



AN AESTHETIC APPRAISAL OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF BOKO HARAM ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

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The International Community and other global bodies have repeatedly issued statements condemning the activities of Boko Haram, a militant organisation which emerged around 2002 as a local Islamic group. The world body has been calling on individuals and institutions, particularly the press, to help in the fight against Boko Haram. However, a typical West African country where the insurgency has as its major flashpoint is Nigeria, whose press, is accordingly used as a case study here. Given the fact that newspapers have a role to play in the fight against Boko Haram, one expects them to be creative in their coverage of the activities of the sect, if their coverage should contribute significantly towards peaceful coexistence. This is where application of aesthetic principles of violent conflict reporting, as identified in this paper, comes in. But have the newspapers been applying the aesthetic indices of violent conflict reporting identified in this paper, while contributing their quota towards the return of peace to the sub-region? An appraisal of the various stories on the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria within the last two years of the group's peak activities shows that Nigerian newspapers have been mainly informative and alarmist in their coverage of the activities of the group, and could not strike a balance with the other aesthetic indices. The paper concludes, therefore, that Nigerian newspapers are, to a great extent, mono-aesthetic in their coverage of Boko Haram activities, and needs to ensure an aesthetic equilibrium for them to create more impact in the peace process.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to existing scanty literature in newspaper aesthetics. It uses a new methodology, called aesthetic content analysis. It is one of very few studies which have investigated aesthetics in conflict reporting. The paper primarily finds out that Nigerian newspapers are mono-aesthetic in their coverage of Boko Haram activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

One issue that has continued to attract public condemnation and concern around the world and has been widely covered by the media, is the insurgency carried out in Nigeria and other West African countries. The militant group is popularly referred to as Boko Haram. The organisation, which initially presented itself as a peaceful Islamic movement, is today ranked among the world's sanguinary terrorist groups. Even though Boko Haram is usually linked with global terrorist groups in terms of ideology and logistical support, the focus of Boko Haram

activities appears to be on Nigeria. Media checks reveal that the first clear case of Boko Haram insurgency around 2002 was in Nigeria. And since then, the media, particularly newspapers, have, been following the activities of the group. However, the extent to which Nigerian newspapers have been reporting the Boko Haram activities to command the serious attention of discernible readers and thereby helping in the global fight against militancy generally, has been a cause for concern; hence the need to examine the aesthetic content of such coverage. Using select Nigerian newspapers, and guided by Zettl (2005) approach to media aesthetics, this paper presents an aesthetic appraisal of Nigerian newspaper coverage of the activities of the group.

1.1. Nigerian Media and Coverage of Boko Haram Activities

Nigeria has had a long and unfortunate history of communal conflicts and ethno-religious violence. For example, in Plateau State, there has been series of bloody violence between different communities since the return of democracy in the country in 1999. There has also been series of riots in the urban centres of Kaduna and Kano, and for several decades there has been a simmering conflict in the Tafawa Balewa district of Bauchi. The Northern Nigeria in particular had witnessed a religious conflict in 1980s known as Maitatsine crisis, which caused havoc in major cities of Northern Nigeria. Muhammed Marwa was an Islamic scholar who migrated from the town of Marwa in Northern Cameroun to the city of Kano in 1945. While in Kano he became an Islamic zealot concerned with the purification of Islam. He believed that Islam had been corrupted by modernization (Westernization). His constant preaching became very abusive and provocative, especially against established institutions like the emirate and the political class to the extent that the then Emir of Kano, Alhaji Sanusi Lamido, expelled him from Kano. Marwa found his way back to Kano in 1966, presumably after the death of Alhaji Sanusi. Between 1972 and 1979, Marwa was detained in prison several times for his provocative preaching and acts of lawlessness against the state.

However, there appears to be a lingering suspicion among Nigerians about the real identity and motive of Boko Haram sect. While some see it as an extension of Maitatsine sect which was established in 1945 to transport turmoil to Islam as it was confirmed that Maitatsine was not a Muslim until his death, others see it as an attempt to Islamize Nigeria. But body language and the utterances of the group members show that Boko Haram is pro-Islam. As an Islamic fundamental group, Boko Haram believes that northern Nigerian politics has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims, who are bent on violating the principles of Islam. It wants to wage (or is waging) a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by Sharia Laws. But when did the group actually start operations in Nigeria and the sub-region?

Various media reports confirm that on June 16, 2001 a terrorist group, believed to be Boko Haram attacked Nigeria Police Headquarters. This was believed to be the first suicide bombing in Nigerian history. The activities of Boko Haram took violent dimension in 2009 and Nigerian security forces, reportedly clashed with the group in a five day violent that resulted in death of its leader Muhammad Yusuf and many of his followers. Since 2009 therefore, Boko Haram has been driven by a desire for vengeance against politicians, police, Christians, and Islamic authorities for their role in a brutal suppression of the group that year.

Some years later, and precisely on July 28, 2009, several Nigerian dailies reported that the Nigerian Army launched an offensive attack on the sect's leader, Muhammad Yusuf's compound and a nearby mosque used by the members in Borno State capital of Maiduguri. According to the newspapers, this violence between the Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces claimed the life of 1000 people with over 700 killed in Maiduguri Borno State capital. This crisis later spread to Kano, Yobe and Jigawa States. In Maiduguri, 100 bodies were reportedly found beside police headquarters. Thousands of people fled their homes in order to escape the violence, while several civilian corpses littered the city's streets. This violence led to the killing of the sect leader Muhammad Yusuf while in police custody, which brought to the end of a five-day uprising.

