# Ethics of Conflict-Sensitive Journalism & Boko Haram

## Oladokun Omojola PhD  & Darlynton Yartey

Mass Communication Department,
Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State Nigeria
Correspondence email: (ola.omojola@covenantuniversity.edu.ng)

*Abstract*: This paper discusses some ethical concepts and issues as they relate to conflict-sensitive journalism. These concepts are legitimization, objectivity and fairness, among others. The salient issues are in respect of the search for a globally acceptable ethical system. They include the varieties of journalism practice that exist, the future of the reporter, the dynamic nature of his or her job and the fact that reporters constitute only one group out of many stakeholders whose interests are crucial to the survival of this brand of journalism and the media industry as a whole. The non-recognition of these stakeholders is identified as a major impediment in the way of the search for the appropriate ethical universals. Using Boko Haram insurgency as the archetype conflict, the paper identifies these stakeholders and their interests and asserts that the harmonization of these interests with those of the journalist is necessary for the creation of a suitable ethical system that can significantly guide the conflict-sensitive reporter.

*Keywords*: Conflict, conflict-sensitive journalism, ethics, insurgents, Boko Haram terrorism, media, media stakeholders, ethical concepts.

## Introduction

In 2002, an unknown armed group attacked Abidjan, the financial capital of Ivory Coast and a few other cities in simultaneous shootout that jolted the nation. At the initial stage of the attack, most Ivoirians were incognizant of any popular

insurgent activity. According to Temin (2003, p. 654), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) managed to conduct an interview with a member of the group named Corporal Kwasi. The airing of the interview provided the clue regarding the identity of the group by describing it as a rebel organization even when its members had not named themselves as such. In no time, the group's name -Mouvement Patrotique de la Cote d'Ivoire (MPCI) – and the motive behind their attack became the subjects of discussion in the nation's dialogic space.

Though MPCI had a few local media outlets that were sympathetic to its cause, the group bypassed them and went directly to BBC. This media strategy did not only ensure that the group was announced, it also implied that a BBC story on it would mean that members were into a struggle that was worth the attention of the citizens. If the story had been published by a local radio or newspaper, chances are that the story might not attract the attention it needed. The BBC report succeeded in legitimizing MPCI as a rebel group.

Besides negotiation, which acknowledges their existence, media reports also serve a vital factor in legitimizing and labeling armed bandits as insurgents, rebel groups, nationalists and the like. Boko Haram in its early days was a group which fought the Nigerian police over the killing of its founding leader Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf who had been accused of giving sermons that were capable of inciting violence. Local and foreign media reports began to refer to the group members as "Jihadists", "Radical Islamists" and Muslim Extremists. These were terms that created some legitimacy and overtly implied some kind of justification for the killings perpetrated by Boko Haram. The group took advantage of this legitimization and began planning full scale attacks on innocent citizens.

Legitimization is only one of the several ethical concepts that apply in conflict-sensitive reporting. In this paper, a set of such concepts are explained but the crux is the argument that a consideration of journalists with regards to their ethics without taking into cognizance the interests of other stakeholders in media industry needs some rethinking. A fresh media stakeholder membership model is proposed as a necessary instrument in the build up to an acceptable ethical system for conflict-sensitive reporting. Ward (2005a, p.4) notes that, the responsibilities of reporters are to the citizens. This makes journalist agents of the global public sphere. The narrow prioritization of interests in media coverage has significant impact on the outcome of conflicts around the world. The

continued right of way accorded journalism ethics smacks of "a consistent pattern that marginalizes or over-emphasizes certain sections of the population" (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 1999, p.42).

## The Search for acceptable Ethics of Conflict-sensitive Reporting and Points to Note

In the search for acceptable ethics of journalism it is important that some issues are noted. First is the different kinds of journalism practice that exist. Business journalists and their counterparts who report crime, courts, family, and government and so forth no doubt have some universals they all subscribe to. Nonetheless, there are some striking differences in the way each genre is practiced which, in turn, defines its ethics.

