

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE CHIBOK GIRLS ABDUCTION IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Since 2002 when the *Boko Haram* sect was first discovered in Nigeria, they has continued to distort the peace and safety of the country and create global concerns. The abduction of about 230 Chibok girls on April 14, 2014 and the fact that these girls are yet to be found still remains a mystery. As the watchdog of the society, the mass media is expected to bring forth such contemporary issues in their discourse, thereby setting the agenda, and keeping its diverse audiences abreast of the situation. Adopting the content analysis research design, this study comparatively investigated the level of coverage accorded to the discourse on the Chibok girls abduction by two national dailies of: The Punch, and The Guardian. 30 news reports were sampled each from the papers. The findings revealed that both newspapers gave prominence to the Chibok girls abduction in their coverage. This proves that the media is living up to their role as the watchdog of the society given the existence of the coverage being analysed.

Key words: Chibok Girls Abduction, The Punch, The Guardian, Coverage

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has been confronted by a series of insurgencies since 2002 when the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* popularly called *Boko Haram* unleashed its first attack in the north-east of the country. The sect whose ideology is waged on propagating the teachings of the Jihad, and abolishing western education have since gained momentum; spreading it's attacks across diverse states of the north-east such as; Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and Bauchi, the federal capital territory Abuja, and neighbouring African countries of Cameroon, and Chad. In line with the ideology of the sect, educational institutions have been a major target. On April 14, 2014, about 230 female secondary school girls who were in the process of writing their O'Level examinations were abducted in Chibok, a town in Borno State. The incident took place in the Government Girls School where the girls had convened to write their final exams in physics.

The Chibok girls abduction led to a global uproar as the international media, and community all joined in the #BringBackOurGirls movement; a call for the Nigerian government to ensure that the girls are found and safely returned to their parents. Although the Nigerian security agencies in collaboration with international troops made discoveries that *Boko Haram* took the girls in trucks into the Sambisa Forest where they have fortified camps, it is unfortunate that nearly nine months later, the girls are yet to be recovered. The international and local media have continued to play a major role in keeping the global community abreast on the state of the Chibok girls abduction. As is expected, the primary role of the media is surveillance. In the coverage of issues of conflict such as the *Boko Haram* insurgency, the function of the media goes beyond the surveillance function of telling the news to fostering a solution thereby setting it its agenda such issues through comprehensive media analysis in their discourse. According to Nwabueze, Ugochukwu, and Gebra (2014), the press can bring to public notice, issues that require attention with a view to mobilizing development efforts in that area. It is only through this that media audiences can readily comprehend and keep in touch with the contemporary world. Deducing from this knowledge of the media, it can be summarized as a collective means of communication used as a tool for mobilization, social enlightenment, information sourcing and dissemination.

McQuail (2000), describes mass media as the organized means for communicating openly and at a distance to many receivers within a short space of time. The source of this news is the society; and the gravity and currency of any issue in the society determines its use as news content. These issues could be political, social, economic, religious or cultural. The criteria for news selection represent the importance people attach to the event, and these criteria have been outlined by Wilson (2005) as hardness (the factual quality), timeliness (recency), significance (worthiness), actualities (real persons or things), newness (freshness), correctness (verifiability), balance (fairness), proximity (nearness of news actors/events), prominence (famous and infamous persons), and human interest (stories that create emotions). These are the news selection and writing criteria that most news writers and editors ignore. He also documented that the absence of fairness and balance in news stories leads to a loss of credibility by the media.

This study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the newspaper medium with particular emphasis on their function as the watch-dog of the society. Based on this premise, the study becomes significant and eye opener in bringing to the notice of the stake holders in the media industry, loopholes in the media duties, especially with regards to news gathering and reportage of security issues. This can lead to the establishment of relevant regulatory policies and reforms that will bring about improvement to the news gathering and reporting process. In addition this study provides a platform for further study on security and other similar issues that border on the masses welfare and security needs.

