

# Critical Minds for Critical Times: Media Role in Advancing Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Society, and the Intricacies of Crisis Communication

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The theme of this year's **World Press Freedom Day** is interestingly convoluted. The reason is that it invites us to, at once examine some important issues, and in great depth. It talks about critical minds, then critical times, and then moves on to the role of the media in the evolution of a peaceful, just and inclusive society. The subject matter therefore envisages some structural or dialectical connections and interconnections between all the variables in evidence. And these variables are critical mind, critical time, the media, and then a society that is peaceful, just and inclusive. There is a delicate relationship between all these variables. It is important, therefore, that we appreciate their differences and similarities, through their definitions, so we can effectively link their collective relevance, or irrelevance, to contemporary media times, and even to our overall everyday life.

First, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, what do we mean by a critical mind? How do we differentiate between a mind that is critical and the one that is uncritical? Why the adjective critical should be deployed to describe the mind? The mind in itself is that part of us that helps us to think. The mind is the faculty of thought, which harbours our senses, and permits us to differentiate between right and wrong. The mind is our guide, our conscience, and the residence of our knowledge. The mind develops through multiple socialization processes, through space and time, while its quality is also determined by the context, and contents of exposures. The mind can be flat, when it is less rigorous in thoughts. The mind is sophisticated when the quality of thought is elevated, urbane and comparatively advanced. The mind may be critical, or uncritical depending on how the content is applied.

A mind is critical if thoughts are situated between all the necessary scales of judgement. That is to say, the critical mind should not be mono-directional, unilineal, or parochial. The critical mind should be disparate in dimensions, versed in perspectives, and logical in approach. The critical mind should look at the good, the bad and the ugly. It should look at the micro, the mezzo, and the macro, and even into positions in-between. The critical mind is, therefore, the objective mind, which figures issues from the thesis, anti-thesis, and then synthesis viewpoint. But remember that the critical mind is probably being mentioned as an utopian concept. The reason is that the human mind is patently self-indulged.

The tendency often, is to see things from the self-serving point of view. Service to self, which remains the first temptation of the human being, is unfortunately less gracious. It is unsalutary, often unpopular, and might even be seen as ungodly in many circles. Grace therefore comes when matters are ideally distanced from the self, when matters are not subjectivised, and when matters are viewed from the lenses of dispassion. The essence of a critical mind is for contextual thinking, for balancing, and ultimately for the situation of solutions to problems. But how then does critical mind relate with the critical time? I'll turn to this next.

Critical times can mean different things. The word critical can parade synonyms like serious, crucial, deadly, important, difficult, dangerous, delicate, and tortuous, amongst others, when related to time. But in this context however, I understand our reference to critical time to mean unusual times. It can mean difficult, strange, or unpredictable times. It can be the time of some revolution, of some fast paced changes, which is redefining our life, how we relate, and how we interact with each other, especially as it concerns media. Critical times now, therefore, are our present times where changes are frenetic, and where changes are taking place almost by the hour, on a planetary basis, and now at speed, even greater than the speed of light.

The critical times in evidence shape our features, our approaches to life, our workplace patterns, and the particularities of our daily schedule. Our ways are partly determined by the growing changes in technologies of communications, and we are regularly confronted with the need to either adjust, or be left behind. If you can adjust, you might keep the pace, but if you cannot, you might be confined to an unfancied yesterday. Newer generations have an advantage here. They have the patience to work through the details of the unfolding changes in technologies. The older ones might not be too patient, even though many are not lost in the process. The lines between these divides might not be rigid though, as they can be interwoven, but the characterisation is likely to fit the divisions of acculturation. Beyond this is the fact of the pluralisation of media channels.

But let us pause and have a look at what media entails. The media, in our understanding, includes the processes and channels of information dissemination to an, heterogeneous audience, who might be anonymous.

It includes all the means through which information are not only sent but shared. The channels of information dissemination are no doubt expanding in the new age of communication revolution. They are however largely grouped into two. These are the traditional and the new media. The traditional, like you already know, are the old and the long existing channels, while the new are the more recent, and yet evolving means, that includes essentially the Internet. Amongst the traditional media are the Radio, the Television, and the Newspaper.