Consequently, since the 2009 uprising, the activities of the group appeared to be dissipated, but they later regrouped and re-emerged in 2010 under the new leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Media] reports also have it that

since the rise of the new leadership, the attacks escalated in terms of frequency and intensity. According to the VOA Hausa, the group carried out one of its first attacks when it orchestrated a large prison break in September 2010 in Bauchi which led to the escape of more than 700 inmates including its members. In August 2011, a suicide bomber attacked United Nations headquarters in Abuja, where many people were killed and more than 60 were injured.

It is also on media record that on January 2012, the sect coordinated and carried out series of fatal bombings in Kano, the largest commercial city in northern Nigeria. The attacks resulted in the death of more than 180 people including a large number of security operatives and civilians. This again was believed to be among the highest deaths in a single day since the group began its full scale violent campaign in 2009, according to Human Rights Watch. However, the activities and attacks from the group escalated in 2013. As a result, the Federal Government of Nigeria declared a State of Emergency in three most affected states of the region in May of that year, extending the existing ones that had been declared in some parts of Borno and Yobe in late 2011.

What appears to be one of the most widely reported activities of the sect and the turning point of the group's inhuman act in Nigeria and in fact in West Africa happened on April 14, 2014. Perhaps, there is no radio station, no television, and no newspaper that did not give a blow by blow account of the historic and inhuman abduction of young innocent school girls and thus punctuating and puncturing their educational pursuits. On that fateful day, Boko Haram abducted more than 250 female students from Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, in Borno State. Following this, the United Nations Security Council blacklisted the group, precisely on May 22, 2014. Furthermore, many Nigerian newspapers reported that the kidnapped school girls by Boko Haram insurgents have been used as suicide bombers. This came after series of female suicide bombings in the ancient city of Kano during and after a Sallah Festival had been reported. A 10-year-old girl wearing an explosive device was also reportedly caught in Katsina State in North-Western Nigeria.

It was also reported in many Nigerian newspapers that the group carried out a deadly attack on Kano Central Mosque in November 2014. The members of the group set off three suicide bombs and fired the worshippers, killed more than 100 people and injured more than 200. In a related issue, Boko Haram carried out a deadliest massacre in the town of Baga in Borno State in which more than 2000 people were killed. Nigerian Military reportedly recaptured Gwoza, a historic town in Borno State on March 27, 2015. Gwoza had been previously captured by Boko Haram in August 2014 and was declared an Islamic headquarters by the group whose leader Abubakar Shekau called Islamic Caliphate. The Sambisa forest where the insurgents' main camps, until recently, were located and where the kidnapped Chibok girls were reportedly first taken to is also located in Gwoza Local Government Area. The media, particularly the newspapers, keep on feeding Nigerians and in fact the entire world, with reports of Boko Haram's deadly activities.

1.2. Nigerian Newspapers, Ethical and Aesthetic Issues

It may be difficult to mention the exact number of newspaper titles in Nigeria. This is because of the fluctuating nature of the business. While some of the newspapers may be intermittently closing shop for economic and political reasons, new entrants keep testing their strengths in the industry. Therefore, even if the number of newspapers in Nigeria were to be determined through registration, it would still be difficult to get the exact number because registration does not mean staying in business. Although Udoakah (2014) puts the total number of local newspapers in the country at "310", this number appears contestable because not all the titles listed by him are still alive. However, it is estimated that there are at least 100 legitimate local and national newspapers in Nigeria.

Nigerian journalism is not well noted for integrity and ethics, and by extension, aesthetics. Many Nigerian newspapers have been criticized for being incapable of upholding ethical and professional standards and for being highly political, (Udoakah, 2014; Udoh, 2014). According to Udoh (2014) some typical local Nigerian newspapers are in danger of becoming a little more than scandal sheets, relying at times, on screaming headlines and hackneyed stories to promote sales. Udoh further observes that some highly politicised newspapers in Nigeria present reports

that are inaccurate, or even untrue. Again, it is observed that some editors in the country, especially the new generation editors, take bribes (brown envelopes) and allow their newspapers to be used for political mudslinging, or for the settling of personal scores, hence rampant abuse freedom of the press (Udoakah, 2014). Also, many newspapers in Nigeria are run by non-professionals – persons with no formal training in the art and aesthetics of news writing and reporting. Accordingly, Udoh (2014) describes Nigerian news industry as an industry now invaded by “mostly un-aesthetic personnel” who ordinarily should have no business with writing for the masses. To him, cases abound where some local newspapers in the country write in poor grammar, thus undermining the traditional educational role of the media. Udoh sees grammar as one aesthetic index in news writing and reporting which should not be ignored. Udoh further observes that the country’s political and business climate makes it easy for anybody who lacks what to do in his original field of study or endeavour to become a newspaper publisher and editor overnight and occupy the front row at government organised press conferences at the expense of those who actually studied journalism or mass communication.

In other areas of aesthetics, Nigerian newspapers have been criticized for their inability to adhere to certain identified principles. Even though some of them, according to Anim (2003) go to great lengths to ensure readability of the news and other contents that they carry, Udoh (2010) in his doctoral study of aesthetics as a factor in newspaper selection among academics in South-South Nigeria, says “a flip through the pages of many Nigerian newspapers know little or nothing about aesthetics”. Borrowing significantly from Zettl (2005) approach to media aesthetics, Udoh observes that most of Nigerian newspaper pages are lacking in unity, balance, contrast, dynamics, and many other elements of modern print media aesthetics.

The situation appears similar in other African countries. M’Bayo *et al.* (2000) indict African journalists for a number of unprofessional conducts. They list these misconducts to include: serious disregard for truth and fairness and unnecessary sensationalism; using the press to pursue personal vendettas (including editorializing in news reports); seeking favours, gifts and other kinds of gratification in order to publish, or stop the publication, of a story; and taking sides, or appearing to do so, with various competing interest groups. And in Sierra Leone, journalism is not noted for its integrity. The country’s reporters have been criticized for being unprofessional and incapable of upholding ethical and by extension aesthetic standards (Gutierrez, 2012) and for being highly partisan (Kerr and Lincoln, 2008).

