



DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-358-366  
EDN: SDSOSR  
UDC 316.48

Research article / Научная статья

## Peace journalism practice in Nigeria: war language and blasphemy conflicts


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**Abstract.** Violent conflicts precipitated by allegations of blasphemy have resulted in loss of many lives and property in Nigeria. Worse still is the effects on peaceful coexistence among the different ethno-religious groups in the country. In all this, the media is a stakeholder, whether as a promoter of peace or exacerbator of tension and division. 306 editions of Daily Trust and The Punch newspapers were explored to ascertain how these national dailies are responding to the tenets of peace journalism enunciated by Johan Galtung, especially in their choice of words, to what extent do they specifically avoid war language in the coverage of sensitive incidents as blasphemy. Using quantitative content-analysis and framing as methodological and theoretical frameworks respectively, this study found that 71 of such (war) lexical indicators were used in covering the incidents of blasphemy investigated, with The Punch having the highest frequency (63). Out of the three war language categories coded (demonizing, victimizing, and emotive), first one is the most prevalent (90%) with individual words like ‘barbaric’ (25.3%), ‘fanatic’ (23.9%) and ‘extremist’ (18.3%) preponderating. All these are arguably a corollary of political, professional and economic factors. The research finally recommends that for blasphemy conflict with its attendant violence to be pre-empted, Nigerian journalists covering ethno-religious crises need to be conscientized on the tenets of peace journalism, whilst national cohesion and peaceful coexistence need to be prioritized by media industry over and above profiteering.

**Keywords:** newspapers, framing, military language, deontology, media education, Johan Galtung

**Author’s contribution.** *Abubakar A. Bukar* – development of the research idea, research data collection and analysis, manuscript writing and editing. *Bishir Bala* – data collection and editing. *Aisha I. Omoloso* – data collection and analysis of material. *Bella A. Bulgarova* – analysis of material.

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**Article history:** submitted October 27, 2023; revised December 1, 2023; accepted December 30, 2023.

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**For citation:** Bukar, A.A., Bala, B., Omoloso, I.A., & Bulgarova, B.A. (2024). Peace journalism practice in Nigeria: War language and blasphemy conflicts. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 29(2), 358–366. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-358-366>

## Практика мирной журналистики в Нигерии: язык войны и религиозные конфликты

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**Аннотация.** В Нигерии конфликты, спровоцированные обвинениями в богохульстве, привели к гибели многих людей и потере имущества. Еще сложнее последствия для мирного сосуществования в пределах одной страны различных этнорелигиозных групп. В подобных конфликтах важным участником являются средства массовой информации, которые выступают как сторонниками мирного решения вопросов, так и противниками. Исследование 306 выпусков газет Daily Trust и The Punch помогло выявить, как национальные ежедневные газеты реализуют принципы мирной журналистики, провозглашенные Йоханом Галтунгом, в какой степени они избегают военного языка при освещении темы богохульства и связанных с этим инцидентов. Посредством количественного контент-анализа и фрейминга в качестве методологической и теоретической основ обнаружено, что 71 из военных лексических индикаторов использовался для освещения расследованных случаев богохульства, при этом издание The Punch показало самую высокую частотность (63). Из трех закодированных категорий военного языка (демонизирующий, виктимизирующий и эмоциональный) именно первый является наиболее распространенным (90%) с преобладанием таких слов, как «варварский» (25,3%), «фанатический» (23,9%) и «экстремистский» (18,3%). Выявленная ситуация, предположительно, является следствием политических, профессиональных и экономических факторов. Заключено, что для предотвращения богохульного конфликта с сопутствующим ему насилием нигерийские журналисты, освещающие этнорелигиозные кризисы, должны быть сознательными в отношении принципов мирной журналистики, тогда как сплоченность нации и мирное сосуществование – приоритетом медиаиндустрии, а не поводом для спекуляции.

