DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

The official journal of the
NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

HOSTILE GATEKEEPING: THE STRATEGY OF ENGAGING WITH JOURNALISTS IN EXTREMISM REPORTING

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Abstract

This article broadly examines the relationship between strategic communications and journalism with specific reference to the issue of violent extremism. Using a case study of reporting on the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria, it analyses the nature and consequences of engagement among the various communicators involved. The primary data were drawn from focus groups and individual interviews with thirty-two journalists and strategic communicators, and from analysis of Boko Haram videos and Nigerian security forces' press releases. The findings suggest that journalists have a tense but interdependent relationship with strategic communicators that is characterised by conflict and cooperation, harassment and intimidation. Strategic communicators' control of the conflict theatre and use of the Internet to reach audiences directly give them leverage in the relationship. They, however, rely on journalists to help enhance the reach and credibility of their narratives, while journalists depend significantly on their media releases.

Keywords— *gatekeeping, journalism, news values, Boko Haram, violent extremism, strategic communications*

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Introduction and Background

Journalism is in crisis,[1] and the art of strategic communications is in the ascendency.[2] Neither is accidental. A combination of technological changes, economic upheaval, and audiences' distrust in news media has thrown much of the traditional media and professional journalism into turmoil.[3] Conversely, the transformation of the media landscape and the growing interest of state and of non-state actors in the battles for the hearts and minds of the public have raised the art of strategic communications to new heights.[4] The consequences are wide ranging. The rapid spread of disinformation (deliberate spread of erroneous information), misinformation (accidental or unwitting spread of erroneous information), and hate speech is the most obvious. 'Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics.'[5] Journalism 'loses ground' and becomes a subject of 'existential attack'.[6]

While strategic communicators reap benefits from the open-access nature of the Internet and the unfettered opportunities it offers them to reach and influence audiences, professional journalism is groaning under considerable strain.[7] Its business models are becoming increasingly unviable—epitomised by the collapse of many outlets, plummeting revenues, and staff cutbacks.[8] It faces severe criticisms from both the Right, who accuse it 'of peddling "fake news"', and the

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1 Scholarship has touched on journalism's crisis from differing perspectives. John Russial, Peter Laufer and Janet Wasko, 'Journalism in Crisis?', *Javnost—The Public* 22(4), (2015): 299–312; Robert McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism? Time for a Rethinking', *Journalism Practice* 13(5-6), (2012): 682–94; Núria Almiron, *Journalism in Crisis: Corporate Media and Financialization* (New York: Hampton Press, 2010).
2 Monroe Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and New Strategic Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
3 Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, 'Effects of Editorial Media Bias Perception and Media Trust on the Use of Traditional, Citizen, and Social Media News', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 94(3), (2017): 703–24.
4 Price, *Free Expression.*
5 Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti (eds.), *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), p. 15.
6 Ibid., p. 18.
7 McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?'.
8 Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?'.

Left, who blame it 'for failing to play a robust monitorial role'.[9] Although the industry is fighting back by adopting digital production practices and developing new business models,[10] it still has a long way to go. Technological and economic changes play a role in this.

Digital giants such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter are increasingly usurping the resources of news organisations, depriving them of advertising revenues, and reaping the benefits of the journalism content news media create without paying for them and without facing the regulatory requirements applied to news organisations. They have developed a business model that aligns their economic interests with those of advertisers and made fortunes from it.[11] While this has helped spread new ideas, enhance creativity, expand commerce, boost business-es, and bring economic prosperity to many, it has also created room for the weaponisation of personal data[12] and the manipulation of vulnerable minds. As Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott argue, in the current marketplace enhanced by technology firms, all advertisers—'whether they are pushing retail products, news stories, political candidates, or disinformation'—are basically alike: they all want to use the most 'persuasive' tools at their disposal.[13] 'The problem is that when disinformation operators leverage this system for precision propaganda, the harm to the public interest, the political culture, and the integrity of democracy is substantial and distinct from any other type of advertiser.'[14]

The impacts from disinformation frequently appear to manifest themselves in the rise of hate politics, extremist ideologies, and identity-related violence. An aspect of this can be seen in the way violent extremists, such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab, easily exploit web technology to recruit new adherents, intimidate their adversar-

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9 Des Freedman, '"Public Service" and the Journalism Crisis: Is the BBC the Answer?', *Television & New Media* (2018): 1–16, p. 1.
10 Mark Deuze and Tamara Wutschge, 'Beyond Journalism: Theorizing the Transformation of Journalism', *Journalism* 9(2), (2018): 165–85; Barbie Zelizer, *What Journalism Could Be* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2017); Jeffrey Alexander, 'The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Cultural Power', *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 8(1), (2015): 9–31.
11 Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott, *Digital Deceit: The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, January 2018).
12 Mark Bridge, 'Tech Firms Have "Weaponised" Personal Data, Says Apple Chief Tim Cook', *The Times* (24 October 2018). [accessed 24 October 2018].
13 Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*, p. 3.
14 Ibid.

ies, and terrorise the citizenry.[15] This is particularly problematic because, unlike most conventional online advertisers who buy space and slots to market their products, extremist groups operate surreptitiously, slipping in their messages on the Internet and social media and executing their deadly plans. Although technology companies and governments now use various cyber-policing techniques to contain them (and security services exploit terror groups' cyber activity to counter such operations),[16] extremist groups often evade these measures. And it is their ability to surprise—enhanced by the affordances of new technology—that strengthens their capability and sharpens their strategic communications efficacy.

Boko Haram has demonstrated its dexterity in this. Formed in Nigeria's northeast around 2002 as a youth Muslim movement aimed at establishing a Salafist state, the ISIS-linked group turned to terror campaigns after a series of clashes with security forces.[17] They have since become the deadliest insurgent group in Africa, blamed for the death of over 30,000 people and the displacement of three million others in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon over the last decade.[18] 'Although it was their abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 that gave them global notoriety, Boko Haram militants committed far worse atrocities, such as beheadings and mass executions.'[19] They staged those attacks to attract media attention. It is a component of their strategic communications campaign, which they carry out relentlessly, although an intense military onslaught by the Nigerian armed forces has managed to curtail part of it.[20] Both the insurgents and the security forces are engaged in a bitter media war. They both use traditional media, the Internet, and social media

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15 Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence: The Media Strategies of Boko Haram', in M. Bunce, S.Franks and C. Paterson (eds), *Africa's Media Image in the 21ˢᵗ Century: From The 'Heart of Darkness' to 'Africa Rising* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016, pp. 200–210); Robyn Kriel, 'TV, Twitter, and Telegram: Al-Shabaab's Attempts to Influence Mass Media', *Defence Strategic Communications,* 4(Spring), 2018, 11–48; James Farwell, 'The Media Strategy of ISIS', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy,* 56(6), (2014), 49–55; Marc Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies', *National Interest* 83, (2006): 50–56.
16 Rafal Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018).
17 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Smith, Mike, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).
18 Umaru Pate and Hamza Idris, 'How Journalists Survived to Report: Professionalism and Risk Management in the Reporting of Terror Groups and Violent Extremism in North East Nigeria', in U. Carlsson and R. Poyhtari (eds.), *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression* (Goteborg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, 2017, pp. 159–71); United Nations, 'Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Lake Chad Basin, Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman', 13 September 2017. [Accessed 12 October 2017].
19 Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications, Boko Haram and Counter-insurgency', *Defence Strategic Communications* 3(Autumn), (2017): p. 147.
20 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

platforms to advance their causes.[21] They both court and repel journalists as part of their communication strategies.[22]

This article investigates the relationship between these strategic communicators and journalists. It uses the case of the media coverage of the conflict to examine the nature of the relationship. It sheds light on how journalists relate with both Boko Haram and security agencies' strategic communicators, and how this impacts their work. It also attempts to provide insights into how the strategic communicators themselves interact with journalists, and how they use their control of information flow and access to conflict zones as leverage in their interactions.

