

## **The Media in Conflict Management/Prevention and Peacebuilding in Nigeria: A Pragmatic Approach**

**Joseph Lucas, Ph.D & Julius Ngomba, PhD**

Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State  
University, Jalingo, Nigeria

Department of Political Science and International  
Relations, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria

Email: [josephlucas928@gmail.com](mailto:josephlucas928@gmail.com) & [ngombajulius@yahoo.com](mailto:ngombajulius@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

This study examines the increasing debate on the ethics of reporting conflict, and outlines series of principles to guide media practitioners, conflict resolution professionals and NGOs on how the media can best play a constructive role in conflict and post-conflict scenarios. The study refers to a number of field projects that demonstrated good practice, as well as those several ones that failed. The study stressed that the very existence of conflict impedes the existence of peace, which is a panacea for socio-economic and political development. Existence of conflict in one part of the world threatens the existence of peace on the other parts as well. And since this era of human civilization is a period of global interconnectedness, the role of media in enhancing peace cannot be overlooked. Media is a tool that can be used to create conflict and also create sustainable peace. Media has dual place in any social milieu. At present, media works as a common platform to create awareness among the global stakeholders regarding issues of interests. The growing concerns about the global issues are interconnected and facilitated through media. Hence, media can play a vital role at different levels in mitigating violence and promoting peace. This article is an attempt to find a general conceptualization of peace and violence as well as to look deep into the role of media in reducing violence and the creation of peace. The paper concludes by presenting some life-line for further research and action to further stress media role in peacebuilding.

**Keywords:** Conflict, conflict management Media, Peace and Peace-Building.

### **Introduction**

The existences of conflict and peacebuilding efforts are two major concerns in the contemporary world. As long as conflict exists, it is not possible to ensure total peace. The scholars in favour of world peace have hypothesized and theorized on various methods to ensure peace and make it sustainable that conflict does not replace peace again. In this respect, the media is considered to be vital adjunct in promoting peace and its sustainability. The role of media and its impact is manifold. From the national, regional and international levels, the presence and influence of media is noticeable everywhere. Though conflict and peace are completely opposing ideas, they are interconnected. Peace

has different meanings and interpretations. At the same time, conflict is multi-faced and multileveled. In all the dimensions of their manifestations, media can penetrate and play an important role to minimize the threat of violence and to promote peace. Hence, it is imperative to understand the concepts of violence, peace, peacebuilding and the role of media. This paper is an attempt to discover these ideas and analyze the complex interactions among them.

Information is power and it can impact on public discourse. Perceptions can be changed by accessing information churn out by media. Different types of media are utilised globally to distribute knowledge and ideas ideally, free mass media is a tool of and signpost for democracy. Freedom of expression is not only at the core of a healthy media but also a fundamental human rights and a vital element for a democratic structure. It stands for freedom of speech, the right to access information and the representation of different opinions in a heterogeneous society. In any culture of prevention, effective and democratic media are an essential part and very much indispensable for societies trying to make a transition towards peace and democracy (Rafal, 2007).

Lack of information can, at any stage of a conflict, make people desperate, restless and easy to manipulate. The ability to make informed decisions strengthens societies and fosters economic growth, democratic structures and the positive outlook for the future. For this very reason, the United Nations Millennium Declaration stressed the need “to ensure the freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information”.

The media does not need justification for its existence. Its service to society is justification in itself. The media can not only help to distribute information but also counter hate-speech and create an environment of balanced opinions, i.e. information equilibrium. For the media it can be problematic to find a balance between preventing harm caused by speech and protecting individual expression. Being able to find this balance, however is important especially in conflict situations. Responsible media practice does not just re-publish press releases but is truly concerned with a truthful, balanced and fair account of events. In order to achieve this, journalists have to stay clear of judgemental representations and describe reality without embellishment (Ronald, 2004).

In case of a crisis or a conflict, the international media can attract worldwide attention. The mass media is a pervasive part of daily life especially in industrialised countries and thus able to shine a light on conflicts anywhere in the world. Since most armed conflicts these days have governmental and not territorial reasons; the parties are often concerned with making sure that the majority of people are on “their” side, which bears a lot of potential for misrepresenting facts and trying to seize control over the distribution of information. For this very reason the intervention of unbiased and free global media is important not only for the world public but also for the people directly affected. However, the number of

conflicts, that gets international attention is small; therefore, local media is vital in this context (Deutsche Welle, 2009).

