

## **War Propaganda and Correspondents: Updating UN Covenant and Media Ethics Principles**

*By Festus Eribo\**

*This study is an examination of war propaganda and correspondents in concomitance with the 1948 Resolution 217A of the UN Covenant prohibiting war propaganda under the rubric of media ethics and the applicable principles and guidelines. The thematic internal contradictions of war propaganda and the intentional or unintentional disregard for ethical news analysis, coverage, reportage, and objectivity are examined. The United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits war propaganda. This qualitative study calls for the continuation of compelling scholarship to advance human rights to live in peace and constructive social change through serious ethical application and consideration in the coverage and reportage of war. Four of the objectives of this study are to (i) promote an update of the 1948 Resolution 217A of the UN Covenant prohibiting war propaganda; (ii) re-emphasize the necessity for media ethics in belligerent and non-aggressive theaters; (iii) address some of the internal conflicts in media ethics' principles of universality; and (iv) contribute to the literature on war propaganda, human rights to live in peace, and media ethics. The study is significant because there is the need for a dispassionate, objective and scholarly examination of the phenomenon at a time of crises across the globe.*

**Keywords:** *War propaganda, War correspondent, UN Covenant, Human Rights, Media Ethics*

### **Introduction**

This study is a qualitative examination of war propaganda, human rights, and the auditorium under the rubric of ethical principles and guidelines as we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The objectives are to expand and elucidate on the application and rationalization of the philosophical premises of the dominant ethical paradigms. Specifically, the study addresses some of the challenges to human rights and the use of media ethics' principles of universality in the promotion of peace. There is an urgent need to re-examine the necessity for media ethics in belligerent and non-belligerent theaters and recognize the continuation of compelling scholarship to advance human rights to live in peace and constructive social change through reasoned ethical application and consideration in the coverage and reportage of war.

The thematic internal contradictions of war propaganda and the intentional or unintentional disregard for ethical news analysis, coverage, reportage and objectivity are examined. The United Nations' international Covenant on civil and political rights

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prohibits war propaganda. This qualitative study calls for compliance with UN's Covenant against war propaganda in order to advance human rights to live in peace.

Three of the objectives of this study are to (i) re-emphasize the necessity for media ethics in belligerent and non-aggressive theaters; (ii) address some of the challenges in bridging the lacuna between media ethics principles of universality and the UN declaration of universal human rights; and (iii) contribute to the literature on war propaganda, human rights to live in peace, and media ethics. The study is significant because there is the need for a dispassionate, objective and scholarly examination of the phenomenon at a time of crises across the globe.

The scholarship on war propaganda has largely focused on post-factum political cum geopolitical analyses in conflict zones. There is the need for more studies on the unethical nature of war propaganda and the auditorium to deter degradation of society and promote human rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study will contribute to existing literature on war propaganda and global auditorium with ethical exigency. The study calls for accountability and responsibility of political leaders in the prosecution of war by joining the combatants in the theater of war rather than staying in the rear while their citizens are deprived of the right to life.

## **War Propaganda**

There is the assumption and realization that some of the basic media ethics principles and guidelines in war time elude some correspondents in war theaters. Although the critical scholarship on how media ethics can engender the promotion of human rights and social change is limited, the issue of war propaganda is addressed in the first optional protocol of 1976 and the second optional protocol of 1989 of the United Nations. Following the protocol, the international Covenant on civil and political rights prohibits war propaganda, arbitrary deprivation of life and other violations of human rights (UN a). This Covenant is under the canopy of United Nations' universal declaration of human rights in Resolution 217A of the General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948. The resolution consists of 30 Articles recognizing human rights and freedom for all citizens of our planet. In summary, it states that everyone has the right to life, peace, dignity and equality (UN b). The 1989 Covenant went further, as noted above, to prohibit war propaganda.

