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Crisis Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa: Media Coverage of Terrorist Attacks in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

In recent years, terrorist attacks became a serious plague ravaging West African countries. However, there is no academic research on the framing of terrorist attacks by West African media, especially in a context of social media predominance. News about terrorism floods more and more West African media ecosystem today. Yet, an appropriate comprehension of the issue could result from a cautious reflexion on the multifaceted nexus that exists between extremism, mass media and public opinion. By generating an anxious environment full of tension, terrorists use media to encourage the mobilization of public opinion to discuss their extortions. In this research, I will analyze and assess the media agenda setting and crisis communication strategy implemented by media practitioners in West African countries following terrorist attacks. Therefore, this study aims to diagnose, analyze, and evaluate the attitude of media professionals in relation to the coverage of terrorism in the light of various ethical and deontological rules that govern the profession of journalism. As such, the investigations are carried out on samples based on interviews, survey data analysis and contents analysis of the main digital media in Burkina Faso and Mali. Therefore, this study is essentially qualitative but follows a Sequential Mixed Method. It encompasses an analysis of a total of 219 news articles from “Maliweb.net” and “LeFaso.net”, along with a corpus of 98 surveyed population and 4 interviews realized with “resource persons”. In doing so, the central purpose of this research is threefold. Firstly, it aims to investigate and establish a nexus between crisis communication, media framing and the advent of social media prevalence. Secondly, this study attempts to check whether the processing of information by West African media respects the professional rules of journalism. The third purpose of the research concerns the comprehension of the digital prosumers’ behaviors towards counterfeits information related to terrorism in West African context.

Keywords: Framing, Maliweb.net, Media, LeFaso.net, terrorism, West Africa

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1. Introduction

In July 1985, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stated that “If Media can stop propagating news about terrorists’ actions, terrorism will end”¹. However, news about terrorism floods more and more the media ecosystem. The media frames the most violent images, not only because they have a duty to inform the public regarding every major

¹ British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher addressed the American Bar Association on July 15, 1985; and stated substantially that “We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend”. For more details, see M. Thatcher. (1985); Quoted by F. Lopez. (2016). *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1). Available online at the following link: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/490/html>. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher addressed the American Bar Association on July, 15, 1985; and stated substantially that “We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend”.

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incident, but besides that, the remarkably dramatic side of terrorism captivates a large audience. Hence, terrorists today exploit this dynamic and act in a way that attracts as much attention as possible. In these mechanisms of framing terrorism, or setting terrorists' agendas, the media obviously play a central role. In the current context of the global fight against terrorism in West Africa, it seems therefore interesting to study the impact of terrorist attacks in Sub-Saharan Africa and the media coverage that follows.

In fact, mass media seems perpetually guilt-ridden of nourishing extremism, by providing a platform that allows terrorists to communicate. By generating an anxious environment full of tension, terrorists use mass media to arouse the manufacture of public opinion discussing their extortions. Despite this, terrorism must not have a negative impact on press freedom and freedom of expression since these are the vital fundamentals of democracy. This situation supposes that the public has the right to get news about issues of general interest such as extremism, extortions, violence, etc. including the reactions given by local governments and worldwide news agencies.

The adequate comprehension of terrorism could result from a cautious reflexion on the multifaceted nexus that exists between extremism, mass media and public-opinion. Contextually speaking, some of the crucial features of media are undoubtedly its nature in sub-Saharan Africa, the influence of politics, and the fragmented audiences. Thereto, it is important to mention that, as a common rule, the more political personalities get engulfed in tackling terrorism, the more mass media will be involved in setting its agenda around terrorist acts. Consequently, a handful of eminent authors such as McLuhan (1962) suggest a "complete censorship" of news on extremism, through the strategically use of "black out" principle. However, this strategical censorship appears to be discordant because of the global nature of terrorism; and correspondingly, it is also inadequate seen from a democratic perspective.

The most brutal and mediatized terrorist attack in modern history is the destruction on September 11, 2001, of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center by hijacked civilian planes. This gave a new dimension and redefined the impact of media and crisis communication in the society. Likewise, the brutal beheading of Iraqi hostage Nick Berg has been seen, via the Internet, around the world in 2004. Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but its permanent presence in both traditional media and social networks, its intrusion into everyday life and its now global reach, underline more than ever the need to rethink the role of the media in a particular context of crisis.

Modern democracy, however, is to a large extent characterized by freedom of expression and the ability of media to access relevant political and societal information be it crisis or not. Once terrorism-related information is blocked by governments or other similar institutions, terrorists may have achieved one of their goals, which is to undermine the values of today's democracy. Thus, democratic institutions like media, are faced with a serious dilemma: on one hand the instrumentalization of media by terrorists to gain maximum attention; and on the other hand, censoring information in defiance of press freedom and freedom of expression and opinion which is a principle and a fundamental value.

As part of this work, I propose to analyze and assess the media agenda setting and crisis communication strategy implemented by new media practitioners in Mali and Burkina Faso following the terrorist attacks in these two West African countries. As a matter of fact, we are attempting to understand how, in a situation of terrorist attack or conflict, is public communication organized and carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa. What constraints or difficulties does it face in this new digitalized public sphere? How do social media influence the flow of public information in times of conflict or terrorist attack? What interactions do communicators from public institutions have with journalists and what are the difficulties that arise in these relationships? In doing so, this study aims to diagnose the attitude of media professionals in relation with the coverage of the issue of terrorism, analyze it and compare it to the various rules that govern the profession of journalism.

2. The Nexus Between Media and Terrorism

The role of media in battlefields (warzones, terrorism or any kind of conflictual situation) is not a new phenomenon. The American academic and political scientist, Nacos (2005), set a difference between criminal violence and its media coverage on the one hand; and the media framing of terrorism on the other hand:

Most criminals who commit violent acts do not do so for propaganda purposes to promote a political cause. By contrast, those who engage in political violence see in their actions a means of gaining media attention and an echo of their struggle, their demands and their political goals (Nacos, 2005)².

Therefore, terrorism constitutes, in fact, an action of communication. The most important thing for the victimizers is rather the publicity about their extortions than the victims and other damages. As the sociologist Aron (1956) puts it,

² Brigitte Lebens Nacos. (2005). *Media and Terrorism: The Central Role of Media in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*. *Nouveaux Horizons* (Ed.), ARS, 13, Paris.

“the terrorists do not want many people to die; they want many people to know about what they did”. Hence, today’s terrorists are looking forwards to making the news in order to create a big audience. The media offer them enough space for advertising by devoting news columns, reports, radio debates and TV interviews about the issue.

In a nutshell, terrorists use media to swell their audience. That is why the US diplomat Holbrooke (2001) stated after the September 11 attack that the world’s biggest terrorist “Osama bin Laden appears to many as a great communicator capable of using against the West the instrument on which he relied to seduce the rest of the world: the screens”. Otherwise, wondered Holbrooke (2001), “how could a guy living in a cave win the informational power³ against the world’s first information society?” This shows how much of a crucial role the media plays in terms of proliferation of news related to terrorism. Talking about informational power, Hillary Clinton addressed the American Foreign Policy Priorities Committee in March 2011 with the following terms: “the United States of America is in an information war and we are losing that war (...) Aljazeera is winning the war” (Savigny, 2000).

However, the French war reporter Adrien Jaulmes (2014) had a different understanding of the relationship that exists between media and war/terrorism:

This relationship is a dangerous but exotic sport that changes its nature with the World War I (1914-1918). Journalists are not only mobilized to support the war effort but also to portray the enemy. Therefore, the credibility of the press becomes doubtful because reporters choose their side. Their works are no longer objective⁴.

Similarly, the English Critic, Orwell (1949) argued that in a conflictual situation such as war or terrorism, “a journalist must work with his heart as much as with his mind”⁵. In addition to that, investigating and reporting news in very restrictive and dangerous conditions is not everyone’s cup of tea. Such journalistic practice involves a combination of several factors such as logistical issues, easy access to battlefields, controversies over the truth, the distinction between facts and opinions and especially how to tell the story impartially and objectively.

Another dimension of the nexus between media and terrorism is the amplification of the terrorists’ messages. According to the American Scholar, Kegley (1999), “all terrorism is international”. Thus, the international dimension of terrorism is made possible by the media (TV, radio, digital media, and social media platforms today). An insignificant fact in a very distant land is put in the spotlight by the media, picked up by as many media as possible. As an illustration, the very scenes of terrorist attacks turn out to be ‘the heart of the mediated messages’; and accordingly, the terrorist discourse is expressed through the images of the dead and wounded people rather than investigating the real sources of the problem. In doing so, traditional media news workers (newspapers, radio and TV journalists), YouTubers, bloggers, and even web activists are rushing to be the first to disseminate terrorists’ messages through their various platforms.

More interestingly, information on terrorist attacks is most often taken in its raw form and is disseminated without any verification; and often no possibility of fact-checking. The imperative mission is to be the first to relay information to the ‘global village’ (McLuhan, 1962). That is how the world has become in the current era of social media proliferation. Media are therefore trapped; because they are used by terrorists to achieve their objectives. In this regard, the academic Nacos (2005) put it this way:

When terrorists strike, they are sure to attract the attention of media professionals, and consequently, the attention of the audience and finally the government of the targeted country. In addition, given the globalization and the internationalization of modern communication systems, the perpetrators of terrorist acts are echoed in the digital media and social media platforms; and as a result, they benefit from the attention of a huge number of populations and governments outside the countries directly targeted (Nacos, 2005).

3. Problematization of the Research

Communication plays a major role in a context of crisis; and more specifically, in the fight against terrorism. In such a context, the struggle is not only military, but also and above all communicational. Unfortunately, crisis communication in Sub-Saharan Africa is still desperately seeking to be well-organized. Governments are putting themselves in a posture of routine communication vis-à-vis terrorist attacks. Talking about communication and terrorism, this statement from Robbins (1994) illustrates this point so well: “If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always got.”⁶

³ In 1959 the psychologists John Robert French and Bertram Raven distinguished five different bases of powers: Legitimate Power, Reward Power, Coercive Power, Expert Power and Referent Power. Then six years later, in 1965, Bertram Raven added Informational Power that he considered as very influential in every domain.

⁴ See Patrick Cockburn. (2014). *The Return of the Jihadists. At the roots of the Islamic State – Ed. Equators. Preface and Translator Adrien Jaulmes.*

⁵ See 1984 by George Orwell (1949). *War is Peace, Ch. 17, 112.*

Any communication about terrorism is de facto crisis communication. Terrorist attacks are increasing everywhere in the world. Hostage-takings follow one another in the Sub-Saharan strip. Nigeria for example is always facing local terrorism that challenges the established socioeconomic order and deadly interfaith crises. In view of these demonstrations by the terrorist groups of AL-QAEDA⁷ and its allies in Africa, it is normal to worry about a plausible worsening of the situation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, since 2013, there have been a fairly significant number of attacks, kidnappings, terrorist intimidations and threats. In fact, it is possible to say that a terrorist act is in fine an act of communication because for the terrorists, it is the message that matters, not the victim.

More importantly, we are living in a digital era characterized by digital news and social media platforms. There is no way-out but to sleep and wake up with the information emanating from smartphones, iPads, computers, and televisions. Thus, using these digital media tools or, at most, navigating through social media platforms has become a habit, a daily routine, a new discipline, and even an instinct for “digital prosumers” (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2009)⁸. There is nothing relevant (in terms of information) but images and videos devoid of depth, originality, and coherence. The human mind, like a black box, wittingly or unwittingly, consciously or unconsciously is perpetually consuming these images, these digital counterfeit contents, this social mediated information.

This state of fact is due to the unprecedented progress of communication and information technologies. In this twenty-first century, everything is essentially based on the utilization of these new technologies by new generation of digital natives. That is to say: without these new technologies nothing can be relevantly possible for the new generation of active “digital prosumers”. These new technologies along with the explosion of digital platforms have generated new ways of spreading information, openhanded citizens’ unprecedented freedom of expression. A freedom of expression that is in accordance with the Charter of Munich (1971) which endorses the right to press freedom, freedom of opinion and to public information.

Freedom of expression is one of the fundamental principles of democracy (UDHR, 1948). This freedom is supremely underlined by the freedom granted to the media ecosystem, including traditional media, digital media, and social media networks. Press freedom has been consolidated by the multiplicity of new media platforms; and particularly with the advent of digitalization process which gave birth to social media: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, Tweeter, TikTok, etc. Thus, traditional media’s reputation tends to be reduced in this context of social media predominance, which reduces both the cost and the time of media news accessibility. Even though the use of seductive traditional media such as radio and TV has been prioritized for a long time, today social networks enable an extraordinary democratization of information giving to the term ‘democracy’ all its acclaim. Nowadays, it is not exaggerating to claim that social media platforms constitute the best privileged means of communication for billions of users everywhere in the world. In this regard, it is indispensable for new generations of media professionals, journalists, communicators and media practitioners in general, to revolutionize the sector with new innovations in order to keep building a specific audience identity, and to keep adapting the products (if we consider information as a commodity) to the new behaviors of media news prosumers.

Furthermore, the appearance of social networks in the field of informational diffusion within two decades has offered new possibilities and advantages. One of these innovative possibilities is the instantaneity in terms of informational dissemination through digital media platforms such as WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook pages, etc. Nonetheless, this new method of propagation of information adopted by media professionals raises crucial questions in West Africa: Is that a real democratization of information for the benefit of the digital contents’ prosumers? How to cover terrorist attacks in Sub-Saharan Africa while respecting the ethical and deontological rules of journalism? In a context of crisis communication like the media coverage of terrorism, what motivates traditional media professionals to resort to social media? What are the favorable and unfavorable factors for better crisis communication about terrorism in the West African context? In other words, do media workers have the necessary hindsight to inform the population about terrorist attacks without condoning terrorism? These different questions will certainly constitute the principal framework of my study and will necessarily find answers at the end of this research.

⁶ Excerpted from Tony Robbins. (1994). *Giant Steps: Small Changes to Make a Big Difference*. Presso Punti di Ritiro.

⁷ Founded in 1988, *Al-Qaeda* (the base in Arabic) is a network of Islamic fundamentalist groups associated with the September, 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in the USA. The main ideology of Al-Qaeda is to eradicate all foreign influences, especially Western domination, in Muslim countries.

⁸ See George Ritzer. and Nathan Jurgenson. (2009). *The Age of Digital ‘Prosumer’*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509354673>

4. Scientific Interest of the Research

I have decided to work on this topic because terrorism is a new phenomenon in West Africa, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, and has strong repercussions on the lives of the population. The interest of this study also lies in the fact that traditional media do not yet have a deep understanding of the issues related to the coverage of these kinds of crises. In fact, the difficulties in processing information during certain terrorist attacks in West Africa reveal the challenges of framing such news. Academically, this study concerns a new phenomenon which influences the behavior of media professionals and the ways of the media framing as well as the West African media agenda setting.

The crisis communication implemented by West African governments and the media's handling of information in the context of terrorism are often singled out. It is common to observe that following a terrorist attack, two types of communication prevail: (a) governmental communication which should reassure the population and attest to the control of the situation; and (b) communication experts (or pseudo-experts) interviewed by the media professionals to make their comments and analysis of the situation. However, according to the scholar Ben-Ammar (2018), this is not an effective way of communicating about terrorism. He articulates it as follows:

The legitimacy and credibility of "official speech" closely depend on the degree of awareness of this reality as well as the responsiveness of the government through effective and well-planned communication. Communication should be thought of as an integral part of any mechanism for combating terrorism (Ben-Ammar, 2018).

This is a relatively young and brand-new field of study that is conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in French speaking countries, as the first cases of terrorist attacks only date back to 2013 in Mali, 2015 in Burkina Faso, and 2016 in Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). Even at the international level, it was in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, that scholars, researchers and academics began to take an interest in the peculiarities of the crisis described as a terrorist act and the challenges that this kind of crisis poses in terms of communication. It is therefore a rather particular work which will be of modest contribution to research in Media, Information and Communication studies in West Africa and beyond.

5. Research Limitations and Difficulties

Difficulties are inherent in all scientific research. The major difficulties that I faced throughout the current study have been essentially related to the availability of research materials. Firstly, in the literature review, general hardcover books on terrorism are not available in nearby libraries. In addition, those available online are quite expensive given the fact that I do not have enough financial research fund to afford them. I, therefore, worked mostly with scientific articles and free access e-books available on e-libraries for free downloads and with a very limited quantity of hardback documents.

