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Media framing and construction of socio-political issues in Nigeria: (Dis)connection between theory and professional ethics?

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ABSTRACT

For decades, the socio-political environment the press operates in had conditioned it to always build prominence around phenomena and people, using language as a strong carrier. Knowing full well that the press can escalate or de-escalate the salience of events through news reportage, media scholars saw the necessity for the institutionalization of some regulatory principles for the press. This is known as social responsibilities. This position paper interrogates the connection or disconnection between two media theories (framing and identity construction) and Nigerian journalism practice as codified by Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) code of ethics, using the farmer-herder crisis and Independent People of Biafra's (IPOB) call for secession as cases. Having identified a plethora of negative frames and constructed identities around the two cases selected from 19 empirical papers conducted between 2015 and 2021, the findings show that the Nigerian press (newspapers) lean more towards war and ethnic journalism than peace/solution-driven journalism while reporting issues related to the two cases. The paper argues that the journalism practice of the Nigerian press, most times, aligns with the propositions of framing and identity construction theories, but largely disconnects from its ethical principles. In order to have a socially responsible journalism practice in Nigeria, this paper joins the conversation on advocacy for peace/solution-driven journalism.

Keywords: framing-identity construction, NUJ code of ethics, farmer-herder & IPOB, war-peace journalism, social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Similar to other countries of the world facing certain challenges peculiar to their territories, Nigeria too cannot be excluded from challenges peculiar to her socio-political environment. Prominent among the socio-political issues retarding Nigeria's growth and development include corruption, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, political instability and bad governance (Obamuyi & Fapetu, 2016). To inform Nigerians about these socio-political challenges and call the attention of political actors (such as governments and politicians) to the challenges, the mass media is expected to perform the multiple roles of information dissemination, education, sensitization and surveillance of its environment. Traditionally, these are the social responsibilities of the mass media.

In most societies, the mass media perform different functions, influenced by the different sociopolitical philosophies or ideologies they operate with (Deuze, 2004) and the political atmosphere where they operate (Center for Democracy, 1999 & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008). For example, the agenda-setting function of the media primarily places the direction in which public discussions take in the hands of the media to the extent that the media determine and/or influence issues that become "prominent in the public mind" (McCombs, 2011). While performing this function, the media uses their platforms to "focus on public attention" (public agenda) (McCombs, 2011). In setting the public agenda, *objects* are given *attributes* to be discussed by the public through the same media or off the media. According to Valenzuela and McCombs (2014), the public agenda is largely dependent on journalistic norms and decisions of the final gatekeepers. With Valenzuela and McCombs's (2014) position, it becomes insightful to submit that the agenda-setting function of the media develops into media framing-- the second level of agenda-setting theory.

In addition, other functions of the mass media can be viewed from the perspective of the social responsibility theory of the press. Drawing from McQuail's (2013) list of the expected social obligations of the media and the provisions of the Nigerian Union of Journalists' (NUJ) code of ethics (NUJ, 2019), one concludes that the social responsibility functions of the media promote peace journalism (De Michelis, 2018; Hanitzsch, 2004; Oluoch et al., 2017) rather than the war-inciting practice common to contemporary journalism. What then are these peace-focused responsibilities of the media as entrenched in the NUJ code of ethics? They include avoiding editorialization of facts;

promoting accurate, objective, balanced and fair journalism; avoiding abusive or vulgar expressions in news reports; refraining from pejorative inferences to people's ethnic groups and religions, which will amount to discrimination; promoting national unity, peace, human rights, equity and public good through news reports; and enhancing responsible press (NUJ, 2019).

However, evidence has shown that many Nigerian mass media (newspapers in this context) hardly consider the ethical principles inherent in their code of ethics while reporting socio-political conflicts that have little or no relationship with the religions and ethnic backgrounds of conflict actors. This position paper argues this point using two socio-political issues in Nigeria as case studies–

(1) farmer-herder crisis and

(2) Independent People of Biafra's (IPOB) call for Biafran Republic.

