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# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, BOKO HARAM, AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

**Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar**

## **Abstract**

Strategic communications is gaining traction as a potent tool of countering insurgency. State and non-state actors—including insurgent groups—are increasingly turning to it in pursuit of their goals. This article offers a comparative study of the use of strategic communications by both the Nigerian Armed Forces and the jihadi group they seek to obliterate: Boko Haram. It also assesses their impact on the media coverage of their activities. The jihadists deployed both their communications skills and their infamies to put their insurgency onto the global scene. The Army employed a range of tools—some effective, some less so—to counter them. The media's obsession with jihadi stories gave the insurgents an edge, but the Army managed to disrupt most of their strategies. Extraneous factors do influence strategic communications campaigns, but honesty—or the perception of it—is a necessary condition for their long-term efficacy.

**Keywords:** *Boko Haram, counter-insurgency, jihadists, militants, Nigerian Army, strategic communication, strategic communications*

## **About the author**

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## Introduction

On 29 July 2017 the Nigerian Army did something they rarely do: they apologised for issuing a false statement.<sup>1</sup> It was in respect of a setback they had suffered in their war with the jihadi<sup>2</sup> group Boko Haram. Four days earlier the group had ambushed and kidnapped a team of oil explorers and their ancillary staff who were under Army and vigilante group<sup>3</sup> protection. In the false statement,<sup>4</sup> the Army had claimed to have rescued all the explorers and seized weapons from the insurgents. In reality, it was the dead bodies of some of the explorers, their supporting staff, soldiers, and members of the vigilante group that they had managed to recover.<sup>5</sup> The families and colleagues of the victims cried foul.<sup>6</sup> And Boko Haram released a video showing three surviving

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1 Director of Army Public Relations Brigadier General Sani Kukasheka Usman issued the statement, which was widely reported by the Nigerian media. See Ronald Mutum, 'Abducted oil workers: Army apologises for misleading the public, recovers 21 additional bodies', *Daily Trust*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/abducted-oil-workers-army-apologises-for-misleading-public-recovers-21-additional-bodies/207747.html> (accessed 30 July 2017). The Nigerian Army published the statement on its official website too. They used the phrase 'highly regrettable' but buried it deep beneath a vague headline: 'Update on Oil Exploration Team Ambush': <http://www.army.mil.ng/update-on-oil-exploration-team-ambush/> (accessed 30 July 2017).

2 The terms 'jihadi group', 'insurgent group', and 'militant group' are used interchangeably in this article. Jihadi is used here in the same sense the news outlets in the West use it to refer to a violent extremist group. It is radically different from the term 'jihad' in Islam, which simply means struggle to uphold righteous deeds.

3 The vigilante group is a team of armed youths, formed by local communities in the northeast, to counter the Boko Haram militancy. They are sometimes called 'Civilian JTF' (Joint Task Force) and often work as a support team for the Nigerian Armed Forces, largely because of their excellent knowledge of the local terrains.

4 The statement, which was issued by the same Brigadier General Usman on 26 July 2017, was reported by several news outlets. See Idris Ibrahim and Abdulkareem Haruna, 'Nigerian Army announces rescue of kidnapped NNPC officials, says nine soldiers killed', *Premium Times*, 26 July 2017, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/238267-nigerian-army-announces-rescue-kidnapped-nnpc-officials-says-nine-soldiers-killed.html> (accessed 26 July 2017). It was also published on the Army's website: 'Update on Search and Rescue of NNPC Staff': <http://www.army.mil.ng/update-on-search-and-rescue-of-nnpc-staff/> (accessed 27 July 2017). And ironically, it remained on the website for many weeks after the retraction.

5 Media reports say more than 45 people were killed. See Hamza Idris, Ibrahim Sawab, and Yusha'u Ibrahim, '45 killed, many missing in Boko Haram ambush on oil workers', *Daily Trust*, 28 July 2017 <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/45-killed-many-missing-in-boko-haram-ambush-on-oil-workers/207500.html> (accessed 29 July 2017).

6 For instance, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Maiduguri, Professor Abubakar Njodi, whose younger brother and staff were among those killed, criticised the Army for describing 'the recovery of corpses' as the rescue of the victims. See Abdulkareem Haruna and Idris Ibrahim, 'NNPC Ambush: UN-IMAID Vice Chancellor faults Nigerian Army, says nobody rescued', *Premium Times*, 28 July 2017: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/238453-nnpc-ambush-unimaid-vice-chancellor-faults-nigerian-army-says-nobody-rescued.html> (accessed 28 July 2017).

members of the exploration team in their custody.<sup>7</sup> The three—two geologists who are lecturers at the University of Maiduguri and their driver—said in the video that they were being held hostage by the militants. They pleaded with the Nigerian authorities to negotiate with the insurgents to secure their freedom. It was a complete repudiation of the Army's claim. And so, with the Nigerian public getting more accurate reports of the incident from other sources, the Army had no viable option but to admit that their own original statement was false.

They would have saved themselves from this humiliating experience, had they not ignored one of the key tenets of strategic communications: truth-telling. The retraction itself—which earned them some praise<sup>8</sup>—was actually a more dignifying act than their previous tradition of telling untruths and keeping quiet. A few days before this incident, the Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General Tukur Yusufu Buratai, had given his troops a 40-day ultimatum to capture the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, dead or alive.<sup>9</sup> The Army had made multiple claims of killing or maiming the militants' leader.<sup>10</sup> Issuing the ultimatum was a confirmation that the Army had deliberately misinformed the public in the past.

In the brutal war they have been waging against the jihadists since 2009, the Nigerian Army have actually been winning the gun battle in the field, though not as effectively and as accurately as they have been representing to the public. They have retaken most of the territory once seized by the militants, killed many of their commanders and young fighters, and forced a significant number of them to surrender. But it is in the 'communications battlespace'<sup>11</sup> that the insurgents often outwit their superior opponents. And this has often been helped by lapses in the Army's narratives. Unknown to military officials, any time they issue a false statement about their encounters with

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7 The video, which was apparently recorded on 28 July 2017, was shared on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5q8pTK7pzw> (accessed 30 July 2017). Boko Haram—the faction led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, which kidnapped them—released the video immediately after the Army had claimed to have rescued the explorers. The captives specifically called for negotiation with al-Barnawi, something that raised questions about a previous claim that he had been arrested by the Nigerian security forces.

8 Asaju, Tunde, 'Towards a Positive Army-media Relations', *Daily Trust*, 2 August 2017.

9 See 'Capture Shekau "dead or alive", Buratai directs Commander', *The Nation*, 22 July 2017: <http://thenationonlineng.net/capture-shekau-dead-alive-buratai-directs-commander/> (accessed 22 July 2017).

10 See, for instance, Festus Ewete's analysis in *Premium Times*: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/238515-analysis-nigerian-military-repeatedly-claimed-killed-boko-haram-leader-abubakar-shekau.html> (accessed 29 July 2017). There were occasions when the Army admitted that Shekau had not been captured, but they didn't admit providing false information. One example is the report in *Premium Times*, 'Why We Are Yet to Capture Shekau – DHQ', 30 March 2017: <http://thenationonlineng.net/why-capture-shekau-dhq/> (accessed 30 March 2017).

