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Ette, Mercy

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Condensational symbols in British press coverage of Boko Haram

Abstract

This study of British press coverage of Boko Haram, a militant group in Nigeria, concentrates on condensational symbols in news reports of one of its major acts of terrorism, the bombing of the United Nations House in Abuja, the country's capital city, in August 2011. The study examines the visibility of Boko Haram in British newspapers before and after the attack. It identifies the condensational symbols that dominated the coverage and how these provided a particular trajectory that could have shaped newspaper readers' understanding of the event. The study argues that the symbolic terms that journalists used in their reports were not only easily identifiable but were specifically chosen to simplify a complex story for audiences that were perhaps uninformed about the group and its activities. The terms also reflect the repertoire of news frames that journalists mine to reconstruct reality for their audiences.

Keywords:

Boko Haram, Farouk Abdulmutallab, terrorism, condensational symbols, news frames, ethno-religious conflict, United Nations.

Introduction

Long before the abduction of more than 200 girls from a school in north-eastern Nigeria in April 2014, Nigeria had already become 'a country of interest in the context of terrorism' (Ette, 2012:45). Boko Haram, the group that claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of the school girls, has been associated with acts of terrorism in the country since 2007. However, the unfolding story of Boko Haram remained largely untold in international media until July 2009. The group gained visibility in the British press when some of its members engaged in a major outbreak of violence that resulted in the death of hundreds of people in the northern part of Nigeria. Following on from then, it received intermittent exposure in the British press but in August 2011, its visibility in international media increased sharply when it bombed the United Nations House in Abuja, the capital city, and confirmed its status as a nascent terrorist group. The attack on the UN headquarters in Nigeria reverberated around the world and marked a critical moment in the country's record of acts of terrorism. For the first time in its campaign of violence, Boko Haram had attacked an international target. As journalists writing for Western media sought to make sense of the tragedy to audiences that were perhaps uninformed about the group and its activities in Nigeria, they needed news frames that had resonance for their readers and contextualised the story. The apparent absence of obvious conventional news values such as cultural proximity and relevance of the event necessitated a perspective that could make the attack comprehensible and discernible for audiences. Journalists needed framed that were capable of evoking shared memories because, as Tiffen (1989:53) has argued, 'in story selection and presentation there is constant effort to reflect and capture the public's concerns. Stories are presented in a way that maximises their apparent relevance to the audience.'

This article reviews British press coverage of that major act of terrorism by Boko Haram to identify the condensational symbols journalists used to contextualise their narratives for their audiences, who, perhaps at the time of the incident, had no or limited knowledge about

the group and its activities. It takes as a starting point an understanding that journalists as an 'interpretative community' routinely depend on familiar news frames in their coverage of acts of terrorism. Dominant news frames in the coverage of international news are often shaped by the political, cultural and social background of the reporters and the news organisations they represent. This article analyses recurring labels in the coverage of Boko Haram to highlight to what extent they were simple description of events or implicit judgement about Nigeria and the group. The study focuses on a defining event in the activities of the group: the bombing of the UN House in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. The study examines how newspapers published in the UK by British news organisations reported the attack specifically to delineate the recurring symbolic phrases that framed the coverage.

News framing and condensational symbols

It is common knowledge that journalists invest energy and consideration into the framing of their reports because news plays a pivotal role in knowledge formation (Schudson, 1995), especially of distant places. Suzanne Franks (2013:3) has noted that the media are sometimes 'the only way of finding out about faraway events' and places. Through the use of familiar frames of reference, journalists are able to tell stories, especially complex stories of events that lie beyond the direct experience of their audiences, in ways that are appealing to their readers. Consequently, journalists play a critical role in the shaping of public perception of a given issue (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Incorporating news frames with 'identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics' (de Vreese et al, 2010:108), can fixate attention on certain aspects of an event, and conversely detract scrutiny from others. Norris et al (2003:2) argue that 'journalists rely upon familiar news frames, and upon the interpretation of events offered by credible sources, to convey dominant meanings, to make sense of the facts, to focus the headlines, and to structure the story line.' As Yang (2003) explains, the news media actively determine the frames of references that audiences depend upon to understand public

events. Thus, dominant news frames influence the way in which people think about issues raised in news reports and this is particularly significant in the coverage of acts of violence and terrorism in distant places. British press reports of the attack on the UN House, for example, were undergirded with frames that provided recognisable labels and fitted into typical formulaic news frames. The frames provided the scaffolding over the incident and enabled the readers to make sense of the story and to apply a particular understanding of it.

