

Insecurity and National Development: The Cognitive Dissonance Arising from the Media's Contradictory Roles

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Abstract:

Irrespective of how journalism and media reports are structured, truth, objectivity, and accuracy are expected to remain the cornerstone, as media reports have the power to make, mar, incite, and pacify. This paper, therefore, examines the conflicting roles the media play due to factors such as media ownership, the proliferation of media houses with differing ideologies, and citizen journalism, all of which affect objective reporting and lead to conflicting information. It also considers how these conflicting reports impact human psychology, resulting in psychological stress, while emphasizing that such media anomalies are not confined to a specific area, as they extend into sensitive matters such as national security. These conflicts further shape public perception of the media's involvement in addressing insecurity and fostering national development. The study also highlights how insecurity has increasingly become a significant barrier to development in many nations, including Nigeria, where political instability, economic

fluctuations, and social fragmentation heighten the influence of media messages. As the media shifts between acting as a watchdog of society and, at other times, serving as a channel through which misinformation unintentionally spreads, audiences are frequently confronted with cognitive dissonance caused by contradictory narratives about insecurity, governance, and development. This psychological tension affects how individuals interpret issues, respond to government strategies, and form opinions about national development initiatives. By interrogating these dimensions, the paper underscores the urgent need for ethical and responsible journalism, improved media literacy, and a more coherent information ecosystem that can support national development and reduce the psychological stress associated with contradictory media messages.

Keywords: Insecurity, National Development, Cognitive Dissonance, Media

INTRODUCTION

Insecurity is a major challenge to national development, especially in countries that struggle with political instability, economic disparities, and social fragmentation, as is the case in Nigeria (Akindoyin & Obafemi, 2025; Onunwa, 2025, Onyemaechi, 2025). In recent years, Nigeria's security environment has further deteriorated due to rising incidents of banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence, creating deeper anxiety among citizens and increasing reliance on news media for interpretation and guidance (Reuters, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). In response to these challenges the media, through its reporting and framing, has the capacity to influence public opinion, inform policy decisions, and direct societal attention. Contemporary research shows that the way the media frames insecurity shapes whether the public views

government responses as effective or inadequate, and whether citizens engage constructively or react with fear and mistrust (Adebiyi, 2025; Apuke & Omar, 2024, Onyemaechi, et.al, 2017).

The media can assume both protagonist and antagonist roles in relation to national development, particularly in how it reports on issues of insecurity. These conflicting roles are further complicated by cognitive dissonance, a psychological phenomenon in which individuals experience discomfort when confronted with conflicting information or beliefs (Eze, Ehikwe, & Odigbo, 2016; DoctorSpin, 2019). With the rapid rise of citizen journalism, algorithmic amplification, and unregulated online reporting, individuals are now exposed to multiple versions of the same event, increasing the likelihood of confusion and emotional strain (Broda, 2024; Lawal, 2025). The proliferation of media, diverse ownership structures, and the rise of citizen journalism have all contributed to conflicting reports, thereby influencing public perception and policy regarding national development and security. This paper explores these dimensions to unravel the complex relationship between the media, insecurity, and national development.

Despite these challenges, journalistic objectivity should not be discarded. Objectivity remains essential to maintaining credibility, trust, and the integrity of the press. As Bo, Nyitse, and Atime (2023) argue, objectivity is not only desirable but possible, especially when journalists apply rigorous methods and ethical standards to their reporting. The media's role in shaping public discourse means that reasonably objective reporting helps the audience access a neutral set of facts from which to form their own judgments, rather than being told what to think (Center for Media Engagement, 2020). Recent studies emphasize that strengthening transparency,

verification practices, and ethical compliance in newsrooms remains central to rebuilding trust and reducing the negative impact of misinformation on national cohesion (European Broadcasting Union, 2022; Tandoc, 2023).

Moreover, objective and balanced media coverage is vital for national development because it fosters civic engagement, encourages informed decision-making, and ensures that security and policy responses are understood and supported by the public (Adebiyi, 2025; Apuke & Omar, 2024). When media reporting is biased, conflicting, or ideologically driven, citizens may disengage from critical discussions, resist government initiatives, or act based on fear and misinformation, thereby weakening collective efforts to address insecurity and achieve sustainable development (Fischer, 2011; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

Understanding the media's influence on public perception, policy, and national development is immense, particularly in contexts of insecurity. While the media can promote awareness, accountability, and social cohesion, it can also intensify cognitive dissonance and public distrust if ethical standards are neglected. Understanding the media's dual role is therefore critical for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen national development and ensure that security challenges are accurately and responsibly reported.