**Ключевые слова:** газеты, фрейминг, военный язык, деонтология, медиаобразование, Йохан Галтунг

**Вклад авторов.** А.А. Букар – разработка идеи исследования, сбор и анализ исследовательских данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. Б. Бала – сбор и обработка данных. И.А. Омолосо – сбор данных и анализ материала. Б.А. Булгарова – анализ материала и редактирование рукописи.

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 27 октября 2023 г.; отрецензирована 1 декабря 2023 г.; принята к публикации 30 декабря 2023 г.

**Для цитирования:** Bukar A.A., Bala B., Omoloso I.A., Bulgarova B.A. Peace journalism practice in Nigeria: War language and blasphemy conflicts // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2024. Т. 29. № 2. С. 358–366. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-358-366>

## Introduction

Nigeria is unarguably a country blessed with enormous human and natural resources but continually faces existential threats since inception (Maier, 2000). At present, almost every sub-region of the country's six geopolitical zones is embroiled in protracted, specialized form of violent conflict. In the catalogue of woes betiding the nation such as endemic corruption that cuts across all nooks and crannies, northern region is conspicuously the worst affected – with highest poverty rate, out-of-school children and perennial violent ethno-religious and political-economic conflicts. The recent rising cases of kidnappings and killing of the inhabitants in their multitude in various parts of Northwest, and the incessant clashes among communities in the Northeast, have led many citizens into concluding that Nigeria is a failed state because it has failed in responding to its most paramount responsibility: protection of lives and property.

Interspersing all these are the intermittent cases of violence precipitated by allegations over blasphemy. Besides setbacks to peaceful coexistence as a result of these blasphemy-induced conflicts, lives and property were also claimed from 1994 when a certain Igbo trader, Gideon Akaluka, was hacked to death for alleged desecration of the Qur'an; to 2002 when *Thisday's* Iseoma Daniel made irreverent characterization of Prophet Muhammad resulting ultimately to the violent reprisal that claimed many lives, down to 2016 when similar cases recurred more than ever before in Kano, Zamfara and Niger States of Northern Nigeria. The role of media in the escalation or de-escalation of such conflicts cannot be denied. "The media have important roles to play in promoting unity in diversity on both the ethnic and religious fronts through ethical journalism. Otherwise, the media can become a liability rather than an asset in the management of religious pluralism. Nigeria has experienced both possibilities" (Oloyede et al., 2015, p. 65). Among other things, media (especially the press) are often accused of using inflammatory language that endanger peace (Pate, 2012). It is on the basis of this, this research therefore explored 306 editions of *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers to ascertain how these national dailies are responding to the tenets of peace journalism in their diction while framing stories on blasphemy controversies in the country. The three cases that occurred in 2016 in Kano, Niger and Zamfara were considered and Galtung's war language indicators were used as checklists. Details of all these, below.

### Blasphemy controversies in Nigeria

Chronologically, the controversy of blasphemy in Nigeria, whether genuine, prima facie or spurious, commenced with Gideon Akaluka's case in December 1994, who was accused of desecrating the Qur'an, forced out of police custody and beheaded by mobs in Kano. This was followed by the uproar caused by Iseoma Daniel's pageantry piece in *Thisday* of 16th November, 2002.

To a lesser degree of outburst, similar incident occurred in Gombe State in March 2007 where a secondary school teacher, Christianah Oluwasesin, was killed by her students after accusing her of mistreating the Qur'an.

Then came to the fore the controversy of blasphemy within – where in May 2015, a certain cleric, Abul Nyass (of a deviant sect from Tijjaniyya Sufi order)

allegedly claimed that Ibrahim Nyass has priority over the Prophet (peace be upon him). Protesters in their multitude razed down his house in the outskirts of Kano and burnt down the Rijiyar Lemo Shariah court when they perceived 'a tactical delay' in his arraignment. He was sentenced to death with four others in absentia, but an appeal court in Kaduna recanted the judgment and acquitted the appellants. To calm down and diffuse the atmosphere of unrest, Kano State government affirmed its resolve to pursue the case in an upper court.

