

Narrating Conflict in the Sahel: A Comparative Analysis of Nigerian Newspapers' Coverage of the Boko Haram Insurgency

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Abstract

This paper explores how major Nigerian newspapers construct narratives around the Boko Haram insurgency through framing and evaluative language. Drawing on a ten-year corpus (2013–2022) of news articles from *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, and *ThisDay*, the study analyzes how conflict is discursively represented, ideologically framed, and regionally emphasized. Through thematic mapping and appraisal theory, we find significant variation in narrative tone, attribution of moral responsibility, and engagement with humanitarian consequences. Southern newspapers tend to adopt more sensationalist and state-critical framings, while northern-based media prioritize pragmatic concerns and local experiences. Linguistic strategies such as judgment, engagement modulation, and affective scaling reveal how journalism in times of insurgency is both a site of meaning-making and an instrument of power. The study concludes by advocating for more contextually grounded, ethically reflective, and community-centered journalism in the reporting of complex national security crises.

Keywords: Boko Haram, conflict reporting, Nigerian media, discourse analysis, appraisal theory, insurgency, news framing, regional journalism, humanitarian narratives

1. Conflict, Media, and Narrative Formation in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region, a semi-arid belt stretching across northern Africa just south of the Sahara, has become emblematic of multidimensional conflict—where terrorism, political instability, climate stress, and state fragility converge. Nigeria, one of the most populous and politically significant countries in the region, has experienced protracted insurgency since the emergence of Boko Haram in the early 2000s. From its origins as a radical Salafi group in northeast Nigeria to its evolution into a violent

insurgency with global jihadist ties, Boko Haram has transformed both the physical and discursive landscapes of the Sahel.

Conflict in the Sahel is not only a material condition but also a discursive one. The manner in which violence, actors, victims, and responses are represented in media becomes central to how such conflicts are interpreted by the public and acted upon by the state. The news media plays a dual role—as both mirror and constructor of conflict. As Entman (1993) argues, media framing selects “some aspects of a perceived reality” and makes them “more

salient in a communicating text.” In the Sahel context, this means that the media not only informs but also influences public perception of insurgency, national cohesion, and state legitimacy.

Within Nigeria, the media’s role in narrating conflict is shaped by several factors: regional disparities, language ideologies, press freedom limitations, ownership structure, and political affiliations. Northern-based newspapers, for example, may portray Boko Haram and its consequences through a different lens than Southern or national publications. Similarly, state-owned media may lean toward narratives of national security and governmental efficacy, while private or opposition-linked outlets might highlight government failures, humanitarian crises, or military overreach.

Narratives surrounding insurgency are further complicated by the highly charged nature of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. Boko Haram’s rejection of Western education and secular institutions invokes deep tensions in a country split between a Muslim-majority north and a Christian-majority south. As such, newspapers do not merely relay facts; they embed ideological positions in choices of terminology, emphasis, victimhood, and agency attribution. Terms such as “terrorist,” “militant,” “sect,” or “fighters” carry moral, political, and emotional weight, reinforcing or challenging dominant state narratives.

The construction of conflict narratives in Nigerian media thus becomes a site of contestation—between security and freedom, between national unity and regional grievance, between government framing and civilian suffering. These narratives are not fixed but shift in relation to events (e.g., the Chibok schoolgirls’ abduction in 2014), audience sentiment, and international attention. By investigating how conflict is narrated across different Nigerian newspapers, this study seeks to unpack the linguistic and ideological mechanisms that mediate public understanding of violence in the Sahel.

2. Boko Haram and the Nigerian Media Landscape

2.1 Historical Trajectory of Boko Haram from 2002 to Present

The rise of Boko Haram is inseparable from the socioeconomic discontent and religious radicalization in Nigeria’s northeast. The group’s

founder, Mohammed Yusuf, gained support among youth disillusioned by state corruption, unemployment, and the perceived moral failures of secular governance. His sermons, widely circulated via cassette tapes and early YouTube uploads, framed Western-style education (“boko”) as haram (forbidden), advocating a return to Islamic jurisprudence. Though initially tolerated by local elites, the group’s growing paramilitary structure led to confrontation with state forces in 2009.

