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Foreign Media Preference for Negative Frames in Coverage of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa

Foreign media have been criticised for promoting Afro-pessimism and preference for negative frames in their representation of Africa. This is more pronounced especially in reporting of terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa. But are the African media less guilty of this preference for negativity? This paper aimed to answer this question by assessing how news media reported terrorism in the Sahel. To achieve this objective, some existing empirical studies that investigated media coverage of terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa were reviewed. The review shows that the news media—both foreign and African media—in their presentation of terrorism in the Sahel, still preserved the dominant paradigm of media preference for negativity in news reporting. Foreign news media, with limited knowledge of the real situation in Africa, used negative frames to report the Sub-Saharan Africa as a region of crises. Ironically, the performance of African media in respect of their coverage of terrorism in the Sahel is ambivalent and less impressive; as the African media tried to perform their warning surveillance function by alerting the state to the potential danger posed by terror groups, they also used frames that exaggerate the impact and dominance of the insurgents. This preference for negativity by news media in the coverage of terror could set negative public agenda, further escalate the spate of terror, and threaten public peace in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Negative Frames, Mass Media, Public Peace, Sub-Saharan Africa, Terrorism.

Introduction

Apart from natural disaster, one major global phenomenon that has remained the most daunting social menace in the contemporary world threatening the world peace and human existence is, probably, terrorism. In every part of the world where terror acts spread and fester, the major catalyst that nourishes terror groups and other criminal acts is the spreading trend of drug trafficking and abuse. The worst-hit regions of the world in this respect seem to be the Latin America and the Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, the Sub-Saharan Africa has remained the transit point in Africa (*United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* [UNODC], 2014; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2015). Since the historical terror attacks on the World Trade Centre in America on September 11, 2001 (Schaefer, 2003; Traugott, 2003; Goldberg, 2014), modern terrorism has become a consequential issue that attracts global attention. From America to Europe, Asia, the Middle-East and Africa, terror attacks and threats have rapidly become a pervasive social reality that dominates public discourse. The emergence of *Boko Haram* sect in Nigeria (see Musa 2012; Walker, 2012; Musa and Yusha'u, 2013; Celso, 2015) is not only a national security challenge for the country but also with exterior impact on the

proximate countries of Niger Republic, Mali, Republic of Benin, and Cameroun. Similarly, the rising spate of terror-induced killings in Egypt and Kenya, and the spreading influence of Al Shabaab in Somalia and the contiguous regions of the Sahel coupled with the terror groups' strategic use of social media technology (see Ulrichsen, 2011; Hansen, 2013; Menkhaus, 2014) have suggested that Africa is already a vulnerable and traumatised continent. In fact, apart from Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Mali, Egypt and Kenya, where terror acts are visibly prevalent, conflicts have spread across many other African countries such as Ghana, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Zaire, Zimbabwe, Benin, and Libya (Odine, 2013). There has also been report of few examples of Burkinabe participation in regional extremist groups and with "some evidence of Boko Haram attempting to fund-raise and acquire weapons in Burkina Faso" (Loada & Romaniuk, 2014:28). This reality has compelled various governments, in collaboration with social institutions and stakeholders across Africa, to join the rest of the world in the project of investing massive resources to combat the menace of terrorism.

The term Sahel commonly is used to refer to the geographic area spreading across the southern belt of the

Sahara Desert and Tuareg settlements. But, in a broader sense, the Sahel may refer to “the space delimited by the Mediterranean Sea in the north, Mauritania and the Atlantic Ocean in the west, the Red Sea Basin in the east and Chad in the south, as the ‘broader Sahara’ geopolitical region within which the Sahel is inserted” (Simon, Mattelaer, & Hadifield, 2012: 8). Specifically in the context of this paper, we define the Sahel as the Sub-Saharan region of Africa which covers Niger, northern Senegal, central Mali, central Chad, extreme north of Nigeria, northern Eritrea, central and southern Sudan, southern Mauritania, northern Burkina Faso, and extreme of Algeria.