The specific objectives of the study include the investigation of; the frequency of the story in the selected newspapers, the genre most frequently used and the prominence of report given to the Chibok girls abduction in April to July of 2014 through a comparative analysis of the coverage

by two of Nigeria's most widely read national dailies (The Punch, and The Guardian newspapers) as case study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What genre was mostly utilized in the coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?
2. What was the frequency of coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?
3. What level of prominence was given to the coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was premised on the Agenda-setting and the Social Responsibility theories of mass communication. One of the first writers to formalize the idea of Agenda-Setting was Walter Lippmann, a prominent American Journalist who observed that the mass media mediate between the realities of the world, and the manner in which media audience perceive such realities. In essence, the theory attributes to the media the ability to create an imagery of reality in the minds of its audiences. Expatiating on this analogy, Freeland (2012), notes that the two most basic tenets of the agenda-setting theory are that firstly, the press and the media do not reflect reality, rather they filter and shape it; secondly, media concentration on a few issues and subjects lead the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. This implies that the prominence of an issue is determined by the prominence the mass media decide to give that issue by way of media coverage in terms of genre, content, frequency, etc. The more the media concentrate on an issue, the more the public perceive it as important.

The Agenda Setting theory is relevant to this study because if the media does indeed set the agenda for public discussion, thus constructing "the picture in our heads" of the way reality is reflected, then we assume that sustained media coverage of the Chibok girls abduction will directly influence the level of importance not only the public but also policy makers attach to the issue. This implies that the more attention the mass media devote to the issue after filtering and shaping it, the more likely the public will consider it to be important and the more important the public consider the issue and respond to the issue, the more important policy-makers will acknowledge it as a pertinent security issue that must be promptly addressed.

The Social Responsibility Theory was developed in the 1940s by Robert Maynard Hutchins but was first introduced in 1947 and was recommended by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of

the Press and the reason for its setup was because of the way the press of those years commercialized every aspect of their business. The theory states that the media should serve the public, and in order to do so, should remain free of all forms of interference; it called for a “free and responsible press” and the “public responsibility of the press”. McQuail as cited by Baran and Davis (2009, p.114) summarized the basic principles of the social responsibility theory as follows:

- i. Media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society.
- ii. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
- iii. In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of law and established institutions.
- iv. The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of the society, giving access to various points of view and right of reply.
- v. Society and public have a right to expect high standards of performance and intervention can be justified to secure the public good.
- vi. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employers and the market.

The press has an obligation to be responsible to the public. Hence, the mass media (newspaper) are obliged to the society who has the right to expect high standards of performance from the mass media. The news of the abduction of the Chibok girls is expected to be reported by the mass media (newspaper) with professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. Any report besides this is not acceptable where the social responsibility theory is concerned.

***BOKO HARAM* INSURGENCY AND THE CHIBOK GIRLS ABDUCTION**

Boko Haram, which means “western education is forbidden”, has targeted schools since 2010, killing hundreds of students in the northern region of Nigeria. According to Zenn (2014), a large proportion of about 10,000 children in northern Nigeria have been unable to go to school due to the insurgencies by *Boko Haram*, and the fear of becoming victims. Prior to this time, the nature of the attacks were such that were targeted at security agencies, and places of worship. Then a major shift in the nature of the attacks was unleashed following as attacks on international organizations such as the United Nations, business places, markets, motor parks, open fire on fellow Nigerian on the Islamic faith, abduction of women and children from villages, and open fire on students became the order of the day.

Of all the attacks by the insurgent, the Chibok girls abduction has been likened to be the most audacious act perpetrated by the sect, and any prior existing insurgent group in Nigeria. Perhaps, the assertions that the sect's affiliation with the Al-Qa'ida could be attributed as responsible for this audacity. Hill as cited by Zenn (2014), opined that *Boko Haram* abducted these girls after coming increasingly under the influence of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, and asserted that the groups' goal is to use girls and young women as sexual objects and as a means of intimidating the civilian population into non-resistance. Hill also described the attacks as similar to Islamist kidnappings of girls in Algeria in the 1990s and early 2000s.