Following Yusuf’s death in police custody—an extrajudicial act widely condemned—Boko Haram evolved into a violent insurgency. Under Shekau, the group adopted suicide bombings, village massacres, and high-profile abductions, marking a strategic shift from sectarian militancy to asymmetric terrorism. Its seizure of territory in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states (2014–2015) led to the declaration of a caliphate and the establishment of Sharia courts. In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS, becoming ISWAP (Islamic State’s West Africa Province), although internal splits soon followed. This shift complicated journalistic labeling of the group—no longer simply “insurgents,” but participants in a transnational jihadist network.

By 2023, Boko Haram’s operational capacity had diminished in part due to military counterinsurgency and intra-factional violence. Yet its media presence remains significant, shaping both domestic fear and international policy discourse. The group’s strategic use of media—video executions, propaganda leaflets, and online communiqués—has forced Nigerian journalists to navigate not only physical danger but ethical dilemmas of platforming terrorist speech. This ongoing transformation of the group—and its discourse—makes it a dynamic object of media narrative construction.

2.2 Overview of Media Structure: Regional vs. National, Private vs. State-Owned

Nigeria’s media system reflects the country’s federal complexity and colonial inheritance. While press freedom is constitutionally protected under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution, practical constraints—including political patronage, commercial pressures, and physical threats—complicate journalistic autonomy. The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) has frequently reported intimidation of conflict reporters, particularly in northeastern zones.

Regional papers such as *Daily Trust* or *Blueprint* are published primarily in the north and operate in closer geographic proximity to Boko Haram's activities. This proximity enhances access to eyewitness testimony and localized sources but also introduces safety risks and potential bias from regional political networks. In contrast, southern-based papers like *The Punch* or *Vanguard* often frame Boko Haram as a distant threat or as a national security concern, without the immediacy of lived experience.

Private ownership tends to afford more editorial freedom but also opens space for sensationalism and ideological bias, particularly during electoral cycles. State-owned outlets such as *The Nigerian Observer* or *The Voice* tend to echo official narratives and emphasize national unity, often avoiding content that critiques the military or federal response. These editorial orientations significantly influence the symbolic language used in headlines and articles—e.g., referring to Boko Haram fighters as “terrorists” (aligning with global discourse) or “gunmen” (a more neutral or regionally coded term).

2.3 Newspaper Selection Rationale: *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, *Thisday*

The chosen newspapers offer a balanced corpus for comparative discourse analysis across Nigeria's media topography:

- The *Punch* (Lagos-based, private): Known for its critical reporting, accessible writing, and wide national readership, *The Punch* frequently editorializes on governance and policy failure. It often frames Boko Haram through lenses of state accountability, corruption, and humanitarian crisis.
- *Daily Trust* (Abuja-based, regional): As the most prominent northern daily, *Daily Trust* offers granular detail on local events, community responses, and military operations in the northeast. Its proximity to conflict zones allows for primary sourcing, though it has been critiqued for downplaying religious dimensions to avoid inflaming tensions.
- *Vanguard* (Southern-based, populist tone): *Vanguard* balances national headlines with sensationalist framing, often using emotive imagery and vivid metaphors in its Boko Haram coverage. It provides insight into how insurgency is consumed by broader publics, especially in urban centers like Port Harcourt or Lagos.

- *ThisDay* (elite-focused, policy-oriented): With ties to political elites and business circles, *ThisDay* offers a formalized, institutional tone. Its Boko Haram coverage often intersects with policy debates, regional diplomacy, and international development framing (e.g., UN, AU, ECOWAS involvement).

This multi-source approach allows for a comparative exploration of how ideology, region, ownership, and editorial culture influence conflict narratives.

