

The Role of Mass Media in Protracted Social Conflict Within Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Protracted social conflict has remained a persistent feature of Plateau State, Nigeria, with mass media playing a critical role in shaping public understanding and responses to such disputes. This study examined the role of mass media in the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict, focusing on media reportage, framing patterns, and ownership influences. An ex-post-facto survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 2,000 respondents drawn from six conflict-prone local government areas in Plateau State: Jos North, Jos South, Barkin Ladi, Mangu, Pankshin, and Shandam. The sample comprised 52.1% males and 47.9% females, predominantly aged 26–35 years (35%) and 36–45 years (28.3%), with most respondents having a tertiary education (51.5%) and regular daily media exposure (71.5%). Descriptive statistics revealed that 68.4% perceived media reportage as sensational during conflict periods, while 61.7% believed media reports influenced public hostility and fear. Inferential analysis using regression and chi-square tests showed that media reportage significantly influenced conflict escalation or de-escalation ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.05$), reportage patterns significantly affected public perception and conflict behaviour ($p < 0.05$), and media ownership and journalists' affiliations significantly influenced conflict reporting ($\chi^2 = 45.73, p < 0.05$). The study concludes that irresponsible media practices contribute to the persistence of protracted social conflict in Plateau State and recommends the adoption of peace journalism, enhanced professional training, and stronger regulatory oversight.

Keywords

Conflict Escalation, Mass Media, Media Framing, Peace Journalism, Protracted Social Conflict.

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Introduction

The mass media occupy a central position in modern societies as primary channels through which citizens receive information, interpret social realities, and form opinions about public issues. In conflict-prone societies, the role of the media becomes even more critical, as news reports can either promote understanding and peaceful coexistence or intensify hostility and violence (McQuail, 2010). The power of the media lies not only in their ability to disseminate information rapidly but also in their capacity to frame issues, define actors, and legitimize interpretations of events (Entman, 1993).

Nigeria has experienced numerous internal conflicts rooted in ethnic, religious, political, and economic tensions. Among the most persistent are the recurrent crises in Plateau State, which have evolved into what can be described as protracted social conflict. These conflicts are characterised by their longevity, deep-seated grievances, identity-based divisions, and cyclical patterns of violence (Azar, 1990). Over the years, episodes of violence in Plateau State have attracted intense media coverage at local, national, and international levels.

While the media are expected to function as neutral conveyors of verified information, evidence suggests that conflict reportage in Nigeria is often sensational, ethnically framed, and politically influenced (Galadima, 2009; Yoroms, 2019). Such reportage may heighten fear, reinforce stereotypes, and provoke retaliatory actions among affected communities. Conversely, responsible and peace-oriented reporting has the potential to foster dialogue, promote empathy, and support conflict resolution efforts (Galtung, 2006).

Despite the centrality of the media in conflict dynamics, empirical studies focusing on how media practices contribute to the persistence of protracted social conflict in Plateau State remain limited. This study, therefore, examines the role of mass media in shaping conflict escalation, public perception, and reportage patterns within the context of Plateau State.

Statement of the Problem

Protracted social conflict in Plateau State has persisted for over two decades, resulting in loss of lives, destruction of property, displacement of populations, and deepening mistrust among ethnic and religious groups. Despite numerous peace initiatives and security interventions, violent episodes continue to recur, suggesting that structural and communicative factors sustaining the conflict have not been adequately addressed.

One critical but insufficiently examined factor is the role of the mass media. Media coverage of conflicts in Plateau State is often accused of being biased, sensational, and ethnically or religiously slanted. Headlines that emphasize identity, selective reporting of casualties, and the use of inflammatory language have been observed during crisis periods (Galadima & Olaniyi, 2019). Such practices risk aggravating tensions and legitimizing violence.

Furthermore, media ownership structures and journalists' personal affiliations may compromise objectivity and professional ethics, leading to reportage that aligns with sectional interests rather

than public peace (McChesney, 2008). When audiences perceive the media as partisan, trust erodes, and misinformation thrives, further complicating conflict resolution efforts.

The problem, therefore, lies in the inadequate understanding of how media reportage, framing patterns, and ownership influences interact to sustain protracted social conflict in Plateau State. Without empirical evidence on these relationships, efforts to reform media practices and promote peace-oriented journalism remain weak and ineffective.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of mass media in protracted social conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. To examine the role of mass media reportage in the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State.
- ii. To assess the effect of media reportage patterns on public perception and conflict behaviour.
- iii. To find out the influence of media ownership and journalists' affiliations on conflict reportage in Plateau State.

