seen of death, destruction and hatred either on television or in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Discourse on the mass media and conflict in Northern Nigeria is a necessity of the moment. But, since the end of violent conflict in the North cannot be predicted with any certainty, it is helpful to study what happened before and the pattern the mass media adopted which instigated or sustained conflict in Northern Nigeria. Findings by Pate (2003) and Kurawa (2000) reveal the scenario:

"...for the first time since 1966, the Jihadists will be confronted by a determined southern army... to teach the northern troublemakers a lesson once and for all," (Reuben Abati, *The Guardian*, 31/3/2000).

"Christian girls forced to marry Muslims," the *Tribune*, 15//2000.

"Kaduna boils again, three churches burnt, " *The Guardian*, 7/10/2001

"Plateau is the only predominantly Christian state in the north and they are not happy about this," *Punch* 10/09/2001.

"Wild, Wild North: Bin Laden's men unleash terror in Kano," *The News*, vol. 17, October 29, 2001.

"Ex head of state and governor behind Jos mayhem," *The Sunday Tribune*, September 2001.

"De-Mallamisation of the Ports Authority," Ochereome Nnanna, *The Post Express*, 12/9/2001

"...Whether they like it or not, we will not allow any Muslim to be president of Nigeria again. I am declaring this as the president of CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria)" Dr Sunday Mbang, in *This Day*, Monday, July 31, 2000: 4

These examples point to the underlying tribalism that has been the motivating factor in these conflicts and the media's subjective coverage. Religion is exploited because it is the mobilizing factor, since in northern Nigeria there is a close link between religious identity and tribal/ethnic identity: almost all Hausa and Fulani people for example, are Muslim, while most of the other minority tribes are predominantly Christian. There are, in most cases, instances where a single inter-communal conflict widens into religious. And while religious differences alone are not the basis for these violent conflict, the media and parties in the conflict use religion as the rallying point for tribal solidarity and propaganda purposes to attract support and assistance from other countries and across boundaries here in Nigeria. As Yusuf (2002) discovered, conflict in northern Nigeria and even the media's role in it, is the struggle over values (which may not necessarily be wholesomely religious) and claims to scarce status,

power and resources in which the aim of the opposition is to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. The examples given above which Pate (2003) cited from some publications prove this further. A deeper analysis is however needed into the context within which the media operated and the extent it participates in instigating and sustaining conflict in northern Nigeria.

First is to identify that the mass media is made up of and operated by people. Journalists are human beings like everyone else. But journalists are ideally expected to be professional, operating within the provisions of the ethics and laws of media practice. When journalists are thoroughly professional, the media will also be, so neither of the two will be accused of instigating and sustaining conflicts. The reality, as the examples cited earlier have shown, is something different. So, it would seem that indeed journalists and the media do in fact instigate and sustain conflict in northern Nigeria.

Consider the examples Pate (2003) cited from the media one by one: the first is a write up in a column. But is a column not one of the traditional journalistic avenues of expression that is also regulated by the laws and ethics of media practice? The point is that anybody can write a column. But once someone chooses to write a column as a journalist, the column in which that person writes as a journalist must be free from libel, defamation, sedition and blasphemy. The column must also be free of any of the offences considered liable for prosecution in the law courts, or likely to be rated unprofessional and unethical. Whenever a columnist who chooses to write as a journalist bypasses the limitations writing a column entails, the consequences could be very tragic. Indeed, this was too clearly seen in the case of the blasphemy against Islam in *This Day* newspaper by Isioma Daniels at the heat of the debate for and against the aborted Miss World beauty pageant scheduled for Abuja in 2004.

According to the rules therefore, "A columnist who is reasonably aware of his limitations and does not stray beyond what is permissible... has no difficulty being accepted" (Kamath, 1980: 172). Among these limitations are that a columnist should not inspire hatred and incite people to war. Other examples are the more serious instances of how the media instigates and sustains conflict in news reports, expected to be accurate, objective and responsible. Yusuf (2002:150-151) explains accordingly:

“Two months after the (Jos) riots *The Tribune* persisted in its conflict promoting style of reporting. It carried a front-page story attributing the riot to “Christian girls forced to marry Muslims”. However the reporter did not cite a single incident of such a forced marriage...In a front page story *The Guardian*, 7/10/2001, screamed “Kaduna boils again: three churches burnt”. *The New Nigerian*, 10/10/2001, followed up (the story) with a back page news item titled: “no church burnt in Kaduna, police repute (*Guardian*) reports”. *The Guardian* did not carry the government (and the police) reactions to its news report. *Daily Times*, 10/10/2001, on its back page, carried a news item titled: “no religious undertone in Kaduna church fire, investigation”.

