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Evaluating the role of the media in Enhancing National Security

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Abstract

National security has evolved beyond traditional military defense to encompass political National security in Nigeria now spans political stability, economic resilience, public health, cyber safety, and social cohesion, going far beyond traditional military defense. Within this wider landscape, the media plays an essential role in shaping public understanding, framing security narratives, and influencing national conversations and policy actions. This study examines how Nigerian media contributes to national security by analyzing the framing of issues such as terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, cybercrime, and public health emergencies in news coverage between 2015 and 2024. Using a qualitative, desk-based approach, the research draws on secondary sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, and documented media reports. Guided by Agenda Setting Theory and Social Responsibility Theory, the study shows that the media has helped elevate major security concerns to the forefront of public debate, prompting government attention and policy responses. However, the analysis also reveals persistent obstacles, such as misinformation, limited access to reliable security information, political interference, threats to press freedom, and insufficient training in conflict-sensitive reporting. These challenges often weaken the credibility and impact of media contributions. The study concludes that the media remains vital to Nigeria's security architecture, but its effectiveness strengthened professionalism, improved cooperation with security institutions, and stronger protections for press freedom

Keywords: Media, National Security, Nigeria, Security Reporting, Press Freedom

Introduction

Historically, national security was primarily associated with the protection of a nation's territorial integrity and sovereignty from external aggression, often through the deployment of military capabilities. In the 21st century, however, the concept of national security has expanded to include a broader set of concerns such as political stability, economic resilience, environmental safety, cyber security, public health, and social cohesion (Williams, 2020). This evolution reflects the interconnected and globalized nature of modern threats, where challenges are increasingly transnational and multidimensional. Terrorist groups operate across borders, cybercriminals can launch attacks from thousands of miles away, and pandemics can destabilize economies and governance structures within weeks. Consequently, national security is now understood as encompassing both hard security measures such as military defense and law enforcement and soft security measures, including strategic communication, public diplomacy, and societal resilience (Adebayo, 2021; United Nations, 2022). Within this expanded security framework, the media plays a crucial and multifaceted role. It functions as both an information channel and a platform for shaping public discourse, influencing societal attitudes, and guiding policy debates. During periods of crisis whether terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or health emergencies the media serves as an early warning mechanism, delivering critical updates and advising citizens on protective measures (McQuail, 2020). In Nigeria, traditional platforms such as radio, television, and newspapers, alongside digital outlets like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, have been indispensable in raising public awareness during events such as the Boko Haram insurgency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the surge in kidnapping incidents (Ibrahim & Adedeji, 2022).

The global landscape also illustrates how the media intersects with national security. For instance, during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, continuous news coverage informed the public but also inadvertently heightened fear and anxiety (Althaus et al., 2019). Similarly, during the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, real-time media updates helped authorities disseminate safety advisories but raised ethical concerns

about revealing operational details that could compromise security (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2015). Such examples reveal the dual edged nature of the media’s role in security matters: while it can be a force for public safety and awareness, it can also become a security liability if reporting is not carefully managed. In Nigeria, the relationship between media and national security has been shaped by both historical and contemporary experiences. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), radio was used extensively for propaganda purposes, influencing public opinion on both sides (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2018). More recently, the Boko Haram insurgency demonstrated how extremist groups can exploit media coverage to project power, recruit members, and spread fear (Chiluwa, 2019). At the same time, the media has served as a vital tool for countering extremist narratives, as seen in government and civil society campaigns promoting deradicalization and community resilience in Nigeria’s North East (Agbiboa, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the centrality of the media in national security. Timely and accurate public health communication proved essential in preventing panic, encouraging compliance with health protocols, and combating misinformation. The World Health Organization (2021) stressed that the “infodemic” the rapid spread of both accurate and false information was as much a threat as the virus itself. In Nigeria, media outlets collaborated with health agencies to debunk myths about the virus, promote vaccination, and clarify lockdown policies (Oloruntoba, 2022). Nonetheless, social media platforms simultaneously became hubs for conspiracy theories, highlighting the persistent tension between information freedom and the need for security-sensitive communication. Beyond emergencies, the media plays a watchdog role that reinforces democratic accountability in security governance. This involves monitoring and evaluating government security policies and their implementation to ensure transparency and legality (McQuail, 2020). However, this role can sometimes conflict with national security imperatives, especially when investigative reporting risks exposing classified information or jeopardizing ongoing security operations. In Nigeria, such tensions have been visible in cases where journalists were harassed or detained for reporting on military activities in conflict zones (Idowu, 2020).

