

Contested Narratives and Civil Security: A Triangular Analysis of Crime Perpetration, Reporting Bias and State Protection in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection between crime perpetration, media reporting bias, and the state's role in security provision within South-East Nigeria. Using a triangular framework, the research interrogates the conflicting narratives that shape public perception and state response. Drawing from Securitization Theory, Information Disorder Theory, and Framing Theory, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach involving 100 respondents—journalists, victims, civil society actors, and security operatives. Key findings reveal a pattern of securitized communication, underreporting of state violence, and competing accounts of criminal activity. Through media content analysis and community interviews, the study reveals that 62% of respondents perceive media reporting as state-aligned, while 71% describe state protection as selective. Case studies of recent incidents (e.g., the Aba Checkpoint Clash and Orsu Community Raid) demonstrate how information disorder and biased framing exacerbate insecurity and erode trust. The study calls for independent journalism, transparent state responses, and the inclusion of marginalized voices in security dialogues.

Keywords: Crime perpetration, media bias, state security, South-East Nigeria, securitization, information disorder, framing, public perception.

Original Research Article

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1. Introduction

The intersection of crime, media reportage, and state security response in South-East Nigeria presents a complex challenge to civil security and democratic governance. The region, marked by historical grievances, political agitation, and socio-economic discontent, has increasingly become a hotspot of violence and disinformation. Amid this crisis, the production and circulation of narratives by the state, media, and civil society have profound consequences on public perception, state legitimacy, and security policy.

This study contends that these narratives are not neutral; rather, they are constructed, contested, and weaponized to serve divergent interests. While state

actors frame militant activities as threats to national unity, local populations often perceive state interventions as oppressive and politically motivated. Media, ideally the intermediary in these conversations, is frequently caught between truth-telling and survival, often replicating dominant state narratives due to political or institutional pressures. The result is a landscape of informational warfare, where the framing of incidents can either fuel insecurity or foster accountability.

This study therefore adopts a triangular analytical lens to explore how crime perpetration, media reporting bias, and state protection mechanisms intersect and influence civil security outcomes in South-East Nigeria.

2. Background to the Study

The socio-political climate of South-East Nigeria has become increasingly volatile since the resurgence of secessionist agitations and the formation of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) linked to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Added to this is the widespread occurrence of unexplained killings, the frequent declaration of "sit-at-home" protests, and the rise of armed groups categorized as "unknown gunmen."

These dynamics have engendered a state of civil insecurity and eroded trust in both media and the state. Residents in communities such as Orsu, Ihiala, and Aba often receive conflicting accounts of violent events one from official channels and another from local or social media sources. This confusion is further aggravated by inconsistent media practices that prioritize sensationalism or reproduce unverified state narratives.

Furthermore, the state's securitization strategy has included deploying military troops, enforcing aggressive surveillance, and framing civil disobedience as terrorism. While such actions are justified in the name of national security, they are often experienced by communities as indiscriminate repression. This tension between perception and protection is at the heart of this research.

The current scholarly discourse lacks comprehensive studies that integrate the dynamics of crime, biased reportage, and state protection. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a triangular analysis that accounts for the power of narratives in shaping civil security outcomes.

3. Statement of the Problem

In South-East Nigeria, who controls the narrative often controls legitimacy. As state actors frame all dissent as terrorism and some media replicate these frames without question, many communities feel misrepresented or ignored. There's insufficient academic interrogation of the triangular relationship between crime, reportage, and protection, especially in how narratives are weaponized.

4. Objectives of the Study

To examine how crimes are perpetrated and perceived in South-East Nigeria.

To assess the bias and inconsistency in media crime reporting.

To evaluate the effectiveness and impartiality of state protection mechanisms.

To analyse how contested narratives shape public trust and civic engagement.

5. Research Questions

1. How are crimes framed and reported in South-East Nigeria?
2. What role does media play in shaping narratives of crime and state protection?
3. How do state security actors respond to conflicting narratives?
4. What are the implications of contested narratives on civil security?

6. Scope and Delimitation

The study covers five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. It analyzes crime reportage between 2020 and 2024 using media content, interviews, and surveys. Respondents were drawn from journalists, victims, civil society, and security agencies.

7. Literature Review

a) Crime Perpetration

Crime in South-East Nigeria is no longer a straightforward law-and-order issue. It increasingly reflects political, ethnic, and economic grievances. Scholars like Okolie (2022) argue that the anonymity of criminal actors—often labeled generically as "unknown gunmen"—obscures root causes and weakens public accountability. Additionally, vigilante justice and community self-policing have emerged in the absence of credible state security presence.

Chibuzor & Anayo (2023) highlight how the labeling of all non-state actors as criminals delegitimizes

indigenous security efforts, creating confusion around who exactly is a perpetrator and who is a protector.

b) Reporting Bias

Nigerian media outlets operate under precarious conditions, with many journalists facing threats, arrests, and economic blackmail. Umezinwa (2022) and Ezeokafor (2023) observe that reporting bias is not just about what is said but also about what is omitted—such as civilian accounts or alternative explanations.