Yusuf (2002), in another example, states:

In a cover story titled “The Jihadists invasion – how foreign fundamentalist wreck havoc in the north,” *The News magazine*, vol. 17 no 8, August 27 2001, in its coverage of the Tafawa Balewa crisis, made unsubstantiated claims that Muslims who had been killed and several driven out of Tafawa Balewa... had deployed foreign mercenaries to fight on their side. It reported that “each foreign Jihadist was paid N8000 to help execute the war.” The News reporters did not interview a single Muslim in the area but all the people interviewed were Christians, among them the chairman of Christian Association of Nigeria, (CAN) in Tafawa Balewa.

Yusuf (2002), again, cites that,

“*The Sunday Tribune* of September 30, 2001 carried front page news titled: “Ex head of state and governor behind Jos mayhem”. The report did not mention names but stated that a former Muslim military head of state from the north sneaked into Jos before the crisis. The insinuation is that he came to organize Muslims to attack Christians. *The Tribune* also reported that the governor of Bauchi state supported him. A prompt rejoinder by The Bauchi state government was later carried in *The Sunday Tribune*, 14/10/2001”

With these and many more instances, Yusuf (2002) provided evidence that the media really instigate and sustain violent conflict in northern

## Nigeria.

Ahmed (2002, 123) similarly explains that: “this has happened many times in Nigeria. For example, as the ethno-religious conflict that engulfed the city of Jos last September raged, *This Day* newspaper reportedly carried a report in its southern edition of Monday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2001 (Alkali, 2001:14). *This Day* report...triggered a reprisal attack on Hausa Fulani in the south – eastern states” .

Kawu (2002:129) perceives a wider conspiracy in which the media plays one ethnic group against the other and one religion against another in the north:

If we take the Nigerian landscape since the return of democracy in May 1999, the deployment of media hostility against the north has remained as it was during the military. Some of the issues used to demonize us (in the media and by that create conflict in the north) include the following:

(a) The implementation of Sharia in some of our states, exploited to fuel Muslim / Christian animosity to tear the fabric of pan northern solidarity in Muslim majority and Christian minority areas of the north.

(b) The agitation for autonomy in the middle belt area of northern Nigeria became a cause to tear the north apart and set communities against each other in our region.

Yusuf (2002: 142) again explains:

The mass media are supposed to present balanced and objective stories from the most credible sources possible. However, rather than fulfilling this obligation, they seem to delight in taking sides and inflaming the conflicts. This is the attitude that prompted some media observers to conclude that most media organizations, particularly the south-west media axis, are also the political tool of the reigning political elite. Since they could be deployed to undermine any and every conflict prevention exercise, they have often distorted news beyond recognition. With the now proverbial paucity of private media in the north and the dependence of northerners and peoples everywhere on south-west based press, northerners are not only despicably portrayed but propelled towards conflict among them.”

Yusuf (2002:144) accordingly further locates the scope of the involvement of the media in instigating and sustaining conflict in northern Nigeria as it affects even the media in the north:

However, even as *The Citizen* and similar northern publications such as *Democrat*, *New Nigerian*, *The Standard* and *The Reporter* strived to maintain balance, fairness and objectivity, their southern counterparts worked and produced the exact opposites. Sharp contrasts can be drawn between the perspectives of the two sides of the media divide.

Earlier in 1994, Yusuf observed that *The African Concord* and *Tell*, among other Lagos based publications, were biased, one-sided and even outrightly false and inflammatory. Yusuf gave evidence of this bias with an instance, when according to Yusuf, General Zamani Lekwot, a key actor in the Zangon Kataf killings, was found guilty and sentenced by a federal government judicial commission, but *TELL*, in its February 4, 1994 issue, claimed and reported that: "many sections of Nigeria see the convictions as a direct attack on the minority ethnic groups in the North in their age old fight against Hausa-Fulani hegemony." Yusuf maintained that *Daily Times* even planted a false story on its front page of March 30, 1994, titled "Lekwot, others regain freedom." The conclusion Yusuf reached was that the lie could only be calculated to hurt the Hausa Fulani who were the hundreds of victims of the Zangon Kataf violence organized by the retired soldier and his cohorts.

From these examples it is evident that the media instigates and sustains conflict in Northern Nigeria. It is also evident that the media violates the laws and ethics of media practice and by such violations, commits crimes against the North and its people and against Nigeria.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The lesson from the above is that the principle of press freedom must be recognized, duly observed by journalists and the Nigerian media, according to the basic internal laws governing and defining it, among which are:

- a. Respect for the rights or reputations of others, and
- b. The protection of national security, public order or public health or

morals.

Among the 10-point declaration of rights and obligations of journalism according to the “Munich charter” are numbers 8-9 which have direct relevance to the problem discussed, These two points are:

- a. to regard as grave professional offences the following: plagiarism, calumny, slander, libel and unfounded accusations, the acceptance of bribes in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression of news.
- b. never to confuse the profession of journalism with that of advertisements, Salesman or propagandist and to refuse any direct or indirect orders from advertisers.

It is only when every journalist and media receives the necessary training and guidelines as well as observes the principles and ethics of the profession that the media can move forward towards its historic role in our quest for political stability and national development. Not only the Northern part of Nigeria, but Nigeria at large, would be better for this.

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