11 Giese, Jeff, 'It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 1(1), (2015), p. 71.

Boko Haram, they indirectly empower the jihadists. For, as academics Mervyn Frost and Nicholas Michelsen have argued elsewhere, non-adherence to truth telling creates ‘opportunities that empower even very weak hostile actors and undermine the basic structural conditions on which even the strongest actors’ credibility is rooted’.<sup>12</sup>

The problem probably stemmed from the Army’s misconception or misapplication of strategic communications, though in fairness to them they do not claim to be using it.<sup>13</sup> The terms they frequently use are ‘public relations’, ‘public affairs’, ‘defence information’, and ‘crisis communication’ (all components of strategic communications)<sup>14</sup>—but all of which they tend to misapply because none of them advocates using misinformation as a tool. The narrow scope of the military’s communications strategy—they seem to target only domestic audiences, apparently in compliance with their specific remits—is an additional constraint, especially as they are, in reality, dealing with an issue that extends far beyond the borders of Nigeria. This might explain their use of terminologies that are of narrower scope than strategic communications, which is usually associated with communication with external audiences. Yet their task is of the magnitude that only a skilful application of strategic communications techniques could address. But, like many military formations, the Nigerian Army appears to equate strategic communications with spin.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps a hangover of the entrenched tradition of using propaganda as part of military campaigns. But as communications expert John Williams points out:

*Strategic communications is not propaganda, nor psychological operations, nor information ops, nor spin—all of which involve an intention to mislead in some way. Strategic communications is about strategic impact through credible narrative. In complex situations, where reasonable people can hold different views or see the problem from different angles, strategic communications is an honest attempt—always honest—to frame the way people around the world understand what is at stake.*<sup>16</sup>

12 Frost, Mervyn and Nicholas Michelsen, ‘Strategic Communications in International Relations: Practical Traps and Ethical Puzzles’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2, (2017), p. 22.

13 Former National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki does use the term ‘strategic communications’, but other security officials rarely do. Most references made here are to the Nigerian Army because they are the ones leading the counter-insurgency campaigns. And the words ‘Army’ and ‘military’ are often used here interchangeably.

14 See Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

15 See Thomas, Timothy, ‘Russia’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, 1(1), (2015), 11–26. Even NATO’s strategic communications definition includes psychological operations (see, NATO, ‘NATO Strategic Communications Policy’, *NATO Unclassified*, (SG (2009)0794) 14 September 2009).

16 Williams, John, ‘Weaponised Honesty: Communication Strategy and NATO Values’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2, (2017), p. 205.



The lack of credible narratives is a major lapse in the Army's counter-insurgency efforts. On numerous occasions the military would issue half-truths or untruths that were easily punctured by the militants or simply detected by the public. Their repeated claims of Shekau's death, for instance, were effectively countered by the insurgents with simple releases of their leader's video and audio recordings to prove that he was still alive and unharmed.<sup>17</sup> Each successful rebuttal of such claims erodes the credibility of the Army and enhances that of the jihadists. It is not that the Boko Haram militants do not exaggerate their claims or spread outright falsehoods; they do. But they tend to give the media more credible accounts of events than the Nigerian military does. This strengthens their standing as news sources and increases the visibility of their narratives in the media. But, of course, it is the media's obsession with jihadi stories that helps lift them out of their relative obscurity and put them onto the global scene.<sup>18</sup> As will be explained later, a growing body of literature has shown that the media's preoccupation with covering terrorism and Islamist militancy, as well as the jihadists' quest for publicity, has helped generate much more media attention to insurgents and terrorists than they deserve.<sup>19</sup>

This article examines the communications strategies of both the Nigerian Army and the Boko Haram militants, and broadly assesses their impact on the media coverage of the jihadi insurgency and counter-insurgency in Nigeria. The data was drawn from interviews with journalists and public relations officers;<sup>20</sup> analysis of Boko Haram's video and audio messages; the researcher's personal reflections, as he has covered the Boko Haram insurgency as a journalist working for both the BBC World Service and the Nigerian *Daily Trust* newspapers; library research; and analysis of the press releases

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17 In one such video, given to the online news outlet *Sahara Reporters*, the Boko Haram leader denied that he was injured in a military airstrike. *Sahara Reporters*, 'Boko Haram Leader, Shekau, Releases New Video to Prove He Wasn't Injured in Nigerian Air Force Bombardment', 4 May 2017: <http://saharareporters.com/2017/05/04/boko-haram-leader-shekau-releases-new-video-prove-he-wasnt-injured-nigerian-air-force> (accessed 5 May 2017).

18 Abubakar, Abdullahi Tasiu, 'Communicating Violence: The Media Strategies of Boko Haram' in *Africa's Media Image in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: From the 'Heart of Darkness' to 'Africa Rising'*, eds. M. Bunce, S. Franks and C. Paterson, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 200–210.

19 See Weimann, Gabriel, 'The Theater of Terror: Effects of Press Coverage', *Journal of Communication*, 33(1), (1983), 38–45; Weimann, Gabriel, 'The Role of the Media in Propagating Terrorism' in *Countering Terrorism: Psychosocial Strategies*, eds. U. Kumar and M.K. Mandal, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2012), pp. 182–200; Lynch, Marc, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies', *National Interest*, 83, (2006), 50–56; Moeller, Susan, *Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit*. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Farwell, James P., 'The Media Strategy of ISIS', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56(6), (2014), 49–55; and Nacos, Brigitte L., *Mass-mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

20 Part of the data was obtained from the individual interviews conducted with twelve Nigerian journalists, two police public relations officers, and two former army public relations officers. The interviews were done in the months of January, April, and July 2017.



and web content generated by the Nigerian Armed Forces (in particular those of the Defence Headquarters, the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Air Force, and the Nigeria Police Force).

### **The Army versus Boko Haram**

The Army were not the primary adversaries of the Boko Haram insurgents;<sup>21</sup> politicians and police were. The jihadists were first critical of politicians whom they accuse of corruption and breach of trust. They then added the police who protect the politicians and enforce their laws. And when they began their uprising in July 2009, they were primarily confronting the Borno State Government and the police, who were trying to enforce a law that stipulates the wearing of helmets by motorcyclists, which the insurgents hate and routinely violate. It was the failure of the police to contain them that prompted the then President Umaru Musa Yar'adua to bring in the Army. The military suppressed the uprising, arrested the founder of the group, Muhammad Yusuf, and handed him over to the police in Maiduguri, Borno State's capital and Boko Haram's main base.<sup>22</sup> Yusuf was killed while in police custody,<sup>23</sup> an act that was believed to have further radicalised the group and made its members more violent. There was a renewed uprising followed by a full insurgency, and the Army became the group's main adversary. With the escalation of the insurgency came a wider involvement of the armed forces. By 2013, almost all the Nigerian armed forces and intelligence agencies were drafted into the counter-insurgency campaigns, which the Office of the National Security Adviser coordinates. This article assesses the overall communications strategy employed in this counter-insurgency work, focusing mainly on the Army's part and making references to that of the entire military and the Defence Headquarters.

The Army has long been playing the lead role in the campaign, although there have been changes in strategy and in the structure and scope of the communications team, which have often been occasioned by changes of governments or of personnel. During the Yar'adua administration it was the Army that handled the media strategy, operating mostly from Maiduguri. The Department of State Services (DSS)—the domestic intelligence agency usually called the State Security Service (SSS)—was involved more in security operations but less in open communications. This system continued in the early part of President Goodluck Jonathan's administration under the supervision

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21 The words 'insurgents', 'jihadists', and 'militants' are used here to describe Boko Haram members because of the political nature of their activities, although most of their activities fall within the definition of terrorism. The Nigerian government and the armed services actually call them terrorists and their actions terrorism. In this article, the term 'insurgency' is often used to describe their activities—again, due to the perceived political intentions of the actions.

22 Smith, Mike, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

23 Ibid.

of the then National Security Adviser retired General Andrew Azazi. But when the insurgency intensified, the strategy was modified. The involvement of other agencies, both in direct security operations and in public communications, was expanded. This was further widened when retired Colonel Sambo Dasuki became the National Security Adviser in 2012. ‘That was the time when we saw a lot of media effort and greater involvement of other agencies in the counter-terrorism work,’ observed a former Army public relations officer.<sup>24</sup> The busiest period was perhaps between 2013 and 2015 when the power of the Boko Haram insurgents was at its peak. The military was doing badly in the battlefield and was using a media campaign to cover it up, noted many journalists interviewed for this piece. Now it was the Defence Headquarters in Abuja—not the Army base in Maiduguri—that was in clear control of public communications, with Major General Chris Olukolade, the then Director of Defence Information, overseeing the production and distribution of most of the media content.

