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# News Values and the Ethical Dilemmas of Covering Violent Extremism

Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the news media and violent extremism to explore the ethical issues emanating from it. It draws on news value theory and journalism ethics literature and analyzes data from individual and group interviews with 41 journalists and newsroom observations to highlight the ethical challenges of covering the Boko Haram insurgency. Findings suggest that journalists face dilemmas in content selection, source relationship, framing stories, and dealing with victims; and that terror reporting impacts on their personal safety and professional sustainability. News value elements push the media toward excessive reporting of extremism but journalism ethics plays restraining roles.

**Keywords:** news values, journalism ethics, agenda setting, framing, Boko Haram, violent extremism

The news media has a complex relationship with violent extremism, the depths of which defy simple description. It is a measure of this complexity that the media is seen as being both an enabler of extremism (Nacos, 2016) and an instrument of countering it (Zgryziewicz, 2018). Courted and reviled by terror groups (Nacos, 2016), the media is often blamed for glamorizing terrorism (Weimann, 2012), for profiting from it (Moeller, 2009), and for obfuscating our comprehension of it (Spencer, 2012). The diversity of those interpretations points to the need for examining the relationship. News value theory could facilitate this. Whether seen from the prism of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) thesis or viewed from Brighton and Foy's (2007) expanded paradigm or from the revised version offered by Harcup and O'Neill (2017), the concept of news values has always been a driving force in journalism production. Violent extremism supplies many of its key elements: negativity, controversy, unusualness, conflict, sensationalism, and impact (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). This is the basis upon which the news media becomes obsessed with covering terror activities (Nacos, 2016; Weimann, 2012)—and audiences get attracted to the coverage (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). But it is not a one-way traffic. Violent extremists need the media even more than the media benefits from their extremism. And this presents ethical challenges to journalists.

From reporting the beheading of their colleagues in Syria and investigating the abductions of schoolgirls in Nigeria to covering terror attacks in London and New York,

journalists routinely handle extremists' stories that require tough ethical decisions (Borradori, 2011; Wood, 2016). Should they report such atrocities fully and risk aiding terrorists or should they under-report them and undermine journalism's truth-telling principle and lull the public into a false sense of security? Whichever decision they take, the core values of their profession would be tested. The credibility of the media and tenets of democracy are equally at stake. "Reporting terrorist attacks fulfils the aims of the terrorism itself in spreading fear, but stifling or limiting coverage can fuel both distrust in the news media and undemocratic practices such as censorship" (Bell cited in Beckett, 2016, p. 2). Added to this complication is the extremists' eagerness to deploy their media savviness without compunction. Groups such as Boko Haram and their senior partners, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are skillful manipulators of media. They do not only employ media for propaganda, they use them to intimidate their enemies, frighten the citizenry, and recruit new adherents (Abubakar, 2016, 2017; Farwell, 2014).

In Nigeria, Boko Haram militants have not only used traditional and social media to advance their cause (Abubakar, 2016), but they have also terrorized journalists and news organizations (Pate & Idris, 2017). They murdered at least two journalists (Zakariya Isa and Enenche Akogwu), bombed *ThisDay* newspaper's premises, and attacked the offices of many outlets (Pate & Idris, 2017). Generally, Nigeria has a poor record of protecting journalists against hostile forces, and Boko Haram has aggravated it (see Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2018; Freedom House, 2017). For six consecutive years, the country has been on the CPJ's Global Impunity Index—a list of "nations with five or more cases of unresolved" journalist murder—mainly because of the Boko Haram attacks (CPJ, 2018). Many studies have shed light on the media coverage of Boko Haram and the associated safety concerns (Abubakar, 2016, 2017; Pate & Idris, 2017; Uwazuruike, 2018); and scholarship has explored the media representations of terrorism (Conway & McInerney 2012; Fahmy, 2017; Moeller, 2009; Nacos, 2016; Weimann, 2012). This study extends the literature by investigating the relationship between the news media and violent extremism. It draws on news values theory and journalism ethics literature to examine the nature of the relationship and the ethical issues arising from it. Analyzing primary data from individual and focus group interviews with 41 journalists and from newsroom observations, it highlights the ethical dilemmas of covering the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. It concludes that while news value elements act as push factors generating attention for extremists' stories, journalism ethics serves as a restraining device to moderate the coverage.

## **Boko Haram, Violent Extremism and News Media**

The term violent extremism has no universally agreed definition, but it is generally seen as a phenomenon that “includes all actions in which identity-motivated violence, from hate crimes to genocide, are used as tools to achieve desired objectives” (Zgryziewicz, 2018, p. 17). Violent extremism is a much broader term than terrorism (Glazzard & Zeuthen, 2016; United Nations, 2015), and provides a clear description of Boko Haram activity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017). It is used here interchangeably with the terms “terrorism” and “insurgency” because parts of the literature from which this study draws—and the Nigerian government and news outlets (see Shuaib, 2017; Uwazuruike, 2018)—use these three terms (sometimes interchangeably) to describe Boko Haram activity. Terrorism itself is a controversial and contested term. In 1999, American historian Walter Laqueur counted more than 100 definitions of terrorism—two years before the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US brought an explosion of interest on it. “Perhaps the only characteristic generally agreed upon is that terrorism always involves violence or the threat of violence” (Laqueur, 1999, p.12). Insurgency, a less contested term, is defined as “an uprising or rebellion by an organized group against their government or governing authority” (Crawford, 2015, p. 502).