The Problem

The mass media are one of the social institutions that have significant roles to play in the war against terror and promotion of peace. The media have the social responsibility to present the pictures of social reality in a manner that is not detrimental to public peace. They occupy a significant position in society through construction of ideology and social order (Norris, 1995; Vreese, 2005; Watson, 2007); and they provide the platform for perception and interpretation of the world (Eun-Ho, Kyung-Woo, & Afif, 2007). That is, the mass media play important roles in shaping how the public perceive, interpret and react to events around them. This suggests that the way the mass media construct and present terrorism has implications for public perception of the problem and also defines the extent of public peace. This crucial role of the media in servicing the social mechanism and implications of how they represent social reality, especially with respect to coverage of terror acts, have attracted attention of scholars (see Keinan, Sadeh & Rosen, 2003; Nacos, 2003; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2003; Omanga, 2012; Pearlman, 2012; Hansen, 2013; Ayoola & Olaosun, 2014; Goldberg, 2014; Jetter; Loada & Romaniuk, 2014; Kisang, 2014; Odoemelam, Ebeze, Okwudiogor, 2015; Ojebuyi, 2015; Ezeah & Emmanuel, 2016; Osisanwo, 2016). Thus, the way Africa as a continent is projected by the media, either foreign or local, has implication for the continent’s peace and security.

There have been claims and counter claims as to how Africa is stereotyped by the Western media. While some journalism scholars believe that foreign media predominantly use negative frames to project Africa (e.g. Saul, 2002; Chabal, 2008; Ojo, 2014; Jacobs, 2015), others argue that this claim is as a result of misrepresentation (Scott, 2015) or is a myth (Nothias, 2016). Despite aggressive debates on this controversy, there are yet scholarly studies, especially from Nigeria, to test the veracity of this claim, at least from the perspective of African journalism scholars. The current study, therefore, contributes to the existing body of knowledge by filling this gap through an empirical review of some studies on media coverage of Africa. The study specifically focuses on media framing of terrorism as a social reality in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Particularly, this study presents the trend of media

performance in the coverage and report of terrorism in the Sahel to establish whether or not African media are guilty of preference for Afro-pessimism and negative frames (Chabal, 2008) as the Western media. Through a purposive sampling, empirical studies that focused on news media coverage of terrorism in the Sahel, and published between 2001 and 2016 were sourced online, downloaded, reviewed and discussed. Author decided to limit the scope to 2011 in order to present the current trend in terms of media performance in reporting terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the studies reviewed focus on Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. What accounts for this is that the two groups are the most dominant and threatening terror groups in Africa operating in the neighborhoods of Nigeria and Somalia (and extending to Kenya) respectively (Hansen, 2013; Musa & Yusha’u, 2013; Menkhaus, 2014; Celso, 2015).

Literature Review

Mass Media Coverage of Terrorism: Implications for Public Peace

Citizens rely on the mass media to get details of events that happen every day in their environment because through their surveillance functions, the media monitor the environment (Clarke, 2014). When they alert the public to the opportunities, the media perform instrumental surveillance while the warning surveillance function takes place when the media alert the public to threats or dangers so that appropriate measures are taken to avert potential consequences (Watson, 2003; Sambe, 2005; McQuail, 2007). One of such threats is terrorism, and how the media report this threat (terrorism) is considered as a mediated reality that has implications for social order (Arno, 2009).

The emergence and integration of new technologies in the process of news generation and reporting have changed news media business from being a local or national issue to a universal phenomenon with global implications (Dimaggio, 2009). News media now have the capacity to gather, process and distribute information across the globe faster and with far reaching impact than the situation was before the emergency of new news technologies. Social media that operate on the platform of Web 2.0 technologies have changed the entire process of news gathering, processing and distribution. News is now everywhere, and every citizen with access to these social media is a potential journalist. As Rich (2010: 4) explains, “increased competition from cable television news stations, and access to millions of sites on the Internet are forcing news organisations to expand ways to interest readers and viewers”. The foregoing scenario has more implications for delivery of news about war, terror and violence, which have become prevalent features of the contemporary society. Any outbreak of war or act of terror in the remotest part of the world will not wait for hours or days before it spreads and becomes a world news. In 2001, after the Al-Qaida attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11 (Nacos, 2003; Schaefer, 2003;

Traugott, 2003; Storie, Madden & Liu, 2014), the world witnessed the power of news media and journalists to influence public understanding and perception of terror. The unprecedented terror attacks revolutionised media landscape in terms of coverage and report of war and terror, and redefined the influence of media coverage of terror on world peace. Journalists, perhaps for the first time, realised the need to know more about issues that had been hardly or badly explicated. “Suddenly, there was more coverage, dramatic coverage... and round-the-clock reporting”, with the new technologies being integrated to disseminate news about terror at a faster and more far reaching speed (Schechter, 2003:3). Both the conventional and citizen journalists (Rich, 2010) reported the event across the world.