Another feature of the communications strategy at that time was the establishment of the Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies (FOSSRA), which includes representatives of the military, paramilitary, intelligence, and response agencies. The 17-member forum was made up of spokespersons from the Nigerian Defence Headquarters, the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Air Force, the Nigerian Navy, the Office of the National Security Adviser, the National Intelligence Agency, the Department of State Services, and the Nigeria Police Force, as well as officers from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, the Nigeria Customs Service, the Nigeria Immigration Service, the Nigerian Prisons Service, the National Emergency Management Agency, the Federal Fire Service, and the Federal Road Safety Commission.<sup>25</sup> A public relations specialist, Yushua Shuaib, engaged by the Office of the National Security Adviser, was the media consultant to the forum.<sup>26</sup> Their open function focused mainly on public relations work. They ran their own website and held monthly meetings in Abuja during which they would often give journalists an update on the campaigns against the Boko Haram insurgency.<sup>27</sup> It was an important component of the overall strategic communications setting. But it didn’t last long.

When President Muhammadu Buhari assumed office after defeating President Jonathan in the 2015 general elections, he appointed a new National Security Adviser, retired Major General Babagana Monguno, and new Defence, Army, Navy, and Air Force Chiefs. With these changes there also came a shift in media strategy. FOSSRA still exists but has lesser

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24 Interview with the researcher in Abuja in July 2017.

25 Shuaib, Yushau, *Boko Haram Media War: An Encounter with the Spymaster*, (Abuja: Image Merchants Promotions, 2017), p. 275.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

involvement in public communications work. Shuaib, the media consultant, resigned a few months after former National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki, the person who hired him, was arrested and taken to court on corruption charges—which he denies.<sup>28</sup> The media visibility of the Defence Headquarters was significantly curtailed. And the Army regained its leading role in handling public communications. The other security services continue to play different roles in the overall communications strategy, though not as much as they were doing previously. However, being conventional security institutions operating under formal government structures, they all publicly maintain their conventional relationship with one another, and with the media.

Boko Haram's case is radically different. First, the group is a secretive extremist Islamic sect whose ideology was originally rooted in Salafism,<sup>29</sup> from which it has since deviated. Even before its members went underground in 2009, many of their activities were shrouded in mystery. The name 'Boko Haram' itself—meaning 'Western education is sinful'—is not the group's real name. The jihadists actually detest it. They want to be called *Jama'atu Ablus Sunna lid Da'awatu wal-Jihad* (approximately 'Movement for the Propagation and Enthronement of Righteous Deeds') or *al-Wilaayat al-Islamiyyah Gharb Afriqiyah* (the Islamic State's West African Province)—their new name after pledging allegiance to the so-called Islamic State group in 2015. Founded by Muhammad Yusuf in Nigeria's northeast in 2002,<sup>30</sup> Boko Haram was originally a peaceful movement. But its liaisons with politicians and clashes with security forces turned it into Nigeria's most violent terror group.<sup>31</sup> The July 2009 uprising, in which more than 800 people (mostly its members) were killed, was one of the most radicalising events for the group.<sup>32</sup> It was after that violence that its members went underground. They resurfaced a year later with Shekau as their new leader. He spearheads their deadly campaigns—which include bombing schools, churches, mosques, and markets, and kidnapping for ransom and for sexual enslavement.<sup>33</sup> They also engage in bank robberies, cattle rustling, and raiding towns and villages in Nigeria and in neighbouring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.<sup>34</sup>

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28 The former National Security Adviser was arrested and later taken to court in December 2015 in connection with alleged arms procurement fraud (see BBC, 'Nigeria's Sambo Dasuki charged over \$68m fraud', 14 December 2015: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/world-africa-35093785> (accessed 14 December 2015)). PR consultant Shuaib resigned few months later (see Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 275).

29 Meijer, Roel (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

30 Smith, *Boko Haram*.

31 Amnesty International, 'Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill': Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-east Nigeria', (London: Amnesty International, 2015), AFR44/1360/2015, pp. 1–98.

32 Smith, *Boko Haram*.

33 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

34 Ibid.

Although it was their abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 that gave them global notoriety, Boko Haram militants have committed far worse atrocities, such as beheadings and mass executions.<sup>35</sup> They seized swathes of territory in north-eastern Nigeria where they declared their caliphate. At one time (between mid-2014 and early 2015), they were controlling a territory the size of Belgium, upon which they imposed their own version of Islamic law, beheading suspected spies and stoning to death those they convicted of adultery.<sup>36</sup> The 2015 report of the Global Terrorism Index describes Boko Haram as the world's deadliest terror group.<sup>37</sup>

It took a reorganisation of the Nigerian Armed Forces and coordinated responses from the neighbouring armies to dislodge the jihadists from much of the captured territory. The formation of the multinational force, called the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), made up of troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin did help in strengthening the regional response; but it was not until the Nigerian military had put its house in order that the jihadists were contained. Boko Haram has since split into two—one faction led by Shekau and the other by Abu Musab Yusuf al-Barnawi,<sup>38</sup> son of its founder Muhammad Yusuf. But even with this split, both camps have been carrying out suicide bombings, raiding villages, kidnapping vulnerable people, and inflicting losses on the Army. The overall impact of the eight-year insurgency has not been fully assessed (as the crisis is still going on and some areas are still inaccessible to researchers), but an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 lives are reported to have been lost and about three million people displaced. In Nigeria's northeast alone, the economic impact amounts to \$9 billion, and, as of September 2017, some 10.7 million people require humanitarian assistance, according to a United Nations briefing.<sup>39</sup> Researchers have identified various reasons for the emergence of Boko Haram, among which are poor governance, Nigeria's endemic corruption, youth unemployment, chronic poverty, incompetent security agencies, the rise of jihadi ideology in response to the West's war on terror, British colonial legacy, and a lack of adequate education.<sup>40</sup>

35 Amnesty International, 'Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill'.

36 Ibid.

37 Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism', November 2015/IEP Report 36: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2016).

38 The real leader of al-Barnawi's faction is believed to be Muhammad Nur, the alleged mastermind of the 2011 UN Building bombing in Abuja. He, like Shekau, was once a deputy to al-Barnawi's father.

39 United Nations, 'Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Lake Chad Basin, Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman', 13 September 2017: <http://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/13092017/lake-chad-basin> (accessed 12 October 2017).

40 See UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, (New York: UNDP, 2017); Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Smith, *Boko Haram*; and Herskovits, Jean, 'The Real Tragedy in Nigeria's Violence', *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2009: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/03/the\\_real\\_tragedy\\_in\\_nigerias\\_violence](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/03/the_real_tragedy_in_nigerias_violence) (accessed 5 August 2009).

As members of a terror group, Boko Haram jihadists derive their power through the use of brutal force; but they also rely on the media to spread their ideology, extend their brutality, intimidate their enemies, and recruit new adherents.<sup>41</sup> Their use of media began long before the commencement of their insurgency. Earlier, when they were still operating as a peaceful movement, Boko Haram leaders had established a 'Public Awareness Department', which was mainly responsible for the production and distribution of their propaganda materials, liaising with the media, and recruiting members. It was run by the group's spokesman, known variously as Abul Qaqa or Abu Darda or Abu Zaid<sup>42</sup>—all pseudonyms used by the group to hide their identity as they tend to be exposed to higher risks. Unlike the bureaucratic setting of the Nigerian Army's communications team (which is often based on impersonal governmental formality), in the Boko Haram structure a spokesman is usually a senior member of the group's *Shura* (Supreme Council) and a close associate of its leader.<sup>43</sup> This is a key feature of the organisation that ensures the centrality of media in the jihadists' overall strategy.