Boko Haram militants engage in activities associated with violent extremism, terrorism, and insurgency (UNDP, 2017; Abubakar, 2017). But they say their aim is to establish a Salafist state (Abubakar, 2016; Smith, 2015, see Meijer, 2009, for detail on Salafism). Founded in 2002—possibly earlier—by Muhammad Yusuf in Nigeria’s northeast (Smith, 2015), the group has never hidden its disdain for other faiths, including mainstream Islam. Boko Haram (meaning “Western education is sinful”) is not its real name; its actual name is *Jama’atu Ahlus Sunna lid Da’awatu wal-Jihad* (approximately “Movement for the Propagation and Enthronement of Righteous Deeds”) (Abubakar, 2016)—though its dominant faction, which is linked to ISIS, now calls itself Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP). Originally a peaceful movement, Boko Haram turned to violence in 2009 following liaisons with politicians and encounters with security forces (Smith, 2015; Abubakar, 2016). Since then, its members have been on a terror campaign spree—such as beheading civilians; bombing schools, churches, mosques and markets; and kidnapping for ransom and for sexual enslavement—not only in Nigeria but also in neighboring Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Once described as the world’s “most deadly terror group” (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015, p. 2), Boko Haram gained global notoriety for the abductions of

276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State in 2014. The group once controlled a territory the size of Belgium, which they declared as a caliphate in 2014 (Abubakar, 2017)—most of which has since been re-taken by the Nigerian military.

Boko Haram insurgents derive their power primarily through the use of deadly weapons; but they also employ the media “to spread their ideology, extend their brutality, intimidate their enemies and recruit new adherents” (Abubakar, 2017, p. 148). They devised their own communications strategies and used them skillfully. Their engagement with the media is practical in nature, but the recognition of media’s ability to influence people’s minds—and its manipulation by state and non-state actors—has a strong conceptual base, explained in agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2005). The insurgents understand the agenda-setting function of the media and exploit it effectively (Abubakar, 2016, 2017). This and the newsworthiness of their activity played the key role in enhancing their media presence (Abubakar, 2016). Examining the reporting of Boko Haram by the Nigerian press, Uwazuruike (2018) observes that the group received wide coverage, which focuses mainly on the group’s violence and the reaction of the government to their activities.

The issue of media’s extensive coverage of terrorism is not confined to the case of Boko Haram alone. It is a long-existing phenomenon, well examined by scholars (Conway & McInerney 2012; Fahmy, 2017; Moeller, 2009; Nacos, 2016; Spencer, 2012; Weimann, 2012). Nacos (2016) details how “frenzied” media coverage of terrorism empowers terrorists and helps disseminate terror tactics (p. 31). Weimann (2012) takes a similar line, describing the coverage as helpful to terrorist propaganda. Moeller (2009) regards it as a packaging of terrorism “for politics and profit” by both the media and politicians who seek to benefit from the scaremongering often created by the coverage—and by the terrorists themselves who benefit from it. Conway and McInerney (2012), however, identify gender bias in the reporting of terrorism, concluding that female terrorists get significantly more press coverage than their male counterparts, and that they are framed very differently from the way the male terrorists are. Spencer’s (2012) intervention is on the motives of the coverage and its implications on policy options, detailing how the media construction of terrorism “as a war, a crime, an uncivilized evil and a disease” makes military response and other tough measures against it quite attractive (p. 410). Similarly, Uwazuruike (2018) argues that the portrayal of Boko Haram in the Nigerian media as “the enemy” has “legitimized the use of violence against the group” (p. 243).

There are differing perspectives in all these but also recurrent references to the concept of framing (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974), which highlights the media's ability to provide salience to certain aspects of stories over the others. This fits well into Schudson's (2011) argument about journalists' role in constructing reality "through the process of selecting, highlighting, framing, shading, and shaping what they report" (p.xiv). But although framing theory highlights the issue of "*selection and salience*" (Entman, 1993, p. 52, original emphasis) in news reporting, it does not really explain what makes terrorism attractive to news media; news value theory does.

## **News Values**

Popularized by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and other scholars (Brighton & Foy, 2007; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006, for instance), news value theory sheds light on how the news media decide what is news. "It is news values that give journalists and editors a set of rules—often intangible, informal, almost unconscious elements—by which to work, from which to plan and execute the content of a publication or a broadcast" (Brighton & Foy, 2007, p. 1). In their seminal study based on the analysis of foreign news coverage by four Norwegian newspapers, Galtung and Ruge (1965) identify twelve factors that determine the newsworthiness of an event: threshold, frequency, unexpectedness, unambiguity, relevance, consonance, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, and negativity. An event does not have to meet all these criteria to become news, but the more it satisfies them, the more likely it will be reported by the media—and regarded by audiences—as news.