Second is that journalism practice is undergoing rapid changes. The advent of the Internet has made it exceedingly clear that journalism practice will never remain the same again. Singer (2010, p.89) explains that the economic, organizational, narrative and relationship structures inherent in the journalism profession are experiencing a dramatic change. This change is sequel to the collapse of the business models that were hitherto popular and the dire need to develop new methods. New business models would normally elicit new organizational structures including such things as the working

conditions and tasks to be performed by journalists. The deluge of information on media audience (Hume, 1996, p. 142) means that the era of long stories are gone as content consumers now have options more than ever about what to read and digest. Moreover, those who do not intend to be in the journalism profession are increasingly finding themselves doing a similar thing that professional journalists do either intentionally or serendipitously.

This brings us to the third point – the future. Since constant dynamism in the profession is now the norm, it becomes imperative then that what becomes of the profession and the professional is of paramount importance. If a written code is to be produced it should be such that recognizes that the profession has a future.

Lastly, journalists do not work in isolation and as a matter of fact, journalism practice exists because several other associates exist. The issue here is that the media industry has a communitarian aspect to it to the extent that justifies the dictum "I am because we are" (Moemeka, 1998, p.174). According to Moemeka, while members of the community are well aware of and cherish the preeminence of a communalistic existence, they are also mindful of the need for individualistic needs and aspirations which are extensions of those of the

community. Omojola (2008, p. 173-187) reports that:

> In addition to scholars and journalists – the only visible self-motivated search enthusiasts - no fewer than seven other active players exist, and the interests of these players (news makers, media content consumers, media users, government/media regulators, media owners, media NGOs and professional associations) are instrumental in the on-going global efforts to seek global media ethics. Careful articulation of the stakeholders' perspectives, to avoid conflict with any eventual broad-based principles, will ensure that the search for a global ethics from the continent is not lost on the path to reality.

The following figure is crafted to reflect the foregoing list of media stakeholders whose interests should be articulated in the discussion about a typical journalism ethics.

**Figure 1: Recommended stakeholders needed to evolve acceptable ethics for a typical journalism practice**



In this paper, we present a modified set of stakeholders that should be recognized in order to develop an acceptable ethical system for conflict-sensitive journalism.

**Contextualizing the Ethics of Conflict Sensitive Journalism**

Three ways of contextualizing the ethics of journalism are visible - personal, local and global. The personal ethics perspective stems from the averment that while the global ethics is accentuated by its universals, it is also individually operated. This means that the self cannot be overemphasized in any ethical system. No matter how strong a global ethical standard may be, its success is hinged on that individual who operates it. According to

Omojola (2014), the integrity of any global standard that emerges does not reside in that document but in the operational capacity of the journalist; meaning that personal initiatives are extremely important in the way journalists practice their profession.

Another perspective to ethics is that which wants ethical standards to be based on the local environments in which the journalist operates. This implies that the customs, traditions, educational backgrounds and so forth matter to ethics. Afrocentrism (Asante, 1991) seems to adequately capture this perspective, stating that phenomena should be approached from the perspective of the African. This view undermines both colonial and post-colonial influences on Africans and wants those influences systematically replaced if it is possible. The local perspective to ethics ignores the globalizing world and maintains that in the event of a clash between the two cultures, Africa should take preeminence. Things that are in the interest of Africa should be promoted not necessarily to the detriment of the foreign things but at least to the favor of Africa and Africans. This perspective favors provincialism to globalization.

The third perspective is that which enthuses about the world as a global village. This is predicated on the belief that the journalist is no longer responsible to a local audience but a global one and therefore, his or her profession is influenced by the global environment. The digital culture shaped by the advent of the Internet implies that people are abandoning the traditional way of receiving news which is characterized by heavy editorial control and lack of feedback access. Digital technology has not only provided access and a cheap one for that matter, but is also a threat to the journalism profession. Furthermore, the Internet has increased the ability of the audience to cross check facts in order to know if a journalist is telling a true story.

The dynamism that characterizes journalism has made imperative a reassessment of the ethics of the practice. A multidisciplinary approach is necessary as evidenced in the work of Rao and Wasserman (2007), which informs the communitarian idea. This paper argues that at the three levels, this multidisciplinary approach is necessary for the formulation of acceptable ethics of conflict-sensitive reporting.