Several references have so far been made to the phrase 'condensational symbols' without any clarification of its intended meaning in the context of this article. For the purpose of this article, a condensational symbol is conceptualised primarily as a shorthand means by which an aggregate of beliefs, values, and perhaps worldviews are transmitted to those who share similar culture. Condensational symbols evoke 'stored meanings already residing within the minds of individuals sharing a given culture' (Johnson-Cartee, 2005:167). It is important to note that in the context of this study, the 'labels' identified as condensational symbols do not necessarily condense beliefs in the way terms such as 'British values' or 'the American dream' do but are signposted as condensational symbols because they provide culturally resonant frames for coverage of acts of terrorism. For this study, condensational symbols are phrases that through repeated use evoke shared meanings and understanding of terrorism. For example, the use of the phrase 'suicide bomber' in a story conjures up a range of discourses. In the West, for example, a suicide bomber encapsulates a perverse sense of bravery that devalues not only the life of targets of a terrorist act but also that of the perpetrator of such an act. However, the idea is understood differently in parts of the world where being a suicide bomber is regarded as a demonstration of conviction and commitment to a cause. Or as Cottee and Hayward (2011:876) note, suicide bombing is an expression of 'one of the core existential attractions of terrorism: namely, violent struggle and self-sacrifice in service to the sacred.' In places where being a suicide bomber symbolises an act of faith in the promise of a reward in the afterlife, it is understandable why family members celebrate the self-sacrifice of

loved ones while in the West, such an act is deemed to be an incomprehensible.

Consequently, in Western media, the use of 'suicide bomber' evokes iconic images of terror and serves as a cue for a particular understanding of terrorism.

Condensational symbols are embedded in the news frames that journalists use to present their narratives. Bennett (1980) explains that such symbols have powerful emotional connections with audiences. Condensational symbols are often embedded in interpretative packages and informed by news frames and these, Entman (1993:52) suggests are 'manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotypical images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement.' In his examination of contrasting news frames used by several important US media outlets in the coverage of two tragic misapplication of military force, Entman argues that 'the components of the frame often tend to cohere with an established *discursive domain*, a series of associated idea clusters that form a way of reasoning about a matter that is familiar to audiences from other cultural experiences. Certain words and images are used repeatedly and together, thereby rendered more salient in the texts' (Entman, 1991:11).

News frames entail 'representing persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events' (Norris et al, 2003:2). Pulled together, condensational symbols reflect boundaries of discourse and signify what reporters deem to be significant issues in a story. The interpretative packages journalists utilise in their coverage of events reflect their socio-political and cultural environment. Thus, it could be argued that condensational symbols are culture sensitive and are rooted in specific socio-cultural milieu as journalists tend to use labels that resonate with their audiences.

Condensational symbols simplify the challenge of telling complicated stories by making information more salient through 'placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols' (Entman, 1993:53). Symbolic words and phrases facilitate the

reporting of distant and unfamiliar stories to uninformed audiences because they provide journalists with recognisable world views, and expression of value systems that resonate with their readers. The point has been made that 'facts have no intrinsic meaning. They take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organises them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasise while ignoring others' (Gamson, 1989:157, as cited by Johnson-Cartee, 2005:158). Conflict situations, such as the bombing of the UN headquarters in Nigeria, intensify the need for condensational symbols as they enable journalists to present their narratives from an episodic rather than a thematic perspective because the latter requires a more textured and contextualised approach that would entail providing detailed background while the former emphasises 'recent alarming or attention-earning event that highlights an individual's or group's plight through personal illustration' (Iyengar, 1991, as cited by Johnson-Cartee, 2005:164). Symbolic language is not only malleable but it also minimises the need to provide detailed background or context of stories over time to facilitate deeper understanding of issues in the news.

In the coverage of terrorism, certain phrases are routinely used to cue particular interpretative packages. For example, Al-Qaeda, conjures up the discourse on the war on terror and the label carries certain undertones. As a condensational symbol, it evokes shared memories of the expression of the ideology and activities of the group and it is readily understood by audiences who are familiar and knowledgeable about its significance. Moreover, a condensational symbol underpins powerful narratives that simplify the social construction of reality and communicate a clear message in news stories. As a reporting device, condensational symbols transform difficult choices into routine decisions and minimise the need for personal preferences. News, therefore, reflect the framework of understanding in the socio-cultural and political environment of journalists and their audiences. Or as Berkowitz (2011:xv) puts it, 'news reflects the culture of its creation, both within and outside of a news organisation.'

This analysis of condensational symbols in British press coverage of Boko Haram focuses on a particular act of terrorism, the bombing of the UN House in Abuja. However, to provide a more longitudinal perspective on the British press coverage of Nigeria, the article evaluates the representation of Nigeria in British newspapers in August 2010 to highlight the nature of coverage a year before the defining moment of August 2011, the focus of this article. Following up on that evaluation, this article concentrates on all news stories about Boko Haram that were published in British newspapers before the bombing of the UN House as well as reports of the attack. Articles were acquired electronically from Proquest online database using two simple keyword search terms, 'Nigeria' and 'Boko Haram.' The first search generated data about routine coverage of Nigeria and the second produced information about Boko Haram within a specific time frame. The objective was to identify the nature of coverage in the absence of a 'what a story moment' and of an event-centred news.