Brighton and Foy (2007) have questioned the viability of some of these criteria in the changing media environment and in a wider global context, beyond the Norwegian society. They propose their own set of values (some of which actually reinforce Galtung and Ruge's original criteria): relevance, topicality, composition, expectation, unusualness, worth, and external influences. But they stress that the values could be as varied as the media themselves (Brighton & Foy, 2007). Further work in the area by Harcup and O'Neill (2017) saw the inclusion of other criteria such as exclusivity, conflict, surprise, audio-visuals, shareability, entertainment, drama, celebrity and news organization's agenda. They equally point out the possibility of fluctuations, "with certain news values rising up the hierarchy in different situations, which may explain why events with similar intrinsic news values are not always given the same prominence" (Harcup & O'Neill 2017, p. 1483). One of the most outstanding

interventions in the area comes from Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) who propose the concepts of “deviance and social significance” as “predictors of newsworthiness, and that the combination of these two dimensions—when both have intense values—results in an accentuated level of newsworthiness” (p.8).

Both in its original form and in the revised versions, news value theory has remained relevant in journalism scholarship. It does not only serve as a useful tool of analyzing news selection process (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017; Hahn & Jaurisch, 2012) and explaining gatekeeping decisions (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), but it also extends its reach to the domains of news dissemination, news consumption, and public relations scholarship. The theory has, among others, been used to predict the chances of press releases becoming news items (Schafraad, Zoonen, & Verhoeven, 2016); to examine audience news choices (Eilders, 2006); and to explain audiences’ engagement with online content (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Weber, 2014). Scholars have also shown that the model equally serves as a foundational stone “to build a concept of shareworthiness”, offering valuable insights into news dissemination research (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017, p.53).

News value theory is also a viable instrument of understanding news media’s interest in violent extremism. Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) argue that events such as 9/11 terrorist attacks possess elements of deviance and social significance, which make them highly newsworthy. Essentially, violent extremists engage in activities that satisfy many news factor criteria, and push this even further with their avidity to publicize their atrocities. “The more negative the event in its consequences, the more probable that it will become a news item” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965, p. 68). Kidnapping of schoolgirls; turning kids into suicide bombers; raiding towns and villages; and bombing schools, mosques and churches are deeply negative acts with far-reaching consequences. They will be seen by the media as newsworthy. “News focuses on visible events, often involving conflict or violent conflict” (Schudson, 2011, p.42). There is also drama, unexpectedness, and unusualness in the activities of extremists, which attracted media to them. “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” (Nacos, 2016, p. x). And it is often the extensiveness of the coverage—and profiting from it—that is seen as problematic (Moeller, 2009; Nacos, 2016). This and the difficulties associated with reporting violence bring up the questions of ethics.

## Journalism Ethics

In covering the activities of extremists, journalists constantly contend with ethical issues that affect their professional duty and personal life. Giving account of his reporting of the terror group ISIS in Syria, BBC journalist Paul Wood (2016) details many ethical pitfalls—ranging from handling stories about the beheading of fellow journalists to the use of terminology—that he had to deal with. These are somewhat similar to the problems that journalists covering the Boko Haram insurgency in Africa often wrestle with. As noted earlier, Boko Haram militants have killed journalists, and bombed and intimidated news outlets (Pate & Idris, 2017). “Indeed, at no other time had journalists experienced such high-level risks and faced dangers to their personal, professional and institutional safety in Nigeria as they did” in covering the Boko Haram conflict (Pate & Idris, 2017, p. 159). This is in addition to the difficulties they face in upholding professional ethics in such a hostile environment. Ethical codes developed both by media houses and journalism bodies—such as the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) in Nigeria’s case—as well as the general ethical principles taught in journalism institutions provide guidance to journalists in their work. The NUJ’s code of ethics in particular stresses the primacy of editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, respect of privacy, and taste and decency (NUJ, 1998). It offers basic guidelines on matters ranging from reporting in the public interest to the treatment of children (NUJ, 1998).

Broadly, there are many approaches to ethics that help build journalism’s ethical codes, the most prominent of which are Kantian deontology “where the emphasis is placed on the notion of duty”, Bentham/Mill’s utilitarianism focusing on consequences, and Aristotelian virtue ethics “where good character is emphasized” (Sanders, 2003, p. 15). Kant’s (1994) 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of categorical imperative, which stresses the importance of action over consequences (people should do the right thing, regardless of the outcome), is often linked with journalism’s truth-telling principle (Sanders, 2003). It does have its inherent contradiction of emphasizing strict adherence to ethical principles and at the same time preaching the need for human compassion, but its duty-based theory has been helpful in developing journalism ethics. Mill’s (1910) utilitarianism highlights the supremacy of outcomes over actions. The rightness or wrongness of an action should be judged by its consequences—the emphasis is on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Much of journalism’s principle of reporting in the public interest is based on utilitarian philosophy. But, as Tomaselli (2009) and H. Wasserman and De Beer (2004) note,

it has shortcomings because it is difficult to accurately forecast the consequences of an action. Furthermore, “utilitarianism runs into severe problems with assessing the consequences of *omissions*” (Tomaselli, 2009, p. 586, original emphasis).

Scholarship has dealt with both the wider area of media ethics (Fortner & Fackler, 2011; Keeble, 2009; Sanders, 2003) and specific cases, such as journalism ethics in a digital network (Singer, 2011) and reporting terror in a networked world (Beckett, 2016). Journalists, too, have reported on various forms of violence, including wars (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Bell, 1995; Pedelty, 2013) and terrorism (Epkins, 2012; Borradori, 2011). And studies have examined journalism ethics dealing with the coverage of war (Risso, 2017; Rusciano, 2010), hate speech (George, 2014), global disaster (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2013), global terror (Borradori, 2011), and trauma (Amend, Kay, & Reilly, 2012; Beam and Spratt 2009).