The emergence of digital media has magnified both opportunities and risks in the national security arena. On one hand, social media enables rapid dissemination of alerts, public mobilization, crowdsourced intelligence, and real time monitoring of public sentiment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021). On the other hand, these same platforms facilitate the spread of misinformation, extremist propaganda, and foreign disinformation campaigns. As a result, media literacy and fact-checking have become critical elements of modern national security strategies (Folarin, 2022). A significant aspect of improving media’s contribution to national security lies in establishing structured collaboration between journalists and security agencies. In advanced democracies, this is achieved through formal protocols balancing the public’s right to know with the operational secrecy necessary for effective security (O’Loughlin & Hoskins, 2015). In Nigeria, such frameworks are still underdeveloped, resulting in reactive information release, rumor proliferation, and public mistrust. Building stronger media security collaboration could enhance the media’s positive impact on security outcomes while safeguarding press independence.

Statement of the Problem

The evolving nature of threats to national security has made effective communication an indispensable component of modern defense strategies. In Nigeria, security threats such as terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, cybercrime, and communal violence demand timely, accurate, and responsible information dissemination to guide public response and maintain societal stability (Adebayo, 2021; Okoro & Agbo, 2018). The media, as the primary channel through which most Nigerians access information, is positioned at the heart of the national security discourse. However, its role is complicated by the dual responsibility of informing the public while safeguarding sensitive operational details, a balance that remains difficult to maintain in practice (Eze, 2019). A major challenge is the persistent trust deficit between security agencies and the media. Security institutions often regard journalists as potential risks to operational secrecy, especially when investigative reporting exposes sensitive intelligence or military strategies (Idowu, 2020). Conversely, media practitioners sometimes view information restrictions by government agencies as deliberate attempts to suppress press freedom or conceal misconduct, leading to strained relations. This mistrust has resulted in delayed or incomplete crisis communication, leaving room for speculation, rumor, and public panic (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2018; Uduak, 2021).

Compounding the problem is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly via social media platforms. In the Nigerian context, false information about security incidents can circulate widely within minutes, fueling fear, distorting public perception, and, in some cases, inciting violence (Oloruntoba, 2022). Extremist groups exploit this “information disorder” to undermine trust in state institutions, while the absence of robust fact checking mechanisms in many media organizations inadvertently amplifies harmful narratives

(Chiluwa, 2019; Salisu, 2020). The gap in standardized training for journalists covering security issues, along with economic and political influences on media houses, further complicates their role. Without structured collaboration between the media and security agencies, Nigeria risks underutilizing the press as a partner in safeguarding national security, while remaining vulnerable to destabilizing forces that manipulate information.

Objectives

(a) To examine how Nigerian media have framed national security issues through existing literature and documented media reports. (b) To assess the extent to which media reportage has influenced national security discourse and policy responses in Nigeria using secondary sources.

Literature Review

Media and Public Awareness on National Security

The media's power to influence public awareness on matters of national importance is well documented. McQuail (2010) highlights the unique ability of mass communication channels to bring distant threats closer to the public consciousness, thereby shaping perceptions of urgency and vulnerability. In Nigeria, television, radio, newspapers, and increasingly online platforms have served as primary sources through which citizens learn about ongoing security crises. For example, extensive coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency and mass kidnappings in the northeast not only kept the public informed but also amplified demands for state intervention. Ojebode and Akinfeleye (2018) argue that Nigerian media outlets have played a significant role in setting the tone of national conversations about terrorism and insecurity by framing issues either as political failures, humanitarian crises, or military challenges. Such framing not only influences how audiences interpret events but also pressures government actors to prioritize particular responses. Similarly, Ibrahim (2020) observes that media coverage of farmer herder conflicts heightened inter communal anxieties but also catalyzed dialogue and policy debates around land use and grazing routes. This dual capacity to alarm and to mobilize suggests that media coverage is more than just informative it actively constructs the meaning of national security for the Nigerian public.

With the rise of digital platforms, social media has further expanded the media's role in raising awareness. As Chiluwa and Ifukor (2019) note, Twitter and Facebook campaigns amplified calls for the release of kidnapped schoolchildren and pressured government agencies to respond swiftly. While traditional media retains authority, citizen journalism and online activism have widened the scope of public engagement with national security issues, making awareness both instantaneous and participatory.

Media as a Support Tool for Security Agencies

Beyond informing the public, the media also functions as an indirect partner to security agencies. Scholars such as Oso and Pate (2019) stress that effective communication strategies can enhance counter terrorism efforts by winning public trust and encouraging intelligence sharing between communities and security forces. In Nigeria, the dissemination of security advisories through radio and television has proven vital, particularly in rural communities where state presence is weak. For example, during heightened Boko Haram activities, radio broadcasts served as warning systems for vulnerable villages, alerting them to avoid certain areas. Empirical evidence further supports this relationship. Ekhareafu (2017) found that security agencies often rely on media outlets to correct misinformation, disseminate official positions, and promote civic cooperation. Media campaigns have also been instrumental in demystifying security operations and improving public perception of the armed forces. For instance, nationwide campaigns against kidnapping and cybercrime in 2019 demonstrated how coordinated messaging between the Nigerian Police Force and the press contributed to greater citizen vigilance.

