

# Nexus Between the Media and Countering Terrorism in Nigeria: A Discourse

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**Abstract:** Terrorism has assumed a global dimension sparing no part of the world. Almost every part of the globe has had its unfortunate share of the menace of terrorism in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the last two decades (2001-2021), terrorism has spread from the Middle-East to America, Europe, Africa and other parts of the world with successful deadly attacks resulting in humongous fatalities. Major actors in terrorism include the terrorist groups, their sponsors, governments' security forces, the victims and the media. Because of the important role the media play in the public space, this discourse examines the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism with reference to Nigeria. Anchored on the theories of agenda-setting, news framing and priming, the paper examines the nature of terrorism, purpose of terrorism, causes of terrorism, terrorism and organized crime, symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism, and ultimately the role of the media in combating terrorism in the world in general and Nigeria in particular. Cases of some notable terrorist attacks as reported in the Nigerian media were cited as illustrations.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Media, Organized crime, Symbiotic relationship, Case studies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism, formerly restricted to the Middle East in decades past, has assumed a global dimension sparing no part of the world. Almost every part of the globe has had its unfortunate share of the menace of terrorism in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As a matter of fact, terrorism has in the last two decades (2001-2021), spread from the Middle-East to America, Europe, Africa and other parts of the world with successful deadly attacks resulting in humongous fatalities. Major actors in terrorism include the terrorist groups, their sponsors, governments' security forces, the victims and the media. The media, being the fastest route to public space, are being courted by both state and non-state actors as well as the citizens. To this end, terrorist groups also covet the media for the purpose of propagating their activities. According to the Council of Europe (2017), "New dynamics of terrorism and the move to an increasingly digital and social media environment, with its wide reach and unprecedented speed with which information spreads across online channels, in particular pose a serious challenge to reporting on the issue." This paper, therefore, attempts a discourse on nexus between the media and countering terrorism in Nigeria.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored on the theories of agenda-setting, news framing and priming. Agenda setting theory, propounded by US scholars Maxwell MaxCombs and Donald Shaw, holds that the media provide the clue on what the people (audience)

should focus their attention on or rather think about at a given period. The scholars surveyed North Carolina voters during the 1968 U.S. presidential election and found that what people thought were the most important issues were what the mass media reported as the most critical (Bajracharya, 2018). This shows the influence the media exert on the people, and as such, the media continued reportage of terrorism can shift public attention to terrorist activities over other issues in the society.

Framing, an offshoot of agenda setting, was developed by Goffman in 1974 in his book, *Frame Analysis* (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). It deals with how the media present certain information to the public in terms of structure and organisation. It employs the strategy of selection, emphasis and exclusion by deliberately selecting a particular issue for public discourse, emphasising certain aspects of that issue and excluding other aspects or other issues altogether. According to Bajracharya (2018), "frame is how a specific piece of information is shown by the media to audience and how it is organized or structured. Frame influences the mindset (perception) of people and impacts their decision making on the topic which is changed by media". This implies that how the media present terrorist activities influence the public perception about terrorism.

Priming theory, promulgated by Iyengar, Peters and Kinder in 1982, deals with the way media images and expressions influence the minds of the people. For instance, terms recently used in the Nigerian media like #EndSars, #BringBackOurGirls, Boko Haram, Fuel Subsidy, e.t.c, have become noticeable in the brains of most Nigerians because of their frequent occurrence in the media. Thus, priming theory talks about the process of how media images control the mind of audience in a psychological way (Businessstopia, 2018).

Agenda setting, framing and priming are interrelated as they are all considered as theories of media effects. Thus, they wield certain levels of influence on the public. Comparing them, it is clear that while agenda setting provides the public what to think about, framing tells the people how to think about it by providing specific angles of frames. Priming on the other hand, though developed after agenda setting is considered to precede agenda setting theory. Comparing the two, Businessstopia (2018) argues that priming is also taken as an effect of agenda setting as it is done before setting an agenda since priming provides basic perception and relative comparison, which makes judgment easier and quicker. The media have much influence on the public as people's opinions are, to a certain extent, shaped by media reports. Terrorists understand this which is why they covet media reportage of their activities in

order to create fear and panic in the minds of the people and thus project them (terrorists) as gaining the upper hand. The media, on the other hand, are capable of either up scaling or downplaying terrorist activities by the way they frame and prime their reports thereby setting the tone for public discourse (agenda setting).

