

MEDIA FRAMING AND TERRORISM: INTERROGATING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN BOOSTING TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

CLETUS C.N. NWADIOGBU, PhD

Commissioner of Police/Deputy Commandant

The Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil Kano

Email ID: cletusnwadiogbu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes the relationship between terrorism and media framing in Nigeria and questions the degree to which the mainstream and digital media organizations amplify, propagate and unwittingly perpetuate terrorism. The research takes a multi-faceted approach to examining how the Nigerian and international media amplify a terrorist narrative by systematically considering the framing theory, agenda-setting theory, and contagion hypothesis with a specific focus on Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The study identifies three trends from a broad survey of available peer-reviewed scholarship and media content analyses and security policy documents from 2019 to 2025: sensationalism, disproportionate coverage of terrorist attacks, and uncritical amplification of terrorist propaganda create a media environment that indirectly supports the strategic communication goals of armed non-state actors. The study also reveals the structural causes of irresponsible media framing such as commercial pressures, lack of media meeting the standards, lack of media regulation enforcement, and the disruptive role of social media platforms. This study ends with recommendations for policy makers, newsrooms, CSOs and technology providers in Nigeria. This study examines media framing of Boko Haram and ISWAP terrorism in Nigeria, including: agenda-setting, contagion hypothesis, press freedom, and the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Media Framing, Terrorism, Boko Haram, ISWAP, Contagion Hypothesis, Digital Media

Introduction

Over the last four decades, relations between the media and terrorism have been one of the most discussed and theoretically fruitful subjects in the field of security studies, communication research and political science. Terrorist organisations as communicative entities (groups that essentially want to spread fear, exert power, and shape political behaviour beyond their immediate targets of violence) have been making the media a key factor in the equation of terrorism (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982; Nacos, 2007). Understand the situation in Nigeria and taking appropriate action has become much more urgent as the human suffering caused by Boko Haram's insurgency, the spread of ISWAP's territorial base, the rise of armed banditry in the north-west, will likely increase due to the explosive growth of digital and social media, which has revolutionised the information landscape (Omeni, 2020; Okereke, 2022). It is therefore not only an academic exercise but a necessity of national security imperative to understand how the media in Nigeria encourage terrorism.

Nigeria offers a fascinating and under-studied example for the study of the relationship between media and terrorism. The nation boasts of a vibrant and diversified media landscape, including a large and growing number of television stations, radio stations, national newspapers with significant circulation, and various news websites, blogs, and social media platforms (Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, 2023; Sobowale, 2022). Despite this pluralism, the institutions are similarly weak, such as the lack of attention to training reporters on conflict sensitivity, inconsistencies in regulatory enforcement, media independence compromised by political pressures and media bias which results from economic interest (Musa, 2021; Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022). Such structural characteristics provide space for terrorist narratives to be amplified, distorted, and/or exploited for purposes that do not necessarily align with protecting public safety and national security.

The study is divided into five main sections. The existing academic literature on the theory of media framing, agenda-setting theory and contagion hypothesis is reviewed in Section 2, which situates these theories in the security environment of Nigeria. The theoretical framework supporting the analysis is given in Section 3. In Section 4, the key analytical results are presented, looking at the specific framing of Nigerian media in reference to Boko Haram and ISWAP, the place of social media in the message of the terrorists and the structural and commercial factors behind some of the media coverage. Section 5 provides conclusions and moves ahead with recommendations for policy action. Based on the adoption of secondary data, the study employs a qualitative research approach that incorporates systematic review of academic publications, media content analysis, regulatory reports, and security assessment reports from 2019–2025. This methodological approach is suitable because of the wide range of the analytical scope and the amount of relevant literature on which the synthesis is based.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theory and Terrorism: Media Framing in the context of Media and Terrorism

The framing theory poses a foundation for analysing the selective representation of information on terrorism in media organisations developed by Goffman (1974) and later by Entman (1993) in the field of communication studies. The canonical definition of framing as the "process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p.52) is relevant in the context of terrorism reporting because selection of the aspects of reality to report, how to report, who to interview, and which images to display is already an inherently political act with security consequences. Scheufel (1999) applied framing theory to point out that media frames are produced in the content of the media text, while audience frames are the cognitive scheme through which individual audiences construe the meaning of media content, which is important for understanding the downstream effects of terrorist coverage on fear of terrorism, political attitudes, and policy preferences.