### **Brief History of Media**

Since the overall history of media covers an extensive time frame and could be the subject of a thesis itself, for the purpose of this paper the history of media as it relates to the timeframe of peacekeeping operations will be discussed relatively within a limited period. At the end of the 1950s, the most pervasive form of mass media was television, as nearly 90% of American homes had television sets (Sterling & Kittross, 1999). In 1969/1970 the United Nations division “COMNET” (Network of Documentation Centres on Communication Research and Policy) was founded “for the support of research activities in the field of communication by publishing a mass communication thesaurus...Between 1969 and 1981, UNESCO was a principal actor in a rising international communication debate...” (Volkmer, 1999).

The strong correlation between public opinion and media is best demonstrated by coverage of the Vietnam War. This statement is founded in the MacBride Report of 1981, referring to the war as one of “the most recent examples of the press’s ability to unearth facts, to forge opinion and to encourage the people to act.” The media often employs the idea of “objective journalism” and journalists often coin the term “neutral observer” (Williams, 1993). As it relates to governments and conflict, “governments use broadcasting to help build or reinforce value consensus among key support groups, as well as to promote cooperation from integral state institutions in service of policy goals” (Zaffiro, 2002).

Interestingly, the policies associated with media outlets often focus on the interrelations created by opposition, power across political bodies, and conflict (Ibid.). In summary of a history of the media, the current media with which the world is presented on a minute-by-minute basis is full of mixed messages and multiple meanings and thus, “the classical enlightenment task of understanding, explaining, interpreting and evaluating is difficult to accomplish” (Eldridge, 1993).

### **Understanding Media and its Role in Creation of Peace**

Creation of peace is a herculean task and it is very much diverse. The creation of peace would include both peace-building and peacekeeping. Media plays a vital role both in peace-building and peacekeeping process. Peace-building is a prerequisite to the peacekeeping process. Hence, it is an issue of paramount importance to conceptualize the idea of peace-building. In 1992, former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali introduced the concept of peace-building in his ‘An Agenda for Peace’. He defined peace-building as “action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.” The Brahimi Report from 2000 defines peace-building as “activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble

the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war”. In 2007, a more detailed and comprehensive definition of peace-building was offered by the UN Secretary General’s Policy Committee thus:

“A range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives.”

At this juncture, there is need to understand the importance of media in the peace-building process in light of the definition mentioned above. In the contemporary world, media is one of the major players which can penetrate into individual personal life right up to issues of international interest and concern. Media has grown manifold with the pace of globalization. The term media refers to both ‘traditional’ mass media (newspapers, TV, radio) and social media (online blogs, Facebook, Twitter etc.). The two have become ‘intimately intertwined,’ with both being used as sources of news and information and tweets used as sound-bites. “Media and journalism should be understood as part of a wider ‘communication ecology’ that includes a wide range of stakeholders and practices.” In discussing the role of media in reduction of conflict and creation of peace, first there is a need to understand the nexus between the two.

The overall aim of peacebuilding is to prevent violent outbreaks of conflicts or to transform violent conflicts in a sustainable manner into peaceful means. Here peacebuilding not only tries to prevent the outbreak of violence but also tries to turn violence into sustainable peace. Peacebuilding involves a multitude of activities, all aimed at decreasing the probability of violent conflict.

On the other hand, it is the media that shapes what we see, hear and understand about conflict or violence. As Michael Howard (1971), said media is very often used as a tool for political purpose or propaganda, media can play roles in limiting violence and creating peace and vice versa. The perspectives of those who run the media shape stories that are covered. Journalists have opinions and beliefs based on their experiences. Media owners have economic and corporate interests; they want to sell their stories and programs to a public who will buy their newspapers or watch their programs. Increasing corporate control over media in some countries also plays a role in controlling the types of stories that get covered and the way stories get framed. Therefore, there is a little scope what may be termed as ‘ideal’ state of media. Media is however distorted, fragmented and biased in many cases.