Norris, Kern and Just (2003:3) provide a picture of how the 9/11 incident and subsequent media coverage of the attacks changed the global social order in terms of world's response to terror:

The events of September 11 ricocheted around the world from satellite to satellite. News spread instantly from the New York studios to London, Rome, and Moscow and from al Jazeera's airwaves to Islamabad, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Kabul. The al Qaeda catalyst triggered massive coverage in the Western news media with hundreds of stories highlighting the grief, suffering, and shock of the victims and their relatives; condemnation by the Bush administration and public officials; speculation about the underlying causes and possible consequences of the events of 9/11; and expressions of sympathy from world leaders. Months later, the reverberations and aftershocks triggered by these events continue to impact international relations, domestic policy, and public opinion.

The “reverberations” and “aftershocks” as contained in the foregoing explanation by Norris et al. (2003) suggest the representation or coverage of the attacks by the media, and the subsequent effect this representation generated across the world. After the 9/11 incident, terrorism started to attract more public attention. From America to Europe, across Asia and down to Africa, the world became more conscious of the implication of terrorism for both regional and global peace. The major reasons that accounted for this consciousness, as further explicated by Norris *et al.*, are the role and effects of media coverage of terrorism.

The nature of media coverage of a given incident determines how the public perceive and react to such an incident. In the same way, media coverage of terrorism in terms of journalists' choice of words (Schechter, 2003) and the nature of frames (see Norris & Carroll, 1997; Schmitz, Fililpone, & Edelman, 2003; McCombs, 2004; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Omanga, 2012; Hirst, 2013; Storie, Madden & Liu, 2014)

the media use to present terrorism as part of social reality affect media consumers' health and influence public perception of the social problem while this perception largely defines the pattern of social order. Keinan, Sadeh, and Rosen (2003) in their study, substantiate this assertion as to how media coverage shapes public attitudes and reaction to terror. Their study confirms that exposure to extensive coverage of terrorist acts, especially when the coverage includes horrifying and threatening details, has serious adverse effect on media audience mental health. The authors give a summary of media contents that are potentially harmful to the public, and recommend adherence to journalistic ethical codes that prescribe moderation in the coverage of terrorism:

Repeated broadcasting of distressing reports, close-ups of bodies or body parts, interviews with victims in extreme states of despair, or allotting air time to terrorists who threaten the audience, are only examples of what the media includes in its coverage of terrorist acts. To limit these phenomena, which have a potential of harming the public's mental health, the media should formulate a set of ethical codes or clearly defined guidelines to ensure restrained and cautious coverage of terrorist incidents (Keinan *et al.*, p.162).

There is no doubt that terrorism in itself is a social menace and tragedy, but when the media choose extremely negative frames to construct terror acts, the audience become inundated with more fear and petrifying images of terror. The use of frames that are more negative and scary than the represented social reality always results in moral panic, which Rothe & Muzzatti (2004: 329) define as “an exaggerated or distortion of some perceived deviant or criminal activity”. Moral panic influence how the individual perceive the social reality and how the society at large conceive itself in terms of peace and social order. As identified by Rothe & Muzzatti, the six agents of moral panic are the mass media, folk devils (i.e. the individuals responsible for the criminal behaviour), rule enforcers (e.g. the police, prosecutors, and judiciary), politicians (who manipulate the media to satisfy their selfish ambitions), action groups, and the public.