The use of framing theory in the analysis of terrorism has resulted in a vast number of empirical studies, especially in the West, but also in growing number of African and specifically Nigerian contexts. Media framing has significant political impact that goes beyond its communicative effects, as Altheide (2006) showed in the case of the dominant "discourse of fear" in the American media post-9/11 that normalised emergency measures, justified military adventures, and marginalised dissenting voices. Within the Nigerian context, Ekeanyanwu and Ologunbe (2021) studied the framing of Boko Haram in major Nigerian newspapers from 2016 to 2020 using systematic content analysis methodology, which revealed that frames of violence and government response were the most common; structural frames of poverty, political marginalisation and governance failure were systematically under-represented. The authors contend that this is an atypical framing pattern. It plays a role in the shallow understanding of terrorism which is only crisis-sensitive and inadequate in addressing the socio-political causes of armed violence in Nigeria.

The theoretical significance of the relationship between framing and a terrorist communication strategy is also important. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) contends that terrorist groups in modern times have primarily adopted "noopolitiks", "strategies of information and narrative", rather than kinetic violence. Boko Haram and ISWAP have worked on the media production and distribution, including the Al-Hayat Media Centre, which has a capability to produce high-quality video propaganda with a deliberate use of the framing conventions of mainstream journalistic production (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2014; Okereke, 2022). If Nigerian media do not critically frame such propaganda productions or if the same propagandas are reproduced by them, they become, unknowingly, part of the terrorist communication infrastructure (Nacos, 2007; Musa, 2021).

2.2 Agenda-Setting and the Amplification of Terrorist Violence

The media do not necessarily tell people what to believe, they do a good job of telling people what to think about, according to agenda-setting theory which was developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their well-known study of the 1968 US presidential election. The effects of the mass media in the area of terrorism are especially strong because the frequency, salience and emotional impact of terrorist coverage directly influence the level of fear and the salience of terrorism as a security threat, often disproportionate to the actual risk of being killed or harmed by acts of terrorism compared to other causes of death or suffering (Moeller, 2006; Boydston, 2013). Terrorism is "theatrical," an act of violence staged for an audience, and the media is the stage for the performance to make its intended psychological impact, Hoffman (2006).

The interplay of agenda setting in Nigeria has been a key determinant in the perception of the Boko Haram conflict in the country. Omeni (2020), Nwachukwu and Igwe (2022) had shown that during the height of Boko Haram activities in the north-east of Nigeria (2013- 2016 and since 2021), the conflict was on the foreground of the media agenda, creating fear beyond the north-east region where the violence was concentrated. The international aspect is also important as media attention and coverage of certain acts of terrorism in Nigeria are less than that of others, a phenomenon that has been most clearly demonstrated in the case of the abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014, which generated worldwide attention and a campaign for the return of the abducted girls, whereas others more harmful to Nigeria's national security interests have received less attention or coverage from the international media (Okereke, 2022; Sobowale, 2022). This selective focus of the international media on Boko Haram, partly due to the communicative nature of their propaganda, is a form of feedback that reinforces the terrorist media strategy and journalists' agenda-setting process.

In addition to the quantitative aspects of the level of coverage, scholarship has now turned more toward the qualitative aspects of agenda-setting effects in the coverage of terrorism. Price and Tewksbury (1997) showed that certain emotional and cognitive characteristics of the media influenced not only what issues were considered important but how. They argued that the media's coverage of issues could produce what they called "attribute agenda-setting," which affects audiences' feelings and perceptions of issues. The use of the term 'terrorism' consistently with religious, ethnic and regional characteristics in mainstream national media coverage has been a factor in the stigmatisation processes which has complicated counter-terrorism policy and has added to communal tension and conflict in the Nigerian context (Musa, 2021; Ekeanyanwu and Ologunbe, 2021). Such attribute agenda-setting effects are one way that the media are complicit in the social reproduction of conditions conducive to terrorist recruitment and radicalisation.

2.3 Contagion Hypothesis and Media-Enabled Terrorist Diffusion

The contagion hypothesis from criminological studies on copycat aggression and later on to terrorism suggests that after a terrorist attack, media attention to the incident can be expected to fuel

further similar acts, because the media creates a sense of inspiration, instruction and emboldening for potential perpetrators through its coverage of previous events (Towers et al. 2015; Weimann and Von Knop 2008). Since the early 2000s, empirical evidence supporting the contagion hypothesis in the field of terrorism has grown, including research showing statistically significant positive correlations between the amount of media coverage given to terrorist attacks and the number of follow-on attacks in similar situations (Jetter, 2017; Brosius and Eps, 1995). The contagion hypothesis is especially relevant in the Nigerian context as the tactics used by various terrorist groups seem to be spreading between groups in different parts of the country.

In an econometric analysis of terrorist events and the coverage of such events in the New York Times journal (as a proxy for global media coverage of events), conducted by Jetter (2017), the coverage of terrorist events in the New York Times is shown to be correlated with a 11-15 per cent rise in subsequent terrorist events in countries covered by NYT. The result of this analysis is not specific to Nigeria, but is similar to the evidence presented by Omeni (2020) and Okereke (2022) on the part of the media exposure in influencing and inspiring the tactical repertoire of armed groups in Nigeria. Banditry has emerged in north-western Nigeria from about 2011 and incorporated many of the tactics previously used by north-eastern jihadist groups, such as kidnapping people for ransom, coordinated armed attacks against military formations and the use of social media for propaganda, implying the diffusion of violent repertoires, perhaps aided by media attention (Mustapha, 2022; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022).