Subsequently, fingers are frequently pointed at war propaganda as a culprit in the dynamics of coverage and reportage of war by both sides of the combatants as well as media users and correspondents in the auditorium. In war, the theater is grotesque and in most cases a killing field with indiscriminate victims, fatalities and casualties. The morbidity is monstrous. The situation is abnormal. Almost everything disintegrates in a war zone while the reporting in such a macabre circumstance is complex, difficult and full of challenges. The assignment is dangerous, frightening and frustrating as morbidity rises. The journalist could die at any moment during the war he or she is covering. Therefore, the challenges in the theater of war may lead to subjective reporting.

In the carnage wrought by World War II alone, about 70 to 85 million people perished. The number included 50 to 56 military and civilian fatalities, 26.6 million

citizens of the former USSR, 20 million Chinese, six million Jews, about 5.8 million Polish citizens, 5.6 million Germans and 3.1 million Japanese. The Soviet Union and China accounted for about 50 percent of the people who perished in the war (Wikipedia, 2023). Other nationalities were affected by the contagious ill wind of war.

The catastrophe exemplified in the casualty figures is not limited to human toll. It leaves one in a quandary about the type of society that does this type of destruction and killing of fellow humans and denying them their basic human rights to live. The monstrosity is tantamount to human sacrifice to no earthly being. Yet the reporter must deliver the professional duty the world has come to expect from journalists on whom falls the onus of accountability, objectivity, responsibility, and the guiding pillars of ethical demands.

War must be taken seriously. It is unproductive, primitive and punitive. In fact, a civilized society should avoid war. In the search for a better civilization, global human rights and social change, the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not be a mirror image of the negativity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's misadventures in senseless killings or human sacrifice in two World Wars and other regional wars.

The pressure on the journalist at the war front is towering not only because of the macabre nature of the assignment but also the manipulative machinery of the authorities behind the war. Cull (1995) points out in his publication on selling war that British propaganda employed different strategies to compel the United States to rescue Britain from the onslaught of the Germans during the Second World War. Using intellectual and practical tactics, Britain sought the cooperation of Isaiah Berlin, an Oxford philosopher, Cecil Beaton, a prominent photographer, Edward R. Murrow, an American media icon, leading Hollywood film makers and others to support the British propaganda plan to turn American isolationism to belligerence. It is significant to point out that the attack on Pearl Harbor led to the final call to arms in the United States, not necessarily the British war propaganda directed at co-opting America.

Earlier, Badsey (2014) notes in his publication on propaganda, media and war politics that propaganda plays an important part in war politics. Some nations are adept in war propaganda based on their experience in numerous violent conflicts around the world. Thus, they negotiate relations with the media using coercion when the agreement with the media fails. In some cases, a more coercive and direct approach is used to compel media compliance with the government. Under coercive conditions, war propaganda is beyond the control of the media and practitioners. The natural instinct for survival compels the journalist to comply with the belligerent authorities.

The values, principles and primordial necessities of life are a manifestation of the dictates of the environment in which the diverse people around the globe found themselves. The world has always been faced with a common fate but human values and principles have been evolutionary and, sometimes, cataclysmic, cooperative and modulatory for the benefit of the few or the whole society (Eribo, 2020).

The destruction in World War II alone is a warning that a similar global war will lead to such a cataclysm that only the unlucky people will survive to live among billions of decomposing bodies or incinerated former humans. The use of killer

drones with lawnmower engines and some less devastating weapons will be regarded as weapons of the middle ages, an anachronism, should the world be plunged into another global war that may lead to conflagration. Thus, it is incumbent on all journalists covering war zones that their ultimate concerns should be the survival of everyone on the planet, the human race (Ellul, 1965). All ethical principles must be observed to discourage combatants from gloating over killing advantages over their antagonists and perceived enemies. Journalists should therefore avoid war propaganda and save lives because saving lives is an indispensable part of human rights which demand the right to live in peace. Although there are legal provisions in international law against war propaganda, the fundamental ethical choices made by the journalist demonstrate the quality of the reporter in such stressful condition (Connelly and Welch, 2005; Kamalipour and Snow, 2004; Kearney, 2007).

