

# The Role of Citizen Journalism in Publicity of Terror attacks in Kenya

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**Abstract-** The study seeks to appraise the role of citizen journalism on publicity of terror attacks in Kenya in a bid to aid Africa in moving towards sustainable security and peace. It aims to achieve this by (1) Evaluating the role citizen journalists' play as victims in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya. (2) Assessing the role citizen journalist's play as bystanders in aiding terrorists attain publicity of terror in Kenya and finally, (3) Evaluating the role citizen journalists play as participatory journalists in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya. The study reviewed literature on three major terrorist attacks in Kenya that have happened between 1998 and 2015. In view of the background and literature review, it was established that citizen journalism plays a key role in ensuring that terrorists receive the required attention to pursue their much coveted publicity hence achieving their goals. Also, attributes of citizen journalists as victims, bystanders and participatory journalists all work together for the benefit of terrorist's publicity in Kenya. The study concluded that, the interplay and harmony of these aspects ensure persuasive publicity is given to terrorists hence helping them achieve their objectives of terrorism. Therefore, there is need to ensure that proper policies and strategies are employed by the communication authority of Kenya and the communication companies to curtail the publicity given to terror attacks by citizen journalists. This will be a step towards achieving sustainable security and peace in Africa.

**Index Terms-** Citizen Journalism, publicity, terror attacks

## I. INTRODUCTION

While the intentions of terrorists differ greatly, every terrorist group is connected to each other by one major norm which is the desire to convey their message to as many people as they can. Their major aim is to maximize publicity for their basis. The concept of new and dangerous terrorism manifested itself after the 9/11 attack on America's soil. Various scholars agreed to the fact that this present-day threat was serious and real. Others indicated that it was not the terror attacks which had gained momentum, but rather, the setting in which the terrorism functioned had taken a different direction. The advancement in information technology and communication has worked as oxygen for terrorists' publicity (Spencer 2006; Nacos 2007b). Cohen (2008) indicates that, whether the contemporary attacks are dangerous or not, publicity is always key for terrorism. DE Graaf and Schmid (1982) further note that, an act of terrorism in authenticity is usually an act of communication as the victims are always used as instruments to propagate the impact.

In essence, access to media is vital for terrorist attacks as their violence, demands or threats to violence will have no meaning if such communication does not reach the greater number of people. Renowned terrorist groups have an easy time disseminating their messages around the world by use of the new forms of communication through the internet. Citizen journalism has been regarded as a recognized way to relate proceedings of terror attacks, to the conventional media-consuming public (Nacos 2016). Citizens involvement in the media is a developing phenomenon whose benefits include audiences witnessing events posting eyewitness versions on the internet instantly or sending these photos and accounts to the media. The result of this is how different states and governments respond. Terrorists' goal is for governments and their societies to overreact and impose great costs on anyone one who cares to listen (Lawrence 2005). Eventually, those who perform acts of terrorism and those who disseminate these acts are presumed to be working in "unison". This study seeks to investigate the role of citizen journalism propelling publicity of terror attacks in Kenya.

## Citizen Journalism

The term citizen journalism was non-existent before the initiation of the Internet. This term grew in tandem with the development of the interactive roles on the Internet. Citizen journalism comprises many features and comes in various forms such as uploading photographs or videos to the media, blogs and forums (Lieb, 2009). The concept behind citizen journalism is that, persons with lack of professional training in journalism can utilize the tools of modern information technology to create content and distribute globally.

In the circumstance of citizen journalist covering scenes of terrorist attack, every single person can become involved from a number of diverse angles. These angles include; as a casualty caught up in the incident, secondly, as an eyewitness who is in the "right place" at the "optimal time", thirdly, as a person who makes way to the scene for the purposes of covering the event or fourthly, as a participatory citizen journalist, who contributes to what is being discussed online regarding the attack (Deuze, Bruns, Neuberger 2007). Even though this kind of journalists may lack proper training, they usually possess ample zeal whose impact could work like a double-edged sword; causing positive or negative results. But, in this context, the impact is usually terrible as it boosts publicity for terror attacks.