Research Questions

- i. What role does mass media reportage play in the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State?
- ii. How do media reportage patterns influence public perception and conflict behaviour?
- iii. To what extent do media ownership and journalists' affiliations influence conflict reportage in Plateau State?

Research Hypotheses

- i. H₁: Media reportage significantly influences the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State.
- ii. H₂: Media reportage patterns significantly affect public perception and conflict behaviour.
- iii. H₃: Media ownership and journalists' affiliations significantly influence conflict reportage in Plateau State.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between mass media practices and protracted social conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria. The framework is premised on the assumption that the mass media, through their patterns of reportage, ownership structures, and journalists' professional and social affiliations, significantly influence the trajectory of violent conflicts—either by escalating tensions or by promoting de-escalation and peaceful coexistence.

The framework integrates insights from Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Peace Journalism Theory, which collectively emphasize the power of the media in shaping public understanding, attitudes, and responses to conflict situations. These theories suggest that the way conflicts are selected, framed, and emphasized by the media determines how audiences interpret events and react to them.

Independent Variables: Mass Media Factors The independent variables in this study are dimensions of mass media operations that shape conflict narratives:

- i. **Media Reportage Style** This refers to how conflict issues are reported, including the tone, language, framing, and emphasis placed on violent events. Reportage may be sensational and conflict-oriented or balanced and peace-oriented. Sensational reporting tends to highlight violence, blame, and ethnic or religious divisions, while peace-oriented reporting emphasizes dialogue, context, and reconciliation.
- ii. **Media Ownership Structure** Ownership structure influences editorial independence and content orientation. Government-owned and privately owned media organizations often reflect the ideological, political, or economic interests of their owners, which may affect objectivity and balance in conflict reporting.
- iii. **Journalists' Affiliations and Location** Journalists' ethnic identity, religious affiliation, political orientation, and proximity to conflict zones may consciously or unconsciously influence news selection, framing, and interpretation, particularly in deeply polarized conflict environments such as Plateau State.

Intervening Variable: Public Perception

Public perception serves as the intervening (mediating) variable in the framework. It captures how audiences interpret media messages related to conflict. Media content shapes public emotions and attitudes such as fear, mistrust, hostility, empathy, and tolerance. These perceptions determine whether citizens support violent actions, withdraw into segregated communities, or embrace dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Dependent Variable: Protracted Social Conflict Dynamics:

The dependent variable is the nature and outcome of protracted social conflict. This includes:

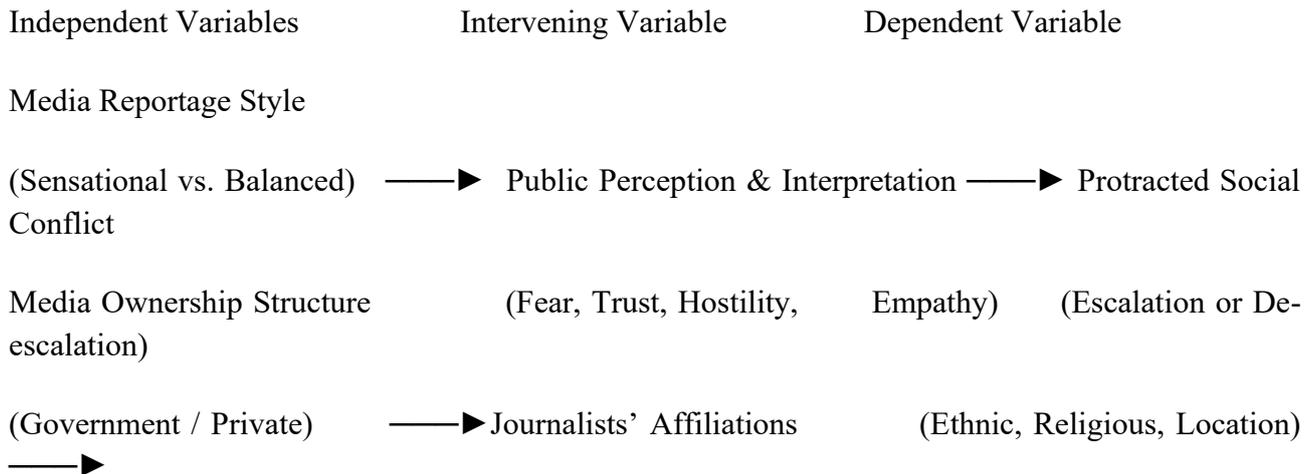
- i. Conflict escalation, manifested in increased violence, reprisals, polarization, and breakdown of social relations; or
- ii. Conflict de-escalation, reflected in reduced violence, improved intergroup relations, dialogue, and peacebuilding initiatives.