War propaganda could be counterproductive. In the following scenario, a belligerent country A tells the media crew that it is winning a war in which it decimated 100,000 tanks in the army of belligerent country B. The truth is that country B sent a total of 20,000 tanks to war and the imaginary extra 80,000 tanks are mere fantasy manufactured by the propagandists in country A. The news when reported by the media crew is a morale booster for country A. But the people in the auditorium thinking that country A is winning the war may be reticent or reenergized in supporting country A. Contrarily, the fake battlefield victory and scenario may garner more support for country B. It is a double-edged sword. In reporting the above scenario, a war correspondent is more likely to be drawn into the propaganda machinery of combatants, thereby violating the basic ethical principles of objectivity and truthfulness in addition to the international law against war propaganda.

### **A priori Opprobrium of War Propaganda**

Emphasis should be placed on a priori coverage and reportage of war vis-à-vis post-factum documentation and reports of the ravages of war. It costs less human toll and resources to prevent a war than to engage in a war. This calls for investment in peace with the concomitant human rights. There should be reports of events to avoid all wars and project human rights to live in peace and pursue self-fulfillment. War and the violation of human rights can be avoided under rational conditions. The vision of the United Nations in 1948 could be maintained based on the realization that billions of dollars spent to prosecute a war could be spent on avoiding any war. The United States Institute of Peace established in 1984 and funded by Congress works strategically to promote peace and prevent future violence across the globe. A noteworthy activity of the institute is the training and mentoring program with an emphasis on the prevention of violent conflicts in both fragile and stable countries. It also engages in de-escalation of conflicts in various field operations worldwide. For example, the institute's operations include the extension of peace-building education into the classrooms of the young generation on whose shoulders lies the future of a peaceful world (*USIP*). The field program within the United States engages K-12 schools with the tools for the promotion and understanding of peace and conflict resolution. Similar programs exist in China, Russia, and other countries.

These programs are examples of a priori projects to promote peace rather than a post-factum approach to war and peace. Given the continuity of belligerence around the world, there should be an intensification of education on conflict resolution and war deterrence at a very young age.

Beyond the a priori peacebuilding strategies of the United States Institute of Peace, there are non-profit organizations and foundations such as the non-violence project foundation, supporting peace initiatives worldwide. The Society for Nonprofits publishes calls for grant applications from individuals and groups seeking funds for research on the examination and prevention of violent conflicts (*Society for Nonprofits*). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also supports research and events on the promotion of peace. Its preamble to the 1945 constitution stating: "Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that defenses of peace must be constructed" is instructive (UNESCO). American University in Washington, D. C. has established the department of peace, human rights and cultural relations seeking to eliminate genocide and war violence and promote world peace. Similar educational peace programs exist in Lomonosov Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University, Russia, China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing, Tsinghua University in Beijing, Fudan University in Shanghai, Duke, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale and other universities in the United States have peacebuilding academic programs. Peace thinkers and scholars should engage in frequent and visible international collaborations. Additional resources for pre-emptive action against war, such as a world peace bank should be introduced and funded. All institutions need more funding to accomplish their lofty objectives. So far, the Nobel Peace Prize is the crown jewel for the recognition of peace advocates around the world. There is the possibility that if there is no war, there will be no war propaganda. This appears to be a tall order in a world that regularly invokes war in time and space.

In addition to the genuine and theoretical efforts by the United Nations and other well-meaning organizations and individuals worldwide to prohibit and discourage wars and war propaganda, it is practically possible to require presidents and prime ministers to lead war efforts right at the war front. Those responsible for the casus belli should be right in front of the armed forces at war. This proviso should be a necessary but insufficient condition to lead a nation or community to war. This conditionality for leadership will test the bravery of those who send men and women to selflessly, in many cases, fight and die for causes beyond their comprehension and control. There should be no excuse for those who fight proxy wars or constitute gangs to denigrate other nations and nationalities. There are covert or overt instigators of war. They should all report at the war front for a test of bravery. An updated UN Covenant should include the call to action.