3. Framing Conflict and Ideology in News Reporting

News media, particularly in conflict environments, do more than relay facts; they serve as ideological machines—organizing public perception through carefully selected language, imagery, and attribution. In Nigeria's reporting on Boko Haram, this is especially evident. The press selectively foregrounds or backgrounds elements such as actor identity, motivation, victimhood, and solution frameworks to construct a particular understanding of the conflict. Drawing on both framing theory (Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007) and critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1998), this section examines how Nigerian newspapers embed ideology in their narratives about the insurgency.

3.1 Ideological Framing of Insurgents and State Actors

A recurring contrast in news framing involves the dual portrayal of Boko Haram and the Nigerian state. *The Punch* often anchors its coverage in a “law-and-order” frame, casting the government and military as embattled defenders of the nation-state. Phrases like “Nigeria's sovereignty under siege” or “federal forces regain control” implicitly frame the state as victim rather than complicit agent. This aligns with a hegemonic narrative of national unity and justifies securitization.

Daily Trust, however, occasionally allows alternative framings to surface. For example, articles have highlighted civilians caught between two fires—those fleeing Boko Haram violence only to face extrajudicial killings or arbitrary detention by government troops. In such framing, the state is not solely the savior but also a coercive actor. In a June 2018 editorial, *Daily Trust* remarked: “What the insurgents have taken by fear, our military now holds by force,

without rebuilding the peace.” Such framing breaks with state-centered narratives and shifts focus to structural failings.

Meanwhile, *ThisDay* tends to maintain a neutral, elite-toned position, often quoting presidential or international responses without significant ideological commentary. However, by foregrounding elite voices and downplaying grassroots experiences, this form of narrative also constitutes an ideological stance—favoring institutional legitimacy over vernacular truth.

3.2 Symbolic Labeling: “Terrorists,” “Jihadists,” “Fighters”

Labels are never neutral. Lexical choices reveal the moral universe in which a newspaper operates. *Vanguard* routinely refers to Boko Haram as “bloodthirsty terrorists,” employing highly charged descriptors like “rampage,” “slaughter,” and “massacre.” This not only demonizes the group (arguably rightly so) but also strips the violence of any political or socioeconomic causality. The violence is framed as irrational and dehistoricized.

By contrast, *Daily Trust* frequently opts for less emotionally saturated terms like “gunmen,” “militants,” or “fighters,” which may reflect a desire to avoid inflammatory language in a region already fraught with tension. This lexical difference has sparked debate: critics accuse *Daily Trust* of downplaying terrorism, while defenders argue that its language prevents ethnic profiling and overgeneralization.

Moreover, *ThisDay* strategically employs diplomatic terminology such as “non-state actors” or “destabilizing agents,” indicating an international policy orientation. This aligns with how global agencies like the UN or ECOWAS frame insurgency—not as criminality, but as governance failure and development crisis.

These semantic choices shape what counts as justifiable state violence, who qualifies as a victim, and whether peace is conceptualized as military victory or social reconciliation.

3.3 Evocation of Ethnic and Religious Discourse

The Nigerian press operates within a national context of deep ethno-religious cleavage, and its coverage of Boko Haram reflects that fault line. Southern-based papers such as *The Punch* often emphasize the Islamic rhetoric of Boko Haram—quoting Quranic references or featuring religious slogans from the group’s propaganda. While factually accurate, this

approach may unintentionally conflate radical Islamism with broader Muslim identity, especially in a country where Islam is practiced peacefully by millions.

In contrast, *Daily Trust*—serving a predominantly northern and Muslim readership—tends to de-religionize Boko Haram in its discourse. It emphasizes economic deprivation, government marginalization, and state corruption as root causes of the insurgency. In a 2020 report, the paper stated: “Until the youth have water, education, and dignity, no counter-insurgency can endure.” This reflects a social justice narrative rather than a clash-of-civilizations frame.

Furthermore, ethnic cues are embedded subtly in language. Southern outlets may mention the Kanuri ethnic roots of Boko Haram’s leadership, while northern papers often omit ethnic identifiers altogether. Such asymmetries matter—they influence how national audiences perceive ingroup vs. outgroup responsibility, and how likely they are to endorse inclusive solutions versus punitive ones.