While scholarship has dealt extensively with the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners (many PR specialists work as strategic communicators),[23] it dwells mainly on their engagement in covering the affairs of corporations, governments, and non-profit organisations.[24] Empirical studies in the field point to a relationship that is marked by cooperation and negotiation,[25] but also by conflict, mutual suspicion, and divergent perceptions.[26] However, despite the high number of such studies—over 200 from the 1960s to 2017, according to Thomas Koch and his colleagues[27]—there is still no 'coherent picture of this complex interaction'.[28] Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to journalists' interface with strategic communicators regarding the reporting of violent extremism. This study attempts to fill this gap. Primary data were obtained from individual interviews, focus groups, and content analysis. The theo-

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21 Ibid.
22 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
23 Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčič and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1(1), (2007): 3–35.
24 There is vast literature on this. For details see Thomas Koch, Magdalena Obermaier and Claudia Riesmeyer, 'Powered by Public Relations? Mutual Perceptions of PR Practitioners' Bases of Power over Journalism', *Journalism*, (2017): 1–17; Hallahan, 'Defining Strategic Communication'; Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams and Bob Franklin, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate? UK News Journalism, Public Relations and News Sources', *Journalism Studies* 9(1), (2008): 1–20; Meron Medzini, 'The Constants and Variables in Israel's Information Strategies: Memories of a Practitioner', *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*, 1(1), (2012): 115–21; Oscar Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982).
25 Ansgar Zerfass, Dejan Verčič and Markus Wiesenberg, 'The Dawn of a New Golden Age for Media Relations? How PR Professionals Interact with the Mass Media and Use New Collaboration Practices', *Public Relations Review* 42(4), (2016) 499–508; Ana Verčič and Violeta Colić, 'Journalists and Public Relations Specialists: A Coorientational Analysis', *Public Relations Review* 42, (2016): 522–29; Richard Walters, Natalie Tindall and Timothy Morton, 'Media Catching and the Journalist-Public Relations Practitioner Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(3), (2010): 241–64.
26 Jim Macnamara, *Journalism and PR: Unpacking 'Spin', Stereotypes & Media Myths* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014); Koch, 'Powered by Public Relations?'; Jean Charron, 'Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners: Cooperation, Conflict and Negotiation', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 14(2) (1989): 41–54.
27 Koch, 'Powered by Public Relations?', p. 3.
28 Ibid.

retical framework was drawn from gatekeeping theory,[29] which helps explain the relationship between strategic communicators and journalists. But the study also draws from news values theory to understand journalists' interest in covering violent extremism,[30] and from agenda-setting theory to help comprehend why strategic communicators crave relationships with the news media.[31] It utilises strategic communications literature both from the military/security perspective (which this study focuses on) and from a public relations research perspective, where the term 'strategic communications' is increasingly being used as many PR professionals tend to see themselves—and often work—as strategic communicators.[32]

Strategic communications

As a subject of scholarly inquiry, strategic communications—originally singular but now mostly plural—is a relatively 'new academic field'.[33] But as a human practice, the art of strategic communications could be traced back to the fourth century BC when the famous Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu declared that 'to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'.[34] This suggests that strategic communications has a military origin but has been appropriated by a variety of other disciplines. Peter Pomerantsev argues that strategic communications is a contested term, 'derided by some as a more palatable substitute for "propaganda", dismissed by others as glamorised public relations'.[35] A comprehensive definition—which this article draws from—was provided by Steve Tatham. He defines it as a 'systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops

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29 Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Jane Singer, 'User-generated Visibility: Secondary Gatekeeping in a Shared Media Space', *New Media & Society* 16(1), (2014): 55–73; Peter Bro and Filip Wallberg, Gatekeeping in a Digital Era, *Journalism Practice* 9(1), (2015): 92–105; David Manning White, 'The "Gate Keeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News', *Journalism Quarterly* 27(4), (1950): 383–90; Kurt Lewin, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics II: Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research', *Human Relations* 1, (1947): 143–53.
30 Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, 'What is News? News Values Revisited (Again)', *Journalism Studies* 18(12), (2017): 1470–88; Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, 'The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers', *Journal of Peace Research* 2(1), (1965): 64–91.
31 Maxwell McCombs, 'A Look at Agenda-setting: Past, Present and Future', *Journalism Studies* 6(4), (2005): 543–57.
32 Hallahan, 'Defining Strategic Communication'.
33 Ibid., p. 4.
34 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Translated by Lionel Giles and originally published in 1910) (Chapter 3, verse 2), [accessed 17 June 2016].
35 Peter Pomerantsev, Introduction to *Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives* by Transition Forums (London: Legatum Institute, 2015), p. 4.

and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour'.[36] It puts strategic communications back to its military origin and is flexible enough to contain different forms of strategic communications campaigns—waged either by the military or by militants—and to accommodate a range of people as strategic communicators, be they government spin doctors, military spokespersons, or violent insurgents.

For many, strategic communications is an essential part of governance and a key 'component of national strategy'.[37] James Farwell sees it from a political and national security angle, and maintains that its goal is to influence the attitudes of target audiences.[38] Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke identify four key components of strategic communications: information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy, and public affairs.[39] There are elements of both closeness and divergence among these components. While public diplomacy primarily focuses on a government's communicating with foreign publics to influence foreign governments,[40] public affairs focuses mainly on informing domestic audiences of a government's (and related agencies') affairs.[41] However, Psychological Operations (PSYOP)—defined by the US military as '[p]lanned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals'[42]—is seen as a component of Information Operations (IO). The same military defines Information Operations as 'the employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, Psychological Operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to affect or defend information and information systems, and to influence decision-making'.[43] Clearly, these components have common elements: 'to inform, influence and persuade audiences at home

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36 Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communications: A Primer*, ARAG Special Series 8/28, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom (2008), p. 3.
37 Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French and Claire Yorke, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy* (A Chatham House Report, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London: September 2011), p. v; Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.
38 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.
39 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*.
40 For detail analysis on public diplomacy see Eytan Gilboa, 'Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy', *Annals of the American Academy* 616, (2008): 55–77.
41 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.
42 Department of the Army, Psychological Operations (Field Manual, 3-05.30: Washington, DC, 15 April 2005), Glossary-16.
43 Ibid., Chapter 7, p. 1.

