

Examining the Media as Channels of Conflict Generation

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Abstract

Wilson, (2013, p.16) and Omenugba, (2013, 0.2) advanced so many reasons for conflict in the world. Not found in their lists is where the media, an acknowledged agent for the courier of information, is a source of conflict. How is the media a channel for conflict generation? This is the question we will be eliciting answers to, as we situate this investigation under the social responsibility theory. A survey was adopted, using fifty (50) respondents from three media houses: the Nigeria Television Authority, NTA; the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation, CRBC; Hit FM, a private radio station located in Calabar and lecturers of Mass Communication Studies, the University of Calabar, Unical; and the Cross River University of Technology, Crutech. The result of the findings show that the media as channels of communication have also constituted themselves sometimes into channels of conflict generation, through scurrilous writing, indecent remarks and intemperate language. We therefore recommend that the media should be circumspect in reporting sensitive issues that could be divisive by eschewing the use of pejorative, denigrating or incendiary remarks about individuals, their ethnicity, religion or other idiosyncrasies.

Keywords: Media, Channels, Conflict generation

Introduction

In the words of Omenugba, (2013, p.2), we live in a world that is ridden with conflict and crises. From the climate change, war on terror, militarism and warfare, world poverty, financial meltdown, fast moving pandemics to human rights abuses, etc, the world each day, according to Omenugba, draws to the brink of precipice. Wilson (2013, p. 16) re-echoing Omenugba advanced reasons for conflict.

Nigeria and other societies, has faced a lot of these crises in the present day. Omenugba and Ukwueze (2011) in an overview of crises in Nigeria between May 1999 and September 2000 noted an average of one bloody clash per

month. Pate, (2012,p.55), reports that there is an unending violent outburst in the world which has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, led to the maiming of hundreds of others, resulted in the damaging and poisoning of established relationships plus the destruction of property of inestimable costs. Among these violent outbursts, provocative media publications form a part. As one contemplates on the role the media could play in the midst of these crises in the world one wonders why the media as channels of communication can constitute themselves sometimes into channels of conflict generation. This paper provides evidence to buttress this assertion.

THE MEDIA AND PROVOCATIVE PUBLICATIONS

The press is engaged in collecting, analyzing verifying and presenting news regarding current events, trends, issues, people groups and society. Since the society depends on the media for information, this makes the existence of the press inevitable, (Udoakah, 2010).

Unfortunately, some Journalists attitude causes certain infractions thereby, breaching public peace. In every country, there are always sections of the media, which mis-use the right of freedom of expression with undesirable consequences to the society. Following the evidence provided below, it is the view of this paper that certain media products like scurrilous writing or indecent remarks directed at a religious group could spark off friction. Such amounts to journalistic impropriety, and could promote communal discord. Below are instances of three selected provocative media publications in the world:

Paris attack: Wednesday, January, 2015

Two young gunmen, identified as brothers, drove to the French capital, heavily armed, shot sporadically, fleeing the scene, shouting, revenge over Allah and Prophet Mohammed.

Information sources had it that the primary reason for the Paris attack was when the French satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo” published satirical images of the prophet, depicting him as -holding a je suis Charlie sign; and, -depicting Prophet Mohammed as shedding a tear.

In the wake of the crisis, twelve people including eight staff of the newspaper died in the attack on Charlie Hebdo’s office in Paris. The Al Qaeda group,

through the chief, Ayman Al Zawahiri, claimed responsibility for the Paris attack. The statement was also collaborated by the senior Al Qaeda branch leader on an on-line video. Part of the statements credited to these leaders, as reason for the attack was, "They carried out the shooting to teach the culprits that there is a limit to the freedom of expression", (extract from Aljazeera news, Wednesday, January, 2015).

Britain:

Still on the foreign scene, a journalist by name Salmon Rushdie, published a book in 1988 titled, "Satanic verses" in which the person of Prophet Mohammed was mudsling, according to the Moslem faithful. In other words, intemperate language was used against Prophet Mohammed in the said publication.

This angered the Muslim community, worldwide. It drew the wrath of the Iranian religious leaders. A ransom was placed on the author of the book for anyone with useful information to his where about to produce him, dead or alive. The author who is on the wanted list of this religious group has been on the run, to this day.

Nigeria:

Back home, incidents of religious upheavals happened sometimes in Kaduna state, with particular reference to the silver bird occasion featuring Miss World Beauty pageant. Eyewitness report that some of the Islamic faithful present in the event complained and condemned in entirety the nudity of the female contestants. In their view, such is against Islamic faith.

In the midst of the storm, a female journalist, Isioma Daniel, who was covering the ceremony, in her publication, (quoted in This Day Newspaper, Saturday, 16th November, 2002) wrote:

"if Prophet Mohammed were to be alive,
he would have approve of the
competition".

This publication angered the Moslem community in Nigeria, who placed a ransom on the female journalist for anyone with useful information to produce her, dead or alive. This media practitioner who resigned her appointment with the media house has been on the run since the incident.

