



Responsible And Responsive Conflict Sensitive Journalism: Rethinking the Role of Editors

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I. Background

Conflict sensitive journalism is based on the principles of good reporting. Good reporting in turn requires strict adherence to fundamental ethical code and values of the profession. In journalism practice this means presentation of an accurate and impartial news report. For it is only through good reporting that conflict is reduced (Ross, undated; 3). The Nigeria media landscape though vibrant, is populated by all kinds of “media practices” and professionals of various hues and coloration, ranging from offline/online media operators, formal, semiformal, non-formal and “hard-to-classify” news establishments with formally trained, informally trained, self-trained and untrained practitioners. Therefore, to avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding about the subject matter of our discussion, this presentation discusses responsible and responsive conflict sensitive journalism practice and the need to rethink the editorial responsibility in formal corporate media organizations (print, electronic and online registered digital platforms). By formal media organization it is referred here as those organizations and practices guided by professional code of ethics backed by the provisions of the law. The primary aim of this presentation is to interrogate some of the existing practices regarding how conflict situations are reported from our newsrooms for a possible redefinition of the role of the editors as gatekeepers in the news manufacturing industrial complex. This clarification is important and necessary because, “to have the kind of editorial responsibility” to transmit news stories or other information, or to be an editor implies {serving in} a (a credible) channel or medium often embodying an organization” (Musa 2017:59).

It is therefore, imperative to understand from the onset that, the mass media play an important role in the society, whether seen from positive or negative perspective. These roles are extensively discussed by scholars in their attempts to understand, theorize, and explain the news production, processing and dissemination functions of the mass media in society. Prominent among these theories is the *agenda setting theory* propounded by McCombs & Shaw in 1968. This theory assumed that by their activities as information managers in the society, “the media attempt to set public agenda for discussing important issues in the society. The theory describes the way the media influence the audience through certain news production processes (reportorial, editorial and managerial) of selection, placement and presentation of news items to the public. Earlier on, in 1922, Walter Lippmann in his seminal work, “*The World outside and the picture in our heads*” tries to establish the “connection between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public” ... and how the former influences the latter. To further buttress this position, Cohen (1963), in a similar effort to explain the effect of the media messages on its audience, argues that although the “press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling readers {viewers, listeners} what to think about” ... arguing further that, “the world will look different to different people ... depending on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read” (Wikipedia). This was the foundational framework led to the evolution of the *agenda setting theory* in early media effect studies.

Another important theory particularly relevant to this presentation, which directly explains the effect of news editorial decision making process on the public is the *gatekeeping theory*. This theory describes the process by which information is filtered to the public by the media. Kurt Lewin (1947) who coined the term “gatekeeping” argues that gatekeepers {or media professionals} operate in a complex field, in which the gatekeeper and its environment “have to be considered as one constellation of interdependent factors” (p.11 Jul, 2018). The theory not only describes the selection process in news editorial but goes further to describe how different interpretations and perspectives are given to news events through the prism of technology, work ethics

and linguistic framing of the issues that eventually come to the public as news stories. Many other contemporary theories later, come to provide more informed perspectives to these theories especially, when applied to specific social-cultural, economic, political contexts and the exiting media environments in thirse societies. Media reporting of conflict sensitive issues is one of the major areas, where these theories are usually applied and tested.

Understanding Conflict and Media Reportage

Burgess & Burgess(1997:1) defined conflict as “a long-term, underlying disagreement that divides two or more parties”. Simply defined, conflict is lack of agreement between two or more parties over something of interest to both (Pate, 2007:2). A conflict situation is therefore “a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share” (Ross, 2004; 6). It is important to understand that not all conflict is violent. Rather a conflict is normal when there is change. Some people want change, but others disagree. If their disagreement or their conflict is managed peacefully it can be regarded as a positive process. But when conflict is not managed properly, it becomes violent. In violent conflict, people fear for their safety and survival. When we say conflict in this presentation, we are referring to violent conflict which usually ends in bloodshed, loss of lives, property and peoples’ lively hood.

Ethical Considerations in Reporting Conflict

Journalism practice generally is governed by ethical code and regulatory provision as provided in the constitution. But while ethics is directed at the moral conduct of the journalist regarding journalists sense of “good or bad conducts and practices,” media regulation, on the other hand, is a legislative instrument meant to check the excesses of irresponsible journalism practice in the society.