and abroad, whether friendly, adversarial or merely a member of the public'.[44] And, as Farwell argues, this is what distinguishes strategic communications from other forms of communication and makes it a vital tool for dealing with political and national security issues.[45]

The use of strategic communications to pursue organisational missions is, however, not an exclusive preserve of security services or governments; non-state actors, especially insurgent groups, have equally noted its relevance. Al-Qaeda,[46] ISIS,[47] Boko Haram,[48] and al-Shabaab[49] have all employed strategic communications campaigns skilfully to advance their causes. Although they are all violent extremist groups with different approaches and techniques in pursuing their goals, they all seem to understand the significance of communicating strategically. Effective use of new technologies and clarity of narratives boost their campaigns.[50] The level at which extremist groups were leveraging strategic communications prompted some scholars to raise the alarm and suggest that the field was in crisis.[51] Neville Bolt argued that the speed at which the terrain was changing under the contemporary 'communications maelstrom' made it difficult for states to cope well.[52] 'Speed, reach and iconic images have become a toxic brew for which states currently have no antidote.'[53] New developments such as governments' ability to employ cyber technology to detect the activities of extremist groups and to subvert terror attacks,[54] however, suggest that states are now overcoming these hurdles, even though non-state actors are equally raising their game.

New technologies have widened the space for non-state and rough-state disinformation operators, and disingenuous corporate bodies, to engage not only in disinformation campaigns but also in what Ghosh and Scott call 'automated' and 'precision propaganda', using various technologies including bots, data

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44 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*, p. 4.
45 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power.*
46 Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies'.
47 Farwell, 'The Media Strategy of ISIS'.
48 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.
49 Kriel, 'TV, Twitter, and Telegram'.
50 David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, 'Putting the Strategy Back into Strategic Communications', *Defence Strategic Communications* 3(Autumn), (2017): 41–69; and Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.
51 Neville Bolt, 'Strategic Communications in Crisis', *The RUSI Journal* 156(4), (2011): 44–53; and Betz, 'Putting the Strategy Back into Strategic Communications'.
52 Bolt, 'Strategic Communications in Crisis', p. 54.
53 Ibid., p. 45.
54 Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications.*

analytics, and audiences' personal data.[55] Reports of the alleged use of digital propaganda devices by Russia to influence the outcome of the 2016 US election suggest that states, too, engage in such acts.[56] New studies[57] commissioned by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence have found that Russian agents (through the state-supported Internet Research Agency) used many social media platforms—particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube—in a bid to influence the 2016 US presidential election. 'Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) launched an extended attack on the United States by using computational propaganda to misinform and polarize US voters', says one of the reports.[58] But even more significantly the activities were carried out with industry-standard tools,[59] suggesting that states have since turned the corner in digital strategic communications. States are also doing better in countering violent insurgents by exploiting the insurgents' own digital strategic communications activity. Security services now use electronic warfare devices to impede the spread of certain messages promoted by terror groups.[60] They also monitor and infiltrate insurgents' social media accounts to gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses, and to detect their activities with a view to countering them.[61] All this suggests that the art of strategic communications is enjoying a boom.[62] But Monroe Price has warned that the massive investments in strategic communications by states, corporations, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations have elevated it to a status that is detrimental to the public good.[63] 'The growth of strategic communications—heavily subsidized, usually transnational, engineered and often deceptive—can wreak havoc on traditional ideas of community realization and self-determination.'[64] He asserts that 'in a media system pervaded by strategic communicators, persuasion, not truth, is often the most prized quality'.[65] Journalism is meant to act as a check on this, but the profession is facing difficulties.[66]

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55 Ireton, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation*; Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*; Bridge, 'Tech Firms Have "Weaponised" Personal Data'.
56 Ibid.
57 Philip N. Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiou, John Kelly and Camille Francois, *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018* (Working Paper 2018.2. Oxford UK: Project on Computational Propaganda); Renee DiResta, Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, Robert Matney, Ryan Fox, Jonathan Albright, and Ben Johnson, *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency* (A report by Knowledge, commissioned by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, DC, released on 17 December 2018), [accessed 18 December 2018].
58 Howard, *The IRA*, p.3.
59 Ibid.; Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*.
60 Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications*.
61 Ibid.
62 Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*.
63 Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and New Strategic Communication*.
64 Ibid., p. 7.
65 Ibid., p. 22.
66 Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?'; McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?'.

Journalism and public relations

Described as essentially 'the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance',[67] journalism is currently 'transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices'.[68] To underscore the diversified nature of the profession, Barbie Zelizer identifies twelve metaphors for understanding journalism.[69] Seven of those metaphors, she states, are provided by journalists themselves—a sixth sense, container, mirror, story, child (news seen as a child requiring nurturing), service, and engagement. The remaining five, she notes, come from journalism scholars—a profession, institution, text, people, and practice.[70] Whatever transformation it is undergoing, journalism is generally seen as a profession whose remit has gone beyond the realm of news reporting.[71] It is often linked with democracy and freedom. Michael Schudson,[72] for instance, has highlighted the role of journalism in sustaining and extending democracy. And there are numerous accounts of journalists making sacrifices to defend democratic values.[73]

But journalism is also considered from other perspectives 'as a form of social control rather than the means of political emancipation'.[74] This view aligns with Antonio Gramsci's broad conception of the media as an ideological apparatus of the state.[75] Here journalism is seen as an instrument used by the dominant class to extend their power and retain privileges. But an even more critical description of the profession was presented a century ago by Upton Sinclair, himself a journalist. He defines American journalism 'as the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege'.[76] Sinclair did not really have disdain for his colleagues, the majority of whom he describes as decent people merely carrying out orders from their greedy employers, but he had contempt for the way the profession was being practiced. 'Journalism,' he says, 'is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over

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67 Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), p. 11.
68 Deuze, 'Beyond Journalism', p. 166.
69 Zelizer, *What Journalism Could Be.*
70 Ibid.
71 McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?'.
72 Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).
73 Ulla Carlsson and Reeta Pöyhtäri (eds), *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression* (Goteborg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, 2017).
74 Martin Conboy, *Journalism Studies: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 52.
75 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).
76 Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (1st Ed., California: Pasadena, 1919), p. 222.

political democracy; it is the day-by-day, between-elections propaganda'.[77]

Many of the issues Sinclair raised have since been addressed with the development of journalism ethics. And the profession is seen by many as 'a watchdog operating on behalf of the public' whose contributions to societal wellbeing and progress earn it the name 'Fourth Estate of the realm'.[78] Brian McNair's *Journalism and Democracy*, which uses the specific case of British society, highlights journalism's role in expanding democratic possibilities and checking the excesses of the powerful.[79] The ongoing struggle by journalists to hold the leader of the world's most powerful nation, US President Donald Trump, to account, and his continuing reference to their stories as 'fake news' is an illustration of this.[80] As a means of public expression and a link between the government and the governed, Denis McQuail argues, journalism plays an essential part in the collective life of a society.[81]

Despite this societal role, though, the journalism industry is facing hard times: falling revenues, closure of news outlets, continuing job losses, and fierce competition from tech giants.[82] New technologies, economic changes, and the rise of the public relations industry are some of the factors blamed for this. But many journalism scholars and practitioners do not regard new technology as a threat to the profession; they see it as a vital tool of transforming it.[83] *Financial Times* editor Lionel Barber argues that journalism benefits from new technologies, as digital revolution has 'led to an explosion of creativity and new forms of rich storytelling'. What is problematic to journalism, he asserts, is 'the growing power of the public relations industry', which uses its muscles to muzzle the press.[84] 'The army of public relations advisers employed by individuals and companies with thin skins and deep pockets', and the 'rising power of private markets versus public markets' make 'it far harder for journalists to access information'.[85]

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77 Ibid.