## Ethical Concepts of Journalism Practice and Relevance to the Conflict Sensitive Media

Journalism is considered to be of high regard and unique (Tebbel 1966, p. 79). In the United States, for instance, it enjoys the protection of the First Amendment to the American constitution. In Nigeria the Freedom of Information Act, while not specifically mentioning journalism practice, enables

reporters' access to information sources. This has made the profession of paramount importance to the public and government which, in most cases, favor a form of control over the media. Such control is deemed necessary with the advent of Internet which is seriously leveling the playing field and dynamically covering the gap that exists between the conceptual parlance "public Interest" and the "interested publics" (Compaine, 2002 p.26). The unfolding dynamism implies that the concepts that shape the ethics of the practice of journalism should be redefined.

Objectivity in news presentation prevents personal opinion or bias. To most journalists it is a "strategic ritual" (Gaye, 1972, pp. 660-679) and some professional communicators believe it influences the way news is accepted (Darley and Smith, 1992, p. 103). According to Hoffman (2007, p. 200), objectivity in media journalism is a commitment which means it is some sort of habitual practice of transparency in reporting, presenting all sides to a story, and using verifiable data for narrative rather than judgment. Objectivity is regarded as challenging because the interested parties who demand it do not usually specify how it should be assessed. For instance, to guard against the broadcast of biased presentations, laws on public broadcasting in the United States require adherence to objectivity and balance in reporting but how both should be enforced is not formally documented.

The conditions for mass media performance are not just the availability of a medium, content, audience, and that contents must have some effect (McNelly, 1966: 345-357) but also that the journalist must be objective in his or her reporting. The concern in focus in this work is that objectivity should have an all-inclusive definition. What the term means to a reporter is not the same as that of the audience of that reporter. Neither can it be the same with the advertiser or other media user.

Objectivity is of great interest to the journalist but other stakeholders in the media industry weigh it on different scales. What this means is that for an acceptable conflict-sensitive journalism to emerge, a kind of balance of interests (Sorauf, 1957, p.630) is expected. What should emerge is a compromise. Compromise in this case may not necessarily mean the promotion of common good but should show that the deal struck took cognizance of the interests of most or all the parties concerned.

The concept of truthfulness further highlights why the interests of other stakeholders must be taken into account when formulating ethics for conflict-sensitive journalism. A journalist is asked to publish the

truth and nothing but the truth. The concept of truth cannot mean the same thing for a journalist, an insurgent, a militant or kidnapper. To a terrorist, the killing and destruction of the opponents who oppose his terrorism activity likely represents the truth. Such bizarre acts would involve suppressing information and attacking whoever attempts to unearth his or her evil behavior. The argument in this presentation is that for the conflict-sensitive journalism to prosper it is crucial that the journalist contextualizes his ethics within what obtains in the entire media industry.

The concept of fairness to the journalist may not be the same with other stakeholders. McMahon (2010, p.91) corroborates this, stating that what often seems fair to the parties to an arrangement and to non-participant observers might seem unfair to others. Cole and Zieky (2001, p.369) report that no acceptable universal has emerged in spite of research efforts at evolving the appropriate definition of fairness. One thing is however certain: group differences constitute a critical issue whenever one attempts to define fairness. However, closing the gap among the stakeholders in a group can make a long drawn definition less cumbersome.

The militant or insurgent in a conflict being covered by a reporter is a stakeholder in the media industry.

Newsmakers are the people in the news and the agenda-setting ability or capability of a journalist is invariably dependent on his or her "agenda-getting" competency, which is determined by what the newsmaker is willing to release as information. This position makes the reporter less effective or precarious should the newsmaker refuse to cooperate even if the reporter is a daredevil investigator operating dramaturgically. This suggests that the expectation of the newsmaker should form part of the agenda of any discussion on ethics of conflict-sensitive reporting. Group differences need to be properly examined before a workable ethical system for conflict-sensitive reporting can be created.