Another remarkable difficulty is that I kept updating information based on the last evolutions of terrorism in West Africa as well as the agenda setting of West African media groups. In fact, the concept of crisis communication is evolving over time, and I found it necessary to take every single development into account in my investigations.

Another limitation was the inaccessibility of media managers, sociologists, and experts in terrorism for online interviews. Hence, I ended up by conducting phone calls and email interviews with some of them, given the research's time constraint. All these difficulties, far from demotivating me, have further galvanized me to continue investigating even more this study. The last and not the least setback was technological failure and this did not make things easy for me during my investigation.

6. Conceptual Definition and Contextualization of Terrorist Attack

Terrorism is in essence a crisis scenario created by an organization or an individual in order to sow unrest and use it as leverage over an institution such as a government, company, country, or system. From the Latin verb '*terrere*' which means 'to frighten'; the word terrorism corresponds to "great fear". It can be a result of the systematic use of terror as a policy by a group or an individual to nurture fear in the population. To paraphrase Walter Laqueur (1977), "terrorism is propaganda by action". Consequently, a terrorist is a person who uses terror and violence to impose his/her ideology (political, religious), beliefs or authority on other individuals or organizations.

Within the international community, a clear definition of terrorism has been the subject of many debates. The General Secretary of the United Nations, António Guterres, indicated on July 12, 2005, that it must be necessary to simply agree that the murder of unarmed civilians, no matter the defended cause, is 'terrorism'. Some researchers prefer the definition that, any action aimed at causing death or serious injury to civilians or non-combatants constitutes a terrorist act.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, terrorist attacks generally constitute killings, bombings, gun fires, and deprivation of liberty, imposed on civilians, armed and security forces, institutional officials, public and private infrastructures, symbols and

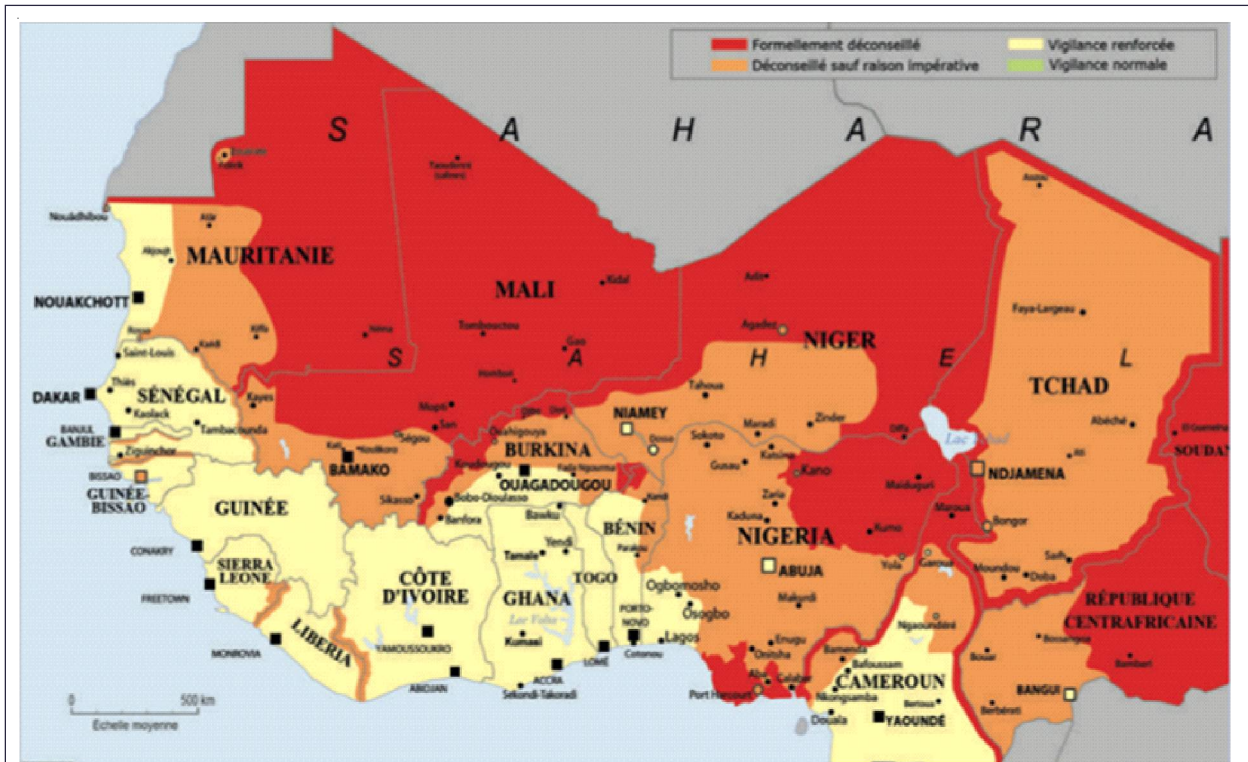


Figure 1: Mapping Terrorism in the Sahel

emblems of the State, etc., by unidentified armed individuals. West Africa has experienced in recent years a proliferation of various terrorist groups, who benefit from the fragility of states in the region to grow and terrorize the population. The Libyan and Malian crises have accentuated the emergence of several of these groups in the West African region. In the map (Figure 1), the red color indicates the very high-risk West African zones, not recommended to foreign tourists. These zones include chiefly Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Niger; and partially Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, and the republic of Central Africa.

According to some data collected from the Citizen Coalition for the Sahel region, the year 2020 was the deadliest year for civilians in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with more than 2,440 deaths. There are currently 1096 attacks which have killed 2443 civilians in these three Sub-Saharan countries, averaging 91 attacks and 203 deaths per month⁹. In Mali, 174 terrorist attacks were recorded in 2020. According to the Observatory for Democracy and Human Rights (ODDH), in Burkina Faso, “between April 2015 and May 2020, terrorist groups carried out at least 580 attacks targeting mainly the army, police stations, militias groups, etc. The worst terrorist attack in Burkina Faso occurred in June 2021 leading to 160 deaths. Many other incidents have been reported in the media and on social media networks, which suggests that the total number of terrorist attacks committed during this period is likely much higher”¹⁰. The graph (Figure 2) gives more visual details about the increase of terrorist attacks in the Sahel region.

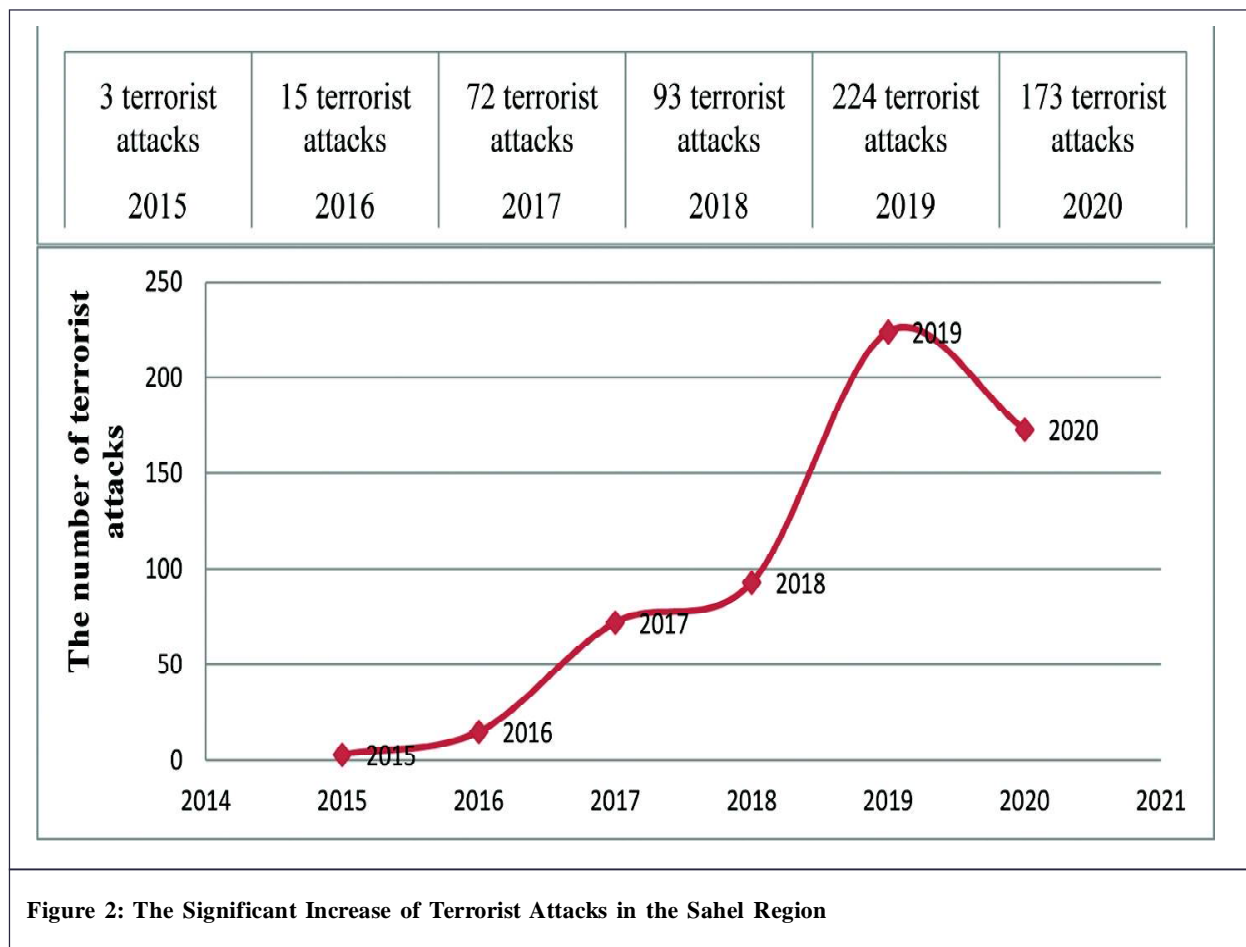
6.1. Media Coverage

Media coverage can be defined as the processing of information devoted to a specific subject, event, or issue through various media platforms (newspaper, online media, TV reports, interviews, or Radio broadcasting), and its dissemination to the public (various audiences). Media coverage can help develop an emotional acquaintance with its audience.

In this era of digital media prevalence, the ‘media coverage’ concept is used to refer to all social media feeds, blog articles, YouTube videos or any type of digital content that frames a specific issue, brand, product, or services. Therefore, to fully understand the concept of media coverage, it is necessary to decipher the notion of media framing.

⁹ Excerpt from the document entitled “Sahel: What must change”. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sahel%20Ce%20qui%20doit%20changer%20-%20Rapport%20Coalition%20citoyenne.pdf>

¹⁰ ODDH produced a document in May 2020 entitled: “Burkina Faso. Risk of a new Rwanda?” https://lefaso.net/IMG/pdf/burkina_faso_risque_d_un_nouveau_rwanda.pdf



6.2. Media Framing

Framing has a huge impact on how the audience comprehends, understands, or thinks about societal issues. Thus, media coverage has always been framed throughout different angles of treatment or perspectives, leading the audience to interpret the information according to the news construction. In fact, mediated information comprises of three distinct categories: objective reality (real image), subjective reality (desired image) and constructed reality (images perceived through media) (Kaid *et al.*, 1991). That is why mass-media is considered as the distributors of ideology (Gitlin, 1980). Basically, this means that the so-called ideologies are constructed, manufactured, or disseminated mainly via framings, or specific angles of treatment (the story focus).

The term ‘framing’ was initially coined in by the British anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, in 1955 to describe how the media selects some aspects of apparent reality and mark them as more prominent in a specific communicative style. Framing can be highlighted as the ways of considering whether a glass is ‘half full’ or ‘half empty’, depending on which aspect of the spectrum newsmakers decide to put forward (Entman, 1993). Thus, framing is the way of “elevating information in salience” (*ibid.*, pp. 53). There are two different types of framings in media coverage: episodic framing and thematic framing. Episodic framing tracks a specific event in a straight line; whereas thematic framing usually befalls later, several times after the event had happened (Kimberly, 2008). In this research, my analysis combines both episodic framings and thematic media framings of terrorism in Mali and Burkina Faso, along with content analysis of two main digital media platforms (*LeFaso.net* and *Maliweb.net*) from these two West African countries.

Furthermore, a handful of modern scholars like Valkenburg (2000), Scheufele (1999), and Gamson (1993), define media framing as a process whereby professionals of communication, intentionally or unintentionally, act to manufacture a point of view that underlines facts concerning a given situation, allowing people to interpret it in a particular manner. Yet, framing can be considered as a form of agenda-setting, a process of communication which consists of directing the public’s attention to a specific issue (Kurt, 1940). The framing concept in this study is related to the indexing theory (Hallin and Mancini, 1986; Naim and Bennett, 1990).

This research aims at investigating how the use of media symbolism and social media platforms affected the apprehension of terrorism news framing in Mali and Burkina Faso. In this context, a symbol can be well-defined as a

distinctive sign, an explicit mark, or a specific word, that labels or designates a constructed idea. Thus, symbols encourage the media audience to construct their own interpretations of a situation in order to grasp it in a way that goes beyond the simple knowledge of the facts. In 1974, the American sociologist Erving Goffman deeply discussed this concept and termed it as “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman, 1974). According to him, “schemata of interpretation” allow people to distinguish, perceive, identify, and interpret events, manufacturing de facto specific meanings.

Moreover, since framing is defined as a way of structuring or presenting an issue, the consideration of the audience is the core question. In fact, it involves explanations and descriptions of an issue in a specific context, retaining the attention and most importantly the support of the audience. This means that the way the issue is framed always reflects the behavior, attitude, and engagement of the targeted audience. A handful of scholars claimed that the quintessence of the framing process is to provide a compact and tangible platform for examining how discourse is orchestrated in the media ecosystem (Kimberly, 2008). Hence, the deliberate purpose of framing is to redirect people’s attention towards specific political subjects.

In visual communication, framing consists of presenting visually symbolic elements through a strategic arrangement in such a way to give a specific connotation (*ibid.*, 2008). Entman (2003) claims that “the words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity of stimulating positively or negatively, objectively or subjectively, different sides in a political conflict”. Thus, it consists of keeping the audience’s focus on the framed topic. That is why Entman conceptualized it as ‘dominant frames’; that is to say, the frames which dictate the outlines of the discussions. For him, certain frames turn out to become more dominant than others via three distinct variables: their motivation, power, strategy, and cultural congruence (*ibid.*).

As a result, the framing theory explores the manipulation of audiences by media through the way of presenting them with only one side of the news. The audience have therefore to be more vigilant and exercise its critical thinking abilities to deal with such mediated information. During terrorist attacks, what the media present us is just pieces of “frames”, emphasizing certain aspects of the reality. Thus, this theory will be very important for my research because it allows comprehending the choices of the media experts in the treatment of information related to terrorism in the context of West Africa.

7. Conceptual Definition of ‘Jihadism And Islamism’

Etymologically, the terms ‘Jihadism’ and ‘Islamism’ are formed respectively from the roots *Jihād* (effort or struggle in Arabic language), *Islām* (meaning literally submission to God) and the suffix ‘*ism*’ which semantically means ideology. This roughly means (and mistakenly) an ideology based on the Islamic religion. Hence, the notion ‘Jihadism’ is widely used (often inaccurately) by Western media, and often Western politicians, to depict those who commit violence. As a matter of fact, after the Vienna terrorist attack which occurred in November 2020, the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz made the following speech to depict the situation:

It has now been confirmed that yesterday’s attack was clearly an *Islamist terrorist attack*. It was an attack out of hatred - out of hatred for our basic values, for our way of life, for our democracy, in which all people are equal in rights and dignity. (...) Our enemy - Islamist extremism - not only wants to cause death and suffering; it also wants to divide our society. (...) We must all be aware that this is not a conflict between Christians and Muslims or between Austrians and migrants. No, this is a fight between many people who believe in peace and those few who want war. It is a fight between civilization and barbarism. And we will fight this fight with all our determination.¹¹

Even though the Austrian Chancellor Kurz deliberately mentioned that “this is not a conflict between Christians and Muslims”, his remarks still reflect a wrong perception of *Islam* widely held in Europe, especially when made a few days after the vehement clashes between the French President Emmanuel Macron and some leaders in Islamic countries.¹² All these things remind us that the fight against both Islamophobia and Terrorism in the West still has a long way to go.