78 Conboy, *Journalism Studies*, p. 72.

79 McNair, Brian, *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

80 BBC, 'White House suspends credentials for CNN's Jim Acosta', BBC Online (8 November 2018). [accessed 8 November 2018].

81 Denis McQuail, *Journalism and Society* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013).

82 Ireton, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation;* Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?'; McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?; Almiron, *Journalism in Crisis*.

83 Deuze, 'Beyond Journalism'; Lionel Barber, 'Too Big to Fail: The Future of Financial Journalism', Paper presented at James Cameron Memorial Lecture (City, University of London, 22 November 2018).

84 Barber, 'Too Big to Fail'.

85 Ibid.

His argument indicates the complex relationship between journalism and public relations, a term some equate with strategic communications. But although public relations is closely related to strategic communications, as both focus on communicating to influence audiences, the two terms are not synonymous. As seen in the definition provided by Tatham and adopted by this article,[86] strategic communications is a much more encompassing concept, with public relations being just one of its main components.[87] Public relations has been subjected to varied definitions, but Lee Edwards provides an apt description that gives it a broad perspective.[88] She defines it as 'the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous transactions with other social entities'.[89]

Given this remit of establishing and sustaining continuous interactions with other entities, public relations is constantly engaged with—and even encroaches on—journalism, as practices such as commissioning brand journalism to promote marketing campaigns and embedding journalists with military units during armed conflicts continue to grow.[90] The way many journalists are also relying on information subsidies[91] from public relations professionals in their work highlights the interdependent nature of their relationship. Defined as 'the efforts of news sources to intentionally shape the news agenda by reducing journalists' costs of gathering information',[92] information subsidies, which mainly come in the form of press releases, have been identified as an effective tool used by public relations professionals to secure favourable media coverage for their clients.[93] They use it effectively to enhance the growth of their profession.

The PR industry is indeed expanding rapidly while journalism is contracting. The situation in the United States illustrates this vividly. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of journalists in the United States in 2016 was

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86 Tatham, *Strategic Communications*.
87 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*; Hallahan, 'Defining Strategic Communication'.
88 Ralph Tench and Liz Yeomans, *Exploring Public Relations* (3rd ed., Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2014).
89 Lee Edwards, Defining the Object of Public Relations: A New Starting Point', *Public Relations Inquiry* 1(1), (2012): 1–24, p. 15.
90 There have been discussions about the blurring of lines between public relations and journalism, details of which is contained in Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.
91 These are mainly news releases by organisations and there are many works on it. See Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Dan Berkowitz and Douglas Adams, 'Information Subsidy and Agenda-Building in Local Television News', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 67(4), (1990): 723–31.
92 Berkowitz, 'Information Subsidy', p. 723.
93 Berkowitz, 'Information Subsidy'; Lewis, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate?'.

50,400, which is projected to decline by 9% in the next decade.[94] This is in contrast to what obtains in the public relations industry, whose practitioners numbered 259,600 in the same year, and is projected to rise by 9% in the coming decade.[95] What is more, despite the swell in their number, PR specialists still earn much higher salaries than journalists. According to the Bureau's figures, the median annual pay for a PR specialist in 2017 is $59,300, compared to journalist's $40,910 in the same year.[96] However, Barber argues, it is not actually the increase in the number of public relations professionals that is problematic—many of them do offer valuable services to journalism and to other spheres of human endeavours—it is the 'Black PR' (using PR for smear campaigns) that is the source of concern.[97] 'Black PR—sometimes pushed by ex-spooks—[…] uses social media platforms to attack and undermine reputations and independent journalism', he notes.[98] Similar concerns have equally been raised about violent extremists using social media and even traditional media platforms to pursue their objectives, as will be seen later in the case of Boko Haram's use of media in Nigeria.

Gatekeeping

As a country, Nigeria has a reputation for sustaining a robust journalism industry, among the freest in Africa, with its media landscape described as 'vibrant and varied'.[99] The print and online media are independent and effectively controlled by the private sector, while the broadcast sector is largely dominated by the state but with an increasing presence of private ownership.[100] Journalists, especially those working in the print and online media, generally have strong editorial independence, exercising judgement on what stories to publish and what to ignore. But government, corporate, and non-profit bodies also exert influence on what the media publish,[101] using patronage, placement of advertisements, and information subsidies. This is the area where the issue of gatekeeping becomes relevant.

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94 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Reporters, Correspondents, and Broadcast News Analysts, 13 April 2018. [accessed 23 November 2018].
95 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Public Relations Specialists, 2 July 2018. [accessed 23 November 2018].
96 Ibid.; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Reporters, Correspondents, and Broadcast News Analysts.
97 Barber, 'Too Big to Fail'.
98 Ibid.
99 Freedom House, 'Freedom of the Press 2017—Nigeria', Freedom House (15 May 2017). [accessed 19 December 2017].
100 Ibid.
101 For detail on this see Yusha'u, Muhammad, 'Investigative Journalism and Scandal Reporting in the Nigerian press', *ECQUID NOVI* 30(2), (2009): 155–74.

Gatekeeping theory originated from the work of German-American social psychologist Kurt Lewin in his analysis of housewives' gatekeeping role 'in determining food habits'—with his brief mention of the existence of a similar process in news production.[102] But it was David Manning White who pioneered the application of the theory in mass communication research with his seminal 'Gate Keeper' study in 1950.[103] The original idea of gatekeeping, though, is traceable to the work of American journalist and intellectual Walter Lippmann—although he did not specifically use that term. His *Public Opinion*,[104] which is equally credited with providing the foundations of the framing and agenda-setting theories, makes clear references to an editor's role in the rigorous process of rejection and selection of materials in news production. 'Without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would soon die of excitement', he writes.[105]

> Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, and what emphasis each shall have.[106]

So, the idea of gatekeeping has been around for nearly a century, but it was White's research on how a wire editor he named 'Mr Gates' performed a gatekeeping role to determine the content of his newspaper that gave us an insight into the application of the theory—at least as obtained in early 20th century American journalism. The theory has since been developed by many communication scholars to fit into the fast-changing nature of the 21st century media landscape.[107] An outstanding contribution comes from Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos who describe gatekeeping as 'the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day'.[108] They highlight its centrality in the role of the media in public life. Gatekeeping 'determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be'.[109]

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102 See, in particular, Lewin, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics II', p. 143. The first volume of the work is Lewin, Kurt, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics I: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria', *Human Relations* 1, (1947a): 5–40.
103 White, 'The "Gate Keeper"'.
104 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).
105 Ibid., p. 352.
106 Ibid., p. 354.
107 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*; Singer, 'User-generated Visibility'; Bro, 'Gatekeeping in a Digital Era'.
108 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*, p. 1.
109 Ibid.

