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Beyond the Framing Process: An X-Ray of Newspaper Reportage of Conflicts in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the pattern of news framing of the Ombatse conflict in Nasarawa State from to 2012-2015 in Daily Trust and Leadership newspapers to determine whether the newspapers mediated mayhem through the application of framing ideology. The Ombatse is an Eggon cult-like ethnic group laced with a political agenda formed to influence the structure of power in the state in response to the alleged marginalization of the Eggon people. This study employed four frames to measure the perspective of media reports on the phenomenon. The study used the census sampling technique to select specific dailies over a four-year period. News stories were the unit of analysis, and the data-gathering instrument was a coding sheet. The data established that newspapers reported the conflict predominantly in negative patterns, painting a grotesque picture of the situation, thereby creating more tension in the state, especially during the massacre of over 100 federal security personnel. The study concluded that at the time of coverage, Nigerian newspapers did not mediate through positive framing patterns; instead, they created more tension. The study recommended that, since the role of the media in conflict may either inflame or deflate passion toward the end of conflict, journalists should focus more on positive news reports, especially in a multi-ethnic, complex, and fragile country like Nigeria. Such positivity of media frames is germen in minimizing tension and resolving conflict amid mutual suspicion and fear of denomination.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, studies on media framing of conflict attracted heavy scholarly attention. This could be attributed to the daily increase in conflicts and the media coverage (Ogbodo, 2018). Silke (2008) notes that "research on terrorism and terrorism related issues has increased drastically in the wake of 9/11 attacks." Schmid (2004) added that terrorists see the media as major channel to reach their target (Msughter & Phillips, 2020). So, question of whether terrorism qualifies as newsworthy has been widely acknowledged. It is newsworthy until tragedy become normal and cease (sic) to be criteria for news selection (Mogekwu, 2011).

During conflict, sufficient or insufficient information could be a critical factor in people's reaction. Information in times of conflict could either escalate or reduce tension, especially in a complex and multi-plural society. While several studies indict the media for igniting tension or exacerbating conflicts, communication scholars affirm that news media play important role in conflict resolution (Aondover et al., 2022; Crowley, 2013; Mojaye & Msughter, 2022; Mojaye & Ogunyombo, 2022).

The power of the news media and more precisely the newspapers influences what people understand of life and its attendants. The news media play a significant role in telling the audience not only what to think about, but also how to think about such events- from what perspective should the issue be viewed. The interpretation of media information or messages by an audience is contingent upon the manner in which these communications are mediated (Anyadike, 2015).

Media exerts great influence on how the audience perceives social events. Ibuot (2019) noted that emotional resonance can have a strong impact on how the general public perceives specific issue. Therefore, this study posed to characterize the tone of Nigerian newspapers coverage of the *Ombatse* from 2012-2015 in its role as a mediator between man and the society. How have newspapers through the application of several frames mediated the conflict? The 2012–2015 marked the peak of the conflict with heavy loss of lives and properties and large population displacement.

Background to the Study

In Nigeria, crises often erupt, characterized by mutual suspicion and fear of domination by other ethnic or religious groups. Such crises claim tens of hundreds of lives and properties. The *Ombatse* was a form of pressure group laced with ethnic agenda, created to influence the structure of power in the state. Soon, the group became a dangerous militia. Between 2012-2015 the group had fought most of its neighbours: the Alago, Koro, Mada, and the Fulani. Tens of hundreds of people have been killed, properties have been destroyed and thousands displayed (Ayuba, 2014). The *Ombatse* conflict at a point in time enjoyed considerable media coverage.

The group spiritual leader, Baba Alakyo became the rallying point of the Eggons and wanted to resurrect the Eggon culture in a kind of renaissance. It was a culture aimed at cleansing the Eggon nation of societal ills: adultery, fornication, theft, etcetera and ensuring a culture of high morality and chastity (Ayuba, 2014). Impressive as this cultural objective may seem, the group metamorphosed into a deadly cult, changed the picture into a negative view. However, because of its alleged magical ability and immunity to bullets, the group became a powerful tool in the hands of desperate politicians, hence its popularity among the youth.