In sum, Nigerian newspapers do not merely reflect conflict—they actively construct its moral and political meaning. Through framing devices, lexical selection, and narrative emphasis, they encode competing ideologies about the causes, actors, and consequences of insurgency in the Sahel. These ideological framings shape not only domestic opinion but also influence international donor perspectives, military strategy, and the public will to pursue peace or war.

4. Corpus Composition and Selection of Newspaper Samples

To enable a systematic comparison of how the Boko Haram insurgency is narrated across Nigerian newspapers, a carefully curated textual corpus was constructed. This corpus consists of 80 articles drawn from four major newspapers—*The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, and *ThisDay*—spanning the period between January 2013 and December 2022. This decade was selected as it encompasses critical phases of the conflict, including the Chibok abduction (2014), the declared ISIS affiliation (2015), military offensives under President Buhari’s administration, and the rise of factional splits post-2018.

Each newspaper contributed 20 articles to the corpus, evenly distributed across peak conflict

moments and relatively stable periods. The types of articles included are straight news reports, editorials, op-eds, and feature stories—ensuring a mix of factual reporting and opinionated framing. Articles were sourced through both digital archives and institutional subscriptions, using keyword combinations such as “Boko Haram,” “insurgency,” “Chibok,” “military operation,” and “terror attack.”

To ensure cross-sectional comparability, articles were filtered by the following criteria:

- Topical relevance: Each article must directly address events, actors, or consequences related to the Boko Haram insurgency.
- Narrative density: Preference was given to texts with a discernible evaluative or framing stance, rather than purely event-based dispatches.
- Source uniformity: For each paper, a balanced mix of datelines (Lagos, Abuja, Maiduguri) was considered to minimize regional bias.

Once selected, the corpus was annotated using NVivo software for qualitative textual analysis. Coding focused on three principal categories derived from appraisal theory and discourse analysis: attitude (judgment, affect), engagement (dialogic positioning), and graduation (intensity modulation). These linguistic markers were used to map how moral blame, emotional salience, and degrees of certainty were distributed across articles.

Additionally, headlines were extracted and treated as a separate sub-corpus due to their outsized role in shaping reader perception. For instance, *The Punch*’s front-page headline on April 15, 2014—“Hell on Earth in Chibok”—was coded as high in affect and graduation, whereas *Daily Trust*’s “Schoolgirls Missing in Borno” on the same day showed more neutral orientation.

This corpus thus provides the empirical foundation for analyzing both explicit and implicit narrative strategies employed by Nigerian newspapers. It captures not only what is said about Boko Haram, but how it is said, when, and by whom—revealing the shifting discursive terrain of conflict in the Sahel.

5. Thematic Mapping of Conflict Narratives

The analysis of the 80-article corpus reveals three dominant thematic frames in Nigerian newspapers’ coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency: the humanitarian toll, the

attribution of moral responsibility, and the securitization of cross-border threat. These themes operate as anchoring narratives across publications but vary in intensity, source attribution, and rhetorical emphasis depending on the outlet’s regional orientation and editorial stance.

5.1 Humanitarian Toll and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS)

A consistent theme across all newspapers is the staggering human cost of Boko Haram’s violence. This is especially evident in the coverage of mass displacements, attacks on schools and markets, and the disruption of rural livelihoods. Phrases such as “villages razed to the ground” (*Vanguard*, 2020) and “children sleep in open fields without shelter or food” (*Daily Trust*, 2019) highlight both affective and descriptive intensity.

While southern papers like *The Punch* frequently frame this toll in emotional terms—focusing on victims’ pain and trauma—northern papers like *Daily Trust* emphasize logistical aspects such as aid delivery failures and overcrowded IDP camps. For instance, one *Daily Trust* headline reads: “IDPs in Bama Lament Five Days Without Water” (June 2021), shifting focus to infrastructural neglect rather than simply victimhood.