Previous findings on the two issues (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017; Akanni & Ibraheem, 2018; Amenaghawon, 2017; Folayan et al., 2021; Gever & Essien, 2019; Igwebuike, 2020; Kolawole, 2021; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019; Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020) show a media system that throws away its code of practice and leans towards episodic and thematic framing (more negative, less positive) as well as identity construction of the conflict actors–herders (most whom are of Fulani tribe), pastoral farmers and IPOB members/agitators. As such, labeling an entire ethnic group or profiling them as criminals, armed invaders, armed agitators, saboteurs, terrorists, murderers, rapists, among other negative frames and identities by the media because very few of them commit certain crimes is both unethical and capable of escalating conflicts, hatred and stereotypes of the ethnic group/movement being hastily profiled and labeled (Adeyanju, 2018; Dunu et al., 2018) in the media. Cited by Akanni and Ibraheem (2018), Abdu and Alabi (2009, p. 150) specifically accuse the media:

> … of repeating deep-seated prejudices" and "exhibiting traits of inflaming and inciting one party in the conflict against the other … of lacking sensitivity to the ethnoreligious sensibilities of people and through this not only contribute to escalating conflicts but also creating new ones."

Therefore, this position paper argues that a wide disconnection exists between the Nigerian newspapers' use of theory (framing and identity construction of actors of farmer-herder crisis alongside IPOB and its agitation for Biafra) and professional ethics (NUJ code of ethics). Structurally, this paper demystifies framing and identity construction theories, identifies emerging frames and constructed identities from 19 purposively selected empirical studies on farmer-herder crisis and IPOB conducted between 2015 and 2021, and builds a critical conversation around the 19 studies, focusing on connection or disconnection between the two media theories and the expected obligations of journalists. The paper then builds a model for better coverage of socio-political issues in the Nigerian media.

DEMYSTIFYING FRAMING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THEORIES

"Frame" as a term was first used by Bateson in 1955. His context of usage was that assumptions influence how humans interpret situations they find themselves. 19 years later–1974–, Erving Goffman's argument followed by showing how humans think and make decisions based on a myriad of consistent narratives that enable them to process such narratives they are exposed to (Feste, 2011; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In 1993, however, framing theory took another dimension when scholars began to observe that happenings around communication and its processes pointed in the direction of the non-static nature of communication. The main observation then was that as people communicated, they built and set frames around the messages they did communicate to media audiences. Concepts such as frame building and frame setting then emerged. Thus, when frames are built, some factors (like editorial policies/newsroom politics) influence the narratives the news media (journalists and media organizations) adopt to report news stories. On the other hand, frame setting involves "interaction between media frames and individuals' prior knowledge and predispositions" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 52) that shape behavior at the individual or the societal level. It was around this time that Entman (2007) observed that frames could be identified in different four subsets: the communicator, the text (communicative messages), the receiver and the culture (de Vreese, 2005).

As one of the media effect theories (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009), framing theory assumes that the mass media has the power to "shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through priming" (Entnman, 2007). In other words, the mass media can heighten the salience of an issue to the extent that the narratives from the media influence its audiences in a way on how they think, feel, and process the framed issue. Whenever the media frame issues, they also tend to show the audiences what they need to think about (Entman, 2007). That is, framing describes:

> the power of the journalists to select what to discuss and how to discuss them; and audience perception of what media discuss may align or contradict the media's frames (Kolawole, 2021, p. 635).

Moreover, the media frame issues by including or removing some keywords in news stories, using stock phrases, labels and name-calling, stereotypical and metaphorical expressions, among others (de Vreese, 2005; Kolawole, 2021). This agenda-setting power of the mass media makes scholars regard framing theory as a subset of agenda-setting theory (Feste, 2011)–second-level agenda setting. It is noteworthy to state that framing takes two dimensions: episodic and thematic. Succinctly, episodic frames concentrate on individual events with a portrait view, while thematic frames focus on issues using a landscape view (Frame Works Institute, 2017). The Institute argues:

> The more episodically social issues are framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold government and other civic organizations accountable for solving the problem. The more thematic and contextual the coverage, the more likely it is that citizens will see the issue as one appropriate for collective action.

