ARE THE MEDIA SERVING BOKO HARAM TERRORIST ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA?

OKECHUKWU GABRIEL MOWETE
DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC, OGWASHI-UKU, moweteokey@gmail.com

CORNELIUS CHIEDOZIE OZEH
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, CHUKWUEMEKA ODUMEGWU OJUKWU UNIVERSITY, IGBARIAM CAMPUS, cc.ozeh@coou.edu.ng

KEYWORDS
Media, terrorism, Boko Haram, publicity, journalism

ABSTRACT
This study investigates the intricate relationship between media, terrorism, and the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria. It specifically, analyses the unintentional facilitation of terrorism via media reportage in Nigeria with special focus on the Boko Haram sect. The complex dynamics between media portrayal, terrorist activities, and the broader socio-political landscape in the context of Boko Haram provides the backdrop for this investigation. Through a nuanced exploration and analysis of data collected from secondary sources guided by framing theory of communication studies, the study aims to shed light on the multifaceted interplay of media narratives, terrorism, and counterterrorism efforts, offering insights into the role of the media in shaping public perceptions and responses to the Boko Haram insurgency. The study recommended responsible journalism and fact-checking towards striking a balance between media roles and Boko Haram's tactics.

1. Introduction

In an era defined by unprecedented connectivity, globalized communication has emerged as a double-edged sword, wielding both the power to unite and the potential to sow discord. This intricate relationship between media and terrorism has given rise to new challenges for international security, with extremist groups exploiting the interconnected nature of our digital world to amplify their messages and reach a broader audience (Weimann, 2008; Kampf 2014). Boko Haram, a notorious terrorist organization based in West Africa, stands as a compelling case study in understanding how globalized communication facilitates and propels terrorist activities towards extending the literature in that regard. Boko Haram's genesis can be traced back to the early 2000s, with its evolution marked by a disturbing blend of ideological extremism, regional instability, and a calculated manipulation of media platforms. Concurrently, the rise of globalized communication channels has fundamentally altered the landscape of terrorism. No longer confined to clandestine meetings and coded messages, terrorist organizations now leverage the ubiquity of social media, online forums, and other digital platforms to disseminate propaganda, recruit followers, and coordinate operations.

As a matter of fact, terrorists primarily aim to manipulate and exploit the media to convey messages of violence, thereby gaining widespread publicity (Peresin, 2007). Conversely, nations, whether on a national or international scale, must integrate both domestic and global media into their counterterrorist strategies. In democratic countries with a free media, it is unrealistic to anticipate that the media will respond directly to a country's inquiries in line with national security expectations. The news media can inadvertently aid terrorists by broadcasting their heinous acts to a broad audience (Rather, 2012). Supporting this perspective, Azeez (2009) asserted that reporting on terrorism poses numerous dilemmas and paradoxes for journalists, whose responsibility is to objectively, fairly, and accurately inform the public. Consequently, there remain unresolved questions within the field of mass communication regarding how the media report on terrorism. These questions include whether the media inadvertently align themselves with the goals of terrorists, who seek inexpensive publicity; whether the media might be exacerbating the perceived threat and fear by reporting on terrorism instead of alleviating public concerns; and whether the media genuinely maintain objectivity and accuracy in their reporting on terrorism and in their portrayal and framing of terrorists.

This research seeks to dissect the intricate interplay between media and terrorism, with a specific focus on how globalized communication has become an enabler for Boko Haram's activities. By unravelling the mechanisms through which this terrorist organization exploits the digital realm, we aim to shed light on the broader implications for counterterrorism efforts in an era dominated by rapid information dissemination and digital interconnectedness. Understanding the role of globalized communication in the context of Boko Haram is of paramount importance for several reasons. First, it provides insights into the evolving tactics of terrorist organizations, which, in turn, informs counterterrorism strategies. Second, the study contributes to the broader academic discourse on the relationship between media and terrorism, offering nuanced perspectives on the challenges posed by the digital age. Lastly, the findings hold practical implications for policymakers, security agencies, and the international community in their pursuit of effective counterterrorism measures.