Underlying Assumptions of the Framework

The framework is built on the following assumptions:

- i. The mass media do not operate in isolation but are influenced by social, political, and economic structures within society.
- ii. Repeated exposure to biased, sensational, or ethnocentric media content reinforces negative stereotypes, fear, and hostility among audiences.
- iii. Ethical, balanced, and peace-oriented journalism can foster understanding, tolerance, and conflict transformation.
- iv. Public perception mediates the relationship between media messages and conflict behaviour

Diagrammatic Representation of the Conceptual Framework



This conceptual framework provides a logical basis for examining how mass media practices influence conflict dynamics in Plateau State. It directly aligns with the study's objectives and hypotheses by explaining the pathways through which media reportage affects public perception and, ultimately, the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict.

Empirical Review

Media Role in Conflict Escalation or De-escalation

Empirical evidence consistently indicates that the mass media play a pivotal role in shaping conflict dynamics. Conflict-oriented or sensational reporting can amplify fear, mistrust, and hostility among communities, thereby escalating violent incidents (Galtung, 2006; Wolfsfeld, 2015). In contrast, peace journalism, which emphasizes solution-focused narratives, human stories, and dialogue, has been shown to reduce tensions, foster empathy, and promote constructive engagement among conflicting groups (Galtung, 2006).

In the Nigerian context, research by Yoroms (2019) highlights that media narratives, particularly during ethno-religious crises, often adopt an inflammatory tone that accentuates divisions between communities. Media reports that disproportionately highlight casualties, emphasize group identity, or rely on unverified sources have been linked to heightened communal hostility and retaliatory violence. These findings support the premise that media are not neutral actors but active participants whose reporting can either escalate or de-escalate protracted social conflicts.

Effect of Media Reportage on Public Perception

Empirical studies reveal that the tone, framing, and sourcing of media reports significantly influence public attitudes toward conflict actors and the acceptability of violent responses. Research by Egwu (2021) indicates that exposure to sensational media content correlates with increased fear, stereotyping, and support for aggressive measures among audiences. Conversely, balanced and objective reporting fosters tolerance, encourages empathy for all parties, and enhances public support for dialogue and conflict resolution strategies.

These findings underscore the importance of examining media reportage patterns, including headline language, the prominence of stories, and the selection of sources, as they are critical

determinants of how the public interprets conflicts. Understanding these patterns is essential to devising strategies for responsible media engagement in conflict-prone areas.

Influence of Ownership and Journalists’ Affiliations

Several studies highlight that structural factors within the media industry, such as ownership and journalists’ ethnic or religious affiliations, substantially influence news selection and framing. Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor (1985) found that newspapers owned by local stakeholders tend to report more extensively on conflicts in their regions, often reflecting the perspectives or interests of dominant groups. Similarly, Galadima (2009) observed that in Plateau State, editorial decisions and story framing were sometimes shaped by owners’ political or religious affiliations, resulting in coverage that lacked neutrality.

These findings align with the political economy perspective of media studies, which asserts that ownership and institutional pressures affect content and can compromise objectivity (McChesney, 2008). In conflict contexts, such biases can reinforce existing societal divisions, influence public perception, and, in extreme cases, contribute to further escalation of violence.

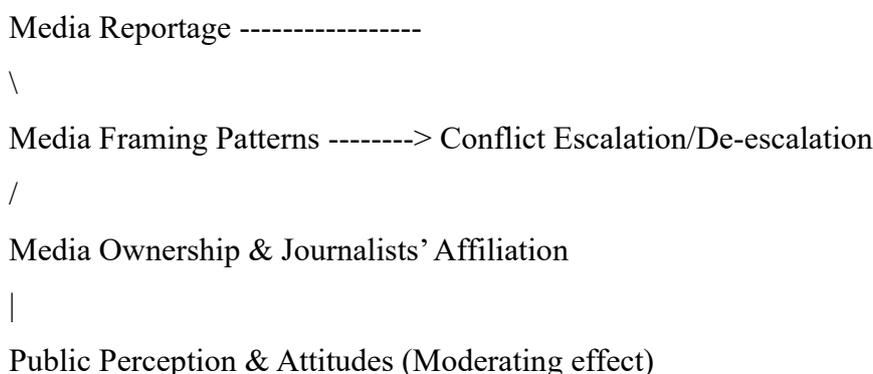
Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework shows the relationship between the independent variables (media practices) and the dependent variable (conflict escalation/de-escalation).