*Terrorism defined*

An acceptable definition of terrorism is hard to come by because motives, targets and modus operandi of terrorism differ from one case to another. However, a few definitions will suffice. Merriam-Webster (2021) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use or threat of violence especially against the state or the public as a politically motivated means of attack or coercion”. The UN Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) defines it as: “criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.” Similarly, the US Code of Federal Regulations (2005) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” The European Union in Art.1 of the Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (2002) says:











Terrorist offences are certain criminal offences set out in a list comprised largely of serious offences against persons and property which: given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.

The above definitions cover the meaning of terrorism, the motives as well as the methods used by terrorists. Terrorism is two-fold—domestic and international—with the former being executed within a country by its own citizens without foreign involvement and the latter transcending national boundaries being connected to foreign governments or groups.

In Nigeria, several terrorist and criminal groups abound. Njoku (2019) listed Boko Haram, Farmer-herder clashes, Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), Niger-Delta and Cameroon as five security challenges that Nigeria’s leader must tackle. Other terrorist groups operating in Nigeria according to Ojewale (2021) include: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS); Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM); Al Quaida in the Islamic Maghreb (a splinter of Boko Haram popularly referred to as the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP); and Fulani Herdsmen of West Africa (once rated the fourth-deadliest terror group in the world). Thus, in global

terrorism index, Nigeria is ranked the third behind Afghanistan and Iraq (See Table 1).

Table I: 2020 Global Terrorism Index (regarding 2019).

2020 Global Terrorism Index (regarding 2019) <sup>[5]</sup>			
Rank	Country	Score (2020)	Rank change
1	 Afghanistan	9.592	—
2	 Iraq	8.682	—
3	 Nigeria	8.314	—
4	 Syria	7.778	—
5	 Somalia	7.645	▲ 1
6	 Yemen	7.581	▲ 1
7	 Pakistan	7.541	▼ 2
8	 India	7.353	—
9	 Democratic Republic of the Congo	7.178	▲ 1
10	 Philippines	7.099	▼ 1

Source: Global Terrorism Index (2020)

Nevertheless, both state actors and non-state actors account for violent deaths in Nigeria. Table 2 shows the number of violent deaths caused by political instability and citizen alienation in Nigeria between 2011 and 2021, by perpetrators.

Table II: Number of violent deaths caused by political instability and citizen alienation in Nigeria between 2011 and 2021, by perpetrator.

State Actor	13,242
Boko Haram	18,397
Boko Haram & State Actor	22,138
Sectarian Actor	12,201
Other Armed Actor	10,081

Source: Statista (2021).

III. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Scholars have undertaken a number of studies on media and terrorism. Jetter (2017) examined the effect of US television coverage on Al-Qaeda attacks. Asking the question of whether media coverage of a terrorist organization encouraged their execution of further attacks, the study analyzed the day-to-day news coverage of Al-Qaeda on US television since September 9, 2011 and the group’s terrorist strikes. To isolate causality, the author used disaster deaths worldwide as an exogenous variation that crowds out Al-Qaeda coverage in an instrumental variable framework. Findings suggested “a positive and statistically powerful effect of CNN, NBC, CBS, and Fox News coverage on subsequent Al-Qaeda attacks. This result is robust to a battery of alternative estimations, extensions, and placebo regressions. One minute of Al-Qaeda coverage in a 30-minute news segment causes approximately one attack in the upcoming week, equivalent to 4.9 casualties, on average.”

Another study on media and terrorism was that conducted by Nelson and Scott (2007). They investigated whether media

coverage empirically causes terrorism by exploring the link between terrorism and media attention using a terrorism micro data set with media variables with particular reference to incidents in the *New York Times* as a proxy for media attention. They further measured which specific characteristics of terrorist events attracted notice by the media and the effects those characteristics had on media coverage. The authors, however, found that media attention did not cause terrorism.

Keranen and Virginia (2008) also examined the media coverage of terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Entitled: "'Oxygen of Publicity' and 'Lifeblood of Liberty' Communication Scholarship on Mass Media Coverage of Terrorism for the Twenty-first Century," The authors evaluated the strengths, limitations, and gaps in scholarship on mainstream mass-mediated news coverage of terrorism. It also listed an agenda for research that cuts across traditional context based divisions of communication research. The study synthesized various conceptions of terrorism as communication and presented models of terrorism's relationship to the media with reference to television, print, Internet, and multi modal international news coverage of terrorism that cut across interpersonal, organizational, religious, and new media subfields of the communication discipline.

