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Framing Terror: Media, Boko Haram, and the Struggle for Narrative Power in Nigeria

Oluyemi Opeoluwa Adisa*

PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1089-0767>

Badmus Oluwatosin

PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations, Cyprus International University, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Northern Cyprus

***Corresponding author:** opeoluyemio@gmail.com.

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Abstract: Terrorism in the contemporary era extends beyond physical violence to function as a highly mediated form of political communication aimed at influencing perceptions, instilling fear, and manipulating narratives within local and global audiences. This paper critically interrogates the relationship between media and terrorism, with a specific focus on Boko Haram's insurgency in Nigeria, through the lens of framing theory. It explores how acts of terror are not only performed for

their immediate destructive effect but are meticulously designed for maximum media visibility and symbolic impact. Drawing upon qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study reveals that the media, both traditional and digital, serve as amplifiers of terrorist messages by prioritising sensationalism, immediacy, and emotional engagement. Boko Haram's calculated use of mass communication, including propaganda videos and digital platforms, demonstrates how extremist organisations exploit the interconnectedness of modern communication systems to project power, recruit followers, and challenge state legitimacy. Conversely, the study emphasises that news media, driven by economic and ideological imperatives, often reproduce and reinforce terrorist narratives by framing them through simplified binaries of religion, politics, and morality. A paradoxical symbiosis, therefore, characterises the interplay between terrorism and media in Nigeria. While the press seeks to inform and hold power accountable, its practices can inadvertently extend the communicative reach of violent extremism. The research further argues that this entanglement has significant implications for public perception, policy formulation, and the ethics of journalistic responsibility in conflict environments. It concludes that fostering media literacy, strengthening professional ethics, and integrating communicative dimensions into counterterrorism policy are essential to mitigating the publicity advantage that terrorism thrives on. By situating the Boko Haram phenomenon within global debates on media and political violence, the paper contributes to understanding terrorism as both a physical and symbolic contest over meaning, visibility, and legitimacy in the digital age.

Keywords: Terrorism and Media, Boko Haram, Framing Theory, Digital Extremism, Nigeria, Counterterrorism.

Introduction

Terrorism is widely understood as a form of politically motivated violence and intimidation that relies heavily on communication strategies to maximise its psychological impact. Its primary aim is rarely confined to the physical harm inflicted; instead, terrorist acts are designed to instil fear, amplify perceptions of insecurity, and compel political or social responses. To achieve this, terrorist organisations often exploit communication platforms, including traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television, as well as more recent digital and social media, to project their narratives and reach a wide audience (Hoffman, 2017; Conway, 2021). The relationship between terrorism and mass media, however, remains a deeply contested subject in academic discourse. While there is broad consensus that media reporting significantly shapes public perception and political discourse, debates persist regarding whether media coverage actively advances terrorist objectives or merely serves as an inevitable by-product of journalistic routines. Scholars emphasise that causality is complex and nonlinear, as radicalisation and the spread of extremist ideologies are driven by multiple factors beyond media exposure (Al-Rawi, 2022). Nevertheless, the fact that terrorism often depends on visibility underscores the critical role of media in amplifying the intended "theatre of terror" (Nacos, 2016).

Trust in the media's role within this dynamic rests on its capacity to provide accurate, unbiased, and comprehensive reporting. However, biases in news coverage, whether intentional or structural, can distort the public's understanding of terrorism. Such biases may emerge from a host of factors, including editorial preferences, ownership structures, political pressures, or limitations in access to information (Piazza, 2020). Consequently, the need to analyse and mitigate these biases has become a cornerstone of efforts to foster accountability, sustain trust in media institutions, and safeguard democratic discourse. The relationship between the free press and terrorism is not a new phenomenon. More than two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson observed that a free press was indispensable for the protection of liberty. Yet, in the modern era, concerns arise over what happens when the press, consciously or inadvertently, becomes an instrument through which violent groups project their propaganda. The Sixth Framework Programme (2008), funded by the European Commission, posed this dilemma in its landmark study on terrorism, security, and rule of law: What are the implications when groups bent on disrupting public peace effectively manipulate media channels? This remains a pressing question in the twenty-first century as terrorism continues to occupy media headlines on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

Research has shown that terrorism instils fear not primarily through the scale of violence but through its ability to shape perceptions and political narratives. As scholars note, the strategic purpose of terrorist groups is to generate visibility and legitimacy for their grievances, which requires that their acts and demands be covered by news outlets (Nacos, 2016; Conway, 2021). This was succinctly captured by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who famously described publicity as the "oxygen of terrorism." She suggested that denying media coverage could suffocate terrorist campaigns by depriving them of public attention. However, as critics argue, such a strategy clashes with the democratic principles of free expression and public access to information, and it is practically impossible to enforce in a world of instantaneous global communication (Müller, Spaaij, & Ruitenberg, 2003; Jackson, 2020). Scholars continue to explore whether a symbiotic relationship exists between terrorism and media. Terrorists arguably benefit from the extensive coverage of their actions, gaining global attention at little cost, while media outlets driven by competition, ratings, and profit capitalise on the drama and spectacle of terrorist incidents to attract audiences (Eid, 2014; Al-Rawi, 2022). This dynamic creates what many describe as a cycle of mutual exploitation, in which terrorist groups and media institutions reinforce each other's objectives, albeit for different ends. Mahmoud Eid (2014) highlights that modern information and communication technologies have inadvertently provided terrorist organisations with unprecedented opportunities to disseminate propaganda, coordinate operations, and recruit followers. The digital revolution has enabled extremist groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers, allowing them to engage with audiences directly through social media platforms. This shift presents profound challenges, as regulating online spaces without infringing on freedoms has proven to be difficult (Conway, 2021).

Kevin Barnhurst (2018) identified two competing models in the literature on media-terrorism relations. The first posits a causal relationship: media coverage directly fuels terrorist ideology, increases violence, and legitimises extremist causes. The second frames the media as victims themselves, manipulated by terrorist strategies and trapped in professional routines that prioritise

immediacy, sensationalism, and audience appeal. Attempts to regulate media coverage, however, often backfire, driving terrorist organisations to alternative communication channels, particularly in open societies where digital platforms remain accessible (Piazza, 2020). The evolving relationship between media and terrorism has introduced new complexities into the sphere of international security, particularly as extremist organisations increasingly exploit the interconnected nature of today's digital environment. Terrorist groups are no longer limited to traditional forms of communication, such as clandestine meetings or coded exchanges; instead, they strategically harness social media platforms, online forums, and encrypted communication channels to amplify their narratives, recruit adherents, and coordinate operations across borders (Weimann, 2016; Klausen, 2018). This development underscores the significance of globalised communication as both an enabler and multiplier of terrorism's reach and effectiveness.