### **An Obsession with Information Control**

Despite the sharp contrast in the structures of their communications teams, however, the Nigerian Army and Boko Haram share a common obsession with information control. They have demonstrated this in multiple ways, with Boko Haram showing greater ingenuity. Even when they were operating openly as a peaceful Islamic youth movement, the Boko Haram leaders had evidently maintained strict control of the information they were releasing to the public. They were not attracting the attention of the news media in their early days because they were just one of several religious movements mushrooming in different parts of the country. And even when they were producing and selling recorded cassettes of the fiery sermons and speeches of their founder and of his deputies, Shekau and Nur,<sup>44</sup> not much media attention was given to them because in northern Nigeria it was not unusual for religious groups to be critical of government. Their inflammatory sermons were, of course, attracting security scrutiny, but the news media showed no interest in the group. It was only when the group members began to clash with security agents that such interest developed. And they too made concerted efforts to cultivate relationships with journalists. This, though, did not stop them from killing and intimidating journalists and attacking media organisations that published

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41 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

42 Idris, Hamza, 'Boko Haram Spox Abul Qaqa Captured', *Daily Trust*, 2 February 2012: [http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=153791:boko-haram-spox-abul-qaqa-captured&catid=2:lead-stories&Itemid=8](http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=153791:boko-haram-spox-abul-qaqa-captured&catid=2:lead-stories&Itemid=8) (accessed 2 February 2012).

43 Ibid.

44 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

reports they dislike<sup>45</sup>—further evidence of their obsession with information control. The stronger they grew, the more they exerted their control on information flow. This was clearly demonstrated when they established their caliphate in 2014. According to many journalists who covered the region, the militants maintained a near-absolute control of information flow during their reign in the seized territory. The little that the outside world heard about the happenings there came from the fragmented accounts of those lucky enough to escape from the territory—and the narratives of the Boko Haram themselves. The group maintained an effective news blackout there throughout their reign. Journalists had no access to the caliphate. Safety concerns and logistics were, understandably, significant factors, but the primary reason was the insurgents' mistrust of people who do not belong to their group. When they decided what they wanted the outside world to know about the caliphate, they would produce video and audio recordings and hand them over to journalists and media outlets through emissaries, or upload them directly to the internet.<sup>46</sup>

The Army's fixation with information control is also unhidden. Over-centralisation of authority and deliberate denial of information are among the techniques they use to ensure control. In the first three years of its confrontation with Boko Haram (July 2009 to June 2012), the Army had allowed its unit in Maiduguri, which was mostly directly involved in the fight, to communicate directly with the media. The officers there would inform the public of the situation on the ground, speak to journalists, issue press releases, and offer guided tours of the areas affected by the conflict. But this approach was abandoned in favour of an over-centralised system, under which virtually only the Defence Headquarters or the Army Headquarters in Abuja would make comments on events happening in remote areas of the northeast. Local commanders and local army public relations officers, who were fully aware of what was happening in their areas, would decline to share such information with local journalists. They would instead refer them to the Defence Headquarters. Journalists in the northeast would get a hint of an incident happening within their locality and seek confirmation from the local commander or the unit's public relations officer, only to be referred on to the Defence Headquarters in Abuja as the sole source of such information. Military officials at the Defence Headquarters usually would not respond to such queries; they would just disseminate information when they saw fit. The Nigerian Army claims that its information dissemination system is decentralised because it has public relations officers at several different levels, but in reality these officers, and even the brigade commanders, are not always given the authority to release useful information to the public.

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45 Smith, *Boko Haram*.

46 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.



Deliberate denial of access to military-controlled areas and intimidation of journalists who dare to go there are two other methods the military employs for information control. The Army's detention of *Al-Jazeera* journalists, who went to Maiduguri in March 2015 to report on the insurgency ahead of the 2015 general elections, illustrates this.<sup>47</sup> Common excuses given by the military when preventing access to certain areas include security concerns and fear for the safety of the journalists. But many journalists who have covered the crisis believe that the Army simply didn't want them to report what was happening there. Since the beginning of the insurgency, there have always been areas that journalists could not access because they were under the control of Boko Haram or the Army, and guided tours of the Army-controlled areas wouldn't always give journalists the information they were looking for. *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) correspondent Mike Smith, who participated in one such tour organised by the Army along with other journalists, expressed disappointment with the quality of the information he received.<sup>48</sup> There were improvements, though, especially after the military had regained control of most of the area; many journalists who were taken on the later tours came back with useful footage and detailed information.

This, however, does not compensate for the more serious cases of the Army's intolerance of media coverage of the insurgency. One such case was the decision made in 2014 to confiscate and destroy copies of several editions of newspapers across the country—another testimony to the Army's obsession with information control. For many days in June of that year, soldiers seized and destroyed bundles of newspapers from at least ten media houses for 'security' reasons, but many regarded this action as a reprisal for the newspapers' coverage of their poor performance in the fight against Boko Haram.<sup>49</sup> Civil society organisations and advocacy groups expressed dismay over the action.<sup>50</sup> The Army's claims of receiving intelligence reports indicating movements of dangerous materials via newspaper distribution vehicles were never substantiated, and the anger of the newspapers' proprietors was never in doubt—the impulse to suppress criticism was unhelpful to the military's strategic communications efforts.

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47 *The Guardian*, 'Al-Jazeera Calls for Release of Two Journalists Held in Nigeria', 31 March 2015: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/mar/31/al-jazeera-calls-for-release-of-two-journalists-held-in-nigeria> (accessed 4 April 2015). *Al-Jazeera*, 'Nigeria Releases Detained Al-Jazeera Journalists', 5 April 2015: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/nigeria-releases-detained-al-jazeera-journalists-150405161952385.html> (accessed 11 May 2015).

48 Smith, *Boko Haram*.

49 Freedom House, 'Freedom of the Press 2015 – Nigeria', 28 April 2015: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/nigeria> (accessed 28 April 2015).

50 *Reporters Sans Frontières* (Reporters Without Border), 11 June 2014: <https://rsf.org/en/news/army-seizes-newspaper-issues-day-after-day-security-grounds> (accessed 12 June 2014). Committee to Protect Journalists, 4 June 2014: <https://cpj.org/2014/06/nigerian-military-seizes-leading-newspapers.php> (accessed 7 June 2014).



## Direct Engagement with the Mainstream Media

The aversion of both Boko Haram and the Army to media scrutiny does not deter either from seeking media support. The jihadists in particular rely on media to do much of their work. After all, they put it at the centre of their overall strategy from the outset. Whether it be small-scale media (audio cassettes and leaflets), legacy media, or social media, Boko Haram militants never ignore the opportunities the media provide—however, their key target has always been the mainstream media. As stated earlier, before turning to violence, the insurgents were not getting the attention of the mainstream news media. But they did have a taste of the prestige it could confer when local broadcast stations aired some speeches given by their group's founder. As a young preacher, Yusuf's sermons propelled him into the public arena; some of the speeches he had made at Muslim youth conferences were aired by local broadcast stations in Borno State. When he became too critical of the government, the stations shunned him.<sup>51</sup> This apparently taught him and his followers a lesson about relating to the mainstream media. When their radicalism brought them into open confrontations with the authorities, they actively cultivated relationships with independent journalists to have them reflect Boko Haram's side of the story. The confrontations naturally drew media attention, and because the insurgents were willing and eager to talk, their stories were reaching wider audiences. They maintained contact with journalists and often held news briefings at their headquarters in Maiduguri. Journalists who attended those briefings said the group's founder would first complain about alleged harassment of his followers by security operatives and then denounce Western culture and express his desire to turn Nigeria into a Salafist state.<sup>52</sup> The peak period of Boko Haram's open engagement with the mainstream media was from the middle of June 2009 to the end of July 2009, when its members were regularly clashing with the police. In those weeks Yusuf spoke frequently with journalists, threatening retaliations for the killings of his followers.<sup>53</sup> But the intensity of the July 2009 uprising and its brutal suppression ended Boko Haram's open media relations approach. The insurgents had to devise new ways of engaging with the media.

