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The risks and resilience in reporting violent extremism

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of conflict reporters to unpick the pitfalls and perseverance in journalism practice in dangerous places. It uses the case of covering the Boko Haram conflict to unpack the risks journalists encounter in reporting on violent extremism. Drawing on individual interviews and focus groups with 34 journalists and newsroom observations, the study provides insights into the complexities of covering violent extremism, their consequences on journalists' lives and on journalism production, and the coping mechanisms deployed to withstand them. Professional collaboration, avoidance of antagonism, social solidarity and remote reporting strategies were found to be the conflict reporters' main modes of resistance and resilience.

Keywords: Conflict reporting, coping strategies, civil sphere theory, trauma journalism, terrorism, journalism safety, emotional injuries, Boko Haram

Introduction

From risking their lives, limbs and liberty to facing psychological trauma and professional predicaments, journalists endure suffering to cover conflicts (Carlsson and Poyhtari 2017; Obermaier et al. 2023). Reporting violent extremism is particularly challenging to them (Feinstein et al. 2015; Idås et al. 2019). They are targeted for terror attacks and manipulation, and bear the burden of reporting extremists' atrocities and witnessing the victims' pains (Abubakar 2020). Violent extremism itself – whether perpetrated by jihadi groups or by far-right militants – has grown steadily in sophistication (Logan et al. 2023). And whether it came in the form of Boko Haram

suicide attacks in Nigeria or Islamic State group's bombardment in Syria or mosque massacre in New Zealand or Al-Shabaab atrocities in Kenya and Somalia, violent extremism is a source of stories and suffering for journalists (Muindi 2023). Its newsworthiness and the public interest in it meant that journalists could not ignore it (Abubakar, 2020). They cover it at very high cost, including paying 'the ultimate price for doing so' (Cottle et al. 2016: 2). But while journalism safety agencies regularly highlight such concerns (UNESCO 2021; CPJ 2025), scholarship has not kept pace with the growing complexity of the problem.

Previous works (Carlsson and Poyhtari 2017; Cottle et al. 2016; Allan and Zelizer 2004) offer insights into the broad areas of journalism safety and difficulties of reporting from conflict zones. Other studies illustrate the universality of the problem (Harrison and Pukallus 2021; Orgeret and Tayeebwa 2020), its impact on journalists in terrorised communities (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Pate and Idris 2017; Muindi 2023), and its possible effects on and beyond journalism (Carey and Gohdes 2021; Walulya and Nassanga 2020). But the specific issues of constraints of covering violent extremism and of journalists' coping strategies remain largely unexplored.

This study addresses the gap by examining the challenges of reporting violent extremism and their consequences on journalists' lives and on journalism production. It uses the case of covering the Boko Haram conflict and Nigerian military's counter-insurgency campaign to explore the risks and resilience in reporting violent extremism. Drawing on individual interviews and focus groups with journalists and newsroom observations, it sheds light on how journalists endure physical and psychological pains to report the conflict. The study uses Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) civil sphere theory as an analytical tool to demonstrate the link between journalists' responsibility to cover conflicts and societal responsibility to protect them. It also draws on trauma journalism

literature (Bradley and Heywood 2024; Obermaier et al. 2023) to analyse the traumatic experiences of conflict reporting. The study helps illuminate our understanding of journalists' motivations in withstanding adversities to highlight human plights; and offers insight into the perils and perseverance of covering violent extremism.

Boko Haram violent extremism and risks to journalists

Boko Haram is the deadliest extremist group in Africa, whose insurgency is largely blamed for the death of tens of thousands of people and displacement of over three million others in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon in 16 years of violence (UNHCR 2025). It gained global notoriety in 2014 after kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in the Nigerian town of Chibok. Both the original group, *Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'ati wal-Jihad*, and its splitter outfits – the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) and *Ansaru* – are engaged in terror campaigns such as beheadings, bombings and abductions (Bukarti 2021; Thurston 2017). Although they operate as different groups, they remain united in their desire to establish their own brand of Islamic state (Bukarti 2021). They use preaching and other soft power instruments to advance their cause, but violence is a key tool of their campaign. Boko Haram was so violent that the 2015 Global Terrorism Index described it as the world's 'most deadly terror group' that caused the death of 6,644 people in 2014 alone (IEP 2015: 2). It had once controlled a territory the size of Belgium in northeast Nigeria before security forces retook most of it (Abubakar 2020). And, although their kinetic capability has been curtailed by military offensives and factional fights, Boko Haram/ISWAP/*Ansaru* fighters have continued with their militancy. Journalists and news outlets endure violence, threats and intimidation from both the militants and the military forces to report on the violent extremism.