The contagion hypothesis has also been expanded to the realm of online and social media, where the lack of an editorial filter and the algorithmic magnification of emotionally charged information put the world in a situation that is more conducive to the dynamics of contagion (Weimann and Masri 2020; Saltman and Russell 2014). Nigeria has become a highly social media-infested country with over 100 million internet users by 2024 (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2024), where by the time the government takes any action or the media manages to investigate it, the virus of terrorism, fake news of attacks and incitement to violence have already spread on social media platforms. The contagion dynamics of social media are therefore a qualitatively different problem from the broadcast/print media framing problem outlined above and need to be a topic for analysis and policy, in its own right.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Framing Theory

The framing theory of Entman (1993) is used as an analytical and normative tool to organise this research. Framing theory is used as a conceptual instrument that focuses on the diagnostic frames (blaming and identifying frames), prognostic frames (solutions and responses frames) and motivational frames (audiences to action or resignation) used by Nigerian media in building terrorism narratives. Framing theory application to the Nigerian context shows that dominant media

frames are more likely to promote the issues of spectacular violence, government response, religious-ethnic categorisation, and to marginalise the issues of structural conditions, historical dynamics, and human security consequences of terrorism (Ekeanyanwu and Ologunbe, 2021; Musa, 2021). As a framework, framing theory suggests that there are criteria for "good" reporting of terrorism: frames that reveal the intricate causal nature of terror, that render the victims of terror relatable, that situate violence in context and that do not facilitate the spread of terrorist propaganda are more responsible than sensationalistic, decontextualised, or identity-based frames.

The systemic aspect of the power of media in the context of terrorism is also highlighted in the framing theory perspective. In his seminal study on the student protest movement in the 1960s, how the movement was framed in the American media, Gitlin (1980) demonstrated that media frames are not solely the result of editorial decisions but are also a result of the institutional structures, professional ideologies, commercial pressures and the distribution of power within society. When applied to the Nigerian media, the Gitlinian insight indicates that irresponsible framing of terrorism is not just a problem of individual journalists and their poor choices, but also structural features of the Nigerian media, such as dependence on advertisements, competition among audience, lack of adequate training of conflict reporters, as well as political ownership of media, which influence the editorial culture and produces systematic framing biases (Sobowale, 2022; Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022). A structural framing analysis can thus provide more analytical power and be more policy relevant than an individualistic critique.

3.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

This study utilizes framing theory as a complementary analysis in tandem with agenda-setting theory as an elaborated version of the theory, which has both a first-level (issue salience) and a second-level (attribute salience) effect. McCombs (2014) compiled decades of agenda-setting research to show that media not only influence what people see as important to discuss, they also influence the evaluative attributes (positive, negative or neutral) of those issues in public consciousness. Within the context of terrorism in Nigeria, agenda-setting theory raises two related questions: first, how does the salience of the coverage of terrorism influence the salience of security as a political issue vis-à-vis other political issues like poverty, healthcare and democratic governance? Second, what are the effects of the particular characteristics of Nigerian terrorist groups covered in the media, such as their religious affiliation, their geographical origin, and their tactics, on the attitudes of the public towards the communities they come from, and how might this lead to a build-up of conflict in community relations? (Omeni, 2020; Okereke, 2022)?

This research's second order dynamics of agenda-setting is significant for national cohesion in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The agenda-setting effects of these framings, which portray Boko Haram as "northern Islam" or "Hausa-Fulani violence" as opposed to criminal

organisation that terrorises Muslim communities to the same extent as it terrorises Christian communities, result in a suspicion and hostility toward Boko Haram, which is another source of insecurity (Musa, 2021; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). Majoritarian grievances are often the key to recruitment by terrorist groups, in addition to being a motivation to provoke a backlash against the community they draw from, and to delegitimize the state, as noted by counter-insurgency scholars, such as Kilcullen (2010). The media's irresponsible agenda setting through the process of naming the terrorist groups as the community or ethnic group leads it to fulfill this strategic goal directly.

3.3 The Contagion Hypothesis

The third theoretical strand of this study builds on the previous two by addressing the direct security implications of irresponsible reporting as part of the contagion hypothesis. The contagion hypothesis is used here not as a deterministic theory suggesting that media coverage necessarily causes terrorist violence, but as a probabilistic approach that suggests that certain types of media coverage and reporting – in this instance, media coverage that glorifies or romanticises violence, provides detailed tactical information, amplifies violent propaganda without critical contextualisation, or confers celebrity status on violent actors – systematically heighten the likelihood of diffusion and contagion (Towers et al., 2015; Weimann and Von Knop, 2008). The probabilistic language is also relevant to policy, because it makes the point that the link between media and terrorism may be influenced by the practices and style of media journalism, through regulations, and through media-literacy education.