## Terror Attacks in Kenya

Terror attacks popularly known as Terrorism are well-defined as forms of violence directed against defenseless civilians with the goal of attaining a religious and/or political objectives. The crucial aim that terrorists seek to achieve is to

create and maintain an atmosphere of anxiety and fear among the people where they carry out the attacks (Judith 2014). The focus of this study is in Kenya, where five major attacks have been carried out which shook the country (Samuel 2013). This was publicized mostly by citizen journalists who were at various angles and conveyed the traumatic messages widely. The attacks include among many others, The United States Embassy bombing in 1998 where 213 people were killed, the Kikambala Hotel bombing in 2002 where 13 people were killed, the West Gate mall attack in 2013 where at least 67 people were killed, the Mpeketoni attack in 2014 where more than 60 people were killed and the Garissa University attack in 2015 where approximately 150 people perished. This study seeks to establish the role played by citizen journalists in the publicity of three terror attacks among the five witnessed in Kenya. The study analyzed the role played by citizen journalists in the US- Embassy bombing attack in Kenya in 1998, the West-gate mall attack in 2013 and the Garissa university attack in 2015 in a bid to evaluate the intensity of the news on air during the different periods.

### Problem Statement

Due to the immense effects of terrorism on people, media finds it as newsworthy to air everything that is happening. Consciously or unconsciously, the media gives terror perpetrators the oxygen of publicity which they thrive wholeheartedly as this is usually their main goal- spread of fear! Nonetheless, conventional mainstream media have the famous gate-keeping rules which guide the gathering and dissemination of news to the public. Such policies aid in shielding the public from real-time horror attacks to the victims. However, with the advent of internet, a new group of journalists popularly referred to as "Citizen Journalists" came into space. Citizen journalism means that there is no control whatsoever of what the public will be treated to in terms of news. Any kind of information, videos and photos will find their way into the public space (Jarvis 2004). The critical importance of this group of journalists is basically at the early phases of an attack when the news is being broken to the public, which is usually done by the victims caught up in the attack. However, citizen journalists are a weak group, due to their contiguity to a risk event. Therefore, they will try to seek sympathy by all means hence giving the terrorist group a big mileage in terms of publicity. This study seeks to establish the role of citizen journalists in boosting publicity of terror particularly in their pursuit to spread terror and inspire the atmosphere of distress and anguish. This coverage of terrorist activities particularly unfiltered events by the practicing citizen journalism intensifies the spread of fear to the masses. The investigation will highlight reasons why it is important to have policies that control those who spread such images, thus aggravating the already awful actions. The ultimate question being examined therefore is, what is the role of citizen journalists, who give the oxygen of publicity to terrorist?

### 1.2 Objectives

The Study had three objectives

1. To evaluate the role of Victims as citizen journalists in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya
2. To assess the role of bystanders as citizen journalists in aiding terrorists attain publicity of terror in Kenya

3. To establish the role of participatory journalism in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (LITERATURE REVIEW)

### 2.1 Victims as Citizen Journalists in helping terrorists achieve publicity in Kenya

Every journalists' dream is to cover a story as it unfolds. It is usually like a race against time as that is what gives them or their media house mileage. However, covering disasters like Tsunamis, earthquakes and terrorist attacks might not be that rosy as these are events of great magnitude and risk, additionally, it's a fact and given that journalists will not always be present when such disasters strike (Gillmor, 2008). Therefore, the professional journalists will always look for images, videos and eye witness accounts, piece them together and send out to inform the world of what is happening.