Terrorism and the news media, a contested relationship

Journalists, studies have shown (Fursich, 2010, Thomas, 2014), tend to favour stories that resonate with their audiences due to their perceived cultural background, especially when such reports are about unexpected and dramatic events. Acts of terrorism by their nature easily lend themselves to extensive media coverage because as Cottee and Hayward (2011:966) have noted, terrorism 'involves the deliberate infliction of physical harm or injury on human beings.' Although Russell Farnen, writing before the defining event of 9/11, describes terrorism as a 'mainly international problem' and argues that terror is 'distant and beyond the average person's experience' (Farnen, 1990:103), terrorism has occupied the attention of scholars since the 1960s and informed research in a variety of disciplines. Terrorism is not a new social problem and as Biernatzki (2002) has noted, it is embedded in history. However, it could be argued that 'what we know as terrorism is actually a media creation; mass media define, delimit, delegitimize, and discredit events that we have not actually seen, but that we

all instantly recognise as terrorist acts' (Farnen (1990:100). Consequently, the intersection of terrorism and mass media has influenced public perception and understanding of the phenomenon.

Stories of terrorism go back a long way but their reach has been widened due to the capacity of the mass media to disseminate information about terrorists and their activities. Thus, the political impact of terrorist attacks has increased significantly. While terrorist organisations no longer rely solely on mainstream media to publicise their activities, but now have the capacity to deliver their messages directly to audiences through social media, in the contemporary world, the news media are still major battlefields for the propagation of information and terrorism and news media are intricately connected. It could be argued that the news media validate and legitimise terrorist acts through coverage of such events. As a result, news organisations are implicated in the dissemination of information about acts of terrorism even in distant places 'because most people only experience terrorism through mass-media accounts' (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006:431). However, this does not suggest a causal link between media coverage and terrorism or postulate shared values between journalists and terrorists. But as Paul Wilkinson notes, 'for as long as terrorists commit acts of violence the mass media will continue to scramble to cover them in order to satisfy the desire of their audiences for dramatic stories in which there is inevitably huge public curiosity about both the victimisers and their victims' (1997:53). Journalists cover acts of terrorism to justify their public role to inform, educate and set the agenda for issues of interest to their audience and not simply to serve the cause of terrorists despite the symbiotic nature of the relationship between news media and terrorist organisations.

Background: Nigeria and terrorism

To contextualise this analysis of Boko Haram's attack on the UN House in Nigeria, it is critical to provide a backdrop by examining the issue of terrorism in the country. As a starting point, it

is important for the purpose of this article to clarify the definition of terrorism that informs this analysis. The term is used here to denote a particular type of violence that:

Is premeditated and designed to create a climate of extreme fear; is directed at a wider target than the immediate victims; inherently involves attacks on random or symbolic targets, including civilians; is considered by the society in which it occurs as 'extra-normal', that is in the literal sense that it violates the norms regulating disputes, protest and dissent; and is used primarily, though not exclusively, to influence the political behaviour of governments, communities or specific social groups (Wilkinson, 1977:51)

In this particular case, it is violence that is associated with religion for political purposes.

Although Nigerians have experienced different forms of acts of violence for decades, terrorism did not 'exist' in the country because it was not acknowledged as a socio-political problem until Boko Haram emerged as a dominant security threat. In 2009 when Farouk Abdulmutallab, a young Nigerian student, attempted to bomb a US-bound aircraft with explosives that he had stockpiled in his underwear, many Nigerian elite distanced him and his action from his country and asserted that 'Nigerians do not have terrorist tendencies' (Ette, 2012:53). This claim was made in spite of a long history of acts of violence, especially in the northern parts of the country, which is home to radical Islam. In the 1970s, for example, an extremist group, the Maitatsine movement, had mobilised unemployed urban youth and other marginalised people under an Islamic flag for a campaign of violence in Kano, a major northern city. Thousands of lives were lost and property worth millions of naira was destroyed. Occasional spate of violence in other northern cities such as Bauchi, Yola, and Kaduna also resulted in the loss of lives but these were not understood as manifestations of terrorism.

The Maitatsine group, which was started by Mohammadu Marwa, a Cameroonian who migrated to Kano in 1945, was known for an anti-Western ideological stance. The group sought to impose a strict Islamic agenda on Nigeria with its leader preaching against Western culture and the use of modern technologies such as automobiles, radio and wristwatches

(Musa, 2012). Members of the group distanced themselves from other Muslims, who had, in their view, become secular by accepting Western influences. Agbiboa (2014:50) explains that Maitatsine members 'lived in secluded areas to avoid mixing with mainstream Muslims, and rejected material wealth on the grounds that it was associated with Western values.' In December 1980, the group engaged in violent clashes with security forces for eleven days during which more than 4000 people were killed (Agbiboa, 2014). Although Marwa, the leader of the group, was killed during the uprising, his followers kept his doctrines alive for several years and engaged in sporadic clashes with security forces. Aliyu Musa (2012:113) makes the point that an outbreak of religious violence in 1985 in Bauchi, a northern city, 'was the last major violence directly linked to the Maitatsine sect.'