For clarity, violent extremism is understood here as a phenomenon that involves a deliberate use of violence to pursue ideological/political/social/religious/racial goals (Logan et al. 2023). It is associated with violent behaviours and ‘actions in which identity-motivated violence’ is deployed ‘to achieve desired objectives’ (Zgryziewicz 2018: 17). Terrorism is an integral part of it (Zgryziewicz 2018) – and the two terms are used here interchangeably. Because it provides newsworthy stories, violent extremism attracts media attention easily (Wood 2016). And because journalists need to prioritise the public interest, they have the responsibility to report on it. This exposes them to greater dangers than they normally face in less dangerous assignments. Extremists target journalists not just to silence them but to also generate publicity and intimidate their adversaries (Wood 2016). Boko Haram insurgents are skilful in this (Abubakar 2020).

Nigeria’s media scene

The Nigerian media landscape is diverse and vibrant but the country is one of the most dangerous places for journalists in Africa (Adeyemo 2024). Its print media, which began in 1859, has a record of agitation for self-determination during Nigeria’s independence struggle before turning to ethnic nationalism and then progressed to promoting national unity and later diluted into big business ventures, supporting diverse interests. Broadcasting, introduced in 1935, was under the tight control of government before private ownership was allowed in the 1990s. Currently, the print and online media are fiercely independent and mostly owned by private individuals. The broadcast outlets are run by the public and private sectors but regulated by the government-owned National Broadcasting Commission. There are hundreds of broadcast channels across the country and over 100 publications (Adeyemo 2024). They face challenges such as declining revenues, government scrutiny and violations of press freedom, including

‘physical attacks on journalists, bombings of broadcast stations, and government sanctions against media houses’ (Adeyemo 2024: 160). The Boko Haram conflict compounds the country’s dismal records on journalism safety (Abubakar 2020).

Physical harm and traumatic experiences for journalists

Violence against journalists and predatory practices that undermine their job are not confined to one country; they are widely spread in the world (Carlsson and Poyhtari 2017). And they seem to be increasing, with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) declaring 2023-2025 as the deadliest period for journalists following the killing of 184 media workers in the Israel-Gaza conflict in just 20 months (CPJ 2025). This highlights the grim situation for journalists in conflict zones. Many studies (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Allan and Zelizer 2004; Harrison and Pukallus 2021) have demonstrated the diversity, complexity and universality of the problem. Cottle et al. (2016) detail the dangers conflict reporters face in many parts of the world, highlighting how events like the 9/11 attacks in the US and the retaliatory war on terror impact negatively on their safety and on news production. Other works (Carey and Gohdes 2021; Walulya and Nassanga 2020) show the wider impact assault on journalists could have on press freedom, democracy and human rights. And violent extremists tend to be very cruel to journalists. ‘From the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002, through to the murders of James Foley and Steven Sotloff in 2014, it is clear that terrorist groups now see journalists as useful targets’ (Cottle et al. 2016: 3). Their tools of terror against journalists include beheading (Wood 2016).

News workers who escape or survive such atrocities often contend with other pains. Studies suggest that conflict reporters are exposed to psychological injuries (Bradley and Heywood 2024; Idås et al. 2019; Obermaier et al. 2023). Examining the experiences of journalists working for German, Austrian and Swiss media in conflict zones,

Obermaier and her colleagues found that they were exposed to three forms of trauma: primary, secondary and tertiary traumatization. They experience primary trauma as direct targets of violence or secondary trauma as witnesses to violence or tertiary trauma ‘as recipients of narrative accounts and vivid images of human suffering’ (Obermaier et al. 2023: 1412). Bradley and Heywood (2024) detail traumatic experiences of journalists both in conflict zones and in less risky environments across countries as diverse as Britain, Burkina Faso and Pakistan. Even prolonged viewing of disturbing images could be psychologically stressful to journalists (Idås et al. 2019). And news workers exposed to violent events risk developing long-term psychological impairment such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Idås et al. 2019).

The situation is worse for those who don’t have access to therapy. Research conducted on journalists who covered terror group Al-Shabaab’s violence in Kenya found that they developed significant symptoms of emotional injuries and didn’t get therapies for them, which compounded their problems (Feinstein et al. 2015). It is not only the absence of therapies that complicates the situation, it is also a lack of trauma training for journalists in many countries. In their study of trauma journalism pedagogy around the world, Ogunyemi and Price (2023) highlight the challenges journalism institutions grapple with in providing trauma training to their students. Journalism educators face systemic and institutional barriers to teaching trauma ‘such as accreditation issues, lack of training, guidelines, and resources’ (Ogunyemi and Price 2023: 227).