In Africa itself, scholarship has explored issues of ethical approaches (Kasoma, 1996; H. Wasserman & De Beer, 2004; Tomaselli, 2009), ethics and ethnicity (H. Wasserman & Maweu, 2014), ethical violation (Chari, 2007), and audiences’ assessment of ethical values (Adeyemi, 2013). Kasoma (1996) sheds light on approaches to journalism ethics in the continent with his concept of “Afriethics” (African ethics). His central argument is that ethics is culture-specific, and as such African journalists should adopt a communal approach to journalism ethics and discard the Western individualistic model (Kasoma, 1996). “The tragedy facing African journalism of the 1990s and beyond”, he contends, “is that the continent’s journalists have closely imitated the professional norms of the North (formally known as the West)” (p. 95). His model was, however, dismissed by Tomaselli (2009) who points to its shaky premise of seeing Africa as a mono-cultural society, its lack of rigor, and its inapplicability—with empirical studies done in the continent failing to support it. Tomaselli highlights the universality of ethics and dismisses the “sterile and distracting complaints by ideologues about the alleged conflict between Eurocentric and Afrocentric values” (p. 578).

H. Wasserman and De Beer (2004) explores the applicability of communitarian and utilitarian approaches to journalism ethics, using the case of the reporting of the HIV/AIDS issue in South Africa, to illustrate how they could lead to different ethical decisions. Chari’s (2007) intervention, focusing on the case of Zimbabwe, is on the impact of ethical violations both on the media’s assumed democratic role and on public trust. The study asserts that there was a lack of strong tradition of ethics in Zimbabwe’s media (Chari, 2007). Another study

(H. Wasserman and Maweu, 2014), with specific reference to the case of journalistic practices at Kenya's leading media establishment the Nation Media Group, found that ethnicity plays a key role in shaping journalists' ethical decisions in handling political stories. Adeyemi (2013) examines audiences' perceptions of journalists' compliance with professional ethics in Nigeria and concludes that adherence to ethical principles has positive impact on media credibility. "Maintenance of ethical values and standards' plays effective role 'in winning audience trust" (Adeyemi, 2013, p. 215).

From the review of the related literature, it is clear that many aspects of journalism ethics, news values, and media's coverage of extremism have been widely studied. What is required is a careful investigation of the links between news elements, journalism ethics and the coverage of violent extremism. This article attempts to do that by employing news value theoretical framework to examine news media's relationship with violent extremism and the associated ethical challenges.

## **Methods**

The primary data for this study were collected through a multi-methods approach that consists of in-depth individual interviews, focus groups and non-participant observations. A total of 41 journalists, selected through purposeful sampling technique, participated in the research. The main qualifying criterion for participation was being a journalist with an experience of covering the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Journalists working for nine Nigerian newspapers (*Daily Trust, Peoples Daily, The Guardian, Punch, Leadership, ThisDay, Blueprint, The Viewer, and The Nation*) and three broadcast organizations (Adamawa Television, Channels TV, and Gotel Radio and Television stations) were recruited for the study. Six of them work as freelancers for both local outlets and international news organizations Reuters, AP, the BBC, and Voice of America (VOA). The participants were recruited through the use of flyers posted at the Press Centre of the Nigeria Union of Journalists in Yola, northeast Nigeria, and through the help of contacts who had participated in previous studies conducted by the author in Abuja. Their age range is 28–61 but their experience of covering the Boko Haram ranges from three to eight years.

Twenty-four of these journalists—four of them editors and two of them officials of the Nigeria Union of Journalists—were interviewed individually in the months of July, August and September 2017 and January 2018. These interviews were conducted

continuously until the researcher noticed that no new information was coming from additional participants, indicating that data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015) had been reached. The researcher first noticed a sign of saturation after interviewing 21 journalists but went on to interview three more to be fully satisfied that saturation had indeed been attained. Focus groups conduct was, however, informed by the availability of willing participants. The initial plan was to organize three focus groups, with an average of eight participants in each, but getting a high number of participants to be in one place at the same time proved difficult. So, although three focus groups were eventually conducted, the number of participants was lower. The three groups—named here as “Yola Focus Group” (containing six participants), “Abuja Focus Group 1” (six participants), and “Abuja Focus Group 2” (five participants)—were conducted in July, August and September 2017 and January 2018. Following Krueger (1994), the focus groups were done to elicit collective responses that illustrated how journalists dealt with difficult ethical issues while working in groups, which is often the case in a real-life situation. The individual interviews generated responses that journalists were more comfortable to give in confidence, and on how they dealt with ethical issues as individuals—which in reality also occurs frequently. The decision to employ both individual interviews and focus groups is mainly because ethical dilemmas in journalism are faced, and dealt with, both individually and collectively. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and data security not only to safeguard their safety, given Boko Haram’s hostility toward journalists (Pate & Idris, 2017), but also to enhance candor. All the individual and group interviews were conducted in the Nigerian cities of Yola and Abuja. The two cities were selected both for serving as bases from where journalists covered the Boko Haram insurgency and for being adversely affected by the crisis (Abubakar, 2017).