Ayuba (2014) further noted that the joint security operation of the State Security Service (SSS) and the military on 17th November 2012 to arrest Baba Alakyo and other members during the group's initiation and oath-taking ceremony was vehemently thwarted by the group in their hundreds. The operatives including a captain that led the operation sustained multiple injuries, two security operational vehicles were destroyed, and firearms were seized by the militia. The three truckloads of armed soldiers were said to have stormed the spiritual center at Allogani, at the foot of the famous Eggon Hill (Joseph, 2012). In January 2013, Fulani clashed with the *Ombatse*, the two parties recorded losses and injuries. On 13th January 2013, the *Ombatse* numbering about three hundred blocked the Doma-Lafia highway in their hunt for the Fulani. The military deployed to the area to dislodge those sustained injuries and the military firearms were also seized by the *Ombase* group. The same day, confident by the sense of invisibility, the *Ombatse* ambushed the military in an attempt to free some of their captured members (Ayuba, 2014).

Following intelligence reports that the *Ombatse* were forcing people (in Mosques and Churches) to take the initiation oath; refusal to take the oath attracted heavy beating and harassment. On 7th May, 2013, a combined security operation of the Nigeria Police Force and the Department of Security Service headed for Assakio, where the *Ombatse* shrine was relocated, 10 kilometres away from Lafia, the Nasarawa State capital to dislodge them and arrest the spiritual leader of the group, Ala Agu, popularly known as Baba Alakyo. The militia group violently launched a resistance by killing over 94 of the security operatives in an ambush; burnt some of the bodies and vehicles and looted their firearms (Msughter & Phillips, 2020; Okoli & Uhembe, 2014).

Aondover (2018) remarks that the unlikely success the group recorded against the law enforcement agents sent a shock wave across the nation, as it made the group seem invincible. This signaled a dangerous trend in the evolution of the group and the future of the nation. Thus, the unfortunate success the *Ombatse* had chronicled enhanced their reputation and raised further apprehension among various communities. The fear often heightened more tension and violence in the state

(Shedrack, 2006). Thus, Ayuba (2014, p. 5) argues that "the fear of *Ombats* is the beginning of wisdom."

The Media, Conflict and Mediation

In life, conflict is inevitable in the affairs of man. Conflict is a clash of interest or ideas, covertly or violently over value. The work of Marshal McLuhan rekindled efforts in assessing the impact of the media in conflict mediation (Crowley, 2013). Pauli (2007) adds that the media alone cannot end conflict, but its roles and contribution facilitate smooth resolution processes. It facilitates for third party intervention. Galtung (2010), one of the leading forerunners of peace and conflict studies, identifies two stages of conflict. According to him, latent conflict is often the first phase, where interests clash. It can best be managed at this stage before it slips out of control. The conflicting parties are expected to engage in effective listening and communication. Mediation and negation are more likely to be effective at this level (Pauli, 2007).

On the other hand, manifest conflict is violent. For journalists, this is less intellectually demanding, than the latent conflict; all that is required is to cover as it unfolds. Salawu (2010) noted that in most wars, the goal of journalists appears to be predicting the victor and vanquished, the winner and the loser adding that, "if these roles are not discernible, it is assumed the conflict has been in vain; the no winner, no vanquished is unattractive to the kind of conflict reporting in the media today." In conflict mediation, when media content is confined to objectivity, holding grip the ethical practice of recognizing only newsworthy elements of news, "journalism tends to become mechanical and less intellectual in bringing about peace in a conflict. In this regard, the media is conflict-sensitive, focusing more on mediation frames (Abba et al., 2021).

Crowley (2011) notes that since society has drastically changed, the media needs to change accordingly to address challenges. Pauli (2007) supported that this kind of journalistic perspective constitutes a departure from the mainstream media: therefore, it requires a different mindset for journalism.

Over the years, the media has made a worthy positive impact on several conflicts, proving the role of the media in conflict mediation; one of such notables was CBS television; Walter Cronkite, a CBS news anchor in 1977, made a breakthrough journalistic performance in the Mideast politics. Walter, for the first time, brought together Anwar Sadat, the then-Egyptian president, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin. The invitation made a landmark victory in the relationship between the two countries and prepared the ground for the 1978 agreement. This mediation broke a 30-year stalemate in the Arab Israeli diplomatic relations (Cronkite, 2007).

This form of approach to news media coverage of conflict is a departure from the media today. First formal meeting to intervene in the policy clash between members of

the African National Congress and some of the proponents of apartheid system in South Africa was hosted by Ted Koppel in 1985 in a series of ABC nightline programmes, a South African state run Broadcasting Corporation (Kurfi et al., 2021). This form of approach to news media coverage of conflict is a departure from the media today since it is no longer practiced.

These striking performances have prompted calls for exploration of journalism's peacekeeping potentials, a subject that has received little attention in research. This according to Malam (2006) paves way for more media professionals, sharing a desire to use those potentials more broadly, have initiated or facilitated experimental projects that draw on conflict resolution techniques and create what is variously called peace journalism, conflict sensitive journalism, and media intervention.