While several groups have spearheaded intermittent uprisings in Nigeria since the 1985 crisis, Boko Haram is the first group to manifest traits similar to those of the Maitatsine. Members of Boko Haram expound radical views and contempt for Western civilization similar to those that were associated with the Maitatsine group. They, too, preach against Western way of life and values and campaign to spread extremist Islamist ideas across Nigeria through violence. Musa (2012) argues that Boko Haram is an offshoot of Maitatsine but unlike the latter has access to modern technology with which it is able to coordinate its activities and consequently has been more successful in waging a campaign of violence in some parts of Nigeria.

The exact origin of Boko Haram is shrouded in historical fog but it is generally believed to have emerged in the late 1990s. Ajayi, (2012), traces its beginnings to Shabaab Muslim Youth Organisation, which was started in 1995 but Andrew Walker, (2012), a freelance journalist who has covered Nigeria since 2006, in a special report for the United States Institute of Peace, links it to a radical Islamist youth group in Maiduguri, which was formed in 2002. Although Boko Haram was initially perceived to be a non-violent organisation, under

Mohammed Yusuf's leadership the group gradually evolved and embarked on a campaign to propagate extremist Islamic ideology in Nigeria. Officially known as Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad, meaning 'people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and Jihad', it quickly became better known as Boko Haram, which implies 'Western education is sacrilege' in the Hausa language, the most widely spoken language in northern Nigeria, due to its anti-Western ideology and hard-line Islamic principles. The popular label, Abubakar (2012:98) explains, 'sticks mainly because the public prefers it partly as a way of ridiculing the group and partly because it seems to fit into the group's outward ideological outlook.' But it should be noted that the group is not simply opposed to Western education but to Western way of life. As John Campbell (2011), a former United States ambassador to Nigeria, explains, Boko Haram also opposes any sort of secular government.

While its origin may be in dispute, there is no question about Boko Haram's campaign of terror in Nigeria. It has claimed responsibility for more violence in Nigeria than any other armed group (Agbibo, 2014) but more importantly, its activities threaten Nigeria's national security and stability. It has led a violent campaign for many years against the Nigerian state to advance its ideological position and rejection of Western modernity, which it sees as the underlying cause of social problems in its Islamic environment. However, in spite of its record of terrorist acts it remained invisible in British newspapers until July 2009.

Nigeria in British newspapers

British press coverage of Nigeria generally constitutes a small proportion of its foreign news. In the absence of major disasters, conflict or other event-centred news, coverage is often very sketchy and limited. This was the case in August 2010, a year before the bombing of the UN House. A search through Proquest using 'Nigeria' as a search term generated sixty-four relevant stories in national, regional and local newspapers. Twenty-eight of the stories were about Nigerian footballers playing for British teams, seven stories were on the economy and

the government's plans to privatise the state-run power generation and distribution company. Twenty-five of the stories were news in brief and were not by-lined and four were about Shell, the Anglo-Saxon oil company. Three of the Shell stories were extensive reports by national newspapers about oil spillage and attack on pipelines. Other stories published during the period included a case of an internet scam traced to Nigeria, the kidnap of the son of the first president of Nigeria, which interestingly was only covered by local newspapers, and sham marriages.

From the foregoing, it is clear that news stories about Nigeria a year before the bombing of the UN House were insignificant and probably used to achieve a certain level of composition of coverage. It could be argued that beyond the 'narrow prism of famine, war and corruption' (Franks, 2013:168), Nigeria, like many non- Western countries, received limited coverage because news of distant places are often nuanced by disaster and crises. The extensive coverage of the attack on the UN House confirmed this view.

Boko Haram in the British press

Boko Haram gained international media attention in 2009 when Yusuf, its leader, led an insurrection against the Nigerian government during which many 'police, low-level government officials, and Christian clergy were murdered until the Nigerian army, with great difficulty, suppressed it and handed over Yusuf to the police who murdered him while in custody' (Campbell, 2011:54). Before the uprising the group was not identified by its popular label in any British newspaper. A clear example of the invisibility of Boko Haram in British press prior to 2009 was the lack of coverage of several waves of violence it perpetrated in parts of Northern Nigeria, especially during the 2007 general election, and for a few days in July 2009 prior to the killing of its leader. Although hundreds of lives had been lost, the group was not mentioned in British newspapers until Yusuf was killed while in police custody. Onapajo and

Uzodike (2012:24-25) argue that 'the government's mishandling of the group's terrorist activities by the summary execution of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, and the arrant use of force on its members, intensified the belligerence of the Boko Haram group.' Consequently, the killing earned the group visibility in international media. This could be because his death fitted into the abuse of human rights news frame.