Jane Singer focuses on digital era journalism where she identifies 'a two-step gatekeeping process' in which users act as secondary gatekeepers.[110] 'Users are choosing news not only for their own consumption but also for the consumption of others'.[111] Peter Bro and Filip Wallberg dwell on the changes 'new technologies and new ideologies' have brought to gatekeeping practices, with audiences becoming more empowered.[112] They reinforce Shoemaker and Vos's earlier proposition about the audience-empowering role played by the Internet. 'Compared to other mass media, the internet provides much more opportunity for an audience member to interact with news makers, news creators, and each other. This high level of interactivity turns audience members into gatekeepers.'[113] It is the ability to highlight the relevance of gatekeepers in the changing media environment and its close relationship with the theories of agenda-setting and news value that affirm the applicability of gatekeeping theory in this research. It is gatekeeping—whether practiced by journalists, strategic communicators, or violent extremists—that determine which content (be it from insurgents or from counter-insurgents) reaches the audience and which doesn't (more on this later).

Violent extremism and news values

Often equated with terrorism, the term violent extremism is increasingly being used in reference to identity-related violence. Rafal Zgryziewicz says it 'includes all actions in which identity-motivated violence, from hate crimes to genocide, are used as tools to achieve desired objectives'.[114] In this article violent extremism is seen as a process of deliberate and illegitimate use of violence, including terrorist attacks, in pursuit of ideological, political, religious, or racial goals. It can be used to describe the actions of violent extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram or the violence perpetrated by racist and right-wing extremists. As the United Nations Development Programme notes, violent extremism 'is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief'.[115]

Boko Haram has engaged in violent extremism since 2009, causing indescribable suffering and devastation in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.[116] Rough

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110 Singer, 'User-generated Visibility', p. 55.
111 Ibid., p. 68.
112 Bro, 'Gatekeeping in a Digital Era', p. 93.
113 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*, p. 6.
114 Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications*.
115 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (New York: UNDP, 2017), p. 19.
116 Thurston, *Boko Haram*; Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Smith, *Boko Haram*.

estimates of the impact of their insurgency range from 30,000 to 40,000 lives lost; and also include three million displaced, $9 billion in economic losses in Nigeria's northeast alone, and about 11 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[117] At one time (between mid-2014 to early 2015) the insurgents controlled an area estimated to be the size of Belgium, but the military has since retaken most of it, with only a part of the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad basin (the size of which has never been disclosed to the public) still believed to be under their control. Boko Haram militants derive their power primarily through armed violence, but they also use media 'to spread their ideology, extend their brutality, intimidate their enemies and recruit new adherents'.[118] They recognised the centrality of media in advancing their cause right from their early days, and set up a unit for it known as the 'Public Awareness Department', headed by their spokesmen with direct guidance from the group's supreme leader Abubakar Shekau.[119] Their strategy is based on the assumption that violence generates hard power and media attention.[120] They saw this in the case of their abductions of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, which put them in the global spotlight, and which they used to secure the release of some of their commanders while gaining concessions from the government. This was followed by new rounds of kidnappings, killings, and negotiations—all of which continue to generate media coverage.[121]

The recognition of the agenda-setting function of the media has its basis in journalism scholarship,[122] and strategic communicators have never lost sight of this. Described as 'the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda',[123] agenda-setting theory helps explain how some state and non-state actors crave publicity, and why they devote considerable energy and resources to use, control or manipulate the news media. The way Boko Haram insurgents employed the media to pursue their objectives has been well explained in works that highlight their communications strategies.[124] But it is the newsworthiness of some of their actions that also helps generate the media attention they get, and

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117 Pate, 'How Journalists Survived to Report'; United Nations, 'Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Lake Chad Basin'; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
118 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications', p. 148.
119 Initially it was the group's founder Muhammad Yusuf, but after his death Shekau became the supreme leader; and when the group split into two, Shekau led his own faction while Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi (Muhammad Yusuf's son) led the other faction. See Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'; Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
122 McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting'; and Lippmann, *Public Opinion*.
123 McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting', p. 543.
124 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

this can be explained through the lens of another theory. News values theory has detailed numerous criteria that make events newsworthy,[125] and previous studies have shown that many actions of the Boko Haram insurgents do meet many of those criteria.[126] 'Whether it was the kidnapping of schoolgirls, the bombing of markets, or the beheading of innocent civilians, each major action carried out by Boko Haram militants has intense negative consequences and is therefore deemed newsworthy.'[127] This and the militants' media savviness enhance the media presence of the group.

The Nigerian security forces, too, receive media coverage in their campaign to dislodge the insurgents, partly on account of the newsworthiness of their operations and partly due to their own media output.[128] Each of the forces involved in the campaign—the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Air Force, and the Nigeria Police Force—has its own formal communications structure, which it uses for its day-to-day media activity. These structures are used in the strategic communications campaign with additional resources such as employment of public relations consultants and coordination of the various units to work as a team. This led to the formation of the Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies (FOSSRA), comprising representatives of the military, paramilitary, intelligence, and response agencies, to help in the long-running campaign[129]—though FOSSRA ceased operations in 2015. The Directorate of Defence Information in Abuja or the Directorate of Army Public Relations in Abuja, often headed by a General, leads the overall strategic communications campaign, with various army public relations units in different parts of the country assisting. The police have a similar structure, with the main Force Public Relations Officer based at police headquarters in Abuja and state commands having their own public relations officers. They all interact with journalists, though the army retains overall control over matters related to countering the Boko Haram insurgency.

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125 Galtung, 'The Structure of Foreign News'; Paul Brighton and Dennis Foy, *News Values* (London: Sage, 2007); Harcup, 'What is News?'.
126 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'; Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.
127 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications', p. 162.
128 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
129 Yushau Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War: An Encounter with the Spymaster,* (Abuja: Image Merchants Promotions, 2017), p. 275.

