Peace Journalism Imperatives for Conflict Resolution in the Era of Social Media Ubiquity in Nigeria: Myth or Reality?

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Abstract

The emergence of social media platforms together with the ancillary appliances, such as android phone technology has liberalized information dissemination thereby popularizing the concept of citizen journalism. Today, anybody can report developing news stories and circulate them to the audience who are always eager to keep abreast of the goings-on in the society. Whilst this trend may be considered useful from the prism of information conveyance, it portends serious danger for the society particularly as it concerns ethical misconduct and conflict escalation. This paper seeks to explore the implications of social media ubiquity on peace journalism with particular emphasis on conflict resolution and attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria.

Introduction

Mass media exist in human societies primarily to provide the citizenry information that are necessary for their general well-being. The role of information dissemination through the media used to be the sole responsibility of professional journalists, who through their training, understand the basic principles of journalism, including the ethical importance of reporting the truth without undermining balance and fairness.

In the last few decades, particularly with the emergence of computer systems, android and i-phone technologies as well as the Internet, the concept of citizen journalism has gained popularity and dissemination of information has become much more rapid.As Guanah (2018, p.26) aptly posit,

> The advent of social media has made anyone with a phone and data to become an emergency journalist, a blogger, owner of an online publication, or an opinion moulder. Information is now rapidly disseminated by individuals who can equally create podcast/vodcast - digital recording of a radio/video broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio/video player.

According to the Internet World Stats and Usage Statistics released in 2019, Nigeria ranked sixth amongst the top twenty countries withthe highest number of Internet users. The countries above it are China, India, USA, Indonesia, and Brazil. With an estimated population of 200,962,417, the population of Internet users in the country as at 31st December 2000 was 200,000. However, within an interval of nine years, precisely as at 30th June 2019, the population of Internet users in the country has grown so astronomically by 61,643 per cent to 123,352,009 (https://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm).

The implication of this is that there has equally been exponential growth of social media, which has made the concept of citizen journalism much more popular.In fact, according to Heravi and Harrower, (2017), the agility of social media in announcing breaking news events more rapidly than traditional media has changed the journalistic landscape.Citizens use social media as a form of direct reportage. Social media contents form a significant part of the digital contents generated every day, and provide platforms for voices that would not reach the broader public through traditional journalistic media alone.

Whilst the foregoing has opened up information space thereby creating a new wave of online journalists, providing alternative avenues of keeping abreast of events and issues in the society, it has, no doubt, raised fresh questionsand challenges. For instance, cases of unethical conduct have

been on the rise and dissemination of fake news and outright false information has become the order of the day. This, according to Obiorah (2018), is because the untrained and the goon who are capable of acquiring digital devices now create contents and keep gates on what the public consume.

More worrisome is the adverse effect of this state of affairs on peace building and conflict resolution which are key variables in sustainable development.Little wonder, we arepresently confronted with an avalanche of anonymously unfounded social media reportage of obscenity, circulation of gory pictures and images, and dissemination of fake news that constantly keep our societies charged and at a precipice of violent crises.In view of the implications of the foregoing, this paper seeks to highlight the effect of citizen journalism on peace building and conflict resolution through peace journalism.

Domains of Peace Journalism

The news media play a central role in the life of every society because they serveas key sources of information for citizens. According to Philo, Miller and Happer (2015, p. 446)), news is central to daily life because, "One of the first places that people go to find out what is happening in the world is the media". We need news in everyday life because, "… news tells us what we do not experience directly and thus renders otherwise remote happenings observable and meaningful" (Molotch & Lester, 1974, p. 101). The mass media is so important that Parenti (1993) argued: "For many people, an issue does not exist, until it appears in the news media."

One of the roles of the media is to build peace within the society where they exist and operate consistent with the social responsibility theory and development media theories. In other words, journalists, editors and media practitioners are socially responsible in the exercise of their journalistic duties of gathering and reporting news.

The term peace journalism is used by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) to define a situation whereby editors and reporters make choices – of what to report and how toreport it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value nonviolentresponses to conflict.Peace journalism uses the insights of conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting, provides a new route map tracing the connections betweenjournalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their journalism –

the ethics of journalistic intervention, and builds an awareness of non-violence and creativity into the practical job of everyday editing and reporting.

According to Çiftcioğlu (2017), being a pro-peace person/journalist does not automatically make one a peace journalist, because peace journalism insists on a specific code or set of rules that are argued to make a conflict more transparent thus opening up possibilities for peaceful solutions. Thus, peace journalism is the kind of journalism that strives to prevent conflict from moving from a latent to a manifest level in order to avoid the violence that is often the main characteristic of manifest conflict.

It goes without saying therefore that peace journalism is a brand of journalism practiced by journalists who are disposed to building peace within the society in which they operate, who are obligated to fairness, truth and balance in their reportage, and whose major preoccupation is not pandering to the whims of their paymaster or toadying the egos of either of the parties in a conflict. Their major goal is to initiate dialogue and sustained conversation on the best ways to de-escalate the issues in question and pave the way for amicable resolution.

Elements of Peace Journalism

Peace journalism is a specialized brand of journalism, which require proper training and requisite motivation. It is, according to Tehranian (2002),concerned with transforming conflicts from their violent channels into constructive forms byconceptualising news, empowering the voiceless, and seeking common grounds that unify rather than divide human societies.