Between 28 and 31 July, 2009, fourteen stories about the group were published in *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Evening Standard* and *The Times*. All the stories focused on the death of Yusuf as reflected in the headlines: 'Nigerian Islamic leader shot dead', 'Nigeria police kill rebel leader', 'Islamist sect leader dies in Nigerian police custody', 'Leader of violent Nigerian sect shot in police custody', 'Islamist sect leader killed by Nigerian army.' The last headline was erroneous given that Yusuf died while he was in police custody, after he was handed over by the army.

Yusuf's death followed days of mayhem, which Abdullahi Abubakar (2012) attributes to unprovoked attack on the group by the police in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri. Abubakar writes:

It was in mid-2009 when their members were on a peaceful funeral procession in the city that police reportedly attacked and killed some of them. They demanded instant justice but saw no sign of it. They then launched revenge attacks, not only in Borno State but also in Bauchi, Yobe and Kano States, killing policemen, burning public buildings, churches and police stations and snatching arms and ammunitions (2012:98).

As noted before, this outbreak of violence did not receive international media coverage until Yusuf was killed by security forces. Reports of the violent clash that led to his death only served as background information in the coverage of his killing. For example, the *Western Morning News*, a regional newspaper based in Plymouth, reported that:

THE leader of a radical Nigerian Islamist sect blamed for violent clashes between his followers and government forces has been shot dead in police custody. Mohammed Yusuf, the head of the Nigerian Taliban, was killed after being captured on Thursday at the end of a four-day manhunt (01 August, 2009:19)

The day before, the *Western Morning News* story and *The Financial Times*, had reported that Yusuf was killed after five days of fighting between security forces and members of Boko Haram:

The leader of an Islamist sect at the centre of five days of fighting in northern Nigeria that has claimed hundreds of lives died in police custody last night. Mohammed Yusuf was killed hours after he was captured, according to police officials quoted by news agencies. Mr Yusuf's death followed an assault on a mosque housing followers of the radical preacher, who demanded stricter imposition of sharia, or Islamic law, across northern Nigeria and the abandonment of secular education. In retaliation for a series of attacks on police stations and other targets that had spread to four states since erupting on Sunday, troops closed in on an area of the city of Maiduguri, the base of the sect whose name - Boko Haram - means "western education is forbidden". Unconfirmed estimates of the death toll ranged from 300 to 600 people (*The Financial Times*, 31 July, 2009:4)

It is clear from the excerpt above that the five days of fighting that resulted in the death of hundreds of people did not merit international news coverage but the death of the leader of the group at the centre of the uprising was considered newsworthy. The choice of words in the excerpt also points to a suggestion of judgment of the action of the security forces through the use of phrases such as 'an assault on mosque', 'retaliation' 'closed in on an area.' One could, therefore, argue that the emphasis on the death of Yusuf and not so much on the hundreds of victims of his group's attack suggests a certain level of sympathy for the group. *The Financial Times*, for example, reported that the Nigerian army killed up to '600 Islamist militants' and *The Guardian* explained that:

Troops were last night on a door to door hunt for Islamist militants after government forces stormed the base of a self-styled Taliban leader and killed him and more than 100 rebels in an attempt to crush an uprising that has racked Nigeria. A local rights group accused security forces of killing unarmed captives alleged to be members of the radical Boko Haram sect seeking to overthrow the government and impose sharia law across Nigeria (*The Guardian*, 31 July 2009:22).

What becomes clear from the above is a criticism of the action of security forces in their

encounter with Boko Haram. This could be due to lack of coverage of the sect prior to the July 2009 outbreak of violence, which inevitably meant adopting an episodic rather than a thematic approach. This sympathetic leaning disappeared in later coverage, as will be discussed later.

Following that spate of violent clash between its members and security forces and the death of its leader, Boko Haram received sporadic visibility in the British press. Frequent attacks on churches, police stations, leisure centres ensured intermittent coverage. However, it was the bombing of the UN House in 2011 that gained the group unparalleled coverage in British newspapers. The attack was reported extensively by local, regional and national newspapers. It was apparent that while it was a local and 'distant' act of terrorism on a spatial level, its impact was global and this was reflected in the way in which British newspapers framed the interplay of the local and the international perspectives. As Onapajo and Uzodike (2012:348) note: 'The thick flames and shattered bodies that accompanied the group's brutal attack on the UN building on 26 August 2011 sent a red alert to the world. It clearly indicates that Boko Haram's potential targets for attack are not limited to Nigerian authorities and its peoples, rather its targets are transnational and multinational in nature.' This was clear in a statement the group issued after the attack:

All over the world, the UN is a global partner in the oppression of believers. We are at war against infidels. In Nigeria, the Federal Government tries to perpetuate the agenda of the United Nations.... We have told everyone that the UN is the bastion of the global oppression of Muslims all over the world (Onapajo and Uzodike, 2012:35).