President Idriss Déby Itno of Chad led his country from 1990 until April 2021 when he went to the war front and took over the command of the armed forces fighting against the rebels. He was killed on the war front after ruling his country for 30 years (*BBC*). In this case, his deputy could have been required by local law or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to replace him at the war front. Will he go to the war front? How many of the current leaders who send their citizens to war will lead the war from the front? Even strong man Muammar Gaddafi of Libya

was on the run and found hiding in a drainage pipe while taking cover from the overpowering gunfire from Misrata rebel militia. He was captured and killed after ruling his country for 42 years from 1969 to 2011 (Campbell, 2013).

Current and future leaders should solemnly swear on pre-inauguration day or inauguration day or post-inauguration that they will personally lead any war against their country or any war their country has to fight. They might stop fighting wars and proscribe war propaganda. Some politicians may resign from their offices under the proviso to lead a war in person as a requirement in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The author calls for the introduction of this proviso in the UN Covenant.

### **Media Ethics Compass**

Eribo (2020) points out that contemporary social construct cannot survive without an ethical compass for the trust and truism required in human communication and societal cohesion. Unethical media practices affect the individual, community, culture, institutional affiliation, human rights, and, indeed, the human race. Subsequently, media workers, observers, users, and critics are, unavoidably, saddled with the social responsibility of ethical communication infrastructure, substructure, and superstructure. It is incumbent on everyone in mainstream and social media to imbibe the edifice of media ethics as the bedrock of constructive communication in cyberspace, terrestrial reality and time. To abandon the appeal and remarkableness of media ethics in gathering, processing and disseminating news and information with concomitant feedback is tantamount to runaway contradiction, degeneration, and dissipation. Thus, there is the necessity to provide an ethical compass in the navigation of contemporary society. At this time, groping in the dark is not an option because of the devastating consequences of abuse of fundamental human rights to live in peace.

Specifically, we are witnessing the abuse of the media, technological innovation, and the workforce while traversing the advent of new possibilities in human, synthetic, and mediated communication. Journalism, as a profession, suffers when individuals choose to violate and sacrifice societal norms and values at the revolting pit of human fallibility. Realistically, there is no reasonable excuse for unethical practices in human endeavors, including communication in the march of civilization and social change. No virtuous society will “exchange good moral values for decadence, deceit, and indignity without remorse” (Eribo, 2020, p. xi).

There is no single definition of ethics and its application to complex and real-life situations such as war coverage and reportage. Barnes (2020) points out that ethics is about doing the right thing and that doing what is right is not always clear in both simple and complex situations. Communication scholars seem to agree on one word in their major contributions to media ethics over the years. That one word is truth (Christians, 2019; Lerner, 1972; McIntyre, 2023; Moorcraft, 2016; Mowlana, 1989, Ward, 2018). In war coverage and reportage, truth is one of the first casualties of war, not necessarily the first casualty of war. In many cases, journalists, media listeners, readers, and viewers or spectators are the arbiters of the truth. Lying is

unethical. The negativity of lying in the media is costly and illegal. People think and make ethical decisions based on their understanding of the facts and truth.

Humans are thinking beings. Thinking is a biological endowment. It is like the air we breathe. The quality of thought may vary but the thinking process is innate. In the *Discourse on Method* of 1637, René Descartes, a French mathematician and philosopher, stated, “I think, therefore, I am” translated from Latin: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (*Britannica*). Our current knowledge dictates that inanimate objects do not think but they are affected by human actions, thinking, and the machinery of war. Thinking may be based on intuition, experience, observation, environment, desire, senses, etc. Critical thinking is the ability to objectively examine the realities of life and our imagination. Critical thinking is a prime factor in building on existing ecosystems, images, science, technology, and thought, in the universe and multiverse. We are thinking critically when we examine life in all its ramifications and add our understanding of the situation in agreement or disagreement with the existing essential or non-essential elements. The ability to think beyond what is in plain sight is often predicated by the questions: what is next? Is there an alternative way to a better solution? Is the present situation satisfactory? Why is it satisfactory or unsatisfactory? Journalists in war theaters understand the need for critical thinking despite the abnormality around them.