Victims of terror attacks have played the role of citizen journalists in helping propagate publicity for terrorism in Kenya and around the world quite well. The new pattern of terrorism is somewhat a consequence of a sudden advancement of information technology, which is predominantly demonstrated in the fact that terrorist organisations need mass media to accomplish their aims (Valenzuela and Zuniga 2010). In Kenya, the three worst terrorist attacks (The United States Embassy-Nairobi bombing in 1998, the West gate mall attack and the Garissa University attack) that have occurred spread quite fast due to the ability of the victims to send out images and videos in a bid to seek sympathy. However, The United States Embassy-Nairobi bombing was communicated differently as compared to the West gate mall attack and the Garissa University. News of the US-embassy blast reached masses outside Nairobi through a state owned television (KBC) hours later (Claiborne 1998). According to Njenga, Nyamai and Kigamwa (2003), the public saw the horrendous news of the US-embassy on state-owned TV, while many more heard about it on the state-owned radio. Others read about it in the press later the same day. This is a clear indication that news to the public in 1998 followed a certain path before it went out. Victims during the 1998 US-Embassy bomb blast had no means of sending out the horrible photos and videos of events unfolding. The most likely reason is that social media was not common then, and rules were stringent from the government. Burke (2000), indicates that, Once Al-Qaida was established by Bin Laden and a couple other veteran radicals in 1988, mass communication around most third world countries and beyond were still controlled by large corporations and States. In Kenya, during that period (1998) Social media had not been introduced and most of the media houses were state owned (Kadhi & Kutten 2006). The two scholars further indicate that during the 1998 bomb-blast, the Kenyan media had the following characteristics which hindered the victims from communicating; incomplete liberalization of the broadcasting sector where by, only Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) was allowed to broadcast, and secondly, there was inadequate press coverage hence lack of correspondents plus great levels of internet illiteracy amongst the public. All these worked against the vibrant communication by the victims regarding the 1998 bomb-blast in Nairobi. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the Al-

Qaida terror attack was not achieved much since Victims were not in a position to spread the fear.

However, in the 2013 Westgate mall attack in Kenya, things were totally different, due to the advent of social media. According to Thotho (2010), Facebook was formed in 2004 and towards 2007, it already had 21 million registered users creating approximately 1.6 billion page views daily around the world. Kenya is among the countries that has liberated communication and mass communication is quite popular. Social media was a perfect platform for terrorists who got “oxygen” from the victims of the 2013 terror attack. Apart from Facebook, twitter and Instagram worked concurrently in making victims of the attack pass the terror messages fast and wide. Before the mainstream media got to know what was happening, victims of the attack were populating the social media with horror messages. These gave the terror group mileage in terms of their goal. Below are some excerpts from victims which got the world shaken about the 2013 attack at Westgate mall.

**@Thumbelinarh;** *Alot of GUNFIRE, AT WESTGATE!!! Where's the police???*

*Something really bad goin on at #Westgate.Gunshots!!!! Everyone's fled.*

**@Ally\_McMimz;** *Shooting is still going on. Does anyone know if police are here? Were scared*

**Shirley (@Shirley Ghetto:** *“I'm under the mattresses!!!!!! This might be my last tweet #Westgate mall. :( :”(*

*“I don't care anymore. If they shoot let them come shoot. It doesn't even seem like we'll make it out anyway #Westgate”*

*“The cop who tried to save us, Thank you. I hope they didn't kill him.”*

*Guyyys!!!!!!!!!!!!!! They found me!!!!!!!!!!!! #Westgate gejhg&\$60-\$\*E*

**KamalKaur(@kamz26):** *“Crying. And praying. I lay in a pool of someone's blood, a dead little boy lying on my side. Trying to call for help, keeping others calm. ”Please tell me if everyone is out of the mall. Please. I can't stop crying. ”My Ruhila is gone...”*

*“The one guy I saw had magazines of bullets attached everywhere on him. Big gun that showered bullets. Randomly shooting at people. And kids.”*

*“Images of the day keep flashing in front of my eyes. Dead bodies, injured people, wailing, crying, scared.”*

When the public is treated to such messages from victims, a crop of fear engulfs everyone and one gets the whole picture of the kind of terror that is taking place. This makes the terror group achieve their goal. Burke (2010) indicates that, the relationship between the media and terrorism is clear. Terrorists' purpose is to aggravate irrational fear among great numbers of people so as to influence policymakers hence advance their goals. Deprived of the media, very few people would know of an attack that has taken place. Similarly, without democracy, those exercising power would have little or no reason to care about the opinions that such violence provokes (Hoffman, & McCormick 2004).