It can also be deduced that the Chibok girls abduction was an intentional act of further reiterated their grievance with western education. The former leader of the sect (Abubakar Shekau) in a video which was posted by the sect via the social media; did not only take responsibility for the attacks, but further declared the reason for the abduction. According to a May 2014 report by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Shekau stated that the girls should not have been in school in the first place, rather they should be married. He also added that Allah instructed him to sell the girls. According to Deutsche Welle (2014), the abducted girls were top students who 'sought the opportunity to advance their education'. Fortunately, 50 of the abducted girls were speculated to have escaped from the Sambisa forest, while *Boko Haram* auctioned off the remaining girls for amounts around '\$12' each. There have also been assertions as to the fact that some of the girls have been trained to become suicide bombers.

The lingering, and lack of swift response from the Nigerian government to rescue the girls fostered the global #BringBackOurGirls campaign on April 30, 2014. The campaign which emerged as an advocacy movement soon gained international endorsements from celebrities from both local and international entertainment industries, Nigerians in the diaspora, international governments, international organizations, and None Governmental Organizations, and individuals of international repute such as the First Lady of the United States of America Michelle Obama, and Malala of Pakistan. Reports from Deutsche Welle (2014), within a week of the abduction, the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign was launched with the aim of creating global awareness, and demanding the Nigerian government to intervene. Although the campaign for the rescue of the girls began via social media, the campaign has also gained momentum on other forms of the mass media (newspaper, television, and radio).

METHODOLOGY

The content analysis quantitative research design was adopted in this study. Content analysis as defined by Kerlinger (2000) in Wimmer and Dominick (2014), is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. A sample size of 60 news editions were selected from the 2014 editions of The Punch and The Guardian national newspapers. The sample size was purposively selected

beginning from April 14, 2014 (the month of the Chibok abduction) to July 13, 2014. Through the systematic sampling technique, 30 editions were selected each from the two newspapers understudied.

The standardized coding sheet research instrument with unites of analysis required to elicit answers to the research questions was utilized. There are four units of analysis which the researcher has chosen to analyze: frequency, space, genre and prominence. The “frequency” looks at the how often stories of the abduction was published within the period of study, that is, the number of times the issue was reported in the categories. The “space” looks at the length of coverage given to the abduction of Chibok Girls by each of the selected newspapers for every selected content category. This will be based on the length of page (full, half, quarter or one-third of a given page) given to the stories covered. For genre the categories include straight news, features, opinions and editorials. The prominence refers to the position or placement of the Chibok Girls issues in the selected newspapers. The categories used to determine this include, the front page lead story, front page other stories, inside front left/right page, and others (which could range from dedicated political page, editorial page, feature page, etc).

Prior to the study, the instrument was subject to inter-coder reliability test using Holsti formula as cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2014, p.175) $Reliability = \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$

Where: M= the number of coding decisions which two coders agree.

N1 & N2= the number of coding decisions by the first and second coder respectively.

The Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) was utilized to analyze the data, and the results presented in descriptive statistical tools of tables and charts for clarity.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Research question 1: What genre was mostly utilized in the coverage of the Chibok Girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?