Methodology

This study specifically examines the relationship between journalists and strategic communicators with reference to the coverage of the Boko Haram conflict. The primary data were drawn from focus groups and individual interviews with thirty-two journalists and strategic communicators in Nigeria as well as analysis of Boko Haram videos and press releases from the Nigerian security forces. Thirty-three press releases from both the police and army public relations units—fifteen of them downloaded directly from the army's website (www.army.mil.ng), the rest, hard copies sourced from police and army public relations officers and journalists—and ten Boko Haram videos (obtained from online sources and journalists) were studied. Following Klaus Krippendorff's guidance,[130] a qualitative content analysis method aimed at identifying the nature and meanings of the messages contained in the press releases and videos was used to analyse them. This was primarily to complement and provide context to the data obtained from the main methods used for the study: individual interviews and focus groups. Purposeful sampling technique was used to select all the participants: only journalists who have covered the Boko Haram conflict and strategic communicators who have dealt with journalists during the crisis were interviewed for the study. Two focus groups—one in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Yola containing six journalists (named the Yola Group for easy identification in the analysis) and the other in the capital Abuja (the Abuja Group), also with six journalists—were conducted in August and September 2017. Individual interviews were conducted with fourteen journalists in both Yola and Abuja in the months of July and August 2017, as well as in August and September 2018. The journalists comprise two editors (one from a national newspaper and the other from a television station in north-eastern Nigeria), five correspondents of national newspapers (*Daily Trust*, *Guardian*, *Peoples Daily*, *ThisDay,* and *Punch*) who have worked in the northeast, two defence correspondents, two television reporters, and three freelance journalists working for both Nigerian and foreign news media outlets. Six strategic communicators—four of them are still serving in the Nigeria Police Force and the Nigerian Army while the remaining two have retired but still offer public relations consultancies—were interviewed during the same period (July–August 2017 and August–September 2018). They are all security forces' public relations specialists who have worked as part of the overall strategic communications campaign and are therefore regarded here as

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130 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).

strategic communicators. There were no interviews with Boko Haram strategic communicators, as the researcher did not have access to them (they are operating underground as their group has long been banned), but the content of their videos and the interviews with journalists who had interacted with them provide insight into their work. All the participants were guaranteed anonymity both to help elicit candid responses from them and to abide by the research code of confidentiality. Richard Krueger's framework of analysis was used to analyse the focus groups,[131] while Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman's guidance was followed in analysing the individual interviews.[132] The findings and discussions are presented under three broad themes below.

A tense but interdependent relationship

Analysis of the data reveals that journalists had tense but symbiotic relationships with both security forces' (army and police) public relations officers and Boko Haram spokesmen/operatives. There was clear recognition from the journalists that they needed sources to carry out their duty, and there was a desire from both the insurgents and the security personnel for their sides to be heard. This was what made the relationships mutually beneficial, and it was to become a key characteristic of their engagement in the early days of the insurgency. 'Before they went underground, Boko Haram members talked to us openly. They organised press conferences, often to complain about police harassment or to tell us what the objectives of their group were, and we attended them (the press conferences),' said a national newspaper journalist who covered the insurgency for nearly a decade.[133] 'We would also speak to police, and later the army, to hear their own sides and balance our stories. We talked to all sides to do our job. They equally needed us to tell their stories.' Another journalist who works both for a Nigerian news outlet and an international news agency gave a similar account but added: 'It was initially a cordial relationship, even though there was a sense of tension, which kept increasing as the clashes between the police and Boko Haram escalated.'[134] A former police public relations officer who had worked with journalists on the Boko Haram conflict for three years acknowledged a tension in the relationship.[135] 'There's too much pestering from journalists', he

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131 Richard Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).
132 Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd ed., London: Sage, 1994).
133 Interviewed in Abuja on 1 August 2017.
134 Interviewed in Yola on 22 July 2017.
135 Interviewed on 11 August 2018.

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said. 'They would always want to get details about the crisis, which is fine. But they focused on the negative part, not on what we're doing to maintain peace', he added. 'At times I just wouldn't answer calls from journalists because I knew they were going to seek reaction about Boko Haram's ridiculous claims.' A serving police spokesman who has four years' experience of dealing with the Boko Haram issue echoed the same points and said he preferred issuing press releases to using question-and-answer sessions.[136] 'I found it easier to just issue a press release stating what happened and what police did', he said. Three samples of the releases he issued (shown to the researcher) were all about Boko Haram attacks: two in a market and one at a mosque. They mainly contain the times the attacks took place, how they were carried out, the casualty figures, and how the police responded to them.

The use of 'information subsidies' such as press releases by PR professionals to enhance engagement with journalists is well explored in public relations literature.[137] And it seems here that the Nigerian security services also found it effective in their handling of the Boko Haram crisis (more on this later). 'This approach [issuing press releases] is better for us, and possibly for journalists as well, because it somehow reduces the pressure we constantly get from them', the police spokesman said. 'But even with this, it wasn't really a positive experience relating with journalists on [the] Boko Haram issue. That was why I felt a big relief when most of this work was transferred to the military'. The police's role was significantly reduced when the military took full control of the counter-insurgency campaigns, including media relations work, following the escalation of the insurgency from 2012 onward.[138] The police are still part of the counter-insurgency work and they continue to communicate with journalists regularly about the issue but at a much lower scale than between 2009–12.

Around the same time, Boko Haram leaders and spokesmen were in regular contact with journalists. This took the form of direct contact when they were organising press briefings and granting face-to-face interviews.[139] It happened mostly prior to and during the group's mass uprising and its suppression at the end of July 2009, events that claimed the lives of about 800 people including the group's founder, Muhammad Yusuf, who was killed while in police custody.[140]

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136 Interviewed on 25 July 2017.
137 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Lewis, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate?'; Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.
138 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
139 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.
140 Ibid.

'The relationship with them at that period was not very difficult', a reporter who was in contact with them at that time said.[141] 'We would cover their press briefings and do our stories without any problem with them or the police. They're not banned then. They did have clashes with police, but they're not killing people like they do now.' This changed when the group went underground after the suppression of the July 2009 uprising. They no longer had face-to-face contact with journalists but their spokesmen, using the pseudonyms Abul Qaqa or Abu Darda or Abu Zaid, would call journalists on mobile phones and organise a teleconference.[142] 'He would call us and deliver the group's message, usually issuing denials of police and army claims or explanation about the group's activity', said a correspondent of a national newspaper who had participated in some of the teleconferences.[143] 'It was going on well before security operatives dealt with them.' Boko Haram terminated the teleconferencing technique after the security services detected and killed the spokesmen.[144] 'But before that they were maintaining a good relationship with journalists, so to say, even though there was a degree of mistrust between us', the correspondent added.

The contradictory mix of cooperation and distrust seen in these journalists' engagements with spokesmen from both the security forces and Boko Haram is a well-known feature of this kind of relationship. Jim Macnamara[145] and Jean Charron[146] have highlighted this in their respective works, citing cases of relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists. Charron argues that the two are 'mutually dependent on one another, a situation which demands cooperation, while their divergent control interests cause distrust and opposition'.[147] From the findings here, it seems that the level of distrust in this case is even higher, as the subject matter itself—violent extremism—is a national security issue that demands a high degree of sensitivity.

