

Media and Conflict Reporting in Multicultural Nigeria

Abdulaziz Nasiru Muhammad

Department of Mass Communication, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos

Abstract:

Nigeria's multicultural landscape is both vibrant and prone to conflict. With over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious traditions, the way the media report conflicts significantly influence public perception and social cohesion. This paper examines how Nigerian media report conflicts within diverse social contexts, focusing on reporting styles, ethical dilemmas, and their implications for peacebuilding. Through qualitative analysis of ethno-religious violence, misinformation on social media, and protest coverage, the study explores the strengths and weaknesses of conflict reporting in Nigeria. Grounded in Framing Theory and Peace Journalism Theory, the findings indicate that while some media outlets attempt to uphold professional and ethical standards, others unintentionally intensify social divisions through biased language and sensational reporting. The paper concludes with recommendations for conflict-sensitive journalism that promotes social harmony and strengthens democratic values in Nigeria.

Keywords:

Conflict Reporting, Multiculturalism, Ethical Journalism, Peace Journalism, Nigerian Media

I. Introduction

Nigeria is widely recognized as one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. The country is home to more than 250 ethnic groups, each possessing distinct languages, cultural practices, and religious identities. Major ethnic groups such as the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Kanuri, and many others contribute to the cultural richness of the nation. In addition to ethnic diversity, Nigeria also experiences religious diversity, particularly between Islam and Christianity, alongside indigenous belief systems (Aondover, 2025).

Okunade et al., (2025) observed that while this diversity strengthens Nigeria's cultural identity and social vibrancy, it also creates complex social dynamics. Competition over political power, economic resources, land ownership, and cultural recognition may sometimes intersect with ethnic and religious identities, creating tensions that can escalate into conflict. These conflicts often manifest in different forms, including communal clashes, farmer-herder disputes, political protests, and episodes of ethno-religious violence.

In such contexts, the media play a critical role in shaping public understanding of events. News organizations act as primary sources of information for citizens, influencing how people interpret conflicts and perceive the actions of those involved. Media narratives can therefore either promote understanding and peaceful dialogue or contribute to the escalation of tensions through sensational or biased reporting (Aondover & Obasi, 2025).

The responsibility placed on journalists in a multicultural society like Nigeria is therefore enormous. Accurate and balanced reporting can promote national unity, whereas irresponsible reporting may deepen divisions and reinforce stereotypes (Onyejelem et al., 2025). This study explores how Nigerian media report conflicts within a multicultural context, examining the patterns of framing used by journalists, the ethical challenges they face, and the broader implications for peacebuilding and social cohesion.

1.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of Nigerian media in reporting conflicts within a multicultural society. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine how Nigerian media frame conflict situations in multicultural contexts.
2. Identify patterns of bias, sensationalism, or peace-oriented reporting in conflict coverage.
3. Analyze the ethical challenges faced by journalists when reporting conflicts.
4. Evaluate the impact of media framing on public perception and social cohesion.
5. Propose strategies for improving responsible conflict reporting in Nigeria.

1.2 Significance of the Paper

This study contributes to scholarly discussions on media responsibility in societies characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. Nigeria's multicultural structure makes it particularly vulnerable to conflicts that can easily escalate when media narratives are inaccurate, sensational, or biased. By examining patterns of conflict reporting in Nigerian media, the study provides insights into the relationship between journalism practices and social stability.

The research is also significant for journalism practice. Conflict reporting requires a high level of professional responsibility because inaccurate or inflammatory reporting may intensify existing tensions. By highlighting patterns in language use, framing strategies, and source selection, this study provides guidance for journalists on how to improve the quality of their reporting in conflict situations.

In addition, the study has implications for media policy and regulation in Nigeria. Media regulatory institutions play an important role in promoting ethical journalism practices. Findings from this research may contribute to the development of stronger editorial guidelines and training programs for journalists covering sensitive issues.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the field of Mass Communication by expanding knowledge on media ethics, conflict communication, and multicultural media systems. It also provides a framework for future research examining how media narratives influence conflict dynamics in diverse societies.

Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of responsible journalism in promoting peace, dialogue, and national unity in Nigeria.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Conflict Reporting

Conflict reporting refers to journalistic practices that involve the coverage of disputes, crises, violence, or tensions occurring within society (Vitalis et al., 2025). It encompasses the processes through which journalists gather information, interpret events, and communicate narratives about conflicts to the public.

Conflict reporting does not simply involve describing events. It also involves framing issues, selecting sources, and shaping the broader context through which audiences interpret conflicts. In many societies, conflicts may arise from political disagreements, competition over resources, cultural differences, or historical grievances. When journalists report such conflicts, their choice of language, headlines, and sources can influence how the public interprets the causes and consequences of the events (Aondover & Akin-Odukoya, 2024).

Responsible conflict reporting requires journalists to provide accurate information, contextual explanations, and balanced perspectives. Instead of focusing solely on violence or confrontation, journalists are expected to examine underlying issues such as economic inequality,

environmental pressures, or political exclusion that contribute to conflicts. (Garba & Msaughter, 2023a)

Within the Nigerian media landscape, conflict reporting has become particularly significant due to the frequency of communal clashes, farmer–herder disputes, banditry in northern regions, and protest movements (Garba & Msughter, 2023b).

2.2 Multicultural Society

A multicultural society is characterized by the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups within a single political framework. Multiculturalism recognizes and respects these differences while promoting coexistence, tolerance, and social integration (Aondover et al., 2022).

Nigeria exemplifies a multicultural society due to its extensive ethnic and cultural diversity. The presence of numerous ethnic groups and religious communities contributes to the richness of Nigerian culture but also introduces complexities in social relations (Yar’Adua et al., 2023a).

The media play an important role in shaping how multicultural differences are perceived and managed within society. Positive media representation of diverse groups can encourage mutual respect and understanding, while negative portrayals may reinforce divisions and mistrust.

2.3 Peace Journalism

Peace journalism is an approach to reporting conflicts that emphasizes solutions, dialogue, and understanding rather than sensationalism and violence.

Traditional conflict reporting often focuses on dramatic events such as battles, protests, or casualties because such stories tend to attract greater public attention. However, peace journalism advocates a more balanced approach that includes the voices of affected communities and peace advocates (Yar’Adua & Msughter, 2023). In the Nigerian context, adopting peace journalism practices could significantly improve the quality of conflict reporting and contribute to national unity.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

a. Framing Theory

Framing theory explains how media organizations influence audience perceptions by selecting certain aspects of reality and presenting them in particular ways. According to Entman, framing involves selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them more prominent in communication texts. This process highlights certain interpretations while minimizing others. In conflict reporting, framing may occur through headlines, images, quotations, or narrative emphasis.

b. Peace Journalism Theory

Peace journalism theory proposes that journalists should adopt reporting practices that contribute to peacebuilding rather than conflict escalation (Mojaye & Aondover, 2022). The theory encourages journalists to investigate the root causes of conflicts and include diverse perspectives in their reporting. By doing so, journalists help audiences understand complex social problems more deeply.

c. Literature Review

Scholars in communication studies have long examined the role of media in shaping public perceptions of conflicts. Akinfeleye argues that the Nigerian media play a significant role in promoting democratic culture and national cohesion, although media institutions sometimes reflect the political and ethnic divisions present within society.

Oso highlights the influence of media ownership and political interests on news reporting in Nigeria, suggesting that ownership structures can shape editorial decisions and affect how conflicts are framed in the news. Amuwo observes that emphasizing religious identities in news reporting may reinforce stereotypes and deepen social divisions. Similarly, Jibo and Okoosi-Simbine argue that ethnic labeling in news headlines can oversimplify complex social problems (Yar'Adua et al., 2023b).