In the creation of moral panic, the news media are about the most crucial of the six agents identified above, and they have the most consequential effect on public peace. Patterns of mass media coverage of terrorism and their overall effect on the mass audience are captured in the following submission by Rothe & Muzzatti (2004: 329):

The media is likely the single most influential actor in the orchestration and promulgation of a moral panic. Media coverage of certain kinds of deviant/criminal behaviour... is usually distorted. It serves to inflate the seriousness of the incidents, making them appear more heinous and

frequent than they truly are. Public anxiety is whipped up through the use of journalistic and linguistic devices. “Special cover story”, “in-depth expose” or “investigative report” style coverage employs dramatic photos, video, and sound bites with moralistic rhetoric.

Based on the foregoing positions that show how the media coverage of terrorism could influence public perception of, and reaction to, terror, it is evident that there is a linkage between patterns of media coverage of terrorism and public peace. Frames that present a terror group as being linked to, or sympathetic towards, a religious group may influence members outside the religious group to develop prejudice against the religion and its adherents (Das *et al.*, 2009). When journalists choose moderate and less negative frames to present terror acts, terrorism is likely to assume a less influential and scary image or profile. But when the opposite is the case where the media exaggerate and give unnecessary prominence to the agents of terror and their exploits, or when politicians get the opportunity to manipulate the media coverage of terrorism to suit their personal goals, the effect is always massively damaging and the public peace is usually threatened.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on the agenda setting theory of mass media which explains that the mass media possess the inherent power to project the significance of social reality in the public’s consciousness. The media do this through editorial emphasis and sustained representation of social reality. (Cohen, 1963; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Watson, 2003; McCombs, 2004; Sibii, 2006; Kiouis & Wu, 2008; Lasorsa, 2008; Nesbitt-Larkinc, 2008). What this theory says is that when the mass media, through their daily reportage of events, give priority to some issues, they (the media) have the power to ascribe to such issues some level of significance, which influences the mass audience to give continued attention to the issues. The theory explicates the power of the mass media to shape information output in such a way that some issues are projected primarily to make them more significant to the public than other events; and this projection influences the public to give deliberate attention to the issues, and form some patterns of perspective on them. This theory is considered relevant to the objective of this paper, which is to examine how the mass media as the societal watchdog have fared in their coverage of terrorism in the Sahel and the implications of this coverage for promotion of peace in the sub-region.

Empirical Review of Studies on Media Coverage of Terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa

This section is dedicated to review of existing empirical studies that focused on media coverage of terrorism in the Sahel. The aim is to interrogate the media performance by presenting the general trend of coverage of terror and the

implications of this trend for peace in the African Sub-region. Most of the studies reviewed have their contexts in Nigeria and Somalia. This is because of these two countries’ strategic influence in Africa. For instance, Nigeria is the biggest democracy and the most populous nation in Africa (Atkins, 2007; *International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE), Nigeria*, 2010), and home to the *Boko Haram* insurgent group in the extreme northern part of the country, while Somalia is not only the epicentre of the activities of the Al-Shabaab group (Ulrichsen, 2011) but also a country proximate to Kenya, the hub of tourism in Africa. Studies from these countries would be useful in assessing the media performance in terms of coverage of terrorism in the Sahel.

Musa and Yusha’u (2013) conducted a study using the critical discourse analysis technique to investigate how two notable media channels—CNN and *Al Jazeera* English—covered and reported the activities of the insurgent group, *Jama’atu Ahlusunna Lidda’ watiwal Jihad*, also known as *Boko Haram*, in the northern parts of Nigeria. The paper focused primarily on how these media organizations often relied on *parachute reporting*, which is conceptualised as a phenomenon where “correspondents are only dispatched to the scene of the conflict from their offices or beats abroad” (p. 251). The authors criticised the tradition as having a tendency to undermine the credibility of the reports of the conflict as the correspondents’ access to local sources was likely to be limited and their perception and definition of the local terrain and context of the conflict could be problematic and counterproductive. The authors further postulated that *parachute reporting* approach adopted by CNN and *Al Jazeera* to report the *Boko Haram* conflict could lead to misunderstanding and misconception of the crisis by the outside world. Other consequences of this practice, according to the study, are (1) tendency to misinform the audience; (2) use of assumptions and stereotypes by the reporters who covered the conflict; and (3) inadvertent polarization of the conflict. The paper concluded that *parachute reporting* could compromise the media’s role as neutral observers and reporters of conflict, terrorism or war.