## Conflict and Conflict-sensitive Journalism

Conflict can be contextualized as a phenomenon of humanity, meaning that as humans continue to exist, conflicts will never cease. Persons are either creating conflicts or stopping them. Conflicts exist with all other species of life but they assume a multidimensional meaning at the level of humans. There is hardly anything in the universe and heavens that humans do not have conflict with – God, fellow humans, animals, the environment, the elements and so forth. Conflict arises as a result of one party's intrusion into another and a response to that intrusion and it wouldn't make any

difference whether that intrusion is psychological, physiological, spiritual or otherwise. Few types can be identified Howard (2003):

- Change-sensitive conflicts are those that exist between an established order and those who disagree with that order. This may either be intellectual, violent or non-violent.
- Goal-sensitive conflict arises when a party decides to purse an ambition or aspire to a new level which is being resisted by the other party. The reaction or counter-reaction leading to conflict in this case would depend on the magnitude of the resources involved.
- Hate-sensitive conflict is driven by a violent desire of one party to dominate or decimate the other and violent rejection of this desire by the opposition. This type of conflict is in most cases violent, resulting in hate speeches, fisticuffs, battles or wars.

Journalism is basically a mediation profession. One reason why journalism exists is because interests and conflicts exist and there is a need to balance these interests. This can be done through proper coverage. "Proper" in this case encompasses the ethical issues involved as explained above – legitimization, truth, objectivity, and so forth. In many nations around the world, government and citizens are believed to be two sides with journalists acting as the mediators. The media is regarded as the market place where buyers and sellers meet to do business and pay a token for doing so.

One question keeps lingering: Why is it many journalists, in spite of exercising restraints and fairness in their coverage of conflicts, are still not able to mediate to the point of conflict resolution? As of mid 2016, Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria had drastically reduced compared to the previous two years. This was attributed to renewed military response and support from foreign countries rather than the efforts of reporters. This article submits that for journalism practice to have the desired positive effect on conflict resolution it is important that the ethics that drives the profession take into cognizance all the interests that are represented in that conflict.

The linear way of reporting, which makes a journalist think mainly of his or media content consumers and advertisers, constitutes serious concern to observers. According to Howard (2004, p.16), journalist should "avoid reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides." They should find other affected interests and include their stories, opinions and goals. This article identifies those stakeholders who the journalist should consider discoursing with as a step toward better ethics. The discourse process

involves the harvesting of these interests and what they represent with a view to determining how they affect journalists' ethical conduct in the public interest. Ward (2005b) calls this coalition-building among journalists and the stakeholders with the intent of writing a code of ethics that is widely accepted.

## Stakeholders in the Conflict-sensitive Media Industry

Omojola (2008, p. 173-187) also discusses the error that characterizes any typical search for journalistic ethics. According to him, it is usual for searchers to look at ethics only or mainly from the journalist-audience perspective. This stems from the erroneous perspective that a reporter's concept of social responsibility should be seen primarily from the need of the world citizens who consumes news content. The linear perspective zeroes in on journalist and the audience and this obviously is not inclusive enough to produce any reasonable ethical formula. Prioritizing journalists and their audiences has been the major impediment toward the establishment of the right ethical guide for journalism practice. Gilman & Lewis (1996) note that ethical perspectives are not only socially and culturally constructed; they are also embedded in political and economic interests.

To resolve this error, Omojola (2008) proposes that consensus among the stakeholders (see Figure 1) is necessary for the formulation of a universally accepted global system. What this implies is that any universally accepted ethical system should be socially, politically, culturally and economically configured and such configuration is certainly beyond the purview of the journalist and his or her audience alone.

This presentation still subscribes to the multi-stakeholder perspective but in the case of conflict sensitive journalism some modification is necessary to accommodate additional stakeholders as noted earlier. For instance, arms suppliers in violent conflicts are rarely mentioned whereas they are the force that ignites and sustains terrorist actions. There are also agents or agencies (to stakeholders) whose interests must be factored in. For instance the Nigerian army declared wanted, detained and later released three persons – Ahmed Bolori, Ahmed Salkida and Aisha Wakil – who were suspected to be agents of Boko Haram, one of the world's deadliest terror groups. Wakil had openly declared, at least once, that striking a peace accord between the group and the Nigerian government could bring peace prospects. Besides agents, terror groups also have backers who wield both political and financial influence though suspected persons in this regard have always come out to deny links with violent groups. Using Boko Haram as an archetype,

the following stakeholders are recommended:

- Terror Group, including their agents and backers: The Boko Haram terror has always acknowledged the backing of God or Allah in all its activities. However, this backing has been found to go beyond an unseen almighty being. A former governor of Borno State of Nigeria constantly faced the allegation that he was a staunch supporter and financier of the group. Besides that, two law makers from the same Borno State (the base of Boko Haram) were quizzed by the country's state security services over the allegation that they were among Boko Haram financiers. The interests of the group and its agents should be critically examined to see how they could influence the ethics of reporters.