In the Garissa university attack, the same thing happened. The victims of the terror attack were first to break the news to the whole world through social media. The attack, considered as the second most horrible attack in Kenya since the 1998 U.S.

embassy bombing in Nairobi, caught everyone by surprise. Most media houses had no clue of the attack until a victim through social media broke the news (Osman 2015). The victim known as Abdicator Musa, wrote on his Facebook account *“We are under attack. Pray for us.”* Shortly after, several other victims spread the horrific news through twitter and Facebook. Some excerpts are as below;

**Alinoor (B) Moulid @AlinoorMB;** *#BREAKING: Students who escaped report that at least 5 armed men stormed facility at dawn & started their killing from masjid & boarding area*

**AugustineAlanga @AugustineAlanga;** *we have been chased out of Garissa university college early this morning by unknown attackers.*

**HannahMcNeish @HannahMcNeish;** *#GarissaAttack survivor tells @GabeJoselow her friends are inside "being held hostage & the policemen are outside"*

Given the instantaneous nature of social media, the broadcast of the attack spread fast! The mainstream media in Kenya were caught by surprise as they were on their daily predictable content of the morning shows when an update of the attack was trending on twitter. Therefore, if Victims did not mention about the attack, very few people around the world including Kenyans would know about it. According to Osman (2015), most Kenyans assumed that this was a small attack and the security personnel in Garissa would handle only to realize through social media bloggers, who spoke to victims inside the university, that the situation was dire. The bloggers gave detailed reports and pictures of how cruel the gunmen were. The whole world was in shock, as the Guardian newspaper reported comments from one of the victims (3<sup>rd</sup> April 2015) *“Kenya attack: There were screams and nobody knew if we would survive”*.

## 2.2 Bystanders as Citizen Journalists in aiding terrorists attain publicity of terror in Kenya

Digital technologies such as blogs, the web, camera phones and digital cameras have developed to the level where people on the scene also known as the bystanders have the ability to reach an extensive audience, to show and tell the world what they witnessed and experienced (Lieb 2009). A few years back, photographs and videos from eyewitnesses turned up for widespread broadcasting only on newspapers and on news programs. Today, through blogs, twitter, Facebook and Instagram among others, amateur news spreads rapidly and efficiently, often finding huge audiences without the help or need of the mainstream news outlets.

By the mere fact that bystanders are always at the “right place” at the “right time”, it is usually quite convenient for them to spread the eye witness messages to the wider population without knowledge of their contribution to the publicity of terror which terror groups aim to achieve. According to Deuze (2009), bystanders always give first hand contribution during crisis events which has no gatekeepers hence ensures that extremists groups have a voice. Most often than not, they usually exaggerate the information since they are neither victims nor professional journalists. Their messages work best for the publicity of terror. The messages from bystanders could be deceitful and subjective (Nacos 2002). Due to the excitement of witnessing terror crises,

the messages could worsen the situation at hand hence alleviate the terror groups' goals. Bystanders are untrained to view events cynically and try to put them in context the way qualified journalists do (Rohner & Frey 2007). Hence, it is very difficult for news organizations or the public to know if the photos are trustworthy or not. Meanwhile, the terror groups are receiving publicity. In Kenya, the three terror attacks received different publicities from the bystanders. The US- Embassy bombing in 1998 did not achieve much publicity from the bystanders since there was lack of internet during that time. However, the 2013 Westgate mall attack was over publicized by the bystanders. A few excerpts and photos from the bystanders are as shown below:

**@TylerHicks**

*"Al-Shabaab militants remain inside Westgate mall with hostages Sun am"*

*Witness to a massacre in a Nairobi mall*



Photos courtesy of: <https://www.tweetsfromwitnessesofwestgatemallattack&rlz=1C1CHBD>

When such photos hit the social media platform, they spread like fire hence terrorists enjoy the publicity. On the other hand, the Garissa university attackers received almost the same privilege of publicity through bystanders. Some of the excerpts on social media were as follows:

**Sam Piranty** ✓ **@sampiranty**

*Garissa Uni eyewitness says 'they were shooting randomly... they were not selecting buy gender' #GarissaAttack*

*10:20 AM - 2 Apr 2015*



**DennisOkari** ✓ **@DennisOkari**

*Just been told to take cover outside the University. I can hear heavy gunfire & explosions. Hundredsof students run out, some crawling.*

*1:18 PM - 2 Apr 2015*

**Ahmed Mohamed** **@Asmali77**

*A nurse at the Garissa General Hospital tells me that the hospital is overwhelmed, requests for blood donations. #GarissaAttack*

*9:42 AM - 2 Apr 2015 · Nairobi, Kenya*

Hoffman (2003) indicates that, if the main resolve of terrorism is to appeal to the public, create mass fear and hysteria, then social media is exactly what terrorists are looking for to promote their agenda. The Bystanders during the 2013 Westgate mall attack and 2015 Garissa university attack gave terrorism ample publicity. Quotes such as "Several hours after the standoff began, Somali jihadist group Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack, saying they are at war with Kenya" were seen on media.

