Media Narratives and Ethical Issues in Reporting Insecurity in Nigeria: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Nigeria's media have been criticised for ethical lapses in reporting insecurity, which often amplify fear, social polarisation, and public misunderstanding. This study examines the prevalence and nature of ethical issues in conventional Nigerian media reportage of Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, farmer–herder conflicts, banditry, and kidnapping. The study adopted a systematic literature review approach, with 23 studies published between 2017 and 2025 carefully selected from a pool of 205 accessed via Google Scholar. Findings reveal recurring ethical concerns, including episodic reporting, sensationalism, source imbalance, stereotyping, political economy pressures, and the marginalisation of peace- and solutions-oriented journalism. Media narratives frequently prioritise immediacy and elite perspectives while neglecting contextual analysis, victims' voices, and constructive conflict resolution. The study concludes that ethical shortcomings in insecurity reporting reflect systemic structural pressures as much as individual journalistic practices. By documenting these patterns, it contributes to understanding how media shape public perception and societal tensions. Implications include the need for regulatory frameworks that reinforce ethical standards, capacity-building for journalists, and the promotion of peace- and solutions-focused reporting to enhance the media's role in mitigating insecurity and supporting national stability.

Keywords: Media narratives; insecurity, ethical issues; Nigeria; systematic review

Introduction

Nigeria is currently confronted with persistent and multifaceted insecurity that poses serious social, political, and economic challenges. The Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgencies in the Northeast, widespread banditry and kidnapping across several regions, recurrent communal clashes, farmer–herder conflicts, and separatist agitations have resulted in extensive loss of lives, destruction of property, mass displacement, and widespread fear (Ayika & Onwurah, 2025). These conditions undermine national stability and weaken public confidence in governance structures. Despite sustained interventions such as military deployments, regional security cooperation, and international support, insecurity challenges in Nigeria remain largely unresolved (Ekpenyong, 2025). The persistence of insecurity underscores the limitations of conventional, force-based

responses and highlights the need for complementary strategies that address the behavioural, informational, and communicative dimensions of conflict.

The media occupy a strategic position in communicating issues and, by extension, shaping how national security matters are understood and addressed (Aziengbe, 2025). Conventional media newspapers, television, and radio serve as primary channels through which citizens access information about insecurity, government actions, and societal responses. Through agenda-setting and framing, the media influence public interpretation of events, guide civic reactions, and provide context for policy deliberations while holding authorities accountable (McCombs, 2008). However, the media's role in insecurity contexts is inherently dual. Ethical and responsible reporting, often associated with peace journalism, can contribute to de-escalation, mutual understanding, and constructive dialogue (Gever, 2018; Bello & Igbashangev, 2023; Abubakar et al., 2025). In contrast, unethical practices such as sensationalism, biased framing, and the irresponsible disclosure of sensitive information can heighten fear, inflame communal divisions, and exacerbate instability (Dušanić-Gačić & Milovanovic, 2024). This duality foregrounds the importance of ethical considerations in reporting national issues.

Historically, Nigerian conventional media have been at the forefront of reporting conflicts and national crises. Coverage of insurgencies, communal violence, political unrest, and humanitarian emergencies has frequently shaped public discourse and drawn attention to security failures, sometimes compelling state responses. Nevertheless, empirical studies suggest that media narratives have often raised ethical concerns. Despite the extensive body of research on media reporting of insecurity in Nigeria, there remains a noticeable gap. Few studies systematically explore how ethical challenges manifest across newspapers, television, and radio reporting of national insecurity. This gap necessitates a focused synthesis of existing scholarship to identify recurring ethical issues and patterns of reportage. Accordingly, this study adopts a systematic literature review approach to examine Nigerian media narratives and the ethical issues that characterize their reportage. By synthesizing findings across studies, the review aims to clarify dominant ethical concerns, assess their implications for public trust and societal stability, and provide insights that can inform ethical journalism practices and media policy in Nigeria.