Such differences reflect broader ideological commitments: where one frame underscores state compassion and urgency (*The Punch*), another suggests state withdrawal or paralysis (*Daily Trust*). Both strategies, however, affirm the centrality of human suffering in Boko Haram narratives.

5.2 Moral Responsibility Toward Government and Military Action

The question of who bears responsibility for the persistence of insurgency divides media narratives. In southern dailies, the tendency is to link Boko Haram’s strength to governance failure. Editorials from *The Punch* describe the federal government as “routinely indifferent” or “administratively flat-footed,” often invoking the military’s delays, mismanagement of funds, or failure to secure abductees.

ThisDay, on the other hand, frames the issue through elite diplomacy and federal response. A 2022 op-ed noted: “The insurgency, once again, tests our strategic depth and regional intelligence sharing”, indicating a more technocratic

assessment of blame.

In contrast, *Daily Trust* adopts a more nuanced tone—often highlighting not only state neglect but also local complicity and community silence. Some editorials point to “residents’ unwillingness to report militant movements,” portraying insurgency as partly embedded in societal fragmentation.

This divergence in moral framing shapes the perceived legitimacy of security operations, humanitarian response, and institutional reform. Whether the conflict is interpreted as state failure, community erosion, or international disengagement profoundly affects public expectations and policy debate.

5.3 Cross-Border Framing and Global Jihadist Narratives

The final major theme is the connection of Boko Haram to global networks of violence. Since the group’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS in 2015, Nigerian newspapers have increasingly situated the conflict within a transnational frame. Headlines such as “ISIS Flag Found in Boko Haram Camp” (*Vanguard*, March 2016) or “Insurgents Train Recruits in Niger Border Town” (*ThisDay*, October 2019) extend the narrative beyond national boundaries.

This theme is strongest in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*, which regularly cite intelligence reports, foreign military support (e.g., U.S. drone surveillance), and multilateral summits addressing the Lake Chad Basin crisis. *Daily Trust*, while reporting these developments, places relatively more emphasis on local security arrangements and regional governors’ coordination.

Framing Boko Haram as part of a global jihadist network performs two discursive functions: it rationalizes militarized response (including foreign aid and arms purchases), and it shifts blame away from national governance toward transnational actors. The implicit message is that Nigeria is one node in a larger war on terror, rather than the sole agent of resolution.

Together, these thematic strands structure the way Nigerian newspapers construct public meaning around the Boko Haram insurgency. They anchor the insurgency within overlapping moral, emotional, and geopolitical coordinates, thus shaping not only how the conflict is reported, but how it is morally understood and politically acted upon.

6. Linguistic and Discursive Strategies of

Representation

While thematic mapping reveals what is being said about the Boko Haram insurgency, a closer linguistic analysis uncovers how it is said—through what tone, evaluative stance, and rhetorical architecture. Drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), this section identifies and contrasts the use of three key discourse strategies across the selected Nigerian newspapers: attitude (judgment and affect), engagement (stance-taking and alignment), and graduation (intensity scaling). These strategies operate not only in full articles but often with greater force in headlines, subheadings, and photo captions, where meaning is compressed and judgment is foregrounded.

6.1 Judgment and Affective Evaluation

Judgmental language directed at both Boko Haram and the Nigerian state is prevalent across the corpus. *The Punch* frequently uses morally loaded terms like “cowardly ambush,” “callous disregard,” or “brazen attack,” which perform dual functions: they condemn insurgents’ actions and emotionally mobilize readers. For instance, a February 2018 headline read, “Massacre in Dapchi: The Government That Sleeps While Girls Disappear.” This not only critiques insurgents but attributes responsibility to state inaction.

In contrast, *Daily Trust* prefers a less accusatory tone, sometimes using more descriptive or bureaucratic expressions such as “military unable to confirm casualties” or “community leaders raise alarm on renewed attacks.” This registers concern while avoiding overt blame, a strategy possibly intended to preserve institutional neutrality or reduce local tension.