Journalists exposed to physical violence and emotional distress are often compelled to develop their own ways of resistance and resilience to deal with such difficulties (Bustamante and Relly 2021). Resistance is understood here broadly as the ability to resist and push back against forces that hinder individuals from doing their work (Bustamante and Relly 2021). Resilience is ‘the ability to continue to function

professionally’ and to adapt successfully ‘in the face of trauma and violence’ (Bustamante and Relly 2021: 7). Modes of resistance and resilience could vary from place to place, as seen, for instance, in the way they were deployed by news workers facing violence in Mexico (Bustamante and Relly 2021) and by journalists dealing with attacks in conflict zones (Obermaier et al. 2023).

The physical and emotional challenges journalists face in reporting violent extremism could impact negatively on their performance and harm journalism production. Empirical evidence shows that in the face of mortal danger, journalistic norms are often ignored and stories left uncovered (Al-Ghazzi 2023; Allan and Zelizer 2004). This infringes on the publics’ right to know and could affect others, given the interdependence of the globalised world (Cottle et al. 2016). Those wider impacts highlight the relevance of accurate reporting of conflicts and the imperative for journalists’ protection to enable them to discharge their duty. It is in this domain that civil sphere theory demonstrates its efficacy.

Civil sphere and protection of journalists

In his seminal work *The Civil Sphere* (2006), Jeffrey Alexander argues that ‘societies are not governed by power alone and are not fueled only by the pursuit of self-interest. Feelings for others matter, and they are structured by the boundaries of solidarity’ (p.3). People do not only commit themselves to their immediate short-term interests but ‘to the transcendent’ as well (Alexander 2006: 3). Building on Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere theory (1989) on its conception of rational discourse but acknowledging the manipulative powers of other forces, Alexander’s civil sphere captures both the bright and gloomy sides of everyday life. The news media are part of communicative institutions of the civil sphere, playing important roles in bringing about civil repair (Alexander 2006). But they are also prone to elites’ manipulation and their

‘interpretations can roll back and make more restrictive the solidarities of civil society’ (Alexander 2006: 81). Still, the media play a major part in expanding the civil sphere (Forde 2015). Journalists ‘do sometimes perform a vital role in shining light on some of the darkest crevices of inhumanity’ (Cottle et al. 2016: 99).

The analytical efficacy of the civil sphere theory derives from its ability to shed light on journalists’ role and societal responsibility to protect them (Cottle et al. 2016). The theory, Cottle (2016) argues, highlights journalism’s central role in enacting the civil sphere and enhances our understanding of how journalists risk their lives to report on the human plights in conflict zones. The theory was employed by Forde (2015) in communication studies to highlight media’s role in expanding civil rights in the United States. It ‘challenges us to consider how communication and journalism operate in civil society’ and assess ‘their role in social struggles for justice and the expansion of social belonging in the civil sphere’ (Forde 2015: 122).

But the civil sphere thesis is not faultless. Critics point to its utopian vision of civil societies overturning powerful institutional structures through mere social solidarity (Turner 2008). While such moral appeal is worthy of support, Turner (2008: 184) argues, ‘there are at the very least worrisome indicators that the civil sphere is profoundly shaken by an alternative dystopian world of walls, closed borders, internal boundaries, ghettos and gated communities.’ Similarly, the theory’s dismissal of both Gramscian description of media as ideological instruments and the political economy’s conception of socio-economic motives in media control challenges its understanding of media theories. Cottle et al. (2016) admit that the civil sphere theory has not dealt exhaustively with the traditional theories of media, but its innovative approach in appraising journalism’s performance and its vision of an expanding role of news media in society demonstrate its efficacy as an analytical tool.

This is what informs its deployment here as a theoretical framework to help understand the perils and perseverance in reporting violent extremism and the societal need for protecting those who undertake it.

Methods

Three qualitative methods – semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups and newsroom observations – were employed for this study. Thirty-four journalists – seven of them editors – participated in the in-depth interviews and focus groups while six-week non-participant observations were conducted at two news organisations in Nigeria: *Daily Trust* newspapers in the capital Abuja and Gotel Radio/Television station in the north-eastern city of Yola. Purposive sampling technique, using job and specialism criteria, was used to select all the participants. This is to ensure that only journalists (job) who have covered the Boko Haram conflict (specialism) were selected as they possessed the rich information required for the study (Hennink et al. 2020). They were recruited via the use of flyers pasted at the Nigeria Union of Journalists’ office in Yola, their by-lines, and direct contact with a few of them that the researcher knew during previous fieldworks. Thirty of the participants were male and four were female – reflecting the preponderance of male journalists in Boko Haram reporting. Their ages range from 29 to 60, with experiences in covering the insurgency ranging from four to eleven years. They were drawn from thirteen news organisations in Nigeria (see Table 1).