The power of the media to define issues in the public mind provides sufficient motivation for Boko Haram to endeavour to sustain the engagement. Apart from

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51 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

52 Ibid., p. 204.

53 Smith, *Boko Haram*.

its status-conferring role,<sup>54</sup> which the group's leaders must have noticed in their early encounters, the media does equally have an agenda-setting function—a key factor of its attraction to jihadists.<sup>55</sup> From the days of Walter Lippmann's identification of the media's central role in shaping public opinion<sup>56</sup> to the current era of sophisticated branding and strategic communications, agenda-setting theory—the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda<sup>57</sup>—has always been a guiding principle of those who seek to use (or manipulate) the media to attain their goals. Although numerous audience studies have highlighted the limits of media 'effects' on its audiences,<sup>58</sup> state and non-state actors will always want to leverage whatever level of influence the media can wield. Theorists of journalism have argued that the media's ability to place issues on the public agenda is a significant factor in shaping people's minds. 'The media not only can be successful in telling us *what to think about*, they also can be successful in telling us *how to think about it*.'<sup>59</sup> The spread of this perspective explains the centrality of media in the battle for hearts and minds. And that was perhaps why the Boko Haram insurgents were keen to maintain their contacts with the mainstream media, even after being pushed underground, as will be seen later.

The Army's direct relationship with the mainstream media was more straightforward. Being a well-established institution that had formal contacts with the media industry long before its encounter with the insurgency, the Army reinvigorated its communications structure and utilised the services of legacy media in its counter-insurgency campaigns. As stated earlier, the Defence Headquarters' information department, FOSSRA, the Army's public relations units, and so on are all involved. They regularly issue press releases, hold news conferences, visit media houses, and organise (in the case of FOSSRA) monthly interactive sessions with journalists. They also employ the services

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54 Lazarsfeld, Paul and Robert Merton, 'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action' in L. Bryson, ed., *The Communication of Ideas*, (New York: Harper Row, 1948), pp. 88–107. See also Wright, Charles, 'Functional Analysis and Mass Communication', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24(4), (1960), 605–620.

55 See Weimann, 'The Theater of Terror'.

56 Lippmann, Walter, *Public Opinion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

57 McCombs, Maxwell, 'A Look at Agenda-setting Past, Present and Future', *Journalism Studies*, 6(4), (2005), p. 543.

58 Decades of audience studies point to the limits of media influence. The literature on this is vast, but the following works provide a range of examples: Klapper, Joseph, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960); Morley, David, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Ang, Ien, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, (London: Routledge, 1996); Abubakar, Abdullahi Tasiu, 'Selective Believability: A Perspective on Africans' Interactions with Global Media', *Journal of African Media Studies*, 5(2), (2013), 219–236; and Abubakar, Abdullahi Tasiu, 'Audience Participation and BBC's Digital Quest in Nigeria' in *Everyday Media Culture in Africa: Audiences and Users*, eds. W. Willems and W. Mano, (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), pp. 140–160.

59 McCombs, 'A Look at Agenda-setting Past, Present and Future', p. 546 (*italics original*).

of public relations consultants.<sup>60</sup> So, in terms of maintaining a direct relationship with the media regarding its counter-insurgency work, the public relations machine of the armed forces has been quite active. For instance, in two years alone (from mid-2013 to mid-2015) the army ‘issued over 3000 media contents including newsworthy items and publications’.<sup>61</sup> This emboldened the then National Security Adviser to claim that the military had used its cordial relationship with the media to effectively counter Boko Haram’s propaganda.<sup>62</sup>

The military’s trust in the power of the legacy media could also be seen in their decision to set up their own radio station in Abuja in 2015 to promote ‘counter-terrorism operations’.<sup>63</sup> And they have been expanding both its services and its reach. The main snag, though, is that a single false statement from the military authorities (as noted in the opening part of this piece) is capable of undoing months of hard work. And their inability to always match words with actions is an equally major drawback. This was evident when the Army was losing territory to Boko Haram in 2014–2015. The image of cowardly soldiers running away from marauding jihadi fighters and abandoning their positions and weapons could not be repaired by propaganda alone. The Army had to retake most of the seized territory and demonstrate that they were gaining control before they began to erase that image of cowardice—and get it reflected in the media. As public diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull argues, the most effective voice of an actor is ‘not what it says but what it does’.<sup>64</sup>

### Psychological Operations and Guerrilla Tactics

Apart from employing traditional media relations methods, both the Army and Boko Haram have also used unconventional approaches in their engagement with the media. The techniques they deploy are mostly reactive (though some are proactive) and necessitated by the situations in which they find themselves. When Boko Haram went underground—making open contact with journalists dangerous and mostly impossible—they devised a guerrilla media strategy. ‘This consisted of using anonymous mobile phone lines to deliver messages to journalists, emailing materials to media houses using fake addresses, and organising teleconferences from secret locations.’<sup>65</sup> It worked particularly well from the middle of 2011 to the early part of 2012, when the militants

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60 Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Daily Trust*, ‘Armed Forces Launch Radio Station’, 24 May 2015: <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index.php/news/20798-armed-forces-launch-radio-station> (accessed 24 May 2015).

64 Cull, Nicholas, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy), (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009), p. 27.

65 Abubakar, ‘Communicating Violence’, pp. 204–205.

were deeply involved in urban guerrilla warfare. But it was terminated after the Nigerian secret police tracked down the jihadists' two spokesmen, killed one, and arrested the other.<sup>66</sup>

The group then came up with a new approach—a direct drop strategy. They would produce video and audio messages and leaflets and deliver them discreetly to journalists.<sup>67</sup> Because of their strong faith in propaganda, Boko Haram fighters often travel with their cameramen to record operations. Their leaders also record sermons and messages. Those they wanted to publicise during this period were usually delivered to journalists through emissaries, while leaflets were mostly dropped in places where journalists and the public would see them. It was through this approach that they staged their biggest publicity coup—when they handed over the video of the Chibok schoolgirls they abducted in 2014 to an AFP journalist.<sup>68</sup> Security agents eventually detected and disrupted this strategy too, but not before it had generated the global media attention the group craves.

The Army's unconventional approach to communicating with the mainstream media was anchored on the desire to manage the security challenges created by Boko Haram's violence. Military officials use their contacts with the media to persuade editors to suppress stories they deem inimical to national security. This approach does not involve using threat or intimidation, rather it relies on moral suasion and appealing to journalists' sense of patriotism to make them handle issues in a way that is helpful to the Army's counter-insurgency mission. Some of the journalists interviewed for this article admitted that they had, at one time or another, handled stories based on appeals from their editors or directly from the security agencies regarding security concerns caused by the Boko Haram crisis. The Army was more successful in using this approach when Boko Haram's use of violence was at its peak. There was a collective fear then, even among journalists and media establishments, some of whom were victims of Boko Haram's attacks. The support the security services received from the media might have come from the need to address this. There was confirmation that the security services did receive this support. 'We received massive and unprecedented support from the local and foreign media for the accomplishment of our nation in the war on terror.'<sup>69</sup>

The other approach the Nigerian Army employed in countering the Boko Haram insurgency was psychological operations. Details for this are hard to decipher, but the Army's former media consultant admitted that it was part of their strategy.

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66 Idris, 'Boko Haram Spox Abul Qaqa Captured'.

67 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

68 Ibid.

69 Former National Security Adviser Dasuki made this comment in the foreword he wrote in Shuaib's book, *Boko Haram Media War: An Encounter with the Spymaster*, p. 10.