It is important for conflict prevention and peacebuilding practitioners to understand these values and the dynamics of media's decision-making on covering 'peace' news and entertainment. However, it does not preclude peace practitioners from utilizing the media to promote their own values. The role of media is now global rather than local or regional. Indeed, the media can play very positive roles in conflict prevention and peace-building. It should be mentioned in this regard that apart from the regular media like newspapers, radio and televisions, the explosion of digital technology combined with optic fiber and satellite links has given unprecedented access to information in recent years. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are some of the examples of the strength of new global media.

Moreover, the power of global communication largely benefits human rights, although not all people benefit to the same extent and there is a strong argument that the poorest are further marginalized as information 'have-nots'. Here the media is enlarging the gap between the 'have' and 'have-nots'. In the long run this may enhance the chance of violence and reduce the peace within the society. It is necessary to point out that the media has tremendous impact not only on public's perceptions but also it can reshape our judgments regarding any particular issue. Hence, we need to analyze different media to get a complete picture on any issue which are presented differently from different perspective in different media.

The following are some specific roles played by the media in management and peacebuilding of conflict:

- i. **Brings together different groups to discuss issues:** The media can be an effective tool to build relationships. It can support greater understanding and cohesion between people who consider themselves different from one another. It can give voice to the most marginalized in society. It can serve as a mediator between political parties especially in situations where there is no other means of communication particularly during conflict and post-conflict reconciliation. There are many FM stations and hundreds of smaller community stations across Nigeria networked to exchange programmes and news. They are a "true alternative source of information to official channels, and they focus on local issues and reflect Nigeria's ethnic and linguistic diversity." The South African "Peace Café" programme brought parties together who had been unwilling to meet by interviewing them separately and then editing the video and showing it to the other side. This process eventually led to direct negotiations between the parties.
- ii. **Helps Improve Governance:** Fact-based, independent, transparent, accountable and impartial reporting can serve to hold officials accountable and make public administrations more transparent. It enables citizens to be active stakeholders, to understand policies and use the impartial information provided to exercise their human rights. All of these are critical for conflict prevention. Investigative

reporting on the complicity of Latin American presidents was in large part responsible for the downfall of four presidents – Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil in 1992, Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela in 1993, Abdala Bucaram of Ecuador in 1997 and Alberto Fujimori in 2000.

- iii. **Increases Knowledge of Complex Issues:** These include issues such as corruption, political injustice, marginalization, lack of economic opportunity and struggles with identity that may drive violent extremism. It can help people critically think about and discuss these issues. Research has shown that people who were exposed to BBC Media Action’s political discussion/debate shows knew more, discussed more and participated in politics more, even when controlling for other factors that may influence these outcomes (such as age, income, education and interest in politics).
- iv. **Provides Early Warning:** Media can provide early warning of potential conflicts and possibly create pressure to address the conflict.
- v. **Outlet to Express Emotions:** Media can allow people to express their fears and frustrations and share experiences and advice with others. It can also link people with power holders, enabling open communication and dialogue. Example, ‘BringBackOurGirls’ mobilized emotional responses to the kidnapping of nearly 300 girls in Nigeria by a militant Islamist movement (Boko Haram). Celebrities, politicians, and citizens were brought together by their online demands for the girls to be returned while airing their dismay at the radical group’s actions.
- vi. **Motivator for Peace:** The media can motivate people to take action and to participate in community events. But the media’s impact on behaviour change is complex. It is more likely to work on attitudes and opinions that shape behaviours rather than directly affecting people’s actions.
- vii. **Media as Watchdog:** The media sometimes acts as a third party ‘watchdog’ which provides feedback to the public on local and international problems. Media can bring hidden stories out into the public. Investigative reports can surface public problems. This community-based reporting or locality-based reporting can accelerate development and peace in the society in the long run. Citizen reporting or citizen journalism is also a part of this. We have seen numerous examples of solving local issues using citizen journalism in Nigeria, for example. The concept of citizen journalism is becoming popular day by day in many parts of the world. Citizens are more informed and aware about the local problems. The explosion of new media has eased the way to a great extent.
- viii. **Media as Peace Promoter:** Media events can be used at the beginning of negotiations to build confidence, facilitate negotiations or break diplomatic deadlocks to create a climate conducive to negotiation. Media events such as press releases, rock concerts, or radio programs can celebrate peace agreements and negotiations. The media events may help to promote and mobilize public support for agreements. Apart from these responsibilities, a suggested framework used by

peace-building media can employ different strategies such as (i) Conflict-sensitive and peace journalism; (ii) Peace-promoting entertainment media; (iii) Media regulation to prevent incitement of violence, but also (iv) Peace-promoting citizen media.