In 2016, three incidences of blasphemy were recorded within the space of three months. The first instance occurred on May 27th, where mobs lynched one Methodus Emmmanuel in Pandogari area of Niger State for alleged discourteous comment against the Prophet. Few days after (2nd June), Bridget Abahime, an Igbo trader in Kano Textile market, was killed on similar allegation.

Notwithstanding, blasphemy crises are understudied specie of ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria. Despite recurrence of such incidents since at least 1994, very few academic studies have been conducted by particularly media scholars to assess whether journalists' coverage of such contentious issues as blasphemy help in dousing tension and promoting peace or exacerbate tension and division. These few studies include the one by Okunna and Omenugha (2008) who investigated local newspapers coverage of the Danish cartoons crisis as it spilled over to Nigeria – the implication of this on peace and national cohesion. There was also some researches on southern/northern Nigerian press framing of *ThisDay's* Iseoma Daniel's negative characterization of prophet Muhammad in 2001 and the ensuing violent clashes. Kperogi (2013) too investigated the framing of the same incident in the editorials and opinion columns of British press. However, none of these examined the use of language by the newspapers in the coverage of such incidents to establish whether words chosen are inflammatory (emotive, demonising, and victimizing) or otherwise. Hence the relevance of this research to the body literature in the area.

Moreover, the cases examined in this research are recent in comparison to the above, namely the three that occurred in quick succession (between May and August 2016) and cause death and destruction of property as a result of violent reactions. These, to my knowledge, have not investigated by any media researcher, local or foreign.

### **Peace journalism: a review of conceptual and empirical literature**

Peace journalism is a departure from violence-as-news value orientation in journalism practice. It emphasizes on the context and background of a conflict rather than the violent scenes of 'here and now'. For example, in exploring the consequences of conflict, it goes beyond such visible effects as deaths and destruction of property to uncover invisible ones like trauma, resentment, fear and desire for revenge. In the process of doing this, propaganda and demonizing language are eschewed to allow less tensed platform for negotiation and change that will result in peace ultimately (Galtung, 2013; Hanitzsch, 2004).

Johan Galtung, a Norwegian Professor and pioneer in Peace Studies, is credited with the coinage and groundbreaking work in Peace Journalism. He observes

that much of war reporting is akin to sports journalism where the focus is on contest between two parties each struggling, principally, for victory against the other which therefore tends to exacerbate tension. This, according to him, is a low road of looking at a conflict. He consequently started deflecting attention towards what he called Peace Journalism (otherwise the high road) in the 1970s which he likens to Health Journalism that typically traces the causes of a particular disease, its effects on the body system, its cures and preventive measures. This started gaining currency among media scholars and practitioners with the turn of the 21st century (Galtung, 2013). A schema which highlights the attributes of peace and war journalism respectively was subsequently presented by Galtung in Fong (2009, p. 33): “War Journalism” uses victimising language, tells only what has been done to people, uses demonising emotive language. “Peace Journalism” avoids victimising language, reports what has been done by people and could be, how they are coping, avoids demonising emotive words.

War journalism, on the other hand, is the antithesis of peace journalism. It is naturally preoccupied with what happen in the battleground (violence, death and destruction of property with their attendant sensationalism). Constricted in time and space, war journalism reduces the parties in conflict to two entangled in tug-of-war each striving to win as the ultimate (if not the only) goal. The “grass” underneath is therefore stampeded not only by the actors but by such journalism, which quickly moves on to the next flashpoint after the victor has emerged.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted to ascertain the presence or otherwise of Galtung’s peace journalism indicators in media content using Goffman’s framing theory but none was specifically on language usage especially in the coverage of blasphemy cases in Nigeria. However, I think the nexus between peace journalism and magic bullet theory in Hanitzsch’s, 2004 essay is overstretched. From Galtung to Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick; to Howard and Tehranian (2002), I am yet to read or derive the alleged impression that media can, on its own, prevent or end conflict. But it is reasonable to surmise that it can be a facilitator for peace or war – as it was in Rwandan genocide of the 1990s.