Conceptualising Insecurity

Insecurity is a multifaceted concept encompassing peril, risk, unpredictability, absence of safeguards, and instability. It reflects both a subjective and objective condition, ranging from the emotional state of fear and apprehension to the tangible lack of protection and safety. Beland (2005) in Omodero (2024) describes instability as an emotional condition of dread or nervousness caused by an actual or imagined lack of protection, emphasising the psychological dimension of insecurity. Similarly, Achumba, et al. (2013) in Omodero (2024) distinguish between insecurity as a feeling of vulnerability to harm and risk as the actual state of exposure to damage. In practical terms, insecurity is understood as the absence of peace, order, and protection, often manifesting in fear, loss of trust, oppression, and social disorientation (Adeodu et al, 2024). Ajodo-Adebanjoko and Ugwuoke (2014) note that insecurity entails exposure to threats, harassment, and violence.

In the Nigeria manifests through violent conflicts including Boko Haram terrorism, banditry, farmer-herder clashes, armed robbery, kidnapping, and militancy, producing widespread fear, economic disruption, displacement, and social instability. Insecurity in the country is deeply entrenched and multidimensional, arising from complex interrelated factors such as poverty, unemployment, poor governance, weak institutions, ethnic divisions, and proliferation of illegal arms (Egunjobi, 2021; Nasiru, 2020). Udoh et al. (2019) argue that Nigeria's insecurity can be traced to the "Resource Curse," where abundant natural resources fail to translate into human

development, leading instead to civil unrest and conflict. Beland (2005) in Udoh et al. (2025) emphasises that insecurity not only undermines physical safety but also generates psychological distress, limiting individuals' potential and the collective well-being of society.

Nigerian Insecurity Situation: A Panoramic view

Insecurity has eaten deep into Nigerian society posing a great danger to national development. Historically, insecurity in Nigeria has deep roots, tracing back to the military takeover in 1966 and the subsequent civil war (1967–1970), which left a legacy of arms proliferation and socio-economic disruption (Obarisiagbon & Akintoye, 2019). In the post-civil war period, many individuals turned to criminality, including armed robbery and kidnapping, as a means of survival. Over the years, with the return of democracy in 1999, multidimensional security challenges emerged across different regions. The North has experienced terrorism, banditry, and farmer–herder conflicts (Nwabueze & Ebeze, 2013), while the South has contended with armed robbery, oil bunkering, Niger Delta militancy, Biafra agitators, and ethno-religious crises (Igbini, 2020).

The pervasive insecurity has been exacerbated by the government's inability to implement effective policies that safeguard citizens' welfare, thereby undermining the principles of freedom, equality, and justice (Oshita & Ikelegbe, 2019). Poverty, deprivation, and unemployment have become key drivers of insurgency, banditry, pipeline vandalism, arson, human trafficking, and cybercrime. These challenges have far-reaching socio-economic consequences, including population displacement, under-development, loss of lives and property, hunger, poverty, and social dislocation (Okpara, Izuogu & Omeonu, 2023; Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2025). Despite military operations and intervention efforts by non-governmental organisations and local communities, insecurity persists, resulting in the deaths of many people, destruction of homes and infrastructure, and widespread trauma and despair. The situation has also strained governmental resources, disrupted economic activities, and hindered the overall development of the country.

Theorising Mass Media's Role in Managing Insecurity in Nigeria

The mass media occupy a central position in shaping societal responses to insecurity, functioning as a critical instrument of nation-building and social mobilisation. Historically referred to as the "Fourth Estate" by Edmund Burke (McQuail, 2000), the media serve as a powerful check on state and societal actors, providing the public with timely information that influences perception, opinion, and behaviour. In the Nigerian context, where insecurity manifests in terrorism, banditry, and communal conflicts, the media's ability to survey the environment and report on unfolding events enables citizens to comprehend the magnitude and implications of these threats. Drawing on the surveillance function of mass communication, the media act as society's eyes and ears, monitoring crises and providing factual accounts that inform public awareness and strategic response (Pate, 2011). By alerting citizens to potential dangers and documenting the operational realities of insecurity, the media facilitate informed decision-making and collective action against threats.

