MASS MEDIA AND MISINFORMATION OF CONFLICT REPORTAGE: A CALL FOR PEACE ORIENTED JOURNALISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Africa as a continent recorded a series of conflicts which hindered meaningful developmental policies from being implemented. It is no longer news that conflict thwarts socio-economic development. It has been documented that whenever there is conflict, developmental processes are crippled either directly or indirectly. Mass media whose roles is to educate, entertain and enlighten the people on developmental issues plays a vital role in information dissemination regarding issues, events and happenings around the environment, even in conflict situation, which triggers human interest and stimulates curiosity especial among the people affected. Disseminating such information, in this regards, requires a high sense of professionalism in other not to misinform the public which may lead to fuelling and escalating more conflict rather than mitigating it. The present paper, therefore, calls for professionalism in reporting conflict and conflict related issues by media practitioner across Africa. The paper qualitatively collected data mainly from secondary sources such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, internet and other relevant documents. Anchored on the social responsibility theory to provide support for the study in explaining the needs for the media to set agenda on developmental issues and be objective, balanced, unbiased and credible in reporting conflict and conflict related issues. Conclusively, the paper calls for professionalism among media practitioners in their conflict related reportage. The paper, therefore, recommends that there is need for trained and professional journalists in reporting conflict related issues. This will, in turn, help in achieving the goal nine (9) of the AU Agenda 2063 which is targeted at "Silencing the gun by 2020" to end all wars, conflict and gender-based violence, prevent genocide and achieve desired sustainable development across Africa.

Keywords: *Mass media, misinformation, conflict reportage, peace journalism, sustainable development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In our world today, news emanating from the media is predominately conflict-related. In fact, over the past several years, it has become more difficult to open some national newspaper on any given day without seeing an article about a violent incident in some part of the country. This is particularly true considering how effective media channels like radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet are at reaching large audiences and permeating the general public. This is due to the significant place the media occupied as the watchdog of the society to report issues and happening within and out its environment. The mass media are primary sources of information in the society; without the mass media the society can hardly exist. People form their opinion and take decisions about issues in the society and their life styles based on information from the media. This is because no matter how information flies in the society in the form of rumours people tend to wait to verify from the media whether such information is true or not. This makes the media a reliable, authentic and credible source of information in the society. As such people tend to believe information emanating from the media than from any other sources.

The bulk of stories in the media have an element of conflict in them. Invariably, media representations of violence including stories of war, crime, violence, and terrorists' attacks are newsworthy because human beings are naturally interested in conflict (Rogers, 2019). According to Beckett, (2016) as cited in Ciboh, Torwel and Jev (2022) bad news is often more newsworthy than good news and conflict more newsworthy than peace. Stories about controversies, quarrel disagreements, challenges, struggles against odds, etc. get the attention of reporters as newsworthy events, issues or topics. The mass media in this regards can play two distinct and

opposing roles in its reportage of conflict, either the media actively engages in the conflict and is accountable for greater violence, or the media maintains its independence and avoids the conflict, which helps to resolve the conflict and reduce violence (Pate and Dauda, 2015). Because individuals frequently use this information to create opinions on very important practical issues, one may argue that the media's value in this context extends beyond merely transmitting information.

Media as a social institution is involved in conflicts in the society either as a forerunner, channel of information and analysis of the conflicts, or as part of the escalation or resolution of the conflicts (Salawu, 2009). Ownership patterns, pressures, political influence, and other factors continue to challenge the media's consistent and committed role in peace-building in the nation, making it increasingly impossible for it to live up to the expected role in peace-building. It can therefore be assumed that when third parties, like the media intervene wrongly, they can easily contribute to the escalation of the problem based on what they say and how they say it.