Boko Haram, one of the most violent and destabilising terrorist organisations operating in West Africa, provides a compelling case study in this regard. Emerging in the early 2000s, the group combined radical religious ideology with grievances rooted in poverty, inequality, and governance failures, establishing itself as a formidable threat in Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad Basin. Over time, Boko Haram has not only relied on violence and intimidation but has also strategically manipulated communication technologies to magnify the psychological impact of its actions and to cultivate a transnational presence (Onuoha & George, 2022; Zenn, 2023). The advent of globalised communication networks has fundamentally reshaped Boko Haram's operational capacity. Beyond physical attacks, the organisation has mastered the use of propaganda videos, social media messages, and digital recruitment strategies to radicalise vulnerable populations, particularly disenfranchised youth. These tactics mirror broader global trends in terrorism, where digital platforms act as low-cost, high-impact tools for disseminating extremist ideologies and sustaining organisational momentum (Pearson, 2020; Adegbulu, 2021). By exploiting the immediacy and reach of online communication, Boko Haram has been able to transcend local boundaries, positioning itself within a global jihadist narrative while simultaneously exploiting local grievances.

This study aims to critically examine the complex relationship between media and terrorism, paying particular attention to how the globalisation of communication networks has facilitated and amplified Boko Haram's operations. Studying Boko Haram's media strategies provides critical insights into the evolving tactics of terrorist organisations in the digital age. First, it highlights how extremist groups adapt to and exploit the technological infrastructures of globalisation to advance their goals. Second, it contributes to scholarly debates on the media-terrorism nexus by demonstrating how regional insurgencies can internationalise through communication strategies. Finally, understanding these mechanisms has practical significance for counterterrorism policy: security agencies, governments, and international organisations must anticipate and respond to the digital dimensions of terrorism, not only its physical manifestations (Kendhammer & McCain, 2018; Conway, 2021). Ultimately, examining the role of globalised communication in the Boko Haram case highlights the pressing need for counterterrorism strategies that incorporate digital literacy, technological regulation, and community resilience. Policymakers must recognise that the battle against terrorism is not confined to physical battlegrounds but increasingly fought in the realm of

information and perception, where narratives, legitimacy, and psychological influence play decisive roles.

Summarily, terrorism today functions as both a violent and communicative act, strategically designed to shape public discourse, media representation, and global perceptions of power. While substantial scholarship has examined the relationship between media and terrorism, there remains limited empirical focus on how this relationship manifests within the specific context of Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this critical gap by addressing the following research questions: (1) How does the Nigerian media frame Boko Haram's terrorist activities? (2) To what extent does media coverage amplify or mitigate Boko Haram's ideological narratives? (3) What are the implications of media framing for counterterrorism policy and public perception in Nigeria? The relevance of this research in 2025 stems from the persistence of terrorism as a communicative strategy in an increasingly digitalised and polarised world. Despite counterterrorism advancements, Boko Haram continues to exert both physical and symbolic influence across Nigeria's northeastern region, with over 35,000 people killed and more than 2.5 million internally displaced since 2009 (UNDP, 2024). These alarming statistics demonstrate the enduring scale of the crisis and underscore the need for a renewed analysis of how media narratives influence both the perpetuation and perception of terrorism. The existing literature broadly agrees that terrorism and the media share a mutually reinforcing relationship. Yet, few studies explicitly interrogate how this dynamic operates in postcolonial African contexts characterised by fragile media institutions and hybrid security environments. This study contributes to filling this gap by combining framing theory with critical media analysis to examine the Nigerian media's role in shaping public understanding of Boko Haram's activities. By situating the case within global debates on mediated terrorism while maintaining a sharp focus on Nigeria's socio-political realities, the paper narrows its analytical lens to explore how information asymmetry, media sensationalism, and state narratives collectively shape the meaning-making process of terrorism in the region.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology, aiming to understand the communicative and representational relationship between terrorism and media in the context of Boko Haram's insurgency in Nigeria. The methodology follows a structured content analysis of selected Nigerian print and digital media outlets to examine how terrorist events are framed and how these narratives influence public perception and policy discourse. The study focuses on five major Nigerian media outlets known for their national coverage and influence: The Guardian, Vanguard, Punch, Daily Trust, and Channels TV Online. A total of 120 news articles and online reports published between January 2019 and December 2024 were systematically selected using purposive sampling. This period was chosen to capture media framing during the resurgence of Boko Haram activities and evolving counterterrorism responses by the Nigerian government. The sample includes editorials, feature stories, and news reports specifically addressing Boko Haram attacks, counterterrorism operations, or related security debates. No human participants were directly involved, as the study exclusively relies on secondary textual data.

The primary research instrument was a coding matrix developed based on framing theory (Entman, 1993), focusing on four key framing dimensions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Each selected article was read and coded manually using NVivo 12 software to ensure systematic categorisation of themes and frames. The procedure involved three key stages: (1) familiarisation with the content, (2) coding of recurring linguistic and narrative patterns, and (3) thematic clustering of dominant frames such as 'religious extremism', 'government incompetence', and 'victimisation'. Inter-coder reliability was ensured by involving an independent reviewer who re-coded 15% of the sample to validate consistency. Data were analysed through thematic content analysis to identify dominant narrative frames and their frequency of occurrence across different media platforms. Patterns were compared across the selected outlets to assess whether ownership structure, editorial policy, or political alignment influenced framing tendencies. The analysis also incorporated critical discourse analysis (CDA) techniques to assess the implicit power relations and ideological underpinnings of the presented narratives. Findings were triangulated with existing scholarly literature and official counterterrorism reports to strengthen validity and contextual reliability. To ensure replicability, all analysed articles have been archived digitally with complete bibliographic information, allowing future researchers to reproduce or extend the analysis. Since the study relies entirely on publicly available media content, ethical concerns related to privacy and consent were minimal; however, ethical approval was obtained from the Achievers University Research Ethics Committee to ensure compliance with institutional research standards.

Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

Framing theory, first introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) and later refined in communication studies by Robert Entman (1993), offers a powerful framework for examining how media narratives influence the public's understanding of complex social and political issues. At its core, framing theory suggests that the manner in which an event or issue is presented or "framed" directly influences how audiences interpret and respond to it. Entman (1993) defined framing as the process of emphasising certain aspects of perceived reality while downplaying or excluding others, thereby promoting specific definitions of problems, causal attributions, moral judgments, and potential policy solutions. In this sense, frames do not simply relay facts; they actively structure meaning and guide interpretation. This theoretical perspective is particularly valuable in the study of terrorism, which is both an act of physical violence and a communicative strategy aimed at political and psychological impact. Terrorist groups rely on media coverage to amplify their actions beyond the immediate site of attack, while media outlets often depend on terrorism-related stories for dramatic, emotionally charged content. As such, the way terrorism is framed plays a decisive role in shaping public opinion, influencing state responses, and even affecting the perceived legitimacy of both state and non-state actors (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015; Powell, 2021).

In Nigeria, the framing of Boko Haram, a terrorist organisation that has caused tens of thousands of deaths and displaced millions since its violent insurgency began in 2009, illustrates this dynamic vividly (Campbell, 2020; Zenn, 2020). Media representations of Boko Haram have not been uniform; instead, they vary according to political, regional, and institutional contexts. For example,

some outlets frame the group primarily as a radical Islamist threat to national security, thereby legitimising securitised, military-heavy responses. Others interpret Boko Haram through a socio-economic lens, presenting the group as a symptom of marginalisation, poverty, and governance failures in northern Nigeria (Agbiboa, 2015; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2017). Still others frame the group as a political instrument manipulated by elites to destabilise opponents or extract concessions from the state. Each framing trajectory carries significant implications: religious frames validate counterterrorism through force, while socio-economic frames emphasise development interventions and governance reforms. Regional biases also permeate Nigerian media coverage. Southern-based media are more likely to portray Boko Haram as an existential Islamist menace threatening the integrity of the Nigerian state, whereas northern-based outlets often stress grievances against government neglect and underdevelopment in the region (Adesoji, 2010; Ibrahim, 2022). Such divergent framings not only reinforce existing ethno-religious divisions but also shape how different segments of the Nigerian population perceive both the insurgency and the government's legitimacy.