Boko Haram disseminated this message through the media thus reinforcing the view that 'terrorists exploit the media to achieve political recognition, present their cause, transmit messages and demands to the government, and induce fear in the general public' (Keinan, Sadeh and Rosen, 2003:150). Ironically, it depended on Western technology to convey its threat.

The UN as a supranational organisation congregates representatives from different parts of the world. It could therefore be argued that the bombing of its headquarters was an attack on the world. Although international media coverage of Boko Haram had been on the increase since 2009, the group was not viewed by Western governments as a potential security threat beyond Nigeria. But as the US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security noted in a report, 'the attack marked a significant shift in the targeting and goals' and signalled an evolution in its capabilities (US House of Representatives, 2011). The US Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence asserted that Boko Haram was capable of attacking US interests and the US homeland. This view was reinforced by a report in *The Evening Times* (Glasgow), which claimed that some of the people behind the bombing 'were even plotting to carry out attacks in the United States' (02 September 2011: 10).

Initial reports of the attack in British newspapers were episodic and focused mainly on the attention-grabbing incident. The stories expanded the reach of the terrorist act as the media spread the effect of the spatially limited act to a wide public. Boko Haram was successful in gaining publicity through its appeal to news values such as tragedy, magnitude and unexpectedness. The reports were undergirded by a dominant discourse of conflict, which is routinely simplistic due to the nature of journalism. As Philip Hammond (2007:2) has argued, 'reporters do not work in a vacuum: their writing will be influenced by the stock of ideas circulating in the culture in which they are working, particularly those which are taken up and promulgated by powerful sources.' Those ideas provide layers of meaning about their subjects as illustrated in the next section.

Condensational symbols in the coverage of Boko Haram's attack on the UN House.

British newspapers used a selection of symbolic phrases in their coverage of the bombing of the UN House to make sense of the incident for their readers. The *Evening Standard* was the

first and only British newspaper to carry a report on the attack on the day it happened. Its story headlined: 'Suicide car bomb destroys UN base in Nigeria' provided a detailed account of how the attack happened and concluded that 'there was no immediate claim of responsibility, but an Islamist group known as Boko Haram has been blamed for a number of bombings in recent months' (Dominiczak, 2011:22). Although Boko Haram was the primary suspect, the bombing could have been launched by another group given that a devastating bomb attack the previous year during the country's 50th Independence Day celebration was carried out by The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, a militant group in the country's oil-rich delta region. The day after the bomb attack, twenty-three newspapers ranging from *The Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, a local newspaper in a university town, to the *Daily Telegraph*, one of UK's national titles, carried detailed reports of the bombing and many referred to Boko Haram as the main suspect. *The Guardian* newspaper, in addition to a news story also published an analysis by Alex Vine, the head of the Africa programme at Chatham House, an independent policy institute in London. The scope of the coverage was emblematic – the attack on the UN House was as Vines noted: 'the first such attack aimed at an international organisation, possibly to provoke a counter-productive international security response' (*The Guardian*, 27 August, 2011:28). The broad response of the British press confirmed that the bombing was not just a Nigerian problem, that the act of terrorism was not a distant occurrence. This view was reflected in *The Guardian's* main story, which reported that 'The Islamist group Boko Haram told the BBC in a phone call that it had carried out the attack. If the claim turns out to be genuine, the attack would confirm American fears that al-Qaida-affiliated groups are targeting the important West African state' (*The Guardian*, 27 August, 2011). The international dimension of the attack was also noted by *The Financial Times*:

The claim of responsibility by the Islamist group marks an escalation in what has hitherto been a localised campaign of violence. It carries ramifications for international businesses and organisations operating in Africa's most populous country.

We believe it represents an expansion in the scope of Islamist militant attacks from the symbols of the domestic Nigerian state - such as police stations and government buildings - to include the country's international presence," an analyst at Control Risks said of the blast. (August 27, 2011:8)

Prior to Boko Haram claiming responsibility for the bombing, majority of the reports were cautious in linking the group to the attack. The headlines reflected this caution as many were straightforward descriptors: 'Car bomb attack,' 'Car bomb attack rocks UN building.' '18 dead in UN building bombing,' 'Assault on Abuja,' 'Suicide car bomber kills 18 at UN AID HQ.' The *Nottingham Evening Post*, a local newspaper, in a story headlined: 'Bomb kills 16 at UN HQ' reported that:

AT least 16 people have died after a car laden with explosives blew up at the United Nations' offices in Nigeria.