The media, in the eyes of the public are the vanguard of accurate, factual and correct perspective of events; hence the people rely on them. Media report, in this regard must not be misleading. When information from the media is misleading it is regarded as misinformation. Misinformation has often been associated with the concept of fake news, which some scholars define as "fabricated information" that mimics news media content in form but not in the organizational process or intent. Media outfit often operates 24 hours a day, and breaks the latest news in hopes of taking audience share from its competitors. News can also be produced at a pace that does not always allow for fact-checking, or for all of the facts to be collected or released to the media at one time, letting readers or viewers insert their own opinions, and possibly leading to the spread of misinformation (Croteau et al., 2013).

However, the ability of the media to fulfil its social responsibilities of reporting truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant information creditably depends on a number of internal as well as external contingencies, such as ownership patterns, political economy of the media, political or personal interest, censorship, editorial policies among other factors (McQuail, 2010). These factors made the media to spread misinformation in reporting conflict-related stories; as the saying goes, "he who pay the piper calls the tune." These have become very challenging, thereby calling on media practitioners to be professionals in their reportage of conflict.

Being professional, in this regards means that the journalist and media practitioner is working to prevent the elimination of an entire tribe, group, race etc. through his report; he is working to stop lives from being lost; he is working to ensure that peace is restored and maintained for development purposes. It is said that development cannot take place in a rancorous atmosphere (Chaikaan, 2011). This is the reason why conflict reporting has been referred to as peace journalism by Galtung (1975). It is against this backdrop that this paper calls for peace oriented journalism for sustainable development in Africa.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Mass media plays a very significant role in reporting conflict. Many scholars like Weimann (2012) and Nacos (2016) believe that "the media are major contributing factors to violence" and think of media as the perpetuators of conflict hence they "effectively serve as publicity and propaganda platform for terrorists and their narratives, their causes, their goals." As a result, many scholars are dissatisfied with how conflicts-related stories are now reported in the media. They accuse journalists and the media of promoting conflict in the society by reporting conflict-related stories in a way that escalates the situation and promote the goals or aggrieved parties involved or terrorist organisations. Some of these academics have proposed a "media blackout," in which news outlets would be "muzzled" or "closed down" in order to lessen its visibility and desired impact.

However, looking at the important place of the mass media in exposing ills and social vices in the society, dissemination of information, education and other functions, better methods of reporting conflict-relations stories in the media

were suggested by Johan Galtung as 'peace journalism' which can transform the way conflict stories are reported in the news as a whole into an opportunity to advance peace, safety and national security that can bring about sustainable development in Africa and the world over.

Undoubtedly, mass media performance in reporting conflict has attracted a score of studies around the world and more so in Nigeria. There seems to be agreement among the studies that mass media is an indispensable tool in publicising conflict. Different studies argues that without the media's coverage, conflict may remain just narrowed to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, rather than spread to a wider 'target audience.' There should be a better approach when it comes to reporting conflict that reduces or prevents violence by making conflict transparent to assist understanding and encourage tolerance between and among aggrieved parties. This represents the crux of the paper.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper is qualitatively inclined. Secondary method of data collection was adopted to gather relevant literature for the study. Data in this regards were collected mainly from textbooks, journals and other documents. The collected data were contextually analysed. This implies that the data analysed by the study were devoid of figures and tables, only words were used in this regard.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Misinformation

Misinformation refers to those who spread false information without realizing it, usually because their friends or acquaintances do the same (Campan et al., 2017). The echo chamber effect greatly contributes to this aspect; the social media system is made up of an algorithm that recommends certain news or information to a consumer based on the group to which he or she belongs on social media, their prior history, and circle of friends, such that when one friend views something, another friend is recommended the same thing, and the user is notified of such co-recommendation. This recommendation system also works as a motivator for consumers to share information, even if they are unsure of its authenticity. People who share the same beliefs or belong to the same political party will distribute and share information that is favourable to their political goals without verifying it.