The contagion hypothesis also offers a theoretical link between the analysis of the mainstream media framing construct and the analysis of the role of social media in the media-terrorism nexus. Weimann and Masri (2020) extended this contagion model to the online context, claiming that the online sharing dynamics, the lack of an editorial gatekeeper and the algorithmic amplification of extreme content makes it a qualitatively different and potentially more potent version of the broadcast and print media contagion. However, the “contagion” effect of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, which are simultaneously used as a vehicle for disseminating terrorist propaganda, platforms for coordinated recruitment and a tool of hate for inciting communal tension has been identified as a critical and under-regulated aspect of the media-terrorism nexus in the context of Nigeria (Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022; Mustapha, 2022). Therefore, the contagion hypothesis that needs to be considered in discussing the role of social media in Nigeria's terrorism would require a full theoretical account.

4. Analysis

4.1 How Nigerian Media Frame Terrorism: Dominant Patterns

The different content analyses and empirical media studies presented in this study reveals that there are certain dominant framing patterns that reflect the media's coverage of the issue of terrorism in Nigeria which is a red flag considering the role of the media in the security ecology. Sensationalism

– the tendency to prioritise in news reporting over analytical, contextual and explanatory reporting is one pattern that has been consistently documented (Ekeanyanwu and Ologunebi, 2021; Sobowale, 2022). The Nigerian media (television and print) are seen to be giving disproportionate attention to images and descriptions of terrorist violence (the bombed markets, dead bodies of victims, destroyed infrastructure), but relatively little attention to the underlying causes of radicalisation, the lived realities of the conflict affected communities, and the strategies of the terrorist groups themselves. This sensationalist approach is not peculiar to Nigeria but is a commercial media phenomenon worldwide, whereby violence attracts attention and sells (Moeller, 2006; Nacos, 2007). But the situation in Nigeria is exacerbated by high commercial pressures on media outlets operating in an intensely competitive revenue-stressed environment, which results in a 'race to the bottom' in quality of conflict reporting, Musa (2021).

The second dominant framing is the emphasis on official government narratives and the de-emphasis of independent and investigative coverage. It has been found from several studies that Nigerian media outlets tend to heavily rely on the official government sources (military spokesman, presidential communication, briefing from intelligence agencies) for framing their terrorism story, which include limited attempt to verify the story or integrate alternative viewpoints (Omeni, 2020; Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022). This source dependency fosters an atmosphere in which government assertions on the gains in security, the effectiveness of operations and the power of terrorist groups are echoed without critical scrutiny, thereby leading to a reinforcement of official narratives that differs from what civil society NGOs and humanitarian groups report on the ground. In the real terms, that is similar to the issue of sensationalisation of terrorism. The Nigerian Military's frequent statements of "technical defeat" of Boko Haram, as broadcasted by the mainstream media with no critical examination, but with continued lethal attacks by the group, is a prime example of the dangers of this source-dependent framing pattern (Okereke, 2022; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). The credibility loss caused by this pattern, on the contrary, as people become aware of the difference between what is announced and what is experienced, can make them less trustful of the security institutions they should trust.

A third framing pattern, which has serious ramifications for national cohesion, is the consistent religious-ethnic characterization of terrorist actors. Musa (2021) reports that the use of the term "Muslim", "northern", "Hausa-Fulani" and "Fulani herdsmen" as adjectival identifiers in the reporting of terrorism in Nigerian newspapers from 2020 to 2024 is a common feature, establishing an associative frame that links the criminal organisation to a religion and ethnic community. This framing pattern is not just analytically inaccurate, but it also has practical security repercussions as it stirs anti-Muslim and anti-northern sentiments in the southern Nigerian media and public discourse, while simultaneously inflaming anti-Christian and anti-Igbo sentiments in some northern media and

public discourse, in a cycle of mutual recrimination that simultaneously serves the strategic agendas of Boko Haram and ISWAP (Danjibo and Falcon, 2022; Omeni, 2020). In this way, the repeated use of identity frames in media reporting of terrorism issues is also a form of terrorist amplification, with the effects of spreading communal fear and hostility well beyond the geographic area of the conflict.