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Scholars and practitioners approach the issue of ethical conduct in journalism from two divergent points of views. Some see it from purely a moralistic perspective while others view it from the point of view of professionalism. Ethics in journalism is defined as the “code of morals [or principles] that journalists are supposed to uphold (Ike, 2005; 75-76).

Professionally, the Nigerian Press Council Which is the main regulatory agency for journalism Practice in Nigeria, described Ethical Code a SINE QUA NON in any profession" (Nigerian Press Council, 1998). It is seen as guiding principles to professional etiquette which serve to guide the journalist in his/her day to day journalistic practice. Ethical relate to one’s conscience and theories of right and wrong. They are in the main, “codes of conduct aim to produce the highest good in one’s profession” (Mupfarutsa, 2000; 1) they are the result of the development of the media as an industry and vocation with an established professional status in society. They relate to the manner in which journalists have obtained a story and/or the manner in which a story is reported. Codes of conduct may differ, but the overall aim is to ensure the integrity of the news and general respect for the rest of society in the journalist’s pursuit and reporting of news. A Journalist should always have a healthy regards and respect for the public interest, public good and social responsibility. Truth, it added is the cornerstone of good and responsible Journalism.

The pertinent question here is to ask how far and how well have or are the Nigerian Journalists been keeping to these code of ethics in order to have a good and responsible journalism? Is it possible to have a responsible Journalism in Nigeria in the situation where the government — Federal and States control and indeed monopolize the ownership and control of the majority of Nigeria's media systems? Particularly the Broadcast media (Akifeleye, 2007).

Over the years Nigerian Press Organization has developed fifteen standard sets of ground rules as the code of ethics for the Nigerian journalists which guide the professional conduct of all members of the trade. Journalism today in Nigeria faces an increasing need for ethical reporting, accuracy, fairness and objectivity. The Code of Ethics should therefore, be the companion of the practicing Journalists as well as the informed public in providing ethical guidelines which practitioners should judge and be judged in order to prevent or at least reduce the cases of unnecessary sensationalism in Nigeria Journalism. The Code of Ethics also affirms that self-regulation through Code of Ethics and other structures drawn by Professionals would best serve the interest of both the profession, the professionals and public, so that they can maintain some levels of journalistic integrity. Furthermore, part of the preamble to the code of Ethics states that "journalism entails a high degree of public trust. To earn and maintain this trust, it is morally imperative for every journalist, and every news medium to observe the highest journalistic integrity in the exercise of their duties. Thus, reporting conflict in Nigeria requires utmost professional consideration to public sensibility and national interest. Therefore, it is important for journalists, especially reporters editors, to understand that in their efforts to provide information to the public they often bring their own interpretive frameworks to whatever conflict they report on. These frameworks may be conscious or unconscious; often they are the latter. Further, the media organizations for which the journalists

work operate within certain frameworks, as do the societies in which we live and their various groupings (Media Peace Center/CWPNM, 2002). On this issue Robert (1996; 3) argues that:

we cannot avoid asking ourselves what more can be done to reduce and prevent conflict and the suffering that attends it, but why invoke the media in this context. Because, taken together, mass media technologies, institutions, professionals, norms, and practices constitute a fundamental force shaping the lives of individuals and the fate of peoples and nations. The media constitute a major human resource whose potential to help prevent and moderate social violence begs to be discussed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, mobilized.

In his analysis of media ethics in African Journalism context, Mupfurutsa (...) contented that;

... it is also common knowledge that some trained journalists know that what they publish is unethical but continue to do so because of editorial policies and pressures of the trade. As a result, more and more media associations claiming to defend rights of a responsible press are busy launching their manifestos. Journalistic values drive what goes on in the newsroom each day - what issues are covered, who journalists interview, how stories are framed and presented. These values come into play every day in the life of the professional.