Overview of the participating journalists

Description of the participating journalists		<i>n</i>
	4 years	7
	5–7 years	15
	8–11 years	12

Experience in covering violent extremism		
Gender	Male	30
	Female	4
Age range	25–39 years	18
	40–59 years	14
	60–69 years	2
News outlets	<i>Blueprint, Daily Trust, Gotele Radio and Television, Guardian, HumAngle, Leadership, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Peoples Daily, Premium Times, Punch, Viewer TV and Voice of Nigeria (VON)</i>	13
	<i>Reuters, Associated Press (AP) and Voice of America (VOA)*</i>	3

* International news outlets, for which three of the participants work as freelancers – in addition to the local outlets they work for.

Ethical approval was obtained from City, University of London, and all the participants signed informed consent forms. They were given assurances of anonymity and confidentiality for their own safety. The presentation of the findings and their accounts was done in a format that would ensure anonymity for them.

Interviews and focus groups

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with nineteen journalists in Yola and Abuja at three different periods: July–September 2019 (in-person), December 2019 to January 2020 (in-person), and December 2020 to January 2021 (via Zoom). Participants were asked questions about the challenges of covering violent extremism, their motivations for the coverage, the impact on their lives and work, their coping strategies, and the support they got. The length of the interviews ranged from 26 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were conducted and recorded by the researcher.

Three focus groups – each containing five journalists – were conducted in-person in July 2019 and January 2020: two in Abuja and one in Yola (only one was done in Yola due to security concerns at the time). The questions focused on the same areas as for the individual interviews above, with follow-up questions asked to clarify key points. The researcher moderated the sessions, asking the questions and ensuring that the discussions didn't stray into irrelevant areas. The length of the focus groups ranged from 85 minutes to two hours. Both the individual interviews and focus groups were conducted continuously until data saturation was reached. The sign of saturation was noticed after conducting three focus groups and sixteen individual interviews when additional participants did not appear to be providing any new information. But three more participants were interviewed to ensure that the saturation had indeed been reached.

Newsroom observations

The newsroom observations were conducted between July 2019 and August 2022 for a total period of six weeks – three weeks at Gotel Radio/Television in Yola and three weeks at *Daily Trust* headquarters in Abuja. The two organisations were chosen because of their reputation in providing comprehensive coverage of the Boko Haram conflict (Pate and Idris 2017) and their location in areas affected by the crisis. The observations involved attending editorial meetings of the outlets and taking notes on discussions related to their handling of Boko Haram stories; sitting in the newsrooms and observing interactions between editors and reporters handling the stories; and talking to them for clarification where required. Admittedly, six-week observations could only capture a tiny part of their work, but the researcher's previous experiences of news-work and newsroom ethnography provided adequate knowledge of newsroom culture and facilitated speedy understanding of the happenings in the observed

newsrooms. The researcher had also built rapport with journalists in the two organisations in previous contacts, which provided opportunities for ‘uninterrupted observations’ (Hennink et al. 2020: 171). The inclusion of observations was to complement the two key methods – individual interviews and focus groups – to enrich the data. The findings should be seen in that context.

Data analysis

Using Hennink et al.’s (2020) analytic cycle and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approaches, the data obtained from the three methods were analysed separately through a cycle of description, comparison, categorisation and conceptualisation. The analysis began during data collection itself as the researcher was taking note of the main issues emerging from the interviews, focus groups and observations and developing codes for them. The individual interviews and focus groups were each transcribed, anonymised and coded manually. The fieldnotes from newsroom observations were also anonymised and coded manually. Coding of each dataset was done carefully, which helped condense the data and break them up into meaningful parts. The coded data (from each method) were then displayed in a matrix to get a graphic view of the emerging patterns and themes. This facilitated a careful comparison and categorisation of the data, and eventual drawing of conclusions. The original transcripts and fieldnotes were re-read again to ensure that the identified themes and conclusions fit well with the data. Findings from the three datasets were then integrated, using a triangulation protocol, to establish areas of complementarity, convergence and divergence before producing the final report.

Findings

The triangulated findings are presented below, based on the key themes identified in the data analysis: risks in reporting violent extremism, psychological injuries, denial of

access to the conflict areas, harming journalism production, erosion of trust, resistance and resilience.

The risks in reporting extremism

A recurrent theme is the risk in reporting Boko Haram's violent extremism. Risks to journalists' lives and liberty, and to their news organisations, were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews and focus groups and at editorial meetings in the observed newsrooms. All the participants recalled the risks they faced in covering the conflict. Many spoke about how they escaped death from the insurgents. One newspaper correspondent described how he was targeted for elimination by the militants in Maiduguri (the group's stronghold) after a report they considered unfriendly. "They came to [our] office looking for me, but luckily I had left a few minutes earlier," he said. His colleagues rang him and warned him to stay away from the area – which he did. The insurgents, he said, had sent him death threats before and that he knew they were serious about it. He fled the city to reduce the risk.