To navigate this complex terrain, our research seeks to answer this fundamental question: How does Boko Haram utilize globalized communication for its activities? This study is qualitative in design. It collected secondary data from newspapers, journals and the Internet which were descriptively analyzed under the analytical guide of framing theory in communication studies, in achieving the research objectives.

2. Media in the Context

Media serves as a communication channel that has effectively unified the world into a singular entity. Derived from the Latin word "medium," meaning in the middle, the term encompasses traditional mass communication systems, content generators, and various technologies facilitating mediated human speech. This broad scope includes conventional publishing (newspapers, periodicals, or books), traditional electronic media (broadcasting, broadband, cable, or satellite), motion pictures, video gaming, recorded music, advertising, and adaptations of the Internet for these media forms (Hoag, 2008).

Information and messages traverse from the sender to the receiver through a designated channel, known as the media. Whether conveyed through spoken, written, or printed words, or any sign, the medium serves as the conveyer of meaning, sometimes coded in the form of electronic messages. Beyond this scientific understanding of the media concept, there exists a colloquial interpretation, portraying it as a process or instrument designed to reach a vast audience, comprising readers, viewers, or listeners. In common parlance, "media" and "mass media" are often used interchangeably, with the term "media" originating alongside the advent of newspapers and magazines (Pushparaj, 2014).

The media serves as a tool for disseminating information and entertainment to vast populations. Numerous Internet-based newspapers, journals, and periodicals have already established a significant presence (Kumar 2008). Web newspapers are gaining increasing popularity, with online editions of major newspapers being as widely embraced as their print counterparts. Mass media has played a pivotal role in fostering social awareness and offering people a convenient way of navigating

through life (Rajan, 2011). Therefore, media encompasses various communication channels with the overarching goal of reaching a broad audience, including the entire population of a country.

3. Understanding Terrorism

The concept of terrorism remains a contentious subject in literature, lacking a universally accepted definition. Neither academic nor international legal circles have reached a consensus on the precise meaning of terrorism. The challenges arise from the politically and emotionally charged nature of the term (William, 2009). Despite numerous attempts, the international community has struggled to formulate a comprehensive definition of terrorism. In the 1970s and 1980s, United Nations efforts encountered obstacles, primarily stemming from disagreements among members concerning the use of violence in conflicts related to national liberation and self-determination. This divergence has prevented the establishment of a comprehensive convention on international terrorism.

In response to this, the international community has embraced a series of sectorial conventions that delineate and criminalize various forms of terrorist activities. Since 1994, the United Nations General Assembly has condemned terrorist acts using a political description of terrorism. According to this description, implies criminal acts designed or intended to instill terror in the general public, a group of persons, or particular individuals for political purposes. They condemned such acts as unjustifiable. This condemnation applies regardless of the political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or any other nature invoked to justify such acts (Burgess, 2002).

Moreover, terrorism is inherently a pejorative term, carrying negative connotations typically applied to adversaries, opponents, or those with whom one disagrees and would prefer to ignore. The label "terrorist" becomes unavoidably subjective, often influenced by one's sympathies or opposition to the person, group, or cause in question (Diaz-Paniaga, 2009). Diaz-Paniaga also emphasizes that providing a precise definition of terrorist activities in international law serves three purposes: to declare the act as forbidden, to express societal condemnation for wrongful acts, invoking social censure and shame; and by establishing and reaffirming values, criminalization may serve as a deterrent to terrorism in the long run.

4. Theoretical Underpinning

This study adopted framing theory of the communication studies as the framework of analysis. The definitions of news frames in both theoretical and empirical literature are extensive. Gitlin (1980) describes frames as persistent cognitive patterns used to organize discourse through selection, emphasis, and exclusion. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) view frames as "interpretative packages" that provide meaning to issues, with a central organizing idea that helps make sense of events. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest that frames activate cultural knowledge, morals, and values, creating contexts that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies.