Humans are typically bad at recognizing what is genuine and what is legitimate, according to the cognitive theories (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), and they are prone to fake news because of their credulous nature. Vaccari & Chadwick (2020), argue that individuals are more likely to accept anything that confirms their beliefs (confirmation bias) and would spread it without verifying it because it aligns with their thinking while distorting those that do not, even if they are true. The aim of the person or source disseminating the information distinguishes misinformation from disinformation. It is not the intention of misinformation to deceive (Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018; Di Domenico et al., 2021). Instead, it seeks to influence or modify public opinion on a particular issue.

Chen & Chang (2019), see misinformation as peoples' shared belief of information assumed to be factual without clear evidences or experts' opinions. Therefore, misinformation could represent information that is unverified before it is shared without any motives to cause destruction.

5. THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

There are many scholarly definitions of the term conflict depending on the understanding and background of the individual proponents. Conflict involves disagreement, clash, collision or a struggle or contest between two or more parties. Conflict represents a clash between hostile and opposing elements, ideas, or forces. It occurs at all levels of human interaction – in homes, institutions, and among groups. This agrees with the definition proffered by Kriesberg (1973) who sees conflict as a relationship between two or more parties who believe they have incompatible goals. The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK, 2005) defines conflict as "the clashing of interests

(positional differences) on national values of some duration and magnitude between, at least, two parties (organized groups, states, groups of states, organizations) that are determined to pursue their interests and win their cases."

Some other definitions are more focused on violent disputes or armed conflicts. No matter how many definitions there are, there is a common thread containing elements of disagreement, either on points of principle, perception, policy, ideology, culture or expectation. Although the most recognisable conflict situation is war, all conflicts, to varying degrees, tend to threaten group, local, national and/or international peace (Caramancion, 2020).

Chiakaan and Ahmad (2011) submitted that when people are not aware of happenings in their society, they become victims of ignorance which is always suicidal. When people are well informed, they are better citizens which go a long way in bringing about development. Reporting conflicts, in this regard, is very fundamental, because just as people in the society have the right to know or be informed about other affairs or events that occur in their lands and beyond, they need adequate information about the conflicts in their lands and beyond.

6. THE CONCEPT OF PEACE JOURNALISM

The word peace originated from the Latin word *pax* which means epact, control or an agreement to end war or any dispute and conflict between two people, ethnic groups, two nations or two antagonistic groups of people. The American military history posited that peace is the absence of war (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Thus, Galtung (1975) already rejected the understanding of peace as the absence of war and opposed to it a positive concept of peace that conceives peace as not only the absence of direct (personal), but rather also of indirect violence.

Peace Journalism is therefore when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – which create opportunities for the society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005). The concept of peace journalism is also concerned with the form

of journalism which strives to prevent conflict from growing, from the latent to a manifest stage as part of the efforts to avoid the violence that is often the main characteristic of manifest conflict. It also applies some fundamentals of traditional journalism. Peace journalism (PJ) uses conflict analysis and transformation to update the concept of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting. The peace journalism approach provides a new road map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their reporting the ethics of journalistic intervention. It opens up a literacy of non-violence and creativity as applied to the practical job of everyday reporting. In the words of Professor Johan Galtung, "Peace Journalism makes audible and visible subjugated aspects of reality." (Galtung, 1975)

In essence, peace journalism has to do with the use of radio, television and print media to disseminate truthful information or alternate viewpoints that could turn public sentiments towards peaceful resolution of conflict. Generally, journalists or reporters of peace journalism are expected to be balanced and unbiased in the face of describing the parties involved in the conflict situation irrespective of who is involved in the conflict, avoid being neutral and passive when it comes to depicting peace as the most acceptable way of resolving conflicts elsewhere in the society (Galtung, 1975).

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the **social responsibility** media theory.

