Audience Assessment of Media Ethics and Professional Standards in Reporting Post-election Crises in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study analyses the media's compliance with professional and ethical standards in their reporting of post-election crises, a period historically marked by societal volatility. The research was based on a survey of 112 lecturers from Kogi State University and Prince Abubakar Audu University, and a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was used to collect data on three main objectives. The article uses Framing Theory to argue that these external elements constitute meta-frames that constrain journalists from telling the truth without bias. The results demonstrate that the media is perceived as having weak commitment to its ethical obligations: perceived lack of objectivity is significant, and ethical violations are very common, including the sharing of fake news, hate speech, and unverified information. Moreover, the research revealed that moral incompetence is primarily caused by systemic problems, such as political influence, economic pressures, and a lack of adequate training and regulatory oversight, rather than by a need to create sensationalism for the audience. Finally, the results prove that the inability of the media to meet the established ethical standards is a burning issue that undermines the confidence of citizens and jeopardises the stability of the country.
Keywords: Media Ethics, Post election Crisis, Nigeria, Framing Theory, Journalistic Standards.

Introduction

The media form primary pillar in democratic societies, as it acts as a watchdog, a platform for debate, and an indispensable source of information, enabling citizens to make informed decisions (Kurfi, Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2025). The importance of its role is even greater when it comes to elections, which often tend to be the era of increased political tension and polarisation (Adeleke, 2025). It is at these crucial points that the media's ability to offer precise, balanced, and objective information is crucial in ensuring a viable electoral process and peace. The inability to adhere to these principles can lead to the escalation of tensions, the spread of disinformation, and even violence, thus affecting the democratic system, which is supposed to support (Ibrahim, 2025).

Historically, the development in the media landscape in Nigeria has undergone a remarkable transformation with the trend of democracy, but it is through the actions of the media during the elections that the media is subject to constant monitoring. Although different sources have done considerable job in educating voters and political discussions, there have been consistent worries with regard to the professional practices (Shamsudeen, Inuwa, Dushe & Heckel, 2025). The heterogeneous socio-political context of the country often poses a difficult situation for journalists, who are expected to make their way through ethnic, religious, and political divisions without any bias (Idi, 2025). This is especially acute during and following the election, as partisan interests and the spread of digital space threaten to undermine the old-fashioned journalistic values (Suemo, 2024; Christopher University, 2021). Media presentation of events, meanings of blame, and coverage of a developing situation can change the way the public thinks and consequently take action on the behaviour of political participants and their followers. As such, professional and ethical judgments made by journalists at this critical stage directly impact national security and societal unity.

Observing the professional and media ethics set by the press is not an exercise as such, but a practical requirement to be a responsible journalist. The main ethical standards, e.g., the truth, objectivity, fairness, and impartiality, act as a guide that can lead a journalist in a complicated and controversial situation (Maigida & Idi, 2025). Specifically, the Nigerian Press Council Code of Ethics requires the professional to do all in his or her power to ensure the truth is established without being sensational and hate speech (Oluwajide, 2023). Nevertheless, they are usually undermined by political pressure, business interests, and the pressure to break news in a competitive media industry. The emergence of digital media and the popularity of social media platforms have contributed to the worsening of this situation (Ajakaiye, 2024). Alternative accounts and image manipulations, such as deepfakes, may be widely distributed and cause fear and distrust, especially in the post-election times (Ibrahim, 2025; Adeleke,

2025). This new information ecosystem puts pressure on journalists to fact-check to a degree that they have never had to sustain ethical boundaries.

Despite the previous research interest in the role of the media in covering elections, there are still large gaps in the systematic and comprehensive assessment of the compliance with media ethics and professional standards in the particular situation, which is post-election crises in Nigeria (Maigida & Idi, 2025; Ajakaiye, 2024; Christopher University, 2021). This, therefore, leaves a significant gap in empirical data that outlines the ethical terrain of post-election reporting. It is against this background that the current study aims to determine the level of media practitioners in Nigeria who observe the media ethics and professional standards in the way they report on the election crisis. The specific objectives are to:

i.　Investigate how well the Nigerian media adhere to the principles and standards of reporting during post-election crises;

ii.　 Determine the occurrence of ethical violations such as sensationalism, hate speech, and misinformation in post-election crisis media coverage in Nigeria;

