Scientific Research

Crisis Journalism and World Peace

Bonachristus Umeogu[1], Ojiakor Ifeoma[2]

[1]Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
[2]Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
Email: {bonaumeogu, ojiakor99}@yahoo.com

With the increase in violence and unrest in many countries, the searchlight has been turned on the media who are supposed to work for peace. This paper is of the position that journalism has a big role to play in maintaining relative peace just as they have the power to fuel crisis. In as much as objectivity should be upheld, it has to go with responsibility.

Keywords: Crisis Journalism; Peace; Peace Journalism; Hypodermic Needle Theory

Introduction

Crisis is as inevitable as death. If a family of only parents and children; no matter how close knit they are experience crisis, how much more people, countries, nations and continents. The comparison between death and crisis is because despite how well you take care of yourself and your vital organs; the amount of time and energy expended in the name of keeping fit, does not deter death in any way. If that is the case, then despite the relative peace experienced in any human setting, there abounds to be crisis. This is because no organization, country, nation or people are immune from a crisis so all must do their best to prepare for one .The difference will now be in the duration of the crisis and the magnitude.

On several occasions, I am scared to the point of being reluctant to tuning to the mass media. Why is that? This is simply because what we see or hear are the news of bombings, kidnappings, rebellions, protests, earthquakes, landslides, Tsunami and other natural and manmade disasters. This is what I call crisis journalism. I am not alone in fearing the unknown because President Abraham Lincoln said, "We live in the midst of alarms, anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read."

It is as if crisis journalism is the new definition of what constitutes news—"scary, alarming and bloody". In other to understand crisis journalism in relation to world peace, the hypodermic needle theory will be used as the theoretical framework. The hypodermic needle theory posits that "the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by "shooting" or "injecting" them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response".

If the tenets of this theory are effective, what role do you think crisis journalism will play in relation to world peace?

In trying to analysis the extent of crisis news, one local network and one foreign network were the sample of this study. The headlines were content analyzed over a period of two weeks to determine if crisis journalism is real or a myth and the recurrent or dominant themes in the headlines of both networks.

Powerful Media Effects

"The media are powerful so much so that they are capable of influencing individual's behavior; converting existing attitudes and pushing people to adopt their promoted ways of living" (www.12manage.com). This theory heralded the hypodermic theory which states that "messages are able to hit individuals directly and personally. This was based in the assumption that the mass society is composed by individuals who were undifferentiated, isolated, automated, anonymous, with a poor level of education and easily suggestible".

Well, this is an insult to the sensibilities of the people who are active and capable of organizing stimuli and information's around them. Yes! The media affects the receivers, if not; they would have lost its relevance. If it does not affect, then there would have been no room for new media like the computer and internet. The bone of contention here should be the type and magnitude of the effect on the individual receivers.

Hypodermic Needle Theory

The name of this theory without an explanation is enough to give a mental picture of what it is all about. That notwithstanding, Wikipedia.com wrote that this theory

"*suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response*".

The propounders of this theory went ahead to say that the people are seen as passive and are seen as having a lot media material "shot" at them. People end up thinking what they are told because there is no other source of information. This theory which became popular in 1920 after the panic broadcast of the "*war of the lords*" see people as passive and have the tendency of believing whatever is thrown at them in the way of information. In fact, this theory likened the receiver to a sitting duck that is left at the mercy of the media. That is one of the faults found with this theory.

Another is that it over exaggerates its effect. For instance, over 12 million people watched the broadcast while a mere 1 million believed the media. If the audiences are really sitting ducks, why was the remaining eleven million not affected by the broadcast? The point is that every communication effort has

the tendency of having an effect but it is erroneous to assume that there will be a uniform effect because of individual differences and intervening variables. It is the intervening variable that will make some people believe what they see or hear in the media while others will wait for opinion leaders to double check their stories. It is the same variable that will cause people to retaliate by fighting while others will calmly wait for the government to address the situation.

Relevance of Hypodermic Needle Theory

Most people assume that the hypodermic theory is obsolete in today's society but I beg to differ. What is the origin of most of the crisis being experienced in the time past and presently? It is as a result of the message they got from the media. Saying that it is obsolete is as good as saying that the media has no effects. If that is the case, why bother with advertising; public service announcement and what have you since you do not envisage the message having an impact on the receiver. The concern should rather be on the nature of the impact because a message intended to have a positive impact might end of having a negative impact which often leads to or escalates crisis situations.

Methodology

Purposively, one local network and one foreign network were considered the sample for this study. The local network is Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) while on the foreign scene, Aljazeera was used. NTA was chosen based on the position it occupies in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. When it comes to getting the news as it happens, they are most reliable especially during the prime time of 9 pm which is the network news time. Aljazeera was chosen because of its stance on objectivity and being unbiased and the time frame for monitoring of headline was usually between 5 pm to 6 pm. It has to be noted that this research was primarily concerned with the headlines which by nature are the summary of the news bulletin for that moment.