The **social responsibility theory** of mass communication evolved as a middle ground between the diametrically opposed authoritarian and libertarian theories. Basically, the social responsibility theory came into existence as a result of a commission set up in 1947 headed by Robert M. Hutchins in America to check the irresponsibility of the press, which gave birth to the libertarian theory. The freedom of the press here is still guaranteed but it is to be balanced with societal responsibility. The press is believed to be a child of the society and as such it is socially

responsible to it. But for the press to be socially responsible to its society, it must be self-disciplined. Self-discipline will enable the press not to embark on activities that would cause violence in the society (Chaikaan & Ahmad, 2011; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

McQuail (2005) summarized the tenets of the social responsibility theory as following:

1. Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to the society.
2. These obligations should be met by setting high or professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity as well as balance respectively.
3. The media should be self-regulating within the framework of law and established institutions following the acceptance and application of these obligations.
4. The media should avoid offensive content triggering crime, violence or civil disorder or harm to minority groups.
5. The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society giving access to various points of views and rights of reply.
6. The society and the public have a right to expect high standards of performance, and intervention can be justified in order to secure the public good.
7. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to the society as well as to employers and the market.

Journalist reporting conflict, in this regards should be guided by the social responsibility theory. The social responsibility theory appears to provide a framework for the operations of the development media theory and others such as structural functionalism which task the press to take upon themselves the duty of operating in such a manner that there will be integration, peace and development.

The journalist who is conscious of the demands of the social responsibility theory on him, in reporting conflict will not be at liberty to report it the way he wants. For instance, he cannot report the conflict apportioning blames on one side, where 10 people are killed, he cannot associate the number with one side, making members of the public feel that the other side is stronger or having an upper hand in the conflict.

The social responsibility theory, according to Chiakaan and Ahmad, (2011) is an ethical theory which came on board to check the excesses of journalists operating under the guidance of the libertarian theory. The social responsibility theory does not take away the freedom of the press offered by the libertarian theory but it rather reminds journalists of their responsibility socially inclined to their society. The journalists are carrying out their duty as information providers, and as such they should know that the whole society relies on them for truthful, balance and objective information.

Journalists are to remove their personal interest from the conflicts they report. Their reports on conflicts should be capable of inspiring or encouraging collective efforts from the government and well-meaning bodies and individuals towards managing the conflicts. When the journalist reports a conflict in a manner that tension cannot increase, urging urgent steps to be taken towards resolving the conflict, he is dancing to tune of the social responsibility theory. It is the responsibility of journalism to ensure that a highly divided Nigeria is integrated; it is his responsibility to ensure that there is peace for development to take place (McCombs, 2003).

Meanwhile, the main duty of the media within the social responsibility media theory is to bring conflict into discussion. Basically, the media can be used to express, but are forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt vital social structures or interests. The only serious constraints on the media are exercised by community opinion, consumer protest and professional ethics. This is because the media have obligations to the society, and media ownership represents a public trust. Therefore, news media should be credible to command the attention and respect of the audience: truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant, and free, but self-regulated by following agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct (McQuail, 2010).

8. MASS MEDIA AND MISINFORMATION OF CONFLICT REPORTAGE

Misinformation has often been associated with the concept of fake news, which some scholars define as "fabricated information that

mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent." While Egelhofer et al. (2020) argued that the media's wide adoption of the term "fake news" served to normalize this concept and help to stabilize the use of this buzzword in our everyday language. Damstra et al., (2021) states that misinformation has been around since the establishment of press, thus leaving little room to wonder how it has been normalized today. Intentional misinformation, called disinformation, became normalized in politics and topics of great importance to the public, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict among others. Misinformation caused irreversible damage to public understanding and trust (Goldstein, 2021).

Misinformation arising from the media can cause fear, confusion, anxiety, unrest, destruction of life and property, falsification of the truth, failure of health intervention, and failure of government intermediation programs, among other negative effects. The mass media, which is a crucial component of society and the political system of the country, must rethink and reposition itself in order to fulfil its social responsibilities in a way that would help Nigeria achieve peace and sustainable development.