1.3. Zettl’s Media Aesthetics Paradigm and Aesthetic Literature Review

Zettl (2005) illustrates the universality of the concept and application of aesthetics when he notes that the activities such as deciding what to wear, or cleaning up one’s room so that things are put where they belong, choosing what flowers to put on a dinner table; or even judging the speed of one’s car relative to that of others while driving, are basic perceptual and aesthetic activities. Zettl then compares these to media production, particularly television production, which he says should follow certain aesthetic elements or principles for such productions to produce a feeling of satisfaction in the minds of the audience, or as Akpan (1987) puts it, command the serious attention of the audience. According to Zettl, these elements are light, sound, motion and colour. To Zettl, for a television film producer to give pleasure and satisfaction to his viewers, he must manipulate these and other production (aesthetic) elements in such a way that the audience feels what the producer feels, thus becoming active partakers in the production exercise. Zettl selects these elements based on how he feels about their relevance to television production. As a follow up to Zettl’s aesthetic notion and application, scholars and media researchers have, depending on areas of interest, identify different aesthetic elements in different media productions and contents. This therefore justifies the present aesthetic appraisal of newspaper coverage of activities of Boko Haram, particularly in Nigeria.

Before now, not enough may have been done in the area of print media aesthetics generally and newspaper aesthetics in particular. But today, there some literatures in media aesthetics, generally and print media aesthetics in

particular. In contemporary broadcasting aesthetics for instance, Zettl (2005; 2009); Akpan and Etuk (1990) and Nkana (2003) have demonstrated the applicability of aesthetics. In advertising aesthetics, there are relevant works such as Akpan (1996) and Ani (2008) and for aesthetics in public relations, one can readily see the work of Akpan (2011). For aesthetics in organizational communication, there is Ikpe (1990) and Ikpe (2003) while for aesthetics in traditional media or trado-modern communication, there is Wilson (1996); Wilson (2015). There are many other literatures in these mass media areas.

Unlike yesteryear, some contemporary writers have come up to prove that aesthetic studies can be fruitful in print media studies. They are: Udoh (2010); Udoh (2012); Udoh (2014); Udoh (2015); Udoh and Obot (2013); Udoakah (1996); Udoakah and Oliseh (2009); Batta (2008); Frost (2012) and Anim (2003). Again, with these and other literatures not listed here, media aesthetics has since left the confines of broadcast media and is now applied in other media studies. So, while Zettl concentrates his aesthetic scholarship on broadcast media (particularly the television), identifying various aesthetic elements for television programme production, this paper, in that strength, takes aesthetics beyond broadcast to print media production.

But how does this apply? According to Udoh (2014) newspaper publisher (manager, director, managing director, editor-in-chief) who, in the course of managing his newspaper, considers how to harness resources by putting right facilities and proper men in their right and proper places for optimal performance, is more or less engaged in an aesthetic activity. To him, the same thing happens when a reporter gathers and assembles his report for publication - he needs to put things in their proper perspectives if he must command the serious attention of his audience.

1.4. Aesthetics in Violent Conflict Reporting?

In media aesthetics generally, and newspaper aesthetics in particular, it sounds rather absurd to discuss the concept of aesthetics alongside an issue as disgusting as violence or conflict or both. This is because when newspaper aesthetics, in particular, is mentioned, what may naturally come to mind is how various page design elements are combined to give a newspaper page that beautiful and attractive look. But what concerns beauty with conflict or violence? The two, to an ordinary mind, are like day and night, having nothing to do together. For instance, an aesthetic feeling is a feeling of pleasure, peace, enjoyment and satisfaction, Akpan and Etuk (1990). This means, while aesthetics has a lot to do with what is beautiful, peaceful, and attractive; or rather, what appeals to, or is pleasant to man's senses; violence or conflict or violent feeling, on the other hand, has very much to do with disorder, fight, hatred, killing, and ugliness and so on. However, the two strange bedfellows are reconcilable. There is always beauty in ugliness. This is what makes this paper unique.

Perhaps, this example will explain it better: If an artist decides to paint a picture of an extremely ugly face, such an artist will not do well if he has to produce a face that is more beautiful than the original face. Rather, he has to be aesthetic by ensuring that he brings out the ugliness of the face in such a way that anybody who comes across the painting would fully appreciate the artness in the art. To a person with an aesthetic frame of mind, the "ugly picture" or the ugliness fully brought out is aesthetic. This is because the realities or essentials of the person being painted have been brought out in such a way that the viewer or beholder does not admire the piece of painting; he also enjoys and feels satisfied with it. The same experience can be expressed while reporting or covering a violent conflict situation like the Boko Haram up to a point of inviting lasting peace between the warring parties.

So, then is aesthetic conflict journalism and how can a newspaper report a violent conflict situation to the satisfaction of readers and by so doing ensure peace? What is really the aesthetics of violent conflict reporting or coverage? In the context of this paper, the aesthetics of violence or violent conflict reporting has to do with those reportorial elements (sentence, word, expression, and graphic) that can be manipulated to enhance more understanding or appreciation of a violent conflict story to a point of contributing to a speedy end of such conflict. In this context, it is any word of visual (photograph, illustration, diagram) employed by newspapers to help bring

out the *conflictiness* of the conflict and by so doing contribute to a speedy end to the Boko Haram conflict. It is that newspaper news or feature story, graphics, illustration, sentence, clause, phrase, punctuation mark that work together to seek an end to the killing of innocent people in Nigeria, southern Cameroun, Chad and the rest of the Boko Haram infested and invaded countries of the world. It is that newspaper story that is critical of the activities of the Boko Haram sect; that story that preaches peace, that story that suggests solution to the cold blood bombing of worship centres; that fearless in-depth story matched with graphics that unearths the activities of Boko Haram members and their sponsors. Aesthetic conflict reporting is similar to Peace Journalism, and Peace Journalism, according to Jayakamar (2014) is when editors and reporters make choices that improve the prospects for peace. These choices, including how to frame stories and carefully choosing which words are used, create an atmosphere conducive to peace and supportive of peace initiatives and peacemakers, without compromising the basic principles of good journalism.