A study by Okoro & Odoemelam (2013) examined the pattern of frames adopted by four Nigerian newspapers—*The Guardian*, *Daily Sun*, *the Vanguard* and *ThisDay*—in their coverage of *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria. Findings of the study showed that two of the selected Nigerian newspapers (*The Guardian*, *ThisDay* and *Vanguard*) reported the *Boko Haram* insurgency in a predominantly policy response frame while the *Daily Sun* newspaper adopted frames which emphasized ethnic and religious slants. Findings of the study also indicated that the newspapers reported government interventions in positive terms. These positive frames, the authors asserted, were apropos to mitigating the influence of insurgencies like that of *Boko Haram*. However, the authors conceded that frames which emphasized ethnic and religious perspectives were negative and could threaten the public peace in Nigeria. The authors recommended the optimization of positive frames

by Nigerian newspapers in order to promote the peace media initiative as a critical platform for positive media interventions.

Another study by Nwabueze & Ekwughe (2014) examined how some Nigerian newspapers—*The Punch*, *The Vanguard* and *The Daily Sun*—reported the effect of *Boko Haram* violence on the environment, the areas of the environment mostly affected by the *Boko Haram* violence, the prominence given to the coverage of the *Boko Haram* violence, and the perspective from which the media reported the violence. The study found that the violence generated by the *Boko Haram* affected the environment, especially the land, which suffered most of the impacts. The newspapers gave prominence to the *Boko Haram* insurgence, but they paid little attention to the environmental implications of the violence. The researchers, therefore, recommended that Nigerian news media should give utmost priority to environmental beat especially by separating this beat from property and housing beats, which are often merged with the environmental beat in the reports of most of these media. They asserted that this merger could suppress the importance of environmental reporting. The researchers also recommended that feature stories and editorial comments should be used more frequently while presenting the environmental effects of *Boko Haram* activities in order to give a more in-depth interpretation to the problems.

Ayoola & Olaosun (2014) conducted a study to examine how the Nigerian media represented the socio-political discourse that centred on the activities of *Boko Haram* with specific focus on newspaper reports published in July and August 2011 in the wake of the bombing of the nation's police headquarters and the United Nations House in Abuja, Nigeria. Through an interdisciplinary and inter-discursive approach that combined historical and ideological analyses, the study elicited the media representation of *Boko Haram* as a militant Islamic group with allies and members outside Nigeria. The study also showed that *Boko Haram* was represented as one that had an international socio-political agenda that could threaten regional peace and the continued existence of Nigeria. The authors concluded that contrary to disbelief about daily newspapers as sources of misery and libel, Nigerian national newspapers served as a platform for accurate information and perceptive analysis on *Boko Haram*. The authors, therefore, argued that the bombing of the Nigeria Police Headquarters and the United Nations House in Abuja by *Boko Haram* exposed the ill-preparedness of Nigerian security agencies to meet the security challenges of the 21st century, which the media were able to highlight through their reports of the activities of the insurgent group, among other issues.

A study by Omanga (2012) examined the dominant frames projected by editorial cartoons of two Kenyan newspapers—*The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*—in the first three months after the launch of the War on Terror in early October of 2001 after the September 11 attacks in New York. The study collected frames from the

analysed media content. The justification for the choice of Kenyan media was based on the precedent of terrorist attacks in Kenya with the embassy bombings that hit Nairobi in 1998 allegedly masterminded by bin Laden. It was believed that Kenyan media would, therefore, support America's military actions on the Al-Qaida. The study was based on "the assumption that legitimacy, a process through which the media facilitates publicity, recognition and acceptance, in a more or less temporal and successive process, is something both the 'terrorists' and the those fighting them contest within and through the media" (p. 94). Findings of the study revealed the ideological positions and discourses in the Kenyan editorial cartoons paved the way for the invasion of Afghanistan by framing the war as justified. That is, the way the Kenyan editorial cartoons framed the war gave the United States the moral legitimacy and impetus to launch reprisal attacks in the first place.