*We also deployed psychological operations (PSYOP) in conveying appropriate narratives through right communication channels in persuading and convincing target audiences on specific objectives. Though strategies under PSYOP are strictly confidential, including self-censorship, few editors are aware of some of the initiatives to counter wicked propaganda and tackle information that could rubbish the nation's integrity.<sup>70</sup>*

The extent to which the Army has engaged in PsyOps is difficult to know, and that is the nature of PsyOps. They have never publicly explained why they engaged in psychological operations—nor have they even admitted using them. There are debates over the inclusion of PsyOps in strategic communications. Security expert James Farwell argues that PsyOps aim at influencing and shaping audiences' behaviour—the key objectives of strategic communications.<sup>71</sup> NATO endorses them.<sup>72</sup> But defence officials at the Pentagon in America were so worried about the pejorative connotations of PsyOps they rebranded them Military Information Support Operations (MISO).<sup>73</sup> And Williams has argued that since psychological operations would involve the deliberate use of disinformation, employing them in strategic communications could be counterproductive.<sup>74</sup> The risk usually lies in the public uncovering the truth—which they sometimes do—and losing their trust. Being caught lying is costlier for the Nigerian Army than for Boko Haram because the public regard the group as an outcast and do not always expect honesty from its members. Ironically, as noted earlier, on many occasions Boko Haram gave more credible accounts of events than the Army did. And this has dented the Army's strategic communications campaigns. However, there is an area where they are making progress—digital engagement—though there, too, it was the jihadists who made the first move.

### Digital Engagement

A strategy common to both the Army and Boko Haram was the use of digital technology and online media to advance their causes. Boko Haram has enjoyed a head start in this. From uploading their videos and audios on the internet to opening and operating social media accounts, the insurgents have demonstrated adequate technical skill to help transform them into 'digital terrorists'. Three factors account for this: Boko Haram's need to disseminate propaganda; the ease with which the new technology can be used; and assistance from international jihadists. When the Nigerian security forces blocked almost all of Boko Haram's chances to contact journalists and the mainstream media physically, the militants were compelled to devise new ways of reaching the

<sup>70</sup> Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

<sup>72</sup> See NATO, 'NATO Strategic Communications Policy'.

<sup>73</sup> Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

<sup>74</sup> Williams, 'Weaponised Honesty'.

public. And they were probably surprised to find out how easy and how effective new technology could be in doing this. They first discovered YouTube and began to upload their messages directly onto the video-sharing site.<sup>75</sup> As soon as they uploaded their videos, they would usually alert journalists and direct them to links where the videos could be found. YouTube regularly removes these videos from its site,<sup>76</sup> but often not fast enough to prevent the newsworthy ones from making headlines in the mainstream media, which is the main objective of the jihadists.<sup>77</sup>

Boko Haram's digital endeavours continued to develop. On 18 January 2015 they launched their first Twitter account, *@Alurwa\_Alwuthqa*,<sup>78</sup> (Figure 1) where they uploaded a variety of propaganda messages, including videos of child soldiers. Jihadists from the so-called Islamic State group—to whom Boko Haram has pledged allegiance<sup>79</sup>—were quick to promote the account.<sup>80</sup> There was also a rapid improvement in the production quality of their materials. Slick and well-produced videos featuring 'music, graphics and slow motion shots' replaced



Figure 1: Boko Haram's first Twitter account *@Alurwa\_Alwuthqa*, which could be translated as 'The Indissoluble Link', was opened in January 2015. It was later shut down by Twitter. [Image accessed on 28 January 2015].

75 AFP, 'Boko Haram: Changing Media Strategy for a Wider Conflict?' *Daily Mail*, 20 February 2015: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2961665/Boko-Haram-changing-media-strategy-wider-conflict.html> (accessed 21 February 2015).

76 Ibid.

77 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

78 BBC Monitoring, 'Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?', 7 March 2015: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-31522469> (accessed 7 March 2015).

79 Callimachi, Rukmini, (2015) 'Boko Haram Generates Uncertainty with Pledge of Allegiance to Islamic State', *The New York Times*, 7 March 2015: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/africa/boko-haram-is-said-to-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/africa/boko-haram-is-said-to-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone&_r=0) (accessed 8 March 2015).

80 BBC Monitoring, 'Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?'



their previous grainy ‘amateurish footage’.<sup>81</sup> Once they discovered the effectiveness of social media, they worked on learning how to use it more effectively. Their Twitter account was frequently suspended,<sup>82</sup> but usually long after the content had been picked up by the mainstream media and published or broadcast to a wider audience.

The Army’s digital strategy for counter-insurgency involves the deployment of new technology and the use of the internet and social media both to disrupt Boko Haram’s online activities and to counter their propaganda. The military and other security services had engaged in cyber activities, including running their own websites and carrying out official business online, well before the emergence of the Boko Haram crisis. As the crisis developed, they extended their remit to include the fight against the insurgency. In this, too, the Army is leading the campaign, followed by the Defence Headquarters. The Nigerian Air Force, the Nigeria Police Force, and related bodies also employ digital strategy.

The Army’s website (<http://www.army.mil.ng>) is dominated by reports of the military’s counter-insurgency efforts. A banner with pictures of ‘Boko Haram suspects wanted by the Nigerian Army’ is placed at the top of the homepage, on the right-hand side (Figure 2)<sup>83</sup>—clicking on it expands the banner to a full page.

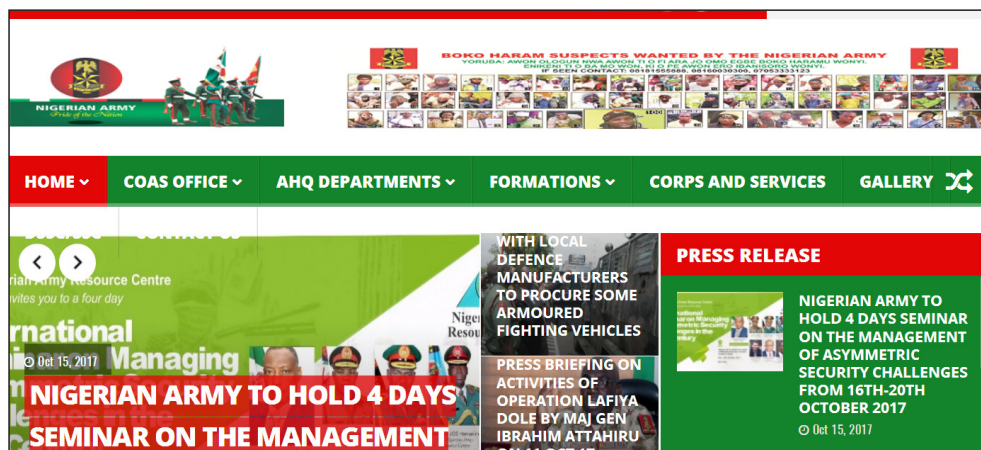


Figure 2. The homepage of the Nigerian Army website. At the top, on the right-hand side is the poster of ‘BOKO HARAM SUSPECTS WANTED BY THE NIGERIAN ARMY’. [Screenshot taken 19 October 2017].

81 AFP, ‘Boko Haram’

82 BBC Monitoring, ‘Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?’

83 The banner, which shows a big picture of Boko Haram leader Shekau at the centre surrounded by pictures of other commanders, has been widely circulated and posted in many public places including airports across Nigeria.



Stories of the Army's various operations—troops intercepting suicide bombers, Boko Haram commanders surrendering, gallant officers receiving promotions, and Boko Haram terrorists being arrested—are the main contents of the site (see Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6). The websites of the Defence Headquarters (<http://defencehq.mil.ng>), the Nigerian Air Force (<http://www.airforce.mil.ng>), and the Nigeria Police Force (<http://npf.gov.ng>) also regularly feature related stories, though not at the same scale as the Army's. The Air Force sometimes posts videos of successful bombardments of Boko Haram targets on its website.<sup>84</sup> Such videos are often shared by other security services and usually uploaded on YouTube for wider circulation (see Figures 7, 8, and 9).

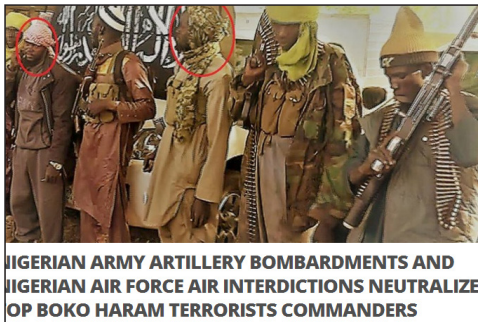


Figure 3. Nigerian Army website. [Screenshot taken 20 September 2017].