The second theory being considered in this paper is identity construction. This theory develops from the self-theory or socio-cognitive model, as identity is viewed as a self-image that regulates the socio-cognitive approaches people adopt to construct, maintain or re-construct individual identity (Berzonsky, 2011). According to Taylor (2015, p. 2), this theory, like other identity or social construction theories, proposes that "identity is produced, and changed, at least in

part by a person's interactional, situational, socio-historic, and cultural contexts". Tailor (2015) further submits that to construct identities, terminologies such as "gender, age, class, nationality, race and ethnicity" remain paramount themes to consider, thereby creating an aura of "other(s)" around the person or group whose identity is being constructed. Generally, in social construction theory, knowledge is produced or constructed around a phenomenon through the knowledge creator's rationality that presents a narration and representation through language (Galbin, 2014). This created identity then builds some frames around the victims, thus devaluing their goodwill. Therefore, language use or word choice is a vital tool that helps researchers identify framed schemas and instances of identity constructions and labelling in news items.

EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED CASES: FARMER/HERDER CRISIS AND IPOB'S CALL FOR THE BIAFRAN REPUBLIC

As stated in the introductory section, the two socio-political issues considered are the herder-farmer crisis and IPOB call for Biafran Republic. In this section, these cases are discussed by evaluating 19 purposively-selected scholarly and empirical findings on how the Nigerian newspapers framed these issues and constructed identities around them. Then, scholarly positions are taken on what the mass media (journalists, editors and media owners) are professionally expected to do while reporting such cases, as stipulated by the NUJ code of ethics. The positions try to respond to the overarching question this paper raises: What connection or disconnection is there among the two theories, journalism practice, and the expected professionalism?

Case 1: Herder-Farmer Crisis

For this case, 10 different empirical articles are analyzed, using purposive and available sampling approaches. These articles focus on the farmer-herder crisis, and specifically investigated how newspapers framed the crisis, its victims and actors as well as the identities created around these concepts. For recency, the selected articles were streamlined to studies conducted from 2015 to 2021. **Table 1** contains the media frames and the identities created for farmers and herders as found out by the ten studies.

The frames in **Table 1** have proven the propositions of framing and identity construction theories, which argue that the mass media, through their reportage, construct and heighten frames and labels around events and people through the use of language. Although two actors–farmers and herders–are always grouped together while discussing the farmer-herder crisis in the Nigerian media, herdsmen are more negatively framed and labeled than farmers. Generic labeling and episodic framing of herdsmen as killers, attackers, violent invaders and rapists (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017; Ciboh, 2017; Igwebuike, 2020; Kolawole, 2021; Nwachukwu et al., 2021; Nwankwo, 2021) are frames capable of inducing fears in people whenever they come in contact with a herder, whether he is a Fulani or he is from other ethnic affiliation. It is more possible that consumers of the news items where Fulani herders are labeled with such negative frames and constructed identities in **Table 1** would have activated some cognitive interpretations of the Fulani tribe. The moment the experience (exposure to the negative content) is stored, news consumers are now left to selectively retain (selective retention) or avoid (selective avoidance) such frames and

identities (Camaj, 2019). By implication, those who decide to retain the frames and identities in their cognitive repository as represented in the media will begin to view and perceive the Fulani tribe as an ethnic group that condones killing, violent invasion, attack and rape–which may not be the true representation of the tribe.

It is understood that journalists and editors might be motivated by some salient propositions of framing and identity construction theories while writing and editing news stories respectively on the farmer-herder crisis, their inability to remain silent on the ethnic affiliation of conflict actors and victims and douse potential ethnoreligious tensions–since ethnicity hardly adds newsworthy value to news stories–will only breed war journalism practice (Suntai & Ishaku, 2017). According to McGoldrick (2006), war journalism comprises every form of journalism practice whose direction of reportage has some biases that can incite war or conflict among people of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. War journalism practice, I argue, breaches the social responsibility theory of the press. This media theory proposes that the mass media is charged with the obligation of reporting accurate and credible information in a manner that does not promote actions capable of leading to crimes, hatred, conflicts, among others, and carrying out their information-dissemination responsibility under self-regulatory guidelines (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The question now arises: Are the negative frames and identity reconstruction of an ethnic group coming from media discourse (as represented in **Table 1**) pro-war practice or anti-war practice? Are those frames and labels capable of inciting one ethnic group against another? If we consider the provisions of the NUJ code earlier highlighted, they certainly are, and this position is further argued in the subsequent paragraphs.