However, in Arabic, the term *Jihād* could designate internal efforts or struggles of an individual or a group against improper temptations. For example, the Muslims’ daily ritual prayers and the fasting during the month of Ramadan can be considered as individual *Jihād*. These efforts and struggles aim, in the Islamic understanding, to build a better Muslim community or to fight against unbelievers (Hegghammer, 2010). This means that the fundamental role of Islamism

¹¹ Carlo Arrighi (2020). *Stating Otherness Through Socio-Cultural Biases - Sociology Study*, 10(5), 207-215 doi: 10.17265/2159-5526/2020.05.003 - University of Padua, Padua, Italy. <http://www.davidpublisher.org/Public/uploads/Contribute/5fd827793a692.pdf>

¹² The assassination of the French high school teacher, Samuel Paty²¹, on October 16, 2020, has further fueled tension between Muslims and Liberals, or more crucially, between East and West, in general. This crime occurred three weeks after a new attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.

is to reorganize the Muslim community in accordance with the Islamic law, or the Sharia. As the Muslim scholar Muzammil H Siddiqi (2012) put it:

Jihad is all about doing your best to better your acts. In the Holy Qur'an, the word Jihad is used 33 times in various forms. It is often associated with other Quranic concepts such as faith, repentance, righteous actions, and emigration (...). Therefore, Jihad is about protecting the faith of the individual and his rights. However, it is not always a war although it can sometimes take this form. Islam is the religion of peace, but this does not mean that it accepts oppression. Islam teaches that we should do all we can to eliminate tensions and conflicts. Islam promotes peaceful means to bring about change and reforms. In reality, Islam insists that one should strive to eradicate evil by peaceful means without resorting to force as much as possible.

This argumentation of Muzammil Siddiqi (2012) was reinforced by the research conducted by the Engineer, Tom Anderson, who developed an analytical Software called "Odin Text" in 2016 to find "the most violent" Holy book amongst the Old and New Testaments as well as the English version of the Quran. It reveals that the Quran uses less violent concepts than the two other Holy books (the Old and New Testament). The researcher explained that:

The research project had been motivated by the constant public discussions, contradictions and debates about whether or not the issue of terrorism linked to "Islamic fundamentalism" reflects - to some degree - fundamentally and characteristically the violence about Islam as compared to other major religions¹³.

In academia, Western researchers started using the term *Jihadism* since the 1990s and more abusively since September 11, 2001, attacks, to portray violent terrorist acts. Notwithstanding, in Muslim societies, *Jihād* turns out to be both an individual and a collective duty that must be accomplished by every believer. That is why the word '*jihadism*' is not frequently used by Muslim thinkers and Middle Eastern scholars because it is wrongly associated with the Islamic notion of 'illegitimate violence'.

7.1. Compromising Media Ethics and Deontology

The word 'ethics' takes its origin from the Greek root '*ethicos*' (meaning moral), and '*ethos*' which means values, customs, or traditions. Hence, in the common understanding, ethics refer to a personal rule based on moral and individual values. As a matter of fact, ethics is personal and include all the rules and arrangements made by an individual in order to perform a job, to exercise a profession. Most often, the term is used in the media domain to bring out the decency of the profession; and in any other profession it is used to qualify the sector as noble. Ethics (generally in plural) is therefore a reflection on the values that guide and motivate our actions. This reflection is concerned with our relationships with others and can be carried out at two levels. At the most general level, ethical reflection concerns conceptions of good, justice and fairness in human activities.

In media communication, the ethics of journalism is defined by two reference texts one of which was approved by the journalists' unions of the six member states of the EEC¹⁴, in addition to those of Switzerland, and Austria, and the Declaration of duties and of the rights of journalists in 1971, known as the Munich Charter. In its preamble, the Munich Charter (1971) states that:

The right to information, to free speech and to criticism is one of the most fundamental freedoms of every human being. The whole complex of duties and rights of journalists derives from this right of the public to know facts and opinions. The responsibility of journalists vis-a-vis the public has precedence over any other responsibility, in particular towards their employers and the public power. The mission to inform necessarily includes the limits journalists spontaneously impose on themselves. This is the subject of the present declaration of duties. Yet, these duties can be effectively respected in the exercise of the journalist profession only if the concrete conditions of professional independence and dignity are implemented.

On the other side of the spectrum, the term 'deontology' is derived from the Greek '*deon*' (meaning duty) or '*deontos*' (which means suitable) and '*logos*' which means knowledge or study. It refers to all the duties and obligations imposed on members of a professional order or association. Like a rule of law, deontological rules apply identically to all members of the group, in all situations of practice. An authority is responsible for enforcing them and imposing sanctions in the case of derogation. In West Africa, and in almost all countries, the profession of journalism is governed by deontological codes and ethical rules guaranteed by professional media associations. Deontology is quite precise as to what the professionals should do or should avoid doing in common practice situations.

¹³ Tom Anderson (2016). *Odin Text*. Article available Online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/violence-more-common-in-bible-than-quran-text-analysis-reveals-a6863381.html>

¹⁴ European Economic Community (EEC) is formed by six key members which are France, West Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries: Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

In modern moral philosophy, the terminology ‘deontology’ is classified amongst the normative theories which discuss what is morally required, allowed or prohibited. The term was coined for the first time by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham – the father of utilitarianism – in 1816 to illustrate his conception of morality. Yet, at the very beginning, Bentham (1816) used it as a synonym of what he called ‘censorial ethics’; those ethics which are based on individual judgment. However, in the contemporary conceptualization and specifically in this research, journalistic ethics should be characterized by duties understood as moral obligations, but not as legal constraints. In short, in its general definition, deontology is a theory of duties which advocates the fact of knowing what is right and proper to do. As a result, journalism is a central profession for the prosperity of democratic nations. However, the profession is organized around the ethical and deontological rules which are above all moral requirements to guarantee the credibility of the mediated information. The scholar Linard and Scirpo (1998) reminds us about the distinction and complementarity between ethics and deontology in journalism:

Ethics and deontology are not synonyms. Ethics appeal to values, to everyone’s awareness of what is noble or infamous, good or bad, to do or not to do. Deontology, on the other side of the coin, is made up of rules that the profession imposes on itself. The compliance to the deontological statements is generally well-organized by internal rules of the profession which penalize any transgression¹⁵.

Amongst the ethical and deontological rules, there are therefore several, but the most common ones are the following: the veracity of the information, the impartiality, the critical distance, the absence of collusion, and the protection of sources of information. I will elucidate these terminologies in the second part of this research.

8. The Nexus Between Terrorism and Crisis Communication

Based on the case of the shooting in the Parliament of Ottawa on October 22, 2014, Serge Banyongen wrote a book entitled “*Terrorism and Crisis Communication: The Case of Ottawa*”¹⁶ in which he assessed the place of communication in the understanding and the management of a terrorist act. His study dissects the preparation and dissemination of strategic messages by officials and politicians through various media, and then deduces operational concepts and theories. Better than a simple case study, Banyongen (2016) confronts different contexts of crises, the communication that results from them and the empirical realities of a terrorist act. Eventually, his work constitutes a fundamental contribution to academic debates across many societies, namely the dialectic between freedom and security in a context where terrorism as a form of asymmetric violence remains a permanent threat. Likewise, to contextualize it with my study, terrorist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased and diversified in the last five years despite the determination of the governments to tackle it. Yet, media communication occupies a central place in the response provided by the public authorities.

Similarly, Fenardji (2015) asserts that terrorism is not just a bombing machine; it is a whole complex system that relies on a strategic weapon of great importance which is communication. Nevertheless, counterterrorism attempts to understand the importance of the ‘terrorist discourse’. Thus, to exist, terrorist groups must show themselves by using the new means of communication. That is the very basis of the thought of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) or Daesh. These groups are condemned to communicate in order to exist. Therefore, this communication process is accomplished via the strategic use of media symbolism.

9. Media Symbolism and Terrorism

Every communication strategy is accompanied by strongly infused symbolism. This can be found in terrorist actions as well as in the choice of dates for operations, or even in the process of naming terrorist groups. For example, the Charlie Hebdo attack in France was highly symbolic. This attack which hit the heart of Paris was one of the most designated targets by terrorist organizations. It was highly symbolic because the fact that the magazine distributed the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad shocked the Arab world in 2005. As a matter of fact, this justifies somehow their actions even though the Islamic religion does not promote violence.

The French geopolitical expert on terrorism issues, Guidère (2015), discussed the importance of symbolism in his book entitled “*Al-Qaida conquering the Maghreb*”. He explains that as long as we do not take into account the totality of the information transmitted by the terrorists, we will have little or no understanding of their mentality, and we will not be able to prevent future actions. Regarding the names of some terrorist groups, or even some operations’ names,

¹⁵ André Linard, in collaboration with Bertrand Scirpo (May, 1998). *Law, Deontology and Ethics of Media*. GRET Diffusion, Paris, France.

¹⁶ See Banyongen, Serge. (2016). *Terrorism and Crisis Communication: The Case of Ottawa*, Editions *Knowledge and Information*, 306.

Guidère (2015) claimed that it is not possible to win a battle or a war without naming it. Even the simple fact of associating the name of God “*Allahu Akbar*” during terrorist operations corresponds to a savvy use of symbolism. Thus, the choice of words responds primarily to a military communication objective, but also has a definite psychological impact in the civilian world (*ibid.*). Just like in marketing, to sell a product or service it must first be assigned a name; the same applies to battles which must also be given ‘seller-names’. For example, the first operation of the Salafist Group in Mauritania was codenamed ‘*Badr*’, in reference to the first victorious battle of the Sunnis, during the time of Prophet Muhammad in the year 624. Therefore, the names of battles do really matter, and so do the names of terrorist groups. For some specialists, these names are concrete clues through which it is possible to access terrorists’ intentions and strategic data related to certain attacks.

In addition, terrorist organizations use the social and political reality to criticize the established order, and most often the state. As an illustration, in the 1990s in Algeria, the Islamic Armed Group (GIA) primarily targeted all symbolic representations of the state. New terrorist groups like AQIM¹⁷, or even *Daesh* (داعش), are continuing to practice the same process of violent protests. From this perspective, the state is symbolically seen as ‘*Kafir*’ (كافر)—meaning impious in Arabic—and constitutes therefore an obstacle to the creation of an Islamic state. With the internationalization of terrorism, this terrorist conception is now accompanied by a witty criticism of the West, and most significantly, it is misunderstood by some scholars in the Western academia. Moreover, terrorist groups often use factual data to justify their actions such as the West’s Islamophobic attitude and interventionism. In fact, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 would have finished sealing this image of a violent West. According to Mathieu Guidère, however, “anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism are two strong axes of Al-Qaida propaganda” and indeed, through numerous press releases, AQIM takes up this discourse full of symbolism in order to galvanize its troops and future members (Guidère, 2015). As a result, terrorists know how to turn people’s frustration to their advantage over foreign powers who seem to intervene most often only to preserve their economic interests than to bring true peace. This state of fact is perceptible in French-Speaking West African countries like Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Niger where many foreign companies, especially French come only looking for opportunities to extract more mineral resources.

Eventually, the use of media symbolism in crisis context takes another dimension when it happens in an era dominated by social media proliferation and this delineated next.

10. The Social Mediated Crisis Communication

The theory of Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC)¹⁸ was recently developed by Lucinda, Austin *et al.* (2017). This communicational model plays a significant role in a context where crisis communication is implemented today. The SMCC theory implies that in a context of crisis, the social media audience encompasses three major components:

- The Influentials¹⁹: Those people who create an important chunk of information related specific crisis contexts on social media platforms including YouTubers, bloggers, digital activists, and other social media accounts managers.
- The Followers: These are the individuals or group of people who are following, sharing, commenting, and liking the information disseminated by the first group (the influentials).
- The Inactive Members: These are the group of people who decide to stay inactive, neither sharing nor commenting on information on social media platforms. Although the ‘inactive members’ have social media accounts, a vast majority is old, mostly born before the age of social media.

The crucial thing about the SMCC model is both *Influentials* and *Followers*’ direct and indirect propagation of messages through social media platforms. Given the fact that almost every traditional media today has at least one social media account, the *Inactive Members* get access to the news via these social mediated pages. As a result, the SMCC theory turns out to be useful for the new generation of digital communication experts in situations of emergency to best spread their messages. This communicational model provides more clarifications on the behaviors and features of audiences that can be helpful in terms of sharpening up appropriate communication strategies according to the contexts. In emergency situations in which there is a relatively limited timeframe for the audiences to develop critical thinking

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu. (2009). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Algerian Challenge or Global Threat? *Carnegie Papers*, Middle East Program - Number 104 - October 2009. Available online: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda_islamic_maghreb.pdf

¹⁸ Lucinda L. and Austin, Yan (2017). *Social Media and Crisis Communication; 1st Edition, 482, Published June 20, 2017 by Routledge.*

¹⁹ According to the SMMC model the concept of “*Influentials*” refers to the definition of “*influencers*” on social media. The Cambridge dictionary defines the latter as “a person or group that has the ability to influence the behavior or opinions of others”. In fine, it is someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave.

mechanisms—because the crises affect the individuals’ psycho-emotional attitudes, it is essential to know how to effectively manage the social mediated information.

Concretely, the SMCC model has been introduced to explore the online crisis management process because during crisis, people spend more time on social networks like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc. (Ouedraogo, 2020)²⁰. In West African countries like Mali, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso, social media networks are heavily used by governments and official institutions. This allows communicators to reach most of the fragmented audience within a very short time. Besides this state of fact, the social responsibility of journalists is also crucial when it comes to framing terrorism-related news.

11. The Social Responsibility of Journalists

Journalism is a profession governed by inviolable principles. These principles include objectivity, impartiality, accuracy, ethics and professional demeanors. It is a profession that is closely supervised on one hand by regulatory bodies disposed with ethical codes and, on the other hand by peers through deontological rules. Indeed, if these fundamentals of journalism are not respected, the media workers—who should be models of honesty and trustworthiness—will accomplish a work that is truncated and harmful for their audiences (Kovach and Rosentiel, 2004)²¹. Also, seen from a different perspective, Cherilyn Ireton *et al.* (2018) stated that:

The primary task of the journalists is to serve the audiences’ right to truthful and authentic information through an honest attachment to objective reality, by consciously placing the facts in their context, by deploying all the creative power of the reporter, so that the public receives appropriate material allowing them to form a precise and coherent picture of the world, where the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and situations, would be understood as objectively as possible²² (Mantzaris *et al.*, 2018).

However, according to Martin-Lagardette (2006), “if the information is truncated or biased, a whole chain of judgments, behaviors and attitudes will be distorted and as a result, readers will suffer unwittingly”²³. Therefore, it becomes important to figure out the necessary means to enable journalists to morally perform their tasks with ability and professionalism. Furthermore, in their work about the ‘Principles of Journalism’, Kovach and Rosentiel (2004) discussed these fundamentals with two key elements formulated as What Journalists Should Know, and What the Public Should Demand. Thus, researchers have redefined the primary role of journalism and the essential principles that drive this profession, “the first obligation of which being to tell the truth”. Beyond this principle, fact-checking, economic and political independence, fairness and the duty of conscience are other sub-principles that are crucial to media professionals. Put it differently, another author, Daniel Cornu (2009), articulates the issue as:

The first duty of the journalists is to respect the truth whatever the consequences for themselves, and this, because of the right that the public has to know the truth (...) A journalist must struggle to ensure that the information he/she is disseminating is correct and intact, to avoid expressing biased comments, conjectures, as well as falsification by distortion.²⁴

In consequence, the ethical commitments to the universal values of humanism oblige the journalists to refrain from any form of propagation of violence, wars, aggression, or to all other forms of hatred and discrimination especially racism, xenophobia, apartheid, etc. This also incites media news workers to resist any type of corruption from tyrannical and totalitarian regimes. Moreover, in dealing with journalistic information, the media focus exclusively on the facts. This is perceptible through the process of framings as well as the angles of treatment. This is most often linked to the editorial line of each media and the recurrence of the event and its impact on the audiences, since some events create an agenda effect via monopoly of media columns.

²⁰ N. Ouedraogo. (2020). *Social Media Literacy in Crisis Context: Fake News Consumption during COVID-19 Lockdown*. *Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN Electronic Journal)*, Available Online at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3601466> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3601466>.

²¹ Bill, Kovach, and Tom, Rosentiel. (2004). *Principles of Journalism: What Journalists Sshould Know, What the Public Should Require*, 34, *Nouveaux Horizons, ARS, Paris*.