### **The Role of Media in Peace Building and Conflict Management**

Broadcasting news by using community radios can help reach people in different areas, even with different languages more easily. This way people can be addressed directly and their own personal experiences and opinions can be incorporated through the feedback process. Although the danger of manipulation and inflammation of ethnic or related tensions looms very high, the regulating agency can be counted on to penalize a defaulting cast media. For Nigeria, the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) regulates the broadcast media and the Nigeria Press Council (NPC) watches over the print. Another advantage of the media, especially radio, is that in border areas it is possible to convey peace messages to passing fighters and refugees alike. Democratic media structures need more than this; it is vital that the use of information within a society is not solemnly passive but that the population gets actively involved in creating content and broadcasting it.

Internal conflicts do not occur spontaneously but tend to have a history. Local media usually have a deeper understanding of the existing political structures, the participants of the conflict as well as the changes preceding the outbreak of violence. The media can therefore not only influence society before the conflict by recognising and properly addressing the issue but also afterwards. Unlike international media covering conflicts, local media are a recognized part of society with the ability to accelerate and magnify fears or reduce them. One should not forget that journalism can play a role in escalating conflicts, which also demonstrates the potential for positive purposes. The media have the power to defuse tensions before they even reach a critical point and keep a critical eye on government, opposition and society. By supplying credible information and reaching a large audience, the media help in managing conflicts and promote democratic principles. In the aftermath of a conflict, reconciliation and societal development can be encouraged as well.

These strategies adopted by the media would minimize the differences between or among the conflicting parties as well as highlight the similarities among them. When the common problems are highlighted, it would become easier to cooperate with each other to find a sustainable solution. At the same time, common interests will bind the parties together to provide a boost in the peacebuilding as well as peacekeeping process and thus minimizing the chances of relapse into violent conflict. Promotion of humanitarian values and virtues by the media will enhance the chances of sustainability of peace in the long run. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that conflict prevention and peacebuilding require a careful study of the lessons of social marketing to prepare for effective use of the media.

## **Conclusion**

With so much choice of news sources and channels for transmitting same, this should be a golden age for media. But in the shifting landscape where so many opposing voices are clamouring for attention, many people do not know who to trust. In many fragile countries fact-based, independent, transparent, accountable and impartial reporting does not exist because of the business and political interests of media owners and the lack of pay and training for journalists. In others, it is often subject to increased censorship, regulation and attack from parties that want to undermine its influence.

Media and journalism can be a great assistance in conflict management and peace building. However, the power they have is also limited, as they will never be able to eliminate armed conflicts altogether. The media can be a good tool in a healthy and functioning environment but more is needed than ethical and responsible reporting to ensure lasting peace and safety. The role of the media is twofold: on the one hand, the media report and reflect on pressing issues and can help to question established concepts and ideas. On the other hand, they can be used for propaganda purposes and instead of revealing truths, they try to cover things up and by this curtail people's freedom and right to information. Regardless, the potential of the media in conflict and post-conflict situations remains a net positive, and has been sadly underutilized to this point in time.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. Ensure that all media for peace interventions reinforce shared identities between opposing groups rather than differences and keep fully abreast of changes to ensure interventions take advantage of and don't fall foul of 'new' ways to communicate. This may include setting up an information exchange on new developments and producing regular country and sector updates
- ii. Commit to prevention, before the outbreak of armed conflict, because that's when information is often compromised, rumours are rampant and emotions become heated.
- iii. Provide media practitioners with capacity strengthening activities to improve their technical, editorial and management skills to produce trustworthy and engaging programming that help reduce all forms of violence and encourage government based on the rule of law that upholds justice and human rights.
- iv. Support programmes that reach out to make citizens – including opinion leaders such as politicians, religious leaders and others in public life – more aware of the need for responsible and fact-based communications.
- v. Do not ignore the power that mass media (radio and TV) still has to reach people at a large scale, particularly the poorest, or the diversity of ways of



communicating with people. This may include face-to face communications, workshops or genres such as radio and TV drama and entertainment.

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