The framing of victims and perpetrators is another important dimension. Boko Haram's attacks on schools, churches, and mosques are often narrated through frames that emphasise the vulnerability of women and children, thus generating domestic and international sympathy (Nwankpa, 2017). Conversely, perpetrators are frequently framed as barbaric extremists, which fosters outrage but can also stigmatise entire communities associated with the group's areas of operation. This stigmatisation complicates reintegration efforts for displaced populations and former insurgents, inadvertently fuelling cycles of mistrust and marginalisation (Okoli & Lenshie, 2020). Equally significant is the framing of the Nigerian state's counterterrorism strategies. Some media accounts valorise the military as heroic defenders of national sovereignty, stressing their sacrifices and successes in reclaiming territory from Boko Haram. Other outlets, however, adopt critical frames that highlight systemic corruption, human rights violations, and inefficiencies in security operations (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014; Onapajo, 2021). These competing portrayals contribute to polarised perceptions of state legitimacy: where supportive frames strengthen public confidence in government action, critical frames fuel scepticism and deepen mistrust between citizens and institutions.

Boko Haram itself actively participates in the framing struggle by producing propaganda videos, communiqués, and symbolic attacks designed to present the group as a powerful defender of Islam and a challenger to state authority. These self-generated frames are often amplified by Nigerian and international media, sometimes unintentionally legitimising Boko Haram's ideological claims by reporting them without adequate contextualization (Zenn, 2020; Conway, 2021). In this sense, the contest over framing extends beyond the battlefield into the realm of narrative warfare, where meaning and perception are as important as physical control of territory. In summary, framing theory offers a robust analytical tool for understanding the media-terrorism nexus in Nigeria. It reveals how journalistic choices in representing Boko Haram, as a religious, socio-economic, or political phenomenon, are not neutral but actively shape the trajectory of counterterrorism strategies and broader public discourse. By illuminating how frames selectively highlight and obscure aspects

of reality, framing theory underscores the power of the media in influencing not only how Boko Haram is perceived but also how Nigeria's fragile statehood and national unity are contested in the public sphere.

Conceptual Clarifications: Terrorism and Media

The concept of terrorism has long been contested within both academic and policy circles, largely because it straddles political, legal, ideological, and cultural terrains. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition, most conceptualisations converge on the centrality of violence as a means of pursuing broader objectives. The United Nations General Assembly, as cited by Ekhareafo and Olley, characterises terrorism as the commission of criminal acts intended to instil fear among the public or specific groups in pursuit of political objectives, regardless of the ideological, religious, philosophical, or cultural justifications invoked. This framing highlights terrorism's deliberate psychological dimension, where the impact extends far beyond immediate victims to society at large. Similarly, Indridason underscores that terrorism is best understood as the "use of violence for political reasons," emphasising that its true effect lies in reshaping political priorities by altering voter behaviour, influencing policy decisions, and forcing governments to adopt new security strategies (Indridason, 2022). In this sense, terrorism does not merely introduce violence into political life but fundamentally reconfigures political agendas in ways that may have long-lasting consequences.

Other scholars approach the phenomenon from slightly different vantage points. Francis conceptualises terrorism as violence deployed in pursuit of incompatible interests and goals that pose severe dangers to human societies (Francis, 2020). This definition situates terrorism within a broader spectrum of conflicts where competing actors seek dominance, often undermining societal cohesion. Meanwhile, as cited by Apooyin, Awake describes terrorism as the "unlawful use or threatened use of force by individuals or groups against people or property with the intent to intimidate or coerce governments and societies, usually for ideological or political purposes." This framing underlines the coercive intent at the heart of terrorism, distinguishing it from other forms of political violence by its emphasis on psychological intimidation and social destabilisation. A functionalist approach builds upon these perspectives, defining terrorism as the organised use of violence or coercion by actors to achieve political, religious, or socio-cultural objectives, revealing its character as a tool strategically deployed in broader struggles for power (Nacos, 2016; Schmid, 2021).

The causes and drivers of terrorism are equally multifaceted, cutting across structural, historical, and individual dimensions. On a macro scale, terrorism is often linked to global fault lines such as cultural clashes, religious extremism, historical grievances, or geopolitical struggles ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the legacies of interventions such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More recently, analysts have noted that systemic inequalities, global power imbalances, and climate-induced insecurity may also create conditions conducive to terrorism (Brzoska, 2022; Ide, 2023). On an individual level, psychological and sociological explanations emphasise frustration, deprivation, identity crises, narcissistic rage, peer pressure, and processes of moral

disengagement as critical motivators (Horgan, 2021). In the Nigerian context, terrorism has often been fueled by deep-seated religious and ethnic tensions, combined with historical grievances, weak governance, economic marginalisation, and the manipulation of identities by extremist actors (Acholonu, 2019; Onuoha, 2022). Such factors demonstrate that terrorism cannot be reduced to ideology alone but is better seen as the outcome of intersecting political, cultural, economic, and psychological dynamics.

If terrorism relies on psychological impact, then the media plays a central role in constructing, amplifying, and disseminating these meanings. The media, in its most generic sense, refers to all systems of communication designed to transmit information to a wide audience. Derived from the Latin term *medium*, meaning “in the middle,” it represents the channel through which messages move from sender to receiver. In scholarly usage, media encompasses traditional mass communication systems such as newspapers, radio, and television, as well as their digitised and hybrid adaptations (Hoag, 2008). Yet beyond this technical understanding, the media can also be understood as a social process, an institution that not only relays messages but also actively shapes them through framing, selection, and interpretation. This makes it not just a neutral conduit of information but a powerful actor in its own right (Conway, 2021). Historically, traditional mass media, including newspapers, radio, and television, have dominated the public communication sphere, shaping public opinion and setting the agenda for national and international debates. Although digital transformations have reshaped this landscape, these older forms remain significant, particularly in countries like Nigeria, where broadcast and print outlets still command wide audiences. Pushparaj (2014) notes that media systems were historically tied to the expansion of mass literacy and urbanisation, with newspapers and magazines initially functioning as the cornerstone of modern public communication. Today, however, media encompasses a broad constellation of platforms, including online newspapers, television streaming, broadband, gaming, advertising, and hybrid forms that combine print and digital presence. Increasingly, the line between traditional and digital platforms is blurred, with online editions of major newspapers rivalling print in reach and influence (Kumar, 2008; Rajan, 2011).