Mupfurutsa (...) further argued that "although journalist ethics are constrained by repressive African government influence, they are also constrained by deliberate unprofessional practices by journalists". Therefore, news reporting generally requires the journalist to adhere to the ethical code of practice which guide his/her professional conduct and behavior as well as the laws governing the practice. This is because, ethical considerations and regulatory provisions, more than anything else, play a crucial role in determining the quality of media reportage in conflict situation and consequently in facilitating its moderation and management. It is generally assumed that, the need to observe the fundamental journalistic code of ethics namely, objectivity, fairness, balance and disinterestedness etc. in reportage should only provide a general operational framework for the journalist in reporting normal societal issues that may not transform into violent conflict among competing interests. On other hand, and with such assumption in mind, it can be argued that, reporting violent conflict and civil disorder in emerging democracies like Nigeria, unlike reporting other issues with very little potential for violent conflict, it is often expected of the journalist to demonstrate the highest sense of social responsibility, extreme caution, sound judgement and a special consideration for the general implications of the news story on the cultural, religious and political sensitivities of the public for which the story is indented. It requires the journalist to study and fully understand the situation by putting the news report "in context" such that it does not further inflame the already volatile situation. Danjibo (2018;268) agrees with Mupfurutsa (...) stressed that, this position is an important ethical question "where journalist has to make discretionary decisions on whether or not to report particular news item in the face of its devastating effect on the general public". This is where the sense of ethical responsibility and sensible responsiveness to public sensitivity comes play on the part of the journalist. Where such considerations are poorly handles by the journalist it is likely to aggravate the violent situation rather than mediate. He further buttressed this argument by concurring with Sharky (2003:20) that:

reporting what you see, might not, on first hearing, seem like such a bad thing. It sounds like a basic definition of objectivity, factual, unembellished coverage. But good journalism includes an appreciation of nuance and an ability to place 'what you see' in a broader context...it also demonstrates that there is a difference between seeing and understanding".

Therefore, when reporting conflicts, journalists must go beyond what is seen or heard from scene and/or sources. To report responsibly and fairly, the media must act as a mediating agent in all violent conflict situations. In such situations, it is generally expected that the journalists will go extra-mile and thoroughly investigate the issues, understand the different points of views of the parties in conflict, the extent of the changing dynamics of the issues and their implications on the public, before providing a fair and balanced perspective for the conflicting parties to see the futility of continuing violence as a means of settling their difference so that they can appreciate the need for peaceful resolution of the issues in question. This in short, is what conflict sensitive or responsible and responsive conflict sensitive journalism is all about.

Media and Conflicts in Nigeria

Nigeria, like many emerging democracies in the developing world, has witnessed several social and political upheavals and crisis situations which threatened the corporate existence of the nation as a single political entity. These situations manifested in several guises ranging from the Wild-Wild-Western political crisis of the late 50s through the 36 months' civil war, the military coups and counter coups of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, and the ethno-religious crisis of the 80s and 90s, and then came the failed political transition characterized by the June 12th saga.

Yet the new millennium added a new dimension to the conflict situation in Nigeria by the resurgence of a web of ethno-religious violence, political thuggery, Niger Delta resource control crisis, farmers/herders conflict, criminal banditry, agitation for succession etc. leading to needless killings and assassinations of prominent personalities and massive loss of lives of ordinary people and wanton destruction of properties.

In 1995 the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), under its Research and Documentation Division, published some research studies contributed by various experts on the performance of the Nigerian media during national crises over the years. The most pertinent area to this study are the contributions of Akinfeleye, Unah, Sobowale and Egbon. Akinfeleye prescribes the roles which the press should play in the society especially in times of national crisis. He argues that the media are duty-bound to give "early warning signals". Unah analyses the performance of the press in the coverage of selected national crisis situations, blaming the press for exhibiting "ethno-partisan tendencies" in some instances, but showing considerable restraint in others. Sobowale recommends a redefinition of the concept of news to enable the press to interpret events in a way that would be beneficial to the great majority of the people. And Egbon re-emphasizes the imperatives of social responsibility of the media during national emergencies.