The media practice of creating negative frames around an ethnic group, perhaps for a reason that very few members of such an ethnic group commit crimes, makes it essentially vital to briefly talk about NUJ code of ethics, a document that self-regulates print journalism practice in Nigeria. The code contains 15 points also known as articles that every print journalist should be wary of while reporting news stories. For this present case, articles 1, 6, 11, and 12 (editorial independence, discrimination, public interest, and social responsibility, respectively) are the main driving points. Labeling and demonizing a tribe with fear-inducing generic labels such as "killer, invader, and rapist" breaches article 6–d*iscrimination*–of the Code. This article states that every journalist should always refrain from making a pejorative reference to an ethnic group while reporting stories. Pejorative reference is an attempt to insult someone or a group or even show disapproval, which might lead to incitement. As succinctly put by Finkbeiner et al. (2016), pejorative is a "negative evaluation" of a concept through language manipulation. Therefore, describing those who attack farmers on their farms or destroy their produce as "Fulani murderers, invaders, attackers" and so on, amounts to pejorative reference, for such labeling will portray all members of the Fulani tribe as attackers, killers and invaders whenever the name *Fulani* is mentioned. This is the first disconnection between the two media theories and the expected professional practice of journalists.

By the frames and constructed identities in **Table 1** again, it also becomes apparent that framing Fulani herdsmen as "gun-carriers" (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017; Ciboh, 2017), "blood-thirsty terrorists" (Gever & Essien, 2019; Igwebuike, 2020) on ethnic cleansing and jihadist missions (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017; Nwankwo, 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2020) is pejorative and can instigate hatred and

Table 1. Literature-driven frames and constructed identities around the farmer-herder crisis

Author	Thematic	Episodic	Generic identity	Ethnic-inclined identity	Religion-inclined identity
Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017)		Killer herdsmen, gun-carrying herdsmen, greedy farmers, intolerable farmers	Killers, gun carriers, greedy, & intolerable	(Fulani) killer herdsmen, gun-carrying herdsmen	Jihadists
Chiluwa and Chiluwa (2020)	Terrorism; foreign media frames: clashes, deadly battle for scarce resources	Massacre, carnage, bloody campaign, savagery	Aggressor, attacker, & invader (violence)		
Ciboh (2017)	Systematic genocide, security quagmire, pure terrorism, new face of terrorism	Ethnic cleansing	Attackers (lethal, deadly, unprovoked and brutal), violent murderer, mindless killers, sophisticated weapon carriers	Fulani carnage	
Gever and Essien (2019)	Blood bath, drums of war		Innocent farmers, defenseless farmers	Terrorists–herdsmen, Fulani mercenaries	
Igwebuike (2020)	Invasion/attack in search of water	Fulani terrorism, herdsmen killing, ethnic cleansing (by Fulani)	Farmers: innocent victims, in-group sufferers	Armed Fulani herders splitting blood, suspected hoodlums as herdsmen, killer herdsmen,	
Kolawole (2021)		Murderous and criminals	Arms carriers, (Fulani) invaders, Fulani: killers, terrorists and kidnappers	Terrorist herdsmen, killer herdsmen, (Fulani) invaders, Fulani: killers, terrorists and kidnappers	
Nwachukwu et al. (2021)		Rampaging/suspected herdsmen: ethnic othering	Militia/killer herdsmen, armed herdsmen	Militia/killer herdsmen, armed herdsmen	
Nwankwo (2021)	Invasion		Terrorists, uncivilized, expansionists	Killer herdsmen, ethnic cleansing	Islamization agenda
Nwankwo et al. (2020)	Nomadic migration, destruction of farmlands and crops, attempt to stop the destruction of farms and crops, environmental degradation	Victims of tribal militias (Fulani), barbaric and uncivilized, herdsmen killings, 'herdsmen attacks, herdsmen destroy, herdsmen kill, herdsmen conflict, herdsmen crisis; farmers, herdsmen clashes, ethnic cleansing and terrorism	Farmland destroyers, fighters paid to attack, indiscriminate killers	Killer (Fulani) herdsmen, (Fulani) herdsmen as destroyers	
Ononye and Osoba (2020)	Attack as game hunting, community sacking	Herdsmen invasion, attack by suspected Fulani herdsmen	Slaughterers, invaders	Heavily armed suspected Fulani herdsmen	

Note. Source: Researcher's compilation and computation (2022)

constant suspicion of the ethnic group (anti-national interest), which may later degenerate into unwarranted ethnic crises.