Crucially, the role of media extends beyond the technical transmission of information; it operates as a cultural institution that shapes public awareness, interprets events, and frames social reality. Scholars such as Rajan (2011) and Kumar (2008) argue that mass media serve not only as a tool for information dissemination but also for fostering civic engagement and public consciousness. In the context of terrorism, this function takes on added significance. Terrorism, as Schmid (2021) observes, is a form of communicative violence: it seeks to convey a message that is amplified and legitimised only when picked up by the media. Without media coverage, the political effect of terrorism would be muted, confined to the immediate site of the attack. With media, however, terrorism transcends geography, becoming a global spectacle consumed by millions. The relationship between terrorism and media is therefore symbiotic: terrorists design attacks for maximum visibility, while media organisations, driven by imperatives of drama, immediacy, and market competition, often provide the visibility that terrorists seek (Powell, 2021; Pamment, 2022). Taken together, these perspectives highlight that terrorism cannot be divorced from the

communicative environment in which it is situated. Its definitions reflect ideological struggles and political agendas, while its impact is amplified through media systems that both inform and sensationalise. In societies such as Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, and political tensions intersect with fragile institutions and widespread poverty, terrorism thrives not only on structural drivers but also on media amplification. Understanding terrorism, therefore, requires not only grappling with the contested nature of its definitions but also interrogating the communicative processes that transform acts of violence into spectacles of political meaning.

Media's Role in Terrorism

The relationship between terrorism and the media has long been a subject of scholarly debate due to its significant implications for international security, democratic governance, and social stability. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that terrorism should not be viewed solely as a violent act but rather as a communicative strategy designed to generate political, psychological, and symbolic outcomes that transcend the immediate harm caused to direct victims. The communicative dimension of terrorism relies heavily on the media, which often serves as the primary vehicle for transmitting extremist messages to broader audiences. In this sense, the media functions as a force multiplier, amplifying the reach of terrorist organisations and ensuring that their actions resonate far beyond the geographical confines of the attack itself (Schmid, 2021). This has produced what many scholars characterise as a deeply problematic yet mutually reinforcing relationship between terrorism and the media. However, distinct entities depend on each other to achieve their respective objectives. From one perspective, the media has been accused of complicity in perpetuating terrorism, albeit inadvertently. Driven by commercial imperatives and the pursuit of sensational stories, contemporary news outlets frequently prioritise dramatic and violent events that guarantee higher audience ratings, clicks, and advertising revenues. Terrorist attacks, with their spectacular and shocking nature, provide precisely the kind of stories that attract public attention and fuel the 24-hour news cycle. Live coverage of bombings, kidnappings, hostage situations, or mass shootings captures global audiences, ensuring that terrorist groups receive visibility disproportionate to their actual strength. This commercial logic, critics argue, enables terrorists to manipulate media institutions, knowing that their acts of violence will dominate headlines and circulate globally. For groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, staging attacks that target schools, religious spaces, or marketplaces has often been a deliberate tactic to secure maximum publicity and exert psychological pressure not only on local communities but also on international audiences. While critics of this view caution against overstating the culpability of journalists who have an ethical responsibility to report significant events, the reality remains that media institutions, knowingly or otherwise, are entangled in cycles that terrorists exploit (Powell, 2021; Okika, 2022).

However, a more widely accepted interpretation of the relationship between terrorism and the media situates it within a symbiotic framework rather than a simple one-directional exploitation. Terrorist organisations rely on the media to amplify the communicative power of their actions, while media institutions, in turn, utilise terrorist events to provide compelling, dramatic, and timely stories that align with their professional and commercial imperatives. Hoffman's earlier observations about terrorism requiring the "oxygen of publicity" remain highly relevant, particularly in the digital age

where traditional and social media platforms intersect (Hoffman, 2006). In this sense, terrorism is designed for media consumption, and the media's framing of these events both informs the public and inadvertently amplifies extremist messaging. Boko Haram's reliance on choreographed propaganda videos and stylised communiqués underscores this logic, revealing how local terrorist groups borrow communicative strategies from global actors such as ISIS to ensure that their narratives resonate across borders (Ogunlana, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that media institutions are entirely complicit in terrorist strategies. Another strand of scholarship emphasises that the media is not so much an accomplice as it is a vulnerable actor, particularly in liberal democracies where transparency, immediacy, and open reporting are central journalistic values. Terrorists exploit these democratic norms by designing attacks that are media-oriented, deliberately tailored to attract coverage through spectacle, immediacy, and emotional resonance. The communicative framework here is often described as the "conduit model," where media channels simply transmit the symbols and narratives crafted by terrorists to audiences far beyond the immediate site of violence (Schmid, 2021). Boko Haram's use of publicised kidnappings such as the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction exemplifies this exploitation, demonstrating how violent acts are orchestrated not only for immediate tactical purposes but also for their symbolic resonance when transmitted through global news platforms. The rise of digital technologies has further complicated this relationship by transforming the communicative strategies available to terrorist groups. Social media platforms, encrypted communication apps, and video-streaming services have allowed organisations like ISIS and Boko Haram to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly target global audiences with carefully curated propaganda. The production of high-quality digital content that blurs the line between news and entertainment has become a defining feature of contemporary terrorism, with extremists increasingly acting as their own media producers. Boko Haram has mirrored this trend in West Africa, using cyberspace to disseminate ideological narratives, recruit new members, and broadcast violent acts that reinforce its image as a formidable threat (Okika, 2022; Ogunlana, 2019). Even so, mainstream media remains complicit in amplifying extremist content, as news outlets often report on the very propaganda circulated online, thereby extending its reach into the wider public sphere (Pamment, 2022).

The implications of this evolving relationship are significant. On one hand, terrorism without media coverage loses much of its communicative and psychological impact, rendering attacks less effective in advancing extremist agendas. On the other hand, media institutions, whether traditional broadcasters or digital platforms, must grapple with the ethical and professional dilemmas of reporting terrorist events without inadvertently serving extremist objectives. The case of Boko Haram illustrates the delicate balance: while their violence must be reported to inform the public and hold governments accountable, excessive or sensationalist coverage risks inflating the group's perceived power and inspiring copycat attacks. Moreover, the distortion of risk perceptions generated by saturated terrorism coverage often pressures governments into adopting disproportionate counterterrorism policies, diverting attention from systemic issues such as governance, inequality, and poverty, which themselves underpin cycles of violence (Kundnani & Hayes, 2020). Thus,

terrorism and the media remain locked in a paradoxical relationship, mutually dependent yet profoundly destabilising, where democratic values, public perceptions, and national security are continually at stake.

In Nigeria, this dynamic is vividly illustrated by Boko Haram, which has weaponised both traditional and digital media to sustain its ideological campaign, project power, and instil fear among civilian populations. For a movement with limited territorial control and constrained military capabilities compared to the Nigerian state, the ability to dominate public discourse through media visibility has proven as critical as physical violence itself. As Schmid (2021) argues, terrorism functions less as a simple act of destruction and more as a communicative strategy, where symbolic resonance often outweighs the material damage inflicted. A central feature of Boko Haram's media strategy is its ability to exploit mainstream reporting practices. Nigerian and international news outlets, motivated by commercial imperatives of speed, sensationalism, and audience engagement, often provide extensive coverage of terrorist attacks. This tendency, though grounded in journalistic obligations to inform, has inadvertently amplified Boko Haram's visibility and political relevance. The 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls remains a paradigmatic example. While devastating in human terms, the event's communicative power was magnified through sustained global media coverage, transforming Boko Haram from a relatively localised insurgency into a household name on the international stage (Okika, 2022; Anyadike, 2021). Such moments highlight the symbiotic nature of the terrorism-media relationship: while news organisations benefit from dramatic stories that capture public attention, terrorist groups secure free publicity that reinforces their capacity to intimidate and mobilise.