4.2 Media Amplification of Terrorist Propaganda.

In addition to how media in Nigeria frame its own reporting, an important aspect of the media–terrorism relationship also involves how media organizations are involved in propagating the media productions of Boko Haram and ISWAP. These organisations have made huge investments in media production capacity, producing videos, audio messages and written materials via online platforms and in some instances directly to Nigerian and international journalists (Kassimeris and Jackson 2014; Okereke 2022). It is well established that the strategic telecommunications goals of this propaganda are to project power and invincibility, recruit new members, demoralize the security forces and civilian population, to communicate political demands to national and international audiences, and to communicate that the organization is active to rival groups and potential state sponsors (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Nacos, 2007). In their news reporting, Nigerian media outlet serve these unwholesome strategic goals in the process of reproducing propaganda content.

The amount of evidence of media uncritical amplification of Nigeria's terrorist propaganda is quite extensive. In several instances, Nigerian media outlets have either shown or published Boko Haram and ISWAP video releases without critical framing, such as the video of the execution of hostages, Nigerian military equipment being destroyed and Boko Haram/ISWAP's claims of territorial control. In isolation, the journalistic justification for this coverage is valid: it is news about an important security event. However, the cumulative effect of daily uncritical reproduction of terrorist propaganda is that such organisation gets a free media platform that magnifies their messages beyond the limits of their own media operations (Weimann and Von Knop, 2008; Schmid and de Graaf, 1982). Mustapha (2022) notes that Boko Haram's media strategy has been finely calibrated to the news cycle in Nigeria, releasing propaganda videos at times of political activity — election, security policy announcements, state visits — indicating that the group is well aware of the media consumption habits in Nigeria and how news is set for its agenda, which media practitioners need to be conscious of and possibly resist.

The use of social media platforms has greatly contributed to the propagation of terrorist propaganda. Social media has created a shift in the relationship between media and terrorism, from a broadcast-based media landscape where audiences were only exposed to terrorist propaganda through the filter of professional journalists, to a social media landscape that allows for propagandists to post directly to user audiences without any mediated journalists. (Saltman and Russell, 2014; Weimann and

Masri, 2020). In Nigeria, WhatsApp plays a crucial role in the dissemination of both Boko Haram and ISWAP propaganda, as well as unverified and inflammatory messages regarding terrorist attacks, due to its encrypted nature that makes it hard to monitor and its extensive user base, which exceeds 90 million Nigerians (Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022; Nigerian Communications Commission, 2024).

4.3 Structural and Commercial Drivers of Irresponsible Coverage

Rather than engage in a single journalistic blame game, attention needs to be placed on the structural and commercial components of the Nigerian media industry, which call into question the failure of the Nigerian media to present responsible reports on terrorism in Nigeria. Sobowale 2022 sees the growing commercial competition as the key structural factor that has facilitated sensationalist news coverage of terrorism, especially since the liberalisation of broadcasting in 1992 that has led to media outlets mushrooming. It inevitably creates high competition in advertising revenues, audience share and online traffic, which in turn creates high incentives for dramatic and emotionally engaging news over sober and analytical reporting. The commercial aspects of this are even more pronounced in the digital media world where click-through-rates and engagement are directly related to advertising revenue and have algorithmic incentives to sensationalize headlines and inflate content (Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022; Musa, 2021). The overall editorial landscape is one where the coverage of terrorism — which demands resources, expertise, time and the editorial restraint and which can only be gained through systematic advantage — is constantly outcompeted by irresponsible coverage that maximises immediate commercial returns.

One of the other structural drivers is the lack of training, the Nigerian journalists are not trained on how to report in conflict zones. The disparity between the amount of conflict reporting that can be done and the number of journalists who can do it, as a result of lack of specialists training has been observed in multiple studies (Mustapha, 2022; Ekeanyanwu and Ologunibi, 2021). According to the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2023), less than 15 per cent of the Nigerian journalists who routinely report on security issues have had formal training on conflict-sensitive reporting, trauma-informed interviewing or the ethical aspects of terrorism reporting. This lack of training can have direct implications for the quality of reporting, as journalists who do not comprehend how to report on the terrorist narrative, how insurgencies are organised, and what terrorist groups are trying to communicate, are unlikely to be able to critically frame the terrorist narrative they encounter or to avoid the sensationalist "shortcuts" (Dart Center, 2023; Sobowale, 2022). The training gap is exacerbated by remuneration in the Nigerian media industry as it is hard to attract and retain specialist journalists. This led to the unstable nature of employment of most Nigerian journalists, especially freelance journalists who cover conflict zones in the north-east, as well as digital journalists.