The introduction of new communication technologies and emerging software programs such as artificial intelligence (AI), chatbot, chat generative pre-trained transformer (ChatGPT), second life, virtual reality, and other digital tools and machine learning should be recognized as another level of human capability. The synthetic contents generated in cyberspace are capable of turning into synthetic war provocateurs. We are at the embryonic stage of the Internet which has the potential for more negative or positive outcomes, depending on bad or good actors. These technologies may have the incognito potential to launch war propaganda and other violations of global human rights. The current UN Resolution 217A of the General Assembly on the declaration of human rights and the UN Covenant prohibiting war propaganda should be updated and extended to artificial intelligence.

Christians et al. (2020) provided ethical guidelines on moral reasoning. The authors highlighted Aristotle’s Mean on moral virtue as “middle state determined by practical wisdom” (p. 22). Aristotle’s Mean was complemented by Confucius Golden Mean on temperance, a much older philosophical principle from China in the fifth century BC. The authors pointed out that Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) are important resources for ethical decision-making regarding Deontological ethics. In addition, they pointed out the unconditional duties of Islam’s Divine commands for “justice, human dignity, and truth” p.27. Other guidelines focused on Mill’s principle of utility for seeking “the greatest happiness for the aggregate whole, Rawls’s veil of ignorance stipulating that “justice emerges when negotiating without social differentiations; the Judeo-Christian person as ends, meaning “love your neighbor as yourself and Noddings’ relational ethics on how “The ‘One-Caring’ attends to the ‘cared-for’ in thought and deeds” p.34.

There are challenges to Christians et al. and their guidelines. Meyers (2016) and Cortes (2020) do not fully subscribe to the original guidelines, arguing against

the absolutism and universality of the guidelines. However, there is agreement that the guidelines are relevant and fundamental. They are important guideposts for any journalist seeking ethical principles for quick decision-making in volatile crises or other situations. A simplified ethical stipulation for journalists can be found in the four guidelines from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). The SPJ code of ethics calls on journalists to seek the truth and publish it; minimize harm; be accountable; and act independently. Whereas Buttry (2020) acknowledges the clarity of the code, he called for an update stating that 21<sup>st</sup>-century journalism requires 21<sup>st</sup>-century code. Meanwhile, the ethical guidelines for social media are still in flux as the Internet remains a free-for-all jungle for ethical and unethical content creators. It should be noted that individuals can be held accountable for what they post on the Internet. War propaganda is prohibited in cyberspace and the media landscape.

## **Conclusion**

It has taken some restraints to avoid naming some conflict zones in this study. This is deliberate. Similarly, specific references to recent wars and conflicts have been deliberately avoided since this study is not a catalog of such events. The lessons of the calamity of World War II are sufficient to deter wars but people continue to repeat history in many regions of the world. The focus of this study includes war propaganda, a priori opprobrium of war, and the fundamentals of media ethics in the promotion of human rights and social change even as nations continue to go to war and trigger media coverage and reportage.

The ethical guidelines cited in this study are dynamic and subject to additional ethical principles as the global society continues to adapt to the new communication and information technologies. The development of artificial intelligence and machine learning indicates the possibility of new challenges to the rights of the people in our global auditorium.

This study is an epistemological examination of war propaganda under the rubric of ethical principles and guidelines as we close on the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The study raises significant possibilities on how to mitigate the rush to war and violation of the UN Covenant against war propaganda. If prime ministers and presidents responsible for the *casus belli* of internal and international wars are required by the updated UN Covenant to fight in the wars they have started, there may be fewer wars since they are not invincible. However, reporting at the war front should be a test of bravery for all leaders, instigators of war, and war propagandists.

There is a dearth of literature on the interplay of war propaganda and human rights and the role of media ethics in communication scholarship. This study calls for a significant increase in the literature on ethical considerations in the coverage and reportage of war. It is astonishing and frustrating to note that human rights have eluded the global community even after the Second World War and other major violent crises. However, the struggle against human rights violations must continue on all fronts until it is successful.

Although the qualitative study in this paper is necessary and sufficient, there are limitations in the study. The limitations are associated with the lack of critical

data. There is room for quantitative methods in future studies. The examination should include empirical and statistical cum quantitative analyses of variables to demonstrate the significance and replicability of the study.

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