The attack yesterday saw a car ram through two gates at the offices in the capital, Abuja, before blowing up.

The suicide bomber inside crashed the car into the main reception area and detonated the explosives, inflicting the most damage possible, a spokesman for the Nigerian National Emergency Management Agency said.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called it "an assault on those who devote their lives to helping others".

UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said: "We do not have any confirmation as yet who was responsible" (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 27 August, 2011: 30).

However, Boko Haram ruled out other suspects when it claimed responsibility for the attack and consequently the papers replaced the cautionary approach with a more direct perspective and used condensational symbols to simplify the story for their readers. The recurring phrases were: 'Islamist sect', 'Islamist extremists', 'Nigerian Taliban', 'Extremist Islamist sect', 'Nigerian extremist group', 'radical Islamist sect', 'Linked to al-Qaeda.' A day after the attack *The Times* reported 'Deadly rise of the 'Taleban of Nigeria' and this reference

to the Taliban was used extensively even though Boko Haram has no known links to the Afghan group. *The Daily Mirror* was one of the first newspapers to emphasise an 'al-Qaeda' link. In a story on 27 August 2011 the paper reported that Boko Haram 'was said to be trying to link up with al-Qaeda' but the headline was more categorical about the connection: '18 DIE AS SUICIDE CAR BOMBER TARGETS U.N: Al-Qaeda link to horror.' Although there was no evidence of a working relationship between Boko Haram and other terrorist organisations, the papers emphasised a connection in their reports. The evidence for this claim appears to have been a suggestion by General Carter Ham, the commander for US military operations in Africa, who said in July 2011 that 'the sect might be trying to link with two al-Qaeda affiliated groups in other African countries to mount joint attacks in Nigeria' (*The Financial Times*, 27 August:8).

The repeated use of 'Islamist sect', 'Islamist extremists', 'Nigerian Taliban', 'Extremist Islamist sect', 'Nigerian extremist group', 'radical Islamist sect', 'Linked to al-Qaeda and even 'Boko Haram' conjured up a particular discourse, the rise of Islamist fanaticism, and narrowed the understanding of the complexity of the Boko Haram threat to Nigeria's national security. These symbolic labels provided a simplistic explanation for Boko Haram's activities because most British newspaper readers were already aware of the 'Taliban' and al-Qaeda and what they represented. The phrases evoked shared memories and understanding and served as shorthand terms and codes for journalists. For journalists who were writing for readers with limited knowledge of Boko Haram, the use of those phrases enabled them to make emotional connection with their readers, set the boundaries of discourse and consequently influence public understanding of the attack. The point could be made that public understanding of Boko Haram's assault was coloured by the cultural and socio-political perspectives delineated by the press. When journalists described Boko Haram as the Taliban of Nigeria with links to al-Qaeda, they were providing a particular frame of reference for their readers and associating Nigeria with Afghanistan, Iraq and the war on terror. This link placed the activities of Boko

Haram primarily in the realm of the war on terror but paradoxically the link did not frame Nigeria as a member of the international security community but as a threat to it.

It is reasonable to understand the condensational symbols as straight-forward descriptors in the sense that Boko Haram is an Islamist sect that has been campaigning for full implementation of sharia in Nigeria; but it was too simplistic to accept the al-Qaeda connection as reality without evidence. Moreover, the group's claim of a link to al-Qaeda has been described as a 'mere slogan given the members' apparent non-comprehension of key Islamic teachings...let alone its complex sharia code' (Abubakar (2012:98) and their appropriation of the 'Taliban' label could be seen as being more aspirational than reality because there is no confirmation that it has real links with the Afghan and Pakistani sects. Against this backdrop, it is reasonable to conclude that the use of those symbolic labels suggested implicit judgement about the group. The reference to al-Qaeda and the Taliban emphasised religion as the driving force behind Boko Haram's violence. It reduced the conflict to a confrontation between Muslims and the State even though it was common knowledge that Boko Haram was not averse to attacking Muslims.

What the ethno-religious frame alludes to is problematic because it diverts attention from more critical issues. Perceptive observers of Nigeria's socio-political problems are aware that the Boko Haram phenomenon is indicative of the group's success at mobilising people who feel marginalised and alienated due to extreme poverty and deprivation that pervade the northern part of Nigeria, their regional base. Musa (2012: 115) for example, argues that 'Nigeria's economic situation had played a substantial role in the emergence of violent groups across the country since the early 1980s.' Jean Herskovits, a leading analyst of Nigerian politics, in a piece published by the *New York Times*, argued that: 'the root cause of violence and anger in both the north and south of Nigeria is endemic poverty and hopelessness' (02 January 2012). In an earlier article, Herskovits had made the point that Boko Haram was not the product of Islamist fundamentalism but the outcome of the 'country's corrupt and self-

serving government. This nuanced view of the Boko Haram and its campaign of violence contradict the discourse invoked by the use of condensational symbols in reports of its attack on the UN headquarters. The simplistic view evoked by the use of the symbols provided cues for a particular understanding of the problem primarily as an ethno-religious problem.