Viewing the aforementioned media publications, and relating such to the statements credited to justices Blackstone and Wendell Holmes (Ogbondah, 2003), can one still advocate for an unrestrained press. This question can best be answered in the eyes of the social responsibility theory.

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory is based on the assumption that “media serve essential functions in society. Therefore, it should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society. These obligations are to be met by setting high professional standards in communication of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. In accepting and discharging these obligations, the media should be self-regulatory within the framework of law and established institutions. In the public interest, the media should underplay that news which might lead to crime, violence and social tension. The media should be pluralist, should reflect the diversity of their society and allow access to various points of view, including the right to reply.

It is this diversity and pluralism of society that has informed certain persons and groups to call the attention of media practitioners, to take heed not to disturb public peace. For instance Wilson (2013, p. 14), warned that the media must reflect on the consequence of their reports. Thus, before the media present a story to the public they must examine the likely effect of such a story on the society. This will, according to Wilson, be showing social responsibility.

The Press, (2013, p. 33) in one of its publications has also warned that the media should be circumspect in reporting sensitive issues that could be divisive by eschewing the use of pejorative, denigrating or incendiary remarks about individual, their ethnicity, religion or other idiosyncrasies. The media should, according to, The Press, promote issue based on debates that focus on challenges of under development, infrastructure, good governance, job creation and national security to steer the emergent leadership that will be imbued with democratic ethos of accountability, integrity, rule of law and repugnance of all corrupt tendencies.

In the view of this work, the lack of infractions to good journalistic behavior shall be the cardinal objectives of the media to ensure that no media product disturbs public peace; promotes communal discord and breaches religious harmony in the country. The events outlined above are in dissonance to those advocating for a free press like justices Holmes and Blackstone of the United States Supreme Court.

Methodology

The research adopted the survey in the investigation. The population of the study was Mass Communication lecturers from the University of Calabar, unical, and the Cross River University of Technology, Crutech. Also, media workers from the Nigerian Television Authority, NTA, the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation, CRBC, and Hit FM, a private radio station located in calabar, Cross River State. The questionnaire was used to gather data. It was administered on 50 media workers and lecturers in these research site. The random sampling technique was adopted. Of the eighty copies of the questionnaire administered, 50 copies were fully completed and returned; 30 copies were either poorly completed or not returned. Data were collated and presented in tables, yielding related percentages.

Discussion of findings and results

The data generated from the respondents yielded the following discussion and results. As journalists work in the public domain, they can hardly escape public scrutiny in their activities, conduct and professional behavior, both as individuals and as a group.

When asked “who and or what is responsible for most religious violence in the society?” 41 of the respondents, representing 82% said that differences in religions could be responsible for most upheavals, while 9 of the respondents, representing 18% mentioned ‘secular’ reasons that could be behind religious violence in the society. However, all the respondents agreed that there are certain media products that could be termed ‘provocative’ such as the evidences provided in this study. The findings agree with Mallam Garba Mohammed and Wilson (2013) who opined that the media as channels of communication have also constituted themselves sometimes into channels of conflict generation.

On whether the “media is free to lay whatever sentiment it pleases before the public” 30 respondents, representing 60% said ‘No’. Their position is in

line with Wilson, (2015) and they made reference to the Nigerian press council (NPC) and the Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) who are the regulators of the journalism profession. According to these respondents, journalists should be guided by the ethics of the profession and principally, by the social responsibility system. However, 20 respondents, representing 40% agree with Justices Blackstone and Wendell Holmes (quoted in Ogbondah, (2003), who strongly believe that the media should be free to publish whatever sentiments it pleases before the public. To forbid it, according to them, is to curtail the freedom of the press. In the opinion of this work, an unrestrained press will produce an avalanche of scurrilous writing or indecent remarks against individuals, as warned by (the press 2013). This will lead to social tension and breach to law and order. This work acknowledges the disruptive power of the press and so, an unfettered press could mean preparing a fertile ground for a large quantity of objectionable media publications.

When asked, “if society is at the receiving end of offensive media publication?. 100% of the respondent acquiesced to the fact that the ransom placed on the authors of the said provocative media publications and the society at large, are enough proofs that both individuals and society are at the receiving end of such breach to public peace. They cited the Paris attack and other similar attacks where lives and property are destroyed in the wake of the crises.

Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has presented evidences of some infractions of good journalistic behavior, with evidences on scurrilous writing or indecent remarks made against religious groups, in three selected religious flashpoints in the world. These have clearly shown that the media as channels of communication can sometimes constitute themselves into channels of conflict generation.

These evidences portrays religion as an emotive issue in a multi sectarian and ethnic diverse society like Nigeria and so, the social responsibility system is unequivocal when it admonishes media workers to underplay that news which might lead to social tension or cause breach to public peace.

In the opinion of this study, media should always avoid stirring the hornet’s nest by recognizing the fact that the right to swing one’s arms stops where the other person’s nose begins. This way, they would have confirmed their

social responsibility and won for themselves the confidence which society had hitherto reposed on them.

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