²² Alexios Mantzarlis., Alice Matthews., Cherilyn Ireton., Claire Wardle., Fergus Bell., Hossein Derakhshan., Julie Posetti., Magda Abu-Fadil. and Tom Trewinnard. (2018). *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation*. *Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*; Paris 07 SP, France. Online access: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0_0.pdf

²³ Jean-Luc Martin-Lagardette. (2006). *Responsible Information: A Democratic Challenge*, PUF, Paris, France.

²⁴ Daniel Cornu. (2009). *Journalism and Truth: Information Ethics in the Challenge of Media Change*, 80, Labor et Fides (Ed.), Genève.

Eventually, all these principles of impartiality, neutrality, objectivity and independence can be conceptualized as the social responsibility of the media. This means that journalists have a social mission within the society in which they live. They work for the manifestation of the truth in the field of information, sensitization and social communication by delivering accurate facts to the public. Concretely, in the case of media covering of the terrorist attacks, journalists are somehow faced with a social dilemma. They are trapped between telling the truth (the facts), or criticizing the actions of the government and weakness of the security forces. Indeed, siding with the government makes the journalists guilty of colluding with the political power in the public’s eyes because “the facts are sacred, but the comments are free” (Rogers, 2011). How to tell it? Can the journalist tell everything? Should journalists be silent in some circumstances, or should they describe the whole lived reality without qualms? That is the social dilemma with which media professionals are confronted when it comes to discussing the social responsibility of the journalists. Eventually, when analyzing the media framing of terrorism public opinion must be considered carefully.

12. Metadata Overview

My investigation of the media coverage of terrorist attacks in the age of Social Media prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa was done through an online questionnaire which was sent to the people from Mali, and Burkina Faso using Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Additionally, I also examined some of the media contents of *Maliweb.net* and *LeFaso.net*, two of the most popular online digital news media in the abovementioned countries. The manning table below (Table 1) gives a broad view about the surveyed and interviewed research populations both in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Type of Investigation	Socio-Professional Activities	Ages: 18-35 Years Old			36- 45 Years and Over		Total
		Male	Female	Other	Male	Female	
Online Survey	<i>General public</i>	78	14	01	03	02	98
Interviews	<i>Media regulatory institutions’ representatives; Media owners</i>	02	00	00	02	00	04

12.1. Framing of Terrorism by “Maliweb.net”

This part of my research deals with the articles related to terrorism in West Africa published by the Malian digital media *Maliweb.net* between January of 2020, and 2021. These articles can be categorized into “Barkhane”, “Jihadism”, and “FAMA²⁵” which correspond to three essential labelling which respectively are: (a) exaggeration; (b) propagation of horror and terror; and (c) pacification of tension. Among a plethora of 317 articles published by *Maliweb.net*, 127 articles focus particularly on terrorist operations in the Sahelo-Saharan strip²⁶. The remaining 190 articles concentrate on international terrorism, government’s official announcements, and press releases. My analysis concentrates exclusively on the 127 articles produced by the journalists of *Maliweb.net* about West African terrorism. Thus, in the following lines, I will linger on the abovementioned labelling to foster my “schemata of interpretation”.

a) The labeling of exaggeration

Amongst the 127 articles dealing with terrorism in West Africa, the word “Jihadism” is repeated 478 times. This can be qualified as exaggerative for the fact that the term “Jihad” itself is quite controversial and does not bear the semantic meaning attributed by Islamic theology. As I have already discussed in the section dedicated to the conceptual framework, the term “Jihad” is initially conceptualized by Muslim experts as a form of submission through effort and struggle. As a result, terrorism should not be assimilated with “Jihadism”. To illustrate this state of fact, the Screenshot (Figure 4) below shows the heading of an article by *Maliweb.net* entitled: “*Jihad Business*”²⁷, published on August, 8, 2020.

²⁵ FAMA meaning in French “*Forces Armées Maliennes*” is the acronym for Malian Armed Forces which consists of the Army, the Mali Air Force and the National Guard.

²⁶ The main countries of the Sahelo-Saharan strip are notably: Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. The Sahelo-Saharan strip brings together around 5,100 soldiers whose mission is to fight armed terrorist groups and they are supported by the armed forces of partner countries (French Barkhane Specifically and some UN forces) so that they can eradicate the terrorist threat.

²⁷ Heading of an article published by *Maliweb.net* on August, 08, 2020. <https://www.maliweb.net/contributions/jihad-business-2889041.html>

Moreover, the abovementioned article includes some controversial expressions and phrases such as: “The leaders of jihadist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger like to present themselves as great virtuous Muslims”. This is somehow a way of condoning terrorist leaders because there is no way of amalgamating terrorists’ leaders and virtuous Muslims. Similarly, in the last paragraph of the same article it is mentioned that “Jihad is a smokescreen and invocations are an excuse”. This definition of “Jihad” has nothing to do with the authentic one.



Figure 4: Heading of an Article by Maliweb.net on August, 08, 2020

More interestingly, in one of the corpus articles published on October 13 of 2020, the columnist talks about “the clutches of ruthless and bloodthirsty Jihadists”²⁸; a phrase which sounds like a combination of both hyperbole and oxymoron. In fact, the terms “clutches, ruthless and bloodthirsty” constitute a sort of exaggeration while the word “Jihadists” appears to be a mere contradiction if we refer to its semantic and authentic meaning. Likewise, the same conceptual maladroitness reappeared in an article published on November 25, 2020, talking about “a sympathizer of the Islamic State”. If the word *sympathizer* is problematical a priori, one must also question the concept of *Islamic State* which is not appropriate because it reinforces the thesis defended by the terrorists. The last paragraph of the same article²⁹ complicates the narration with another “hyperbolic oxymoron” through the use the expression “major jihadist extremist attacks”. Obviously, these kinds of conceptual confusions can be labelled as a sort of condoning terrorism, and hence, propagating horror and terror as the information may divide the public opinion about the facts. This leads me to discuss the next major labelling of *Maliweb.net* which is the propagation of horror and terror.

a) The propagation of horror and terror

Etymologically the terms *horror* and *terror* are associated with the “feeling of fear, or dread” and accordingly, the term terrorism itself is derived from *terrorem* (terror). From this definition, terrorism is the act of inciting terror onto an individual or population. So, media workers should pay more attention to this aspect while using terrifying words or images while framing terrorism. As an illustration, *Maliweb.net* stated in one of its articles published on February 28, 2020 that “terrorists (...) cut throats and hands and inject their evil ideology ...” In this same article, the journalist depicts terrorism as “a real ideology with a real hypnotic power”, qualifying violent extremism as “a safe cancer which quite easily manages to metastasize vast swathes of territories in the Sahel”. These terminologies do not make things easier for the readers as such depictions of terrorism are frightening, especially if the audience is in locality directly affected by these terrorist extortions.

²⁸ Maliweb, October, 13, 2020 – Online access link: <https://www.maliweb.net/non-classe/groupes-dopposants-armes-jihad-et-si-mariam-petronin-avait-raison-2899485.html>

²⁹ Maliweb: article published on November, 25, 2020 – Online access link: <https://www.maliweb.net/international/lassaillante-suisse-etait-apparue-dans-une-enquete-sur-le-jihadisme-2905794.html>

Additionally, Maliweb.net tends to commit a sort of “hara-kiri”³⁰ when it publishes articles such as the one entitled: “*Terrorism in the Sahel and beyond: An unconscious complicity of the media is to be denounced*”³¹. This article deals specifically with the role of media professionals in a context of terrorism. The visual (screenshot) below gives more visual details about this article.

There is also an avalanche of portrayals of horror and terror, each as controversial as the other, which is evidenced in the following popular adage “*When you can do nothing against the thief, you must even help him to take away the goods that he has just stolen from you*” (Maliweb.net - February 24, 2020). This clumsiness is reinforced by phrases such as “*a fight lost in advance by IBK [Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the name of Mali former president]*” (November 26, 2020) or “*Such is the sad record ...*” (September 7, 2020), “*the Jihadists seem to have not buried their hatchet*”. This way of giving news fosters horror and de facto, nurtures terror in the population. That is why one of the social responsibility of journalists is trying to pacify the situation despite its probable complexity. This motivates me to discuss, the notion of “solution journalism” alongside with the pacification labeling in *Maliweb.net* in the following lines.



Figure 5: Article on Maliweb About the Role of Media Professionals in a Context of Terrorism

c) The pacification of tension

“Solutions journalism”³² is a concept coined by the professor Pauline Amiel in 2017. For the researcher, it is a sort of news reporting approach which concentrates on the responses to social issues as well as the societal phenomena. It consists of presenting tangible solutions to the perceived problems, and seeing how and why these solutions work. Consequently, in a crisis context such as the framing of news about terrorism, media professionals should consider “solutions journalism” as a central part of their social responsibility.

Although the journalists of *Maliweb.net* do not apply “solutions journalism” while reporting terrorist attacks, it is possible however to identify few attempts of “tension pacification” labelling in some of their articles produced between January, 2020 and January, 2021. As a matter of fact, one of the corpus articles (published on February, 28, 2020)³³ attempts to give hope to the population through smooth terms such as “*reassure the populations*”, or talking about the

³⁰ Hara-kiri is a Japanese ritual suicide which consists in cutting one’s own stomach with a sword. It was formerly practiced in Japan by samurai as an honorable alternative to executions. I used this term here to point the fact that Maliweb’s journalists are tackling their own maladroitness.

³¹ Maliweb: article about the role of media professionals in a context of terrorism. <https://www.maliweb.net/insecurite/le-terrorisme-au-sahel-et-au-dela-an-unconscious-complicit-in-the-media-is-to-denounce-2861252.html>

³² Pauline Amiel. (2017). Solutions Journalism. A Solution to the Local Press Crisis?: *Communication. Media Information Practical Theories*, 34/2, July 6 (ISSN 1189-3788, DOI 10.4000/communication.7226. <https://journals.openedition.org/communication/7226>

³³ Maliweb: article published on February, 28, 2020. <https://www.maliweb.net/communique/actualitec-de-la-force-barkhane-du-21-au-27-fevrier-2020-2861407.html>

operations of military services they qualify them as “*extremely meticulous and rigorous intelligence work*”. This way of covering the terrorism-related news is highly recommended because it somehow corresponds to a form of “solutions journalism”. The same form of journalistic work reappeared in an article published on November, 10, 2020 entitled “*Barkhane participates in the support of the inhabitants of Farabougou*”. Put it differently, another article written and published on June 15, 2020 headed: “*After Droukdel’s death, the end of terrorism*”³⁴. Figure 6 (screenshot) below is a concrete illustration.



Figure 6: Article Published on November, 10, 2020 by Maliweb.net

Five months later, the same echo resounds in a different article published on December, 9, 2020 entitled: “*Impact of Terrorism to Decline in Africa*”. But, before the abovementioned article, Maliweb.net has already published a similar heading on February, 24, 2020: “*The rise of the Defense and Security Forces*”. Hence, this way of media coverage responds to the exigence of the “solutions journalism” approach. This is an approach which calls for the social responsibility of journalists as I mentioned earlier. In the following chapter, I will analyze the depiction of terrorism in the Burkinabe Online media *LeFaso.net*.

12.2. Framing of Terrorism by “*LeFaso.net*”

This part of my research deals with the articles related to terrorism in West Africa published by the Burkinabe digital media *LeFaso.net* between January, 2020 and January, 2021. A total of 129 published articles related to terrorism have been listed; but only 92 articles written by the journalists of *LeFaso.net* deals precisely with the context of Burkina Faso and West Africa. Therefore, my analysis focuses exclusively on these 92 articles. It is possible to divide these articles dealing with terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso and West Africa into three main categories: “terrorism”, “Jihadism” and “FDS”³⁵. Consequently, the mentioned categories can be split into three various schemata of interpretation. These are namely: (a) the labeling of “Patriotic journalism”; (b) the labelling of neutrality and partiality; and finally (c) the labeling of visual symbolism.

a) Patriotic journalism labeling

Patriotic journalism is a practice of journalism which deviates from the objective or neutral ideal of journalism. It is, therefore, related to what Ginosar and Cohen (2017) considered in their research³⁶ as “our news” or “our war” mode of coverage. Basically, patriotic journalism can be labelled with two significant indicators which are namely:

³⁴ Maliweb: article published on June, 15, 2020. <https://www.maliweb.net/contributions/apres-la-mort-de-droukdel-en-finir-avec-le-terrorisme-2879891.html>

Abdelmalek *Droukdel*, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Aqmi), was killed in June 2020 during an operation carried out by French forces in northern Mali. He was killed in Talhandak, along the Algerian border with Mali. Born in the early 1970s near Algiers, *Droukdel* has reigned for around 15 years over many Salafist jihadist groups in North Africa and the Sahel.

emotional depictions and bravery. Thus, among the 92 analyzed articles, there are more opinion articles and thematic framings than factual news. These articles consist of emotional statements, opinion columns, interviews, analysis and reports; which are characterized by messages of compassion towards the population and the headlines were intentionally articulated to encourage the soldiers.

In other words, the journalists of *LeFaso.net* praise the bravery of the army as well as the elegy of the victims, calling for social cohesion, unity of action around the government to face terrorism. In doing so, on April 16, 2020, the headline of *LeFaso.net* was articulated as it follows: “*What if ridicule could kill the terrorists of Mali and Burkina?*”³⁷ This heading was illustrated with a picture of two terrorist leaders. Figure 7 (screenshot) below gives more details.



Figure 7: Heading of LeFaso.net on April, 16, 2020

Furthermore, on March 10, 2020, in an article entitled “*Insecurity: 70 terrorists incapacitated*”, the journalist argued that “*the forces of evil had the misfortune to come across a team of the gendarmerie on patrol*”. This way of portraying the facts is all about patriotism. A month later (May, 16, 2020), another article titled “*Terrorists neutralized in Sebba: The MPP applauds the bravery of the FDS*”³⁸ reported the compliments made by the political authorities (the ruling regime MPP) towards the national army (FDS). Five days later, on May 21, 2020, another article praises the work of “the boys”, the soldiers, with such terms: “*Good harvest for the Defence and Security Forces engaged in the fight against terrorism*”. Such depictions are quite frequent in *LeFaso.net* because in different columns it is possible to read sentences such as “*the boys administered a bitter correction to the madmen of God*”. The “boys” here refers to the armed forces and terrorists are qualified as the “*madmen of God*”; also “*70 terrorists received their visas to hell*” is quite a way of overstating the killing of terrorists with a literary mixture of irony, oxymoron and hyperbole.

Thence, as I mentioned above, patriotic journalism in crisis context may consist in praising the bravery of armed forces. In *LeFaso.net*, we have a perfect illustration with sentences such as: the soldiers “*succeed in thwarting the macabre and Machiavellian plans of the enemy*”. Or even, they “*surprise them and inflict heavy defeats on them during a confrontation*”. Also, one of the articles concluded with the following terms: “*This is how hundreds of terrorists have been neutralized across the country by the brave FDS who go out of their way to protect the Burkinabe and defend the country’s territorial integrity*”. In this manner, the labeling of patriotic journalism is quite perceptible in the aforementioned depictions.

³⁵ FDS is an acronym in French which stands for: *Forces de Défense et de Sécurité*; meaning Burkina Faso Armed Forces for Security. The FDS include the army, the air forces, the national police and gendarmerie, the national fire brigade, and the central group of armies.

³⁶ For more information, see Avshalom, Ginosar. and Inbar, Cohen. (2017). *Patriotic Journalism: An Appeal to Emotion and Cognition*, May 25, 2017; Research Article. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217710678>

³⁷ The headline of *LeFaso.net* published on April 16, 2020. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article96232>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

As a result, it is possible to say that when journalism is combined with patriotism, it is difficult to be neutral and impartial. Therefore, in the following chapter, I will discuss the concepts of neutrality and partiality in *LeFaso.net*.

b) Neutrality and partiality

To be impartial means to limit as much as possible the biases of subjectivity, that is to say, to avoid as much as possible any preference and bias, in particular of an ideological, political, economic, social, racial or cultural nature, in relation with the facts (Cornu, 1994). Put it differently, the Swiss researcher Daniel Cornu argues that:

Impartiality is not simple neutrality, which consists of never deciding. It does not prohibit taking sides. It commands that we judge without bias. In doing so, impartiality allows journalists to relate facts without taking sides, to report the facts, just the facts. In consequence, journalists should avoid both in their professional and personal life, any behavior, engagement, function or task which could distract them from their duty of independence and integrity³⁹.