Cordiality, intimidation, and harassment

When the military took full control of the communications strategy in 2012 the dynamics of the relationship between them and journalists and insurgents changed. Broadly, both the military personnel and Boko Haram insurgents

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141 Interviewed in Abuja on 31 August 2018
142 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
143 Interviewed in Abuja on 30 August 2018
144 Ibid.
145 Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.
146 Charron, 'Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners'.
147 Ibid., p. 43.

would court and cajole journalists when they wanted their versions of stories published, but they would also intimidate and harass them and their news outlets when unfavourable reports were published. 'Once they are interested in seeing something published, they will look for us or send their statements to us. You will hear some nice words from them', a defence correspondent who participated in the Abuja Group discussion said of his experience in relating with the military over his Boko Haram reporting.[148] Other members of the group unanimously endorsed his view, citing instances when their colleagues were harassed or intimidated by the military on account of their coverage of the insurgency. One such instance was the army's detention of Aljazeera journalists (Nigerian citizens working for the broadcaster in the country) when they went to Maiduguri to report on the insurgency in 2015.[149]

Journalists who participated in the Yola Group discussion[150] spoke of experiencing a relationship with the military that they said was a mixture of cordiality, intimidation, and harassment. 'They are unpredictable; they could be nice in one moment and antagonistic in another', one television reporter said of the army public relations officers. 'It depends on what their superiors want. If their commanders had interest in pushing a story, the army PRO [Public Relations Officer] would look for us; if not, they would avoid us.' Other members in the group agreed. 'When they [the army] retook Mubi [a town in the north-eastern state of Adamawa] from Boko Haram, they organised a big tour for us and treated us very well', said one freelance reporter in the Yola Group discussion. 'When we were there, we saw the destruction, we got many stories. But after that, it was hard to get even a single-line comment from them on other stories.' Another television reporter spoke of how he was promised by the army to be allowed to cover their campaigns to retake another town from the insurgents only to be let down at the last minute. 'Everything was set and I was ready to go. I called the army public relations officer. He said, okay, I should call him later. Lo and behold, he stopped taking my calls.'

However, an army public relations officer offered a possible explanation on what might have prompted this fundamental kind of gatekeeping.[151] He said the military tends to refrain from taking journalists to counter-terror operations due

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148 Conducted in Abuja on 14 September 2017.
149 *The Guardian*,'Al-Jazeera Calls for Release of Two Journalists Held in Nigeria', *The Guardian* (31 March 2015), [accessed 4 April 2015].
150 Conducted in Yola on 19 August 2017.
151 Interviewed on 29 August 2018.

to safety concerns. 'We only take journalists to safe places, where their safety and the operations wouldn't be compromised. I personally wouldn't promise to take them to counter-terrorism operations', he said. 'And, frankly, I never have any conflict with any journalist. Yes, I do ignore their calls sometimes and even get irritated by them, but we generally work well.' A former army spokesman also spoke of having a cordial relationship with journalists, but admitted that there were 'many instances' when he had to 'warn them against spreading Boko Haram lies'.[152] There were 'frictions', he said, but most of them were not between the 'Army PR team and journalists but between journalists and soldiers on other duties'. One newspaper correspondent said he had had an unpleasant experience in one such encounter.[153] 'I was harassed and intimidated by soldiers when I went to Chibok to cover the return of the kidnapped Chibok girls', he said. 'They [the soldiers] seized my camera and only returned it after a senior officer intervened. They were very hostile.' A different hostile engagement was witnessed in June 2014 when armed soldiers seized and destroyed copies of several editions of newspapers from about ten media houses in the country. According to a Freedom House report, the 'soldiers impounded newspaper delivery vehicles, searched employees, blocked printing and distribution centers, and seized copies of at least 10 newspapers'. The papers were the leading dailies in the country, the most prominent of which were: *The Guardian*, *Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *ThisDay*, and *Leadership*. 'A military spokesman described the measures as a "routine security action" to search for alleged contraband, but they were widely interpreted as reprisals for coverage of the military's faltering efforts against Boko Haram', the Freedom House report adds.[154]

Boko Haram's hostility towards journalists over perceived unfavourable reporting is even more severe. 'Before his death, Abul Qaqa always complained about negative reports', a former senior correspondent who is now a newspaper editor said.[155] 'One day he called and threatened me with death when my paper published a story based on an army statement that they'd killed some Boko Haram commanders.' Two freelance journalists said they too had received similar death threats from other Boko Haram operatives.[156] They said they were so frightened, they relocated their families to safer places because the insurgents have

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152 Interviewed in Abuja on 4 September 2017.
153 Interviewed in Yola on 25 July 2018.
154 Freedom House, 'Freedom of the Press 2015—Nigeria', Freedom House (28 April 2015). [accessed 28 April 2015].
155 Interviewed in Abuja on 29 August 2018.
156 Both interviewed in Abuja on 30 August 2018.

a reputation for carrying out their threats. Indeed, the militants do not always issue empty threats to journalists: they had killed at least two in the past and attacked offices for many newspapers following perceived negative coverage.[157] A cameraman of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Zakariyya Isa, was murdered in October 2011 after he was accused of providing 'security officials with information about their activities'.[158] And in January 2012 Enenche Akogwu, a correspondent from Nigeria's Channels Television, was killed when the insurgents attacked a major police station in the city of Kano. It was unclear whether they deliberately targeted him or whether he was caught in the crossfire, but they were responsible for his death. In April 2012 they bombed the offices of the newspaper *ThisDay* in Kaduna and Abuja, killing an employee of the company and three passers-by. '*ThisDay* Director, Eniola Bello said, "one of the reasons Boko Haram gave to justify their attack on our Abuja office was that we were not giving their activities front page prominence. They wanted to create panic".'[159]

Gatekeeping and avoidance strategies

It is not just threat and violence—or enticement and persuasion—that Boko Haram strategic communicators use in relating with journalists; they also employ gatekeeping and avoidance strategies. Even during the group's early days, its leaders always kept effective control of information flowing from the group to the public. This was strengthened as the power of the group grew. 'Most of the important information we have about Boko Haram is actually the information they supply to us themselves,' said one senior correspondent who has covered the insurgency for nearly a decade.[160] 'It's a very secretive organisation. They release their information selectively and effectively, as seen in the way they handled the information about the Chibok girls: releasing it in bits when it suited their interests.' The newspaper editor concurred.[161] 'They send their video and audio messages to those journalists they have confidence in and avoid those they dislike. The internet too helps them to reach the public directly', he said. 'And the public does pay attention to what they say because the information the military often releases about them is not always accurate.' The insurgents tend to release their messages when they sense a public desire for them, such as at the peak of

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157 Pate, 'How Journalists Survived to Report'.
158 Ibid., p. 163.
159 Ibid., p.164.
160 Interviewed in Yola on 20 August 2017.
161 The editor interviewed on 29 August 2018 quoted earlier.

the Chibok girls' saga, or when the government makes claims about defeating them, or the army claims to have rescued kidnap victims from them, or when news about the purported killing of their leader is spread.