Another Kenyan study by Kisang (2014) examined how media report activities of Al shabaab in Kenya. The author predicted that terrorism drives the media by staging dramatic events which tend to benefit the media through large audience traction. The study found that the media in Kenya gives minor coverage to counter terrorism measures taken by governments and other foreign nations such as the USA, France and Israel, who are also targeted by the terror group because of their that these countries support war on terrorism. In addition, the study established that Kenyan journalists failed to detach themselves from reporting terrorism: instead, the journalists praised people known or suspected to be Al shabaab members. Author, therefore, warns that media should be pro-state and deny terrorists an opportunity to access publicity.

Workneh's (2011) study examined the coverage of the Somali conflict by selected American and British newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. This study attempted to (1) compare the war/peace journalism framing employed in the reporting; (2) find out how diverse the sourcing of the news stories are; and (3) determine the relationship between war/peace journalism framing and sourcing trends. Findings of the study showed remarkably superior war journalism frames at the expense of peace journalism based on the core indicators which included professional orientation (visual dimension of the war), social dimension, and political orientation. For instance, results of the study revealed that the visual representation employed by the newspapers was clearly dominated by the visible effects of war with an overwhelming ascendancy of 83.9% as opposed to 14.4% of less emphasis on the visible effects of war marking a peace journalism frame. This projection of war effect, as argued by the author, is one of the strongest means for the war journalism frame. Also, from the social orientation perspective, the study found that more than 85% of the items analysed relied on elite/official sources, whereas less than 14% relied on "people-sources." There was also a high difference in the use of demonizing language across the stories with an overwhelming 86.8% percent war journalism frame, and a clear absence of peace

journalism framing in any of the groups of indicators of social orientation. As regards the political orientation, findings of the study revealed that sourcing trends in the selected newspapers showed a marked superiority of elite-oriented sourcing, 77%, suggesting the resulting dominant war journalism framing. The implication of this value, according to the researcher, is that “the newspapers, consciously or unconsciously, promoted interests of their respective states’ political ideologies, especially given the strategic significance of Somalia in the so-called war against terrorism” (p.48).

Mellese & Muller (2012) conducted a comparative analysis of text–visual frames of Sub-Saharan Africa in the online news content of *Al Jazeera* and *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC). In order to investigate how the Sub-Saharan African nations (e.g. Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, Somalia, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Ethiopia, DR Congo, Rwanda and Ivory Coast) were portrayed in the foreign news, the authors analysed 311 online news stories collected for 3 months from the online sites of the two international media organisations. Results showed, among others, that *Al Jazeera* and BBC online news sites portrayed sub-Saharan Africa negatively both in textual and visual frames with more occurrence of negative news mostly about terrorism and crises in all their reports about the African sub-region.

Shifting attention from how the conventional media cover terrorism to how terror groups use the media, especially the social media, to execute their strategies, Pearlman (2012) identified and analysed the strategic use of *Twitter* by *Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen* (HSM) popularly known as Al-Shabaab, in Somalia, in terms of the *why*, *whom* and *how*. The central question the study attempted to answer is: *why* Al-Shabaab uses *Twitter*; *whom* it is trying to reach; and *how* it is attempting to establish that connection? Pearlman examined Al-Shabaab’s tweets, photos and followers from three perspectives— (1) intended functions of the *Twitter* account, (2) target audience, and (3) thematic messages. Findings show that the microblogging platform (*Twitter*) is used by the HSM Press Office to accomplish three primary objectives. The first is to coordinate information within the movement; the second is to become an information creator for its followers and residents of its administered territories; while the third objective is to engage in dynamic propaganda as a method of contention, with the global audience in mind. The group propagates its ideological stand by projecting itself, through the lens of Islamic legitimacy, as a righteous saviour of Islam in the face of Western manipulation, intervention, and subversion. The author explains that by understanding what Al-Shabaab seeks to change and whom it seeks to attract, especially through the microblogging platform, we can further have a clear grasp of the group’s inner ideology. From the perspective of linguistic and discourse analysis, Osinsanwo (2016) examined discursive representation of *Boko Haram* terrorism in selected Nigerian newspapers (*Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *The Punch* and *The Nation*). The study identified different representational strategies used to