The emergence of digital media has further complicated conflict reporting. Okoro notes that social media platforms have increased the speed of information dissemination during crises, creating both opportunities for rapid communication and risks of misinformation. Overall, existing literature demonstrates that media narratives can either contribute to peacebuilding efforts or intensify existing conflicts.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine patterns of conflict reporting in Nigerian media. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine selected media reports between 2018 and 2023, a period characterized by several major conflict events in Nigeria including farmer–herder clashes, banditry, ethno-religious tensions, and the EndSARS protests.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select fifteen media reports from reputable Nigerian and international news organizations. The reports were analyzed based on variables such as framing patterns, identity labeling, source attribution, tone of reporting, and adherence to ethical standards.

3.1 Operationalization of Variables

The following variables guided the analysis:

Framing Pattern
Identity Labeling
Source Attribution
Tone of Reporting
Ethical Compliance

3.2 Selected Media Reports

1. Vanguard Newspaper – “*Herdsmen attacks: We’re still haunted by fear, cannot return to farms – Benue farmers.*” (June 6, 2018).
2. Channels Television – “*Nigerians Take #EndSARS Protest To Police Headquarters, Other States.*” (October 8, 2020).
3. Sahara Reporters – “*#EndSARS: CNN Releases Second Report On Lekki Shootings.*” (November 24, 2020).
4. Premium Times – “*CNN, BBC coverage of #EndSARS protest disgusting – Bubari.*” (2020).
5. Daily Trust – “*Banditry: Northwest residents demand urgent government intervention.*” (2021).
6. The Guardian Nigeria – “*Communal clashes threaten peace in Nigeria’s Middle Belt.*” (2021).

7. Sun News Online – “Benue expresses concern over new influx of Fulani herdsmen, cattle.” (2021).
8. BBC News Africa – “Nigeria’s #EndSARS protests: What happened and why?” (2020).
9. Al Jazeera – “Nigeria protests: Calls grow for police reform after shootings.” (2020).
10. Premium Times – “Banditry crisis escalates in Zamfara as communities flee attacks.” (2022).
11. Channels TV Online – “Security forces launch operations against bandits in Northwest Nigeria.” (2022).
12. Vanguard Newspaper – “Farmer–herder clashes worsen food security fears in Nigeria.” (2022).
13. The Guardian Nigeria – “Ethno-religious tensions rise in Kaduna communities.” (2019).
14. Daily Trust – “Plateau killings spark fresh concerns over communal conflicts.” (2021).
15. Sahara Reporters – “Nigerian youths protest police brutality in nationwide demonstrations.” (2020).

3.3 Data and Analysis Table

Conflict/Event	Location	Media Outlet	Sample Headline/Report	Coverage Type	Ethical Concern	Bias Observed	Year
Farmer-Herdsmen Clashes	Kano, Benue	Vanguard	“Herdsmen attacks: we’re still haunted by fear...”	Ethno-Religious	Early reports unverified	Ethnic bias	2018 - 2020
Kaduna Ethno-Religious Violence	Kaduna	Sun News Online	“Benue expresses concern over influx of Fulani herdsmen”	Headline ethnic labelling	Exaggeration of attacks	Religious bias	2019 - 2021
EndSARS Protests	Lagos, Abuja	Sahara Reporters	“#EndSARS: CNN Releases Second Report on Lekki Shootings”	Protest vs violence framing	Sensationalism	Minimal	2020
Banditry/Clashes	Northwest Nigeria	Premium Times	“Banditry crisis escalates in Zamfara	Focused on criminal activity	Minor generalization	Minimal	2021 - 2023

Note: This table above summarizes key trends identified from the fifteen selected media reports across Nigeria and international news outlets covering major conflicts events.