Review of Related Studies

Recently, the focus on the agenda-setting tradition of the mass media has significantly shifted to framing and priming theory research. These models have drawn much scholarly attention. Due to the changing concept, researchers, since the early1980s have become increasingly infatuated with news framing research to find forces that shape news media contents based on more theoretically and methodologically strong ideas. This shift was a major break from the early assumption of the hypodermic needle and magic-bullet models of the 1920s and 1930s (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) note that framing denotes a method of media presentation that aligns with the preexisting cognitive frameworks of the audience. Of course, this does not connote the media spins a story to deceive the audience. To them, it is a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of news content (Rabiu, 2013). In the period of conflict, framing provides an emotional connection between the readers and the news subjects, therefore binds readers to emotional inclination or detachment from the news subject (where the subjects are presented as either the victims or the perpetrators) (Cosand, 2014). Framing structures the social world and therefore, remains the parameter for discussing reality (Ghanem, 2009).

Generally, tone denotes the idiosyncrasy of an individual in speech or writing over time, the way and manner issues are expressed, which encompasses the degree of viewpoint and diction. In this way, the tone of news stories could be positive, negative or neutral. Researchers acknowledge that frames entail a series of mediating factors, these combined and shape public perception. Teng'O (2008) observes that some media, most often, employ a neutral tone, which is the ideal cardinal principle in standard journalism. On the other hand, Brunken (2006) remarks that media, in its attempt to interpret and analyze an event, tends to be more descriptive. However, what is important is whether or not the content is subjective or objective (Osaghae, 2005). In

their study on media framing of terrorism, they established a standard of measurement, nominal versus descriptive tone. The former reports unfolding events as they were, devoid of judgment; the latter is subjected to journalistic perspective, which could be positive or negative.

Frames around an issue may redirect audience perception without altering the fact, so framing may be seen as shaping and packaging of some forms of rhetoric to reorient the audience's central axis of thoughts and interpretation. Touri & Koteyko (2015) explain that emotional resonance greatly impacts the recipient's perception of a specific issue. Examining the newspaper portrayal of Nursing Homes, Miller et al (2013) discovered that 49.2% of the articles were negative, 40.3% were neutral and 10.5% positive. In examining how the media portray people with disability in Nigeria, a content analytical study of *Daily Trust* and *Tribune* newspapers, Oshita (2013) found that people with disability are often portrayed negatively, adding that they are portrayed in stereotypically offensive language. Such derogatory frames often employed were, "crippled,' 'beggars' handicapped, less privilege' in reference to disability.

This, according to him, affirmed Okoli & Uhembe's (2014) view that society holds a negative or positive view of people living with disability subject to how they are placed in the papers. In the experiment on how terrorism news shapes U.S foreign policy, Gadarian (2010) holds that a striking difference exists between citizens' views, especially when the news becomes more emotional. The study revealed that the role of the media is more than just relying on information; it exerts great influence on the reader's perspective and decision-making process. Shana further argues that after the September 11 U.S attacks, the media's emphasis on terrorism and the uses of imagery combined and increased the public's tendency to support political policies.

In the study of online news media coverage of Weight Loss Surgery and Related Media Comments, using Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Glenn et al. (2012) discovered that 63% of the tone of the article was mostly positive, and 56% of the comments were predominantly negative and often derogatory. Another study on conflict-sensitive reporting in Northern Nigeria uses qualitative research techniques (Bello & Ayodele, 2018). The study indicated the media for igniting tension or exacerbating conflict. The study further recommended that in a conflict situation, the media should be a mediator among the warring parties; words must be chosen with caution. This is because any word written or spoken could be a weapon in the hands and hearts of victims or perpetrators (Pate, 2002).

In his work on conflict-sensitive journalism on the Jos crisis (2010-2011) using the *Guardian, Punch, Daily Trust,* and *National Standard* newspapers, Jimoh (2015) found that 30.5% of the coverage reflected conciliatory language, and 32.2% was inciting. 11.3% were sensational in tune, and 26% were considered neutral. Mohammadzadeh's (2016)

study on the analysis of the reportage of the Jos crisis and the *Boko Haram* violence in Northeast Nigeria by some selected newspapers revealed that the way and the manner newspapers build conflict news stories could further legitimize conflicts. The study heavily indicts the media for igniting tension. The study further recommended that the media must promote doctrines of peace and reasons for co-existence among the diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.