Political ownership of Nigerian media represents a third structural condition that is a cause for irresponsible coverage of terrorism in Nigeria. Ownership of major media outlets in Nigeria indicates high degrees of oligopoly in the hands of political actors, business interests that have close political ties and ethnic/regional pressure groups (Sobowale, 2022; Musa, 2021). This type of ownership sets the stage for editorial decisions that might be influenced by the political interests of the owners, and consequently result in a framing of coverage that may be consistent with what may be considered a factional political agenda – stigmatizing specific areas, ethnic groups or political opponents in relation to terrorism – as opposed to the public interest of accurate, impartial security reporting. Omeni (2020), Danjibo and Falcon (2022) observed several cases where the editorial framing of terrorist violence in Nigerian media is found to be related to the political leanings of the media owners, especially in attributing blame to security lapses and in poor government counter-terrorism efforts. The political ownership interference in editorial independence therefore is not only an ethics issue for journalists but also a national security issue.

4.4 Regulatory gaps and accountability deficiencies

The regulatory regime that exists in the context of the conduct of Nigerian media coverage of terrorism has huge gaps which are a contributing factor to the accountability problem highlighted in this study. The key regulatory bodies with relevant jurisdiction are the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) whose capacities to regulate are not only weak, but lacks specific guidance on terrorism coverage. There are provisions in the NBC Broadcasting Code that ban the broadcast of material which incites crime or threatens public order, yet this has been interpreted and applied inconsistently; usually in a reactive manner, more regularly led by political considerations, while enforcement is almost never proactive (Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, 2023; Okereke, 2022). The NPC's power of regulation over print and online media is even more tenuous because its powers are primarily advisory and its sanctions are not often in force. Such lack of regulation fosters a climate of freedom where media outlets are reluctant to invest money in responsible coverage of terrorism because of low level incentives (Musa, 2021; Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022).

The challenge of regulating the Internet and social media is a different type of challenge. The major social media platforms, which provide the main avenues of terrorist propaganda and viral disinformation in Nigeria—Meta (Facebook and WhatsApp), Twitter/X, Google (YouTube), and Telegram—have global terms of service that were not created for Nigeria, whose content moderation resources and policies reflect the priorities of their primacy - American and European markets (Saltman and Russell, 2014; Weimann and Masri, 2020). Civil society and international human rights bodies have questioned the Nigerian government's initiatives to regulate social media, which included the controversial Social Media Bill of 2019 and periodic suspensions of Twitter in

2021, as disproportionate, politically motivated and the very opposite of a democratic and security-enhancing media freedom (Nwachukwu and Igwe, 2022; Sobowale, 2022). One of the most delicate issues in the governance of the media-terrorism domain in Nigeria is the balance to be struck between legit government security interest in preventing the spread of terrorism-related propaganda and the democratic interest in maintaining freedom of the press and internet.

In addition, self-regulatory mechanisms in the Nigerian media have failed to deal with irresponsible reporting of terrorism. There are codes of ethic for conflict reporting, notably by the Nigerian Guild of Editors and the Nigerian Union of Journalists, but there is no enforcement mechanism for these codes as they are not enforced and no sanctions are put in place to prevent violations in practice (Ekeanyanwu and Ologunebi, 2021; Mustapha, 2022). Lack of credible self-regulatory enforcement opens up the conditions of moral hazard, in which the individual journalist/editor is aware that responsible reporting of terrorism will not give him a competitive edge, but irresponsible reporting will not cost him anything professionally.

5. Conclusion

The study has critically explored the role of media as a source of encouragement to terrorism in Nigeria. The study revealed from a profound reviews of the available scholarship and evidence, that media and terrorism in Nigeria's context are a series of reinforcing dynamics that together create serious problem of national security. The products of Nigeria's mainstream media are characterized by sensationalism, reliance on official narratives and religious-ethnic characterization of the terrorist actors and groups. This results to a media environment that is dominated by fear and which misrepresents the complexity of the violent acts of the terrorists, allowing a media environment that serves the divisive strategic communication needs of the armed non-state actors. The uncritical dissemination of Boko Haram's and ISWAP's video statements and the viral dissemination of unverified, inflammatory messages on social media platforms increases the communicative reach of groups with a clear intention of creating fear and sowing division.

The conditions that gave rise to irresponsible reporting of terrorist incidences in Nigeria, such as economic and commercial pressures against the media in a hyper-competitive media environment, lack of skills among journalists to report conflict-sensitive material and political ownership interference in media editorial independence, show that the media, as a driver of the spread of terrorism in Nigeria, is not of its own making but systemic, which also requires systemic solutions. There are also regulatory gaps in both broadcast and online media, which allow irresponsible coverage to go unchecked and reduces the ability of the media industry to self-regulate. Thus, tackling the media-terrorism nexus in Nigeria demands action at various levels, including regulation, capacity development, restructuring of media ownership, platform governance, as well as public media literacy programmes to help viewers critically analyse the content of terrorism reports.