In Yola, a television reporter with eight years' experience of reporting the conflict, said he narrowly escaped death when Boko Haram insurgents bombed a newly-built mosque in the city in October 2015. "I had to lie down close to corpses and [the] mutilated bodies" of those killed by the blast, he recalled.

The bomb was [detonated] in the mosque and a lot of people died [sigh ...] and then the military came and then there was sporadic shooting in the air. Everybody had to lie down, near the corpses [...] and all that.

He said he was lucky to survive because there was no additional blast. "Not only me but other colleagues [too]," he added, explaining that fellow journalists who went there to cover the commissioning of the new mosque also had a narrow escape. At least 27 people were killed, and 96 others were injured, in the blast.

Other participants detailed different incidences of escaping Boko Haram attacks while reporting on the conflict. “There is surely [a] risk from the insurgents because you are dealing with terrorists that do not respect conventions,” one senior correspondent said. “They can kill anybody; they have [a] history of killing journalists, aid workers, health officials and even children”. Boko Haram insurgents had killed at least four journalists (Zakariyya Isa, Enenche Akogwu, Fara Modu and Suleiman Bisalla) while another (Audu Madugu) was killed during an exchange of fire between the militants and Nigerian soldiers (Pate and Idris 2017).

Journalists also risk losing their liberty, and news outlets risk being raided by security forces. Many respondents described how they were detained or intimidated by security operatives. A regional editor of a newspaper explained how he and his reporters were arrested by security operatives in Maiduguri after publishing a Boko Haram story that the Army said was insensitive to national security. “They arrested us, seized our mobile phones and computers, and detained us,” he said. “It took [a] serious intervention and appeals from many quarters before they released us”. Other participants narrated experiences of having their mobile phones/computers seized or their workplace raided or their publications confiscated by soldiers. One of them explained how armed soldiers raided the *Daily Trust* headquarters in January 2019, harassed news workers, seized their computers and sealed off the premises. They only vacated the place after pleas from civil society organisations. But they did not return the seized computers until after several days, during which they apparently hacked into them to scrutinise the data stored by the journalists and the news organisation. “I realised that my personal data was being scrutinised when I received a notice that my social media account was being tempered with,” one of the affected journalists said. Two other participants narrated similar experiences.

The *Daily Trust* raid incident featured in the observation fieldnotes, too, as it was discussed twice at the paper's editorial meetings the researcher attended. The first was on 23 July 2019 when the paper's editors discussed plans for a cover story on the tenth anniversary of the Boko Haram insurgency but raised safety concerns, citing the incident. The second happened two days later when stories for the anniversary were commissioned and staff cited their negative experiences from the raid, and devised ways of dealing with possible aggression from the military/militants. Many *Daily Trust* journalists had previously been harassed/threatened by the militants. And the company, concerned of being targeted, erected physical barriers at its headquarters to guard against Boko Haram attacks. The insurgents had bombed a nearby office of *Thisday* newspaper in 2012, killing one staff and three passers-by (Pate and Idris 2017).

Such fears also dominated discussions during an editorial meeting in Gotel newsroom in Yola, attended by the researcher, when they planned to do features on the ten years of the insurgency. They wanted to send a crew to the area most affected by the conflict but were worried by possible attacks. At the editorial meeting, reporters described instances where they were "temporarily detained" by the Army for travelling to the area "without permission" and cases of being refused permission when they requested for it. Days later, after assessing the risks and unable to secure a permit from the Army, the planned trip was abandoned in favour of doing stories within Yola city.

Psychological injuries

Psychological difficulties and emotional injuries are other challenges the respondents said they routinely encounter in covering violent extremism. They pointed to three difficult situations – threats and intimidation from the militants and the military; witnessing violence and suffering of victims; and being blocked from accessing information to do their jobs – after which they suffer such pains. Clinical diagnosis of

mental conditions is beyond the scope of this study, so only the experiential accounts of the journalists are stated here. Most participants said they felt emotionally distressed after witnessing Boko Haram attacks. “The sights of charred bodies [...] really leave some mental marks on me – it is really not a good thing to remember,” said one senior correspondent who has been covering the insurgency since 2010. Another participant, who has covered the conflict for both a local broadcast station and an international news agency for more than eight years, said:

Seeing mutilated body parts was horrible for me. Eating meat became an issue for me [...]. Anytime you see meat, you begin to see the picture of the mutilated bodies that you saw. And then, once in a while, you have nightmares.

For many journalists, it was not only seeing the dead bodies and physical wounds of the victims that affected them but also hearing their graphic accounts of suffering – an indication of secondary and tertiary traumatization (Obermaier et al. 2023). The following description by a reporter with nine years’ Boko Haram reporting experience provides an apt illustration:

You see starving children, you see women whose husbands were killed by Boko Haram, you see women who were abducted and taken to forests, and you hear their stories. And that they were the lucky ones as some did not survive. Stories of how people were slaughtered, how people were beheaded, and how children were made to behead their mothers [...]. It is still disturbing to me.