### **Theoretical/methodological framework**

In this study, framing theory is considered relevant because it deals with how the newspapers (*Daily Trust* and *The Punch*) handled the blasphemy controversies in respect of areas of lexical emphasis, inclusion and exclusion which ultimately influences reader’s perception and judgement of issues and events in line with the intended frames (Entman, Matthes & Pellycano 2009).

Methodologically, content analysis is deemed fit because the research is concerned with the examination of documented information – how frequent and prioritized these particular units (words) are in the content and how they fit into the broad classification of war journalism indicators developed by Johan Galtung. A census, which deals with the examination of the entire population elements (Krippendorff, 2004), on incidents of blasphemy in Northern Nigeria was taken from two national dailies. Thus, all the editions of *Daily Trust* and *Punch* newspapers from 1st May to September 30th, 2016, a total of 306 editions, were considered for data collection and analysis.

The researcher used purposive sampling in selecting the period of the coverage because it is in the editions of these months that articles on the cases under investigation can be found. Hence this peculiar characteristic informed the choice of timeframe. The choice of the date (May to September, 2016) is informed by the fact that the first case of the blasphemy controversy in the year commenced with the acquittal of Abul Nyass and four others from blasphemy charges in May by Kaduna High Court of Appeal which the Kano State Government vowed to pursue in higher court till they are ‘properly’ brought to book, while the last, so far, occurred in Zamfara on the 22nd of August, but coverage and commentaries spilled into September.

### Results and discussion

A sum of 71 war language indicators were produced by both *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* within the period of investigation. Out of the three categories of war language (Table 1), demonizing lexis received the greatest attention in both *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* taking 90% (DT = 11.2%; P = 78.8%) of the total war language indicators. It is followed by emotive language usage 7.0% (DT = 0%; P = 7%), while victimizing language received the least attention in both *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* 2.8% (DT = 0%; P = 2.8%). Of the 23 words coded, ‘barbaric’ 18 (25.3%), ‘fanatic’ 17 (23.9%), ‘extremist’ 13 (18.3%), all belonging to demonizing category, received the highest frequency.

Occurrences of war lexical indicators in *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers

Categories	Words	The Punch, N %	Daily Trust, N, %	Total N, %
<b>Demonizing</b>	Barbaric	15, 23.8	3, 37.5	18, 25.3
	Cruel	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Vicious	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Brutal	4, 6.3	1, 12.5	5, 7.0
	Terrorist	6, 9.6	0, 0	6, 8.4
	Extremist	11, 17.4	2, 25	13, 18.3
	Fanatic	15, 23.8	2, 25	17, 23.9
	Fundamentalist	3, 4.8	0, 0	3, 4.2
	Tyrant	1, 1.5	0, 0	1, 1.4
	Savage	1, 1.5	0, 0	1, 1.4
	Ruthless	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Inhuman	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
<b>Victimizing</b>	Destitute	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Devastated	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Defenceless	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Demoralized	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Pathetic	2, 3.1	0, 0	2, 2.8
<b>Emotive</b>	Genocide	4, 6.3	0, 0	4, 5.6
	Assassination	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Systematic	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Tragedy	1, 1.5	0, 0	1, 1.4
	Decimated	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	Massacre	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
<b>Total</b>		<b>63, 100</b>	<b>8, 100</b>	<b>71, 100</b>

Source: compiled by Abubakar A. Bukar, 2023.

The presence or absence of war lexis in media content is one of the key determinants of a given medium's commitment to peace journalism. This research therefore gauges and compares the occurrences of war lexical indicators in both *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers.