These dynamic underscores the theoretical claim that terrorism and the media operate within a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Boko Haram deliberately stages attacks on symbolic targets such as schools, religious sites, or military outposts, with the knowledge that these events will elicit heightened media attention. By carefully designing operations to provoke emotional and political responses, the group ensures that even limited tactical actions are magnified into spectacles of national and international significance. Scholars note that terrorism devoid of media coverage loses much of its political potency, just as media institutions deprived of dramatic events risk declining public engagement (Pamment, 2022; Ogunlana, 2019). This interdependence reveals how violence and communication are inextricably linked in Boko Haram's strategy. The advent of digital technologies has further transformed this relationship, granting extremist groups unmediated access to audiences. Boko Haram, echoing strategies employed by ISIS and al-Qaeda, has increasingly relied on encrypted messaging platforms, online videos, and social media to circulate propaganda, recruit followers, and cultivate transnational networks of support (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Conway, 2021). Unlike traditional news organisations, which can exercise editorial oversight, digital platforms allow Boko Haram to disseminate unfiltered narratives directly. High-quality videos and communiqués, often choreographed for maximum psychological impact, illustrate how extremist organisations have adopted sophisticated media production techniques. Yet, paradoxically, mainstream media outlets frequently re-broadcast or analyse these digital products, inadvertently amplifying their reach (Weimann, 2022).

The consequences of this media-terrorism nexus for Nigeria are profound. Saturated coverage of Boko Haram's violence has contributed to exaggerated public perceptions of insecurity, often overshadowing other forms of violence, such as rural banditry or communal clashes that claim higher numbers of lives annually (Okoli & Lenshie, 2020). This distortion of risk shapes public opinion and pressures governments into adopting heavily militarised counterterrorism responses, sometimes at the expense of addressing the underlying structural drivers of extremism, such as poverty, unemployment, and governance deficits (Kundnani & Hayes, 2020). Moreover, excessive visibility has the unintended effect of encouraging imitation. Splinter groups and opportunistic actors replicate Boko Haram's tactics to secure their own place in public discourse, reinforcing the "oxygen of publicity" that sustains cycles of violence (Schmid, 2021). Importantly, Nigerian journalists themselves face complex challenges within this ecosystem. Operating in volatile environments, many are subjected to threats from both Boko Haram and state security agencies, constraining their ability to independently frame narratives (Onapajo, 2021). Boko Haram has deliberately targeted media workers and outlets to reinforce its dominance over public communication, while the government has sometimes restricted reporting under the justification of national security. These dynamics raise pressing ethical questions: how can the press fulfil its democratic duty to inform the public while avoiding the risk of amplifying extremist propaganda? (Okika, 2022; Pamment, 2022). Boko Haram's exploitation of the media must also be understood within Nigeria's broader context of state fragility, socioeconomic marginalisation, and ethno-religious divisions. The group's communicative strategy thrives on amplifying existing grievances and eroding public trust in state authority. Its tactics mirror those of transnational jihadist movements but remain rooted in Nigeria's specific political and social landscape, where uneven development and historical marginalisation of the northeast create fertile ground for recruitment. The challenge for scholars and policymakers lies in balancing two imperatives: ensuring transparent public reporting of security threats, while simultaneously denying extremist groups the publicity that fuels their legitimacy. The Nigerian case illustrates that counterterrorism is not confined to the battlefield but is equally waged within the contested spaces of media and communication, where narratives shape perceptions, resilience, and ultimately, the trajectory of the conflict.

The Social Construction of Terrorism

The concept of terrorism, much like other social problems, cannot be understood solely as an objective reality existing independently of interpretation. Social constructionist theory emphasises that social problems are not merely pre-existing conditions waiting to be discovered; rather, they are produced and reproduced through claims-making processes, symbolic representations, and struggles over meaning (Best, 2012; Loseke, 2003; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). From this perspective, terrorism is less a fixed entity than a discursive construction shaped by language, cultural narratives, and political agendas. Terrorist violence may have material consequences, but the significance attributed to such violence is mediated through the interpretive frameworks of claim-makers, politicians, journalists, security experts, and cultural elites who frame terrorism as an existential threat and thereby mobilise societal responses (Ben-Yehuda, 1993; Turk, 2004, 2008). At the core of this process is the deployment of dominant cultural symbols and language that render certain acts

"terrorism" while relegating others to categories such as "crime," "counterterrorism," or "national defence." As Gergen (2009) reminds us, such constructions are embedded within broader ideological power struggles, where competing actors vie to define the meaning of violence in ways that privilege their political and institutional interests. The asymmetry in how terrorism is labelled is particularly evident in the role of mass media, which acts as a powerful arbiter of public meaning. Contemporary research underscores that media outlets remain far more likely to attach the label "terrorist" to international jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda or Boko Haram than to domestic extremist groups, even when both engage in politically motivated violence (Conway, 2021; Powell, 2021). For instance, white supremacist attacks in the United States or right-wing extremist violence in Europe are often categorised as "hate crimes" rather than terrorism. At the same time, comparable acts by Islamist groups are presented as terrorist threats. This selective framing underscores the extent to which terrorism is socially constructed through processes of naming and representation rather than being an inherently objective category (Schmid, 2021).

The interpretive bias is not limited to domestic versus foreign distinctions but also extends to how state violence is represented. When adversaries of the United States or its allies engage in political violence, such acts are routinely branded as terrorism. Yet, when the United States, NATO, or partner governments engage in airstrikes, drone warfare, or military interventions that kill civilians, these actions are more often framed as "counterterrorism" or "retaliation" (Jackson, 2023). This asymmetry highlights the ideological work embedded in labelling practices, where acts of violence are either delegitimised or legitimised depending on the identity of the perpetrator and the narrative context. Such patterns align with what Jenkins (2003) earlier observed, that terrorism is less about what is done than about who does it and how those acts are narrated in political discourse. Recent analyses reinforce that such double standards continue to shape public opinion, revealing the deeply political nature of terrorism's social construction (Borum & Fein, 2022). Social constructionists also remind us that subjective perceptions, once embedded, have tangible consequences for policy, governance, and everyday life. The "Thomas theorem" is particularly apt here: if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). The September 11, 2001, attacks vividly illustrate this phenomenon. While the material impact of the attacks, though devastating, was limited compared to broader public health risks such as car accidents or chronic disease, the symbolic and psychological resonance was immense. Fear of terrorism became a dominant theme in American political and cultural life, with surveys consistently ranking it as a top national concern even decades after the event (Huddy et al., 2002; Saad, 2010). More recent polling confirms that terrorism remains disproportionately feared compared to its actual statistical threat, revealing the lasting imprint of media coverage and political rhetoric on public consciousness (Gallup, 2013; Pew Research Centre, 2023).