Non-participant observations were carried out by the researcher for a period of three weeks at *Daily Trust* newsroom in Abuja in July/August and September 2017 and January 2018 to see first-hand the processes involved in handling Boko Haram stories, and to identify the factors affecting editorial judgements and the nature of interactions among the news workers. Admittedly, it was too short a time for comprehensive observations of behaviors that could give a definitive reflection of the relationship between reporters and their editors in handling such stories, but it was enough to provide a general picture of the situation and add to the researcher’s existing knowledge of newsroom culture. The researcher had worked in newsrooms for many years, a factor that also facilitated a faster and better understanding of the happenings in the observed newsroom. The choice of the *Daily Trust* newsroom was

explained by the paper's reputation as being "perhaps the most authoritative newspaper in the region" (Pate & Idris, 2017, p. 165) and one of the news organizations that covered the Boko Haram crisis most comprehensively (Abubakar, 2016). Analysis began partly during, and immediately after, the data collection to ensure accurate representation of the key details and important nuances. Using Gibbs's (2007) and Miles and Huberman's (1994) guides of analyzing in-depth interviews and observations as well as Krueger's (1994) framework of analyzing focus group discussions, all the datasets were fully analyzed. The findings are laid out under the themes that emerged from the data and discussed accordingly.

## **Newsworthiness and Ethical Dilemmas of Terror Reporting**

The key findings that reverberate across the themes are that journalists considered Boko Haram stories to be highly newsworthy, and that they constantly contended with ethical dilemmas in covering them. Participants repeatedly mentioned elements of newsworthiness—conflict, negativity, unusualness, drama, impact, and topicality—as the main factors that impelled them into covering Boko Haram stories. Those who had had direct encounters with the extremists in Nigeria's northeast, the region most affected by the violence, reported getting more newsworthy stories and facing more ethical challenges than those who covered the crisis from relatively safer places. But each of the 41 participants admitted encountering one form of dilemma or the other while reporting on the insurgency. This basically centers on making decisions on what to report or not to report, selection of content, framing of stories, choice of terms and labels, dealing with attack victims, relating with sources, and safeguarding personal safety and professional sustainability.

### ***Content Selection and Censorship Dilemmas***

The dilemma that each of the participants had reported facing was that of handling stories that they felt if reported could help Boko Haram's propaganda effort and if left unreported or was underreported could harm the journalist's duty of telling the truth and informing the public. This quote from a reporter of a local news outlet who also freelances for an international news agency provides a typical example.

I had problems with many stories because I felt that reporting them was like promoting Boko Haram activity, they staged the attacks to get publicity. But, in as much as you don't want to promote Boko Haram, people still want to know what happened. It's a difficult decision to make.

The dilemma is not just over the issue of informing or not informing the public, but also how to inform them. “I don’t kill Boko Haram stories, but I always struggle in finding the angle to take so that I don’t create fear,” said a newspaper correspondent who is also an official of the Nigeria Union of Journalists. Boko Haram’s terror attacks often spread fear to the areas that they did not attack. This happened particularly in 2014 when they were seizing towns in Nigeria’s northeast (Abubakar, 2016) and thousands of people in the neighboring towns were fleeing in panic. Journalists became concerned that reporting the details could help spread the panic. “It’s a very serious issue for us. We’ve to choose between providing details of what was happening and hiding some information, which may bring calm but risk misleading people,” said one radio reporter. He was not alone; other participants contended with this problem.

What is difficult is that I’m unable to broadcast what I know is true, like beheading of people. It is horrendous but it is true. Boko Haram wants us to report that, they even produce videos, they want us to tell the world, but we can’t give those details (Editor at a television station).

The situation reflects what Amend, Kay, & Reilly (2012) describes as “the personal tension between journalistic job obligations and ethical responsibilities” (p. 239). On the one hand, these journalists want to stick to their deontological remit of reporting the events (Sanders, 2003); and on the other, their conscience warns them of the dangers of doing something that would be helpful to the perpetrators of the atrocities.

Decisions to publish stories or not often rest with editors, and this gatekeeping role (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) heaps an even greater pressure on them. The data from the researcher’s three weeks’ observations at the *Daily Trust* newsroom highlight this quite clearly. There was, in particular, a story about the kidnapping of oil workers and academics by Boko Haram insurgents on 25 July 2017. The Nigerian Army claimed falsely that they had rescued them, but the militants refuted the claim by releasing a video of the victims in their custody. News organizations (including the *Daily Trust*) that had earlier publicized the “rescue” report were disappointed to discover that it was false, and that many people including soldiers were actually killed by the insurgents. The researcher was in the newsroom when *Daily Trust* journalists learnt from reliable sources in Maiduguri that the rescue story was false. *Daily Trust* editors and reporters, the researcher observed, deliberated on this issue carefully during their morning and evening editorial meetings on 27 July 2017. They expressed disappointment about the Army’s false claim, and decided to cover the story more

effectively by gathering information from multiple and reliable sources in both Maiduguri and Abuja. Their reporters gathered details about the incident and wrote a comprehensive piece. The paper published the story promptly (for the online version of the report, see Idris, Sawab, & Ibrahim, 2017). The Army later issued an apology, which the paper also published promptly (see Mutum, 2017).