3.4 Case Analyses

a. Farmer-Herdsmen Conflicts

Reports often tagged incidents with ethnic labels like “Fulani herdsmen attacks,” leading to broad generalizations. Later pieces did shift focus toward underlying issues like land use or climate change (Okoro, 2020).

b. Kano Ethno-Religious Violence

Early narratives leaned heavily on religious differences without proper verification which only stoked fear (Sun News Online, 2021). More neutral pieces focused on verified causes instead of identity labels.

c. EndSARS Protests (2020)

Some coverage fixated more on violent aspects rather than addressing governance concerns raised by protesters. A balanced approach would’ve highlighted both goals of the protests alongside any violent incidents (Sahara Reporters).

d. Challenges in Conflict Reporting

Reporting conflict in a multicultural society such as Nigeria presents numerous challenges for journalists and media organizations. These challenges arise from political pressure, safety risks, limited access to reliable information, and the complex nature of Nigeria’s ethnic and religious diversity. In many cases, these factors influence how conflicts are reported and the type of narratives that dominate public discourse.

One major challenge is political interference and pressure from powerful actors. Government officials, political elites, and security agencies sometimes attempt to influence media coverage in ways that protect their interests or portray certain groups more favorably. Journalists covering sensitive issues such as ethno-religious violence or protests may face pressure to modify their reports or avoid publishing certain facts. This can limit the independence of the media and undermine the credibility of conflict reporting (Abba et al., 2021).

Another critical challenge is the risk to the safety of journalists. Conflict reporting often requires journalists to operate in dangerous environments where violence, hostility, and instability are common. In regions affected by insurgency, banditry, or communal clashes, journalists may face threats from armed groups, security forces, or local communities suspicious of media coverage. These risks can discourage in-depth reporting and sometimes lead to reliance on second-hand information rather than direct field investigation.

Limited access to accurate and timely information also complicates conflict reporting. During violent incidents, communication systems may break down, official sources may release incomplete information, and rumors can spread rapidly. In such circumstances, journalists may struggle to verify facts before publication. The urgency to report breaking news can sometimes result in the dissemination of unverified information, which may escalate tensions or spread misinformation.

Another challenge relates to ethnic and religious sensitivities. Nigeria's multicultural environment means that identity-related narratives can easily provoke strong reactions. The use of certain labels, such as identifying groups by ethnicity or religion, may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or deepen existing divisions. Journalists must therefore balance the need for factual accuracy with the responsibility to avoid language that could incite hostility.

The rise of social media and digital misinformation has further complicated conflict reporting. Information spreads rapidly through online platforms, often without verification. False narratives, manipulated images, and misleading videos can circulate widely before professional journalists have an opportunity to fact-check them. This environment creates pressure on traditional media to respond quickly while maintaining accuracy (Aondover et al., 2024).

Additionally, economic constraints within media organizations affect the quality of conflict reporting. Many newsrooms face limited resources, inadequate training opportunities, and shrinking budgets for investigative journalism. As a result, journalists may rely heavily on official press statements or wire services rather than conducting detailed field reporting.

These challenges collectively influence how conflicts are portrayed in the media and highlight the need for stronger professional standards, training, and institutional support for journalists working in conflict environments.

3.5 Ethical Practices for Conflict Reporting

Ethical journalism plays a crucial role in preventing the escalation of conflicts and promoting social cohesion in multicultural societies. Responsible reporting requires journalists to follow professional standards that emphasize accuracy, fairness, and sensitivity when covering conflict situations.

One of the most important ethical principles in conflict reporting is accuracy and verification. Journalists must ensure that information is thoroughly verified before publication, especially during volatile situations where rumors and misinformation can spread rapidly.

Verifying facts through multiple credible sources helps maintain public trust and reduces the risk of amplifying false narratives (Vitalis et al., 2023).

Another key ethical practice is balanced and inclusive sourcing. Conflict reporting should reflect multiple perspectives, including those of affected communities, government officials, civil society organizations, and independent experts. Providing diverse viewpoints helps audiences understand the complexity of conflicts and prevents the dominance of one-sided narratives.

Responsible language use is also essential. Journalists should avoid sensational or inflammatory language that may provoke emotional reactions or reinforce stereotypes. Instead, neutral and precise language should be used to describe events and actors involved in conflicts. Careful wording can help prevent the stigmatization of particular ethnic or religious groups.