- Journalists: Journalists are the professional communicators. They are trained unlike their pseudo-counterparts popularly referred to as citizen journalists. Professional journalists are the most prominent focus of the search for the ethics of conflict-sensitive journalism.

- Arms suppliers: This category has significant interest in any typical conflict and their economic interests are crucial to

a conflict (Morah and Omojola, 2011, p.157). Their interest in a conflict is complicated because the same suppliers supplying arms to rebels could also be the same supplying their opponents.

- The audience comprises the news consumers. Coincidentally, they are among the victims of conflicts.

- Government: Government seems to be most the popular stakeholder. Besides the fact it is usually a party to the conflict, it is also empowered by law to regulate the media and in a conflict situation endeavors to control it. In the case of Boko Haram, several government agencies are involved including the armed forces, the Presidency and so forth.

- Media owners: These are the investors from whom journalists receive their pay as salaries or allowances. The ethics that drives their businesses and investments should be considered in any discussion about the ethics of conflict-sensitive journalism. Social media operators are also included in this category.

- Media users – These are the advertisers and their agents, public relations officials, commercial news couriers and the like.

- Non-governmental Organizations: NGO's have been

playing a significant role in Nigeria. Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) is just one of the several NGO's involved in the Boko Haram affair and has been featuring significantly, calling on the government to ensure that the Chibok girls kidnapped by the Boko Haram Group are set free. The group has also called on the government to protect journalists and all those involved in the attempt to solve the problem.

• Foreign Countries: Embassies of foreign nations in the country experiencing conflicts have often been targets of terrorists. The American embassies in both Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salam (Tanzania) were bombed simultaneously but extra security caution taken by embassies in Nigeria may have prevented Boko Haram from attacking embassy buildings in Lagos or Abuja.

• International (multilateral) organizations: Terrorist activities constitute a serious concern to multilateral and global organizations. The Boko Haram insurgents attacked the United Nations office in Abuja in 2012 and similar attacks have been carried out in other countries. Such attacks have made the global body an interest party and a stakeholder since it has the task of ensuring global peace and security

*Figure 2: Recommended stakeholders needed to evolve acceptable ethics for conflict-sensitive journalism practice*

## Suggested agenda and fora for stakeholder discussions

Regular meetings and interaction media of stakeholders, both formal and informal are necessary for any unversally acceptable ethical system to emerge. One meeting may never be enough to thrash all the issues involved. The challenge of getting the agents of terrorists to attend meetings becomes obvious as they would not want to be seen publicly associating with insurgents in many cases. However, in the case of Boko Haram, at least one of the group's agents had once voluntereed to represent its interest at meetings with the Nigerian government. In the case of equipment suppliers, it is possible to trace the arms used in a conflict to a country. It is the resposnbility of the ethical searchers to get those countries involved to participate in the meetings. Agenda in respect of journalists may include the following:

- The extent to which the journalist can go in the coverage of conflict events.
- What do the ethical elements of objectivity, fairness, truth and so forth mean to the journalist and other stakeholders especially in the face of the attempt by the warring parties to control the media?
- To what extent can the reporter's working tools be used in a conflict situation?

- What would be the insurance cover for journalist working in a conflict-ridden environment?
- How much help are the NGOs or the professional associations willing to give the reporter who finds himself or herself in trouble doing his or her job.
- What are the government rules that govern the coverage of conflicts and do those rules conflict with those of the journalists?
- How far are the insurgents willing to allow a journalist probe their agents or backers? Is there any red line?
- What are the roles of international organizations especially the United Nations with regard to conflict sensitive reporting? How do these roles conflict with those of journalists?
- What do media users and news content consumers want from conflict-sensitive reporters?
- What should be the role of other countries regarding the coverage of events in conflict-affected environments.