iii.　Ascertain the factors that affect the media's adherence to ethical standards in post-election crises in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Examining media ethics and professionalism in the coverage of the post-election crisis in Nigeria begins with the requisite appreciation of the dual nature of the media in democratic societies. The press, being the fourth estate, is charged with the responsibility of informing the masses, bringing power into check, and even promoting positive ongoing discussions. During such an unstable period just after an election, these responsibilities become even more important (Olutola, 2023). The media ethics and professional standards, including the codes like the Nigerian Press Council Code of Ethics, are a guiding principle that makes sure that the reportage is not only accurate but also fair, balanced and that it does not harm national stability

in any way. However, the situation in Nigeria is quite tricky and complicated as these ideals often interfere with existing political, economic, and social realities (Ndukwe, 2020).

Truth, accuracy, and responsibility are some of the foundations of ethical journalism. The media role is even more critical when post-election crises take place. News sources are also supposed to uphold high standards of facts verification and fact-checking before releasing news. The reason is that, during such sensitive times misinformation or disinformation can easily cause the build-up of tensions, conflict or even the loss of confidence by the people on democratic institutions. Journalists take the moral responsibility of differentiating between facts that are verified and those that are not, or rumours and speculations. The inability to fulfil this norm can have such consequences: a false statement about the malpractice of elections or an inflammatory word of a political leader can rapidly trigger the onset of violence and mass unrest (Ibrahim, 2025). As a result, the credibility of the media as a credible source of information is directly connected to its ability to support this basic criterion.

Also, there are principles of fairness and balance that should be taken as the foremost ones. Ethical reporting also forces journalists to provide both sides of the story, devoid of any bias and give equal voice to the opposing sides, the security agencies, civil society organisations and the affected citizens. This involves a sense of contextual background to events and avoids the selective use of information that helps individuals to support a specific story (Olayode, 2022). Such an equilibrium is, therefore, a challenge in the highly polarised post-election environment in Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, and political loyalties are strong. It is, however, an ethical requirement to ensure that the media is not seen as a mouthpiece to any given political or ethnic groups, hence preventing the further polarisation of the societal fault lines (Adewale, 2021).

Sensationalism is also another issue with media ethical practices. The media world is very competitive, and there is a great temptation to use a catchy headline and emotive words

to attract attention to the audience and to enhance readership or viewership. This practice is a serious ethical violation, even in times of crisis and is not commercially viable. Sensationalism has the potential to inflate the conflict scales, create panic, and contribute to the environment of fear and mistrust (Suemo, Etuh & Akpan, 2024). Ethical reporting, on the other hand, is required to be written in a cool, measured and responsible tone that will not inflame the tensions; instead, it will try to calm and de-escalate the situation.

In this regard, the language by itself is a vital aspect in ethical reporting. The word choices determined by a journalist can be bridging or building fences. This involves not resorting to stereotypes, generalisation and putting the crisis in such a position that pits one group against the other (Maigida and Idi, 2025). Such failure to adhere to media ethics and professionalism during the post-election crisis has far reaching repercussions to the democratic consolidation process of Nigeria, since it undermines the credibility of the populace to both the press and democracy, heightens the political tensions and conflicts, compromises the accountability process by enabling leaders to escape scrutiny, distorts democracy by biased or misleading coverage, diminishes the role of the media in the civic education process, and may bring government repression of the media freedom, all of which will hold back the stability and growth of the Nigerian democracy. It undermines popular confidence in the media, which is an important institution of working democracy (Adeleke, 2025; Ajakaiye, 2024).

Thus, assessing the ethics of the media in the case of post-election crises in Nigeria is a complex play with professional principles and cold reality. The principles of truth, accuracy, fairness, and balance are obvious, but their implementation is complicated due to the political risks, economic motivations, and the interference of digital technology. Comprehensive compliance with these standards is not a fringe aspect of professionalism; it is an element of the conceptual foundation of peace and stability, and a decisive factor in whether the media will be a binding element or a dividing factor in an already divided nation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Framing Theory by Erving Goffman, who in his 1974 book Frame Analysis, investigated how individuals use frames to interpret the social interactions and occurrences (Goffman, 1974). The theory concerns ways through which the media chooses and frames information to influence the mindset of people. It was applied to media and political communications by Robert Entman (1993) who defined media framing as a process of selecting and emphasising specific aspects of events or issues, and connecting them in a manner that reinforces a certain interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution (Entman, 1993). Though Framing Theory has become a very influential theory, one of its key criticisms is that it tends to reduce the complex process of media influence into a one-way model of communication where the media influences the opinion of the audience without sufficient consideration of the agency and interpretation of the audience (Reese, 2001). The theory allows empirical research into the ways in which the media houses present the crisis as an indication of acceptable popular discontent, an act of violence, a tribal struggle or a need to claim state power.