Aesthetics is an adaptive concept (Johnson, 2004). While explaining the adaptability of aesthetic principles or elements, Johnson (2004) explains that every subject matter, discipline or mass medium has certain aesthetic elements that could be identified and manipulated and explained by those steeped in those subject areas or disciplines. What Johnson means is that as long as it can be explained, the nature of the subject matter determines its aesthetic indices. This view therefore gives credence to the present identification of aesthetic indices that could make for a more pleasurable assimilation of newspaper reports on conflicts, and the Boko Haram activities in the West African sub-region. More so, having earlier explained and demonstrated the universality of aesthetics (Zettl, 2005) and the application of aesthetics to the print media and its various forms, it becomes necessary to explain the adaptability and application of aesthetics in reporting of conflict or violent activities, particularly in newspaper reporting. As observed by Udoh (2014) application of aesthetic principles in print media news reporting becomes important because unlike broadcast, print media news is permanent in form. In other words, news reports in hardcopy newspapers can be easily referred to at any time. By extension, whatever word used in print media news can either be instantly or permanently interpreted in different ways by readers or can create lasting impact on the same audience. This position therefore makes it expedient to look at certain elements that can make newspaper violent reporting more enjoyable (aesthetic); hence the need to examine aesthetic indices for violent conflict reporting or coverage.

1.5. Aesthetic Indices for Violent Conflict Reporting

Having explained the adaptability of the aesthetic concept, this paper now identifies certain aesthetic indices, which, if well manipulated in newspaper violent conflict reporting, may not only bring satisfaction to the reader, but could be a part of the “agenda for peace”. It must be pointed out that Boko Haram coverage or report is a conflict report; hence the need to identify those indices that could make such a report more peace-seeking and in this context, aesthetic. These indices, by the design of this paper, all end with the suffix, *ness*. This is to emphasize the state, condition or quality of the indices. They are: informativeness, criticalness, depthness, visualness, peaceableness, ethicalness, moodiness, and hopefulness.

1.6. Informativeness

This is the ability of a newspaper to present a blow by blow account of a violent conflict or war. It has to do with the ability of a newspaper to give direct publicity or straight report on the unfolding in the (Boko Haram) battlefield. This index comes against the backdrop that it is not every item in the newspaper that can convey information that is capable of changing attitude, except such items contain certain words or expressions. The following constitute some of the words or expressions that convey journalism information: new, ongoing, recently, currently, now, happening live, yesterday, tomorrow.

1.7. Criticalness

One of the objectives of any newspaper report is that of criticism - constructively commenting on or criticizing what should be criticized, probing what should be probed and condemning what is condemnable. This can come by ways of personal or group opinions published as articles. By so doing, the newspaper sets an agenda for public discourse. This objective becomes more relevant and useful when it comes to reporting violent conflict. It is, therefore, expected that in covering the Boko Haram deadly activities, the media, particularly newspapers, should consistently criticize, reject, probe and condemn the activities of the group. Examples of critical coverage of conflicts include reports that explain the short and long term effects of the Boko Haram crisis, reports daring or challenging the perpetrators, reports that explain the position of the scripture or religion on the conflict, reports giving analyses of the issues in contention, and reports that openly blame any defaulting parties. Words or expressions of criticalness, which can be expressed mostly in news or feature headlines include: this is suicidal, inhuman, uncalled for, and condemnable, culprits must be punished, and no rest for the wicked, as well as wicked act.

1.8. Depthness

Unlike most traditional stories that deal with ordinary developments in the society, conflict stories are often full of trauma, shock, pains and general complexities, meaning it should be treated with more care and depth. Depthness demands that for a conflict report to be satisfactory, it ought to be a product of constant or repeated investigation or research into the background or root cause and effect of the conflict. Thus, such reports must foresee the basic questions that would be asked by readers and as such should contain answers to these questions. Such questions border on solutions, i.e., ways of stopping or minimizing the impact of the violence. Often, such answers are arrived at through consistent investigative features.

1.9. Visualness

This is otherwise referred to as picturesque. It essentially has to do with using photographs to tell or complement a story and is very important in conflict reporting. For a newspaper conflict story to command the serious attention of the reader, and invite peace, such a story should be accompanied with a current photograph or such other graphics that do not so much lean themselves towards war memories. In this case, the issue of recycling a particular war photograph for years may not only be boring to the reader but is capable of worsening the situation. So, visualness in this context, means using a news photograph that is not only attractive and peaceable, but is as fresh as the textual news story accompanying that it complements.

1.10. Peaceableness

Peaceableness, requires a newspaper report to be presented in a language that encourages togetherness instead of provoking concerned parties and inviting disunity. This means conflict reports should play down inflammatory words, words of division, and words of war, such as strangulate, demolish, cut into pieces, killed in broad day light, blood bath, hacked to death, and burnt to ashes. Rather than stress these war words, reports meant for human interest and the much needed peace should emphasize these peace and peace-related words: olive branch, mitigation, palliatives, settlement, roundtable, roadmap to peace, forgiveness, peace deal/accord, ceasefire, regrets, apology, repentance, surrender, denouncing, and so on.