An analysis of a sample of ten Boko Haram videos released from April 2014 to October 2018 shows that the group focused on each of these issues at the time when each was attracting public attention, making their contents attractive to journalists. All the videos contain speeches of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, with him talking to the camera as if delivering his messages directly to the public. Another common feature of the videos is the rebuttal of claims by the government or security forces, which strengthens their appeal to journalists as a means of balancing one-sided official claims. All the journalists interviewed admitted sourcing stories directly from Boko Haram video or audio messages. 'There is virtually no other way of getting information from the group now', said an editor from a television station.[162] 'Their videos contain newsworthy material and they often have more accurate information than the stuff we get from the government.' So, clearly, a lack of direct access to Boko Haram (and to the area it controls) and the newsworthiness of the material it dishes out compel journalists to rely on the insurgents' information subsidies—highlighting the relevance of both the concept of information subsidies[163] and that of news values theory.[164]

The security forces' strategic communicators also use gatekeeping and avoidance strategies in their relationship with the journalists. As noted earlier in comments by army and police public relations officers, where they admitted ignoring journalists' phone calls, strategic communicators employ avoidance tactics to block access to certain information, discourage the publication of unfavourable stories, and reduce pressure from journalists. 'We could not respond to every interview request; the best option was to issue press releases to reach every journalist at the same time', said a senior army officer who had worked in their public relations department for many years.[165] 'It enabled us to control the information we're releasing. With the availability of the Internet and social media now, the army is reaching the public directly, without any hindrance.' Journalists are aware of this strategy and have apparently learnt to live with it. 'The military strictly controls access to the conflict zone. Only they, Boko Haram and the

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162 Interviewed on 26 July 2017.
163 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*.
164 Galtung, 'The Structure of Foreign News'; Brighton, *News Values*; and Harcup, 'What is News?'.
165 Interviewed on 24 July 2017.

victims trapped there know what is happening', the editor from the television station said. 'They control the flow of information and we rely heavily on them. They hardly come to us these days, they just email press releases to us after uploading them on their website and social media.'

A national newspaper correspondent concurred, adding that the only time army spokespersons showed keenness in looking for journalists was when they were caught lying.[166] 'That's when you will see them desperately looking for journalists to publish their stories with claims of how mistakes were made', he said, citing instances when the army made false claims about rescuing kidnap victims or issued inaccurate casualty figures and then sought journalists' assistance for damage limitation after public outrage. If they were not looking for such help, he said, the military would just email press statements to journalists 'sometimes directly, sometimes via PR Nigeria' (a public relations firm employed by the military). 'And there is little we can do, other than to use them because we can't go to the actual conflict zone to get the stories ourselves', he added.

The security forces' use of information subsidies in their media campaign against Boko Haram is extensive. From mid-2013 to mid-2015 alone they 'issued over 3000 media contents including newsworthy items and publications'.[167] The figure is much higher now (no updated statistics because the military no longer releases them) as the security forces have continued to produce and distribute such materials. These are mostly press statements providing information about the military's 'counter-insurgency operations' and the 'successes' they recorded. Many of them were also uploaded on the official websites and social media pages of the Army and the Defence Headquarters. An analysis of thirty of those releases show they are largely army promotional materials; but they contain news elements attractive to journalists and are written as news stories. They include stories about troops disarming teenage suicide bombers, how the 'Army neutralizes Boko Haram terrorists', how 'troops rescue hostages used as sex slaves', how they 'kill 15 Boko Haram insurgents', how they retake towns once controlled by Boko Haram, and how they 'recover arms' and 'restore normalcy'. The public relations firm PR Nigeria was involved in carrying out the 'extensive activities involving editorial works, event management, media production

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166 Interviewed in Abuja 14 September 2017.
167 This information is contained in Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 10, in a Foreword for the book by former National Security Adviser Retired Colonel Sambo Dasuki. The book details part of the media relations work done by the military from mid-2013 to mid-2015.

and placements in print, electronic and online media' required by the military.[168] They often liaise with news organisations to help facilitate the publication of the press releases.[169] It was partly due to the high volume of media publications resulting from these releases that the military admitted that, despite difficulties encountered, some of the media outlets have 'played very strategic roles' in their strategic communications campaigns.[170]

Public relations scholarship has highlighted the significance of information subsidies in image building and agenda setting in government affairs and in the corporate world.[171] It is clear that this also applies to security and military matters. What is more, the evidence in this study suggests that the use of this strategy in reference to the issue of violent extremism reaches beyond image building and agenda setting;[172] it extends to the area of gatekeeping.[173] Mass communication scholars have identified layers of gatekeeping from newsgathering through to news consumption, even in the current digital era: news sources, journalists, users, and audiences all play the role of gatekeeper.[174] And it is evident here that strategic communicators (both Boko Haram and security forces) have managed to turn themselves into major gatekeepers, regularly using the Internet and social media, and their control of the conflict zone, to appropriate a significant part of the journalists' gatekeeping powers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that journalists have an increasingly complicated but interdependent relationship with strategic communicators in conflict reporting. The relationship is characterised by cooperation, conflict, and confrontation—with journalists sometimes being subjected to harassment and intimidation. They rely heavily on strategic communicators for information because the level of violence in the Boko Haram conflict prevents them from accessing the conflict zone. Unlike the reporting of corporate and government affairs, which usually takes place in a peaceful environment, covering violent insurgency involves serious risk-taking (such as going to the scene of violence),

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168 Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 15.
169 Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*.
170 Ibid., p. 9; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.
171 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Charron, 'Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners';
Lewis, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate?; Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.
172 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; and McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting'.
173 White, 'The "Gate Keeper"'; Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*; Singer, 'User-generated Visibility'; Bro, 'Gatekeeping in a Digital Era'.
174 Ibid.

which strategic communicators here exploit fully to the detriment of journalists. Strategic communicators' control of the conflict theatre and use of the Internet and social media enabled them to transform themselves into major gatekeepers. This control notwithstanding, the findings show that strategic communicators still court journalists to help enhance the reach and credibility of their narratives, suggesting that the more the public uncovers strategic communicators' false claims, the stronger the influence of journalists. Conversely, the more the gatekeeping role of journalists diminishes, the greater the power of strategic communicators becomes.

This research has provided some insight into the dynamic nature of the relationship between journalism and strategic communications practitioners, shedding light on how it is affected by new technologies, and how this impacts their works. However, the research throws up new questions: How much does strategic communicators' use of information subsidies influence media coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency? And to what extent has the media's lack of access to the actual conflict zones affected our understanding of the crisis? These are areas for future research. But importantly, this study does point to the continuing relevance of gatekeeping theory in mass communication research, even in the current radically changing media landscape. It also shows that its applicability reaches beyond corporate and political communications to critical areas of security and military strategic communications. And even more significantly, this research highlights the power dynamics between journalists and strategic communicators in their gatekeeping roles in conflict reporting, indicating an apparent shift of power from the former to the latter. The power shift, however, does not end strategic communicators' reliance on journalists in their bid to enhance the credibility of their narratives—a testimony of the value journalists have to them and a sign that their relationship may nevertheless survive.

Acknowledgements

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