Methodology

This research used a quantitative survey research design in an attempt to gather data from lecturers of two universities: Kogi State University, Kabba (n=114 lecturers) and Prince Audu Abubakar University (n=447 lecturers). These two universities are combined to make a total population of 561 lecturers. The selection of lecturers as a sample is not random, even though the study addresses media ethics and professionalism. Lecturers in the social sciences are considered appropriate since they are audience and analysts of media contents, and their views are important in determining the impact of media practices on the consolidation of democracy, especially in the post-election crisis.

The sample size was estimated based on the sample size determination method provided by Glenn Israel (1992), which suggests the selection of about 20 per cent of the population in

case of limited resources and a population not too big in case of survey studies. According to this criterion, 112 lecturers (20% of 561) were selected as sample of respondents. Simple random sampling was the sampling strategy used, and all the lecturers in the population were given an equal opportunity to become participants in the research. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data related to the perceptions of the lecturers concerning the adherence to ethical practices and professionalism in the post-election crisis by the media. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, which is between Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree, to enable respondents to give subtle answers. To be valid and understandable, the pre-test on the instrument was conducted with the young professionals before the actual survey. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse. Descriptive statistics (mean scores) was used with benchmark of 3.00 in that the scores of 3.00 and above were accepted, and the scores lower than 3.00 were taken as rejected.

Analysis

Table 1: Adherence to media ethics and professional standards in reporting post-election crises in Nigeria

Perceptions of Objectivity and Balance in Post-Election Reporting	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
Media outlets provide a balanced view of all political parties.	23	31	15	28	15	*3.25*	*1.39*	*Accepted*
Reports on post-election crises are free from political bias.	18	27	21	35	11	*2.97*	*1.25*	*Rejected*
Journalists offer equal voice to opposing viewpoints.	29	36	18	19	10	*3.61*	*1.23*	*Accepted*
News coverage focuses on facts rather than opinions.	11	15	28	32	26	*2.51*	*1.25*	*Rejected*
The media's reporting helps to de-escalate tensions.	20	25	29	22	16	*3.01*	*1.34*	*Accepted*
Reports are framed to promote national unity.	25	30	17	18	22	*3.28*	*1.50*	*Accepted*
The media covers crises without sensationalism.	13	19	24	38	18	*2.65*	*1.29*	*Rejected*
Media outlets provide a balanced view of all political parties.	23	31	15	28	15	*3.25*	*1.39*	*Accepted*
Perceptions of Ethical Lapses in Post-Election Reporting	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**	*Mean*	*SD*	*Decision*
Fake news and misinformation are widespread in reports.	48	32	10	14	8	*4.09*	*1.23*	*Accepted*
The media uses inflammatory or hate speech.	35	28	19	18	12	*3.55*	*1.41*	*Accepted*
News outlets publish unverified information.	41	34	12	16	9	*3.86*	*1.31*	*Accepted*
Journalists accept bribes to alter their reports.	38	22	17	25	10	*3.48*	*1.38*	*Accepted*
Media coverage is often sensationalized.	30	29	15	21	17	*3.22*	*1.48*	*Accepted*

	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
The media uses misleading headlines to attract readers.	44	25	18	13	12	*3.73*	*1.39*	*Accepted*
Reports tend to glorify violence or protest.	27	21	14	34	16	*2.95*	*1.49*	*Rejected*
Fake news and misinformation are widespread in reports.	48	32	10	14	8	*4.09*	*1.23*	*Accepted*
Factors Influencing Adherence to Media Ethics	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
Political pressure from ownership affects reporting.	51	38	12	9	2	*4.15*	*1.13*	*Accepted*
Journalists lack adequate training on crisis reporting.	26	32	20	25	9	*3.26*	*1.33*	*Accepted*
Economic pressures influence ethical decisions.	47	30	18	11	6	*4.05*	*1.22*	*Accepted*
Digital media speed compromises verification.	40	36	15	14	7	*3.89*	*1.25*	*Accepted*
Lack of regulatory oversight allows for unethical practice.	33	29	22	16	12	*3.49*	*1.40*	*Accepted*
Journalists fear for their safety when reporting.	42	34	10	15	11	*3.88*	*1.39*	*Accepted*
The public's demand for sensationalism drives reporting.	19	24	28	21	20	*2.92*	*1.39*	*Rejected*

Source: Field Work, 2025.