1.11. Ethicalness

Aesthetics and ethics are like Siamese twins in journalism practice. But they are not altogether the same. While aesthetics stresses the beauty of a work of art; ethics emphasizes morality. Morality in news coverage requires the reporter write in God's terms. It requires him to remember God's standards. For instance it is unethical to report

falsehood, so truthfulness is an important element of conflict reporting. It is also unethical to display indecent and provoking pictures in the name of news. Ethics also requires the reporter to protect child and women right rights during violent situations. Ethical considerations in journalism generally demand that whatever is presented to the audience should be done according to God's approved standards. So, frequent use of words like sinfulness, righteousness, God's judgement, fact, truth, decency, child right, women's right, sacredness, tranquillity constitute a yardstick for determining ethicalness as an aesthetic index.

1.12. Moodiness

This is otherwise called, empathy. As an aesthetic index of conflict reporting, moodiness requires a conflict report to contain elements or words that express the sorrowful feeling of the reporter, which should in turn arouse the empathy of the reader. Since conflict reporting is associated with sorrow, wailing, pity, and trauma, a report on conflict should be full of words that command or conjure sorrow, pity, and trauma particularly expressed or experienced by victims of violence. With such words, a feeling of empathy is spontaneously created in the mind of the reader and this is aesthetic. Words of moodiness which have aesthetic impact include: sorrow, teeth gnashing, weeping and wailing, tears flow, hunger in the land, flag flown at half mast, and dusk to dawn curfew. They conjure mood and make the reader involved in or feel what is happening.

1.13. Hopefulness

Hopefulness, also identified as solution index of conflict or violence reporting requires a newspaper report to give its reader some hope – hope for better days. Such reports and articles suggest solutions to problems. This can be done by publishing as much information as possible not only about when the violence is expected to end, but also about the sponsors or perpetrators of the crisis or violence, how they could be tracked down, where they are staying, their networks, how improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are manufactured, who manufactures them, and so on. It should also emphasize the positive responses of the conflict perpetrators to government overtures, their demands, their grievances, and their ultimatums. These are details that may help in fast tracking the peace process, thus giving hope to the victims and reducing fear and tension. Words or expressions of hope and great expectations, may be incorporated into headlines include: Better days are coming for residents of Boko Haram areas; Boko Haram: end in sight, Hope rises for Chibok Girls, Chibok parents to smile soon, and Boko Haram sponsors, kingpin arrested.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored on conflict, media and aesthetic theories. Conflict theory addresses the reaction of individuals, groups, cultures, institutions, and societies to changes. The main argument of structural conflict theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured and organized. The theory looks at the social problems such as political and economic exclusions, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, and inequity as sources of conflict (Ademola, 2006). The emphasis of structural conflict theory is, thus, on how the social, economic, and political organisation of society as well as the nature and strength of social networks within and between groups. Accordingly, conflict reporting in newspapers is always tied to economic and political problems ranging from injustice, exploitation, and inequity, especially in developing countries. The theory also finds similarity with systematic theory. Systematic theory provides a socio-structural explanation for the emergence of violent social conflict. The position of this theory is that a reason for any social conflict lies in the social context within which it occurs. Conflict arises when the social, cultural, and economic systems like cherished values and tradition break down. It must be pointed out that the socio-cultural and economic systems in some West African countries have resulted to various violent conflicts including the Boko Haram conflict.

Conflict reporting in newspapers is also contingent upon the agenda-setting postulations. The mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time. McQuail (2005) observes that the core idea of the theory is that news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are. The elements involved in agenda-setting, according to Folarin (2002) are: the frequency in reporting, the prominence given to a particular report, and the degree of conflict generated in the reports. Thus, it may not be a surprise for the masses to be following developments in the Boko Haram world because of how newspapers set agenda on it and in the process make it important. Hedonism theory of aesthetics also has relevance to this discourse. Taken from the Greek word, hedonic, which means "pleasure", the theory holds that a beautiful thing is that "thing" which gives a unique kind of pleasure or interest or satisfaction. The hedonistic theory has both ethical and psychological counterparts. While discussing ethical hedonism, Akpan and Etuk (1990) state that "what makes an action or piece of conduct beautiful is that it brings pleasure to or nothing more." They also hold the view that: "in psychological hedonism, men always do those actions which have pleasant consequences". From these, it can be deduced that the pleasure theory of aesthetics or aesthetical hedonism explains that the immediate pleasure derived from perceiving any object determines the aesthetic value of that object, while the amount of pains or unpleasantness on the other hand indicates negative values. Arising from the above, a well written news report gives a unique experience, which can well be called pleasure or satisfaction. Newspaper enthusiast cannot, for instance, negotiate pleasure or satisfaction in reading an aesthetically written news story.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is, traditionally, a content analysis of newspaper coverage of Boko Haram activities. But in the context of this paper, it is an aesthetic appraisal of newspaper reports (textual and graphic) on the activities of the sect. Three Nigerian newspapers, *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, and *The Nation*, were selected for the appraisal. They were selected because of their background, philosophy, consistency and popularity in Nigeria and in fact the West African sub-region. Above all, they were selected because many other Nigerian newspapers observably follow their pattern of reportage, thus making it possible to generalize the result of findings.

As a part of its profile, *The Guardian* newspaper of Nigeria was established in 1983 by Alex Ibru, an entrepreneur, and Stanley Macebuh, who was with the *Daily Times* newspapers. *The Guardian* was the pioneer in introducing high-quality journalism to Nigeria with thoughtful editorial contents. The paper was first published on February 22, 1983 as a weekly, appearing on Sundays. It started daily publication on July 4, 1983. In the early 1980s *The Guardian* had a long-running campaign against the use of traditional chieftaincy titles, calling for Nigerians to be addressed simply as "Mr" or "Mrs".