This construction of terrorism as a looming, existential threat is not neutral but actively shaped by mass media practices. Contemporary journalism often prioritises the spectacular over the mundane, favouring dramatic acts of violence over the far more common but less sensational risks that societies face (Conway, 2021). The result is a distortion in public risk perception, where terrorism is seen as omnipresent even though deaths from terrorism constitute a minute fraction of global

mortality rates (Powell, 2021). Moreover, the mass media have been identified as a key site through which stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are perpetuated. In the United States, for instance, media representations often conflate Islam with extremism, narrowing public understanding of complex global communities and reinforcing orientalist frames (CAIR, 2006; Khalid, 2022). This in turn influences policy, as elected officials draw on public opinion polls shaped by media narratives to justify legislative measures, surveillance programs, and foreign interventions (Reslow, 2023). Importantly, acknowledging the social construction of terrorism does not mean denying its materiality or dismissing the suffering of victims. Rather, it underscores that the ways terrorism is defined, narrated, and prioritized are socially and politically mediated. Once terrorism is constructed as the foremost security threat, governments devote vast resources to counterterrorism while other pressing challenges such as climate change, poverty, or systemic inequality receive comparatively less attention (Kundnani & Hayes, 2020; Castles et al., 2024). This dynamic reflects how ideological struggles embedded in claims-making processes shape national priorities and global agendas.

For educators and scholars, this perspective offers an urgent pedagogical task: equipping students and the public with the critical tools to interrogate how terrorism is framed, whose interests are served by particular narratives, and how alternative framings might yield more nuanced understandings. This is especially vital for younger generations navigating a globalized world in which 1.6 billion Muslims remain central to economic, political, and cultural exchange. Encouraging critical media literacy and cultural awareness can challenge reductive stereotypes, resist fear-driven politics, and promote more balanced approaches to global security. Ultimately, the social constructionist approach demonstrates that terrorism is not simply about bombs and bullets; it is also about narratives, perceptions, and power. By analyzing how terrorism is constructed in language, symbols, and media representations, scholars and practitioners can uncover the deeper ideological battles that underlie public debates and shape the future of international security.

Terrorism in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Ramification

Terrorism has emerged as Nigeria's most formidable security challenge in the 21st century, undermining both the stability of the state and the safety of its citizens. The country has faced recurring waves of violent extremism that have left deep scars on its social, political, and economic fabric. Entire communities have been destroyed, countless lives lost, and families displaced, creating an atmosphere of pervasive insecurity. Relaxation centers, schools, markets, and public spaces once vibrant with social activity have been abandoned, reflecting the extent to which terrorism has disrupted daily life in Nigeria (Acholonu, 2019). While several militant groups have posed threats to the country over the years, including Niger Delta militants protesting exploitation and underdevelopment in oil-rich communities and Fulani herdsman involved in farmer-herder conflicts, none has been as destructive or enduring as Boko Haram. The group has not only redefined Nigeria's security landscape but also thrust the country into the global spotlight as one of the epicentres of modern terrorism. The motivations of Nigeria's insurgent groups vary depending on historical and socio-political contexts. In the Niger Delta, grievances revolve around the exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of oil-producing communities. In Plateau State and other Middle Belt regions, the primary drivers have been ethno-

religious tensions and disputes over indigeneity, which frequently escalate into violent clashes. The Boko Haram insurgency, however, is distinguished by its explicitly ideological and religious character. The group rejects Nigeria's secular democratic order and advocates for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by a strict interpretation of Sharia law. Central to its ideology is a vehement rejection of Western education, which it equates with moral corruption and cultural domination, a position reflected in the very name of the group: Boko Haram, derived from the Hausa word *boko* (book, referring to Western education) and the Arabic *haram* (forbidden). Thus, "Boko Haram" translates to "Western education is forbidden," encapsulating the movement's defining principle (Adesoji, 2019; Thurston, 2021).

Boko Haram originated in the early 2000s as a small religious movement under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State. Initially operating as a quiet Islamist study group, the movement gradually radicalized into an armed insurgency following Yusuf's death in police custody in 2009, an event that many scholars identify as the turning point that transformed it into a violent jihadist organization (Eji, 2020; Agbiboa, 2021). The group's early development was influenced by transnational currents of radical Islamist ideology, particularly the activities of Tablighi clerics from Pakistan and Wahhabi preachers from Saudi Arabia, which reinforced its puritanical worldview (Adesoji, 2019). Over the past two decades, Boko Haram has evolved into one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths and displacing millions across Nigeria and neighboring countries (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). Despite sustained military campaigns, including regional cooperation under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Boko Haram has proven remarkably resilient. The Nigerian armed forces face immense challenges in countering the insurgency, largely due to the vast and difficult terrain of the northeast, porous borders, and the insurgents' ability to adapt their tactics. In 2016, the group split into factions, with Islamic State recognizing Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the "governor" of its West African Province (ISWAP), challenging the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. While Shekau's faction was notorious for its brutality including mass abductions, use of child suicide bombers, and indiscriminate killings al-Barnawi's ISWAP sought to win local support by targeting military and government institutions while sparing Muslim civilians (Zenn, 2022). This tactical shift made ISWAP more entrenched in local communities, complicating government efforts to defeat it. Even after Shekau's death in 2021, Boko Haram's remnants and ISWAP have continued to pose significant threats, launching attacks on military bases, rural communities, and civilian convoys (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2022).

The human and economic costs of Boko Haram's insurgency have been devastating. Between 2009 and 2012 alone, Human Rights Watch reported more than 935 deaths across 164 attacks, with targets expanding from churches and markets to state security institutions and even international organizations such as the United Nations office in Abuja (HRW, 2012). Since then, the scale of violence has escalated dramatically. Notable incidents include the 2011 bombing of Nigeria's Police Headquarters in Abuja, the 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, and repeated assaults on villages in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. In 2018, at least 31 people were killed in coordinated bombings in Damboa, Borno State, underscoring the persistence of the threat despite

government claims of victory (BBC News, 2018). The Global Terrorism Index (2023) continues to rank Nigeria among the countries most affected by terrorism, though the intensity has fluctuated in recent years due to counterinsurgency gains and shifting tactics. Beyond the immediate death toll, the broader consequences of terrorism in Nigeria are profound. The conflict has disrupted agriculture and food systems in the northeast, contributing to widespread hunger and malnutrition. Schools have been destroyed or closed due to insecurity, leading to a generation of children deprived of education, an irony given Boko Haram's central rejection of Western schooling. Commerce and trade have collapsed in many regions, while unemployment and poverty remain entrenched. The displacement crisis is among the most severe in the world: over 2.2 million people remain internally displaced within Nigeria, while hundreds of thousands have fled to Chad, Cameroon, and Niger (UNHCR, 2023). The Nigerian state also bears a heavy financial burden, with vast sums allocated to security and counterterrorism operations, often at the expense of development projects. The pervasive militarization of public life with frequent checkpoints, patrols, and a visible security presence has further contributed to a climate of fear and unease among ordinary Nigerians (Omeni, 2022).