Ethical conflict reporting also involves contextualization of events. Rather than focusing solely on violent incidents, journalists should provide historical, social, and political context that helps audiences understand the underlying causes of conflicts. Contextual reporting promotes informed public discourse and encourages constructive solutions.

Another important principle is conflict-sensitive reporting, which aligns with the ideals of peace journalism. This approach encourages journalists to highlight efforts toward dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. By emphasizing solutions and shared interests, the media can contribute positively to conflict resolution rather than intensifying divisions (Abba et al., 2021).

Professional media organizations also have a responsibility to provide training and guidelines for journalists covering conflicts. Training programs on media ethics, conflict-sensitive reporting, and fact-checking can enhance journalists' ability to navigate complex reporting environments responsibly.

Ultimately, ethical practices in conflict reporting help strengthen democratic institutions, promote public accountability, and support the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities.

IV. Conclusion

Nigeria's multicultural composition presents both opportunities and challenges for the media, particularly in the context of conflict reporting. As one of the most influential institutions in democratic societies, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of conflicts and influencing public narratives. This study examined how Nigerian media report conflicts within a diverse social environment. The findings show that responsible journalism can contribute to dialogue and social cohesion, while sensational reporting may unintentionally escalate tensions. Thus, responsible journalism remains essential for promoting peace, national unity, and democratic stability in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to improve conflict reporting in Nigeria's multicultural media environment.

First, media organizations should prioritize training programs on conflict-sensitive journalism. Such training would equip journalists with the knowledge and skills needed to report conflicts responsibly, particularly in diverse societies where language and framing can significantly influence public perception.

Second, journalists should adopt peace journalism principles when covering conflicts. This approach encourages reporting that focuses on solutions, dialogue, and reconciliation rather than solely emphasizing violence or blame. By highlighting efforts toward conflict resolution, the media can contribute positively to peacebuilding processes.

Third, media regulatory bodies and professional associations should strengthen ethical guidelines for conflict reporting. Clear standards on language use, source verification, and identity labeling can help journalists navigate sensitive reporting situations more responsibly.

Fourth, collaboration between media organizations and fact-checking institutions should be encouraged. In the digital age, misinformation spreads quickly, particularly during conflict situations. Partnerships with independent fact-checking organizations can help ensure the accuracy of information disseminated to the public.

Fifth, media houses should invest in investigative journalism and field reporting. Providing adequate resources for journalists to conduct in-depth investigations can improve the quality and credibility of conflict coverage.

Finally, public awareness initiatives should promote media literacy among audiences. Educating citizens on how to critically evaluate media content can reduce the influence of misinformation and encourage more responsible consumption of news.

Limitations of the Paper

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research relied on a qualitative analysis of fifteen selected media reports, which may not fully represent the entire spectrum of conflict reporting in Nigeria. The limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, the study focused primarily on mainstream media outlets and did not extensively analyze the role of emerging digital platforms and citizen journalism in conflict reporting. Given the growing influence of social media in shaping public narratives, future research could examine how online platforms contribute to or mitigate conflict escalation.

Another limitation relates to the reliance on publicly available media reports rather than direct interviews with journalists or editors involved in conflict coverage. Incorporating the perspectives of media practitioners could provide deeper insights into the professional challenges and decision-making processes associated with conflict reporting.

Implications of the Paper

The findings of this research have important implications for journalism practice, media policy, and academic scholarship.

For journalists and media practitioners, the study highlights the need for greater awareness of how reporting styles and framing patterns influence public perceptions of conflict. By adopting ethical and conflict-sensitive reporting practices, journalists can contribute to more balanced and constructive narratives.

For policymakers and media regulators, the research underscores the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks that promote responsible journalism. Effective regulation,

combined with professional self-regulation, can help ensure that media coverage does not exacerbate social tensions.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on media ethics, conflict communication, and peace journalism. It also provides a foundation for further research on the role of media in managing diversity and conflict in multicultural societies.

Finally, for society as a whole, responsible conflict reporting can help foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and social cohesion in Nigeria's complex multicultural landscape.

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