According to Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, (2017) there is a need for efficiency in the dissemination of news to the public because most media organizations compete for viewers. Due to the increase in news media options available to consumers, it is more likely that they will select a news outlet that supports their prejudices, which raises the risk that they will be misinformed. In an effort to overtake their rivals in terms of audience share, news media outlets frequently broadcast stories around-the-clock and report the most recent developments. Additionally, the speed at which news is produced might prevent fact-checking and the simultaneous collection and release of all relevant information to the media, allowing readers and viewers to express their own opinions and thus contributing to the spread of false information (Croteau et al., 2013).

Misinformation can also be used to deflect accountability. For example, Syria's repeated use of chemical weapons was the subject of a disinformation campaign intended to prevent accountability (Steward, 2021). Stewart further shows how disinformation was used to conceal and purposely misinform the public about Syria's violations of international law. The intention was to create plausible deniability of the violations, making discussion of possible violations to be regarded as untruthful rumours. Because the disinformation campaigns have been so effective and normalized, the opposing side has also started relying on disinformation to prevent repercussions for unfavorable behaviour from those pushing a counter narrative.

According to Stewart, (2021), in most cases the damage of misinformation can be irreparable. Misinformation can affect all aspects of life. Misinformation from the media, especially through social media is a potential threat to democracy and broader society. The effects of misinformation can lead to decline of accuracy of information as well as event details (Bodner, 2009). When eavesdropping on conversations, one can gather facts that may not always be true, or the receiver may hear the message incorrectly and spread the information to others. On the Internet, one can read content that is stated to be factual but that may not have been checked or may be erroneous. In the news, media may emphasize the speed at which they receive and send information but may not always be correct in the facts. These developments contribute to the way misinformation may continue to complicate the public's understanding of issues and to serve as a source for belief and attitude formation (Southwell et al., 2018).

In regards, therefore, misinformation of conflict-related issue is viewed by many scholars as worse than any other form. Misinformed citizens can take law into their hands. The 1967 civil war in Nigeria, for instance, according Chiakaan & Ahmad, (2011) was blamed on rumour and propaganda. Professional journalism is expected to be peace journalism, it is expected to be a bridge building journalism, it is expected to be the kind of journalism that is inclined to crises management; this is the kind of journalism that can bring about peace and sustainable development.

9. PEACE ORIENTED JOURNALISM AS AN APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Peace is said to be the absence of war, fear, threat, anxiety, suffering and violence. Peace is a value and necessary ingredient of security of life, property and sustainable development. The mass media play a significant role of creating and sustaining peace in a society through it reportage, programmes and surveillance function.

In the words of Lynch (2008), peace journalism proposes a set of principles in the reporting of conflicts, as well as a workable set of methods for editors and reporters to employ, based on an awareness of these distinction, in mainstream news and current affairs. This form of Journalism created a very good platform for the entire society to consider and value non-violent, developmental responses as the best approach towards peace. Peace journalism has been developed from research which indicates that oftentimes, news about a conflict has a value bias towards violence.

It is important to note that when news consumers and audience members are furnished with such opportunities, but still decide they prefer war to peace, there is nothing more journalism can do in this respect. Lynch (2018) argued that there is no matching commitment to ensuring a fair hearing for violent responses as they seldom struggle for a place on the news agenda. As a as a remedial strategy and an attempt to supplement the news conventions to give peace a chance:

i. Explore the backgrounds and contexts of conflict formation, presenting causes and options on every side (not just both sides) - this implies that peace journalism examines the context in which the dispute evolved and explains what caused the conflict in the first instance.

ii. Gives voice to the views of all rival parties, from all levels;

iii. Peace journalism provides creative ideas for conflict resolution, development, peacemaking and peacekeeping;

iv. Exposes lies, cover-up attempts and culprits on all sides, and reveals the excesses committed by, and suffering inflicted on, peoples of all parties;

v. Peace journalism pays attention to peace stories and post-war developments.