### 2.3 Participatory Journalism in helping Terrorists achieve Publicity of Terror in Kenya

Participatory journalism or what is popularly known as networked journalism involves collaborative nature of journalism (Jarvis 2006). This collaborative nature allows amateurs and professional journalists to work together to get the actual story by linking information to each other across products and to share ideas, questions, facts, answers, and perspectives. Journalists tussle with the hurrying pace of the news sequence and the complex and diverse nature of terrorism. Particularly, in the event of breaking news, they have to adjust to the complexity and speed of the information streams that are gradually influenced by the digital platforms and the terrorists themselves as well. Therefore, according to Meikle (2002) an embrace of participatory journalism by professional journalists challenges media organizations to encompass the level of their direct contact with audiences as contributors in the processes of collecting, selecting, editing, generating, and communicating news.

One key focus of participatory journalism is opinion. There are several blogs and forums where viewers and listeners analyze, discuss and do "post mortem" of events appearing in the media, or debate events as they unfold. Some of them are indiscriminate, but others steadily perform these roles and articulate issues in a synthesized way (Gillmor 2009). In Kenya, during the West gate Mall attack in 2013 and Garissa University attack in 2015, participatory journalists gave ample publicity to terrorists. This is because, at the hit of the attack, media houses had no idea of what was happening while social media had already published the news (Osman 2015). Therefore, media houses had to solicit news from citizens through participatory journalism. As indicated below, various media houses and government offices used content from citizen journalists to buffer what they were reporting:

**reported.ly** ✓ **@reportedly**

*Eyewitnesses per @daily nation: 8 bodies received at Garissa Hospital mortuary #GarissaAttack <http://bit.ly/INCTkJ>*

*12:00 PM - 2 Apr 2015*

**ktn** ✓ **@KTNKenya**

*Nkaiisery: We lost one KDF officer, one policeman and two guards #Campus Siege9:19 PM - 2 Apr 2015*

**Nation FM** ✓ @NationFMKe

*Heavy gunfire as @kdfinfo soldiers fight to smoke out #GarissaUni hostage takers.1:21 PM - 2 Apr 2015 · Kenya*

**InteriorCNG Ministry** ✓ @InteriorKE

*#GarissaAttack Update: Of the four hostels, 3 have been evacuated. The attackers have been cornered in one hostel & the operations continue.11:05 AM - 2 Apr 2015*

**MaryHarper** ✓ @mary\_harper

*#AlShabaab told me it entered university in #Garissa at 3am, separating Muslims from non-Muslims. #GarissaAttack12:19 PM - 2 Apr 2015*

Such information would be aired by most media houses and press as received from eye witnesses and victims. The danger is that, these kind of news coverage provided the publicity which terrorists were really looking for, plus add misinformation through poor confirmation and lack of background. Such publicity could be mistaken for helping terrorists increase their power and make their enrolment more effective (Mohammed 2016)

Participatory journalism amplifies the communicative level and impact of terrorism, while adding to the fabrication and emotional responses to terror incidents. Participatory journalism has changed the nature of news concerning terror, by providing eyewitness accounts, images and live video. This kind of journalism has transformed news but there are still policy problems in terms of news judgement and verification. This has allowed a lot of publicity of terror through citizen journalism.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study was based on literature review related to Citizen Journalism and publicity of terror attacks. It evaluated the role of victims as citizen journalists in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya, secondly, it assessed the role of bystanders as citizen journalists in aiding terrorists attain publicity of terror in Kenya and finally, it established the role of participatory journalism in helping terrorists achieve publicity of terror in Kenya.

### IV. CONCLUSION

The study established the following conclusions based on literature reviewed. The technology companies that offer platforms for citizens and the general public plus journalists to disseminate and discuss terrorism must work harder to filter and improve how they dispense information. The same way media

houses have to accept a wider accountability for effects of reporting on terrorism, the digital companies must also recognize that they are part of the formation of narratives and public opinion.

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