Beyond reporting, the mass media perform the correlation function, interpreting events and relating them to individuals' lives and environments (Okunna & Omenugha, 2013). This aligns with the agenda-setting theory, which posits that media can shape what the public perceives as important by prioritising certain issues over others (McCombs, 2008). In the case of insecurity, newspapers, radio, television, and digital platforms influence public discourse by highlighting security challenges, government responses, and community experiences, thereby guiding civic engagement and fostering societal intolerance of violent or criminal acts. Similarly, the social responsibility theory underscores the normative obligation of the media to report accurately and

responsibly, promoting social cohesion and national development (Adnan, 2023). By providing context, analysis, and potential solutions, journalists enable citizens to critically evaluate the causes and consequences of insecurity, reinforcing accountability among state and non-state actors involved in security management.

Furthermore, the media's strategic role extends to the watchdog and development functions, which complement efforts to combat insecurity. Acting as a watchdog, the press scrutinises government policies, security agencies, and community initiatives, exposing gaps, corruption, or inefficiencies that may exacerbate vulnerability (Omula & Ogbole, 2024). Through the development function, the media educate and sensitise the populace, fostering preventive behaviours, promoting peacebuilding, and encouraging cooperation between citizens and security institutions (Aho, (n.d.). On a general note, the media is not merely as chroniclers of insecurity but as active agents in mitigating threats, shaping public attitudes, and supporting national stability. In doing so, mass media emerge as an indispensable tool in addressing the complex, multidimensional security challenges facing Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach to examine ethical issues in Nigerian media reportage of insecurity, with a focus on farmer–herder conflicts, Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping. Literature published between 2017 and 2025 was selected to ensure that the findings reflect current trends and practices in newspaper reporting within Nigeria's rapidly evolving security landscape. The primary database used for the search was Google Scholar, chosen for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles relevant to communication, journalism, and security studies, particularly from Nigeria. Keywords employed in the search included: "insecurity reporting," "Boko Haram coverage," "farmer–herder conflict media," "banditry reportage," "kidnapping reportage," "media framing," "media reportage of insecurity in Nigeria," and "ethical challenges in reporting insecurity." Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2025, written in English that specifically addressed ethical issues or challenges in media reporting of the selected insecurity themes. Articles that focused exclusively on social media rather than conventional media (newspaper, radio, and television) were excluded. The selected studies were systematically analysed to identify recurrent ethical issues.

Data Presentation

A total of 205 studies were identified, but only 23 (*see appendix 1*) met the inclusion criteria and were used for this review to document insights into ethical issues in Nigerian media reportage of insecurity, specifically regarding Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, farmer–herder conflicts, banditry, and kidnapping. Analysis of the reviewed studies reveals several recurring ethical concerns, including episodic framing, source imbalance, sensationalism, stereotyping, political economy pressures, and limited peace-oriented journalism, which are synthesised below.

Episodic and Event-Driven Reporting versus Ethical Depth

A recurring ethical concern across the literature is the dominance of episodic and event-driven reporting in Nigerian media coverage of conflict and insecurity. Studies by Gever and Essien (2017), Ehigiator et al. (2023), Salisu (2023), and Owolabi et al. (2023) reveal that conflict reportage is overwhelmingly presented as straight news, focusing primarily on incidents as they unfold. This pattern limits journalistic engagement with the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that sustain conflicts such as herders–farmers clashes, banditry, and insurgency. By prioritising immediacy over depth, the media reduce complex conflicts to isolated violent events, thereby constraining public understanding and undermining journalism's explanatory role.

From an ethical standpoint, such reportage reflects a deviation from the principles of responsibility and completeness. Gever and Essien (2017) specifically note that little attention is given to victims' narratives, aftermaths of violence, or long-term consequences, which raises questions about the media's commitment to public interest journalism. The ethical implication is that audiences are informed about violence without being equipped with the contextual knowledge necessary to engage constructively with conflict issues or demand policy solutions.