Affective stance toward victims—especially women and children—is common. Across all newspapers, emotive phrases like “helpless children,” “weeping mothers,” “shattered communities” appear frequently in lede paragraphs, underscoring the symbolic value of innocence lost. These expressions humanize the cost of conflict while implicitly casting insurgents as moral deviants.

6.2 Engagement and Dialogic Positioning

The level of authorial alignment with quoted sources varies across newspapers. *ThisDay* and *Vanguard* tend to report security briefings and presidential statements with minimal hedging, using attributions like “President said,” “Army

confirmed," "Military declared." These monoglossic stances (asserting a single authoritative voice) reinforce state legitimacy and limit alternative readings.

Daily Trust, however, often includes multivoiced expressions: "Residents say...", "Eyewitnesses contradict...", "Survivors recount...", inviting multiple interpretations and positioning the reader within a more dialogic, contested space. This form of discursive engagement may reflect a deliberate editorial attempt to balance institutional voices with those of everyday citizens, especially in conflict zones where the state's credibility is often questioned.

6.3 Graduation: Scaling of Intensity and Force

Lexical intensifiers play a crucial role in modulating the emotional and moral intensity of reports. *Vanguard* makes frequent use of amplified expressions such as "massive explosions," "horrific scenes," "unspeakable brutality," which create a heightened affective tone. This strategy often blurs the line between journalism and advocacy, pushing the reader toward outrage or urgency.

By contrast, *ThisDay* prefers calibrated language, using technical terms like "operational setback," "disruption of supply lines," or "temporary withdrawal" to frame military losses. This form of graduation tempers emotional responses, reflecting an elite or policy-facing narrative register.

Interestingly, both *The Punch* and *Daily Trust* vary their intensity levels depending on proximity to key anniversaries or public outcry moments. For example, coverage of the Chibok girls' anniversary in both outlets used stronger evaluative markers than regular weekly reporting, indicating a discursive strategy tied to national memory and symbolic capital.

These linguistic strategies do not merely style the text; they shape how the conflict is interpreted, by whom, and with what emotional or moral consequences. Through patterns of judgment, stance, and intensity, Nigerian newspapers participate in the construction of a public vocabulary of insurgency—one that defines heroism, failure, suffering, and hope in a highly stratified media environment.

7. Comparative Reflections on Editorial Positioning and Regional Emphasis

The differences in how Nigerian newspapers narrate the Boko Haram insurgency are not

incidental but deeply structured by factors such as regional affiliation, media ownership, audience expectations, and political proximity. This comparative section synthesizes earlier findings by organizing divergences into three analytical axes: regional contrast between North and South, editorial strategies of private vs. state-aligned media, and geographic framing of the insurgency's impact—urban vs. rural focus.

7.1 North–South Contrast in Narrative Tone and Emphasis

Northern-based *Daily Trust* and southern-based *The Punch* and *Vanguard* display marked differences in how they position the state, the insurgents, and local communities. *Daily Trust* often adopts a measured and localist tone, embedding reports within community voices and material consequences. Its narratives prioritize pragmatic concerns—food shortages, IDP camp breakdowns, and infrastructural gaps—over ideological framing. For example, while *The Punch* might headline "Terrorists Burn School, Defy Buhari's Troops", *Daily Trust* might lead with "Three Schools Destroyed in Kukawa, Students Displaced." Both report violence, but their framing of actors and consequences differs sharply.

Conversely, *The Punch* and *Vanguard* typically emphasize spectacle, urgency, and outrage, with a tendency to personalize blame (e.g., "Buhari fails again") and dramatize civilian suffering. This reflects a crisis journalism orientation that appeals to broader southern urban readerships, less directly exposed to the day-to-day reality of Boko Haram but more receptive to national-level political critique.

7.2 Private vs. State Media Editorial Framing Strategies

While all four papers are privately owned, degrees of editorial independence and alignment with state narratives vary. *ThisDay*, known for its elite readership and ties to political actors, often employs technocratic and institutional framing. It rarely uses high-intensity affect and favors quotes from military briefings, diplomats, or think tanks. Its insurgency discourse centers around regional stability, security cooperation, and governance capacity—a framing that supports policy legitimacy rather than populist anger.