To realise the pristine objectives of building and sustaining societal peace through journalism practice, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) as well as Tehranian (2002) have prescribed what they termed the "10 commandments" of peace journalism, which should guide both professional and non-professional journalists in the course of news reporting.They include:

a) Never reduce the parties in human conflict to two. Remember that when two elephants fight, the grass gets hurt. Pay attention to the poor grass.

b) Identify the views and interests of all parties to human conflicts. There is no single truth. There are many truths.

c) Do not be hostage to one source particularly those of governments that control the source of information.

d) Develop a good sense of skepticism. Remember that reporting is representation. Bias is endemic to human conditions. You, your media organisation, and your sources are not exceptions.

e) Give voice to the oppressed and peacemakers to represent and empower them.

f) Seek peaceful solutions to conflict problems, but never fall prey to panaceas.

g) Your representation of conflict problems can become part of the problem if it exacerbates dualism and hatred.

h) Your representation of conflict problems can become part of the solution if it employs the creative tensions in any human conflict to seek common ground and nonviolent solutions.

i) Always exercise the professional media ethics of accuracy, veracity, fairness, and respect for human rights and dignity.

j) Transcend your own ethnic, national, or ideological biases to see and represent the parties to human conflicts fairly and accurately.

There is no denying the fact the import of the foregoing submissions was to ensure utmost professionalism which is necessary in resolving conflict rather than stoking the embers of internecine violence that may threaten the society and the populace. Omenugha (2013) quoted the former Secretary-General of United Nations Organization, Kofi Anan, as saying that by giving voice and visibility to all the parties in any conflict, including the poor, the marginalized and members of minorities, the media can help remedy inequalities, the corruption, the ethnic tension and the human right abuse that are always the root causes of many conflicts. Because most citizen journalists are untrained on the basic professional and ethical principle of journalism, they observe the peace journalism principle more by default.

Social Media, Citizen Journalism and Conflict Resolution

One of the dramatic changes that have been brought about by the Internet is that it has broken the monopoly on the distribution of information that was hitherto under the control of media moguls and practitioners who act as gatekeeper and determine what the public are served. The existence of numerous social media platforms buoyed by high-speed Internet facilities has given impetus to citizens' involvement in journalistic activities of information gathering and dissemination of uncensored facts.

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. (Glasser, 2006). According to Miller (2019), people with no news-media organizational ties have taken advantage of the convenience and low cost of social computing technologies by publishing their own

stories,otherwise known as user-generated contents. These people are referred to as citizen journalists. A citizen journalist is therefore an individual who is not a trained journalist, who nonetheless, may report on his or her neighbourhood or community by gathering, preparing, collecting, photographing, recording, writing, editing, reporting, or publishing of news or information that concerns local, national, or international events, or other matters of public interest. Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 9) simply defined citizen journalism as the act of a citizen, or group of citizens who play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information, while Nah (2008, p. 64) defined citizen journalists as individuals (not considered professional journalists), who produce, disseminate, and exchange a wide variety of news and information, ranging from current topics to common interests to individual issues.

It has been argued that the intent of the participation of the citizens in journalism is to provide the independent, reliable,accurate, and wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.However, we are not unmindful of the implication of allowing journalistic novices and greenhorns inundate public spaces and domains with information and details that are adverse to peace, public taste, morally depraved, fake and unfounded, especially in a society like ours which is polarized along ethnic, religious, political and other primordial lines.As Obiorah (2018, p. 8) put it, "The advent of the Internet and new media technologies which offers unlimited opportunities to upload, and share content for public consumption has thrown up new challenges of regulating the media space. Topics that hitherto could not make it to traditional media have nowadays unlimited space to be published on citizen journalism sources, especially news portals, Facebook and blogs."

While we may not blame the mass media for creating and exacerbating violent social conflicts in Nigeria, they can intensifysuch conflicts through their reportage. The media can be a major catalyst turning a small fire into a raging inferno" (Wolfsfeld, 2001, p. 107). A case at hand was during the Rwandan genocide when "The Rwandian Radio Television Libre des Milles Colines played a crucial role in initiating the slaughter of more than half a million people in less than 100 hundred days"(Bratic, 2008, p. 488).

As Tehrenian (2002)has insisted, journalists have to consider whether their work will be part of the problem or part of the solution – opening up possibilities for non-violent solutions to conflict. In his words, reporting is representation and your representation of conflict problems can become part of the problem if it exacerbates dualisms and hatred. Therefore,journalists must always exercise the professional media ethics of accuracy, veracity, fairness, and respect for human rights

and dignity", since how a conflict is represented can become part of the solution if it employs the creative tensions in any human conflict to seek common ground and nonviolent solutions.

According to Mogekwu (2012), the kind of journalism that helps bring about peace is that which is discerning and can understand the mood and context in which an event occurs. It is journalism that understands the people involved in an event, their psychology and sociology, religion, and psyche, and the nuances surrounding the event as well as the consequences and ramifications of the conflict. This kind of journalism, as Futamura (2010) posited, inspires people, prompts them to reflect and helps them to learn about others. Citizen journalists are completely bereft of this knowledge and they care less about the effect of their information.

Being untrained and utterly ignorant of the ethical burden placed on those who report news, citizen journalists are much more prone to be biased, unfair and unbalanced in their reportage; and all these are conflict enablers. The attendant frustration with citizen journalism in Nigeria was borne out clearer by the Nigerian Minister of Information and National Orientation when he stated, "There was a time when the spoken and written words were not challenged or questioned, but today, it is not so.... about 50% of what we read in the social media is not true but unfortunately even when it is not credible, it goes viral and people believe the fake stories." (Guanah, 2018, p. 34)

Conclusion

Peace is vital to national development and peace-building and conflict resolution is the task of all and sundry, including the mass media and the general public. In the discharge of their responsibility of reporting events, news media are not only expected to be fair and truthful, but they should ensure balance in their reportage. While the Nigeria media have been grappling with this onerous task, the advent of the Internet and the social media have thrown upon them and the societies with yet another challenges to counter the groundswell of misinformation, fake news and pejoratives reeled by citizen journalists.

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