negatively describe *Boko Haram*. The newspapers, according to the study, also deployed discourse strategies to manage the voices of social actors, identify and specify the social actors and action, label and condemn BH activities. The author submits that “the reporters and the newspapers set the agenda by orientating their readers to negatively perceive the BH terrorism in Nigeria” (p. 360). The negative frames adopted by journalists, as reported by Osinsanwo, are capable of setting agenda that further gives power of dominance and destruction to the sect thereby suggesting that the Nigerian government is incapable of suppressing the insurgents. Findings of Osinsanwo’s study share some semblance with the findings of a study by Ezeah & Emmanuel (2016). Through a critical evaluation of how BBC and Aljazeera reported the *Boko Haram* Sect, The study established to frame *Boko Haram*, BBC adopted the age-long and deep-rooted stereotypic “narratives of western media that associate Islam with barbarism, killing, suicide-bombing, fanaticism, extremism, and terrorism” (p. 30). As the study further reported, while Al-Jazeera appeared to be fair to both the ruling and the opposition sides, the BBC seemed to confer the status of competence and dominance on the opposition party in a manner that would perpetually portray the ruling party as grossly incompetent in handling the menace of *Boko Haram*.

Discussion

The trends from the foregoing empirical reviews show that on the whole, foreign news media report terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa in a way that could not only project Africa as a continent replete with all forms of crises, but also further escalate the spate of terror in the region. Ironically, the performance of African media in respect of their coverage of terrorism in the Sahel is ambivalent and less impressive, not in terms of quantity of coverage, but in respect of their ideological slants. The media in the African nations affected by the extremists’ activities, in some instances, use frames that suppress the negative influence and perceived dominance of the terror groups on the public peace in the African continent, while in most cases the media use frames that could highlight the negative influence and image of terror in manners that could negatively affect the public psyche and global perception of Africa.

The coverage of the Somali conflict by selected American and British newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*—as reported by Workneh’s (2011) provides a good instance. The selected foreign media used demonizing language and frames that projected the war and showed remarkably superior war journalism frames at the expense of peace journalism in reporting the Somali conflict. Citing Bishop *et al.*, (2007), Workneh concluded that the coverage of the Somali conflict by the selected international newspapers gave little evidence to challenge critical views that perceived Western media as “monolithic and undifferentiated” (p. 50). The author asserted that existing empirical evidences regarding conflict reporting suggested a less optimistic

realisation of peace journalism practices in international journalism, warning that the trend was bound to continue unless primary factors like ownership patterns and organizational structures ceased to be market-driven. Mellese & Muller (2012) share a similar critical view of the performance of foreign media in their coverage of Africa. With the results of their study showing that *Al Jazeera* and BBC online news sites presented sub-Saharan Africa negatively both in textual and visual frames of reports that focused more on the negative news mostly about terrorism and crises generally, the authors came hard on the two international media organisations. They posited that, in line with previous research findings, international media giants consider negative events more newsworthy than positive developments in reporting the Sub-Saharan continent—a trend that may imply that “there is a lack of newsworthy positive developments from sub-Saharan African countries...” (Mellese & Muller, 2012: 217).

African media are no less guilty of this preference for negativity than the foreign media. For example, the findings of the study by Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) showed that while *The Guardian*, *This Day* and *Vanguard* reported the *Boko Haram* insurgency in a predominantly policy response frame, the *Daily Sun* newspaper used frames which emphasized ethnic and religious slants. While emphasis on policy response frames could reduce the influence of the insurgent group, the use of frames that project ethno-religious perspective is inimical to peace projects in a secular and multi-cultural country like Nigeria, as argued by Okoro & Odoemelam, (2013). These patterns of reporting would always make it difficult for scholars to situate the Nigerian media—and African media generally—in a specific matrix of performance assessment in their coverage of terror in the sub-region.