This supposes that the journalist tracks down his own prejudices, fears, desires, beliefs, etc. in short, his own emotions, during his journalistic activities. It is the distance that a journalist takes from the facts that will determine his credibility and success in the profession. Impartiality is often difficult to respect, as everyone's ego and subjectivity want to express themselves (Freud, 1916). It is this ability to tame this ego that will allow media professionals to fully play their role as journalists, and consider journalism as a profession governed by deontological rules. This is what also differentiates them from the ordinary citizens who would flaunt everything that goes through their minds in front of the world, on social networks. As a result, critical distance is akin to the notion of impartiality. It is the distance that one would place between a researcher and his work, between a journalist and the facts that he relates.

In *LeFaso.net*, the excessive use of adjectives while practicing patriotic journalism can be considered as an absence of neutrality. Concretely, there are several adjectives repeatedly used such as “*unfortunately*”, “*brave FDS*”, “*heavy defeats*”, “*macabre and Machiavellian plans*”, etc. Likewise, the fact of stating that the armed forces “*neutralized several terrorists*”, without specifying an approximate number, is a kind of subjectivity in terms of facts and comments. As wrote Simon Rogers (2011), “*comments are free but facts are sacred*”. The concept of neutrality, partiality and subjectivity can also be seen through the intentional use of visual symbolism. This labeling will be discussed in the next lines.

c) Visual symbolism

In journalism, visual symbolism can be defined as the set of informational techniques based on images, graphics, diagrams, figures, in short, visual illustrations. The primary purpose of visual symbolism is to convey (visually) specific information to the readers. Depending on the situation, visual symbols can be used to grab the attention of the audience by creating sensational news, seducing the readers, terrifying or motivating them, etc. However, broadly defined, in visual communication journalistic framing encompasses the fact of presenting visual elements exclusively related to the topic through intentional arrangements so that it will bear specific connotations (Kimberly, 2008). Discussing the process of media framing and the use of visual symbolism, the researcher Robert Entman argued that “*the words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity of stimulating positively or negatively (objectively or subjectively) different sides in a political conflict*” (Entman, 2003). Accordingly, this consists in keeping the readers' attention on the outlined subject.

In the context of the current study, a visual symbol can be understood as a visual distinctive sign, an explicit observable mark, or a specific image or color that labels a fabricated opinion, a constructed idea. Therefore, visual symbols tend to urge media audiences to comprehend or interpret a topic in a particular manner, in a strategic way; by going beyond the facts and fostering new interpretations. In consequence, there are many uses of visuals by journalists of *LeFaso.net*. For example, in an article entitled “*Fight against terrorism: More than twenty terrorists neutralized, material recovered*”⁴⁰, published on September 29, 2020, the illustrative picture was full of symbolic meaning of military steadfastness. See Figure 8 (screenshot) below.

Once again, one of the articles published the following weeks, on October 26, 2020, played sensationally on the visual symbolism by associating the images of soldiers in battle position to give news about the reopening of classrooms in a war zone. The screenshot (Figure 9) below is a concrete illustration.

³⁹ Daniel Cornu. (1994). *Journalisme et vérité: Pour une éthique de l'information* (English: *Journalism and Truth*). Edition Labor et fides, Geneva, Switzerland, January, 1, 1994.

⁴⁰ Article of *LeFaso.net* published on September, 29, 2020. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article99586>



Figure 8: The Illustrative Image of an Article of LeFaso.net Published on September 29, 2020



Figure 9: The Illustrative Image of an Article Dealing With the Reopening of Classrooms

Therefore, we can see that there is a discrepancy between the article which deals with the reopening of classrooms and the picture which shows the militaries in battle position. Similarly, in May 21, 2020, the visual elements (see Figure 10 below) are commented with an intertitle articulated as it follows: “*Good harvest for the Defense and Security Forces engaged in the fight against terrorism*”⁴¹.

There are also several visual elements which show the theatre of operations, the devices put in place by military forces (both Barkhane and FDS) to counter the enemy. For instance, Figure 11 below is a concrete illustration. In doing so, media professionals offer strong emotional news to their readers.

⁴¹ LeFaso.net - May 21, 2020. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article96951>



Bonne moisson pour les Forces de Défense et de sécurité engagées sur le front de la lutte contre le terrorisme.

Figure 10: The Illustrative Image of an Article Published on May 21, 2020

Terrorisme : la force Barkhane met la pression sur les groupes armés terroristes dans le Liptako

Accueil > Actualités > DOSSIERS > Attaques terroristes • LEFASO.NET • samedi, 19 septembre, 2020 à 00h28min

J'aime 0



ARTICLES DE LA MÊME RUBRIQUE

Mali : Environ 300 m Barkhane mobilisés convoi de ravitaillement
5 Réactions

Figure 11: The Illustrative Image of an Article Published on September 19, 2020

To sum up, the various schemata of interpretation helped understanding the conflictual relations between media and terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. Consequently, it is possible to affirm that difficulties of several kinds tend to hamper journalistic works in the context of terrorism in West Africa. In fact, deciphering major frames and corresponding essential labeling—such as exaggeration, propagation of horror and terror, and pacification of tension—leads to demonstrate that the West African media serve, to some extent, as channels for terrorist messages’ propaganda. Also, through the analysis of patriotic journalism labelling, the labeling of neutrality and partiality, as well as the labeling of visual symbolism, I can argue that the processing of information in West African digital media did not respect the ethical and deontological principles of journalism. In order to check whether the processing of information via both traditional media and social media platforms respects the ethical and professional rules of journalists, it is better go through an analysis and interpretation of my online surveyed data.

12.3. Deciphering Interviews' Data

Regarding the interviews' data, collected essentially from the media regulatory institutions' representatives, it is worth mentioning that I approached two West African media bodies in line with my research corpus: the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) in Burkina Faso and the High Authority of Communication (HAC) in Mali. In doing so, the questions were semi-structured, which means that all the questions were not asked to the interviewees in a chronological order as it is structured on the interview guide. In concreto, some questions have been rephrased, skipped, or asked in a different order; depending on the answers provided by the interlocutors. Also, depending on how the discussions evolved or progressed, some probing questions (not mentioned in the interview guide) have been used accordingly. The consents of all the interlocutors have been got before starting to record the interviews. They were also informed that the conversations would be stored, transcribed, treated and used only for academic purpose.

As a result, in this part of the investigations both the Superior Council of Communication's representatives and the High Authority of Communication's representatives avowed that there were no deliberate interpositions relating to the processing of information on terrorist attacks between January 2020 and January 2021. However, in Burkina Faso, there were two exceptional cases falling within the general coverage of terrorist issue, or more specifically, of inter-community conflicts. More interestingly, some media published sensational news on their social media pages, especially on Facebook, that the regulatory bodies considered violating the ethical principles. Hence, traditional media's social media accounts have offered new strategies to democratize information in West Africa, by providing an easy way of disseminating news related to terrorist attacks. Yet, this process of disseminating information through social networks is an opportunity offered to the public, the digital citizens, in order to facilitate their access to information about terrorism. The analysis of the surveyed data collected from 98 respondents from Mali and Burkina Faso will give more details about the digital prosumers' behaviors towards counterfeit information related to terrorism in West African context.

12.4. Survey Data Analysis

During my investigations about the fake news related to terrorism in West African context, I have used an online questionnaire, with open-ended questions, which has been sent to the research population in Mali and Burkina Faso. Given the fact that the questionnaire is composed in its vast majority of open-ended questions, the data obtained are essentially qualitative. Thus, this part of my work consists of analysis and interpretation of these surveyed data.

In fact, the online survey was conducted in order to comprehend the "social media natives", the "digital prosumers", or even the "digital citizens'" behaviors towards counterfeit information related to terrorism in the West African context. Also, it aimed at investigating and establishing a nexus between crisis communication, media framing and the advent of social media prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Concretely, the online survey took approximately three months (from February, 15 to May 25, 2021) to be filled in by respondents from Mali and Burkina Faso. During this period of time, 98 respondents from the abovementioned countries have filled it in. Indeed, given the fact that it is primordially a qualitative research, the number of respondents does not matter. Indeed, according to some sociologists such as Stoetzel (1980), Creswell (2009), Balima and Duchenne (2005), at least a number of 50 respondents is sufficient enough for qualitative researches; especially when the survey is constituted of open-ended questions.

Hence, this part of my analysis concentrates on the data gathered from 98 West African populations; from different education backgrounds, and diverse domains of activities. This provided, *ceteris paribus*, pertinent research data for scientific extrapolation because the population is highly representative of the phenomenon under study. Thereby, the implied analyses and interpretations attempt to understand first and foremost the impact of social media platforms on the framing of terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, when asked to know through which channels did the public learn about the first terrorist attack in Mali and/or in Burkina Faso, social networks are mentioned in the first position. As it is illustratively mentioned in the graphic below (Figure 12), social media platforms constitute the main sources of information for West African citizens between January 2020 and January 2021.

As it is perceptible in the pie-chart above, beside the social media platforms (35.8%), the hypermedia⁴² platforms represent the second major sources of information for West African populations with 22.9% of respondents. And only 17.5% of digital citizens learnt about the first terrorist attack through television channels. Basically, it means that the vast majority (58.7%) has been informed about the first terrorist attack through the internet sources. This can be justified by the fact that the advent of the Internet, which gave birth to hypermedia, generates a sort of fragmentation of audiences. Hence, each type of media (social, traditional or digital media) holds a small part of audience. Notwithstanding, the rise

⁴² Hypermedia brings together the new media born thanks to media convergence (online media, web radio, web TV, YouTube Channels, etc.) which includes sound, video, plain texts, graphics, and hyperlinks; reinforced by the birth of social media and other multimedia contents.

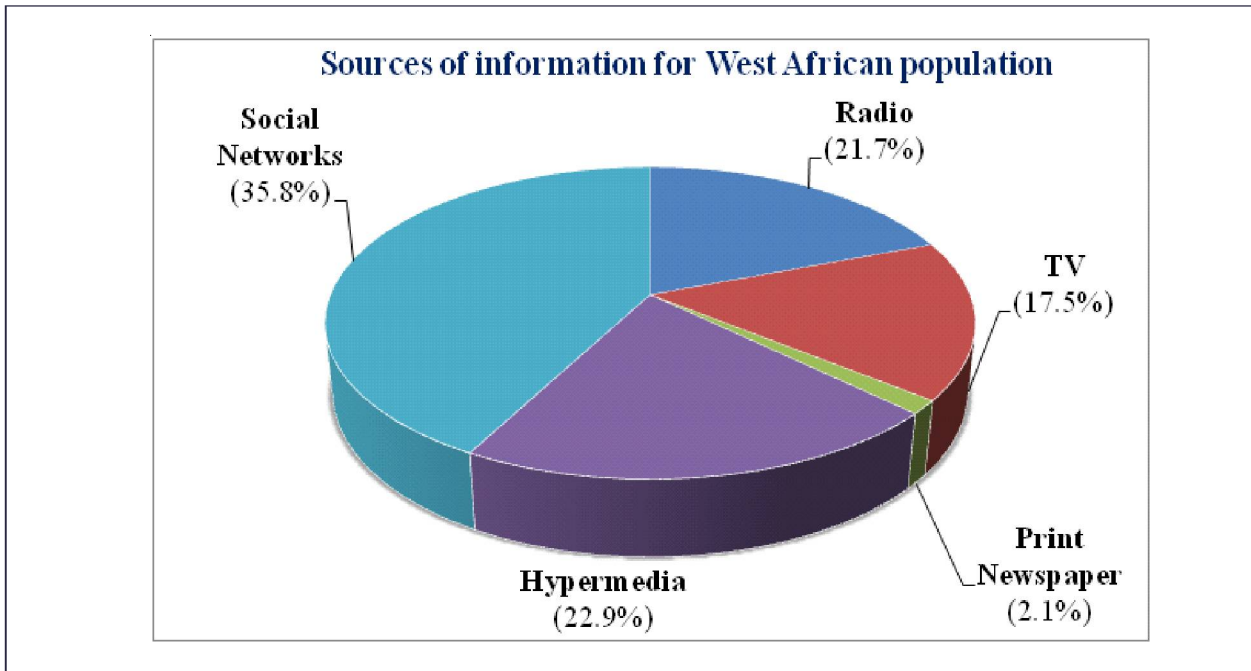


Figure 12: Social Media Platforms Constitute the Main Sources of Information of West African Population to Get News Related to Terrorist Attacks

of the Internet with its corollary platforms of social media and hypermedia tends to oust the popularity of print newspaper in West Africa with only 2.1% of the audience.

With social networks and hypermedia platforms, West African citizens participate more in the life of their society. Indeed, on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and other social media platforms, digital citizens disseminate information on the atrocities of terrorism, and give their opinions on information related to the security of the populations and public affairs. Thus, West African Internet users voice their opinions and suggestions for plausible solutions, but also react to the actions of those in power. Accordingly, they often manage to influence certain high-level decisions. In Burkina Faso and Mali for example, after the recurrent terrorist attacks which have grown in proportions in the recent years, Internet users have always drawn the attention of the population to the need of peace and social cohesion. As a result, these different reactions on the web push the West African decision-makers to take appropriate decisions for the security of their territories.

Moreover, it is possible to say that West African new media (hypermedia and social networks) have participated in an awakening of citizens on the security management, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. In these two West African countries specifically, terrorism is well argued and condemned by Internet users both on their social network accounts and on the discussions fora offered by the online media (blogs- official websites, social media pages, Web-radio, Web-TV, etc.). This participation in the debate about terrorism is decisive both for governmental actions and for raising the awareness of populations in order to face the danger posed by terrorism. In fine, West African digital citizens offer good projections for the development of States. Certainly, with their participation increased tenfold thanks to social media and hypermedia, the rulers have a pressure which obliges them to observe a minimum of seriousness to fight effectively against the scourge of terrorism. But what motives West African population to overuse social media in a context of terrorism? This is what I will discuss in the next following paragraphs.

12.5. The Necessity of Using Social Media After Terrorists Attacks

In the following lines, my analysis concentrated on what preoccupied West African people, especially in French speaking countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, to resort to social media when it comes to getting information about terrorism. The question asked in the online survey was formulated as the following: Q1: *What do you do on social media after a terrorist attack?* And to this question, the respondents have three open-for-comments options which are respectively:

- 1) Give my opinion and share contents on the atrocities of terrorists;
- 2) Just to keep me informed through the posts and comments of Internet users;

3) *Just out of curiosity: to compare Internet users' information with that of traditional media (radio, TV and print newspapers).* Thereby, West African people's motivations for social media use after terrorist attacks can be visually read in the graph (Figure 13) below.

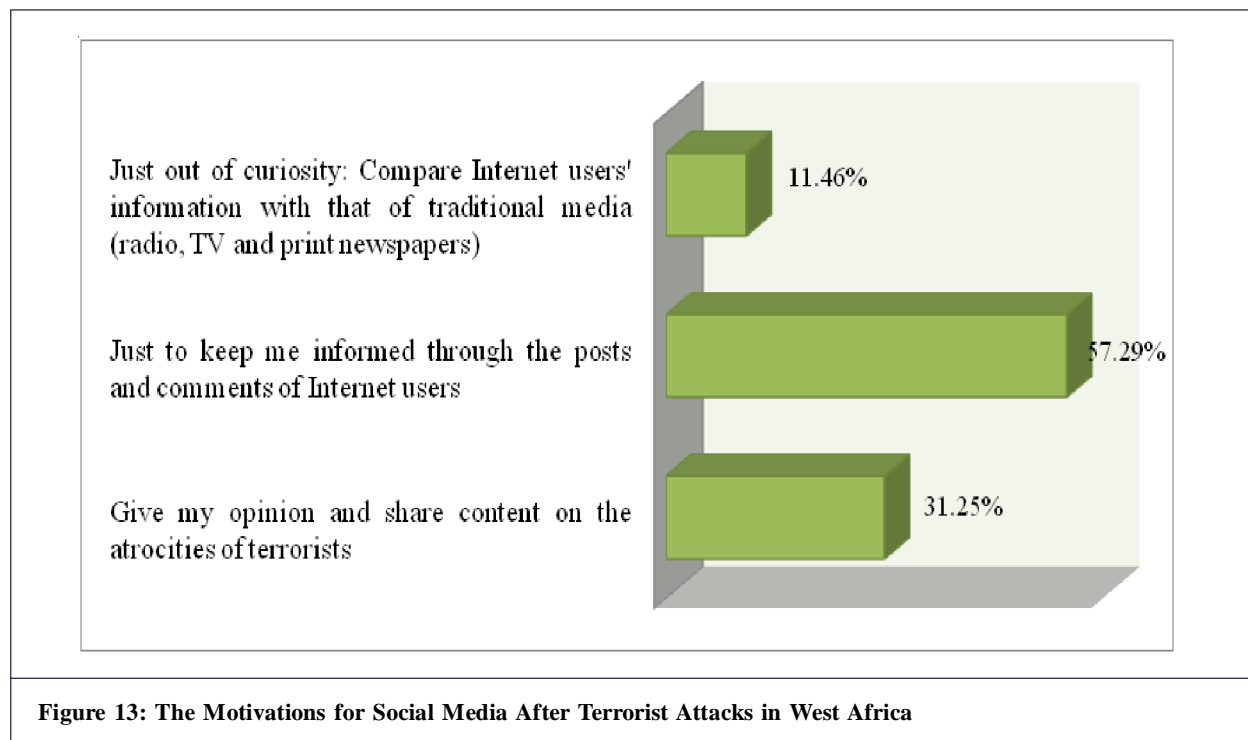


Figure 13: The Motivations for Social Media After Terrorist Attacks in West Africa

As we can see in the graph (Figure 13) above, the vast majority of West African digital citizens (57.29%) use social media platforms just to get information about terrorist attacks. This implies that they do not pay attention to the veracity of information circulating on social media. According to the Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model developed by Lucinda Austin and al. in 2017, this corresponds to the *“inactive members”*. As a matter of fact, just 11.46% of them use to compare Internet users' posts and comments with the information published by West African traditional media. These are the *“followers”* when it comes to the SMCC categorization. And accordingly, those who use to share posts and comments on social media platforms represent 31.25% of the surveyed population. This last category can be considered as the *“influentials”*.