Discussion of Findings

In line with the first objective which investigate how well the Nigerian media adhere to the principles and standards of reporting during post-election crises, it reveals that there is political bias in general and selective factual reporting, with the dismissal of the statement that reports about post-election crisis not containing political bias (Mean=2.97). This supports the statement by Kurfi, Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2025) that media neutrality is one of the biggest problems in Nigeria. Equally, the observation that respondents do not think that reports are concerned with facts but views (Mean=2.51) has been echoed in the analysis of the utilisation of the print media to advance certain political interests instead of using it as a source of objective information. These findings lead to the submission that there is a big gap between the ideals of ethical objectivity and the realities of the media reporting regarding the events in the post-election Nigerian environment. More so, the data revealed a subtle and somewhat paradoxical perception.

As much as respondents agreed that journalists are giving a balanced opinion (Mean=3.25) and that they are giving equal voice to an opposing opinion (Mean=3.61), they also did not believe that news is devoid of political bias. This implies that although media can

literally use both sides of a story, the framing, use of words and editorial bias can still have a partisan message. This is similar to the idea of subtle gatekeeping, where information is not blatantly blocked, but is rather presented in a manner that leans toward a particular side of the political spectrum in a subtle manner. It means that media impact is well-developed and not one-sided reporting. Further dissection of the information leads to the particular malfunctions of the factual reporting. The fact that the news coverage is concerned with facts and not opinions was not strongly accepted (Mean=2.51), which is a very damaging criticism of the professional standards of the media. This observation implies that journalists can leave their main functions of informing the population with confirmed information and adopt spreading their personal opinions or unverified assertions, especially during the emotional and unstable phase of a post-election crisis. The contribution of digital platforms to the exaggeration of this problem cannot be underestimated. Since the traditional media sources cannot maintain objectivity, their biased news is usually repackaged and spread to social media, where it can be further manipulated. The first ethical breach by the media house forms a point where a series of misinformation and propaganda can be developed. This further complicates the ability of the people to tell when they are getting real news or when they are being fed political information, and thus distrusted in the whole media system, as well as exposed to fake news by people. From the lens of the Framing Theory, it indicate that Nigerian media houses are prone to use a partisan frame, or conflict frame, rather than the objective frame, or reconciliation frame, when covering post-election crises. The positive outlier is the acceptance of the item that reports are framed to foster national unity (Mean=3.28), although the overall data indicates the situation when the media is seen as a cause of conflict instead of its resolution. The highly selective focus on a few aspects of the crisis and the exclusion of others reflects a conscious or subliminal decision on the part of journalists that advances specific interests, thus falling short of the

fundamental ethical criteria of neutrality and detracting from their essential contribution to a democracy.

In response to the second objective which seek to determine the occurrence of ethical violations such as sensationalism, hate speech, and misinformation in post-election crisis media coverage in Nigeria, the study revealed there is a high rate of ethical violations. This is seen by fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents (Mean=4.09) agreed that fake news and misinformation are widespread and that inflammatory language (Mean=3.55). This validates the arguments presented by Ajakaiye (2024) concerning the digital platforms as a platform to share harmful content. This is also supported by the fact that journalists release information that has not been proved to be true (Mean=3.86), which is a characteristic of unethical reporting, and one of the attributes by which media credibility is damaged, as observed by Maigida and Idi (2025) in their discussion of online news. The information indicates that these cases of ethical violations are not one-off cases but a systematic issue that is deeply entrenched in the media industry. The fact that respondents think journalists are bribed to change their stories (Mean=3.48) and to issue false headlines (Mean=3.73) reminds one of the long-running criticism of brown envelope journalism in Nigeria. Although this is not a new development, it is evident in practice as a long-standing challenge which undermines the integrity of reporting in sensitive times. These findings concur with the overall ethical issues discussed by Adedokun, Okeke, and Ojo (2025) regarding the role of external factors in media performance in the case of elections. Through the framework of Framing Theory, the findings is apparently presented in unethical frames. Once the media resorts to the false headlines and sensationalised stories (Mean=3.22), the media can be said to be practising what Framing Theory would define as sensationalism framing or dramatisation framing (Entman, 1993). These frames are constructed in such a manner that they leave an emotional impact on the audience instead of giving them facts on the ground. In such a way, the media not only contravenes the ethical codes but also