Sensationalism, Fear Amplification, and Emotional Harm

The literature consistently highlights sensationalism as a major ethical flaw in Nigerian insecurity reportage. Studies by Oyebode and Adelakun (2020), Rufai and Salawu (2024), and Suemo et al. (2022) demonstrate that news stories frequently emphasise killings, abductions, and destruction using emotionally charged language and alarming headlines. This framing strategy prioritises shock value and audience attention, often at the expense of balanced reporting and ethical restraint. Such sensational reporting has profound ethical consequences, particularly in its capacity to amplify fear and anxiety among audiences. Rufai and Salawu (2024) found that persistent exposure to crime-laden narratives heightened residents' sense of insecurity, even when stories provided limited preventive or educational information. Amos and Steven (2025) further reveal that harsh-toned photographic representations reinforce emotional distress and normalise violence. These practices violate the ethical principle of minimising harm, as the media inadvertently contribute to public panic, psychological distress, and desensitisation to violence.

Stereotyping, "Us-versus-Them" Framing, and Identity Polarisation

Another critical ethical issue identified in the literature is the persistent use of stereotyping and polarising frames in conflict reportage. Studies by Aja et al. (2022), Odiegwu-Enwerem et al. (2020), Felix et al. (2025), and Ternenge, Suemo, and Achakpaikyo (2025) show that Nigerian media frequently construct conflict narratives around ethnic, religious, and regional binaries. The recurrent framing of herders–farmers conflicts as "Fulani versus farmers" exemplifies how media texts simplify complex socio-political disputes into antagonistic identities. This framing practice raises serious ethical concerns because it reinforces prejudice, collective blame, and social division. Omolabi's (2023) discourse analysis demonstrates how linguistic strategies such as labelling, metaphorisation, and categorisation create in-group and out-group distinctions that legitimise one group while demonising another. Such representations compromise fairness and accuracy, two core ethical principles, and risk escalating tensions by legitimising hostility and mistrust among affected communities.

Source Dependence, Power Asymmetry, and Credibility Deficits

The ethical problem of source imbalance is evident across multiple studies, particularly in relation to conflict reporting. Odiegwu-Enwerem et al. (2020), Alhassan and Celestine (2020), and Salisu (2023) observe that Nigerian newspapers rely heavily on official sources, including government officials, security agencies, and religious leaders. This reliance results in narratives that privilege elite perspectives while marginalising victims, grassroots actors, and independent analysts. Such sourcing practices raise ethical concerns regarding credibility, plurality, and accountability. When media organisations depend excessively on powerful actors, reportage risks becoming one-sided and susceptible to manipulation. Nwaezeihenatuoha and Ukonu (2025) go further to argue that collaboration between government actors and journalists in framing banditry contributes to its glamorisation. This compromises the media's watchdog role and undermines public trust, highlighting the ethical tension between access, authority, and independence.

Political Economy, Ownership Influence, and Ethical Compromise

The reviewed studies also situate ethical lapses within the broader political economy of Nigerian media. Sa'idu (2024) and Oluyemi and Badmus (2025) argue that ownership structures, ideological leanings, and commercial pressures significantly influence how insecurity is reported. Media organisations operate in competitive environments where sensationalism and immediacy are economically rewarded, often discouraging ethical reflection and professional restraint. These structural pressures shape editorial decisions, including story selection, framing, and visual presentation. The influence of ownership and political alignment introduces subtle biases that compromise ethical neutrality and balance. Consequently, ethical shortcomings in conflict reporting should not be understood solely as individual journalistic failures but as outcomes of systemic constraints embedded within Nigeria's media landscape.