One important question to raise at this juncture is: How do journalists arrive at the generic labels and frames they attach to the Fulani herdsmen in many instances, and farmers in very few instances? For instance, how do they know a bloodbath between herding and farming communities was instigated by only the Fulani herdsmen? How can frames such as "Fulani carnage, massacre, and bloodbath (Chiluwa & Chiluwa, 2020; Gever & Essien, 2019) be defended when all that the journalist reports come from 'eyewitnesses'? Aside that journalists rely largely on witness accounts while reporting such a story, there is a tendency that eyewitnesses can also frame their accounts (positive, negative, and neutral) (Albright & Rakoff, 2015; Mojtahedi, 2017; Wexler, 2011). For that reason, it is left to the journalist to establish the fact when he/she get eyewitness accounts of such a story instead of reporting every information scooped from the 'eyewitness' who may have overblown the story using hasty ethnoreligious frames.

Furthermore, if one argues from the episodic frames of suspected Fulani herdsmen being "heavily armed" (Ononye & Osoba (2020), one question that resonates centers on how the journalist arrived at "heavily armed" to label the suspected Fulani herdsmen. The response is that they rely on eyewitnesses whom they attribute in their stories to set a public agenda within the media agenda. Also, framing the conflict as a

Jihadist struggle or a plan to Islamize the affected communities (a form of religious-inclined identity) is questionable, and can only be argued as a form of comment being passed by the journalist. It is questionable because there are Christians among the Fulani tribe, and those ones might not even understand what Islamization really means. When a journalist is confronted with such frames from the sources, his or her expected responsibility is to avoid pejorative inference as much as possible. In fact, avoiding such negative and pejorative words will save journalists from conjecturing or editorializing on events that are expected to be accurately reported; no editorialization is allowed. That is the more reason every journalist covering conflict-related issues should go beyond the information collected from eyewitnesses to how they can identify some level of truth in the eyewitnesses' accounts; the fact that an eyewitness says a particular tribe sacks a community in a bloodbath does not really justify the inclusion of ethnicity in such news item if the journalism is truly peace-oriented. The professional approach is to simply detach ethnicity away from the perpetrators' crimes. Any journalist who chooses the route has really respected articles 11 (a journalist should strive to enhance **national unity and public good**), 12 (a journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, **peace**, and international understanding) of the Code.

In another instance, the media succeeded in passing comments on what had befallen farmers. Framing farmers as innocent and defenseless (Gever & Essien, 2019; Igwebuike, 2020), greedy and intolerable farmers (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017), the media had editorialized. With these conjectured descriptions of the farmers, the Fulani herdsmen were busy "destroying" farmlands (and farm produce, "sacking" communities (Ononye & Osoba, 2020). Constant repetition of narratives such as these is capable of making journalists lose the core ethics of being socially responsible to promote peace. As it stands from **Table 1**, the social responsibility of the press to promote peace through their journalism practice was jettisoned for issue-based framing. It is therefore submitted that the primary essence of social responsibility in the Code is to promote peace journalism instead of war journalism (reflected in **Table 1**).

Also, the Nigerian print media also hid under statements from government officials and security agencies to push out the generic identities they constructed around the crisis. Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017), Chiluwa and Chiluwa (2020), Ciboh (2017), Gever and Essien (2019), Nwankwo et al. (2020), alongside Nwankwo (2021) found this in their studies. This approach used by the media promotes war journalism at the expense of peace or solution-driven journalism (McGoldrick, 2006). According to McGoldrick (2006), war journalism has "a bias in favor of official sources, a bias in favor of event over process, and a bias in favor of 'dualism' in reporting conflicts" (p. 3). Looking carefully at the previous arguments on framing and identity labeling of farmer-herder as positioned in this paper, the three components of war journalism identified by McGoldrick (2006) are rife in the Nigerian media coverage of important socio-political issues. To avoid media-induced conflicts, Adisa (2012, p. 8) suggests:

> A conflict-sensitive journalist applies conflict analysis and searches for new voices and new ideas about the conflict. He or she reports on who is trying to resolve the conflict, looks closely at all sides, and reports on how other conflicts were resolved. A conflict-sensitive journalist takes no sides but is engaged in the search for solutions. Conflict-sensitive journalists choose their words carefully.