While Islamic fundamentalism is not peculiar to Nigeria, the coverage pointed to the 'othering of Nigeria. This was explicit in a report in the *Western Press* on 03 September 2011, which claimed that 'the rapid release from detention' of four men who were caught with explosives 'was apparently aimed at placating Muslims groups. Some of those arrested were said to be plotting to carry out attacks in the United States.' The allegation of complicity of the Nigerian government in the release of terrorists plotting to attack the United States, a country that is almost paranoid about its national security, echoed suggestions that Boko Haram's success was due to the religious conflict in Nigeria. However, Herskovits attributes the popularity of Boko Haram to 'flagrant lack of concern on the part of those who govern for the welfare of the governed.' Herskovits notes that:

Ten years of supposed democracy have yielded mounting poverty and deprivation of every kind in Nigeria. Young people, undereducated by a collapsed educational system, may 'graduate,' but only into joblessness. Lives decline, frustration grows, and angry young men are too easily persuaded to pick up readily accessible guns in protest when something sparks their rage (www.ForeignPolicy.com, 03 August, 2009)

A better understanding of the Boko Haram phenomenon calls for more contextualised reporting of its activities and a rejection of simplistic news frames that echo preconceived notions of terrorism as a distant problem.

Conclusion

Although the bombing of the UN House in Nigeria was a 'distant' event for the British newspaper readers, the event had global significance. The attack was a local manifestation of a problem that drives the global 'war on terror.' However, the newspapers, through the use of

symbolic phrases that were culturally sensitive and reflective of a Western perspective 'framed' a particular narrative for their readers and helped to shape a particular understanding of the event. The frames reinforced the view that coverage of the developing world by Western press is often triggered by crises and disasters. Boko Haram had existed for more than a decade and had engaged in spates of violence for many years without attracting international media attention but when the group attacked an international target it gained unprecedented coverage in British newspapers. The incident was deemed newsworthy even by British local newspapers because it met several news values. Although the symbolic language used to frame the news reports appear to be straight forward description, it reinforced and evoked a particular understanding of terrorism. Moreover, the symbolic labels shaped the dominant definition of the event and ruled out alternative frames. The coverage reflected discourses of violence embedded in Western perception of distant places such as Nigeria and depended on familiar news frames that magnified that understanding. The news framing of acts of violence by Boko Haram enforced the 'othering' of Nigeria because the symbols were codes that suggested that Nigeria was at risk of becoming an African Afghanistan.

Condensational symbols have strong appeal for journalists especially for the coverage of faraway events due to their capacity to simplify a complex story and provide a view of conflict that resonates with Western readers. Moreover, as Chermak and Gruenewald (2006:436) argue, the media tend to 'emphasise the dramatic, most violent, and conflictual terrorist accounts, and ignore historical, cultural, and social explanations for terrorism.' Utilising symbolic labels that located Nigeria within the Islamic world somehow made Boko Haram's atrocities comprehensible and discernible. The seemingly 'natural' labels framed a specific interpretation of the bombing, reinforced the notion of distance and underpinned the image of Nigeria as the 'other'. The coverage oversimplified and sensationalised a complex story as the use of symbolic labels obscured the complexity of the problem expressed through Boko Haram's activities. It conveyed the sense that Nigeria's insecurity was the result of innate

ethno-religious conflict. While Boko Haram clearly fits into the 'religious and evangelical political spectrum' (Farnen, 1990), its activities cannot be attributed simply to ethno-religious conflict because its victims are not only non-Muslims. The dynamics of Boko Haram's acts of terrorism go beyond religious conflict and must be understood as a reflection of a compelling sense of alienation and marginalisation and the failure of the Nigerian state.

As this study has suggested, Boko Haram represents what the Oxford Research Group conceptualises as 'revolt from the margins.' The group has been successful in mobilising support of Muslims in many parts of northern Nigeria by occupying the space left by the state. The failure of Western education, for example, to provide an escape from poverty and deprivation seems to justify the group's rejection of Western values. Consequently, it has been successful in harnessing the frustration of marginalised people to challenge the authority of the Nigerian state. Agbiboa (2014) has suggested that the most effective way to tackle the terrorist group must entail addressing the socio-economic inequalities and deprivation in the regional base of Boko Haram. The rise and success of Boko Haram in terrorising Nigeria is undoubtedly due to a variety of factors, including the weakness of the state and inefficiency of the security system. This understanding was not reflected in the reports of the group's attack on the UN building because it did not fit into the episodic frame that underpinned the British press coverage of the group. The use of stock labels limited the understanding of a multi-faceted problem and emphasised a one dimensional perspective.

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