Abimbola (2020) explored the ethical and legal considerations of media and hate speech. Specifically, the paper was a self-affirmative discourse on the concept and types of hate speech as it relates to the media and presented ways to address the menace through ethical and legal frameworks. It argued that hate speech is a crime and that it is on the rise and recommended that stakeholders in the media industry should work together to tame the monster of hate speech through ethical and legal means.

#### *Purpose of terrorism*

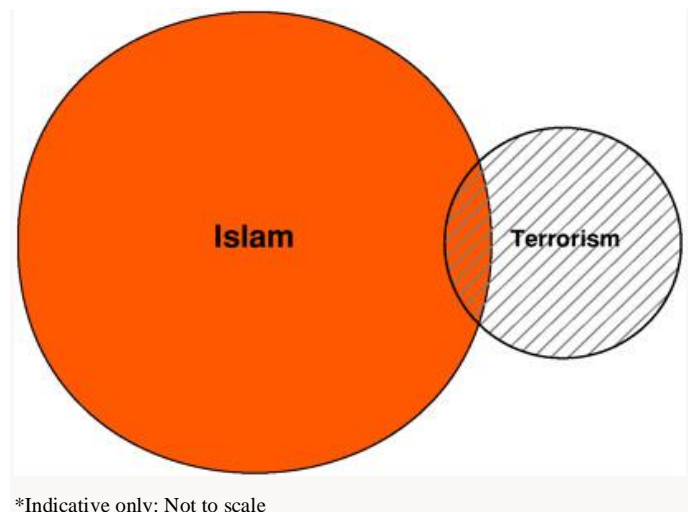
Terrorism is not without purpose, aim and objectives. The UN says the purpose is "to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act" (UN Security Council Resolution, 2004). This implies that terrorist groups/organisations have the intent of pursuing an agenda driven by an ideology and trying to foist such on the public through violent means. Moreover, terrorist groups exploit the media for maximum attainable publicity to reinforce their activities in order to influence the targeted audience(s) for a desired end.

#### *Causes of terrorism*

The causes of terrorism in the world continue to be a subject of debate and controversy and they vary from country to country. Some of the suggested causes include: "poverty," "inequality," "globalization," "technology," "energy," "oil," "Islam," "Islamic fundamentalism," and "psychopathy," among others. As a matter of fact, most terrorist groups lay claim to Islam but members of such groups are none the less extremists and

fundamentaists. See Figure 1 on the relationship between Islam and terrorism.

Figure 1: Islam and Terrorism.



\*Indicative only: Not to scale

Source: National Research Council. (2002).

Lia and Skjøberg. (2004) have listed the theories over the causes of terrorism to include:

- Perceptions of deprivation and inequality, especially amongst culturally defined groups. This can lead to civil violence, of which terrorism may be a part. Terrorism represents social control from below, as attacks are directed upon targets symbolising central government or a superior community.
- A lack of political legitimacy and continuity, as well as a lack of integration for the political fringes, encourages ideological terrorism. The potential is exacerbated by ethnic diversity.
- Terrorism in one country can spillover into neighbouring areas. Mass media can influence the patterns of terrorism by enhancing agenda setting, increasing lethality and expanding the transnational character.
- A skewed gender balance and high proportion of unmarried males increases the association with intra-societal violence and instability. Political and criminally motivated violence is largely the work of young unmarried men.
- Windows of opportunity when terrorist violence can serve to influence opinion and resource. In the case of peace agreements, radical members of coalition groups resume and escalate hostilities to undermine confidence and prevent compromise, thus regaining the initiative and avoiding marginalisation.
- Hegemony in the international system by one or two actors will cause a high level of transnational anti-systematic terrorism as a war by proxy develops. Therefore, terrorism can represent a backlash against globalisation and modernisation.