Terror acts always have negative impact on both the people and the environment, but in a situation where the mass media pay more attention to the terror group at the expense of the victims of the violence and havoc wreaked by the insurgents, as reported in Nwabueze & Ekwughe's (2014) study, the whole situation becomes worrisome. Wrong media frames (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Omanga, 2012; Hirst, 2013) that exaggerate terror acts and give undue attention to any terror group have the inherent capability of generating moral panic (Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004: 329) which could ultimately give legitimacy to the extremist group. The overall implication is that this situation may create the impression that the state is losing the battle even when the current situation is actually the opposite. When the media present terror groups such as *Boko Haram* in Nigeria (Musa 2012; Walker, 2012; Musa & Yusha'u, 2013; Celso, 2015) and Al-Shabaab in Somalia (Pearlman, 2012; Menkhaus, 2014) as powerful groups with strong international allies and international socio-political agenda that could threaten regional peace (Ayoola & Olaosun, 2014), the media may seem to perform their warning surveillance function (Watson, 2003; Sambe, 2005; McQuail, 2007) by alerting the state to the potential danger posed by the terror groups. However, when extremely

negative frames are used to do this, the media are simultaneously setting negative public setting agenda (see Cohen, 1963; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Watson, 2003; McCombs, 2004; Sibii, 2006; Kioussis & Wu, 2008; Lasorsa, 2008; Nesbitt-Larkinc, 2008) that could threaten public peace especially when the picture the citizens see through the media lens is not only gloomy, nauseating and frightening but also confers power of dominance on the terror groups.

Conclusion

The primary objective set to achieve in this paper was to assess the performance of news media in their coverage of terror in the Sahel and the implication of this performance for peace in the African sub-region. To achieve this objective, some existing empirical studies that examined media coverage of terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa were reviewed. Studies that focused on both foreign and African media were considered. The main trend revealed through this review is that the dominant paradigm of media preference for negativity in news reporting is largely preserved by the media in their presentation of terrorism in the Sahel. In some cases, as reflected in the reviewed studies, when the media tried to perform their warning surveillance function by alerting the state to the potential danger posed by terror, they used frames that exaggerate the impact and dominance of the insurgents in manners that could set negative agenda and ultimately threaten the public peace in the region. More emphasis is usually given to terror actors and their deeds in manners that give them some image of dominance and progressive victory while African social political actors are portrayed as being corrupt and incompetent.

The situation appears worrisome when studies have shown that the terror groups are now effectively employing the new media technology to coordinate information within members and outside allies, create information for their followers and residents of their captured territories, and engage in dynamic propaganda as a method of pushing their ideological position across the world. The reality is that the media terrain has changed with the emergence new media technology that provides relatively open access to the information sharing platforms. The gate-keeping and agenda-setting power of conventional media has been reduced. Almost everyone with access to the social media is now a potential journalist. As established by empirical evidences, the major implication of this liberal media gate is that the new media can be used by anybody or group, including terror groups, to take their messages to their target audience without any recourse to the conventional media. Therefore, in order to ensure that the mass audience are not fed with wrong and negative information that could threaten public peace, there is the need for responsible journalism that feeds the mass audience with the most accurate and truthful reports of the day. When the citizens do not get what they expect from the mass media, they are likely to resort to other alternatives.

And if this happens often, outlawed groups can take the opportunity to launch their propaganda and spread their message of terror. Besides, there is the need for a paradigm shift in journalism practice in Africa. African media cannot afford to continue to present their continent in negative frames because they want to sell their news. In order to reduce moral panic and build a peaceful Sub-Saharan Africa, Africa news media should consciously change the stereotypic narratives of negativity by de-emphasising Afro-pessimism and preference for negative frames.

Limitations

This study relied solely on evidences from previous studies. Besides, because this study is not a meta-analysis, the number of studies reviewed is limited. These may constitute some limitations to this study especially in attempts to generalise the trends presented by the reviewed studies. It is, therefore, recommended that meta-analyses that accommodate more studies are conducted by scholars in order to establish more generalizable trends of media performance in terms of reporting terrorism in the Sahel and the entire African continent. Nevertheless, this study provides a framework for assessing performance of African media in their representation of the Continent especially in issues relating to terrorism and human security.

Declaration:

This is the revised version of an article which this author had earlier published in *African Journal of Peace and Human Security*. This version has been substantially modified to accommodate current literature and reflect latest trends in media framing of terrorism in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

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