Online communication represented by the Internet bear other means of communication, which have graduated to be social in view of their interactive abilities. These are platforms that permit many to many communications, unlike the old ones where interaction was just one, or a few to many. With the old media, sender could be singular, one person broadcasting or reporting to many. In the new age, many could broadcast to many in real time, and across distances. Items in the new media list are multiplying everyday, but the more common ones are Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, amongst others. Chief characteristics of the new, social media are that it has supposedly democratised media and communication. It is also cheap, accessible, portable, user-friendly, popular and fast spreading. The downsides as reflected in dumb-down reporting, fake news and hoaxes, exaggerations, are also inherent.

With the social media, the process is no longer top-down, but also bottom-up. Many are now publishers, reporters, analysts, columnists and commentators. The spaces for the above abilities are multiple, cheap, and fast-moving. In fact, the pace is literally like lightning. Because of this, users who are variegated, differentiated, and expanding, and can post any information, from anywhere, at any time, on any platform, and to whomever, and it will be multiply circulated within a short time. In the age of the social media, there are little or no references to quality. Control is weak. There are no subscriptions to ethics, or best practices. The use of the social media is an all-comer's affairs, and has challenged the traditional role of the media. In doing this, information dissemination is no longer the exclusive preserve of the journalists, but could be done simply with the possession of the smartphone.

The smartphone can at once be a Radio House, a television station, and a newspaper, in the new age of ultra-convergence, and some ultra-freedom. As a result of this seemingly uncontrollable plurality of channels, society is now challenged in the management of the media. Societies are tasked to no end in the way they manage information. Reason is, for instance, that if you can trace the *Thisday* Newspaper to an office in Lagos, how well can you trace an offending Whatsapp message, probably originating from Outer Mongolia, and which is damaging to your person, or organisation? This scenario would firstly have raised multiple issues around jurisdiction, and then other issues on the economics of retribution.

With the social media, therefore, we are somewhat at the mercy of the "closet nymphomaniacs", the hactivist, the smartphone sadists, and the killjoy, who constructs negative reality against you, paying little regard to ethics, your rights and liberties, your feelings, and without any thoughts for the laws of libel, of slander, and of sedition. This is besides multiple cases of copyright violations, trademark infringements, intellectual property abuses, covert and overt defamations, denigrations, and innuendoes. With this new development, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, how best should we situate the media against the background of the identified critical times?

The role of the media cannot essentially change, whether the times are critical or uncritical. The media is primarily to inform, educate and entertain. There might be other functions, but the above roles are adjudged central to media functions. The performances of these roles have also led to the development of different ways of theorizing the functions. Some familiar ones are the social responsibility, the libertarian, the cognitive dissonance, uses and gratifications, the Marxian, and the propaganda model, amongst many others. Many other understandings are yet evolving. Regardless, today's topic may likely sit well with the social responsibility and the libertarian understanding.

While we should not bore you with these drab theories, we will quickly argue that the bottomline in media role, when all of the above are broken down is that the media is an agenda setter. They shape public opinion, for good, or for ill. The ability of the media to do this is also a function of some factors. Some of these are the society in context, the quality of practitioners, and ownership patterns, amongst others. The argument in this "critical times" is that the popular traditional roles and responsibilities of the media have been markedly altered, distorted, reconstructed and deconstructed by the new age of communications technologies. This age has been a witness to the nebulous online media, intertwining with the social media, and redefining how media could help the advancement of a peaceful, just and inclusive society.

But let's not forget however that inventions have characteristically come with their demerits. The motorcar came with accidents; the airplane came with air crashes, and electricity came with shocks. The titanic sank, and flight MH370 disappeared at cruising altitude. There will always be the otherside of things, just as the world will continue to witness mysteries and irritations. The challenge of man has been the perfection of his inventions to avoid the downsides. As much as man keeps trying, other sides keep manifesting. It seems like a ding-dong? The Internet age cannot be left out. As hinted earlier, the age of online communication is replete with multiple, or cross posting, fakes news, outright lies, brazen assassination of character, fraud, and multiple deceptions. Would

we therefore rather not have the Internet? I am sure none of us will answer in the affirmative.