This paper, thus, advocates peace or solution-driven conflict-focused journalism as rightly asserted by Adisa (2012). Without a deliberate peace-driven conflict reporting and de-escalation of war-like language usage by Nigerian print media, demonizing only one actor in farmer-herder crisis reports will continue for as long as crisis remains.

Case 2: Independent People of Biafra's Call for Biafran Republic

The same inclusion criteria used to select farmer-herder crisis' empirical papers were also used to select empirical papers related to IPOB. Similar to the previous case, the focus of using IPOB as a case is to identify the media frames and identities created around IPOB as established in the findings of nine selected journal articles (**Table 2**).

From the nine studies, five different voices were heard—a voice from the government; a voice from the media; a voice from security officials; another from supporters of Biafra secession; and the last one from IPOB members. All these voices affirm that the media, while framing events and people as they report stories, build and set some public agenda within the overall media agenda setting (Blood, 1989; McCombs, 2007). The following framing and identity construction patterns were identified.

One, the first voice, which comes from the government through newspapers' reports demonizes IPOB as "armed agitators, abductors, murderers, terrorists, criminal agitators, militants, and separatists" (Akanni & Ibraheem, 2018; Chiluwa, 2018; Ezu, 2019; Folayan et al., 2021; Jimoh & Abdul-Hameed, 2017; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019). These negative generic labels raise the salience/prominence of IPOB in manners that portray every IPOB member as an armed and criminal agitator, murderer, terrorist and militant, even if only few of its members are criminals. Critics may argue that there is nothing wrong with journalists reporting accounts of newsmakers, for journalists are socially responsible to let the public know, as entrenched in article of 2 of the NUJ Code of Ethics–accuracy and fairness. However, Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) argue that the ideological stance of the journalists influences the direction in which journalists report stories, particularly crisis-related stories. If we contextualize Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti's (2013) assertion, we submit that the ideological positioning of the journalists who represented the government's voice about IPOB aligned with the positions of the government on IPOB. Also arguing from Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti's (2013) submission, one sees more positive media frames of IPOB. Such positive frames represented the voices of IPOB supporters and members of the movement whose own arguments were that IPOB was only interested in seceding because they are ready to free themselves from "finalization", oppression and marginalization (Amenaghawon, 2017; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019) after experiencing years of "political irrelevance" (Ezu, 2019).

Another government voice in the selected papers framed IPOB's agitations as "genocidal" (Akanni & Ibraheem, 2018), and fruitless (Chiluwa, 2018) aimed at threatening national security and causing "nuisance" (Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020). The IPOB members were also framed as enemies of Nigeria (Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020) whose agitations are to make money (Chiluwa, 2018) and sabotage the nation's economy (Amenaghawon, 2017; Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020). The same voice described the movement as an illegal and unlawful gathering of "secessionists, separatists, terrorist, and discredited organization" (Folayan et al., 2021). If we are to also argue with Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti's (2013) submission on the place of journalists' ideology in reporting opinions of newsmakers, we will realise that majority of the newspapers that framed IPOB using the government's voices are domiciled outside the Eastern Nigerian regions where Biafra agitation is prominent. Most are not also owned by newspaper proprietors of Igbo origin. These papers include *Daily Post, Premium Times, Daily Trust, Nigerian Tribune, The Punch,* and *The Nation.* Voices from newspapers owned by Easterners/South Southerners (*The Sun, The Vanguard,* and *The Guardian*) as established in some studies tilted their frames of IPOB towards positive prominence and identity creation. As found by Jimoh and Abdul-Hameed (2017), Amenaghawon (2017), Ezu (2019), Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi (2019) as well as Osisanwo and Iyoha (2020), the papers they studied framed IPOB as "activists, (armless) freedom fighters, nationalists, neglected, disadvantaged, deprived, and oppressed."