Similarly, the excessive use of the internet sources, especially social networks, to get access to the news about terrorism can be justified by the fact that the majority of the surveyed West African populations are relatively young.

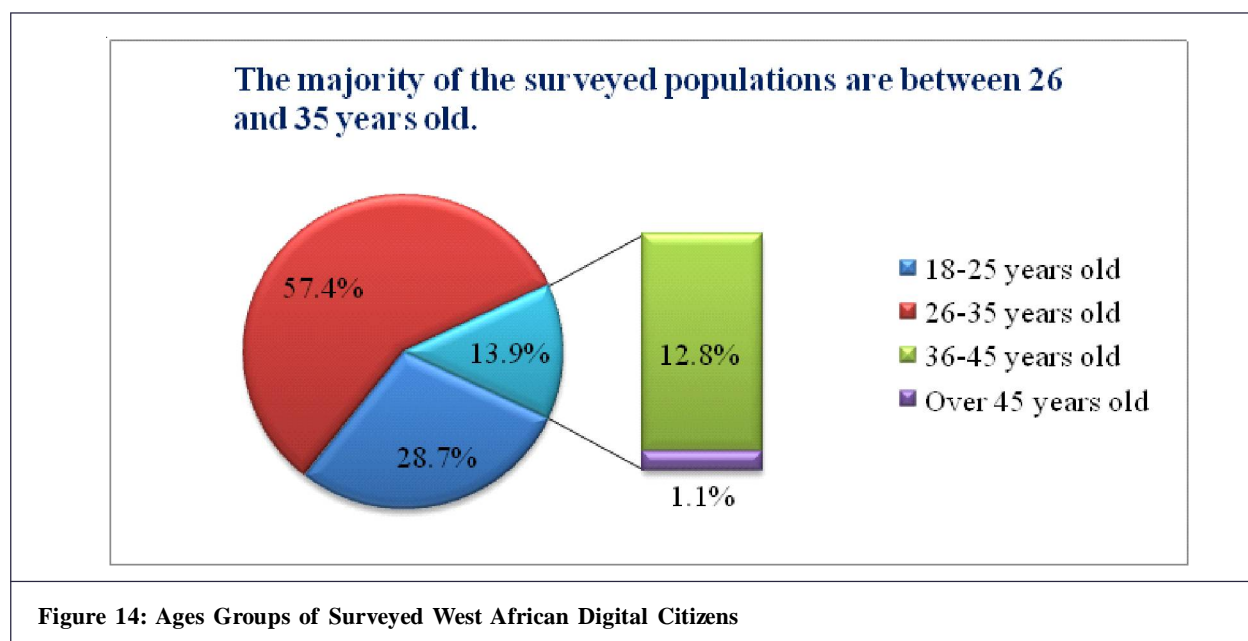
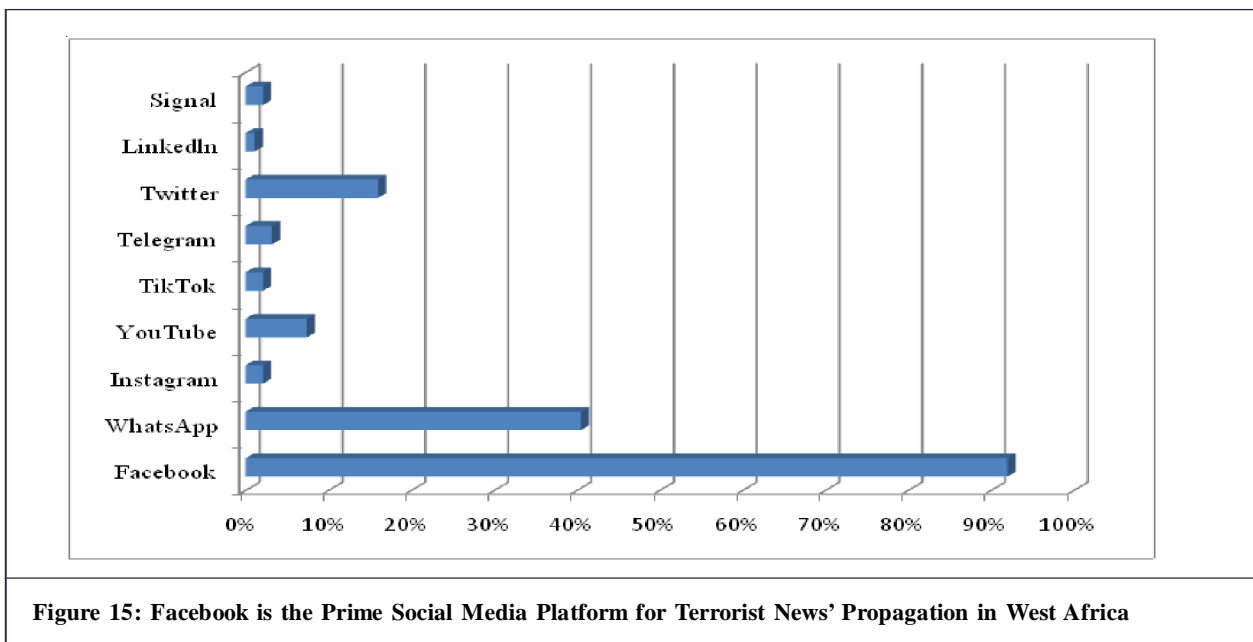


Figure 14: Ages Groups of Surveyed West African Digital Citizens

Therefore, most of them belong to the last generation of digital natives which turns out to be called “digital prosumers”⁴³ or even digital citizens because their lives are fundamentally linked to the use of the services provided by the new technologies of information and communication. More concretely, 57.4% of the corpus is constituted of young West Africans, whose ages vary between 26 and 35 years old; while 28.7% of them are between 18 and 25 years old; 12.8% between 35 and 45 years old; and only 1.1% beyond 45 years old. And most importantly, most of them are students (52.1%), civil servants (30.2%) or contractors (17.7%) with high educational backgrounds. See the graph (Figure 14) below for more details.

Additionally, in Mali and Burkina Faso, the majority of the surveyed population encounter most often information about terrorism on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Besides, Twitter is the third platforms on which the surveyed digital citizens encounter the most terrorism-related news. The following question has been asked: Q2: *On which social media platform do you see the most terrorism-related publications?* The graph (Figure 15) below gives descriptive information about this issue.



Thus, the excessive use of the Internet sources for information is fraught with many drawbacks. In terms of information relating to terrorism specifically, there are several unreliable sources of propaganda. Many web sites and social networks are specialized in disseminating all types of fake news: misinformation, disinformation, satire news and rumors (Ouedraogo, 2020). It is therefore important to inculcate West African digital citizens—particularly in Social Media Literacy (SML)—to be able to recognize reliable sources and fake news related to terrorism.

12.6. Assessment of Information on Terrorism Circulating in Social Networks

According to many of the West African surveyed populations, the contents of social networks help them to have more information on terrorist exactions. To do this, they prefer getting information via social networks than through traditional media (TV channels, radio stations, print newspapers). Although social networks sometimes propagate terrorism in the African Sahel, some populations claim that social networks are reliable sources for information on terrorism. Concretely, 52.2% of them admit that the information relating to terrorism is controversial; and subsequently, most of the news about terrorism circulating on social media is likely to be misleading. Conversely, 47.8% of the surveyed populations find it difficult to recognize that most of the information coming from social networks can be propaganda, rumors, parodies or disinformation. The graph (Figure 16) below put it visually decipherable.

In addition, the massive flow of social networks’ contents, along with their global aspects, does not allow adequate control and contents regulation; except those that are linked to traditional media groups. In fact, West African media regulatory institutions do not have the legal competence to regulate information on social media platforms. This gives free rein to the spread of all kinds of fake news on sensitive topics such as terrorism. The excessive use of social media

⁴³ For more details about the concept of “digital prosumers”, see Ritzer. and Jurgenson. (2009). *The Age of the Digital “Prosumer”*. *J.Cons. Cult.*, 163-196.

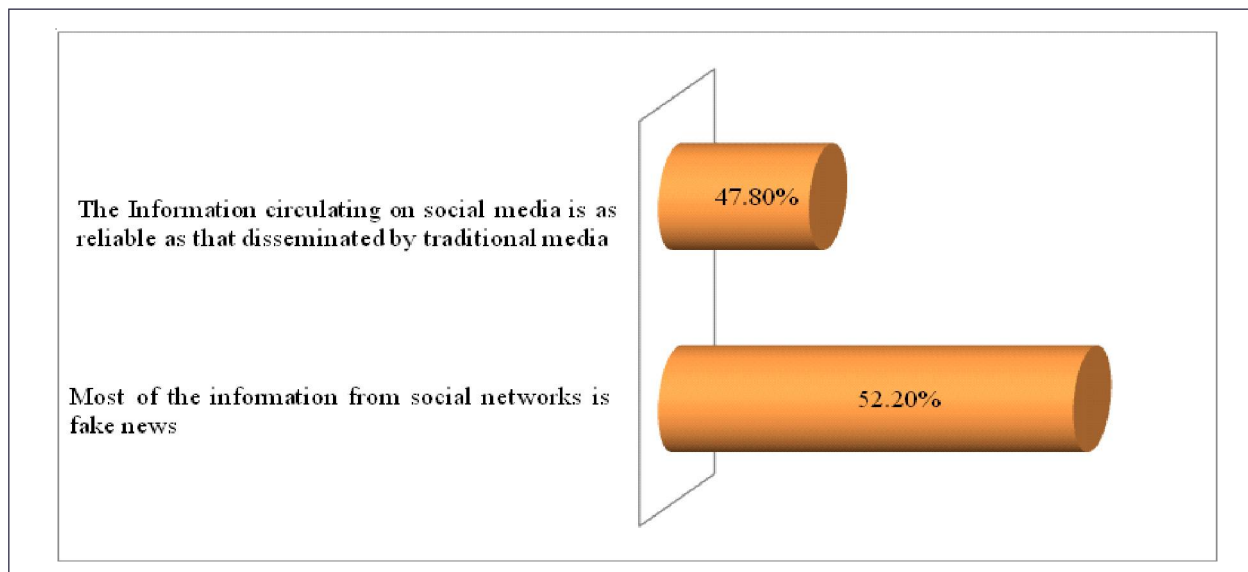


Figure 16: Appreciation of Social Mediated Terrorism-Related News

can furthermore lead to addiction and prevent some people from developing critical minds by verifying information with that of traditional media.

Furthermore, when it comes to the veracity of “social mediated terrorism-related news”, 67.1% of the West African surveyed population think that the information is either trustworthy or neutral. The following question has been asked: Q3: *How do you assess the information related to terrorism posted on social networks?* The pie-chart (Figure 17) below illustrates it descriptively.

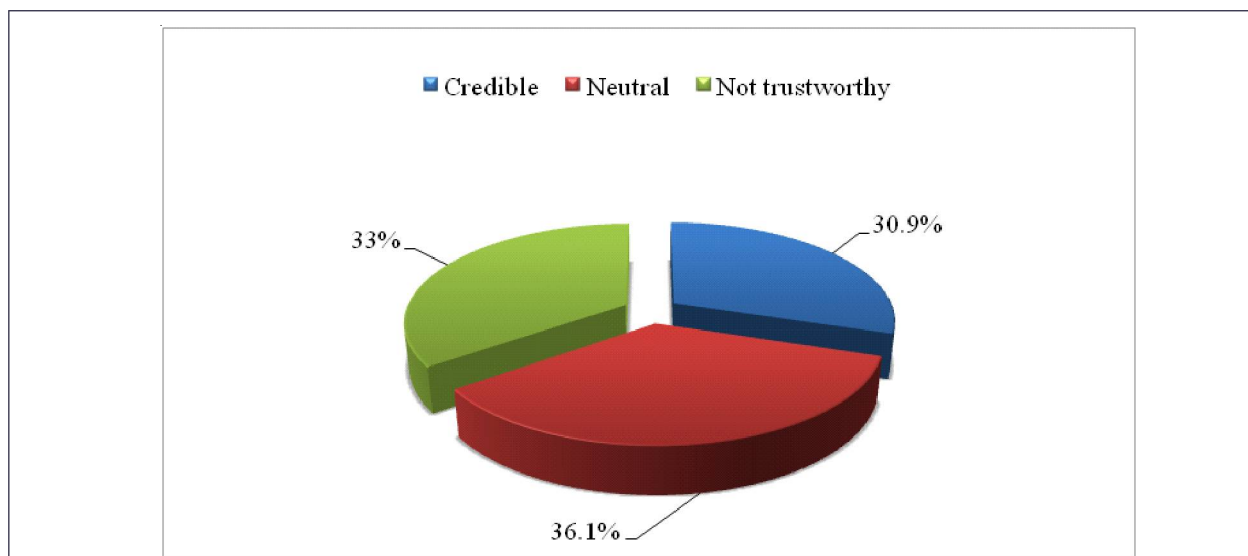


Figure 17: Opinions About the Veracity of Terrorism-Related Information on Social Media

As we can see on the Figure 20 above, only 33% of the surveyed population state that terrorism-related information flowing on Social media platforms is not trustworthy. For 36.1% of them, the social mediated information on terrorism is neutral; while 30.9% consider this information to be credible. As a result, it is not exaggerating to say that the vast majority of West African digital citizens may not possess Social Media Literacy (SML).

Moreover, the overuse of social media instead of traditional media by West African population to get access to news about terrorism can be justified by the fact that traditional media are somehow reproached for (a) the delay in disseminating information; (b) the lack of professionalism of journalists; and (c) the lack of credibility and veracity in the information disseminated. In my investigative survey, the question asked to the population is articulated as the following: Q4: *What*

don't you like about terrorism and media coverage in West Africa? In other words, what exactly do you blame the Malian and/or Burkinabe media for? Hence, in their responses, they delay in the dissemination of information by traditional media is the main factor that discourages West African digital citizens. The graph below (Figure 18) is a concrete illustration of this state of fact.