The Punch newspaper was founded by two friends, James Aboderin, an accountant, and Sam Amuka, a columnist and editor at the *Daily Times*. Sam Amuka became the first editor of the *Sunday Punch*. In November 1976, a few years after the first print of its Sunday edition, the duo started printing their trademark daily newspaper. Both editions were designed to favour a friendlier apolitical approach to news reporting, combining footages of social events with everyday political news. The paper sustains itself by delving into broad issues that interest myriad people and is truly a daily newspaper.

The Nation is a daily newspaper published in Lagos. According to a 2009 survey, it was the second most read newspaper in Nigeria. It appears so till date especially prior to 2015, when it was mainly seen as an opposition newspaper, uncompromisingly reporting the ruling party's attitude towards growing militancy.

This paper looks at how the select newspapers covered the activities of the group between 2014 and 2016 - a period of high Boko Haram activities especially in Nigeria. It was within this period that more than 250 school girls were abducted and kept in captivity for more than two years by Boko Haram members. The aesthetic content analysis method adopted in this paper borrows significantly from Zettl (2005) media aesthetic concept and application. A total of 167 textual and photographic stories on the activities of Boko Haram spread across the three

newspapers for the period 2014 -2016, were carefully identified and appraised against the eight aesthetic indices identified in this paper. For the textual appraisal, the paper looked at word, phrases and sentence structures of the stories to find out their levels of informativeness, criticalness, depthness, peaceableness, ethicalness, moodiness, and hopefulness. For the visual or non-textual appraisal, the paper looks at the freshness and currency of the accompanying photographs and their ability to communicate the required meaning. A five-point scoring system of very good (5), good (4), fair (3) poor (2), and very poor (1), was used to determine the newspapers' aesthetic performances. This took care of the aesthetic indices namely: informativeness, criticalness, depthness, visualness, peaceableness, ethicalness, moodiness, and hopefulness. For instance, if a story contained words that primarily convey information, or is written just to give information to the public, such a story was graded 5. In other words, if a story was very informative, not very informative, fairly informative, poorly informative, or very poorly informative about the activities of Boko Haram, such a story was graded 5,4,3,2, and 1. Similarly, if a story was very critical, not very critical, fairly critical, poorly critical, or very poorly critical of the activities of Boko Haram, such a story was graded 5,4,3,2, and 1. The same grading method was adopted in all other six aesthetic indices.

3.1. Presentation of Data

(a) Textual Data

The following table hereunder is the summary of Aesthetic Appraisal of textual stories in the select newspapers between 2014 and 2016 period of coverage of Boko Haram Activities in Nigeria. According to the table, 50 stories were appraised from *The Guardian* newspaper, 57 from *The Punch*, and 60 were taken from *The Nation* newspaper. The degrees to which newspaper reports on the activities of Boko Haram adhere to each of the eight aesthetic indices are graded with the numbers 1 – 5.

Select Newspapers	No. of Stories	Aesthetic Indices and Scores							
		Informativeness	Criticalness	Depthness	Visualness	Peaceableness	Ethicalness	Moodiness	Hopefulness
The Guardian	50	5	1	1	1	2	3	1	2
The Punch	57	5	2	1	1	2	3	2	1
The Nation	60	5	3	3	1	1	3	1	1

While *The Guardian* scored 5 points in informativeness index of conflict story reporting, and 1 point in criticalness, 1 point in depth, 1 in visualness, 2 in peaceableness, 3 in ethicalness, 1 in moodiness, and 2 in hopefulness indices of conflict reporting.

The Punch newspaper scored 5 points in story informativeness, 2 points in criticalness, 1 point in depthness, 1 point in visualness, 2 points in peaceableness, 3 points in ethicalness, 2 points in moodiness, and 1 point in hopefulness. *The Nation* scored 5 points in informativeness, 3 in criticalness, 1 in depthness, 1 in visualness, 1 in peaceableness, while scoring 3 in ethicalness, and 1 in moodiness and hopefulness respectively.

(b) Visual Data Presentation



Visual A – Unidentified gunman



Visual B – Across section of the abducted Chibok girls



Visual C – Unidentified gunmen



Visual D – Unidentified gunmen



Visual E – Unidentified gunmen



Visual F: Some of the Chibok girls released in October 2016.



Visual G: Some of the released Chibok School girls at a meeting in Abuja.



Visual H: Vice-President of Nigeria, Yemi Osinbajo (left), receiving one of the released Chibok School girls in Abuja on October 13, 2016.

For the visual analysis, the photographs are labeled: A - H. Going back to the table presented above, each of the three newspapers scored just one point in visuals. A reason for the low score is that throughout the period under review, each of the select newspapers was recycling between A, B, C, D, and E in many of their issues. Because they probably lacked current photographs on Boko Haram activities, they just repeated them even when those photographs were no longer relevant. Whereas what readers need more is the current photographic situation of the victims, these photographs, for any reason, have, for the period under review, been repeated in most of the editions of the three newspapers and even other major newspapers in Nigeria. This repetition therefore makes the photographs un-aesthetic as they, to a great extent, violate the currency and freshness rule of visuals. For instance, Visual B, which is the most recycled Boko Haram-related photograph among Nigerian newspapers, and is said to represent the more than 250 abducted school girls, is not only doubtful about the actual identities of the girls as it is never accompanied with cutline. Regrettably, many of the repeated photographs are photographs of unidentified armed men. As consistently repeated war photographs, they are capable of provoking the parties and as such aids in worsening the situation. However, the last three photographs, published by the same newspapers during the release of 21 of the Chibok girls, to a great extent, contain elements of visualness as an aesthetic index. They possess elements of currency and freshness, showing the exact situation of the girls. The photographs were published by the newspapers within the period that the 21 girls were released by the group. This is why the mood of the girls could be seen on their faces. The same mood is observed on the faces of the sympathizers, including the Vice President of the country, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo. Moodiness, it would be recalled, is an aesthetic index in violent conflict reporting. This is aesthetic.