In their study of print media framing of Boko Haram, Okoro & Odoemelam (2013) discovered that Nigerian newspapers use more positive frames in terms of government intervention. Accordingly, such positive frames are germane to minimizing insurgency, adding that coverage emphasizing ethnic and religious frames is detrimental to Nigeria's corporate existence. The two are also relevant in the treatment of frames. One more striking similarity is in their findings. Both showed newspapers' alignment with the government using positive frames in terms of government interventions.

Olayoku (2019) suggests that the media were actively biased and promoted a particular frame. The study sampled *Daily Trust* and *Eggon News* newspapers. *Daily Trust* is a private newspaper based in Abuja, while *Eggon News* is a community-based monthly newspaper owned and published by the *Eggon* people. The study examined the issue of labeling by the two newspapers. While the *Eggon News* labeled the Fulani as 'mercenaries and 'militia,' the Daily Trust profiled the Ombatse as a 'cult group' and ethnic militia.' However, in his submission, they argued that there was a dire need for journalists to be conflict-sensitive in a way that it would take a key role in conflict resolution through various frames.

Drawing closer ties between the previous studies and the present, the works employed content analytical approaches to the studies of conflicts; the *Ombatse* fracas led to the unprecedented destruction of lives and properties in the state. The findings of the two studies showed that the newspapers could not positively shape public perception of the conflict and bring it to an end earlier. Another stricken relevance is the studies were anchored on framing theory. The previous focused on ethnic profiling of the *Ombatse* using words such as "cult group, *Ombatse* killers," and so on. Ethnic profiling itself is an aspect of framing. It falls within the ethnic frame. Looking at the various studies, the media plays a significant role in the conflict. The news it projects may either inflame or deflate passion toward conflict resolution and reconstruction processes.

Theoretical Framework

Maikaba (2015) asserts that theories assist researchers in navigating realities. Its beauty lies in connecting study to theory and then gives a better perspective of the research problem. Accordingly, Aondover (2018) remarked that the media use a variety of frames

to structure and simplify narratives in guiding audience perception of an issue. This study was anchored on framing and mediator theories of the mass media to examine newspapers reportage of the *Ombatse* and its activities. Such synergy provides a wider perspective of the media's role in the phenomenon.

Evident amass that the media thrives on crises. This interesting news value attracts both reporters and editors to stress combative themes in news reports. The news may either deflate or inflame passion toward the resolution of such mayhem. Pauli (2007) adds that journalism has played a role in some historic moments in conflict resolution, and an emerging group of scholars and practitioners are exploring the further potential of journalism in promoting peace. So, the mediator theory explains that 'media serves as host and chair bringing parties together' for the purpose of establishing peace among warring communities. Similarly, the framing theory popularized by Erving Goffman in 1977 explains how the media shape and present telescopic news content to influence public understanding of such events. Ibuot (2019) noted that a more subtle effect of the media is its ability to alter feelings through persuasion.

METHOD

This study adopted content analysis, which is a quantitative approach to examine the manifest content in the *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers on the activities of the *Ombatse* group. Pilot study suggested the two Northern newspapers covered the *Ombatse* significantly, presumably because of their proximity to the affected communities. Framing theory explains that the media consciously or unconsciously create frames through predefined and narrow conceptualization designed to enhance news understanding from a particular angle. In light of this, Rabiu (2013) adds that people with a limited understanding of an issue need not just the information but also rely on the media for understanding and interpretation of such events. The theory helps us understand how the selected two northern newspapers – *Daily Trust* and the *Leadership* framed the *Ombatse* conflict and its pattern of news frames.

The study further applied the census sampling technique in the selection of the specific editions based on their informational need (Bengtsson, 2016). This method offers an enumeration of all members of the designed population. For this reason, the study examined all copies of *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers within the study period and retrieved the needed information. An ethnographic approach to content analysis was employed. This allowed the use of numbers, tables, and texts in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The information was analyzed using a simple percentage. Coding sheets were developed for data collection and utilization while the unit of analysis was news stories. Holsti's (1969) formula was applied in the calculation

of inter-coder reliability, 2M/(N1+N2). The result showed good agreement between the coders, as shown below:

Reliability = 2M/N1+N2 = 2(179)/(179+199) = 0.94

The study employed three frames ranging from neutral, positive, and negative as examined thus:

Neutral: This is a news story on Ombatse conflicts from 2012 to 2015 by the selected newspapers, which evoked mixed reactions.