However, the relationship is not always smooth. While media can support security agencies, it can also expose their failures. Okoro and Agbo (2019) caution that when media reports highlight corruption, human rights abuses, or operational lapses, they may undermine trust in security institutions. This tension illustrates the delicate balance between the media's role as a watchdog and as a partner in safeguarding society.

Challenges in Media Reporting of Security Issues

Despite its importance, the Nigerian media faces substantial challenges in covering security issues. A recurring problem is censorship and intimidation. Journalists often operate under threat from both state and non-state actors. As Freedom House (2022) reports, Nigeria ranks low on press freedom indices, with several documented cases of harassment, arrest, or violence against reporters investigating military operations or insurgent activities. Such constraints not only endanger journalists but also weaken the depth and credibility of reporting. Another challenge is sensationalism, which sometimes characterizes coverage of crises. Adesoji (2017) warns that exaggerated reporting of Boko Haram attacks may unintentionally serve the propaganda aims of insurgents by spreading fear. In contrast, under-reporting or state enforced media blackouts risk creating information

vacuums that breed rumors and erode public trust. Thus, journalists must navigate a narrow path between informing citizens and avoiding content that exacerbates panic or undermines operational security.

Resource limitations further constrain Nigerian media institutions. Many outlets lack the financial or technical capacity to conduct in depth investigative reporting, particularly in conflict zones where logistics and safety costs are high. Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2019) highlight that reliance on official press releases often substitutes for field reporting, raising questions about independence and accuracy. Moreover, the growing dominance of social media has complicated professional journalism, as unverified reports spread faster than editorially vetted content, challenging the credibility of mainstream outlets.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda Setting Theory was originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their landmark study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election. The theory posits that the media may not dictate what people think, but it profoundly influences what they think about by assigning salience to particular issues. Applied to the Nigerian context, this theory explains how persistent coverage of Boko Haram, banditry, or cybercrime has elevated these issues onto the public and policy agenda. For example, Ojebode and Akinfeleye (2018) show that consistent reportage of the Chibok girls' abduction shaped both public outrage and international diplomatic interventions. Similarly, Ibrahim (2020) illustrates how farmer herder conflict was prioritized as a national crisis partly due to sustained media visibility. Agenda setting thus underscores the media's ability to define the contours of Nigeria's national security discourse and indirectly influence policy formulation.

Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory, articulated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) and expanded by later scholars such as McQuail (2010) and Christians et al. (2020), emphasizes that media freedom must be balanced with accountability to the public interest. In security reporting, this theory highlights the ethical obligations of journalists to avoid sensationalism, protect sensitive intelligence, and ensure accuracy in times of crisis. Nigerian media practices frequently illustrate the tension outlined by this theory: while investigative reporting uncovers corruption and failures in security institutions, responsible editorial decisions must weigh whether certain details such as troop movements or hostage negotiation strategies should be made public. Social Responsibility Theory thus provides a framework for understanding the professional and ethical dilemmas that Nigerian journalists face when reporting on national security.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources to examine the role of the media in enhancing national security in Nigeria. The choice of this approach is premised on the study's focus on analyzing documented evidence rather than collecting primary data. Secondary data provides rich insights into how Nigerian media have framed national security issues and the extent to which reportage has shaped public discourse and influenced policy responses.

The data for this study were drawn from published journal articles, books, policy documents, media reports, and government publications that address media and security related matters in Nigeria. Reputable international databases such as JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, and Google Scholar were consulted, alongside credible Nigerian newspapers and security focused reports. These sources provided a comprehensive foundation for evaluating how different media platforms have reported on issues of terrorism, insurgency, farmer herder conflicts, and other security challenges.

A systematic review analysis method was employed to organize and interpret the materials. The data were categorized along the study's objectives: first, examining how Nigerian media have framed national security issues, and second, assessing the influence of media reportage on national security discourse and policy. The themes were then analyzed to identify recurring patterns, trends, and contradictions. This approach allows for a critical synthesis of existing knowledge while highlighting the media's contributions, limitations, and challenges in reporting on security issues. The choice of secondary data also ensures that the study avoids the ethical and practical difficulties of interviewing journalists or security officials on sensitive matters of national security. Instead, it makes use of already published materials to draw evidence based conclusions. The findings are therefore grounded in existing scholarly and media discourse, providing a reliable basis for understanding the role of the Nigerian media in enhancing national security.

Discussion of Findings

Examine how Nigerian Media have framed National Security issues through existing literature and documented media reports.