3.2. Discussing Nigerian Newspapers' Mono-Aesthetic Nature/ their War Journalism Slant

Radio is by far the most popular means of receiving news and entertainment; more so as it appears more audience-friendly than other media organs. Of course, news on the escapades of terrorists around the world is often transmitted on radio more readily than newspaper pages, and more people, observably, have more access to radio than to newspaper. This makes it seemingly perverse to choose newspapers to appraise the aesthetics of reports on Boko Haram activities. But this appears not to be a strong argument. The problems associated with obtaining sufficient recordings of the radio news, and then transcribing them for coding meant that newspaper appraisal was a far more realistic option for this paper. Already, it was more convenient to get newspaper cuttings and/or printouts for the appraisal.

As earlier explained, this paper's methodology is a content analysis of newspaper reports of the last two years of peak Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria (between 2014 and 2016). The main aim is to appraise the aesthetic worth of the stories presented on the activities of the dare-devil organisation. There are several reasons why the period (2014 - 2016) is apt and unique. First, this period covers the era of weeping and wailing among Nigerian parents, especially mothers daughters numbering over 250, schooling in a secondary school in a community called Chibok, in the northern part of the country, were abducted by Boko Haram extremists. The period is significant because this is a period of general mourning for Nigerians – a period when Nigerian women and human rights groups periodically took to the street to demonstrate against the continued primitive incarceration of their innocent children in an unknown location.

As aptly shown in the summary table, the select newspapers are, to a great extent, mono aesthetic in their coverage of the activities of Boko Haram. In all the results and findings that ensued, three common elements that have a direct relationship with one of the aesthetic indices identified in this paper, informativeness, were found. Those elements, as also corroborated by [Jayakamar \(2014\)](#) are: propaganda, us-versus-them, and a conspicuous absence of peace efforts – three factors that feed into the very quintessence of war journalism.

In other words, there is a slant in the way the newspapers apply the identified aesthetic indices in their coverage of Boko Haram activities. The slant is in favour of one of the aesthetic indices – informativeness, meaning

that the newspapers largely report the Boko Haram war without adequately discussing the war. Each newspaper scores five points in informativeness, meaning that all the three tabloids mainly presented their Boko Haram stories in an alarmist, war-like, reportorial and straight news format, thus to a great extent, ignoring the other seven aesthetic indices. A look at the wordings of the individual stories (as even reflected on the headlines), shows that the stories mainly give information about what the government has done defensively and what the Boko Haram members are doing offensively, and vice versa. A further look shows that the newspapers, to a great extent, are interested in reporting the latest tactics used by the insurgents, their booties, and the number of casualties, their strong and weak points, their operational base, government's defensive strategies, and statements by both parties and so on. In fact the reportorial slant or the mono aesthetic nature of the stories could be understood in the following 21 major headlines that introduced some of the stories:

1. Boko Haram: Abduction, bombs kill ceasefire hopes (*The Guardian*, October 24, 2014)
2. Chibok Girls: Anxiety over Fed Govt, Boko Haram deal (*The Guardian*, October 20, 2014)
3. 27 Boko Haram hostages freed in Cameroun (*The Guardian*, October 11, 2014)
4. Boko Haram Slaughter Wives in NE Nigeria, Witnesses (*The Guardian*, March 19, 2015)
5. Boko Haram Launches Overnight Attack on Chad (*The Guardian*, February 13, 2015)

As already suggested in the headlines, the stories, which are mainly presented in news forms are significantly lacking in criticalness, depthness, peaceableness, ethicalness, as well as moodiness and hopefulness. Of course, news is mainly for information. None of the newspapers scored above average in the other seven aesthetic indices.

The newspapers also perform poorly in visualness, which as an aesthetic index, says, among other things, that a violent conflict visual (photograph) should communicate the current state of the objects depicted by such a visual. In relation to Boko Haram visuals, it means that the visuals should be fresh, current or updated and not recycled photographs. It must be pointed out that there is nothing physically wrong with photographs generally and the select photographs on Boko Haram activities commonly used either independently or with textual reports by Nigerian newspapers as shown in the analysis table. As news photographs, each of them contains what [Udoh \(2015\)](#) describes as the physical aesthetic indices such as sharpness, clearness, moodiness and contrast. However, what is un-aesthetic about them is that a majority of them have been over-recycled by the newspapers. A recycled photograph is boring and what is boring, according to [Udoh \(2015\)](#) is not aesthetic. While, many of the issues of the newspapers appraised repeat at least one of the first five photographs; there is hardly any newspaper in Nigeria that is interested in the activities of Boko Haram activities which does not use these five photographs repeatedly, sometimes as fillers. This is a violation of a principle of visualness, which is freshness.

Again, according to [Udoh \(2015\)](#) a news photograph, among other things, loses its aesthetic value if it is used in the same shape for too many times. Therefore, the visuals (A - E) as repeatedly carried as news photographs by Nigerian newspapers, violate this aesthetic rule. Again, Visual B, which is said to represent the more than 250 abducted school girls was not only commonly used whenever a story has to do with the abducted girls, the photograph is also not specific about the actual identities of the girls as it does not usually have a caption. Captions give more meaning to a photograph. When a news report (photograph) leaves any doubt in the mind of the audience, such news was not well presented ([Udoh, 2014](#)).