The three analytical frameworks used in this study: framing theory, agenda-setting theory and contagion hypothesis are found to be complementary and mutually reinforcing in generating a comprehensive analytical account of the relationship between the media and terrorism in Nigeria. Framing theory was used to explain the specific content choices that helped create some terrorism narrative; agenda-setting theory was used to explain how the specific choices of content were related to other public perceptions and political consequences; and the contagion hypothesis was used to explain how patterns of media coverage were related to the likelihood of diffusion and escalation of violence. Combined, these frameworks substantiate the main argument of this study, which posits that the media does not simply reflect the reality of the terrorism problem, but plays a construct role in the social and political dynamics of the terrorism problem in Nigeria; and hence has some level of responsibility, alongside the government and other civil and international actors, to the trajectory of the problem.

Admittedly, there are some limitations to this research. It is a secondary-source and qualitative review, as such, it does not offer empirical data on media content or media effects; the findings are therefore limited in the degree to which these can be drawn from existing studies. It may also be susceptible to sampling errors in previous content analyses and the existing scholarship on north-eastern Nigeria at the expense of other areas. Future research should provide original longitudinal content analysis of media terrorism coverage in Nigeria, explore the framing and agenda-setting effects found in this study through audience reception studies and conduct comparative research to examine the media-terrorism nexus in other West African countries in order to establish region-specific and country-specific drivers of the relationship.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward for the media organisations, the regulators, civil society, the government and technology companies, both in the light of the analysis and in line with the findings:

Revision of the National Broadcasting Commission and Press Council Mandate: NBC and NPC to create new clear guidelines on how to report on terrorism, based on best practices from international organisations such as International Federation of Journalists and Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. These guidelines should also bar the uncritical dissemination or publication of material which is used for terrorist propaganda, call for contextualisation of terrorist acts in structural narratives, discourage the use of religious-ethnic identifiers for terrorist actors as the main frame and ensure the inclusion of voice of survivors and affected communities in news coverage on terrorism. Regular content audit should be used to monitor compliance with graduated sanctions such as suspension of broadcast licences where necessary should be implemented in cases of non-compliance (Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, 2023; Musa, 2021).

Investment in a national programme of conflict-sensitive journalism training for Nigerian journalists and editors, whose work involves security issues, should be made by the Nigerian government in collaboration with international development organisations, journalism schools and journalism professional associations. The programme would be based on models developed in the International Media Support and Dart Center which will incorporate fixed training sessions on the following topics: Radicalization processes, organisation of insurgents, ethics of the reproduction of terrorist propaganda, trauma-informed interviewing with conflict survivors and verification techniques for material related to terrorism in the digital space. Incorporating conflict-reporting ethics into Nigerian journalism schools' curricula should form part of the accreditation process of journalism schools (Dart Center, 2023; Sobowale, 2022).

Media Ownership Transparency and Conflict of Interest Regulation: Nigerian government should pass legislation mandating public disclosure of the beneficial ownership of all licensed media organisations with specific provisions to regulate media organisations' conflict of interest by barring sitting politicians, active political party officials and people with current government contracts from exercising editorial control over the organisation. A separate Media Ownership Commission should be set up to oversee compliance, accept complaints against politically-motivated editorial interference and impose sanctions such as licence withdrawal if ownership-driven editorial interference in the coverage of terrorism is found. These are all necessary strategies for tackling the structural causes of politically-biased framing as revealed by this study: Sobowale (2022); Omeni (2020).

Platform Governance and Content Moderation: The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) should develop a formal framework for the regulation of harmful content in social media platforms used in Nigeria with the model of the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act (2023) in mind, but suitably adapted to the Nigerian constitutional context. This should include platforms to provide Nigeria specific content moderation resources, such as the ability to moderate in local languages, as well as establish rapid response procedures to remove verified Nigerian terrorist propaganda content, publish transparency reports on content moderation activities in Nigeria and ensure stakeholder participation in a multi-stakeholder advisory body: a National Online Safety Council (NOSC) in Nigeria. Financial sanctions must be progressive, with the amounts based on a platform's worldwide revenue, as per the proposals of Nwachukwu and Igwe (2022) and Weimann and Masri (2020).

Public Media Literacy Initiative: The National Orientation Agency (NOA) needs to create and execute a National Media and Information Literacy Programme for secondary school students, tertiary students and adult citizens of Nigeria in conflict zones. The programme should include skills training that allows learners to critically analyse information from the media which is related to

terrorism, identify the methods used by terrorist organisations to propagate their message, access and utilize fact checking resources to verify information, spot and resist the manipulation of information, using an emotional approach as to sensationalism and identity related terrorism frames. The literature review indicates that media literacy is among the most effective countermeasures that can be adopted at the audience-level to neutralize the effects of terrorist propaganda and irresponsible media framing in the long-term (Mustapha, 2022; Ekeanyanwu and Ologunebi, 2021). Designation of a Dedicated Security Media Ethics Ombudsman: An independent Security Reporting Ombudsman with the mandate of receiving and investigating complaints by members of the public, government, civil society and affected communities regarding the coverage of terrorism and security related issues by the media in Nigeria. The Ombudsman should be empowered to investigate, publish and call for corrections and refer serious cases for formal regulatory action by the NBC and NPC. The institution should be independent from government, independent of the media, well-financed and have the power to undertake its own investigative and adjudicative functions. Having a credible and active Ombudsman would provide a tangible accountability system which will incentivize responsible coverage of terrorism among media houses in Nigeria on professional and reputational grounds (Ekeanyanwu and Ologunebi, 2021; Okereke, 2022).