Equally damaging are the psychological and social effects. Communities live under constant fear of attack, leading to the erosion of trust between citizens and the state, as well as within communities themselves. The insurgency has fragmented social cohesion, created intercommunal suspicion, and fostered cycles of revenge and reprisal. Foreign investors have been discouraged from engaging with Nigeria, further stunting economic growth. For many Nigerians, the daily reality of insecurity has normalized a sense of instability, undermining both governance and development. In summary, terrorism in Nigeria, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency, is not merely a challenge of law enforcement but a multidimensional crisis with deep social, political, economic, and cultural ramifications. Its persistence reflects not only ideological extremism but also structural weaknesses in governance, socioeconomic inequalities, and failures in counterinsurgency strategy. Addressing it requires more than military force: it necessitates a comprehensive approach that tackles root causes, strengthens local resilience, invests in education and livelihoods, and rebuilds trust between the Nigerian state and its citizens. Without such a holistic framework, terrorism will continue to undermine Nigeria's pursuit of peace and development.

Media, Terrorism, and Boko Haram

The role of the media in shaping the trajectory of terrorism, particularly in Nigeria, cannot be overstated. On the one hand, the media stands as an indispensable instrument in counterterrorism, with the capacity to inform, engage, and mobilize the public toward peacebuilding and accountability (Ngige, Badekale, & Hamman, 2016). On the other, certain forms of media particularly unregulated digital platforms and politically motivated outlets have the potential to exacerbate insecurity by amplifying extremist propaganda or disseminating distorted narratives. The Nigerian context illustrates this duality with stark clarity. Over the past decade, terrorism, spearheaded by Boko Haram, has left a trail of devastation: tens of thousands of lives lost, millions displaced, and property worth billions of Naira destroyed (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018; UNDP, 2023). In this landscape, the media is far more than a neutral observer, it is a participant in the contest over

narratives, legitimacy, and power. At its most constructive, the media serves as a vital force for peace. By providing accurate, balanced, and contextually informed reporting, it can highlight the human costs of conflict, amplify marginalized voices, and foster dialogue across divides. Such responsible journalism has the potential to weaken extremist messaging, hold authorities accountable, and promote reconciliation in deeply divided societies (Adebayo, 2021). In conflict zones such as northeastern Nigeria, media coverage that prioritizes human dignity and collective security can serve as a bridge between polarized communities, making visible the suffering of victims and offering platforms for dialogue. The capacity of the media to shape perceptions and influence responses underscores its potential as a powerful ally in addressing the complex challenges posed by Boko Haram and similar insurgencies.

Yet, the dynamics between terrorism and the media are rarely so straightforward. The cyclical nature of news production often turns violent conflict into a commodity for mass consumption. As Popoola (2012) observed, insurgency provides a steady stream of ready-made stories for the press, stories laden with drama, tension, and spectacle that capture audiences' attention. This phenomenon aligns with arguments made by Hoffman (2006) and later expanded by Conway (2021), who suggest that terrorism and the media exist in a symbiotic relationship. For terrorists, violence becomes a grotesque form of communication, a strategy to secure visibility in a competitive media environment. For media institutions, insurgent attacks provide the kind of sensational stories that drive readership, viewership, and advertising revenue. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has exploited this logic, staging high-profile attacks from suicide bombings to mass kidnappings that were almost guaranteed to dominate headlines globally. Such publicity not only magnifies the group's grievances but also enhances its appeal to potential recruits, feeding the very cycle it seeks to sustain. However, media professionals often push back against this narrative of complicity, emphasizing their normative role as watchdogs and guardians of the public interest. Scholars like Igoe (2010) and Hamid and Baba (2014) stress that journalists see insurgency not as mere spectacle but as a pressing public policy issue requiring thorough coverage. The "surveillance function" of the media, alerting citizens to dangers and contextualizing threats forms a cornerstone of its democratic responsibility. By interrogating state responses, analyzing root causes, and situating local violence within broader socio-political contexts, responsible journalism can mitigate sensationalism while still informing the public. In this sense, the media's role is not passive reproduction but active interpretation, with the potential to illuminate complexity rather than reinforce fear.

Nevertheless, the debate over whether media amplifies terrorism remains unresolved. Scholars like Ekwueme and Obayi (2012) and Keranen and Sanprie (2008) argue that publicity serves as the "oxygen of terror," allowing violent groups to achieve through spectacle what they cannot achieve through military strength alone. Terrorist violence, in this sense, functions as a macabre form of advertising, where bombs and bullets become substitutes for billboards and television slots (Hoffman, 2003; Laqueur, 1977). Every attack represents not only an act of physical destruction but also a bid for symbolic recognition, a desperate claim for global attention. Without the media's megaphone, Nacos (2000) argues, these acts would be akin to silent screams, powerless and forgotten. The mass coverage of Boko Haram's atrocities, particularly the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl

abduction, exemplifies this dilemma. While coverage brought international condemnation and advocacy, it also magnified Boko Haram's message, lending the group a notoriety that further entrenched its profile both locally and globally (Onuoha & Thurston, 2021). For governments, this conundrum poses a particularly thorny dilemma: how to balance the imperative of press freedom with the need to avoid amplifying extremist propaganda. Some states have resorted to heavy-handed censorship, restricting coverage of terrorism under the guise of national security (Wilkinson, 1997). Yet, censorship risks eroding democratic accountability and suppressing citizens' right to know. In Nigeria, debates over government control of media during counterterrorism operations illustrate this tension. Citizens demand transparency and accurate information, while the state often prioritizes narrative control to maintain legitimacy and avoid panic (Akinwale, 2022). Striking this balance requires delicate negotiation between transparency and restraint, ensuring that the public remains informed without inadvertently becoming a secondary audience for terrorist propaganda.

This dilemma has intensified in the digital age. Traditional media, with editorial filters and professional norms, is no longer the only channel for terrorist messaging. Digital platforms, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, and YouTube have provided Boko Haram and its affiliates with direct access to global audiences, bypassing conventional journalism altogether (Conway, 2021; Zenn, 2022). Online, extremist groups produce slick propaganda that blurs the line between political messaging and entertainment, leveraging memes, videos, and social media campaigns to radicalize and recruit. Yet even here, mainstream media plays a role in amplifying digital propaganda by reporting on these campaigns, thereby reproducing their reach. The globalized media ecosystem thus creates a paradox: while journalists aim to expose and critique extremism, the very act of coverage can extend its resonance. Ultimately, the relationship between Boko Haram and the media reveals the enduring tension between transparency and amplification, between the right to know and the risks of spectacle. Responsible journalism anchored in accuracy, fairness, and contextual depth offers the most viable path forward. By resisting sensationalism and focusing instead on nuanced narratives, the media can serve as a counterweight to extremist propaganda, exposing the conditions that sustain terrorism while amplifying stories of resilience and recovery. In the Nigerian context, this means not only documenting atrocities but also highlighting local peacebuilding initiatives, community resistance, and the everyday struggles of survivors. Only by reclaiming the spotlight from sensationalism can the media transform itself from an unwitting accomplice of terror into a catalyst for understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, peace.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the complexity of the relationship between terrorism and the media, revealing it as both symbiotic and deeply entangled within the broader politics of communication, visibility, and legitimacy. Terrorism, in its contemporary form, is no longer reducible to isolated acts of violence confined to geographical boundaries; rather, it has evolved into a communicative strategy that seeks to penetrate public consciousness and influence political agendas far beyond the sites of physical attack. Groups such as Boko Haram exemplify this dynamic, deliberately harnessing both traditional mass media and digital platforms to magnify their reach, propagate fear, and construct an image of power that often exceeds their material capabilities. In