Another psychological stress for some reporters was the feeling of powerlessness to help victims. They saw them in pains and became distressed for being unable to offer them any assistance beyond expressing sympathy. “They tell you what they have gone

through – and they’ve gone through so much,” one television reporter said during the focus group discussion in Yola. “Whenever you come to talk to them, they expect some measure of help. That for me is a challenge”. He said the feeling of being unable to help lingered in his mind and worried him. Other members of the group nodded in agreement.

An additional problem for local journalists covering the insurgency was a lack of clinical support to address psychological impairment. Most of the participants said they had never received any form of psychological intervention after witnessing violence or encountering emotional difficulties. One television reporter cited an incident when he and his crew covered a “horrific encounter between the insurgents and the military” in Adamawa State where they saw many dead bodies, including soldiers’, but received no counselling on their return: “When we came back there was no debriefing or psychological counselling – not at all.” A senior journalist who has covered the conflict for eight years was categorical on this. “I have never had any counselling or psychological support or training to deal with any trauma that might arise in the course of my work,” he said. The lack of professional psychological support compounds the emotional strain of journalists who cover violence in Nigeria, as Feinstein et al. (2015) equally found in their study in Kenya.

Access denial and harming journalism production and trust

Three related themes that emerged from the datasets were deliberate denial of access to the conflict zone by the military and militants and its negative consequences on journalism production and on trust in news media. To control the reporting of the conflict, both combatants routinely prevent journalists from visiting the areas they control – a scenario recorded in previous research (Pate and Idris 2017). All the respondents cited a lack of access to the conflict zone and to accurate information as a

key impediment to covering the insurgency. “The major challenge, I think, is [a] lack of access to information, especially with the military,” said a journalist who works for a local newspaper and an international news agency. “They block us from reaching the conflict area and from getting information”. A television reporter in Yola concurred, adding that the “lack of cooperation from the security agencies” always hinders the coverage. An editor of a Sunday newspaper blamed both the Army and insurgents for it:

The fact that Boko Haram attacks or can attack anybody actually disqualifies one from gaining access to the territory where they operate.

Secondly, on the part of the security agencies, too, they draw a line to you on where to go and where not to go.

Denial of access to the conflict theatre compels journalists to rely on information subsidies from the combatants, which dents their reports. All the respondents expressed concerns over their reliance on press releases and other content produced by security forces and insurgents. “Lack of accurate information affects the credibility of the stories [we] produce,” said one participant in Yola. “Sometimes you have to leave a story because of the risk (involved)”. Another participant, in Abuja, who has covered the insurgency for ten years both as a reporter and an editor, concurred. “You know, a good journalism is about going to the actual place where the story is happening, talking to the subjects, talking to the people on all sides,” he said.

So, the quality of the report is affected in the situation where journalists cannot get on the ground to speak to the actual people who are directly involved in the story or who are the direct victims of the situation.

One way some journalists get access to the conflict theatre is by embedding with the military. But participants who had this experience said the Army exerts significant

control over their reporting. A journalist in a government-owned media outlet who embedded with the Army to cover the conflict said there was clearly a limit to what she could report.

You see a lot of things that are of interest to you, but they regulate what you should report, what you should snap, what you should take [...]. All these regulations, they say, was that they need to see me there as a partner rather than as a saboteur.

Respondents also listed self-censorship, confiscation of equipment and recorded materials by the Army, a lack of working tools and insurance cover, and poor remuneration as other factors that imperil their coverage. One editor said he lost experienced reporters – two of them female – because of Boko Haram and military intimidation. “They felt [that] the only way to protect themselves was to leave,” he said, adding that it subsequently affected the quality of the content. This adverse impact on journalism production is in addition to the ones caused by emotional injuries suffered due to the coverage. It extends beyond newsrooms to news consumption itself, with an apparent decline in audience trust.

Participants said poor reporting of the conflict has created credibility problem for them as audiences seem to be losing trust in their news outlets. “There were many instances where we published stories that we got from the Army, which turned out to be incorrect. So, people are losing trust,” said one senior reporter who has reported on the crisis for ten years. An editor whose paper has covered the conflict since 2009 concurred: “Readers are very sceptical, they’re very cynical. They doubt what we publish in newspapers.”

It is unclear how widespread the perceived public distrust is as no reception research has been conducted to confirm it, but the problem seems to have pushed many

journalists to be more diligent in sourcing their Boko Haram stories. “We are more careful now. We try to get as many eyewitnesses as we can,” said an editor of an Abuja-based newspaper. “We don’t use the Army press releases and Boko Haram statements without checking other sources”. Other participants in both the individual interviews and focus groups expressed similar views, stressing the significance of accurate reporting – though they admitted that deadline pressure and complexities of the stories make the task difficult. However, they said, as their key motivation in covering the conflict is to report in the public interest, accurate reporting, using credible sources, was essential to sustaining public trust – a vision stressed in Alexander’s civil sphere theory (2006). Their desire to improve their news sourcing and to deal with other challenges compelled them to develop coping strategies.