A Quick Look at the Term "Crisis"

As there abound writers and researchers, so also abound definitions of what crisis means. One thing that always stands out is that crisis causes a disruption in the normal way of things; poses a threat to all the people involved both the leaders and the citizenry; affects the reputation of all the parties involved negatively. According to Dilenschneider 2000 in Coombs, 2007, "all crises threaten to tarnish an organization's reputation".

Well, in truth, it is not only organizations within the financial sector that experience crisis; countries and nations do and always have their fair share of it which means that crisis have the tendency of dragging the reputation of a country to the mud. For instance, considering the recent activities of "Boko Haram" and its subsequent coverage by both foreign and local media, what is the reputation of Nigeria against the backdrop of the current crisis? Borrowing from Walter Lipmann's quote of the "*world outside and the pictures in our heads*", what are the pictures the international community have in their heads with regards to the image of Nigeria as a terrorist country?

Coombs (2007) summarizes what crisis means by outlining the characteristics of crisis thus:

"*A crisis can create three related threats*: 1) *public safety*,

2) *financial loss*, *and* 3) *reputation loss. Some crises, such as industrial accidents and product harm, can result in injuries and even loss of lives. Crises can create financial loss by disrupting operations, creating a loss of market share/purchase intentions, or spawning lawsuits related to the crisis*".

What I have been able to deduce so far is that crisis usurps the normal way of things and most often than not always end and have negative consequences.

Crisis Journalism

This paper has seen crisis journalism as the report of the disruptions and the problems and its aftermath on the lives of the people. President Abraham Lincoln in Wikipedia said that "*we live in the midst of alarms, anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read*". Well, are the journalists guilty of not promoting world peace in the course of doing their job? Well, from time immemorial, the quest for truth and objectivity has been the cornerstone of what is considered as good journalism. The second principle in the international code of ethics has it that

the foremost task of the journalist is to serve the peoples' right to true and authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality whereby facts are reported conscientiously in their proper context, pointing out their essential connection and without causing distortions, with the deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and state of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.

Coming back to Nigeria, NUJ knowing the relevance of Accuracy has it as one of its principles and it reads thus:

The public has the right to know. Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence.

When journalists report happenings in crisis situations in line with being objective and accurate, it is called crisis journalism and thereby meant to look like sadists or promoters of crisis. Addressing this dilemma, Kempf (2007) asserts that

Of course it is urgently necessary that the usual understanding of objectivity in journalism must be revised and constructively enhanced; to radically turn away from the demand for objectivity not only endangers the acceptance of the peace journalistic project in the journalist community, however, it also can cause peace journalism to squander the trust bonus that its recipients have granted it.

What I understand from this excerpt is that people are now concerned about the role of crisis journalism in achieving relative peace and thereby wishes to be spared some details which will not escalate crisis or cause new ones. The same people who wanted to know it all to make rational decisions are not capable of handling the information and now want it filtered. This also proves that crisis communication directly or indirectly works

against unity and peace.

It was this realization that prompted researchers, media persons and even journalists to think about how the potential of the media could be used not only to fuel conflicts, but rather to encourage peaceful conflict settlement and serve as mediators of peace-building and reconciliation processes. This concern led to the term "peace journalism" and which Shinar 2007 in Kempf (2007) explained as

journalism with peace as an external aim. It understands itself as a normative mode of responsible and conscientious media coverage of conflict that aims at contributing to peacemaking, peacekeeping, and changing the attitudes of media owners, advertisers, professionals, and audiences towards war and peace.

In addition, Kempf (2007) noted that the Art 3 of the 1978 UNESCO Media Declaration, for instance, states that,

the mass media have an important contribution to make to the strengthening of peace and international understanding and in countering racialism, apartheid and incitement to war (UNESCO, 1979, 102). Also the numerous ethical codes for journalists that apply in almost all the countries of the world give expression to similar self-imposed obligations and contain the obligation to act for peace and against any kind of war propaganda.

Crisis Journalism and World Peace

In the course of this research, I found out that crisis journalism is at the point of being replaced by peace journalism. One recurrent theme is that the media have so many roles in peace keeping or conflict escalation. In fact, the role of the media in conflicts has led to the advocacy on peace journalism. Peace journalism advocates that journalists and media practitioners should take a more active role in finding solutions to conflict. This is because journalism as it is willingly or unwillingly emphasizes and encourages violent conflict by its coverage and treatment of the issues. McGoldrick 2000 in (Hanitzch 2004) described peace journalism as a "new form of journalism" which looks "at how journalists could be part of the solution rather than part of the problem".

Writing on this, Kempf (2007) commented that

It has generally been acknowledged that conflict coverage, whether by international news agencies or local reporters, produces its own significant impacts on conflict. As such, more and more local and international groups, media trainers, media institutions and others have developed methodologies for interventions aimed at countering the dangerous effects of poor or deliberately manipulated conflict coverage or for media interventions designed to reduce conflict through a change in the way the media work.

In the same vein McGoldrick 2005 in Kempf (2007) opines that "*Journalists are responsible for the way, for how they report; and even the creation of opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict*".