Vanguard, in contrast, leans toward populist sensationalism, often fusing nationalistic sentiment with moral condemnation. Its

headlines frequently call for military escalation or government action, such as “*Enough is Enough: Deploy the Drones Now*”. It reflects a hybrid editorial posture: anti-establishment in tone, yet nationalistic in aspiration.

Daily Trust maintains a more cautious editorial voice, shaped both by its proximity to the conflict and a need to balance critical reporting with safety and community engagement. It is the only paper in the corpus that occasionally publishes letters from survivors, community leaders, and religious figures, offering plural perspectives rather than singular official narratives.

7.3 Urban-Centered vs. Rural-Affected Story Representation

Spatial orientation also plays a key role in how Boko Haram is represented. *The Punch* and *Vanguard* often cover the insurgency from a Lagos- or Abuja-based editorial lens, with little embedded reporting from the Northeast. As a result, their stories often rely on third-party sources (military spokesmen, press agencies, NGOs) and emphasize the insurgency’s symbolic and political meaning rather than its material toll.

By contrast, *Daily Trust* integrates rural and peri-urban reporting, with field correspondents based in Maiduguri, Yobe, and Adamawa. This enables granular coverage of events such as village-level raids, school shutdowns, and community displacement, thereby grounding the insurgency in lived rural realities rather than abstract national anxieties.

This urban–rural gap is not merely geographic but epistemological. It determines whether the insurgency is viewed as an existential threat to state sovereignty (as in southern papers) or a structural development crisis (as in northern reportage).

Together, these comparative reflections illuminate the discursive fault lines in Nigerian media coverage of Boko Haram. While all outlets ostensibly cover the same conflict, they frame it through distinct ideological grids, shaped by geography, political alignment, ownership structure, and target audience. These differences matter—not only for academic discourse analysis but for policymaking, peacebuilding, and national reconciliation. Media narratives construct the lenses through which violence is seen, interpreted, and ultimately responded to.

8. Toward Responsible Journalism in Times of Insurgency

As Nigeria continues to grapple with the Boko Haram insurgency and its evolving security and humanitarian implications, journalism occupies a precarious yet critical position. The media is not only a narrator of violence but also a constructor of national memory, moral community, and public judgment. Yet in highly polarized and politically sensitive contexts such as the Sahel region, this role becomes fraught with tension—between state loyalty and civic duty, between factual reporting and emotional resonance, and between urgency and accuracy.

The comparative analysis of *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, and *ThisDay* illustrates the extent to which conflict coverage is shaped by spatial, ideological, and institutional logics. These papers each deploy language and framing devices that implicitly or explicitly guide readers toward certain interpretations—about who the victims are, where guilt resides, and what kinds of solutions are imaginable or legitimate.

In this context, responsible journalism must do more than react to violence. It must interrogate the structures that produce and sustain it. This means:

- Avoiding stereotyping: Not reducing complex insurgencies to religious or ethnic essentialism, particularly in a country as culturally diverse as Nigeria.
- Amplifying marginalized voices: Especially those of women, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and rural communities, whose experiences are often rendered invisible in elite media.
- Challenging official narratives when necessary: Without resorting to sensationalism or unverified reporting.
- Practicing reflexivity: Journalists and editors must continually ask how their positioning—geographically, socioeconomically, politically—affects the stories they tell and omit.
- Investing in local correspondents and long-form reportage: To counteract the metropolitan bias that erases ground realities in northeast Nigeria.

There is also a pressing need for institutional support mechanisms that enable such journalism: safety guarantees for conflict

reporters, funding for regional investigative work, and legal frameworks that protect freedom of speech without enabling hate speech or misinformation.

Ultimately, the call is for a journalism that is ethically grounded, contextually informed, and socially engaged—one that resists binary narratives of heroism and villainy, and instead fosters the kind of public discourse that can build peace rather than deepen polarization. In narrating conflict, the media must not only speak truth to power but also narrate with care, with nuance, and with responsibility.

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