Marginalisation of Peace Journalism and Solutions-Oriented Reporting

Across the literature, there is strong agreement that Nigerian media largely neglect peace-oriented and solutions-focused approaches to conflict reporting. Aja et al. (2022), Gever (2018), Ternenge, Suemo, and Dami (2025), and Nuhu et al. (2025) demonstrate that reportage overwhelmingly privileges conflict-escalating frames over narratives that promote dialogue, reconciliation, and prevention. This ethical gap reflects a limited commitment to journalism's role in peace-building. From an ethical perspective, the marginalisation of peace journalism undermines the media's social responsibility to contribute to conflict resolution. While some studies acknowledge emerging awareness of solutions journalism, these efforts remain inconsistent and constrained by inadequate training, political pressure, and professional norms that favour drama over depth. The literature therefore suggests a pressing need for ethical reorientation toward constructive, context-driven, and solution-oriented conflict reporting.

Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrates that Nigerian media's coverage of insecurity operates predominantly within conflict-escalating frames, which systematically shape public perception and reinforce social polarization. Through episodic reporting, selective sourcing, and "us vs. them" narratives, media not only reflect but also amplify existing societal tensions, privileging sensationalism over constructive discourse, limiting the media's potential as a proactive agent in conflict mitigation. For policymakers and regulatory bodies, these patterns indicate the necessity of integrating ethical communication standards into national security and conflict management frameworks. Journalists' professional capacity, media literacy, and adherence to normative ethical principles are central to reducing the unintended social consequences of reporting.

Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This study is among the few that systematically document the prevalence of ethical issues in Nigerian media reportage of insecurity, highlighting areas where conventional media fall short in fulfilling their normative roles and providing valuable insights for policy and practical interventions. Nonetheless, the study has some limitations. The 2017–2025 scope may have excluded earlier research offering unique perspectives, potentially narrowing the historical context. The sample of 23 studies also limits exploration of ethical dimensions embedded in media structures, editorial decision-making, and the operational challenges faced by journalists. Focusing solely on conventional media newspapers, radio, and television while excluding digital and social media constitutes a notable gap, given the transformative role of new media in conflict reporting. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches, incorporating primary data from journalists, editors, and audiences, to examine these unstudied dimensions and better understand how both conventional and digital media shape insecurity narratives.

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Appendix 1. Characteristics of studies included in the systematic review

S/N	Author(s) & Year	Focus / Theme	Methodology	Key Findings	Ethical Issues in Reporting
1	Gever & Essien (2017)	Newspaper coverage of herders–farmers conflict in Tiv Land	Content analysis & survey (Daily Sun & Daily Trust, 12 months)	Straight news dominated; limited victim coverage; 71.3% stories inside page	Episodic reporting; neglect of victims; minimal context
2	Alhassan & Celestine (2020)	Newspaper frames of causes & solutions to conflict, Southern Kaduna	Qualitative content analysis	Religion cited as main cause; solutions framed as tolerance & legal measures	Over-reliance on elite sources; imbalance in perspectives
3	Aja et al. (2022)	National newspaper coverage of herders–farmers clashes in Plateau	Content analysis (The Sun, Guardian, Punch)	Coverage negative; criminality frames; peace journalism principles not applied	Sensationalism; conflict-escalating frames; lack of peace-oriented reporting
4	Odiegwu-Enwerem, Oso & Amodu (2020)	Portrayal of herders–farmers conflict in Nigerian newspapers	Content analysis (6 newspapers)	Reliance on correspondents & herders; focus on protests & government intervention	Source dependence; credibility deficits; regional bias
5	Salisu (2023)	Coverage of kidnapping in North-West Nigeria	Content analysis (Daily Trust & Guardian, 2 years)	Low prominence; government sources dominant; interpretative role limited	Episodic reporting; underreporting of preventive measures; low ethical depth
6	Ehigiator, Asemah & Nwaoboli (2023)	Coverage of kidnapping in Guardian & Vanguard	Content analysis (Sep–Dec 2022)	Straight news dominant; limited coverage of security measures	Insufficient investigative reporting; neglect of public interest responsibility
7	Sa'idu (2024)	Politics of insecurity reportage in Northern Nigeria	Literature review & qualitative analysis	Media exacerbates security challenges through ideological, ethnic, & ownership biases	Ownership influence; politicisation; imbalance in framing
8	Owolabi, Alade & Onwuka (2023)	Patterns of media reportage of security threats	Content analysis & survey	Reports frequent but low prominence; media reactive rather than proactive	Minimal analytical depth; episodic coverage; failure in surveillance function
9	Ternenge, Suemo & Achakpaikyo (2025)	"Us vs. Them" narrative in insecurity reporting	Library research; thematic analysis	Media frames security in binary terms; convergence influences perception	Stereotyping; polarisation; biased framing
10	Gever (2018)	Media coverage of anti-open grazing law	Content analysis & interviews	Horror and hope frames dominate; sources mostly Benue indigenes	Partiality in framing; selective sourcing; limited ethical neutrality
11	Olajuwon, Ajaegbu & Atakiti (2024)	Television webcast framing of banditry	Content analysis of YouTube channels (2019–2022)	Conflict & human-interest frames dominate; government efforts covered	Sensationalism; selective framing; imbalance in depth