The above insights from the studies point to two important points. The first is regional or ethnic journalism, while the second is ownership structure. What the scholars found out from the newspapers they studied points our direction to the fact that the regional location of newspapers alongside the ethnic background and leaning of newspaper proprietors in Nigeria largely influence the pattern and the direction in

Table 2. Literature-driven frames and constructed identities around IPOB

Author	Thematic	Episodic	Generic identity	Ethnic-inclined identity	Religion-inclined identity
Chime-Nganya et al. (2017)			Agitators, secessionist	Biafran separatist, Biafran agitators	
Amenaghawon (2017)	Marginalized, neglected/disadvantaged		Saboteurs, nationalists	Biafra agitators	
Jimoh and Abdul-Hameed (2017)	Criminal agitation, criminality		Powerless protesters, freedom fighters		
Akanni and Ibraheem (2018)	Genocide-like agitation		Armed agitators, abductors & murderers [public agenda in news]		
Chiluwa (2018)	Metaphor for change [public agenda in news]	Fruitless agitation, money-making industry, terrorism, trouble-making [public agenda in news]	Criminals, terrorists		
Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi (2019)	Militancy		Agitators, militants, freedom fighters	Deprived, marginalized, & oppressed Igbos	Freedom from finalization/Islamizaton,
Ezu (2019)	Biafra agitation, Biafran agitators, Biafran activism, political irrelevance		Agitators, activists, separatists	Biafra agitation, Biafran agitators, Biafran activism	
Osisanwo and Iyoha (2020)	Non-violent, freedom agitators, national threat, & insecurity, nuisance, enemies of nation		Freedom fighters not protesters, law-abiding protesters, armless freedom fighters (public agenda), economic saboteurs, violent protesters		
Folayan et al. (2021)	Illegal, unlawful		Secessionist, separatist, terrorist, & discredited organization (Government's voices)		

Note. Source: Researcher's compilation and computation (2022)

which they frame issues affecting their regions, ethnicity alongside other regions and their ethnicities.

This position aligns with Daramola's (2013) argument that ethnicity is a potent factor that influences journalism practice in Nigeria similarly to how the concept crept into journalism when political figures such as Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (both late) established their newspapers and used them as "megaphones" to spread their ethnic political discourse. The position in this paper also correlates with the argument that the ownership structure of a mass medium (in Nigeria or beyond) influences how, when and what to report, and by extension, raises questions of objectivity, editorial independence, professional culture and economic reality of each medium (Namyalo, 2013; Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019).

Considering the dominant voices and frames from the studies represented in **Table 2**, two implications are imminent. One, the negative episodic and thematic frames the newspapers presented, using their own voices and those of government officials, create some sort of "othering" and "bad omen" around all IPOB members, whether the criminal or the peaceful ones. The peaceful ones among IPOB members will feel oppressed and stereotyped if the media keep referring to all IPOB members as "economic saboteurs, criminals, terrorists, militants" and the country's enemies (Amenaghawon, 2017; Chiluwa, 2018; Folayan et al., 2021; Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020). As most humans are psychologically emotional (Ovejero, 2000), it is therefore expected that the peaceful IPOB members who have been demonized, together with the violent ones, will abhor the country's political elite, the voices of whom the non-Eastern newspapers represent while reporting stories related to Biafra secession. The second implication is that all IPOB members–the peaceful ones and the violent–will continue to see themselves as "(armless) freedom fighters, activists, nationalists and

law-abiding protesters" through the voices of the pro-Biafra elite represented in the media discourse. As such, the identified media frames and constructed identities on IPOB will create media divides in IPOB-related discussions, and discursive polarity between pro-Biafra and anti-Biafra Nigerian citizens.

Therefore, using the tenets of the social responsibility theory of the media to view the two cases brought forward in this paper, one argues that the Nigerian print media is good at framing issues and taking positions on such issues, using positive, negative and neutral frames. However, the evidence provided in **Table 1** and **Table 2** indicates that the Nigerian print media is not very conscious of the social responsibility obligations the NUJ Code of Ethics demands of them. As stipulated in Article 12 of the Code–social responsibility–, media should report stories in a way that "promote principles of … peace and international understanding." Since the farmer-herder crisis and IPOB agitation are socio-political stories comprising some elements of conflict reporting, journalists can only be socially responsible/de-escalate tensions by abiding by the tips Akanni and Ibraheem (2018) suggest. According to them, journalists covering conflicts can de-escalate the occurrence of further conflicts by focusing on other news sources–"the words of ordinary people who may voice the opinions shared by many" (p. 20) –aside from the elite. Journalists should also:

> … avoid only reporting what divides the sides in conflict … avoid focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side … avoid words like devastated, tragedy and terrorized to describe what has been done to one group… avoid emotional and imprecise words … avoid making an opinion into a fact … (p. 20).