Key Variables

- Independent Variables (IVs):
 1. Media reportage (tone, language, objectivity)
 2. Media framing patterns (identity emphasis, solution orientation)
 3. Media ownership and journalists’ affiliations (ethnic, religious, political bias)
- Dependent Variable (DV):
 1. Conflict escalation or de-escalation
- Moderating Variable:
 1. Public perception and attitudes (fear, trust, tolerance)

Diagrammatic Representation



Explanation of the Framework:

- i. Media reportage (IV) directly influences public perception, which in turn affects the level of conflict escalation or de-escalation.

- ii. Framing patterns determine whether news reporting promotes tension (e.g., ethnic blame) or encourages peace (e.g., solution-focused stories).
- iii. Ownership and journalists' affiliations affect both the tone and framing of news, introducing bias that can either escalate or reduce conflicts.
- iv. Public perception acts as a moderating variable, amplifying or mitigating the impact of media practices on conflict outcomes.

This framework provides a clear, testable model for the study and aligns with the objectives, research questions, and hypotheses of the study.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted an ex-post-facto survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because the variables of interest, media reportage patterns, media ownership influence, and protracted social conflict, had already occurred and could not be manipulated by the researcher. The design enabled the study to examine relationships and predictive effects between mass media practices and conflict dynamics among residents of Plateau State.

The ex-post-facto approach is suitable for social conflict studies where ethical and practical considerations prevent experimental manipulation, while still allowing for statistical testing of hypotheses using observational data.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised of adult residents of Plateau State, particularly those living in conflict-prone areas with sustained exposure to mass media coverage of communal crises.

The target population was drawn from six local government areas that have experienced recurrent episodes of protracted social conflict: Jos North, Jos South, Barkin Ladi, Mangu, Pankshin and Shandam. These areas were selected due to their history of ethno-religious violence and active media coverage during conflict episodes. Using stratified random sampling, a total of 2,000 respondents were selected to ensure adequate representation across gender, age, religion, and ethnic groups.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire titled Mass Media and Protracted Social Conflict Questionnaire (MMPSCQ). The instrument consisted of four sections:

Section A: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Section B: Exposure to mass media and perception of media reportage

Section C: Media reportage patterns and public perception of conflict

Section D: Influence of media ownership, journalists' affiliations, and conflict behaviour

Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1).

The instrument was validated by experts in mass communication and conflict studies, while reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency.

Method of Data Collections

The data for this study were collected using a combination of structured questionnaires and key information interviews (KIIs) to ensure both quantitative and qualitative insights into the role of mass media in protracted social conflict in Plateau State.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	1,042	52.1
	Female	958	47.9
Age (years)	18–25	430	21.5
	26–35	700	35
	36–45	565	28.3
	46–55	200	10
	56+	105	5.2
Education Level	No formal education	75	3.8
	Primary	180	9
	Secondary	715	35.8
	Tertiary	1,030	51.5
Occupation	Student	500	25
	Civil servant	620	31
	Trader/Business	520	26
	Farmer	260	13
	Others	100	5
	Religion	Christianity	1,100
	Islam	850	42.5
	Others	50	2.5
Media Exposure	Daily	1,430	71.5
	3–4 times/week	400	20
	1–2 times/week	100	5
	Rarely/Never	70	3.5

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One H₁: Media reportage significantly influences the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State.

Statistical Technique: Simple linear regression analysis.

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Media Reportage	0.5	10.62	0

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, Hypothesis One is accepted. The result, therefore, means that media reportage significantly influences the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State. Increased exposure to sensational or biased reporting is associated with heightened conflict intensity.

Hypothesis Two H₂: Media reportage patterns significantly affect public perception and conflict behaviour.

Statistical Technique: Multiple Regression Analysis.

Predictor Variable	B	t-value	p-value
Sensational Headlines	0.39	8.74	0.000
Biased Framing	0.31	6.92	0.000
Peace-oriented Reporting	-0.28	-6.11	0.000

All predictors are significant at $p < 0.05$. Hypothesis Two is accepted. The result, therefore, means that conflict-oriented reportage patterns increase hostile public perceptions and support violent responses, while peace-oriented reporting reduces aggressive conflict behaviour.