Reporting bias becomes particularly dangerous when it aligns with state propaganda, thus reinforcing a single narrative and excluding community voices. The over-reliance on police press statements, and the lack of independent investigative journalism, contribute to one-sided reporting that does not reflect the complexity on the ground.

c) State Protection

State protection in Nigeria is selective and often politicized (Nnamani, 2021). Rural communities complain of delayed responses to attacks, while urban centres receive disproportionate attention. Moreover, the rise of parallel security outfits, such as the ESN, points to a deep-seated mistrust in formal institutions.

Research also indicates that some communities view military operations as punishment rather than protection—especially when raids occur without warrants or result in civilian casualties (Okafor, 2024).

d) Contested Narratives

Narratives in conflict zones are often contradictory, depending on who tells the story. Okafor (2024) emphasizes that the South-East region suffers from narrative suppression—wherein community perspectives are either ignored or re-framed by powerful actors. For instance, an attack framed as a terrorist ambush by the government might be seen as a retaliatory act against police brutality by the community.

These contested narratives contribute to a

fragmented public sphere where truth is relative, and trust is in decline.

8. Theoretical Framework

a) Securitization Theory (Buzan et al., 1998)

Explains how actors declare a threat to justify extraordinary measures. In South-East Nigeria, this theory explains how government frames IPOB and local youth movements as existential threats, thus rationalizing military presence and operations.

b) Information Disorder Theory (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Differentiates between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Reflects the chaotic media ecosystem where half-truths, fake news, and political propaganda distort public understanding of crime and state responses.

c) Framing Theory (Entman, 1993)

Media does not just reflect reality; it constructs it through framing. The theory explains why the same incident is framed as terrorism by government, as self-defense by communities, and as criminality by opposition media.

9. Methodology

Design: Mixed-methods

Sample Size: 100 respondents

30 journalists

30 residents

20 civil society actors

20 security operatives

Tools:

Structured questionnaires

Semi-structured interviews

Content analysis of five newspapers

Analysis:

SPSS for quantitative data

Thematic coding for qualitative responses

Framing analysis of newspaper articles

10. Data Presentation and Analysis

Sample Demographics:

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	62	62%
Female	38	38%
Age 25–40	55	55%
Age 41–60	45	45%

Key Results:

Media Bias: 62% believe the media report crime in a way that aligns with government interests.

State Protection: 71% see the government’s security response as reactive and politically selective.

Narrative Contestation: 58% say they receive contradictory accounts of crime incidents between the media and their communities.

11. Case Studies & Media Content Analysis

🔪 Case 1: Checkpoint Clash in Aba (May 2024)

Vanguard: “IPOB Militants Kill Soldiers” — Framed as terrorism, no community voices included.

Peoples Gazette: “Residents Dispute IPOB Link to Aba Violence” — Presented local accounts contradicting the military version.

Contested Narrative: Eyewitnesses blamed a disagreement over police harassment of a cyclist, not IPOB.

🔪 Case 2: Orsu Community Raid (August 2023)

Daily Trust: Reported military neutralized IPOB camp.

BBC Pidgin: “We No Be IPOB – Orsu Women Lament after Raid” — Emotional testimonies of

indiscriminate arrests.

Narrative Clash: Government framed it as anti-terrorism; locals called it aggression.

12. Discussion of Findings

The research uncovered a significant disjuncture between how crime events are narrated by the state and media versus how they are experienced by local populations.

Media-State Alignment: 62% of respondents believed media reporting aligns with government interests, limiting diverse perspectives.

Trust Deficit in Security: 71% reported that state security responses were reactive and selective, particularly in marginalized communities.

Narrative Discrepancies: Over half (58%) had encountered events where official reports conflicted with lived experience.

Language and Framing: Words like “neutralized,” “IPOB-linked,” or “unknown gunmen” shape perception and legitimize violence.

Information Disorder: Disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation create confusion, eroding civic trust and encouraging alternative media systems.

These findings suggest that civil security is not

merely about military presence but about narrative legitimacy, trust, and participatory representation in discourse.

13. Recommendations

1. Media Training: Equip journalists with tools for conflict-sensitive reporting and source verification.
2. Fact-Checking Initiatives: Fund local fact-checking desks to combat disinformation.
3. Community Media Platforms: Encourage platforms where marginalized voices can be heard.
4. Security Oversight Mechanisms: Independent review of security operations for human rights accountability.
5. Narrative Equity Policy: Establish frameworks to include community perspectives in state communications.

14. Conclusion

The triangular relationship among crime, media reporting, and state protection in South-East Nigeria is mediated by contested narratives, securitized frames, and information disorder. For civil security to be achieved, truth, transparency, and plurality of voices must be prioritized.

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