Those were the easier parts. The difficult part was dealing with the Boko Haram's video of the surviving kidnap victims who were still in the militants' custody. The *Daily Trust* has a policy of not publishing materials that could promote Boko Haram propaganda, and so handling their video would be problematic. Clearly, Boko Haram militants were the source of the video, which they had already put online, but its content was a message by the abducted academics, pleading with the Nigerian government to negotiate with the insurgents to secure their freedom. After careful consideration, the *Daily Trust* editors decided to put the video on its online edition (see Daily Trust, 2017). Months later, the Nigerian government—as in the case of the kidnapped schoolgirls in Chibok—began a negotiation with Boko Haram and in February 2018 secured the release of the academics and ten women who were abducted earlier by the militants in a separate operation (see Wakili, 2018).

This case highlights another dimension of journalists' dilemma in handling stories of Boko Haram violence: making decisions regarding the agony and wellbeing of attack victims. Censoring reports could sometimes worsen the suffering of victims, both for not drawing public attention to them (and therefore potential remedy) and for dampening their spirits if they felt that their suffering was not deemed worthy of reporting upon (though some victims would not want media attention at all). Many participants acknowledged facing difficulties on this. One of the six journalists in the Yola Focus Group discussion said he regularly struggled with it.

Any time there is [a Boko Haram] attack, and we cover it, we help them [the insurgents to] achieve their objectives by traumatizing people. I do the stories but not from my heart; I do them because it is my duty [to do so].

Torn between his concern of becoming an unwitting propagandist for Boko Haram and his worry about shirking his professional responsibility, the reporter began to take what he felt was a middle-ground option. "I decided to be focusing on the human angles, reporting only the suffering people are going through, not telling the world that Boko Haram has killed so many people, has bombed so many places, and all that," he said. But this too did not end

his dilemma; it created a new one: a worry that he was exploiting the suffering of the victims. “Although I am highlighting their suffering, I feel like I am benefitting from it, and it’s not always easy talking to them. There’s no joy in it”. Other members in the group echoed his views. They were not enjoying covering the crisis, they said, but they were doing it because it was their journalistic obligation to do so. “As a correspondent, there’s no way that an attack would happen here without me reporting it,” said a Yola correspondent of a national newspaper. “My editor will query me; my journalistic instincts wouldn’t even allow it. I’ll report it, even though I don’t like the fact that it has happened. It’s a newsworthy event”. The other participants in the group concurred. The issue of newsworthiness (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006), which all the participants repeatedly cited as the main factor in deciding what they cover and with what prominence, highlights the relevance of news value theory (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2017) in terror reporting.

### ***Framing and Terminological Dilemmas***

Choice of terminology, which can be linked to Entman’s (1993) concept of framing, is another source of dilemma for both the journalists and their outlets in their coverage of Boko Haram. This came out in different ways, starting with the name of the group itself. Participants said they struggled hard to decide on whether to call the group by its real name (*Jama’atu Ahlus Sunna lid Da’awatu wal-Jihad*—or its shorter version *Ahlus Sunna*, which the group prefers; or to call it Boko Haram, which the group detests. “Boko Haram members harassed and intimidated us when we called them Boko Haram,” said a reporter who has been covering the group since 2009. He was in Maiduguri long before the group’s 2009 uprising and knew some of its members quite well. “I was calling them by their original name, but it was long and unpopular. So, I decided to be calling them Boko Haram, and that was when the intimidation began.” He said they sent him frightening messages and even tried to attack him physically. “They intimidated me so much I had to relocate my family out of Maiduguri,” he said. Two other participants echoed his points. “They hate being called Boko Haram because it’s derogatory, and they always warn media houses about it. There’s even a claim that they bombed *ThisDay*’s Abuja office because of that,” said one newspaper editor.

A defense and security affairs correspondent who participated in the Abuja Focus Group 1 discussion said he initially had difficulties in resolving which of the group’s names to use but eventually decided to be calling them Boko Haram “because it actually describes the group’s anti-western stance” and also because he felt using the real name was “like doing

a propaganda for them.” Besides, he added, calling them *Ahlu Sunnah* would confuse them with members of *Izala* movement, a peaceful Islamic group whose members call themselves *Ahlu Sunnah*. This explains the popularity of the label “Boko Haram”. All the participants in the Abuja Focus Group 1 discussion expressed their preference to using the term Boko Haram mainly because they believed it provided clearer description of the group but also because they felt it was easier to be understood by their audiences.

This case bears some resemblance to the case of covering the insurgent group ISIS. Many news organizations, including the BBC, have faced a dilemma in deciding whether to call them *Da'esh* (which the group does not like) or ISIS or Islamic State—which the group apparently likes but many mainstream Muslims find offensive because they feel it associates their religion with terrorism—(Harley, 2015; Wood, 2016). The BBC settled for “Islamic State group”, which caused concerns even among some members of British Parliament; but the broadcaster stuck to it on the premises of editorial impartiality (Harley, 2015). The problem, though, was complicated by a lack of consistency. The same BBC did not apply the same impartiality policy in its handling of Boko Haram’s case. It calls the group “Boko Haram”—a further illustration of the difficulty of addressing the issue properly.