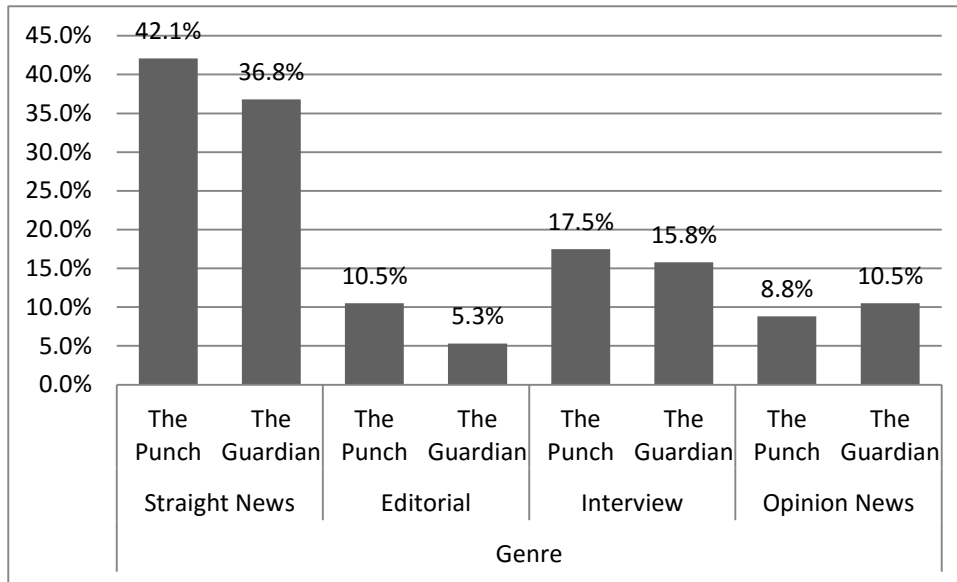


Figure 1: Genre with most Chibok Girls Stories

The coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by both The Punch and The Guardian newspapers had slightly more straight news (42.1%) than The Guardian (36.8%). This is followed by interviews on Chibok girls abduction with the Punch having 17.5% of the interviews while The Guardian had 15.8%. Editorial and opinion news had lower coverage of Chibok girls abduction on both newspapers.

Research Question 2: What was the frequency of coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?

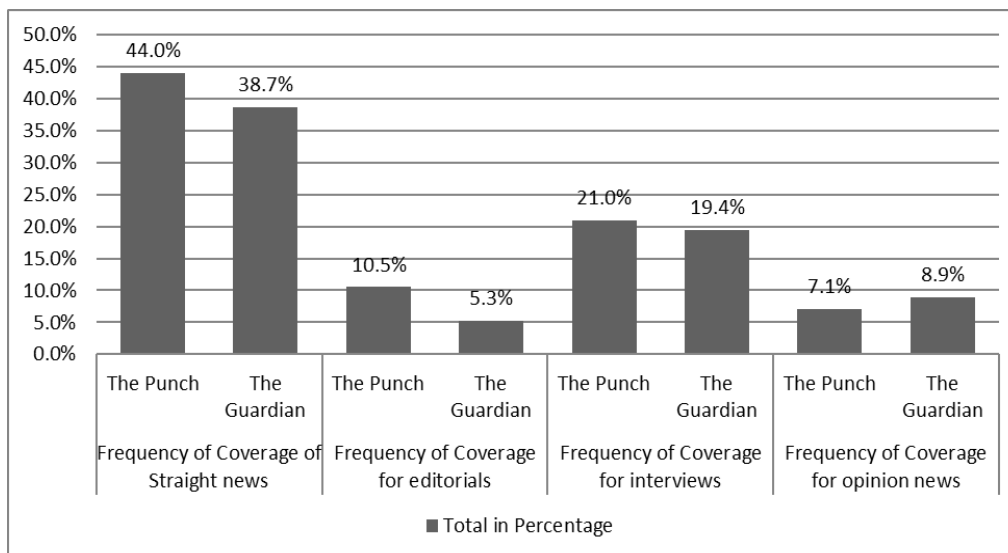


Figure 2: Frequency of news reports on the Chibok Girls Abduction

Figure 2 illustrates that most Chibok Girls’ stories in The Punch and The Guardian were straight news (44%, 38.7% respectively), followed next by interviews (21%), 19.4% respectively); while editorials got lower with (10.5% and 5.3%) frequency of coverage by selected newspapers respectively.

Research question 3: What level of prominence was given to the coverage of the Chibok Girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers?