Resilience and resistance

Analysis of the data shows that journalists routinely employ different strategies to counter the constraints they encounter in reporting violent extremism. One of them is ‘remote reporting strategy’ to minimise the impact of the denial of access to the conflict theatre. This involves reaching out, via mobile phone, to civilians living in the conflict zone – in places where mobile phone services exist – and getting information from them. Participants mentioned this as a key strategy of circumventing the military-militants’ conflict theatre blockade. “We usually phone our contacts in the conflict zone and get useful information from them,” said the senior journalist with eight-year conflict reporting experience. “Sometimes they call us themselves to tell us what is happening”. Many participants spoke in a similar vein, confirming the popularity of this approach.

Respondents also said they use ‘safety-in-number method’ (working in teams as a professional group) in covering Boko Haram stories to reduce the risk of being targeted

individually by the insurgents or security operatives. Here they work in small groups, informing one another about events related to the insurgency and reporting on them together. In this way, the journalistic practice of covering exclusive stories is jettisoned in favour of team coverage for safety concerns. This method is related to a ‘collaborative approach’ that the participants also said they adopt to strengthen individual safety. In it, reporters share stories among themselves and publish them in their respective outlets, providing a collective cover for themselves and making it difficult for the combatants to target an individual journalist or outlet for publishing the stories.

Another strategy that the respondents said they routinely use to mitigate the challenges is ‘avoidance of antagonism strategy’. This involves avoiding dangerous places or potentially “antagonising” news angles that could anger the Army or the insurgents. It is a form of self-censorship in which key elements of a story are published without giving prominence to the angle that could “antagonise” the combatants. Most participants admitted avoiding covering many stories for safety reasons, and data from the newsroom observations show how the news organisations refrained from sending their reporters to dangerous places. The other strategy the participants mentioned is ‘extra-security approach’ (being more security conscious) to protect themselves and their outlets from attacks. Some news organisations have erected extra barriers to protect their premises especially after the Boko Haram’s bombing of *Thisday* premises in Abuja (Pate and Idris 2017).

Almost all the participants also mentioned ‘solidarity strategy’ as a useful tool of tackling the security problems they face in reporting the conflict. In this approach, journalists, often with the help of their unions and in collaboration with civil society organisations, support their colleagues who face threats from the combatants.

“Professional solidarity in support of those attacked and in shielding vulnerable colleagues proves helpful to many of us,” said the editor of the Abuja-based newspaper. It was this form of solidarity that also helped news organisations that were raided by security forces or attacked by the insurgents to cope with the consequences.

Discussion

The findings show the challenges of covering violent extremism, their consequences on journalists’ lives and journalism production, and the strategies of countering them. The risks-to-lives-and-liberty findings dovetail with previous works that demonstrate how journalists faced serious dangers, including losing their lives, while reporting on terrorism (Cottle et al. 2016; Wood 2016). However, this study has gone further to identify the endemic nature of the problem by highlighting its persistence in Boko Haram reporting over the years. The ironic cases of security agencies harming journalists instead of protecting them came out clearly in this research – a phenomenon evidenced in previous studies too (Carey and Gohdes 2021; Pate and Idris 2017). The lack of protection from Nigerian security forces has increased the vulnerability of conflict reporters and further dented the country’s dismal records on press freedom (Adeyemo 2024). Significantly, Boko Haram atrocities against both the public and news workers – and the military’s aggression against journalists to block accurate reporting of the conflict – indicate the dark side of the world that Alexander (2006) refers to in his civil sphere theory.

The findings on the exposure to psychological pains and emotional injuries do not only indicate the different forms of suffering that terror reporting could cause to journalists, they reinforce previous findings that link conflict reporting with traumatic experiences (Bradley and Heywood 2024; Obermaier et al. 2023). Consistent with Obermaier et al.’s (2023) work, this study has shown that covering violent extremism exposes

journalists to three forms of trauma: (1) primary traumatization as direct victims of attacks by the militants and the military, (2) secondary traumatization as witnesses to violence by extremists and security forces, and (3) tertiary traumatization as recipients of the terror victims' accounts of suffering. It also highlights the trauma local journalists could face while 'reporting on massacres, murders, and destruction of their own communities' (Bradley and Heywood 2024: 6). And 'exposure to trauma creates emotional wounds that need help to heal' (Simpson 2004: 77). But unfortunately, unlike the situation in the Global North where professional intervention could be readily available, such help is lacking for journalists in Nigeria. This is also consistent with what Feinstein et al. (2015) found in their study of the journalists who covered violent extremism in Kenya.