References

1. Altheide, D.L. (2006) *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*. Lanham: AltaMira Press.
2. Arquilla, J. and Ronfeldt, D. (eds.) (2001) *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
3. Boydston, A.E. (2013) *Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. Brosius, H.B. and Eps, P. (1995) "Prototyping through Key Events: News Selection in the Case of Violence against Aliens and Asylum Seekers in Germany", *European Journal of Communication*, 10(3), pp. 391–412.
5. Danjibo, N.D. and Falcon, O. (2022) "Media, Ethnic Framing and the Escalation of Herder-Farmer Conflicts in Nigeria", *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 12(1), pp. 28–55.
6. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2023) *Conflict Reporting in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Survey of Practice and Training Needs*. New York: Columbia University Dart Center.
7. Ekeanyanwu, N.T. and Ologunebi, O. (2021) "Newspaper Coverage of Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria: A Content Analysis of Framing Patterns", *African Journalism Studies*, 42(2), pp. 45–68.
8. Entman, R.M. (1993) "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp. 51–58.
9. Gitlin, T. (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of*

the New Left. Berkeley: University of California Press.

10. Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
11. Hoffman, B. (2006) *Inside Terrorism*. 2nd edn. New York: Columbia University Press.
12. Jetter, M. (2017) "Terrorism and the Media", *Journal of Public Economics*, 153, pp. 32–48.
13. Kassimeris, G. and Jackson, L. (2014) "The West, Islamic State, and the Narrative of No Choices", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(5), pp. 977–997.
14. Kilcullen, D. (2010) *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
15. McCombs, M. (2014) *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.
16. McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L. (1972) "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176–187.
17. Moeller, S.D. (2006) "Regarding the Pain of Others: Media, Bias and the Coverage of International Disasters", *Journal of International Affairs*, 59(2), pp. 173–196.
18. Musa, A.S. (2021) "Journalism, Terrorism and National Security in Nigeria: An Assessment of Press Coverage of the Boko Haram Crisis", *Security Journal*, 34(4), pp. 723–745.
19. Mustapha, M. (2022) "Digital Media, Extremism and Radicalisation in West Africa: The Nigerian Nexus", *Journal of African Media Studies*, 14(1), pp. 67–88.
20. Nacos, B.L. (2007) *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. 2nd edn. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
21. Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (2023) *Annual Report and Broadcasting Statistics 2023*. Abuja: NBC.
22. Nigerian Communications Commission (2024) *Industry Statistics: Internet Subscribers Data*. Abuja: NCC.
23. Nwachukwu, J.O. and Igwe, P.C. (2022) "Social Media, Fake News and Security Reporting in Nigeria: Implications for Counter-Terrorism Communication", *Journalism Practice*, 16(8), pp. 1723–1742.
24. Okereke, C.N. (2022) "Strategic Communication, Media and Terrorism in Nigeria: Interrogating the Nexus", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 33(4), pp. 701–726.
25. Omeni, A. (2020) *Counter-Terrorism in Nigeria: The Military and the Fight Against Boko Haram*. Abingdon: Routledge.
26. Price, V. and Tewksbury, D. (1997) "News Values and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing", in Barnett, G.A. and Boster, F.J. (eds.) *Progress in Communication Sciences*. Greenwich: Ablex, pp. 173–212.
27. Saltman, E.M. and Russell, J. (2014) *The Role of Prevent in Countering Online Extremism*.

London: Quilliam Foundation.

28. Scheufele, D.A. (1999) "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects", *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), pp. 103–122.
29. Schmid, A.P. and de Graaf, J. (1982) *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: SAGE.
30. Sobowale, D. (2022) "Commercial Imperatives, Political Ownership and the Decline of Quality Journalism in Nigeria", *African Journalism Studies*, 43(3), pp. 12–34.
31. Towers, S., Gomez-Lievano, A., Khan, M., Mubayi, A. and Castillo-Chavez, C. (2015) "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings", *PLOS ONE*, 10(7), p. e0117259.
32. Weimann, G. and Masri, N. (2020) "Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 46(5), pp. 752–765.
33. Weimann, G. and Von Knop, K. (2008) "Applying the Notion of Noise to Countering Online Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31(10), pp. 883–902.