Journalists also reported facing dilemma in choosing description terms for Boko Haram, its members and their activity. Some participants call Boko Haram a terrorist group while others call it an insurgent group. But none of them chose their preferred terms without encountering difficulties in making their choices. “I call them insurgents because the news agency I work for uses that term. Even if I used the word ‘terrorists’ they would change it to ‘insurgents’”, said one freelance reporter. “But what these people are doing is terrorism, and if we want to ensure accuracy in our reports, we should describe them as such.” A correspondent of a national newspaper said he personally preferred to call them “insurgents” because “it is a more neutral term”, but his paper often refers to them as “terrorists”. He admitted that the urge to call them terrorists was strong because “the public and particularly the victims of their attacks” saw them as terrorists. The data from the newsroom observations at the *Daily Trust* office reveal a similar division, with some reporters using the term “terrorists” and others “insurgents”. The paper prefers to use the term “insurgents” in its reporters’ narrations and “terrorists” when quoting government officials’ and security forces’ statements. But this was not being strictly enforced. “I try to use the word ‘insurgents’ consistently but sometimes the word ‘terrorists’ slips in even in my own narration because

that is what my sources often use,” one of its reporters said. The confusion was compounded by a lack of “specific editorial guidelines on reporting Boko Haram” by most of the Nigerian news outlets (Uwazuruike, 2018, p.259).

The findings about terminological dilemmas are not unexpected. Moeller (2009) has argued that “news outlets have struggled with how to use the ‘terrorist’ label—some media are leery of using the word ‘terrorist’ to describe the perpetrators of acts most members of the public wouldn’t hesitate to label as such” (p. 13). She notes that the BBC and Reuters do not use the term “terrorist” without attribution (Moeller, 2009, see also BBC, 2010). What has come out from the case of Boko Haram here extends this literature. It also shows that the concept of framing (Entman, 1993) does have relevance in researching media coverage of terrorism, as previous studies (Conway & McInerney, 2012; Spencer, 2012) illustrate. It equally points to the relevance of agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2005), too, for the terms used in describing the group could potentially bring the issue into the public arena and influence the public perceptions of the group.

### ***Sourcing, Safety and Sustainability Dilemmas***

Relationship with sources, safeguarding personal safety, and securing professional sustainability were other issues journalists said they regularly contended with while reporting on Boko Haram extremism. The main dilemma was on sourcing stories from the insurgents, who, despite their notoriety, tended to give more accurate accounts of events than the messages dished out by the Nigerian security forces (Abubakar, 2017). Participants spoke of the legal pitfalls of talking to members of a banned group, and the moral concerns of speaking to people who kill and kidnap children. They weighed up these worries with their desire to give the public accurate accounts of events—a utilitarian remit (Mill, 1910)—and provide contexts and useful insights into the crisis. “I don’t want to be associated with people who are seen by the public and the government as terrorists, but I still want to tell people exactly who they are,” said one reporter who has never spoken to Boko Haram members but has been accessing their materials on the internet. “I would personally like to talk to them directly but the moral and legal concerns are there. In any case, I don’t know how to reach them.” Reaching them directly became difficult after the government banned the group, an action that partly forced its members to resort to using emissaries to deliver their videos to journalists (Abubakar, 2016). Some of the participants had received such videos many times, and eight among them said they had had direct contact with Boko Haram members,

especially before the group became very violent and went underground. “They would come to our office and talk to us or even organize a news conference, which was an open event and not difficult to deal with,” said one senior correspondent who had covered the group in Maiduguri. “But when they moved to Sambisa (Forest) and especially after the government declared them a terrorist organization, contact with them became difficult.” A few participants said they still had contacts with former members of the group whom they still used as sources but often faced difficulties in verifying the veracity of their claims.

Two participants in the Abuja Focus Group 2 discussion, who in the past had contact with Boko Haram members, said the contact had enabled them to write insightful stories about the insurgency. But when their sources sought favorable coverage for the group, they cut off the link with them. “This became a problem because they then started sending me threatening messages,” one of the participants said. He was not physically attacked by them, he said, but it was “an unpleasant experience”. Other participants in the discussion also said they encountered problems in sourcing Boko Haram stories, and that both the militants and security agencies had at one time or the other impeded their ability to get information that would enable them provide accurate and impartial reports. These concerns are valid because sources are vital in news reporting. “Source relations are at the core of journalism practice” because “news media—whatever their sense of social mission, their standards, their technological savvy and market health, their legal shields or constitutional privileges—depend, first and foremost, on their sources” (E. Wasserman, 2017, p. 72).

The other dilemmas journalists said they also wrestled with were safeguarding their own personal safety while struggling to cover violent attacks under tight deadlines—an aspect of timeliness/topicality, which is an element of news values—and retaining their jobs, if they were unable to cope with the pressures of the competition. Almost all the participants reported encountering situations where they had to make a choice between safeguarding their personal safety and missing a big story or a deadline.

There’s a time when I nearly got killed at police headquarters. Immediately I heard a bomb explosion I went there, but unknown to me the [bombs have] not finished exploding. On getting very close [to the scene], the second one exploded. It was a narrow escape (Freelance reporter of an international news agency).

He said there was so much pressure on him to get big stories—and file them quickly to beat the competition, in line with the demanding task of news agency reporting—that he did not realize the risk he was taking. “As a stringer, if you are unable to beat other reporters,

you will be jobless,” another freelance journalist said. And this often means taking risks. Most of the participants described their reporting of the insurgency as “very risky”. “You’re not sure of your safety as a reporter because the insurgents can attack you and explosives can detonate, especially in the case of suicide bombing”, said one correspondent. Another concurred and added that the attack could equally come from the security forces, citing an incident where a military commander harassed him “along with another journalist”. Their accounts reinforce the views expressed by many participants who complained of being harassed by either the militants or the security forces. These findings are well supported by a previous study (Pate & Idris, 2017) that details the risks and hardships other journalists said they had encountered while covering the Boko Haram crisis.