Compounding the problem of the Boko Haram conflict reporters was the denial of access to the conflict zone by the combatants. It was a situation seen in previous studies (Pate and Idris 2017; Bradley and Heywood 2024) and had negative effects on journalists and their work. Essentially, it hinders their ability to cover conflicts well, and creates ethical dilemmas on whether to cover certain stories and with which sources (Abubakar 2020). This adds to their psychological stress (Idås et al. 2019) and weakens the quality of their reports. The obstacles to accurate reporting of conflicts, including self-censorship – a common response to safety concerns (Walulya and Nassanga 2020) – are imposed by uncivil forces to undermine journalism and restrict the civil sphere (Alexander 2006), with far-reaching consequences on society as a whole. 'If there are territories or issues which become effectively unreported or unreportable, it affects all of us, not only those directly involved' (Cottle et al. 2016: 5).

Undermining journalism could lead to erosion of trust in news media and a loss of credibility for journalists. To address this, the journalists devised ways of improving

their news sourcing, which highlights their desire to uphold journalistic norms and to protect their jobs. Their determination to deploy different strategies to discharge their duties does not only indicate a commitment to professional integrity, it illustrates their role in expanding the boundaries of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006).

The findings that detail the other strategies journalists employ to withstand adversity and execute their work (collaborative approach, safety-in-number and extra-security methods) resemble the ones reported in Pate and Idris's (2017) work. But they also show that those practices have now been routinized. Other mechanisms, such as avoidance of antagonism, remote reporting and social solidarity strategies, are new findings, and reflect the increasing resourcefulness of journalists to deal with the challenges of reporting violent extremism.

Those efforts, as the participants explained, were motivated by their desire to discharge their professional and societal responsibilities – which brings to the fore the news media role in society. Evidently, journalists' commitment to accurate reporting of conflicts and the compassion they show to victims fit into journalism's normative roles in society and its ability to advance the civil sphere (Alexander 2006). Where journalists fail to live up to societal expectations, by failing to report accurately, societal disapproval ensues: public distrust of their journalism. The news media are, of course, 'vulnerable to "public relations," to staged events', and other influences, but it is when they rise above them that their societal role becomes more pronounced (Alexander 2006: 84).

The civil sphere theory's recognition of the efficacy of solidarity in forging societal ties (Alexander 2006) is another useful analytical device here. It works at two levels: (1) the journalists' use of 'solidarity strategy' to mount collective resistance to overcome aggression against them, and (2) the solidarity they receive from civil society groups to help them shed light on human plights. Both demonstrate journalism's enhancement of,

and being enhanced by, social solidarities. They also illustrate the relevance of the civil sphere theory in understanding the dynamics of relationships among journalists and with others, and the essence of collective efforts for civil repair even in places adversely affected by uncivil activities of violent extremists. Caring for others, Alexander (2006) argues, is at the core of societal wellbeing, and journalism could serve as a tool of attaining this.

Conclusion

Reporting on violent extremism presents challenges to journalists and news outlets, taking a heavy toll on them and on the journalism they produce. This study shows that journalists risk their lives and liberty, face constant threats and intimidation from the military and militants, and suffer physical and psychological pains to cover violent extremism. It sheds light on the three levels of traumatization – primary, secondary and tertiary – they are exposed to; and illustrates the intricacies of conflict journalism and the mechanisms of coping with its pitfalls. Conflict reporters deploy different devices – avoidance of antagonism, professional collaboration, social solidarity and remote reporting strategies – as their main modes of resistance and resilience.

The study extends the literature on conflict journalism by providing insights into the specific challenges of reporting violent extremism and identifying viable coping mechanisms. It also demonstrates how Alexander's civil sphere theory, a cultural sociology thesis, could serve as a useful analytical tool in media studies and help expand the field. Admittedly, the theory does not explain all the complexities of conflict journalism, but it helps explain journalists' motivations in defying death threats to cover conflicts, highlights the social solidarity shown among themselves and civil society groups, and sheds light on the role of journalism in expanding the civil sphere. It also reinforces the imperative for conflict reporters' protection and the need to enshrine this

in the United Nations' responsibility-to-protect doctrine (Cottle, 2016). News organisations and other bodies should extend such protection by providing resources for physical and mental wellbeing of news workers. Further scholarly intervention is also needed. This study focuses on local journalists' struggles to cover a particularly difficult conflict in Africa. Future research could cover other geographical areas, use bigger samples, look at the gender dimension of it, and focus on freelance journalists who face even greater challenges in covering conflicts.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This research was approved by the Senate Research Ethics Committee of City, University of London (REC Reference Numbers: ETH819-1574 and ETH2122-0814). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study and for the findings to be published.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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