It is generally observed that both *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* have been relatively sensitive for, arguably, the conscious eschewal of highly emotive words such as 'massacre', 'systematic', 'decimated' and to some extent 'genocide'. Instead of 'massacre' for example, 'murder' and 'killing' were repeatedly and consistently used by both newspapers. Even the frequency of 'barbaric' (which is the highest of all war lexical indicators) can be argued to be in the service of peace. For, if mob justice (arson and killing for alleged blasphemy or whatever crime) is not strongly chided by particularly the northern elite (Sultan, emirs, governors, scholars etc), it can be easily interpreted as connivance or tacit approval, hence the attendant reprisal and breakdown of peace, order and trust. Implicitly, this triggers the need to revisit this war lexis to ascertain whether it is in all contexts that these terms serve the end of violent conflicts or there are exceptions. If the use of such words as 'barbaric' in this case cast the actors as 'beyond the pale of civilized behavior' (Lynch, McGoldrick, 2005); 'make the other side seem impossible to negotiate with' (Howard, 2009) and 'to use them puts the journalist on that (other) side and help to justify an escalation of violence' (Lynch, McGoldrick, 2005), what else shall the journalist use for such action as the one described above where there seem to be unanimous agreement that it is immoral, irreligious and illegal?

Moreover, the frequent use of demonizing language in *The Punch* newspaper (see for example the editorials of June 21, and September 5, 2016 where 'extremist' and 'terrorist' were used more than a dozen time, quite evocative of anarchists in Conrad's *Secret Agent*) and the relative downplay of such language in *Daily Trust* for the same incidents can equally be interpreted as a result of economic expediency – pandering to audience's preferences.

Again, it may also be a mark of professionalism exhibited by the Trust which according to Shehu (2014) is empirically more conflict-sensitive than the rest of Nigerian newspapers he investigated. Arguably, this is noticeably lacking in *The Punch* for the preponderance of war language and war frames in comparison.

However, this is not an isolated case in war language usage and deployment of conflict-inducing frames. Besides using such words as 'brutal', 'barbaric' and 'ethnic cleansing' in an editorial titled *Rescuing Benue from murderous Fulani herdsmen*, *The Punch* of August 4, 2016, alleged that the President's taciturnity over the matter is due to the involvement of his ethnic group to whom he is paradoxically protective in the face of cattle-rustling in Zamfara. As such Benue communities should have a way of self-preservation and defence '...against the impunity and genocide of the Fulani'.

Finally, geographical factor may also be another cause of the difference in the coverage. *Daily Trust* being closer to the people and places of these conflicts obviously appreciate better the socio-economic and psychological variables at play in such incidents.

Where genuinely so, when one's object of adoration is dragged to the gutter, and the judiciary and security institutions are perceived with incapacitation for

redress, and one lacks the know-how of the religion let alone of conflict management, such violence can surely be a rule. This also draws the nexus between the invisible and visible effects of violent conflict – a crisscross of identity need and suppression of freedom both of which are precursors of direct violence.

### Conclusion

Perspectives vary as to what should ideally be the role of the media and what ethical stand a journalist should take – from the deontological which privileges ‘saying it as it is’ (or rather as the journalist sees it) irrespective of whose ox is gored, to the teleological that prioritizes weighing the consequences of one’s choice side by side public interest. This is largely the context within which peace journalism debate is premised. What is, however, undeniably important is for the journalist to be sensitive to the milieu within which he operates. Nigeria, for example, is not only a potpourri of hundreds of ethnicities but remarkable for its volatility as a result of political, economic, historical, religious and geographic dynamics.

Drawing from the findings of this study, there is the need for media organizations to invest in the training of their particularly conflict reporters in the art and science of peace journalism. This will hopefully reduce the amount of inflammatory language in the coverage of conflicts in Nigeria. There is also a need for curriculum review of higher institutions offering Mass Communication and Journalism courses. As research by Pate, Osov and Jibril (2017) vindicated, most universities offering bachelor’s degrees in Mass Communication and Journalism do not have courses in this area. This research therefore recommends a prerequisite course on conflict-sensitivity for all final year students majoring in Mass Communication and Journalism, and refresher courses for those on-the-job.

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