Hypothesis Three H₃: Media ownership and journalists' affiliations significantly influence conflict reportage.

Statistical Technique: Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence.\

χ^2 Value	Df	p-value
45.73	4	0.000

Since $p < 0.05$, Hypothesis Three is accepted. There is a significant relationship between media ownership, journalists' ethnic or religious affiliations, and the framing of conflict reportage.

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis One: The findings revealed that media reportage significantly influences the escalation or de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State. This confirms that the media are not neutral actors in conflict situations, but rather active agents capable of shaping the trajectories of conflict. Sensational reporting, selective sourcing, and inflammatory language amplify fear and mistrust among communities, often triggering retaliatory violence. This finding aligns with Azar's Protracted Social Conflict theory, which emphasizes communication and perception as critical conflict-sustaining factors.

Hypothesis Two: Results showed that reportage patterns significantly affect public perception and conflict behaviour. Sensational headlines and biased framing were found to increase hostility, reinforce stereotypes, and legitimize violent responses. Conversely, peace-oriented reporting reduced aggressive attitudes and encouraged dialogue. This supports framing theory and peace journalism literature, which argues that the way conflicts are framed determines whether audiences adopt confrontational or conciliatory positions.

Hypothesis Three: The study also found that media ownership and journalists' affiliations have a significant influence on conflict reportage. Ownership interests and personal identities shape editorial decisions, story selection, and framing, often resulting in ethnocentric or partisan narratives. This finding explains public distrust of media neutrality in Plateau State and reinforces the need for stronger ethical safeguards and professional accountability in conflict reporting.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of mass media in the escalation and de-escalation of protracted social conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria. Findings indicate that mass media are not neutral observers but influential actors whose practices significantly shape conflict dynamics. Media reportage was shown to influence public perception, behaviour, and the intensity of conflict episodes, with sensational and identity-driven reporting exacerbating tensions among ethnic and religious groups. Media framing patterns played a decisive role in either promoting fear and hostility or fostering understanding and dialogue. Furthermore, the study found that media ownership structures and journalists' religious and ethnic affiliations affected neutrality, objectivity, and the overall credibility of conflict reporting.

The results confirm that protracted social conflict is not only rooted in structural grievances but is also shaped by the narratives constructed and disseminated by the media. By either escalating tensions through biased and inflammatory reporting or promoting peaceful coexistence through responsible reporting, the mass media have a direct impact on the cycle of conflict. These findings reinforce theoretical perspectives on protracted social conflict (Azar, 1990) and media framing theory (Entman, 1993), demonstrating the critical interface between communication practices and social stability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Institutionalize Peace Journalism Practices. Media organisations should adopt frameworks and guidelines that prioritize peace-oriented reporting. This includes avoiding inflammatory language, reporting on all sides of a conflict, and highlighting solutions and reconciliation efforts rather than solely focusing on violence.
- ii. Regular Conflict-Sensitive Training for Journalists covering conflict-prone areas should undergo continuous professional development on conflict sensitivity, ethical reporting, and verification of sources. Training should emphasize neutrality, the potential social impact of reportage, and the principles of responsible journalism.
- iii. Strengthen Regulatory Oversight Media regulatory bodies, such as the Nigerian Press Council and the National Broadcasting Commission, should rigorously enforce ethical standards, monitor reportage during crises, and sanction media outlets that propagate biased or inflammatory information.
- iv. Promote Editorial Independence and Accountability. Media owners should ensure editorial policies allow reporters to work independently of political, religious, or ethnic pressures. Transparent editorial practices and accountability mechanisms will reduce biased coverage and enhance public trust.

- v. Encourage Dialogue-Oriented Programming. Media houses should produce programmes that encourage dialogue, mutual understanding, and community engagement. Initiatives such as conflict analysis, debate programmes with balanced perspectives, and community radio discussions can help reduce mistrust and promote social cohesion.
- vi. Incorporate Media Literacy and Public Awareness Campaigns Policymakers, civil society, and the media should collaborate on programmes that educate the public on interpreting news critically, recognising bias, and seeking verified information. Increased media literacy reduces the likelihood of public manipulation and helps mitigate conflict escalation.
- vii. Leverage Media for Conflict Early Warning Systems. Media can be strategically integrated into early warning mechanisms by reporting on emerging tensions responsibly, allowing authorities and communities to respond proactively before conflicts escalate.

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