Also, in his treatise on disaster management, eminent scholar of emergency sociology, A.H. Barton (2003), underscores the importance of media coverage of such events, pointing out that "response from the outside the disaster area, especially across national boundaries, is particularly dependent on the mass media". However, in most conflict situations in Nigeria the mass media have contributed in escalation rather than prevention or mediation. This is because, the Nigerian journalism practice is delicately balanced between a shaky economic structures and a politically polarized media environment with sectionally controlled considerations over-shadowing the national and even the professional interests. Therefore, the potential for the media to fuel any crisis situation to a full blown violent conflict becomes ever greater. Reviewing the role of the media in reporting diversity and conflict issues in Nigeria, Pate (2007:1) once argued that:

reading through the literature on diversity and conflict in Nigeria, there seems to exist an agreement that the politicization [poor] mediation of diversity and conflicts issues in pluralistic Nigeria have been partly accountable for the negative turn of events (Lyman, 1988; Egwu, 2001; Albert, 2002; and Pate, 2002). Arguably, one institution that has received occasional knocks for its [poor] management of diversity and conflict issues is the media for "its role in the exacerbation of ethnic and religious violence in the country" (Egwu, 2001).

He concluded that the apparent inability of the Nigerian media to handle such issues might not be unconnected to certain "observed professional deficiencies" associated with media operations and practices in Nigeria. These assumed 'observed professional deficiencies' arise from the practitioner's poor understanding of the ethical codes of practice which govern the professional conduct and behavior of every journalist.

A case in point was the Shagamu crisis coverage carried by the media with sectional bias, which later produced a ripple effect of revenge killings in Kano and other northern cities. Another case in point was the Kaduna ethno-religious violence which attracted a web of revenge killings in the south. This too was overblown by the Nigerian media. In all these the media's role in shaping the direction of the conflict situation, even though hard to prove empirically, nevertheless, provide enough grounds to redefine the role the media should play in reporting conflict situation in Nigeria (Aliyu, 2004; Momo, 2004; Akinfeleye, 2007).

While discussing professional ethics and journalistic values in the context of conflicts reporting in Nigeria Pate and Oso (2017:10) argued from the premise that in reporting conflicts in multicultural and diverse societies like Nigeria:

"the media reporting, often guided by sentiment or zeal to be associated with the scope, tends to ignore the implication of sensitivity in multicultural settings thereby exacerbating conflict, sometimes inadvertently. In this case, the degree of political correctness in being culturally sensitive becomes a measuring rod for reporters in such contexts, in line with the code of conduct and ethics of journalism. Thus, in examining the prospect and issues at play, it is important to critically understand the context in which we live today".

The media can also play a positive role in reporting conflict situation. Some of the positive roles ascribed to the media by scholars at various stages of conflict include; detection, prevention and mediation (Robert, 1996: 3) and in some cases, management of the conflict situation (Burgess & Burgess, 1997:177-178). Through any of these interventions the media's role in shaping and positively influencing public perception and understanding of the situation before, during and after any conflict is never in doubt. As a matter of fact, "in large-scale, societal-level conflicts involving many people and interest groups, the print and broadcast media, (and now the internet/digital/social media), provide some of the most important means through which the parties in conflict learn about the issues and communicate with one another (Burgess & Burgess, 1997:177-178). When this role is played ethically with public interest as the guiding principle, especially in times of violent conflict, it is mostly from the activities of the media, journalists/reporters (and credible bloggers), that the public comes to know the real nature of events and the circumstances influencing the situation on the ground. In such situations the public's reaction to the situation largely depends on the way the journalists covering the event handle the

reportage and the quality of the information available to him/her to write the news report before passing same to the editorial desks in their respective organizations for the editor to choose from. The editorial mechanism in the organization will then refine the report and brought it to public attention. In other climes, the media, through the reckless and unprofessional practices of the journalists the public often, accused media of further inflaming the already violent situation leading to more violence rather than the plying a mediatory or reconciliatory role expected of an impartial umpire. This is part of the reason why covering and reporting conflict situation by the journalists always attracts research interest from scholars, regulators, professional organizations, civil society organizations, human right advocates and sometimes, even the public. This fact is true of all conflict reportage, whether intercommunal/intra-communal crises in local communities or at broader international level of full scale war between nations.

Of greater concern to most people however, is the relative professional integrity of the editorial process that produces the final news published by the media organization. This process entails the way information about the conflict is gathered, processed and presented to the public as news story. At the heart of this process is the editor whose responsibility is it to supervise and manage the entire process in accordance with the best ethical standards of professional practice, the house style of the organization and appropriate legal framework.