The challenge to man is to keep finding ways of dealing with these inadequacies. The task is to critically think out methods to deal with the negatively critical mind, manipulating the machine to hurt the other. The machines are inanimate. The inventors design them for good. But remember that evil will always gaze at good. And to think that an invention won't have a bad path is to think that evil will ever disappear from the world. The antidote is for good to prepare itself continuously against evil. And despite evil, we have got to achieve a peaceful, just and inclusive society. But first, what do we mean when we say a society is peaceful, just and inclusive?

A peaceful society, in my understanding, is a stable, predictable, and organised society. Things work in a peaceful society. Life is somewhat easier. It may not be entirely devoid of crisis, but the mechanisms for dealing with them have matured, and are effective. A peaceful society might be prosperous, and it might as well be in want. It all depends. A just society is often hinged on the rule of law. It can be a society where peace, liberty, justice reign. It is a society where the law, as against the man, rules. A just society is a fair society, one that does not discriminate in criminal justice administration.

An inclusive society, like the peaceful and just society is also an ideal state. Inclusion implies integration, the absence of discrimination, abhorrence for the presence of the ugly sides of otherness, and distaste for the celebration of difference. In the face of diversity, an inclusive society deploys different management tools for balance, for a sense of belonging, and for feeling of oneness. A perfect state of peaceful, just and inclusion may not be in evidence, but nations and societies perpetually work towards them. The degree of success from working on them is sometimes directly proportional to the level of progress registered in the society. But more importantly for this discourse, what role do the media play in the evolution, or in the engineering of a peaceful, just and inclusive society?

We have tried to highlight some generic functions of the media above. But we've got to relate these functions to the question of peace, justice, and inclusion, against the background of the World Press Freedom day, and our desire for a free press. It was probably even easier for the media to help keep the peace of a society in the days of the traditional media, where platforms were less nebulous. Now however, the platforms have become the sources, or triggers of tension, and even disorders. But like I wondered earlier, is there no solution? Of course, there are solutions. The first thing we think is for the consumers of media products to develop a greater sense of discernment.

The new age needs extra care. An average piece of information surely has a source, or a platform. And it cannot be too difficult separating the wheat from the chaff, if we are a bit more sensitive. For instance, how tough is it to identify the few credible Nigerian news based online platforms? Three consistently false or problematic reports from one controversial platform are too much to discredit a platform. Why then would you privilege that source or platform, irrespective of man's unending appetite for the mundane, the frivolous, the salacious, and the entertaining? The argument here is that some contents and platforms can as well be ignored, once they are identified as discreditable channels.

Is anything wrong with rebuttals or rejoinders? Not at all, we'll say. A detailed, one-off reaction is good enough, for the preservation of reputation and to drum home the fact that the channels are in fact discreditable. Beyond this is the need to say that the press is better engaged? Engaging them foster understanding, partnership, and camaraderie. The envisaged partnership should provide a ground for the sharing of organisational information, for the circulation of Public Relations tools, and for the development of mutual respect, and companionship. The above somewhat relates more to the traditional media. For the new, social media, the approach is different. What to do here is to simply join the fray. You cannot be afraid of being on twitter, of having a Facebook, or LinkedIn account, or of being active on Whatsapp. Good to know that many organisations have not been left out in the ownership of these spaces. What is however left is the need to increase the level of participation, or engagement on them.

The essence of joining the fray is to level up with the trend, provide information (if necessary) on the go, and prevent, as much as possible, the shaping of information against the self, whether institutional, or private. What about propaganda? Many times, we see this as bad. Propaganda is often associated with the bad and the ugly. But this is definitely not the case. Propaganda, according to Philip Taylor, involves the systematic release of information from a sender to some receivers for the purpose of benefiting the sender. The fact that it is meant to benefit you does not make it less salutary. It simply reflects self-consciousness, and the need to preserve same. We talk of propaganda only in war situations, but some situations can as well be war-like, which is why we can a times deliberately indulge in positive propaganda so you would not be defamed, or dismissed in the media as a failure, or as an incompetent.