When applied to terrorism, Framing Theory explores how media coverage can influence public perception, spread fear, and potentially serve the interests of terrorist organizations by amplifying their message and reach. In media reportage of terrorism, it is noteworthy that media decides which terrorist events to cover and which aspects to highlight, influencing public focus and concern, and that media's portrayal of terrorists, victims, and authorities can shape audience perceptions and attitudes towards terrorism and security policies. In fact, extensive media coverage can prioritize terrorism over other issues, affecting public and political agendas, and their graphic imagery and sensational headlines can evoke strong emotional reactions, heightening fear and anxiety.

5. Brief History of Boko Haram Terrorism

Boko Haram, a radical sect, is a product of history, and its precise date of establishment is still debated. While most local and foreign media trace its origin to 2002 when Mohamed Yusuf became its leader, Nigeria's security forces date its origin to 1995 when Abubakar Lawan established the *Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra* sect. Initially peaceful, Boko Haram turned radical under Yusuf's leadership in 2002, launching a short-lived armed uprising in June

2009 to establish an Islamic state in the north, which was violently crushed by the military.

Yusuf established a religious complex with ulterior political goals, serving as a recruiting ground for future jihadists. The group attracted members from neighbouring countries and spoke only Arabic. The complex was later relocated to Yusuf's home state, Yobe. Boko Haram has been described as a Sunni Salafi jihadist group, opposing not only Western education but Western culture and modern science as well. The term "Boko Haram" comes from the Hausa word "Boko," meaning non-Islamic education, and the Arabic word "Haram," figuratively meaning sin. The group seeks to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia, attributing societal issues to the embrace of Western civilization (Kelechi, 2014). Boko Haram is officially known as *Jama'atu Ahli-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*.

The Nigerian government initiated an action in 2009, leading to clashes and deadly confrontations with security forces. The group opposes Western education, culture, modern science, and democracy and has conducted sophisticated attacks, including bombings, since its formation (Murtada & Ahmad, 2014; Kyari, 2014; Nossiter, 2012; Hamid & Baba, 2014; Ekwueme cited in Popoola, 2012).

6. Media, Terrorism, and Boko Haram

Broadly, the media play a crucial role in the global counterterrorism effort (Ngige, Badekale, & Hamman, 2016). However, certain media forms, particularly private organizations associated with groups advocating for independent states, and unregulated social media platforms, have the potential to exacerbate various forms of terrorism and other criminal activities. Over the past years, Nigeria has faced diverse terrorism challenges, significantly impacting lives and properties valued in billions of Naira (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018). Boko Haram terrorism is one of them. The ongoing conflict with Boko Haram, an extremist group operating in northern Nigeria, presents a significant security challenge for the Nigerian government. This conflict has tragically resulted in the loss of over 10,000 lives, countless injuries, and widespread destruction of property. In addressing such challenges, the role of the media in informing and engaging the public is crucial.

A responsible and informed media plays a vital role in conflict resolution and reconciliation. By providing accurate and balanced reporting, the media can foster understanding, promote dialogue, and hold authorities accountable. This can contribute to a more peaceful and stable society. The potential of the media in this regard is immense. By highlighting the human cost of the conflict, giving voice to diverse perspectives, and promoting constructive solutions, the media can be a powerful force for good. It is therefore essential for both the government and the public to recognize and support the media's role in addressing this complex and sensitive issue.

The drumbeat of conflict, unfortunately, can become the rhythm of the news cycle. Popoola (2012) observed that insurgency and conflict provide ready-made stories, like a chef's pantry perpetually stocked with tension and drama. These narratives, while captivating audiences, can line the pockets of media houses, creating a potentially exploitative dynamic. Some, like Hoffman (2006), suggest a symbiotic relationship between insurgents and the media, both feasting on the spotlight.