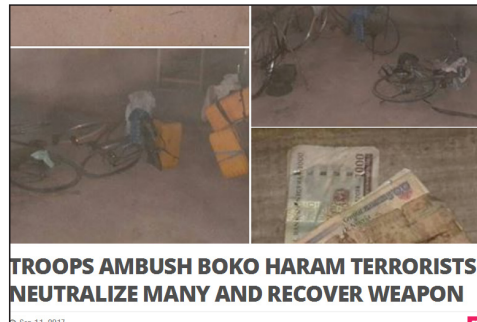


Figure 4. Nigerian Army website. [Screenshot taken 19 October 2017].

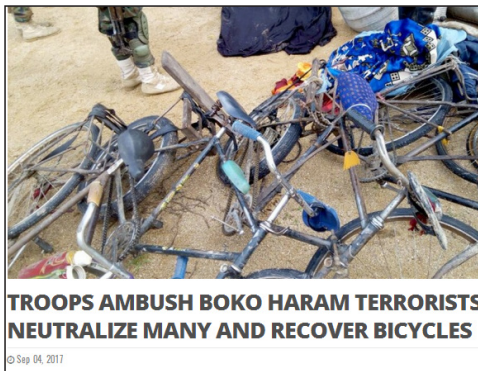


Figure 5. Nigerian Army website. [Screenshot taken 20 September 2017].

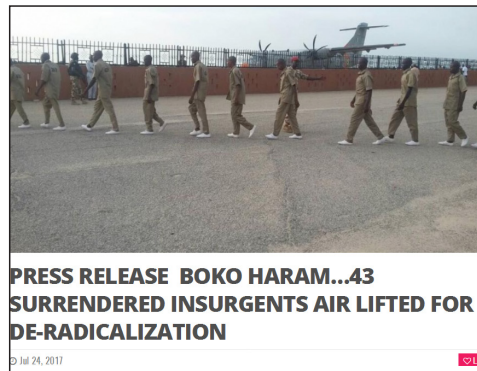


Figure 6. Nigerian Army website. [Screenshot taken 20 October 2017].

<sup>84</sup> One of them was its attack on the militants in Sambisa Forest on 8 August 2017. See Nigerian Air Force, 'Nigerian Air Force Destroys Boko Haram Hideout', 10 August 2017: [http://www.airforce.mil.ng/post/nigerian\\_air\\_force\\_destroys\\_boko\\_haram\\_hideout](http://www.airforce.mil.ng/post/nigerian_air_force_destroys_boko_haram_hideout) (accessed 20 August 2017).



Figure 7. Nigerian Air Force video showing their strike on Boko Haram target in Sambisa.



Figure 8. Nigerian Air Force video showing their strike on Boko Haram target. [Posted on YouTube by the Nigerian Air Force 7 March 2017].



Figure 9. One of the videos of the Nigerian Air Force's attack on Boko Haram in Parisu, Borno State. [Posted on YouTube 30 May 2017].

The armed forces also actively use social media in their counter-insurgency strategy, with the Army and Defence Headquarters taking the lead here, too. The most popular platforms they use are Twitter and Facebook, though the Defence Headquarters' Facebook account did not seem to be active as of 20 October 2017 (Figure 10). Their official Twitter account, @DefenceInfoNG, has been very active (Figure 11). It has been so effective that it became a target for cyber criminals who created a fake Twitter account using the same logo. In August 2017 the Defence Headquarters had to alert the public about this, vowing to track down 'the perpetrator of this heinous act'.<sup>85</sup> The Army's Twitter account, @HQNigerianArmy, is even more popular (Figure 12). On 20 October 2017 it showed 245,615 followers and 2,668 tweets, compared to Defence Headquarters' 194,092 followers and 1,770 tweets. The Nigerian Army's Facebook page—<https://www.facebook.com/NigerianArmy/> (Figure 13)—has an even wider reach in Nigeria; this is where they embed pictures and videos promoting their counter-terror activities. The security forces interact and promote one another's activities extensively. News outlets keenly monitor these accounts as they are a significant source of counter-insurgency-related stories.

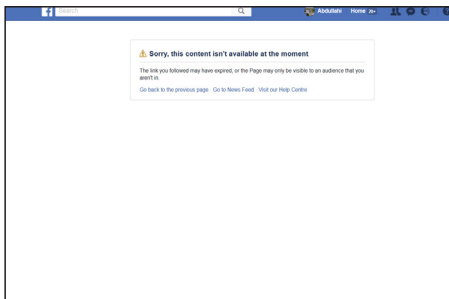


Figure 10. Inactive Facebook account of the Defence Headquarters [Screenshot taken 20 October 2017].



Figure 11. Defence Headquarters active Twitter account [Screenshot taken 20 October 2017].



Figure 12. Twitter account of the Nigerian Army [Screenshot taken 20 October 2017].



Figure 13. Nigerian Army's Facebook account page [Screenshot taken 20 October 2017].

<sup>85</sup> *The Nation*, 'Beware of fake twitter handle, DHQ warns', 24 August 2017: <http://thenationonline.net/beware-of-fake-twitter-handle-dhq-warns/> (accessed 24 August 2017).

The open engagement of the security forces with the digital media is wide-ranging and generally robust, but they also use technology in their covert operations to counter the jihadists. What they do exactly is unclear, but officials indicate that they are secretly using technological expertise to dislodge Boko Haram from cyberspace. Director of Defence Information Major General John Enenche has made comments to this effect. ‘We have our strategic media centres that monitor the social media to be able to sieve out and react to all the ones that will be anti-government, be anti-military, (and) be anti-security,’ he said. ‘We have measures in place, scientific measures to be able to sieve this information and also to get the public and let them know that some of this information they are getting is not genuine.’<sup>86</sup> There are numerous anti-Boko Haram videos online—some of them purporting to come directly from the group or showing the capture and killing of its leader (Figure 14)—which many believe were uploaded to the internet by the security services. Apart from helping to get Boko Haram videos removed from YouTube, and their social media accounts suspended (Boko Haram has no active social media account as of 20 October 2017), the Army frequently disrupts the online activities of the jihadists, distorts their messages, and sometimes blocks access to the content of their accounts. They have largely managed to contain the militants on this front.

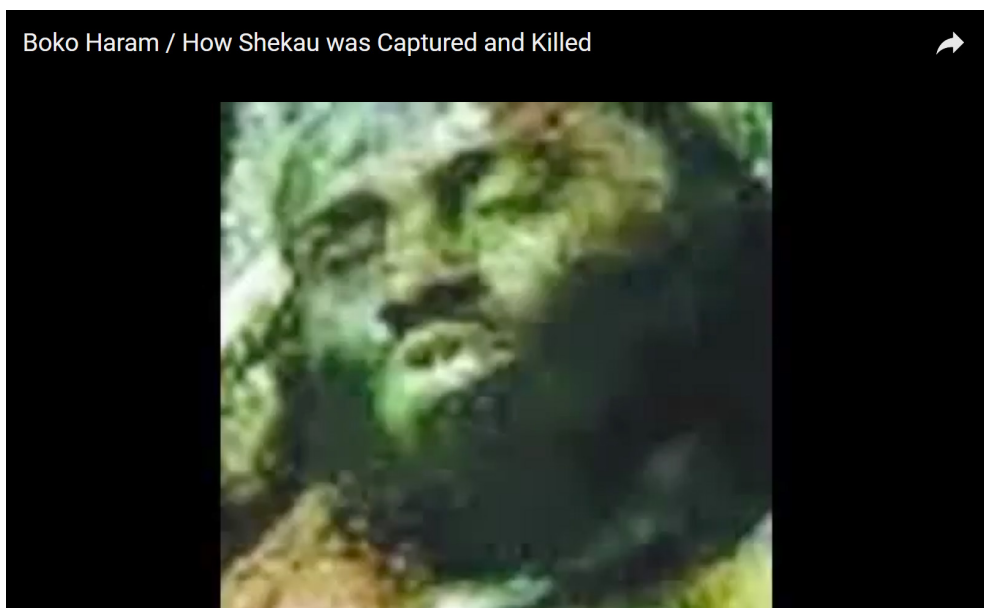


Figure 14. A video claiming that Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was captured and killed. But Shekau has repeatedly released a counter video denying that he was killed [Screenshot taken 20 September 2017].