In addition, editorial influence seems to be waning in our system. The editorial is a publications' opinion on chosen issues, usually topical, and objectively analysed before a conclusion is reached. Media organisations were once known for populating their editorial board with quality thinkers, drawn from different walks of life. They often came out with well-informed write-ups, capable of tilting policy directions. What is the place of editorial

writings in modern journalism? Can we not reason that editorials are platforms through which the media can encourage a just and inclusive society, given the critical minds, and processes that characterizes their deliveries? The editorials are one lasting feature of the serious media. The mushrooming ones won't have that time. The editorials are sections that state officials should be focused on, while publishers should as well ensure standards are not compromised on there.

We shall conclude this raving, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, by referring to the famous lines of Professor Jerry Gana. He said simply that whatever you are doing, please do it well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If you are a dancer, dance well. If you are a manager, please manage well, and if you are a singer, sing well. Gana was probably furthering the little corner theory in the nature of things. This theory asks us to operate well from our little corner. And when we do this, it will eventually rub-off on the social system. From its own angle, as a result, the media need to continuously do some reflections, and some reflexions, through trainings, retraining, and exposures, especially with changing times, so they won't only be able to play their roles as educators, entertainers, and informers, but can as well galvanize the leadership and the led towards the achievement of a peaceful, just and inclusive society, and better still, through the critical points of view, pursuant to their quest for greater freedom.

### **THE LINK OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION: MANIFESTATION AND SOLUTION**

Crisis is going to be defined in organisational context. It is going to be x-rayed from the point of view of an agency, and with the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) as a case. Therefore, crisis is the absence of peace. It is the disruption of a routine and the appearance of disjunctures in plans. Crises are emergencies, often unpredictable, often unanticipated, which come up in the course of assignment, of life, or while executing schedules. Crisis can be disturbing, stressful, and unsettling. Crisis can be good or bad, depending. Some crisis may be precursors to growth and development, while some others may herald doom. At the level of faith, we will always say "not my portion", or we often wish that it should lead to progress, but it is a different ball game in the philosophy of life: It might just herald some doom, which could also challenge a subject to rise again. In our everyday work life, however, crisis can hardly be avoided, as possibly demonstrated in the imaginary cases constructed above.

Jeannette Walls argues that "Sometimes you need a little crisis to get your adrenaline flowing and help you realize your potential". I agree, because crisis triggers the searches for solutions, for remedies, so you can be propelled to a next stage. There might be lethargy, reluctance, and inactivity in an excessively routine state. The disruptive effect of crisis might just be helpful. Amit Ray also noted that: "In every crisis, doubt or confusion take the higher path-the path of compassion, courage, understanding and love" That quote underscore the multifaceted possibility in an average crisis. The fact that crisis can reflect not just the different path of the man, but usher in different dimensions to reality. What then do we do in the face of crisis?

First, can we prevent crisis? If we have a choice, we surely will like to prevent it. Remember the street wisdom: "Prevention is better than cure" But, of course, it is often beyond us most of the time. Because we cannot prevent all of them, we have to be ready to deal with them. How then do you react to crisis? Calmness is key. You have to be calm not to rush into solutions, so as not to compound the problem. The proverbial and even biological deep breath can be helpful before acting. See this instance: Somewhere in Utako Abuja, few months ago, a man was on the third floor of a building. Then he was alerted to a fire outbreak on the ground floor. I would not want to judge a dead man, but we were told he probably did not ask too many questions. He perhaps was not calm enough to find a solution out of where he was. He saw a space through his office window and he took a dive. It was a final dive! It is why we are told to be calm in all crisis situations, as much as possible, to seek understanding, and then proffer appropriate solutions.