In the case of Boko Haram in Nigeria, this spotlight amplifies their message, spreading grievances and potentially attracting recruits. Critics warn of this "bread and butter" syndrome, where sensationalism trumps deeper understanding. Yet, Igoe (2010) counters that professional journalists view insurgency as a vital public policy issue deserving substantial coverage. They argue that journalistic ethics, like objectivity and balance, act as a guardrail against exploitation, ensuring diverse perspectives are represented. This is not to say the media's role is simply passive observation. Hamid and Baba (2014) emphasize the media's "surveillance function," acting as a vigilant watchdog, alerting the public to impending dangers. This responsibility demands not just reporting on conflict, but analyzing and contextualizing it, illuminating the broader landscape within and beyond society.

The dance between media and insurgency is indeed a delicate one. Finding the right steps requires a commitment to responsible journalism, prioritizing accuracy, fairness, and context. Only then can the spotlight shine a light on understanding, not just fuel the flames of sensationalism.

Imagine a stage bathed in the harsh glare of publicity, where violence becomes the macabre script and fear the captive audience. This is the unsettling scenario at the heart of the debate surrounding media coverage of terrorism. On one side stand terrorist groups, desperate for attention and seeking to exploit the media's insatiable appetite for conflict. On the other, stand journalists and the public, caught in the crossfire between the right to know and the potential amplification of terror.

At the crux of the argument lies a chilling logic: terrorists, unable to afford billboards or prime-time slots, resort to violence as their twisted marketing campaign. Every explosion, every bullet fired, becomes a desperate plea for the spotlight, a twisted bid for infamy. Scholars like Ekwueme and Obayi (2012), Keranen and Sanprie (2008), and Hoffman (2003) echo this, suggesting that media coverage becomes the oxygen that fuels these flames of terror. Laqueur (1977) goes so far as to say that the success of every terrorist operation hinges on the spectacle it creates, its place in the global news cycle.

This symbiotic relationship, however, comes at a steep price. Nacos (2000) argues that attention lends terrorists legitimacy, their voices amplified through headlines and airwaves. He paints a stark picture: without the media's megaphone, a terrorist act becomes a silent scream, a tree falling unheard in the vast forest. Caught in this web of fear and responsibility, governments face a daunting dilemma. Should they silence the media, effectively censoring the narrative of terror? This, as Wilkinson (1997) points out, aligns with media censorship, a strategy employed by some states to control the flow of information and potentially stifle the glorification of terrorists. But at what cost? The public, meanwhile, craves information, hungry for details and desperate to understand the world they live in. This right to know, championed by Brinson and Stohl (2012), Ross (2007), and Picard (1981, 1986), becomes a counterpoint to government control. But can unfettered coverage, in turn, amplify the terrorists' message, playing into their hands?

Navigating this treacherous terrain requires a delicate dance, a tightrope walk between transparency and caution. Responsible journalism becomes the key, wielding fact-checking as a shield against sensationalism and prioritizing nuanced narratives over knee-jerk reactions. Only then can the media truly fulfil its role as a watchdog, illuminating the darkness without inadvertently feeding the flames.

As long as the battle for attention continues, this dance will remain. But by acknowledging the complexities, by embracing responsibility, and by prioritizing truth over spectacle, we can hope to transform the stage from a platform for terror into a space for understanding, empathy, and ultimately, perhaps, even peace.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The interplay between media, terrorism, and Boko Haram in Nigeria presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. It's a story woven from threads of fear, misinformation, and the desperate struggle for power and understanding. Media coverage in Nigeria inadvertently amplify terrorist messages and legitimize their actions through the very act of reporting. Sensationalized headlines and graphic imagery fuel fear and play into the hands of those seeking notoriety. Boko Haram has historically used media attention as a tool to spread fear, recruit new members, and gain political leverage. They understand the power of imagery and narratives, and exploit them to their advantage. But then, promoting responsible journalism that prioritizes accuracy, context, and diverse perspectives, and also, fact-checking, avoiding sensationalism, and giving voice to marginalized communities are essential in dismantling Boko Haram's manipulative tactics.