<sup>86</sup> *Daily Trust*, ‘Nigerian Army Now Monitors What You Post on Social Media,’ 23 August 2017: <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/online-special/nigerian-army-now-monitors-what-you-post-on-social-media/211303.html> (accessed 23 August 2017).

## The Media, Newsworthiness, Insurgency, and Counter-Insurgency

This containment, however, is not enough to eliminate the ability of Boko Haram jihadists to manipulate the media and advance their cause. Some factors are simply beyond the control of the Nigerian security forces—the ideological orientations of various media outlets and the expectations of their audiences. Media practitioners and their audiences are orientated in such a way that certain activities of Boko Haram attract their attention more than others. And this has theoretical foundations. In their seminal work *The Structure of Foreign News*,<sup>87</sup> Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge argue that journalists have a set of criteria—news values—which they use to determine the newsworthiness of events. They identify twelve such criteria—such as frequency; threshold; relevance; unexpectedness; unpredictability; and negativity—and conclude that the more an event meets these criteria, the higher the possibility of its being reported by media and regarded by audiences as news.<sup>88</sup> Although further studies have since added other factors and modified some of Galtung and Ruge’s original criteria,<sup>89</sup> Boko Haram activities fit well into many of them. ‘The more negative the event in its consequences, the more probable that it will become a news item.’<sup>90</sup> Whether it was the kidnapping of schoolgirls, the bombing of markets, or the beheading of innocent civilians, each major action carried out by Boko Haram militants has intense negative consequences and is therefore deemed newsworthy. ‘Events have to be unexpected or rare, or preferably both, to become good news.’<sup>91</sup> Many of the actions taken by Boko Haram jihadists were unexpected. And even the expected actions often meet the newsworthiness criteria of negativity and continuity. For, as Galtung and Ruge note, ‘once something has hit the headlines and been defined as “news”, then it will continue to be defined as news for some time even if the amplitude is drastically reduced’.<sup>92</sup>

The concepts of news values and agenda setting (discussed earlier) are the engines that empower Boko Haram and other insurgents and terror groups to manipulate the media. The increasing competition for audience shares or expansion of readership, the incessant pursuit of drama and controversy, and the intense pressure arising from 24/7 news coverage have unwittingly made media more vulnerable to terrorists and insurgents.

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87 Galtung, Johan and Ruge, Mari Holmboe, ‘The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), (1965), 64–91.

88 Ibid.

89 Harcup, Tony and O’Neill, Deirdre, ‘What Is News? News Values Revisited (Again)’, *Journalism Studies*, (2016), DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193.

90 Galtung and Ruge, ‘The Structure of Foreign News’, p. 68.

91 Ibid., p. 67.

92 Ibid.



*As long as terrorists offer visuals and sound bites, drama, threats, and human interest tales, the news media will report—and actually over-report—on their actions and causes at the expense of other and more important news. Terrorism fits into the infotainment mold that the news media increasingly prefers and offers villains and heroes the promise to attract new audiences and keep existing ones.<sup>93</sup>*

Scholars of terrorism and counter-insurgency experts have argued that publicity is the ‘oxygen or lifeblood’<sup>94</sup> of terrorists and that the frenzied media coverage of their activities is empowering them. Professor of Communication Gabriel Weimann puts it succinctly: ‘More than anything else, publicity is the lifeblood of terrorism and the media, therefore, are playing a central role in the calculus of terrorism and through their choices can serve to minimize or magnify terrorist violence’.<sup>95</sup> There are others who argue that the media’s motive in playing up terrorists’ stories is to impel the authorities to take tough actions against them.<sup>96</sup> Whatever the motives, insurgents relish the media attention they are receiving. It is not that journalists cover insurgencies or terrorism with the deliberate intent of promoting such activities; it is just that insurgents and terrorists are willing to do anything to attain their goals. Unless there is a radical reorientation of the concept of news and of the nature of media coverage, opportunistic insurgents will continue to reap benefits from the questionable premises of the news media’s orientation.

## Conclusion

The Nigerian Armed Forces and Boko Haram insurgents have engaged actively in strategic communications campaigns in pursuit of their goals. The jihadists have succeeded in attracting global media attention, mainly by the sheer scale of their violence and their infamies, but also by the effective use of their communications strategies. The Army is at the forefront of Nigeria’s effort to counter these strategies. It uses its formal communications structure and other methods to challenge their narratives and disrupt their media strategies. The military has recorded some successes in containing the insurgents, largely because of the upper hand it has gained on the physical battlefield, but also because of waning media interest in the militants due to their diminishing capacity to stage headline-grabbing attacks.

The Army’s narrow conception of strategic communications—often limiting it to public relations work and spin—has sometimes had costly consequences, harming

<sup>93</sup> Nacos, *Mass-mediated Terrorism*, pg. x.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 30.

<sup>95</sup> Weimann, ‘The Role of the Media in Propagating Terrorism’, p. 197.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Spencer, Alexander, ‘The social construction of terrorism: media, metaphors and policy implications’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 15(3), (2012), 393–419.

its credibility and empowering the insurgents. Yet, the main factor enhancing Boko Haram's communications efforts seems to be the media's fixation on jihadi stories. The militants do demonstrate remarkable media skills and fully utilise the opportunities offered by the online and social media, but the biggest boost to their publicity has been the mainstream media's preoccupation with their stories. As media scholar Brigitte Nacos asserts, 'the mainstream news media remain indispensable for terrorist propaganda because conventional news outlets tend to alert the general public to the most sensational features and developments in terrorists' mass self-communication via internet sites and social media networking'.<sup>97</sup>

However, as pointed out earlier, the media do not cover insurgency or terrorism with the intent of enhancing them. They cover them as part of their basic function to inform the public, based on the guiding principles of their profession. There are, no doubt, excesses that need to be addressed, but downplaying the risks of terrorist attacks wouldn't necessarily be part of the solution. Doing so would carry the inherent danger of undermining public safety. Both the insurgent groups and those responsible for counter-insurgency work are aware of this dilemma—and it is the insurgents who benefit from it. There is a strong need to review the concept of news and how it is covered. Counter-insurgency strategists also ought to devise ways of minimising insurgents' ability to manipulate the media. The Nigerian Armed Forces have obviously made progress with their counter-insurgency campaigns. To be clear, their success has come more through the use of force (e.g. killing Boko Haram spokesmen and commanders, and retaking captured territory) than the use of soft power (effective strategic communications campaigns). To enhance their soft power, the Nigerian Armed Forces would have to expand their strategic communications remit by incorporating into them the services of rich Nigerian cultural institutions—such as the Nollywood and Kannywood film industries<sup>98</sup>—and enlisting the support of respected religious bodies. Even more importantly, they should anchor their communications strategy on credible narratives. Credibility is the cornerstone of effective narratives, and honesty—or the perception of it—is a necessary condition for the long-term efficacy of strategic communications.

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97 Nacos, *Mass-mediated Terrorism*, p. 36.

98 Nigeria has a booming film industry that has received international recognition and has made a significant impact on the country's cultural scene. Films could be good vehicles for conveying strategic messages. See McCain, Carmen, 'Video Exposé: Metafiction and Message in Nigerian Films', *Journal of African Cinemas*, 4(1), (2012), 25–57. One Kannywood producer, Zaharaddeen Sani, has produced a film with such intent, but it remains a private individual effort and its first screening was planned outside Nigeria (see *Premium Times* of 24 June 2017: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/entertainment/kannywood/234994-why-film-depicting-boko-haram-atrocities-wont-premiere-in-nigeria-producer.html> (accessed 30 June 2017)).



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