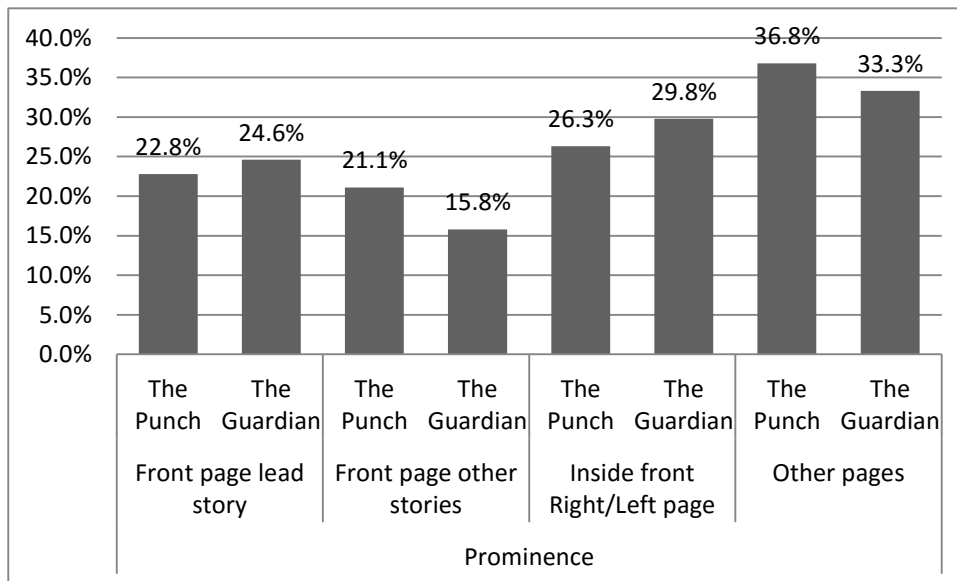


Figure 3: Prominence on Chibok Girls Abduction

The Punch and The Guardian from Figure 3 featured most of the Chibok Girls’ abduction stories on the other pages (The Punch=36.8%, The Guardian=33.3%). This is followed next by Chibok Girls’ abduction stories on the inside front right/left pages (The Punch=26.3%, The Guardian=29.8%). The page with the lowest publications of Chibok Girls’ abduction stories was front page other stories (The Punch=21.1%, The Guardian=15.8%).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The aim of this research was to determine the newspaper coverage of the Chibok girls abduction in terms of the frequency, space, genre and prominence; that is, the frequency of coverage given to the story of the Chibok girls abduction, the amount of space dedicated to the story, the genre most frequently used and the prominence given to the report of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers.

The frequency, in terms of the number of times the story was covered in each story type within the scope of study, was appropriate. In both The Punch and The Guardian newspapers, Straight news had more coverage; feature stories had enough coverage while editorials and opinion articles did not have sufficient coverage. The absence of sufficiency can be ascribed to the low level of reportage dedicated to editorials as compared to other genres represented. The frequency of presentation of news stories by the mass media enables the news reader to perceive it as important. Given the position of the agenda-setting role of the mass media as the medium that “paints the picture in our head”, emphasis on a news story results in the assumption that that news story is important. The emphasis made by both newspapers – purposively selected – was made on both Straight news and Interview; it was also covered to an extent in the Editorial and Opinion news page which should have been emphasized more. Given the seriousness ascribed to Straight news stories and the consistency of coverage by both newspapers, therefore, the frequency of coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by the newspapers was accurate.

The amount of space allotted to the straight news story type of the Chibok girls abduction is commendable in The Punch but not The Guardian. While there was more full-page and half-page straight news stories of the abduction of Chibok Girls in The Punch, majority of the space dedicated to the story by The Guardian newspaper was in quarter-page. The mass media is socially responsible to the society and therefore should report with effectiveness. The space given to the straight news, if it be full or half-page, will be classified as important and factual. The presentation of the issue of terrorism (abduction) in just a quarter or one-third page will not be adequate as there will be no room for updates and relevant facts that the public is entitled to obtaining. According to McCombs (2003), as cited by Amber (2012, p.2), “In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign.”

The amount of space allotted to the opinion and editorial story of the Chibok girls abduction in both The Punch and The Guardian newspaper was sufficient. They were both majorly allocated half-pages which did justice to the content of the story. If more had been given, the readers will hastily discard the publication as newspaper readers are readers who are always on the go. Nwabweze et al (2014, p.108) citing Ossai (2002, p. 221) in Offor and Obiorah (2012, p. 46), insists that editorial is a critical interpretation or an evaluation of significant usual contemporary events so that the publications typical readers will be informed, educated, influenced and

persuaded. While Opinions offer the readership with independent and knowledgeable perspectives to issues, especially where the writer is coming from outside the organization. The amount of space dedicated to the interview story type of the issue was given a full-page in The Guardian but a half-page in The Punch. This also is considered sufficient as interviews are subjective from the interviewee's perspective; it permits factual information on issues pertaining to the society at large.