plays an actively negative part in the creation of the panic and unrest in the population by diverting attention to the most explosive and entertaining sides of the crisis, thus significantly compromising its responsibilities as a public watchdog.

In line with the third objective which determine the factors that affect the media's adherence to ethical standards in post-election crises in Nigeria, it reveals that ownership political pressure influences reporting (Mean=4.15) which confirms that political structures have a great impact on the media behaviour (Reese, 2001). This observation is consistent with the fact that media ownership structures will tend to affect editorial policy, especially where the political environment is heated (Idi and Shadrach, 2025). On the same note, economic pressures mean (Mean=4.05) is high enough to support the long-held view that financial insecurity may force media houses to give in to the temptations of compromising ethics to remain afloat. The results are also characterised by an impression that it is not only individual journalistic shortcomings that are in play, but also structural problems. The consensus about the insufficiency of training among journalists (Mean=3.26), the lack of regulatory control (Mean=3.49) and the fear of journalist security (Mean=3.88) indicates the ecological problem of ethics in reporting. These findings are consistent with the findings of Suemo, Etuh, and Akpan (2024), who discovered that journalists are forced to work under precarious conditions, which expose them to manipulation and coercion. The information indicates that such structural inefficiencies lead to a situation in which ethical compliance is not only challenging but also, in most cases, hazardous, forcing journalists into harsh decisions that can jeopardise their professional practices. The fact that the concept of sensationalism reporting being a demand of the population (Mean=2.92) is rejected is a rather important one. This implies that the lecturers do not consider the audience as the main force behind unethical media practices. They instead place the blame on the system and institutional failures, including compromised ownership, poor working conditions, and a weak regulatory climate. This approach changes the ethical

wrongdoings on the audience to the media sector and its political and economic background. The fact that these external factors are prevalent has direct and far-reaching effects on the media in its capacity to exercise its watchdog role. The media is no longer a means of doing good to people when political and economic pressures determine the content of the editorial process; it becomes a mouthpiece of interested parties. It is a serious breach of the democratic principles of a free press and may be disastrous to the stability of a country. This is a loss of independence in a volatile post-election period that can only serve to widen existing tensions, making a political crisis a social crisis. According to the Framing Theory, these results underscore the limitations on the selection of frames by media houses. The political and economic pressures that the study has identified are strong meta-frames that shape and limit the particular frames that journalists can apply. Indeed, a journalist employed by a media house owned politically may be institutionally obliged to take a pro-government frame, notwithstanding the truth of objective facts of a post-election crisis.

Conclusion

This study examined media's compliance with the ethics and professional standards of the media in the era of post-election crisis in Nigeria. It validated the assumption of ethical misdemeanours in the form of political bias, sensationalism, and the spread of fake news through a survey of lecturers in two higher institutions. It was found that there was a great divergence between the principles of democracy of the free and objective press and the reality of the media environment that was determined by political and economic pressures. This implies that although the media houses might have the knowledge of their moral obligations, they are unable to exercise them because of a mixture of internal and external circumstances, hence derailing their important role of promoting peace and stability at such sensitive stages. Finally, the findings of the study provide a very important alert to all stakeholders. Not only does a mass feeling of an unethical and compromised media undermine the trust of the people,

but it is also directly threatening the national cohesion. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

i. The media regulators must have the authority to closely regulate the media houses and bring them in line with ethical practices, whereby infractions like fake news, sensationalism, and hate speech are brought to book.

ii. Journalists ought to be put through processes of constant training and professional development initiatives, which dwell on ethical crisis reporting, fact-checking, and balanced coverage.

iii. Independent ownership arrangements and sustainable funding patterns should be encouraged to help media organisations to resist unnecessary political interferences and economic stress that may compromise editorial independence and promote objective reporting.

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