parallel, media institutions guided by the imperatives of immediacy, market competition, and audience engagement frequently provide the very publicity upon which these groups thrive, thereby reinforcing the performative dimension of terrorism. Framing theory has proven particularly useful in illuminating this nexus, as it draws attention to the ways in which acts of terror are selectively constructed, represented, and interpreted. The manner in which terrorism is framed whether primarily as a religious crusade, a political rebellion, or a symptom of socio-economic marginalization shapes not only public perceptions but also state policies and societal responses. In Nigeria, where Boko Haram's insurgency intersects with deep-rooted ethno-religious, political, and regional cleavages, these frames carry far-reaching consequences. Divergent representations between northern and southern media outlets, for instance, demonstrate how the press can amplify existing fractures in society, reinforcing stereotypes and exacerbating mistrust between communities. Moreover, the framing of victims and perpetrators is never a neutral exercise; while media narratives often elicit sympathy for certain groups, they can simultaneously stigmatize entire populations, complicating peacebuilding efforts, undermining reconciliation, and perpetuating cycles of suspicion and violence.

The rise of digital communication has further intensified these dynamics. Boko Haram, like other extremist movements globally, has bypassed traditional gatekeepers of information by constructing its own propaganda networks, producing high-quality videos, statements, and social media campaigns that directly reach both domestic and international audiences. These self-generated narratives serve not only to recruit adherents but also to challenge state legitimacy and project resilience in the face of military setbacks. Mainstream media, however, continue to play a central role by reporting on these messages, sometimes inadvertently amplifying them and reinforcing extremist claims to power. This convergence of terrorist propaganda and media amplification foregrounds one of the most pressing ethical dilemmas of contemporary journalism: how to reconcile the democratic duty of informing the public with the responsibility to avoid becoming an echo chamber for violence and fear. The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical debates and into urgent policy and practice. Scholarly, the research contributes to the expanding body of work on the media-terrorism nexus by contextualizing framing theory within Nigeria's unique socio-political environment. It demonstrates how the battle over narratives is as critical to the trajectory of insurgencies as physical clashes on the battlefield, and how the politics of representation directly shapes perceptions of legitimacy, victimhood, and state authority. Practically, the findings highlight the necessity of fostering responsible journalism that privileges accuracy, nuance, and sensitivity over sensationalism, as well as promoting media literacy among the public to critically engage with the ways terrorism is represented. Counterterrorism strategies must therefore transcend purely militarized responses and incorporate a communicative dimension, acknowledging that the struggle against groups like Boko Haram is as much about controlling narratives and frames as it is about reclaiming territories. Ultimately, terrorism in the twenty-first century must be understood as both a physical and symbolic phenomenon. The violence it unleashes on communities is inseparable from the symbolic power it derives through representation and dissemination. In fragile states such as Nigeria, where weak institutions, social divisions, and governance deficits already create fertile ground for extremist ideologies, the stakes of this interplay

between media and terrorism are exceptionally high. Combating terrorism, therefore, cannot rely solely on force of arms; it requires an integrated approach that addresses the communicative logics sustaining extremism, disarms its narratives, and reconstructs the symbolic terrain upon which legitimacy and fear are contested. Only by engaging simultaneously with the material and communicative dimensions of terrorism can Nigeria and similar states hope to weaken the hold of groups like Boko Haram and move toward sustainable peace and security.

This study reaffirms that terrorism in the digital age operates as a communicative act, deeply intertwined with media logic and technological amplification. By examining 120 Nigerian media reports from 2019 to 2024, the study demonstrates that Boko Haram's strategy of visibility depends not only on violent spectacle but also on the capacity of media systems to circulate narratives that sustain its ideological appeal. The application of framing theory revealed that news coverage frequently emphasized themes of religious extremism and government failure, while minimizing the socio-economic roots of terrorism. This theoretical insight underscores that the media-terrorism nexus is not simply symbiotic but structurally embedded in the political economy of communication and crisis reporting. Based on these findings, this research recommends several targeted actions to improve media practices and counterterrorism communication:

1. **Development of a Counter-Framing Strategy:** Government and civil society organizations should collaborate with journalists to construct alternative narratives that emphasize resilience, reconstruction, and community peacebuilding rather than fear and division.

2. **Establishment of Media Training Modules:** Nigerian journalism institutions and media houses should implement specialized modules on conflict-sensitive reporting and ethical storytelling, integrating UNESCO's guidelines on reporting terrorism.

3. **Fact-Checking and Source Verification Protocols:** News organizations should adopt AI-based verification tools to minimize the dissemination of terrorist propaganda, particularly on social media.

4. **Multi-Agency Communication Framework:** Collaboration between the Ministry of Information, security agencies, and media regulatory bodies should be formalized to ensure timely, transparent, and accurate dissemination of counterterrorism information.

While this study provides significant insights, it acknowledges several limitations. First, it focuses on mainstream Nigerian media and excludes community radio and foreign coverage that may offer alternative framing patterns. Second, the reliance on secondary textual data limits the exploration of audience interpretation and reception. Third, the qualitative approach prioritizes depth over statistical generalizability. Future research could employ mixed-method designs or audience-centered ethnographies to broaden understanding of media-terrorism interactions in the African context. The study contributes to the growing field of media and terrorism research by offering a context-specific analysis of how African media institutions negotiate the tension between information dissemination and national security imperatives. Practically, it provides a framework for designing evidence-based communication policies that counter extremist narratives without compromising press freedom. Theoretically, it advances framing analysis within Global South

scholarship, demonstrating how postcolonial media systems both resist and reproduce global hierarchies of knowledge and power. Ultimately, this research calls for a paradigm shift—from reactive crisis coverage to constructive communication that promotes peace, accountability, and informed public discourse in Nigeria and beyond.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on the relationship between media and terrorism should move beyond descriptive analyses of news coverage to explore how media audiences interpret and internalize such narratives. There is a need for audience-centered studies that examine how exposure to terrorist-related news influences public perception, political attitudes, and behavioral responses in different demographic groups. In addition, comparative studies between Nigerian media and other African or Global South countries could provide deeper insights into how socio-political and cultural contexts shape the framing of terrorism. Scholars should also adopt mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative content analysis with ethnographic or interview-based methods to capture both narrative construction and reception dynamics. Expanding the dataset to include social media platforms—especially X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok—would be critical in understanding how digital networks amplify or counteract extremist messaging. Furthermore, research should explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in detecting misinformation, propaganda, and deepfake content related to terrorism, assessing both its promise and ethical challenges. Policy-oriented research could investigate the effectiveness of counter-framing initiatives, media literacy programs, and inter-agency communication strategies in mitigating the influence of extremist narratives. Ultimately, addressing the complex interplay between terrorism, communication, and technology requires a multidisciplinary framework integrating political science, media studies, psychology, and information systems to generate innovative, evidence-based responses to the evolving threat of information-driven extremism.

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