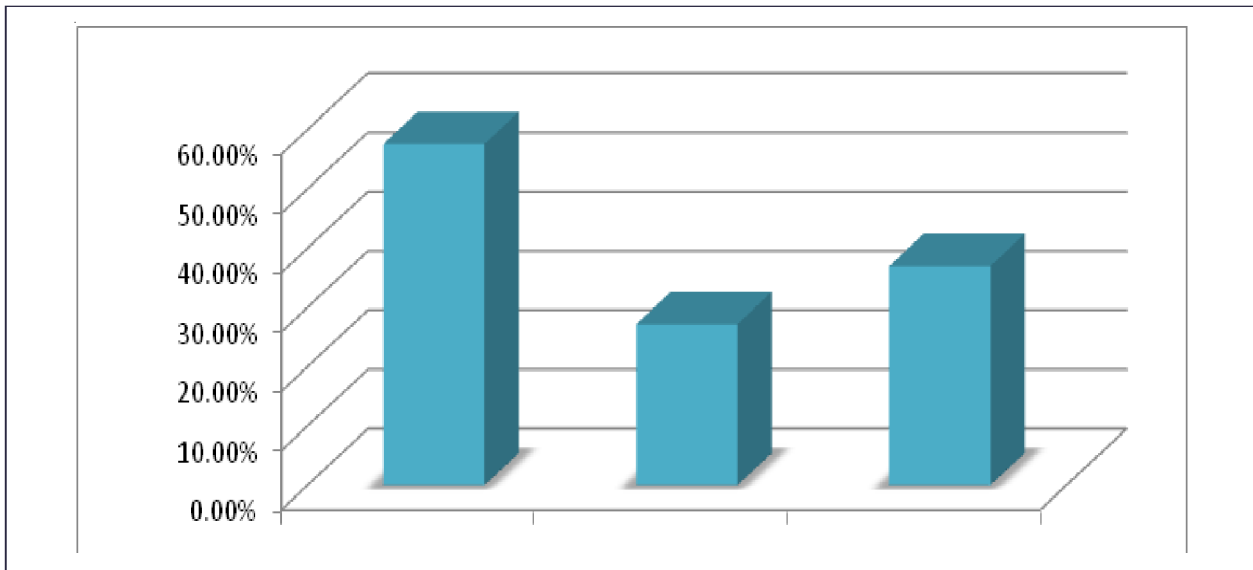


Figure 18: The Main Reproaches Made Towards West African Traditional Media

As it can be seen from the graph above, 57.6% of the surveyed West African people prefer using social media to get access to information related to terrorism because traditional media use to disseminate it late. Also, 37% amongst them think that the news related to terrorism disseminated by West African traditional media lack of credibility and veracity. The latter prefers referring to international traditional media such as RFI [French International Radio station] and France24 [French popular TV broadcasting channel] to get their daily news. In the meantime, 27.2% of them point out the lack of professionalism of West African journalists.

Likewise, when it comes to the appreciation of West African journalists' professionalism, only 35.1% keep having a positive image of media professionals, while 33% of them have a negative image of journalists. Nonetheless, 31.9% prefer being neutral. The question was articulated as the following: Q5: *Do you have a good appreciation of the professionalism of Malian and/or Burkinabe journalists in covering terrorist attacks?* The majority of the respondents denounce some contradictions observed from traditional media which make them lose the credibility of the information. Also, they state that when the sources of information are not explicitly mentioned by the journalists, the information is likely to be fabricated.

Interestingly, some surveyed people assert that traditional media often propagandize terrorism by devoting lots of time and space to discuss of the terrorists' exactions. Similarly, some of them believe that the terrorism-related news is often disseminated with exaggeration. To the question: Q6: *What is the last case of unprofessionalism that you have observed (?)*; the surveyed populations' opinions vary. Amongst others, the most pertinent comments made by the surveyed West African populations are the following:

Traditional media also propagate fake news. On May 08, 2021 for example, the Facebook page of Radio Omega FM announced about twenty deaths in a terrorist attack, when it was not. Realizing their mistake, they have just deleted the post; they did not say anything more, not even to apologize for their fake news.

Sometimes our traditional media wait for the publication of RFI [French International Radio station] or France24 [French popular TV channel] to repeat almost mechanically the same news, although the facts happened here in our country.

Actually, the security issue is very sensitive. There are some types of information that our media must give partially, not completely, because they might put the lives of some people in danger or even aggravate terrorism in the area.

The international media provide terrorism-related information with great gravity. They do not recognize the effort being made by the West African army. They always focus on the effort of the foreign forces. Some are credible

and others are not. Professionalism is not everyone's cup of tea. It is all about informational intoxication. The credibility of the information is first recognized via its source: the independent media, the leftist (those of the opposition) and the rightist media (governmental media). However, the official communication of the governments in West Africa is also slow.

Furthermore, in order to better understand the functioning of West African media landscape vis-à-vis the framing of terrorism, it is worth approaching the media regulatory bodies. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some information obtained from the media regulatory institutions in Mali and Burkina Faso.

13. Discussions, Perspectives and Suggestions

13.1. From the Media Regulatory Institutions' Standpoint

During this research I approached two West African media regulatory institutions which are namely: the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) in Burkina Faso and the High Authority of Communication (HAC) in Mali. As for the main media regulatory bodies in these two West African countries, their principal missions are the following:

- To ensure the application of laws and regulations relating to public communication in Burkina Faso and Mali;
- To contribute to the respect of professional ethics by private and public radio and television broadcasting companies, as well as public and private print newspapers, periodicals or digital media focusing on the national issues;
- To issue operating licenses for radio stations and television broadcasting channels or any other media company (print or digital). This point concerns exclusively the context of Burkina Faso and does not include Malian media landscape. In fact, according to the law in Mali, to edit a print newspaper or a digital media, the owner does not need any authorization; just the declaration of existence prevails⁴⁴.
- To contribute to compliance with standards relating to broadcasting and reception of equipment for radio stations and television channels;
- To promote freedom of expression and the right to information in accordance with the law;
- To guarantee the right of access of media to the available sources of information;
- To receive copies of declarations of existence especially from print media, advertising companies and online media;
- To define, in collaboration with the Ministry in charge of communication, the conditions of granting and the methods of distribution of public aid to the private press;
- And to ensure compliance with the mission and specifications of advertising companies.

Regarding the regulation and sanction of contents posted on social networks, the judicial texts of both the HAC (in Mali) and the CSC (in Burkina Faso) are not clear. For example, the CSC managers stated that the "question about the regulation of social media contents call for technical debate because the law is a little bit ambiguous". Therefore, there is neither deliberate restriction about the regulation of social media contents, nor any express obligation except by extrapolation. Thus, the CSC and the HAC regulate the social networks of the existing traditional media (newspapers, radio, television and Online media) by considering them as relay media. But these extrapolations do not concern private discussion forums and individual social media accounts. Moreover, "it would be very tedious for the regulator to ensure the reorganization of social networks, given their plethoric number and their cross-border nature", stated Abdoulaye Dao, representative of the CSC. In fine, the fundamental missions of the HAC are similar to those of the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) in Burkina Faso.

13.1.1. The High Authority of Communication (Mali)

In Mali, the "*Haute Autorité de la Communication (HAC)*"—which means literally the High Authority of Communication—was created by decree in 2014⁴⁵, replacing two other regulatory institutions of media contents called CSC and

⁴⁴ According to the article 7 of the law (Law N° 00-46/AN-RM of July 7, 2000) relating to the press regime in Mali: "*Before the publication of any newspaper or periodical media, a declaration of existence should be done at the prosecutor's office. The declaration of publication contains specifically: the title of the newspaper or periodical and its mode of publication; the name and address of the Publishing Director; the indication of the printing house's location (its address); the expected average of circulation*". However, radios stations and televisions channels need to get a deliberate authorization before start operating.

⁴⁵ HAC: Created by Ordinance n° 2014-006/P-RM (*Official Journal of the Republic of Mali* of January 31, 2014); ratified by law n° 2015-018 of June 4, 2015 amending and ratifying the order of January 21, 2014 (*Official Journal of the Republic of Mali* of June 19, 2015).

CNEAME⁴⁶ which started operating in 1992. The role and missions of the HAC (the High Authority of Communication) is chiefly to regulate the communication sector in the fields of audio-visual communication, the print press, advertising by means of the audio-visuals, as well as the online media.⁴⁷ To this end, the HAC is the only institution which has the ability to give accreditations (authorizations) for the creation of private broadcasting radio stations, television channels, Print newspapers and digital media. As a regulatory body, it also plays a role of media watchdog, consultation, research, control and sanctions.

Nevertheless, according to the president of the HAC, Fodié Touré, the institution has an educational, monitoring and anticipatory role. It must contribute to raising the professional standards of the traditional media by training and providing adequate technological means. Hence, there were no direct sanctions regarding the regulation of publications on traditional media by the HAC between January, 2020 and January, 2021. Indeed, no legislation obliges Malian Digital media and blogs to make a prior declaration. In principle, all Malian websites are totally free. In fact, the online media and Blogs constitute a new form of media in Mali and, therefore, they are not subject of any legislation or regulation. To this end, they are not subject to prior declaration or authorization from the public authorities ([African Media Barometer, 2010](#))⁴⁸. This entails de facto that online media contents cannot be subject of any censorship, sanction or regulation by the High Authority of Communication (HAC).

More interestingly, given the complexity of the tensions in Mali, even media professionals free themselves from relating news about terrorism for fear of cruelty on the behalf of terrorists groups. As a matter of fact, “several radio stations closed for fear of reprisals; some animators, victims of death threats, left their localities”⁴⁹. Yet, in accordance with the Declaration of the Citizens’ Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the Malian constitution guarantees freedom of expression, including freedom of the media⁵⁰.

13.1.2. *The Superior Council of Communication (Burkina Faso)*

In Burkina Faso, the “*Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC)*”—the Superior Communication Council—was created by decree in 1995⁵¹. However, the CSC did really begin to function in 1997. It is an independent administrative authority responsible for promoting press freedom through professional practices for transparency in society and for governance. As of April 26, 2021, the CSC has nine members headed by Mathias Tankoano. Their job is to support journalists in their political function by playing the role of arbiter in the public space, in the pluralism of debates that characterize democracy in Burkina Faso under the slogan: “*The regulation of communication to promote democracy*”. The CSC also advocates equal access to public service media, especially in certain periods of political life, during elections for example. Its regulatory instrument is the “*Information and Communication Code*”.

Thereto, regarding the media framing of terrorist attacks between January, 2020 and January, 2021, there were no deliberate sanctions by the CSC towards media in 2020. But according to the head of the institution, there are two similar cases falling within the general framework of “*terrorist hydra*”⁵² with its corollary of inter-community conflicts.

Indeed, the first case concerns the publication—on February 10, 2020, of the daily “*L’express du Faso*”—of an article entitled: “*Inter-community conflict in Kombori/Kossi: at least thirty dead and material damage recorded*”. According to the media controlling director of the CSC, Abdoulaye DAO, the text is confusing and indicates to the front page a conflict between Fulani and Dogon but in the body, the newspaper deals with a conflict between Dozo and Malian. In the meantime, other newspapers have preferred being cautious and reported that these attacks have been perpetrated by “*unidentified armed individuals*” (an expression referring a priori to terrorists). Therefore, the CSC heard the director of the newspaper in question (*L’express du Faso*) and the latter promised more vigilance in the future. Nonetheless, he received a “*letter of observation*” which is a smooth form of warning from the CSC.

⁴⁶ CNEAME is a French acronym which refers to the National Committee for Equal Access to State Media in Mali.

⁴⁷ Article 5 of the Ordinance of 21/01/2014.

⁴⁸ African Media Barometer, Mali (2010). Page 23. Online Access link: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/africa-media/08153.pdf>

⁴⁹ Abdourahamane Ousmane. (2019). *Formulation of an Approach for the Regulation of Community Media in the Liptako-Gourma space Burkina Faso/Mali/Niger*; October, 24. https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Etude_IMS_R%C3%A9gulation_for-web.pdf

⁵⁰ The Constitution of Mali states in its article 4 that: “*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression and creation with respect for the law*”. Likewise, the Article 7 of the Declaration of the Citizens’ Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights stipulates that: “*The freedom of the press is recognized and guaranteed. It is exercised under the conditions set by law. Equal access for all to public media is ensured by an independent body whose status is established by organic law*”.

⁵¹ CSC: Created by Decree No. 95-304/PRES/PM/MCC of April 1, 1995 in application of Article 143 of the Information Code.

⁵² In the Greek mythology, “*hydra*” is a creature with several heads; and when one of heads is cut, two different heads reappears. In this context, it is both imagery and hyperbole used to qualify the complexity of fighting against terrorism in the Sahel.

The second case is about a private radio station called “Radio Omega” which aired poorly cross-referenced information pointing to the “Koglwéogo” (the self-defence civil militia groups) as the perpetrators of terrorist attacks on the Fulani population of Barga in the Northern region of Burkina Faso and two other surrounding villages. This information was broadcast on March 9, 2020 at 12:15 and posted on the Facebook page of *Radio Omega* the following day. Faced with the “recklessness” of the radio in making such allegations and the social context plagued by social conflicts, the CSC challenged the managing directors of the radio through a hearing followed by an “observation letter” inviting the employees to be more professional in handling information related to conflicts in general and to terrorism more specifically.

Regarding the regulation of social media contents, the last cases in fact concerns the Facebook pages of “Radio Liberté” and “Radio Omega” FM (see the abovementioned case of Radio Omega). Notwithstanding, in terms of regulation of contents on social networks, the CSC has not yet adopted specific texts to regulate the posts. The media controlling director of the CSC, Abdoulaye DAO, puts it this way:

As far as I know, there is not even a law regarding the regulation of Social media contents. Except the Penal Code which was revised in 2019 to introduce restrictions on media coverage of counter-terrorism operations and this also concerns web activists and other facilitators of discussion forums on social networks; in accordance with the amendments of our Penal Code (Dao, 2021)⁵³.

14. The Nexus Between Terrorism, Media And Propaganda

From its Latin root “propagare”, which means literally “to spread or to propagate”, the word “propaganda” is a concept designating a set of persuasion techniques implemented in order to propagate with all available means an idea, an opinion, an ideology or a doctrine and to stimulate the adoption of specific behaviors within a targeted audience. These techniques are exercised on populations in order to influence them, even to indoctrinate them, as did Adolf Hitler with the “Nazi Party” in 1933, suavely orchestrated by his “propaganda ministry” Joseph Goebbels⁵⁴.

Sergei Tchakhotin (1992), quoted by Francis Balle (2011) in *Media and Societies*, provides the keys to understanding how political power, in democracy as in dictatorship, can guide and orient public opinion. He enumerates, in details, many sources of political propaganda: intimidation by symbols, slogans, music, huge gatherings and symbolic gestures, etc. Seen from this perspective, political propaganda can be understood as a “collective communication technique aimed at sharing opinions against opposing propaganda (real or virtual) in order to acquire power” (Tchakhotin, 1992). This, therefore, takes place through the combination of various techniques: media or human resources mobilized because of their supposed effectiveness in responding to a specific intentionality. It is also a question of effective communication. Discussing the concept of media propaganda and terrorist strategies, Brigitte Nacos (2005) elaborated the media-terrorism triangle (see Figure 19)⁵⁵ below.

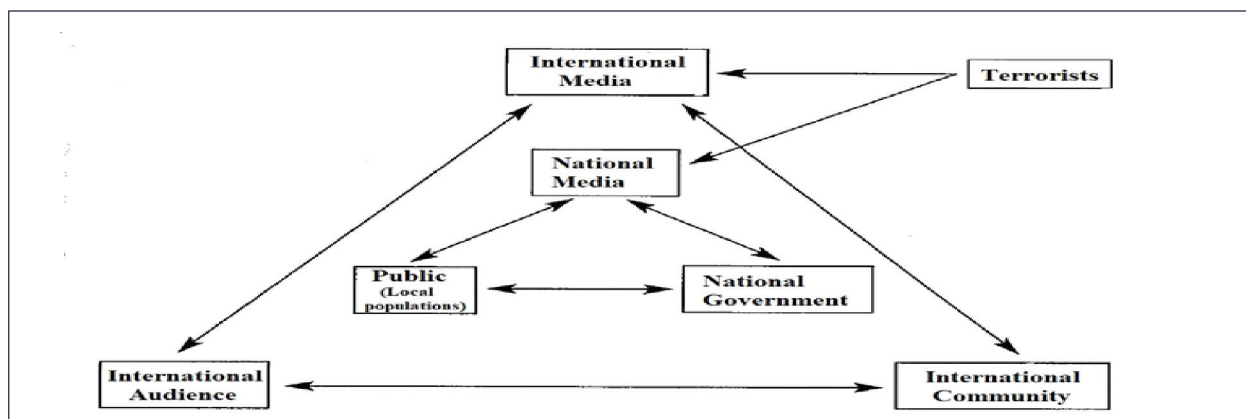


Figure 19: Triangle Depicting the Role of the Media in Terrorism (Nacos, 2005)

⁵³ Abdoulaye Dao is a media regulatory representative at the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) in Burkina Faso. Excerpted from my interview conducted in February 2021.

⁵⁴ See William Allen (1930). *The Nazi Seizure of Power*. Chicago Quadrance Books. According to Hitler and his propaganda ministry, “The aim of propaganda is not to regulate the rights of the various parties; but to underline exclusively that of the party which we represent. Neither does it have to objectively seek the truth, but to pursue only what is favorable to us”. The book chapter is available online at the following link: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~acichope/Allen,%20The%20Nazi%20Seizure%20of%20Power%20Chap%203%20and%2011.pdf>

⁵⁵ Nacos Brigitte L. (2005). *Media and Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*,15; Ed. Nouveaux horizons, Paris.