12	Felix, Jigem & Ngantem (2025)	Newspaper framing of Southern Taraba farmer/herder conflict	Content analysis & survey	Conflict-escalating frames dominate; ethnic blame & victimisation prevalent	Biased framing; reinforcement of conflict; neglect of peace journalism
13	Nwaezeihenatuoha & Ukonu (2025)	Media & government promotion of banditry in Northern Nigeria	Mixed methods; content analysis	Killings & abductions prominent; government collaborates in framing	Media-government collusion; glamorisation of crime; biased coverage
14	Nuhu, Santas & Ogande (2025)	Broadcast media & insecurity management	Library research & synthesis discourse analysis	Media raises awareness & fosters vigilance	Regional/ethnic bias; framing may inflame rather than prevent conflicts
15	Suemo, Ternenge, Sase, Otor & Dogo (2022)	Radio contributions to addressing attacks on farmers	Quantitative survey	Radio reports incidents; lacks proactive prevention	Episodic reporting; fear amplification; limited public education
16	Oluyemi & Badmus (2025)	Media & Boko Haram narrative power	Qualitative secondary analysis	Media amplifies terrorist messages; sensationalism prioritised	Sensationalism; media extends terrorist reach; simplified moral binaries
17	Rufai & Salawu (2024)	Perceptions of Lagos residents on crime coverage	In-depth interviews	Episodic crime reportage; stories gratify safety info need	Fear amplification; episodic framing; partial investigative reporting
18	Amos & Steven (2025)	Photograph selection in newspapers	Content analysis	Harsh-toned images dominate; editorial decisions implicit	Emotional manipulation; lack of transparency; sensationalism in visuals
19	Oyebode & Adelakun (2020)	Handling of insurgency in Northeast Nigeria	Content analysis & interviews	Media awareness enhanced; manipulation by non-state actors	Sensationalism; manipulation of public perception; ethical compromise
20	Omolabi (2023)	Critical discourse of insurgency coverage	Qualitative CDA	Six discursive strategies highlight in-group/out-group	Bias in coverage; ideological manipulation; stereotyping
21	Kugbayi (2024)	Mass media reportage of herders–farmers conflict	Mixed method; content analysis & interviews	Media failed balanced reporting; public perception influenced	Partiality; inadequate ethical standards; imbalance in sourcing
22	Ternenge, Suemo & Dami (2025)	Solutions journalism in herders-farmers conflict	Critical discourse analysis	Conflict-escalating frames dominate; obstacles to solutions-oriented reporting	Neglect of peace journalism; political & resource pressures; biased framing
23	Wonuola & Adisa (2023)	Stakeholders' perception of newspapers' framing	Mixed method (content analysis & interviews)	Violence-induced frames escalate conflict; stakeholders perceive bias	Polarisation; stereotyping; ethnic framing; conflict escalation