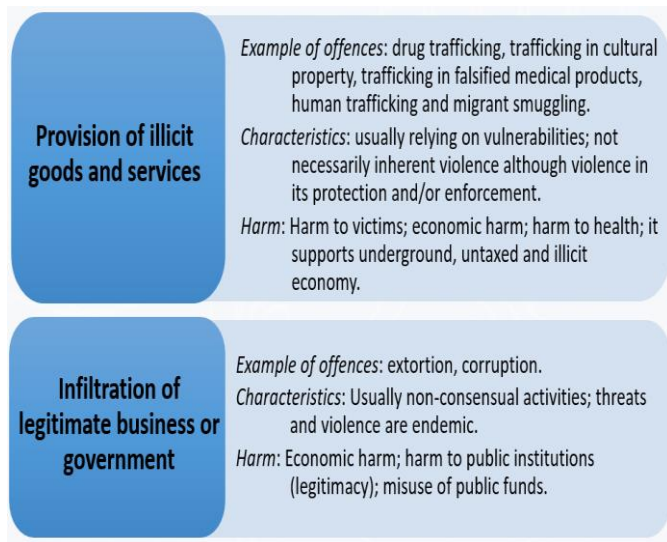
The authors opine that societies that are more exposed tend to be:

- Poor societies with weak state structures. These are more exposed to civil wars than wealthier countries, and therefore the risk of terrorism increases.
- States engaged in democratic transition rather than democratic or authoritarian regimes. Levels of transnational terrorism are highest in semi-authoritarian states.
- Undergoing societal changes brought through modernisation. Thus creating the conditions for terrorism through mobility, communication, widespread targets and audiences.
- Weak and collapsed states that contribute to international terrorism. Ongoing or past wars can have terrorism motivations rooted within. Armed conflicts also have facilitating influences on transnational terrorism.

**Terrorism and organized crime:**

Oxford Languages (2021) defines organized crime as criminal activities that are planned and controlled by powerful groups and carried out on a large scale. The basic types of organized crime include trafficking in people, drugs, illicit goods and weapons, armed robbery, counterfeiting and money laundering. Terrorism is also a form of organized crime but it has distinct status different from other crimes. According to UNODC (2021), terrorism involves crimes committed with the objective of intimidating a population or compelling a government or international organization with a view to achieving political or social objectives while organized crime always seeks to obtain a financial or other material benefit, whereas power and control can be secondary motives (See Figure 2 for types, activities and harms of organized crime).

Figure 2. Types, activities and harms of organized crime.

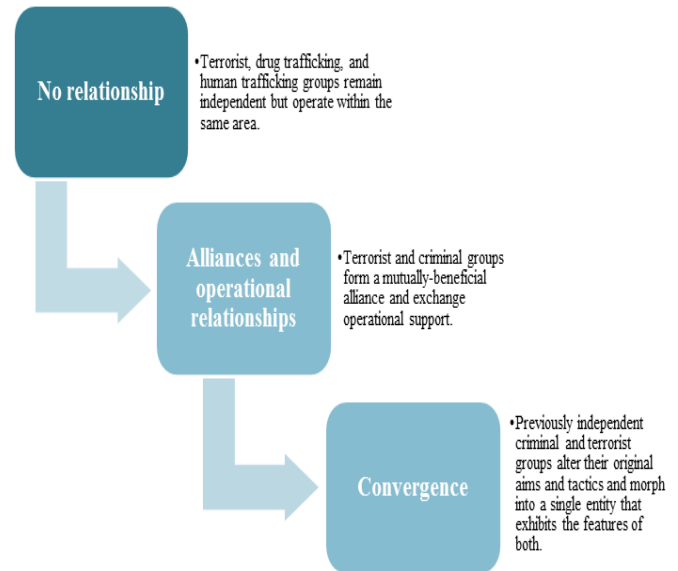


Source: Unodc (2021).

Establishing the relationship between organized crime and terrorism, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says:

“Terrorists can benefit from organized crime as a source of financing or logistical support through the illicit trafficking of arms, persons, drugs, artifacts and cultural property. But terrorist groups can also benefit from the illicit trade in natural resources and wildlife, the abuse of legitimate commercial enterprise, donations, and proceeds of criminal activity, including kidnapping for ransom, extortion and bank robbery, as well as piracy” UNODC (2021). Figure 3 shows the crime-terror nexus.

Figure 3. Crime-terror nexus.



Source: Unodc (2021).

**Symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism**

Sadly enough, both the media and terrorist groups need one another. While the media feasts on terrorist activities as sources of news, no thanks to the newsworthiness of conflict and wars; terrorist groups depend on the media for publicity. By reporting on terrorist attacks, the media plays a part in conveying terrorist messages to a large audience. Unfortunately, this is the objective of terrorist organizations as such publicity encourages them to carry out more attacks, which will in turn be reported by the media.