The genres used in the presentation of the story in The Punch and The Guardian newspapers were in various forms but the analysis done was based on the story types selected for this research. The genres are straight news, editorial, opinion and interview. In both newspapers, the straight news gained precedence over the others. Nwabueze (2014, p.108) et al citing Nwabueze (2009, p. 32) affirms that unlike the feature story, straight news reports do not contain interpretations, forecast or any information outside what has happened, the way it happened, except the views of people interviewed in the course of gathering facts for the story.

According to Ochonogor & Hyacinth (2011, p.363), serious and current events are usually given straight news treatment. Therefore, the reports were relayed as it occurred after going through the media process of gate-keeping and were relayed to the public majorly as straight news stories as a result of the level of seriousness and currency of the issue. In the story types of interview, opinion and editorials, the news was also presented. Thus, despite the fact that other story types were adopted in the presentation of the story of the Chibok girls abduction – given the predominance of the straight news coverage in the outcome of the research – it is vivid that enough research was not conducted on the issue. The evidence of research on the issue would have resulted in a higher percentage of the editorial, opinion and interview genres applied in the coverage of the issue by the selected newspapers of The Punch and The Guardian.

According to Dennis McQuail as cited by Baran and Davis (2009), one of the basic principles of the social responsibility theory is that the mass media can fulfill societal obligations by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. The placement of a particular current issue on the front page of the newspaper by the editor determines its prominence. The prominence given to the Chibok girls abduction in the selected newspapers was not good enough, as the placement of the stories should have been more on the front page lead story or front page other stories than on other pages. This is because newspaper readers survey the headline of the newspaper to be aware of what they believe is prevailing in the news media, and therefore, society. Other stories related to economy, business, and politics, were given more prominence. Most of the stories were buried inside the report. According to Donald Shaw, Maxwell McCombs, and their colleagues, as cited by Little John, and Foss (2013) the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.

CONCLUSION

The study of the newspaper coverage of the Chibok girls abduction by The Punch and The Guardian successfully proves that the media is living up to their role as the watchdog of the society given the existence of the coverage being analysed. Although, in relations to the prominence given to the issue, the study discovered that enough prominence was not given as other stories related to economy, politics, business were given precedence as front page lead stories and front page other stories. Also, clarity is another goal to uphold in reporting news. The media should provide the clearest, most factual and most balanced information and should endeavour to access the news despite the actual source. Although, the space given to the coverage was enough considering the issue being reported is one of terrorism, the genre most frequently used could have been presented in a balanced way with the use of more genres than straight news; this is necessary because straight news is a report that attributes the news source with no deep representation of editorial opinion. The straight news is hard news and it was the genre mostly used and also allocated more space than other genres. The general coverage of the Chibok girls abduction was done in an average manner and could have been made better by the media. Therefore, this study has established that although the print media performs their role as the fourth estate of the realm, they do not present the news in a balanced way. They also rely on secondary sources of information but despite this action made by the mass media, the general coverage is commendable given the actual report of the incident after the occurrence; and consistent coverage despite the lack of relevant updates; and then the eventual coverage made possible as a result of the reaction of the government due to the involvement of the foreign media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for the media to take a relook at their journalistic ethics. The role of the media in reporting has become a public affair where even non-practitioners can participate. There should then be ethical reporting by the mass media, a journalistic requirement, which is a key principle of the watchdog and gate keeping function of the mass media. The mass media should not take for granted the public's patronage which can be easily lost, but should uphold the ethical standards in order to strengthen their bond with the public. The mass media should present the news in a balanced way that can be done by giving more prominence, dedicating more space, using relevant genres and extending the frequency of coverage especially to issues of terrorism in Nigeria given the magnitude of the event.

Also, the mass media should also drift from the path of 'Journalism of Convenience', and should endeavor to accumulate on-the-spot reports of terrorism events. They should discard every setback that will discourage progress in meaningful reporting and should invest enough human and financial resources to report stories beyond the comfort of urban setting. Given the location of the event, Chibok, and the federal government's failure at the beginning to visit the scene, it is no wonder that the Nigerian media were discouraged. The mass media has no excuse as they are the mirror of the society, they are the watchdog, it is through them that the society can see events and try to understand them. Chibok, whatever the location, is important also and should have

their experience mediated by the mass media; therefore, the mass media should be capable of mediating the experience of the public in conflict zones, rural or urban based.

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