As these issues are discussed over and over again by stakeholders, mutual understanding becomes possible, not simply in terms of the ethics of the journalists but also towards finding a lasting peace to make the stakeholder community a better a place.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

One issue that may bother a stakeholder meeting enthusiast is the fear that some participants could disorient interactions and meetings, thereby frustrating stakeholders and their good intentions. For instance, government could misread these intentions and harass journalists and stakeholder representatives or agents. Boko Haram agents have accused the government of incessant harassment and treating them as though they are also terrorists. This is why we recommend that media scholars, who are more intellectually positioned, should assist journalists in conceptualizing such stakeholder meetings, the agenda and other issues involved. In this way, media scholars become part of the stakeholders, specifically as backers of professional communicators.

## References

Abubakar, A.A. (2011). Political participation in social media during the 2011 presidential electioneering. In Oladokun Omojola et al (eds.), Media, terrorism and political communication in a multi-cultural environment. Ota: ACCE, pp. 445-452.

Asante, M (1991). The Afrocentric Idea in education. Journal of Negro Education, 60, 170-179.

Cole, N. & Zieky, M.J. (2001.) The new faces of fairness. Journal of Educational Measurement 38(4), 369-382.

Compaine, B. (2002). Global media. Foreign Policy,133, 20-22+24+26+28.

Darley, W.K. & Smith, R.E (1993). Advertising claim objectivity: antecedents and effects. Journal of Marketing, 57(4), 100-113.

Deacon D., Pickering, M., Golding P., & Murdock G. (1999). Researching communications. London: Arnold Publishers.

Gaye, T. (1972). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. The American Journal of Sociology, 77(4), 660-679

Gilman, S.C & Lewis, W. (1996). Public service ethics: A global dialogue. Public Administration Review 56 (6), 517-524

Hoffman, M. (2007). Academic's dictionary of mass communication. New Delhi: Academic (India) Publishers.

Howard, R (2003). Conflict sensitive journalism. URL (consulted August 2016) https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-csj-handbook

Hume, E. (1996). The new paradigm for news source. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 546 (The Media and Politics), 141-153.

James, W. (1890) The principles of psychology. New York: Dover Publications (Reprinted 1950).

McMahon, C. (2010) Disagreement about fairness . Philosophical Topics, 38(2), 91-110.

McNelly, J.T. (1966). Mass Communication and the Climate for Modernization in Latin America. Journal of Inter-American Studies, 8 (3), 345-357.

Moemeka, A.A (1998). Communalistic societies: Community and self-respect as African values. In C. Christians & M. Traber (eds.), Communication ethics and universal value. Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage, pp. 170-193.

Morah, N.D. & Omojola, O. (2011). Nigeria, media and economic effects of terrorism. In O. Omojola (ed.), Communication perspectives of terrorism and conflict resolution. Saarbrucken: LAP Lambert Publishing, pp. 156-178.

Omojola, O. (2008) Global Ethics Search: Exploring the Perspectives of local media stakeholders. Ecquid Novi: Africa Journalism Studies, 29 (2), 173-187.

Omojola, O. (2014). Ethical Search in Africa and the Potential for Personal Morals. In L. Oso, R. Olatunji & N. Owens-Ibie (eds).

Journalism and Media in Nigeria: Context Issues and Practice. Concord: Canada University Press.

Rao, S. & Wasserman, H. (2007). Global Media Ethics Revisited: A post-colonial critique. Global Media and Communication, 3(29), 29-50.

Singer, J. B. (2010). Journalism ethics amid structural change. Daedalus, 139 (2), 89-99.

Sorauf, F.J. (1957). The public interest reconsidered. The Journal of Politics, 19 (4), 616-639.

Tebbel, J. (1966). Journalism: Public Enlightenment or Private Interest? Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 363(Ethics in America: Norms and Deviations), 79-86.

Temin, J. (2013). Considering the role of the BBC in African conflict. Review of African Political Economy, 30(98), 654-660.

Ward, S. J. (2005a) Philosophical foundations for global journalism ethics. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 20(1), 3-21.

Ward, S. J. (2005b). Global Journalism Ethics, URL (consulted February 2008): www.journalismethics.ca.