Beyond the state of our psychology is the need to work in a team. And do we really know that one of the reasons why we are not developed in this country is the absence of team spirit? The team spirit is definitely a great concept for productivity, for efficiency and for the aggregation of understanding and solution to crisis. Again, another street wisdom tells us that no one knows it all. Here another: A tree cannot make a forest. And yet another: Two (good) heads are better than one. There are many more. The point we are making is that the team works in the collective interest, while the individual may be self-serving. The team focuses on the bigger picture, but the individual gazes at the personal image. The team is concerned about the macro, while the individual prioritizes only the micro. The team, in the ideal sense, is the most noble, the most rewarding, and the most salutary. In dealing with crisis, therefore, the team is important for the optimization of solutions.

How about a crisis management team? The team is like a fire-brigade body. It is conceived as a temporary outfit with the sole aim of dealing with the crisis at hand. The crisis management team will concentrate better, working on a minute by minute, hour by hour, and on a day by day solution. From this team should come a head, who'll act like an arrowhead, and interfacing with the management and the public, depending on the magnitude and duration of crisis? This team can also snowball into a post-crisis team, with the objective of reviewing the crisis and developing ways of possibly avoiding same in the future. The crisis management team may not

necessarily be a permanent body. It could be, in the unlikely event that the crisis at hand is prolonged. But the originally intention is that it should be temporary, and rightly disbanded after the expiration of the crisis.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the original topic of my lecture did not really tell me to do Crisis Management and the role of the media. But I have noted its relevance in the theme of the workshop, communicated to me by the very competent Director of Press and Public Relations. And because my background is media, from practising to teaching it, besides the fact that the media occupies a major part of our everyday life, especially in an age of social media, I shall now turn to the management of the media in a crisis situation, as I hinted in my reconstructed title.

In the first instance, how do we define the media? The media, in this context, includes the processes and channels of information dissemination to an anonymous, heterogeneous audience. It includes all the means through which information are not only sent but shared. The channels of information dissemination are no doubt expanding in the new age of communication revolution. They are however largely grouped into two, which are the traditional and the new media.

The traditional are the old and the long existing channels, while the new are the recent, and yet evolving means, that includes essentially the Internet. Amongst the traditional media are the Radio, the Television, and the Newspaper. Online communication represented by the Internet bear other means of communication, which have graduated to be social in view of their interactive abilities. These are platforms that permit many to many communications unlike the old ones where interaction was just one, or a few to many. Items in the new media list are multiplying everyday, but the more common ones are Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, amongst others. Chief characteristics of the new, social media, are that it has democratised media and communication.

The process is no longer top-down, but also bottom-up. Many are now publishers, reporters, analysts, columnists and commentators. The spaces for the above abilities are multiple, cheap, and fast-paced. In fact, the pace is the speed of light. Because of this, users who are variegated, differentiated, and expanding can post any information, from anywhere, at any time, on any platform, and to whomever, and it will be multiply circulated within a short time. In the age of the social media, there are little or no references to quality. Control is weak. There are no subscriptions to ethics, or best practices. The use of the social media is an all-comer's affairs, and has challenged the traditional role of the media. In doing this, information dissemination is no longer the exclusive preserve of the journalists, but could be done simply with the possession of the smartphone. The smartphone can at once be a Radio House, a television station, and a newspaper, in the new age of ultra-convergence.

As a result of this seemingly uncontrollable plurality of channels, the public official is now challenged in the management of the media. They are tasked to no end in the way they manage information. Reason is that if you can trace the *Thisday* Newspaper to an office in Lagos, how well can you trace an offending Whatsapp message, probably originating from Outer Mongolia, and which is damaging to your person, or organisation? This scenario would firstly have raised multiple issues around jurisdiction, and then other issues on the economics of retribution.

With the social media, therefore, we are somewhat at the mercy of the "closet nymphomaniacs", the hactivist, the smartphone sadists, and the killjoy, who constructs negative reality against you, paying little regard to ethics, your rights and liberties, your feelings, and without any thoughts for the laws of libel, of slander, and of sedition. With this new development, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, how best can we manage the media for us to positively shape public perception about us? How do we achieve quality representation in the eyes of the public with the challenges of ever emerging media channels, and the increasing ability of users to manipulate them for different ends? I'll turn to this next.