Positive: This is a news story on Ombatse conflicts that was not supported by the selected newspapers from 2012 to 2015.

Negative: this is a news story on *Ombatse* conflicts with support by the selected newspapers in the 2012-2015.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the narrative frames of the news stories on *Ombatse* conflicts in Daily Trust and Leadership from 2012 to 2015 on an individual level. *Daily Trust* shows higher percentages of positive and negative narrative frames than *Leadership*. *Leadership* shows a higher percentage than *Daily Trust* in the neutral narrative frame.

Table 1

Individual Narrative Frames of the News Stories on Ombatse Conflicts in Daily Trust and Leadership, 2012–2015

Narrative frames	Frequency				Total (%)
	2012	2013	2014	2015	
Daily Trust					
Positive	–	24	8	2	34 (34.7%)
Negative	2	42	10	–	54 (55.1%)
Neutral	2	4	4	–	10 (10.2%)
Total	4	70	22	2	98 (100%)
Leadership					
Positive	–	21	4	0	25 (30.5%)
Negative	–	24	9	2	35 (42.7%)
Neutral	1	15	5	1	22 (26.8%)
Total	1	60	18	3	82 (100%)

Source: Author's analysis.

Table 2 summarizes cumulative narrative frames of the news stories on *Ombatse* conflicts in *Daily Trust* and *Leadership*. From the data, 89 new stories representing 49.4%, were negative, 59 (32.8%) were positive, and 32(17.8%) were neutral. From the analysis, it was established that the two newspapers were more negative in their reportage of the activities of the *Ombatse*. This finding validates the outcome of previous studies like

Otufodunrin (2013) and Rabiu (2013) that media can decide to make conflicts more complex and difficult to resolve. In this regard, *Daily Trust* appeared more negative than the *Leadership* newspaper.

Table 2

Cumulative Narrative Frames of the News Stories on Ombatse Conflicts in Daily Trust and Leadership

Narrative frames	Daily Trust	Leadership	Total	%
Positive	34	25	59	32.80%
Negative	54	35	89	49.40%
Neutral	10	22	32	17.80%
Total	98	82	180	100.00%

Source: Author's analysis.

Findings also suggested that negative media reports on the *Ombatse* predominated and negatively influenced what people had of the *Ombatse*, therefore lodged fears in the hearts of the affected and the neighboring communities. The negativity of the reports exacerbated more tension and displacement of the various ethnic communities. Ayuba (2014) corroborates that the unfortunate success the *Ombatse* had recorded against various ethnic groups and the federal forces made, "the fear of *Ombatse*, the beginning of wisdom."

Within the theoretical postulations, framing and mediator theories of the mass media examine newspaper reportage of the *Ombatse* and its activities. Such synergy provides a wider perspective of the media's role in the phenomenon. In this direction, evident amass that the media thrive on crises. This interesting news value attracts reporters and editors to stress combative themes in news reports. The news may either deflate or inflame passion toward the resolution of such mayhem. Pauli (2007) adds that journalism has played a role in some historic moments in conflict resolution, and an emerging group of scholars and practitioners are exploring the further potential of journalism in promoting peace. So, the mediator theory explains that 'media serves as host and chair bringing parties together' for the purpose of establishing peace among warring communities.

CONCLUSION

The increased media coverage of conflict has been the reason for the renewed interest in the media and conflict research. This growing interest facilitated the growth of models that shape news content and the better role the media play in conflict management, and resolution. As the mediation effect is getting more global strength and attention, positive news framing patterns help facilitate conflict resolution and peace-building process. However, in the period of the *Ombatse* phenomenon, Nigerian

newspapers had not given considerable attention to facilitate mediation, instead, its negative frames sprayed more fear beyond the immediate communities; though, conflict itself is tension, fear, terror and horror. The *Ombatse* died naturally after the alleged killing of the group's spiritual leader, Ala Agu popularly known as Baba Alakyo by Fulani men during a fierce battle in Lakyo village in 2015.

Therefore, the study recommended journalists should be trained and retrained on conflict-sensitive reporting and the art of conflict mediation, focusing more on positive news frames, especially in a multi-ethnic and fragile country like Nigeria. Such positivity of media frames is germane in minimizing tension and resolving conflict amid mutual suspicion. This paper also recommends the art of conflict resolution and conflict-sensitive reporting through positive framing patterns as they serve as timely interventions to incessant conflicts in the country.

Author Contributions

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Department of Mass Communication, Nasarawa State University Keffi, Keffi, Nigeria.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not required for this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to institutional policies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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