### ***Truth Telling not Terror Enhancing***

As they struggled to deal with the dilemmas and pitfalls of terror reporting, journalists became more conscious of the ethical principles of their profession, from which they said they often sought guidance. The key journalistic principles of accuracy, objectivity, editorial independence, impartiality and social responsibility (NUJ, 1998) were repeatedly mentioned by the participants in reference to their coverage of the insurgency. “Fairness, I always try to be fair in my reporting, to ensure balance, and to be accurate,” said one senior reporter who participated in the Yola Focus Group discussion. Other members in the group spoke in the same vein, though two of them stressed that their main focus was on accuracy rather than on achieving balance. “Being accurate is more essential to me. It is difficult to balance some stories as we don’t really have direct access to Boko Haram,” said one participant. “Well, you can still [write] balanced reports when dealing with claims and counter-claims between the Army and Boko Haram,” said another participant. The data from the individual interviews, too, detail the journalists’ views regarding adherence to ethical principles. A senior correspondent of a national newspaper who also worked for an international news agency said he was guided by both professional code of ethics and his conscience.

My first guiding principles are the ethics of journalism: stating the facts; accuracy and objectivity. My second guiding principle is my conscience. If three people were killed and I reported four, my conscience will question me. And, you know, “conscience is an open wound [only truth could heal it]”.

Much has been said about the news media aiding terrorist propaganda and empowering extremists (Nacos, 2016; Weimann, 2012). The participants in this study were

aware of such assertions and some of them said there were times when they felt that their reporting could be helping the insurgents, and had to make efforts to ensure that it did not. They said the desire to get newsworthy stories had increasingly compelled them to pay more attention to the insurgency—further confirmation of the relevance of news value theory in understanding media’s interest in extremists’ activity—but that ethical considerations served as a check. Almost all the participants said they felt that their reporting was also helpful in countering the insurgency. “I reported the facts accurately and objectively so that policy makers, the government in particular, would have an understanding of the issue and step in—which was what happened,” said a television reporter in Abuja, whose view was shared by most of the participants. Whatever the impact their reporting might have, however, the participants were unanimous in stressing that their primary remit was to tell the truth—a sort of deontological commitment to duty (Kant, 1994). And the bulk of the data analyzed here do show that truth telling was what they consistently referred to in describing their job obligation. This is unsurprising, given that “journalists’ role in society arguably makes truthfulness more fundamental to their ethical conduct” (Singer, 2011, p. 859). And truthfulness—or at least the perception of it—is essential to achieving credibility and professional sustainability (Adeyemi, 2013; Sanders, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Newsworthiness is the driving force in news media’s extensive coverage of violent extremism. Stories emanating from extremists usually possess news elements: negativity, unexpectedness, unusualness, conflict, drama, and topicality. The news media is interested in them because its central remit is to produce and disseminate news. The ability of the extremist groups to exploit the agenda-setting function of the media does help in generating media attention for them, but it is their capacity to provide newsworthy stories that primarily attracts the media to them. The political/economic or ethical motives that might have informed the framing of violent extremists’ stories by the media—either to avoid aiding their propaganda or to influence authorities’ response to extremism or to get more audiences and revenue—also play roles in the coverage. But here, too, it is the news elements that the media primarily focuses on. So, news value theory is found here to be a potent tool of understanding media-violent extremism relationship.

But this relationship generates ethical concerns. Journalists contend with the dilemmas of deciding what to report or ignore; the moral and legal pitfalls of relating with a terror group;

the difficulties of dealing with their victims; and the challenges of framing their stories. They wrestle with the problems of choosing between meeting their job obligations and performing their societal responsibilities. Terror reporting also impacts on their personal safety and professional sustainability. The constant struggle to deal with these difficulties and dilemmas compels the journalists to seek guidance from their profession's ethical codes. And here the deontological rubric of truth telling is found to be their primary guide. The utilitarian concept of reporting in the public interest also serves as a useful guide, especially where it does not seriously compromise the truth-telling principle.

These findings suggest that while the concept of newsworthiness pushes journalists and their news outlets into paying intense attention to violent extremists' stories, journalism ethics serves as a moderating device to check excesses in the coverage. This study highlights the significance of news values theory in enhancing our understanding of media-extremism relationship. But it also points to the need for extending the theory by integrating elements of journalism ethics into it, as ethical elements too seem to play some roles in determining what journalists report as news. Further studies are needed to identify the specific elements to be included in the model and evaluate the role they play.

For journalism practice, this study shows that violent extremism brings to journalists a new set of challenges radically different from those presented by other forms of conflicts. Dealing with a group that is eager to turn children into suicide bombers, just to be in the headlines, presents ethical difficulties that require robust but skillful response. This points to the need for a careful review of journalism ethical codes that would enable the profession to provide clearer guidance in dealing with the new challenges. And it needs to be a universal approach that also takes into consideration specific local concerns, for violent extremism is both a local and global phenomenon.

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