Insecurity continues to pose a significant challenge to Nigeria's national development, manifesting in widespread threats such as kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, communal clashes, and rising social unrest. These persistent threats create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that affects both governance and everyday life. In recent years, insecurity in Nigeria has intensified, creating conditions that make the media's role in shaping public understanding more significant

than ever. Insecurity threatens national development by disrupting economic growth, political stability, and social cohesion. The media plays a dual role in this context: as a protagonist, it raises awareness and holds authorities accountable, but as an antagonist, it spreads misinformation and fosters polarization. Conflicting reports from diverse media sources, driven by ownership biases, differing ideologies, and citizen journalism, contribute to public confusion and cognitive dissonance.

However, the speed at which information now circulates especially through digital and social media has intensified these challenges (nwobi, et.al, 2025, Adigbe, et.al, 2025). The pressure to deliver news quickly often leads to incomplete, exaggerated, or misleading reports, which complicate public understanding of security issues. When audiences are exposed to such inconsistencies, trust in both the media and the government weakens, and people struggle to distinguish verified information from false or manipulated narratives. Furthermore, the absence of a unified media framework for reporting insecurity allows contradictory storylines to thrive, creating an information environment in which citizens are left uncertain about the true state of national security. This fragmentation not only shapes how insecurity is perceived but also affects how development policies are received and whether the public supports government interventions. This study aims to explore the media's dual role and the impact of conflicting narratives on public perception, policy, and national development efforts.

Research Objectives:

- To examine the dual role of the media as both a protagonist and antagonist in reporting insecurity
- To analyze how conflicting media narratives contribute to cognitive dissonance and influence national development efforts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Framing theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory. As the Framing Theory highlights media's influence on the public through the way they present information which can be conflicting, the Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains the impact of such reports and how they lead to psychological stress.

- Framing Theory

In the views of Little John and Foss (2009), the framing theory is credited to Erving Goffman. This theory states that the way and manner a specific event or issue is presented will have an effect on the way it is being understood and perceived (Ajaero, 2014). In ideal circumstances, research on framing examines the production of news stories, how the people interpret these frames and how the stories articulate the frames (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 215, as cited in Ukonu & Ajaero. 2017). The approaches to framing in media studies can be related to the sociological and psychological propositions that people need certain explanatory frames to be able to form an opinion or give an assessment on an issue (Carstea, 2012, p. 98). The aim of framing theory therefore, is to identify systems in which people see the world. Although media are not especially effective at telling us what to think, they do tell us what to think about (Cohen, cited in Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

In practical terms, framing affects national development and security reporting by highlighting some narratives while downplaying others. For instance, media reports on insecurity may emphasize government failures, successes in combating crime, or societal impacts, depending on the outlet's ideological stance, editorial policies, or ownership interests. The way stories are framed can evoke specific emotions, guide judgments, and even mobilize public action or inaction (Entman, 2007). By focusing attention on certain angles or perspectives, framing creates interpretive shortcuts that help audiences make sense of complex issues but can also lead to cognitive biases.

Recent studies continue to underscore the relevance of framing in shaping public understanding. For example, research by Onyekachi and Eze (2022) highlights how media framing of security issues in Nigeria affects citizen perception of government effectiveness, public trust, and civic engagement. Similarly, global studies show that framing in news coverage influences policy debates, electoral outcomes, and societal attitudes toward social problems (Ajaero, 2016; Shah, 2016). Understanding framing is therefore crucial for both media practitioners, who craft the narratives, and audiences, who must critically interpret them.

- Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, developed by Leon Festinger in 1957, remain a fundamental concept in psychology, illuminating the complexities of human cognition and behavior. It explains how individuals cope with conflicting information, contradictory beliefs or inconsistent behaviors. This psychological phenomenon occurs when a person's existing beliefs, attitudes or

values clash with new, contradictory information. Cognitive dissonance is characterized by a feeling of psychological tension or discomfort, prompting individuals to alleviate the discomfort. This motivation drives people to reduce dissonance through various strategies. When confronted with conflicting information, individuals employ strategies to reduce dissonance. They may change their beliefs to align with new information or reject the conflicting data to maintain existing beliefs. Alternatively, they integrate new information into existing belief structures or downplay its significance. Some seek support from like-minded individuals to reduce dissonance. Cognitive dissonance influences decision-making, attitude change and social influence. Researchers study dissonance reduction strategies using surveys, experiments, interviews and content analysis. Understanding cognitive dissonance helps develop critical thinking, improves decision-making and enhances effective communication. Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory challenged traditional notions of human motivation and behavior, emphasizing the psychological tension arising from conflicting beliefs, attitudes or values.

In practical applications, cognitive dissonance has significant implications for understanding responses to insecurity, political reporting, and development-related issues. For instance, when media outlets present contradictory narratives about national security or government policies, citizens may experience discomfort and uncertainty, prompting them to rely on sources that confirm their pre-existing beliefs. This phenomenon can exacerbate polarization, hinder consensus, and complicate policy implementation. Studies have shown that individuals often employ strategies such as selective exposure, rationalization, or social support to reduce dissonance, which in turn affects public engagement with national development initiatives (Fischer, 2011; DoctorSpin, 2019). Understanding cognitive dissonance is therefore essential for

both media practitioners, who aim to communicate effectively, and policymakers, who seek to mobilize public support.

Insecurity and National Development

Insecurity, in its various forms, presents a significant threat to national development. It undermines economic growth, destabilizes political systems, and fractures social cohesion, creating an environment where both human and material resources are at risk. Scholars like Ake (1996) argued that development is not merely measured through economic indicators such as GDP or industrial output; it encompasses the overall improvement in the well-being of the population, including access to security, peace, and social stability. In regions plagued by terrorism, armed conflict, banditry, or rampant criminal activities, development initiatives are often disrupted as resources are diverted to manage security concerns. Public infrastructure projects stall, educational activities are interrupted, and healthcare systems struggle to meet growing demands. Additionally, potential investors are often discouraged from committing resources to unstable environments, limiting opportunities for economic diversification, job creation, and technological advancement (Collier, 2007; Akinwale & Ogundipe, 2021). Consequently, national development cannot be fully realized without addressing the underlying security challenges.

The media plays a critical role in mediating public understanding of these security challenges. By reporting on incidents of terrorism, insurgency, armed robbery, and systemic failures in governance, the media informs citizens about prevailing risks and vulnerabilities, thereby shaping public perception and influencing policy formulation. Well-researched and objective

reporting can galvanize public discourse, mobilize collective action, and prompt government agencies to implement timely interventions. For instance, media coverage of kidnapping and communal violence in parts of Nigeria has pressured authorities to strengthen local policing, deploy security forces, and engage in community-based peace initiatives (Obi & Nwankwo, 2022). However, the media's role is not always straightforward or purely constructive. Conflicting reports, biased narratives, and sensationalism can exacerbate fear, reinforce stereotypes, and contribute to public confusion. In some cases, misinformation can erode trust in government institutions, discourage civic participation, and hinder coordinated development efforts. Therefore, while the media has the potential to enhance national security and development, its effectiveness largely depends on accuracy, ethical standards, and balanced framing of security-related events (Ajaero, 2016; Anazonwu, et.al 2016; Shah, 2016). Understanding the interplay between insecurity, media reporting, and development outcomes is essential for designing strategies that foster resilience, stability, and sustainable growth in vulnerable societies.

Media as a Protagonist in National Development

The media serves as a protagonist in national development by fostering public awareness, holding governments accountable, and promoting transparency in governance. By reporting on instances of insecurity, corruption, and policy failures, the media exposes weaknesses in national security apparatuses and compels authorities to take corrective action. This role aligns with the media's traditional function as the "fourth estate," acting as a watchdog of the government to ensure that public officials are held accountable for their decisions and actions (McQuail, 2010).

In addition, the media can foster national unity by promoting narratives that emphasize common interests and collective security. During times of national crises, such as insurgencies, communal clashes, or natural disasters, media outlets often mobilize citizens around shared goals, encouraging solidarity, resilience, and community support (Entman, 2007). By providing accurate and timely information, the media shapes public perception and motivates citizens to actively participate in efforts to maintain national security, whether through civic engagement, community initiatives, or support for government policies.