REFLECTION

The main argument this paper has brought forward is whether there is a connection or disconnection between two media theories–framing and identity construction–and the ethical practice of the Nigerian journalists as contained in their Code of Ethics. Nineteen (19) empirical studies conducted by Nigerian scholars on media framing and labeling of the farmer-herder crisis and IPOB's call for secession were used to interrogate this argument. Throughout the 19 articles, more negative episodic frames and generic labels such as "criminals/criminality, invasion/invaders/armed invaders/Fulani invaders, rapists, Fulani terrorists/terrorists, IPOB terrorists, saboteurs", among others, were more prominent than positive frames such as "Biafra activists, nationalists, freedom fighters, armless/powerless farmers, armless protesters", among others. Seeing frames and labels like these in the fourth estate of the realm is an indication that the Nigerian newspapers are more connected to the application of theories in their reportage than the application of ethics in their practice. This is so because the framing theory places salience of events or objects (escalating or de-escalating frames) in the hands of the media the same way identities are constructed whenever the media frames an event or object. However, journalism ethics provide that journalists should always desist from reporting news stories in manners that draw pejorative references to people's ethnicity and religions, which invariably can breed national disunity and threaten peace and harmonious living in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria.

This paper also argues that language use in the media, when reporting conflicts, is a potential tool that can contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of conflicts. It is time print journalism in Nigeria had a paradigm shift from war and ethnic journalism to solution/peace journalism. This latter model of journalism does not only deconstruct the principle of ethnic labeling in conflict reports, but also interprets conflicts from the point of view of proffering solutions to crises. Peace journalism, as argued in this paper, is pro-social responsibility obligations of the press and a replica of the NUJ Code of Ethics. As simple as this paradigm shift might seem, a question of headline clicks, and the economic relevance of newspapers might be raised. That is, the current journalism model (bad news sells and receives more readership or clicks than good news) would cease operation if peace journalism is deliberately infused into Nigerian journalism. But another question arises: Should we have peace journalism practice and make our nation peaceful and devoid of media-induced ethnic labeling? Or should we have economically buoyant journalism that practices war journalism, and have our nation set afire? These are two important questions that would confront journalists who adopt peace journalism and war journalism models respectively.

With the evidence provided so far in this paper, it is emphasized again that there is a wide disconnection between the Nigerian newspapers' use of theory and professional ethics. Therefore, it is recommended that Nigerian journalists "avoid only reporting what divides the sides in a conflict, avoid focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side, avoid emotional and imprecise words, avoid making an opinion into a fact" as they report conflict and ethnic-related stories (Daramola, 2019, p. 20 citing Howard, 2009).
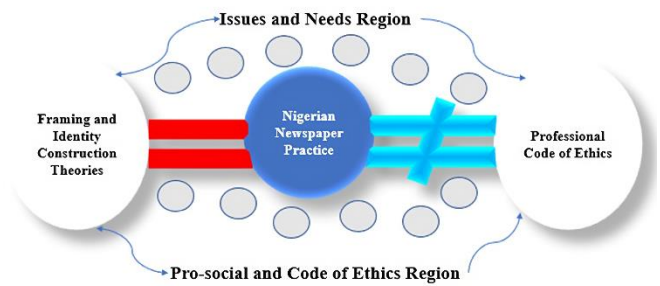

Figure 1. Emerging model for better coverage of socio-political issues (Researcher's computation, 2022)

EMERGING MODEL FOR BETTER COVERAGE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

The two cases have shown that the Nigerian journalists as exhibited by newspapers' reportage of the cases cannot do without leveraging propositions and assumptions of framing and identity construction theories. This is not bad, but it should not be done at the expense of their expected social obligations to society, which social responsibility theory and professional code of ethics had been documented to achieve.

In **Figure 1**, it is noted that the newspapers deployed their resources using the theories instead of concentrating the resources on peace journalism practice with the consideration of specific ethical principles that prioritize peace journalism over war journalism. The smaller circles within the dominant environment in the model (**Figure 1**) indicate the salient part of the two cases picked by the newspapers used by authors of the 19 articles studied. The circles, at the same time, represent the salient part the newspapers left unpicked for peace journalism practice. Specifically, based on the constructs in the model, the paper proposes that significant attention be paid to the salient parts and report them using the professional ethics in the Code. Where and when it is necessary to use theories, their propositions and assumptions that promote peace journalism should be considered and prioritized.

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