The Editor's Roles

Formal media organizations entrust all the editorial functions and roles to an editor (or editors of various designations) who is/are entirely responsible for whatever gets published by the news organization. These roles can be categorized into five categories viz:

1. Overseeing the entire operation of the news organization regarding news stories and any publishable content
2. Determining the allocation of essential editorial and technical resources (manpower, space, length, time, prominence, non-journalistic content, etc.) required to get the news story out.
3. Determining the direction of editorial perspectives which often expresses the official opinion and position of the news organization on important issues.
4. Signing-off the published content on behalf of the news organization.
5. And safe guiding public safety, decency, sensitivities (cultural, political, economic, religious. etc.) and promoting the overriding national interest in their reportage.

Under normal circumstances in conventional journalism practice, all editors carry out the first four functions seamlessly, out of the five. But unknown to most reporters and editorial staff, the fifth function is often the litmus test which differentiates responsible and responsive conflict sensitive journalism and any other kinds of journalism practice. This is especially true when it comes to covering and reporting conflict situations with a potential for national and/or international dimension. The implication of this has been extensively discussed under subheadings in the preceding section. To appreciate this aspect of reportage and editorial functions and manage the process responsibly, an editor/journalist needs to understand the nature of conflict and the principles which guide how it should be reported as discussed earlier.

II. Conclusion

Earlier in this presentation, it was suggested elsewhere, that the media should function as a platform for conflict detection, prevention, moderation, mediation and management, and not necessarily as a resolution agent. In this sense, journalists intervene in conflict to mediate between the parties in conflict (Media Peace Center, 2002:1). Therefore, good reporting practice in tandem with responsible journalism should form the basis for effective conflict management and eventually resolution; As Manoff (1996:2) rightly suggested that:

“We cannot avoid asking ourselves what more can be done to reduce and prevent conflict and the suffering that attends it, but why invoke the media in this context. Because, taken together, mass media technologies, institutions, professionals, norms, and practices constitute a fundamental force shaping the lives of individuals and the fate of peoples and nations. The media constitute a major human resource that has potential to help prevent and moderate social violence begs to be discussed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, mobilized”.

To this end, the Media Peace Center, an organization concerned with peace journalism outlined a partial account of the potential media's roles in any conflict situation. The Centre recommends that in such situation the media and by extension, the editors should play the following roles:

- Promote and help enforce national or international norms regarding human rights, the conduct of war, the treatment of minorities, or other issues;
- Relay negotiating signals between parties that have no formal communication or require another way to signal;
- Focus the attention of the international community on a developing conflict, and by doing so bring pressure on the parties to resolve it or on the international community to intervene;

- Establish the transparency of one conflict party to another;
 - Engage in confidence building measures;
 - Support international peacekeeping operations in countries where they are active and in countries contributing military contingents;
 - Educate parties and communities involved in conflict and thereby change the information environments of disputes, which is critical to the conflict resolution process;
 - Identify the underlying interests of each party to a conflict for the other;
 - Prevent the circulation of incendiary rumors and counteract them when they surface;
 - Identify the core values of disputants, which is often critical to help them understand their own priorities and those of their opposite number;
 - Identify and explain underlying material and psychological needs of parties to conflict, clarifying the structural issues that are perceived to be at stake;
 - Frame the issues involved in conflict in such a way that they become more susceptible to management;
 - Identify resources that may be available to help resolve conflicts or to mobilize outside assistance in doing so;
 - Establish networks to circulate information concerning conflict prevention and management activities that have succeeded elsewhere;
 - Publicize what should be public and privatize what is best left private in any negotiating process, although the definitions in each case are likely to be highly contested and should not be taken for granted;
 - De-objectify and re-humanize conflicting parties to each other and avoid stereotyping;
 - Provide an outlet for emotions of parties, the expression of which may be therapeutic in and of itself;
 - Bring to bear international pressure on media organizations that promote xenophobia, racism, or other forms of social hatred;
 - Encourage a balance of power among unequal parties where appropriate, or, where the claims of parties are not equally just, strengthen the hand of the party with the more compelling moral claim.
- It is the opinion of this presentation that Nigerian journalists/editors should adopt these highlights as the template in their professional approach towards responsible and responsive conflict sensitive journalism.

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