Peace journalism therefore aims to correct this form of bias in the media with a view to create opportunity for the society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict in the society. The mass media is a powerful tool of communication in peace and conflict situations as it can be positively used to promote peace and resolve conflicts at appropriate times. Peace journalists employ the model of conflict analysis and transformation to update concepts of balance, fairness, and accuracy in reporting; it provides a link between journalists, their sources, the stories they report and the consequences on the society. In the process, peace journalism creates awareness about non-violence and creativity in the practical job of everyday activities of a journalist and by extension the practice of journalism. It is important that the journalist and media practitioner needs to be sensitive when reporting as reporting all details of a conflict could help spread panic. In the sense that where casualties are involved, no need to mention numbers and 'be telling people that 10 people died'. They seem to agree with peace journalism approaches of emphasizing the invisible effects of violence instead of focusing on the visible effects of war as casualties and damage to property (Ciboh et al., 2022).

Ciboh et al. further affirms that journalists reporting conflict must allow 'multiple sources' and 'let more voices be heard' by 'letting those affected tell their stories' and let people draw whatever conclusion everybody wants to draw' because, very often, "media persons merely respond to statements of politicians, ethnic champions, religious zealots and other interested party rather than initiate their own independent inquiries about specific social conflicts" (Pate and Dauda, 2015).

The media, in many instances contributed to reshaping the course of events in a peaceful direction. For instance, the media usually point out the advantages of peace building, promote individuals and groups involved in peace

initiatives as well as balance the views of the actors respectively. Peace Journalism is based on the proposition that the choices journalists make when reporting conflicts situations tend to either expand or contract the space available for the society at large to imagine and work towards peaceful outcomes (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Peace journalism gives voice to the parties involved in conflict, empathy, and understanding and sees conflict/crisis as a problem; hence it is proactive: preventing any form of conflict in the society for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development.

The Freedom of Information (FOI) Act according to Akpan et al., (2013) as practice in Nigeria and many African countries provided ample opportunity for the practice of journalism in and the entrenchment of peace media as a major tool for conflict resolution, social justice and human development. However, for the media to become a veritable tool and further perform this transformative role in a deeply divided and conflict prone society like Nigeria, it is important that the media undergo a paradigm shift from reporting issues and conflicts as they occur without selective coverage. This shift must be such that would provide a place for peace oriented journalism and operation in order to reduce the tendencies for violent manifestations of conflicts. The media must present itself as the direct mirror-image of the society, particularly at this historical point when conflicts especially violent conflicts and crimes are prevalent (Akpan et al., 2013). By doing this, it can enhance a peaceful coexistence among diverse multi-ethnic groups that can bring about sustainable development in Africa.

10. CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, peace is imperative in any nation building, hence, it is imperative to promote peace oriented journalism in conflict reporting for sustainable development. This can be achieved through the mass media which represents an indispensable tool of communication in peace and conflict situations. It can be used positively to promote peace and resolve conflicts at appropriate times. The potentiality of the media as a means of communication to promote peace cannot be overemphasized. Generally, the media in its entire genre have an important role to play in any peace building process. They help in defining the socio-economic and political atmosphere in which the peace process takes place; they help to influence the actions of stakeholders in the peace process. Thirdly, the media has an important influence on the nature of debate about the peace process. Fourthly, the media can promote public approval of the peace process.

Thus, it is on the basis of the above submissions that the study recommends the following:

i. Conflict reporting should be included in the training of journalists by institutions of higher education that teach mass communication or journalism. Training can have a positive influence on the way conflict is reported.

ii. Media organizations and reporters should refrain from using an inciting or offensive tone when covering a crisis. Reporting on constructive events, such as community cooperation, may help to reduce tension, promote peace and bring sustainable development.

iii. The media should learn to develop a thorough understanding of the conflict and convey that understanding to their audiences in a way that reflects the truth of the conflict in all its complexity.

iv. The media and reporters should look for areas of agreement, investigate and evaluate attempts to resolve conflicts. The media should give its readers the information they need to create an informed opinion on the parties involved by critically scrutinizing the attempts to settle the conflict. In doing so, they may also help to stop the spread of false information that can devastate communities and thwart growth.

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