3.3. Newspaper Information Role, Aesthetic Equilibrium and Agenda for Peace

There is no doubt about the inevitability of the information role of the media. This role becomes even more important in any violent conflict situation. A reason for this is that all parties to a conflict need information in order to know how to cope with any conflict. Consequently, information is needed by all parties affected by the Boko Haram and related insurgencies especially in the West African sub-region. For instance, Boko Haram masters and their disciples need sufficient information about what government and the entire world are doing to about their activities (bombings, abduction, kidnapping, arson etc). On the other hand, government and philanthropists need

enough information so as to know where and how to protect the people and provide palliatives. All this information comes primarily from the mass media, especially the newspaper.

But the question is: is information all that the people need from the media during a violent conflict situation such as the Boko Haram conflict? The answer to this question is NO! Some researchers and scholars are also of this opinion about ensuring aesthetic equilibrium while reporting conflict generally and violent conflict specifically. [Eti \(2009\)](#) in his study of objectivity and balance in conflict reporting, has a relevance to this paper. Eti believes that reportorial balance should be the hallmark of journalism generally and conflict reporting specifically. On his part, [Onu \(2009\)](#) highlights methods of conflict resolution. He argues that dialogue and negotiation should be the centre of conflict resolution. [Umar \(2002\)](#) worked on reporting conflict in the media where he looks at editorial dimension as crucial in reporting conflict. He believes that a medium's in-depth or critical editorial opinion not only reflects the policy of the medium, but is important in shaping people's views about issues like conflict. In his own opinion, [Owens-Ibie \(2002\)](#) says "conflict is the bread and butter of journalism and that conflict sells journalism noting further that the aims of conflict reporting are not only to create awareness, but to generate adequate ideas on how to resolve the conflict. And, in writing on the topic Peace Journalism and Boko Haram, [Jayakamar \(2014\)](#) views peace journalism as a situation when editors and reporters make choices that improve the prospects for peace. These choices, including how to frame stories and carefully choosing which words are used, create an atmosphere conducive to peace and supportive of peace initiatives and peacemakers, without compromising the basic principles of good journalism. He maintains that Peace Journalism gives peacemakers a voice while making peace initiatives and non-violent solutions more visible and viable.

All these views point to the fact that people do not only need information to cope with a conflict; they also need well thought out and well presented ideas, criticisms, assessment and evaluation of the information as a way of finding lasting solution to the conflict. This means, in the present context, that people (government, philanthropist, aid donors, readers) do not require information and publicity alone to cope with a violent conflict such as the Boko Haram conflict. They expect newspapers to present consistent discourses, editorial opinions, critical essays, and in-depth features on the activities of Boko Haram. As discernible beings, newspaper readers need to be exposed to articles that would not only give them hope, but would help them to know that there is nothing positive about killing and maiming of innocent people in the name of religion or politics.

One of the observed dangers of over-dependence on informativeness as an aesthetic index is the danger of continuous leaking of government strategy and plans to Boko Haram members, thus helping the sect to plan new strategies of destruction. Of course, one can imagine the effect of such leakage on the peace process. One effect is the delay in the release of the more than 250 abducted schoolgirls in Nigeria, and finding a lasting solution to the general problem. This means that although information, as an aesthetic index, is a must in violent conflict reporting, it is not, altogether, supposed to be used as the main weapon against the Boko Haram insurgency after so many years of Boko Haram operation. Therefore, combining it with other aesthetic indices can contribute more to the peace agenda.

4. CONCLUSION

To many, the subject matter of this paper, An Aesthetic Appraisal of Newspaper Coverage of Boko Haram Activities, may sound rather perplexing. While one reason is that it may be ordinarily difficult to strike a balance between conflict reporting and aesthetics, another reason is that to many, when the concept of aesthetics is mentioned in the media domain, their minds first go to the broadcast media. But this should not be the thinking. This is because even though this paper adopts ([Zettl, 2005](#)) paradigm, it has married that paradigm with [Johnson \(2004\)](#) view on the criteria for identification of aesthetic elements of a particular subject matter. Accordingly the paper has been able to identify certain aesthetic indices that can be applied in print media writing generally, and violent conflict writing in particular. This effort therefore makes this work one of the pilot studies in aesthetics of

print media violent conflict reporting. The major finding of this paper is that the leading Nigerian newspapers have not ensured aesthetic equilibrium in their coverage of Boko Haram activities. They have, to say the least, not been able to imbibe the principles of aesthetic journalism. Aesthetic journalism is about transparent journalism that relies on facts and explores the reality of the situation. Such journalism does not give information alone; it discusses the information and charts a peace course. In any of the reports appraised, this paper has not found serious backgrounds on the Boko Haram or any description of its activities, its rationale or its motivations. Had the stories and reports carried by the newspapers advanced themselves from an aesthetic journalism perspective, rather than tilting towards the traditional blow by blow war journalism, the people would, perhaps, have been able to divert attention to realistic and valuable solutions. They would be able to work strategies that are capable of addressing the undercurrents that motivate the Boko Haram members and supporters in their activities.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings, the newspapers are (war) information and publicity oriented; hence, it is recommended that:

1. For speedy return and retention of peace, newspapers covering Boko Haram activities should portray conflicts in realistic terms and encourage the exploration of backgrounds and contexts of conflict formation.
2. They should be transparent in the representation of the causes, background and issues concerning a conflict.
3. They should aim at offering creative ideas that can culminate in conflict resolution, development, peacemaking and peacekeeping.
4. Newspapers should expose lies, cover-ups and attempts to cover-up as well as culprits on all sides unequivocally.
5. They should reveal the suffering inflicted on people of all parties involved in the conflict.
6. They should promote peace stories and efforts for peace.

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