References

Azeez, A. L. (2009). The role of the media in reporting terrorism: A personal viewpoint. Published in *the Journal of Communication and Media Research*, Volume 1 No. 1, 1-15

Brinson, M. E., & Stohl, M. (2012). Media framing of terrorism: Implications for public opinion, civil liberties, and counterterrorism policies. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 5(4), 270-290.

Burgess, T. (2002). The Boko- Haram tragedy and other issues .*The Paunch News*

Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of Cynicism. The Press and the Public Good*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chukwuere, J. E. & Onyebukwa, C. F. (2018). The Impacts of Social Media on National Security: A View from the Northern and South-Eastern Region of Nigeria, *InternationalReview of Management and Marketing*, 8(5), 50-59.

Diaz-Paniagua, C. F. (2008). *Negotiating Terrorism: The Negotiation Dynamics of Four*

Ekwueme, A.C. & P.M. Obayi (2012). Boko Haram assault on Nigeria: Towards effective mass media response. *New Media and Mass Communication*, (33), 1-7.

Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95, 1–37.

Hamid, A. M., & Baba, I. M. (2014). Resolving Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgence. What role for the media? *Social and Behavioural Sciences.* 155 (2014) 14-20

Hoag, A. (2008). Measuring media entrepreneurship. *International Journal on Media Management*, 10, 74–80.

Hoffman, B. (2006). *Inside terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Igoe, J. (2010). Media attention to terrorist attacks: Causes and consequences. Project Leads Walsh, PhD, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Kampf, Z. (2014). News-Media and Terrorism: Changing Relationship, Changing Definitions. *Sociology Compass*, 8(1), pp. 1 -9. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12099

Kelechi, N. (2012) Boko Haram and 2011 Bombing in Nigeria. *Nigeria Institute of International Affairs*

Keranen, L., & Sanprie, V. (2008). "Oxygen of Publicity" and "Lifeblood of Liberty" communication scholarship on mass media coverage of terrorism for the twenty-first century. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 32(1), 232-275.

Kyari, M. (2014). Origin of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Unpublished lecture note.

Laqueur, W. (1977). *A History of Terrorism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Nacos, B.L. (2000). Accomplice or witness? The media's role in terrorism—Is the media terrorism's 'oxygen'? -A critical examination of how terrorists rely on and use various media. Current History, 99, pp.174-179.

Ngige, C.V., Badekale, A.F. & Hamman, J. I. (2016). The media and Boko haram insurgency in Nigeria: A content analysis and review. *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJPCS), 3(1), 58-65.

Nossiter,A. (2012). In Nigeria, a deadly group's rage has local roots. *The New York Times.*

Peresin, A. (2007). Mass media and terrorism. *Medij. istraž.* (5-22) IZVORNI ZNANSTVENI RAD

Picard, R.G. (1981). 'The journalist's role in coverage of terrorist events', in O.A. Alali and K.K. Eke (eds) *Media coverage of terrorism: methods of diffusion*, 40–62. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Picard, R.G. (1986). News coverage as the contagion of terrorism: Dangerous charges backed by dubious science, *Political Communication and Persuasion* 3(4), 385–400.

Popoola, I. S. (2012). Press and terrorism in Nigeria: A discourse on Boko Haram. *Global Media Journal African Edition*. 6 (1) 43-66

Pushparaj, A. (2014). An essay on the role of media. http://www.publishyourarticles.net/eng/articles/anessayontheroleofmedia.

Rajan, M. (2011). *Media in Modern India*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications.

Rather, D. (2012). Media's balancing act with terrorism. *CNN*. September 11, 2012

United Nations Counter-Terrorism Treaties. University of New York.

Weimann, G. (2008). The psychology of mass-mediated terrorism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764208321342

Wilkinson, P. (1997). The media and terrorism: A reassessment. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9(2), 51-64.

William. T, (2009). Terrorism and the cold war. *Journal of World Affairs*. 46 (2).