Citing Hoffman, Bilgen (2012) opined that without the media’s coverage, terrorist act’s impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, rather than reaching the wider ‘target audience’ at whom the terrorists’ violence is actually aimed. In a similar vein, the author quoted Stoh, Staci, Bennett, and Flickinger 2002) as stating that “terrorists are primarily interested in audience, not the victims, and emphasizes that how the audience reacts is as important as the act itself. Accordingly, winning the attention of the media, national and foreign publics, and decision-makers in a government is one of the primary goals of terrorists. To this end, terrorists carefully select the places in which they carry out their attacks in order to provide the best media coverage.” Figure 4 shows front page headlines in some U.S newspapers.





Specifically, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2017) invites media professionals to:

- i. develop through their professional organisations a code of conduct for journalists, photographers and editors dealing with terrorist acts and threats, in order to keep the public informed without contributing unduly to the impact of terrorism;
- ii. organise training courses for media professionals aimed at increasing awareness of the sensitive nature of media reports on terrorism;
- iii. co-operate between themselves, for instance through their professional organisations, in order to avoid a race for sensational news and images which plays into the hands of terrorists;
- iv. avoid contributing to the aims of terrorists by adding to the feeling of public fear which terrorist acts can create or by offering terrorists a platform of high publicity;
- v. refrain from disseminating shocking pictures or images of terrorist acts which violate the privacy and human dignity of victims or contribute to the terrorising effect of such acts on the public as well as on the victims and their families;
- vi. avoid aggravating through their news and comments the societal tensions underlying terrorism, and in particular to refrain from disseminating hate speech.

According to the Council of Europe (2017), “New dynamics of terrorism and the move to an increasingly digital and social media environment, with its wide reach and unprecedented speed with which information spreads across online channels, in particular pose a serious challenge to reporting on the issue.” Given the sensitive role media plays in terrorism, Nigerian media can use the following measures to counter terrorism rather than helping it to fester.

#### *Patriotism*

Nothing can better unite, advance and develop a country than patriotism by its citizens including the media. Since the media takes on the coloration of the social milieu in which it operates, it cannot thus be separated from the yearnings and aspirations of its home country. For the Nigerian media to help in countering terrorism based on the recommendations listed earlier in this paper, it has to imbibe the Nigerian spirit and identify with the dreams, goals and aspirations of the nation. Thus, it is patriotism that will make the Nigerian media to place the national interest above its commercial, sectional or primordial sentiments. Editors and news managers should note that any instability in the system affects the smooth running of the media as well.

#### *Framing*

Framing operates on the principles of selection, emphasis and exclusion. Nigerian media should continue to report terrorist attacks but select the stories that unite and assure the citizens of the national effort in combating terrorism, de-emphasise and if possible exclude those that magnify or reinforce the successes of terrorist groups in the country. .

#### *Balance and fairness*

As much as the media has the right to report terrorist attacks, much more should it also report authorities’ breakthrough in their efforts to combat the menace. Thus, the media should not only report major attacks, it should also not hesitate to balance such with reports of major feats recorded by authorities in countering terrorism. Bilgen (2012) aptly captures this thus: “objectivity and bipartisanship should be key when reporting a story. The media should present both sides of the story to the audience fairly and accurately without bias, so that the audience can make their own opinion of the news and/or story independent of the media’s negative influence. The media coverage of success stories should be balanced with the coverage of failure stories without speculation and dramatization in order to add to the credibility of the source and public order in the aftermath of an attack.”

#### *Intelligence for security agencies*

Reporters, editors, directors and media managers have the patriotic responsibility to work in close connection with concerned authorities and security agencies in intelligence gathering and sharing data at times of crisis for reasons of National security and public order. It is not every information that should be published. Some are better shared with security agencies for further steps. As a matter of fact, journalists should avail the authorities with useful information just as they (journalists) also depend of them as news sources.

## V. CONCLUSION

Terrorism and the media are inseparable but incompatible twins. This is because the media cannot ignore terrorist attacks because of their newsworthiness and terrorists need the media for publicity. As stated earlier, by reporting on terrorist attacks, the media plays a part in conveying terrorist messages to a large audience. Unfortunately, this is the objective of terrorist organizations as such publicity encourages them to carry out more attacks, which will in turn be reported by the media. To counter terrorism therefore, the media should tread the path of caution. Professionalism and ethical standards are imperative if the media will help to counter the global terror. To combat the menace in Nigeria, the media should allow patriotism to drive its reportage in terms of framing, fairness, and providing intelligence for security agencies.

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