S/N	Source (Author, Year, Title)	Methodology	Type of Publication	Theory	Findings from Current Study
1	Ette, M. (2018). Rival visions of reality: An analysis of the framing of Boko Haram in Nigerian newspapers and Twitter." <i>Media, War & Conflict</i> .	Qualitative framing analysis	Journal article	Agenda/Setting Theory	The study found that Nigerian media predominantly framed security issues (terrorism, insurgency) through conflict and responsibility frames, focusing heavily on violence, government response, and casualties. This reliance heightened public anxiety but limited alternative perspectives.
2	Odiegwu-Enwerem, I., Isika, B., & Ogu, C. (2020). Sourcing dynamics in security reporting: A content analysis of Nigerian newspapers	Media Watch Content analysis	Journal article	Framing Theory/Source Theory	Findings revealed that Nigerian media often relied on elite/government sources when reporting security issues, which narrowed the diversity of viewpoints and reinforced official narratives rather than grassroots perspectives.
3	Chiluwa, I., & Ifukor, P. (2015). War against Our Children': Stance and evaluation in #BringBackOurGirls campaign discourse on Twitter and Facebook." <i>Discourse & Society</i> 26(3):267–296.	Critical discourse analysis of social media campaign	Journal article	Digital media framing/Agenda Setting	Findings showed that while mainstream media were limited to traditional frames, social media activism (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls) reframed national security as a humanitarian crisis, influencing global attention and pressuring government action.

To assess the extent to which media reportage has influenced national security discourse and policy responses in Nigeria using secondary sources.

S/N	Source (Author, Year, Title)	Methodology	Type of Publication	Theory	Methodology Type of Publication Theory Findings from Current Study
1	Ojebode, A., & Akinwalere, R. (2019). Media's role in crisis awareness and policy response: A comparative analysis. <i>Journal of Nigerian Communication Studies</i>	Comparative secondary analysis	Journal article	Agenda Setting Theory	The study found that media coverage was central in shaping public awareness of crises and often pressured policymakers into reactive responses. Findings from this research confirm that Nigerian media play a strong agenda setting role in security discourse but often lack consistency in sustaining policy engagement.
2	Obot, I., & Essien, E. (2021). "Farmer herder conflicts and media framing: The role of discourse in public policy debates." <i>African Security Review</i>	Qualitative discourse analysis	Journal article	Framin/Agenda Setting Theory	The study revealed that media framing of farmer herder conflicts strongly influenced public debates and political discussions, often amplifying ethnic and regional dimensions. This aligns with the current study, which shows that reportage significantly shaped policy responses but sometimes deepened polarization.
3	Uwalaka, A., & Watkins, G. (2018). "Social media, misinformation, and security threats: Digital challenges in Nigeria." <i>Cybersecurity and Media Journal</i>	Review of digital media incidents	Journal article	Social Responsibility Theory	Their findings showed that digital media amplified misinformation and insecurity fears, making policy response more reactive than strategic. Similarly, findings from this study confirm that unchecked digital narratives often forced the government into restrictive policies instead of preventive strategies.
4	Oladipo, T. (2022). "State restrictions, regulatory pressure, and media freedom in Nigeria's Twitter ban." <i>Journal of Digital Rights and Security</i>	Policy analysis	Journal article	Social Responsibility Theory/Press Freedom	Findings revealed that government clampdowns on media platforms (e.g., Twitter ban) reflected an attempt to control national security narratives. The present study confirms that such restrictions undermine media's watchdog role and create gaps in citizen

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of the Nigerian media in enhancing national security through existing literature and secondary reports. The findings reveal that the media significantly influence public awareness and policy discourse on insecurity by shaping the framing and prioritization of issues, as explained by Agenda Setting Theory. At the same time, Social Responsibility Theory highlights the ethical responsibility of the press in balancing transparency with national interest.

While the media have been effective in drawing attention to security challenges, they also face limitations such as political pressure, restricted access to information, and risks of sensationalism. Overall, the study concludes that the Nigerian media remain a vital actor in the country's security landscape, but their impact depends on responsible reporting and constructive collaboration with security agencies.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

1. Promote Responsible Security Reporting: Media outlets in Nigeria should prioritize accuracy and context in reporting security issues to prevent public panic and misinformation.
2. Strengthen Media Security Agency Relations: Channels of cooperation should be established between journalists and security agencies to enhance timely and credible dissemination of security-related information.
3. Regular Training for Journalists: Capacity-building programs on conflict-sensitive and investigative reporting should be institutionalized to improve professionalism in national security coverage.
4. Encourage Policy Support for Press Freedom and Responsibility: Government and regulatory bodies should strike a balance between press freedom and the need for responsible reporting to safeguard both democracy and national security.
5. Harness Digital Media for National Security Awareness: Media practitioners should maximize social and digital platforms for public education campaigns on national security, while applying fact-checking measures to counter disinformation.

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