A Glance at Crisis Journalism Headlines

Betz, M. explained that "an estimated one-quarter to one-third of UN member states are conflict-stressed or emerging democ-

racies. All of these are multi-ethnic states with racial and/or ethnic divisions and will ultimately need to go through a peace building process". Please take a look at these headlines and say whether they are helpful in the peace building process or not.

- US experts warn of looming food crisis in west and central Africa.
- UN downgrades Somali famine but situation still dire.
- US accuses Sudan of bombing civilians in southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States.
- MEND resumes bombing.
- Political violence in Senegal.
- Flood in 2010 killed over 1 million people and displaced 21 million.
- Russian foreign minister warns speculation about Iran's nuclear programme could have "catastrophic consequences".
- 20 more bodies of migrant recovered from a boat that capsized off the Dominican Republic raising the death toll to 41.
- Unicef warns of a malnutrition crisis in badly hit Sindh province.
- Uprising in Syria as Syrian military continues shelling and rocket attacks on western city of Homs.
- 2 dead, 40 wounded in Egypt violence over football match.
- 6 injured in Sunday car bomb, 5 arrested.

Crisis Journalism and Management

Wikipedia sees crisis communication as a part of larger process referred to as crisis management though it may well be a major tool of handling a crisis situation in government, organization or business. If crisis is seen as an unexpected and detrimental situation or event, then crisis communication can play a significant role by transforming the unexpected into the anticipated and responding accordingly.

Crisis management is a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can inflict on an organization, its stakeholders or the general public. In fact, the primary concern in a crisis has to be public safety. A failure to address public safety intensifies the damage from a crisis and even extends the duration of the crisis period.

When public safety is a concern, people need to know what they must do to protect themselves. When there is a crisis, the people naturally lose direction and will always run to mass media for direction on the next line of action. This is normally where you lose or hold the public. The government or officials in charge always have good plans to contain a crisis but how well they are able to contain the crisis depend on how well the crisis management efforts are communicated to the disarrayed public. According to Coombs (2007)

The news media are drawn to crises and are a useful way to reach a wide array of publics quickly. So it is logical that crisis response research has devoted considerable attention to media relations. Media relations allow crisis managers to reach a wide range of stakeholders fast. Fast and wide ranging is perfect for public safety—gets the message out quickly and to as many people as possible.

Also throwing more light of effective communication as a tool in crisis management, Coombs (2007) asserted that

In the face of crisis, leaders must deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risks and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they

need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue. The necessity for management is even more significant with the advent of a 24-hour news cycle and an increasingly internet-savvy audience with ever-changing technology at its fingertips.

The mention of ever changing technology is an advantage to people in authority because it reminded them of the power of the media and how well it can be used in conflict management to reduce the casualties and loss to the barest minimal. What I have been trying to establish is that there cannot be effective crisis management without communication.

Effects of Crisis Journalism on the Public

- One of the effects of crisis journalism is the loss of brotherly love and unity. If I always watch the bombing of Christians by Muslims, how will I be seeing the Muslims that are my neighbor? If I want to be truthful, it will not be with love no matter how close we were before the start of the crisis.
- In every seminar, owing to the increased rate of diseases, people are always advised to manage their stress levels. The truth is that crisis journalism adds to the stress which at the moment is difficult to control as a result of the poor economic condition of the country. What about the psychological trauma experienced by the people?
- It leads to lose of lives and properties. In fact, it primarily leads to lose of life because it is the living that will acquire properties. Have you ever bothered to calculate the number of people who have lost their lives for no just cause all in the name of crisis? I once came across a YouTube video where a terrorist was saying that they will revenge the death of their religion brothers. Who told them their brothers were killed? It is through the media especially through the construction of their headlines. For instance, if I see a headline that reads: 5 churches attacked on Christmas day. A soothsayer is not needed to explain that Christian were the target of the attack. Fanatics after listening to such news might retaliate by launching counter attacks thereby killing and maiming lives. The situation might be different if the headline was: places of worship attacked on Christmas day. Headline fans like me will not know that it was churches thereby sparing the fanatics the details that would have led to crisis.

Conclusion

Our world is rapidly changing and adjusting to face the challenges that are threatening world peace. As it is, crisis journalism or core objectivity in journalism is one of the biggest threats and challenges facing the information age. In the course of this research, it has been found out that the desire on many researchers and citizens alike is to replace crisis journalism with peace journalism since the reportage and handling of crisis issues have done more harm than good.

This paper do not advocate the complete disregard for objectivity but practitioners should always consider the greater good

for man in whatever approach they deem it fit to take in reporting. The media acts as a mirror through which we see the world. Journalism and the media do, however, play an essential role in the societal construction of reality that can be fulfilled through the type of news coverage chosen they can give an impetus either to the escalation or to the de-escalation of conflicts. Because few of us experience terrorism firsthand, the media play an important role in informing us when major incidents occur. Also, because of its speed and ability to reach many audiences at once, the electronic media and particularly television can have a significant impact on the various players who become involved in a particular crisis.

The fact that most people feel that world peace is a myth; that man is violent in nature and would work against its achievement should not deter journalists and man from striving towards it. After all, it has been said that a journey of a thousand miles looks impossible but all it takes to actualize begins with a step.

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