The first mistake we make as public officials is the tendency to hate the press. We are either looking down on them, or completely keeping them off us. We need not do these. The press is better engaged. Engaging them foster understanding, partnership, and camaraderie. This eventually warms you into their hearts, and they are likely to have an unconscious obligation towards defending, or protecting you. This warm relationship shouldn't be at all cost, but can be as much as is possible.

The envisaged partnership should provide a ground for the sharing of organisational information, for the circulation of Public Relations tools and for the development of mutual respect, and companionship. The above somewhat relates more to the traditional media. For the new, social media, the approach is different. What to do here is to simply join the fray. You cannot be afraid of being on twitter, of having a Facebook, or LinkedIn account, or of being active on Whatsapp. Good to know that many organisations have not been left out in the ownership of these spaces. What is however left is the need to increase the level of participation, or engagement on them.

The essence of joining the fray is to level up with your public, provide information (if necessary) on the go, and prevent, as much as possible, the shaping of information against you. And in the thick of a crisis, you are

likely to have less work to do, because you would literally have been on ground. Do feel free to cross, or multiple post in a crisis period. Emergency period calls for greater action, and the more correct information you send out in that period, the better for the organisation. Feel free as well to put some spin to stories. Shape them up in the way you want as you are ethically justified to do this. What about propaganda?

Many times, we see this as bad. Propaganda is often associated with the bad and the ugly. But this is definitely not the case. Propaganda involves the systematic release of information from a sender to some receivers for the purpose of benefiting the sender. The fact that it is meant to benefit you does not make it less salutary. It simply reflects self-consciousness, and the need to preserve same. We talk of propaganda only in war situations, but some crisis can as well be war-like, which is why we can deliberately indulge in positive propaganda in a crisis period, so you would not be defamed, or dismissed in the media as a failure, or as an incompetent.

The next thing to do is to network. Contact as many relevant people as possible. The importance of this is to get as much information as is possible so you can probably process them into intelligence. Do not forget the street wisdom that knowledge is power. The more informed you are the better will be your ability to think out solutions. Besides, your level of confidence to deal with the problem will also be heightened. In contacting relevant or familiar media people on your directory, you are also unconsciously recruiting them into your army of defenders. They are wont to feel your pains, and then drop in words for you, either in public or in private, only for the reason that you consulted them, seeking information, or asking for their help. Networking therefore helps to expand your horizon, your solutions net, and then brings you closer to the solution to the crisis.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the other solution will be to clarify, convince and contextualize. You clarify by providing as much information as possible, while you convince with as much evidence as is possible, and then you contextualize by situating the issues within time and space. You do this by relating it to the good records of your organisation, hopefully, and against the background of future plans. That way you are likely to be on top of the situation, and would have increased your portrayal rating before your public. It is all about creativity, about thinking out of the box, always, and about being forward looking.

Al and Laura Ries noted the importance of creativity, within the prism of PR. And remember we are not far from PR when crisis management is in focus. They said: "It's PR that needs to be creative. It's PR that needs to be new and different. It's PR that needs to be original. The best way to establish a brand is to create a new category, and creating a new category requires creative thinking of the highest order." And Simmons takes it further from a broader context: "If a young man tells his date how handsome, smart and successful he is –that's advertising. If the young man tells his date she's intelligent, looks lovely, and is a great conversationalist, he's saying the right things to the right person and that's marketing. If someone else tells the young woman how handsome, smart and successful her date is – that's PR." Bottomline here is that there is no one approach that is absolute. In media relations, PR management is involved, just as marketing, and advertising. In a crisis situation, we have got to have an open mind, to think fast, to keep our eyes on the ball, and to focus on the bigger picture of winning. With that in mind, victory shall surely be yours. As was, is now, as ever shall not.

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- *The above paper was first used as public lectures. The authors critically reviewed it for the more rigorous academic audience in view of their currency and conceptual essence.*