To explain terrorist propaganda through the mass media, Brigitte Nacos (2005) refers to the triangle of political communication (Figure 19) above. She defines the combination between propaganda and political communication in the following terms:

Political communication is, therefore, the means by which people express both their unity and their differences. Through communication, we express our demands, assert our interests, rally to our cause those who adhere to our ideas and castigate those who do not share our vision of the world.

Hence, this communication is collective, insofar as the propaganda is directed to communities (or to individuals as members of those communities). Propaganda (if it works) strengthens an ideology and earns it supporters or partisans; it weakens the opposite forces.

In doing so, one of the vertices of the communication triangle is the media. Due to their strategic position, they amplify or minimize information about terrorism or terrorist acts. What terrorists expect is, in fact, when confronted with political violence, the media will leak any information to describe and propagate these events. As it can be seen in Figure 19, when terrorists strike, they are guaranteed to benefit from the attention of the media, and therefore that of the populations and rulers of the targeted countries. Given the globalization of communication systems, with the proliferation of hypermedia and social media specifically, the perpetrators of terrorist acts also find an echo in the international media and at the same time benefit from the attention of the international communities, as it was the case during the major terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the USA. Today, with the advent of hypermedia generated by the convergence of media, then role of media in covering terrorism-related news is crucial.

Media convergence or technological convergence refers to the amalgamation of previously separated technologies and media platforms through digitization and computer networking. The Internet has also enabled the development of new forms of journalism inspired by classic media practices. These are online magazines, web radios and web televisions, mobile journalism or mobile films, etc. Thereafter, even traditional media become accessible on digital platforms via their Facebook pages, official websites, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, etc. Consequently, with media convergence, terrorism-related news reaches more people, more audiences. Likewise, media products' consumers can access multiple media contents for free.

In addition, media convergence widens, accelerates and facilitates the distribution of media contents. Thereby, digitized media contents become accessible from a multitude of devices. This facilitates a large production and distribution of contents. Undeniably, this made "media prosumers" very active because, in addition to being able to react spontaneously to the contents, they have the possibility of creating and distributing their own contents online; contributing to the construction or the fabrication of both informative and entertaining digital contents. This, in a context of crisis marked by terrorism, may contribute to the propagation of unfavorable news.

Roughly, the primary purpose of terrorism is to inspire terror. The terrorist approach thus responds to a concern for "dramatization". Terrorist attacks have above all a psychological objective. Therefore, "terrorist propaganda" involves the manipulation of minds by using in particular strong images, myths, and words that convey the senses and values. And terrorists are experts in doing so. They hijack television for propaganda purposes. However, it is clear that terrorists, and more broadly, certain religious extremist groups, are now using this to serve their ends. In fact, the aim of the terrorists is to send messages of mobilization to those to whom they belong and to demoralize the adversary—amplifying psychosis—shocking the public with acts of violence in order to dissuade anyone who does not espouse their ideology; and gain public opinion.

Subsequently, in an asymmetric war, information and communication occupy a central place. For terrorists, gaining public opinion is fundamental. It provides them with political, moral and even logistical support, which is generally vital. In fact, thanks to a benevolent opinion, terrorists can blend in with the population and, as a consequence, be able to easily carry out a number of reprehensible acts. That is where the mass media, the hypermedia in today's context, come in as the propagators of the desired effect. Once this psychological manipulation has been deployed, the game is practically won by the terrorists.

15. Discussion and Suggestions

West African media, especially social media platforms, have somehow served as channels for terrorist propaganda. Indeed, after each terrorist attack, several horrible images and videos circulate on social networks; but West African media regulatory institutions face some difficulties in regulating these types of information. This is the case, for example, with the burning of national flags or the dissemination of messages of threat by terrorists' groups, which is shared constantly on WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages by West African digital citizens.

As for the traditional media, the episodic framing devoted to the various attacks instead of thematic framing, in the form of “solution journalism”⁵⁶, constitutes one of the informational limits in certain West African countries. However, in general, West African traditional media treatment of terrorist attacks has, despite some abovementioned difficulties, respected the fundamental principles of journalism. Yet, considering both the survey data and the content analysis it appears that the processing of terrorism-related news is problematic due some aforementioned obstacles. Another finding emerging from our research is the self-censorship that some traditional media impose on themselves to fight against the issue of fake news. As a result, the West African media landscape is almost entirely neutral in the treatment of information linked to terrorism. This might probably justify the absence of major complaints or sanctions from the media regulatory institutions, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, linked to the coverage of terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, the coverage of terrorism by West African traditional media in this context of social media prevalence is a challenge for media professionals. In order to handle this delicate task, the professionalism and the social responsibility of journalists are highly required. Otherwise their actions may jeopardize the survival of West African democracy. In this regard, ethical and deontological principles are essential for processing information related to terrorism. This can help analyzing the facts, contextualizing them, validating them and giving them meaning. In doing so, West African media professionals must set a clear editorial line in dealing with these types of crisis events. This includes the following fundamental principles to be taken into account when covering terrorist attacks:

- Collect and disseminate terrorism-related information so as not to panic the local citizens;
- Avoid putting the lives of citizens in danger while framing terrorists’ extortions;
- Avoid divulging secrets related news which can thwart military operations on battlegrounds.

Also, West African traditional media must train their journalists and promote the specialization of journalists in crisis and security issues. This comprises the initiation of continuing training policy for journalists on the basics rules of the profession, taking into account the socio-political evolution of the countries, encouraging and motivating those who distinguish themselves by the quality of their journalistic works related to terrorism.

In addition, due to the current context of digital media predominance—marked by the issue of fake news, rumor and disinformation—it is appropriate to cross-check and verify terrorism-related information before dissemination. In doing so, West African news professionals must refrain from any participation in the scoop race. Otherwise they might sow confusion and fuel the feeling of fear amid the local populations. This goes without saying that West African journalists must solicit the contribution and collaboration of local populations, security services, officials and politics to provide them with accurate and credible information to deepen their thematic analyses.

Another key-thing to be taken into consideration is the issue of labeling. As a matter of fact, West African journalists must pay attention to the use of some terms and concepts such as “jihadist attack” for instance, when dealing with terrorism-related news. Similarly, the use of terms like “sophisticated attack” runs the risk of embellishing the killers and portraying them as heroes. In fact, this kind of lexical labelling is in line with one of the objectives of terrorists, which is to project an image of both power and the possession of Islamic ideology. Thereby, this somehow magnifies the importance of the threat, exaggerates the strategic power of terrorist groups or praises their tactical skills; and subsequently, media become inevitably the oxygen provider of terrorism (Nacos, 2005)⁵⁷. In any case, media professionals must not portray the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in an aspect that could be perceived as positive.

Moreover, West African traditional media should go beyond the dissemination of press releases related to terrorist attacks to produce more thematic framing of the issue with profound analysis about the real causes of the propagation of terror with an approach based on “solution journalism” mechanisms. Concretely, only the informational value of press releases should be selected as excerpts by journalists who will eventually strip it from all propaganda, explain the context and supplement the information with the reactions of the targeted local populations and the authorities; focusing specifically on the solutions and the precautions to be taken in order to avoid similar extortions in the future.

Additionally, the use of visual symbolism is crucial in the framing of terrorism; therefore, West African journalists must avoid disseminating images of horror and terror or images that could undermine the dignity of victims, the hostages or their relatives.

⁵⁶ “Solutions journalism” is a form of journalism which aims at providing solutions via compelling and rigorous coverage of social issues. Conceptualized by Bornstein *et al.* (2013), this type of journalism investigates and explains, in a critical manner, how to work toward solutions. Therefore, it is an approach which concentrates both on the responses to social issues and the problems themselves.

⁵⁷ According to Bigitte Nacos (2005). For Terrorists, Advertising is a Vital Element; It is Their Oxygen; in *Media and Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, p. 47—Quoted by Hagada Judith Gaele (2018).

Nonetheless, in terms of processing information related to terrorism, journalistic works become more complicated when digital citizens, witnesses of the attacks, are able to shoot the horror scenes with their mobile devices and disseminate them on social networks without any knowledge of citizen journalism ability. This entails, de facto, the proliferation of fake news on social media platforms. This scenario places digital citizens into a serious ethical dilemma: to ignore such information flows with the risk of being not up-to-date with the news, or to relay them with the high risk of giving false information. Hence, the right thing to do is to consider the following graph (Figure 20).

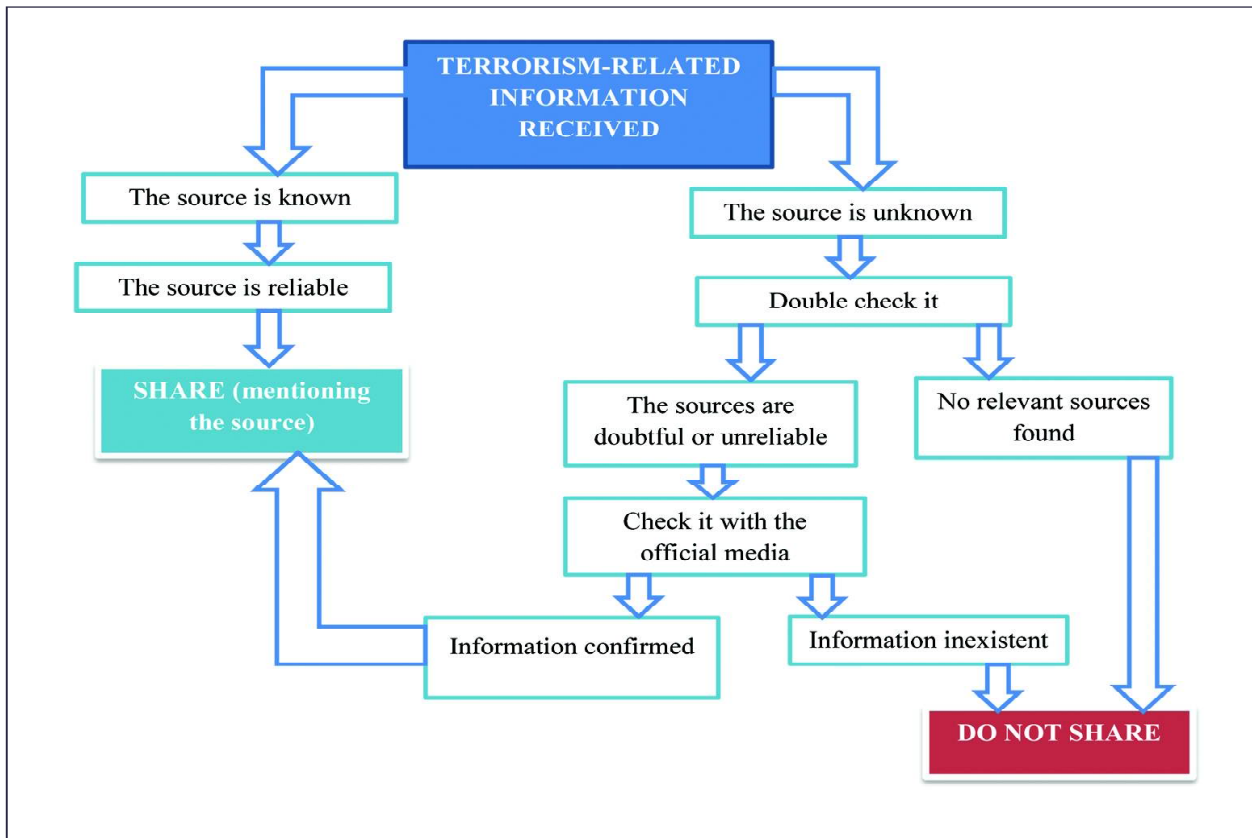


Figure 20: The Attitude To Adopt By Digital Citizens To Avoid Propagating Fake News

Actually, sharing terrorism-related news can have an emotional impact on the general public who is concerned about terrorists’ extortions. Worse still, it can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder that can cause the targeted populations to develop feelings of horror, fear and hopelessness. In this way, by strengthening the verification processes, the “digital prosumers” will contribute fighting against the proliferation of fake news on social media platforms.

All in all, West African media regulatory institutions must work to ensure the protection of reporters at the scenes of terrorist attacks. Indeed, in West African countries, very few media have so far put in place adequate requirements to protect their journalists. Sometimes journalists are deported to the theatres of attacks without any security measures; and even they do not possess at least security vests most of the time. Yet, both security forces and journalists should work collaboratively so that media would not be guilty of disseminating information that could compromise the investigative work of the police.

16. Conclusion

“The real battleground of terrorism is in the newspaper columns and on television screens”⁵⁸, wrote the Canadian academic Pierre Mannoni (2003). This highlights the crucial role of media in terrorism context. The September 11 attacks have profoundly changed the relationship between media and terrorism. Thus, news about terrorists’ crimes floods the traditional media—radio stations, television channels and newspaper columns—and, more importantly today, the social media platforms.

⁵⁸ P. Mannoni. and C. Bonardi. (2003). *Terrorism and Mass Media*. *Topique* N°83, 55-72. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-topique-2003-2-page-55.htm>

The Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most affected areas in the world by terrorism, which causes economic, political and social impacts on the local populations. Almost every day, social networks report new terrorist attacks in West Africa, particularly in the borders of Mali and Burkina Faso. As underlined Tavernier and Garcin-Marrou (2001):

In a context of terrorism, media must make a “rationalized discourse” about the violence which profoundly undermines the basic principles of any democratic society (...) The journalistic framing of terrorist events strappingly depends on the involvement of the media discourse related to the terrorist threat (...) Hence, between the emotional and the rational, the media discourse differs significantly; depending on whether the antagonists are defamed at the international level or not⁵⁹.

However, in this 21st century, communication is really the battlefield for terrorists; and accordingly, the Islamic State terrorist group also had its own news agency called Amaq, founded in August 2014. This entails the excessive use of hypermedia by extremist groups to propagate their messages.

Consequently, with the occurrence of terrorist extortions in Sub-Saharan Africa, West African journalists are now faced with raw information whose treatment requires greater professionalism and a high sense of social responsibility. It is difficult today to talk about terrorism, especially about its proliferation, without the contribution of both traditional and new media. Sometimes still, West African media become veritable relays of terrorists’ news. After each bloody attack, media help terrorist groups claiming their extortion; and therefore, they win a moral victory by terrorizing the populations via the media.

As a result, the fight against terrorism should not be used as an excuse for states to restrict press freedom. For their part, media professionals should avoid playing the terrorists’ game with a frantic race towards information and publishing sensational images. Hence, West African media, which have a central mission of informing their citizens about the major events that occur in the region, are therefore confronted with a difficult dilemma: to inform the populations about terrorist attacks without terrorizing them.

At the beginning of this work, my main objective was to investigate and establish a nexus between crisis communication, media framing and the advent of social media prevalence in West Africa. At the end of the study, in the light of the various insights provided through the interviews with the media owners, the representatives of the media regulation institutes, the content analysis of 219 articles published on *Maliwe.net* and *LeFaso.net*, as well as the data collected via the open-ended questions survey, proved that the over-media coverage of terrorist attacks and the mode of informational processing constitute a form of involuntary propagation of terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the method of processing information linked to terrorism creates psychosis amongst West African populations. As the researcher Kriegel (2003) explains, “When a person is exposed to television violence, the immediate physiological effects are of the same nature as if that person is exposed to a situation of actual violence”⁶⁰.

Finally, to avoid being complicit of terrorist propaganda, West African media professionals must take more precautions in framing terrorism, so as not to contribute to fueling panic movements or to accentuating the anxiety-provoking nature that occurs in such crisis contexts. Thus, media professionals must exercise particular vigilance in dealing with matters relating to terrorist acts. Ultimately, since media are used as weapons in battlefields, it is possible to affirm that crisis communication is a sort of double edged sword which cuts both ways. Therefore, information literacy for crisis management – along with patriotic journalism – is vital to fight against terrorism propaganda in West Africa and beyond.

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⁵⁹ A. Tavernier. and I. Garcin-Marrou. (2001). *Terrorism, Medias and Democracy. Études de communication*, no 24, 147-149. Presses Universitaires de Lyon coll. Passerelles.

⁶⁰ B. Kriegel. (2003). *Violence on Television: Report of the Evaluation Mission, Analysis and Proposals Relating to Violent Representations on Television*, 173, Paris, PUF.

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