Beyond accountability and awareness, the media plays a significant role in disseminating knowledge and education, which are essential pillars of national development. Reports on insecurity can be framed in ways that explain the root causes of violence, conflict, and social unrest, thereby encouraging informed debate and constructive policy solutions (Shah, 2016). Media campaigns highlighting the consequences of crime, the importance of law enforcement, and civic responsibilities can enhance public understanding and participation in development programs. Moreover, investigative journalism can uncover systemic inefficiencies or mismanagement, providing evidence-based insights that guide policymakers in designing effective interventions. Educational programming, documentaries, and analytical news features further contribute to public literacy and informed decision-making. In this way, the media bridges the gap between policymakers and citizens, ensuring that development policies are not only well-grounded in empirical evidence but also resonate with public concerns and societal needs. The proactive engagement of media as a protagonist is thus indispensable to national

development, as it nurtures transparency, accountability, and collective social responsibility while fostering an informed and participatory citizenry.

Media as an Antagonist: Conflicting Reports and Cognitive Dissonance

However, the media also assumes an antagonist role in national development, especially when it promotes misinformation, exaggerates security threats, or becomes complicit in political propaganda. One of the most significant ways in which the media undermines national development is through the dissemination of conflicting reports on security issues, a phenomenon that has become more pronounced in an age of media proliferation. This often happens as a result of:

1. Proliferation of media with different ideologies: As different media outlets, driven by varying ideologies and ownership interests, present divergent perspectives on issues of insecurity, they create cognitive dissonance among audiences. Cognitive dissonance, as described by Festinger (1957), occurs when individuals are confronted with information that contradicts their beliefs or previous knowledge, leading to psychological discomfort. In the context of media reports on insecurity, audiences are often bombarded with conflicting narratives; some outlets may portray the government's response to insecurity as effective, while others highlight its failures. This can result in confusion, apathy, or even polarization, as individuals gravitate towards information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, a concept known as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). The role of media ownership in shaping these conflicting narratives cannot be overstated.

2. Media Ownership: Media ownership influences editorial policies, and this is particularly evident in contexts where media houses are owned by politically aligned individuals or groups.

For instance, in countries with high levels of political polarization, media outlets may present security issues in ways that align with the interests of their owners or affiliated political parties, further deepening divisions within society (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Such media practices can obscure the true nature of security threats and hinder national development by preventing a unified response to insecurity.

3. Citizen Journalism: The proliferation of media outlets, particularly with the advent of digital and social media, has exacerbated the problem of conflicting reports as any individual with the help of their phones at least can post both verified and unverified information online. The sheer volume of information available today, coupled with the ease of accessing multiple sources, has led to ideological fragmentation. Traditional media, social media, and citizen journalism often present vastly different accounts of the same security event, each shaped by unique ideological or economic interests. As Kraidy (2017) notes, this fragmentation results in the public consuming information within ideological silos, reinforcing existing biases and contributing to a polarized understanding of insecurity and national development. Citizen journalism, while democratizing the flow of information, also poses challenges in this regard. While citizen journalists can provide on-the-ground reports that mainstream media may overlook, they are often untrained in journalistic ethics and may lack the resources to verify their reports. This increases the likelihood of the spread of misinformation or sensationalism, which can exacerbate public anxiety and insecurity (Allan, 2013). The unregulated nature of citizen journalism also means that it can be used by malicious actors to spread propaganda or fake news, further distorting public perceptions of national security.

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Cognitive Dissonance and Public Response to Insecurity

Cognitive dissonance plays a critical role in shaping public responses to insecurity and, by extension, national development. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance explains that when individuals encounter conflicting information, beliefs, or values, they experience psychological discomfort. In the context of insecurity, citizens are often exposed to contradictory media reports on incidents such as insurgencies, communal clashes, or terrorist attacks. Some reports may highlight government successes in addressing these threats, while others emphasize failures or exaggerate the severity of the situation. This contradictory messaging produces cognitive dissonance, prompting individuals to either selectively seek information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs or dismiss all sources of information entirely. Such responses can result in confusion, disengagement, or public apathy, which negatively affect collective efforts toward national security and sustainable development (Fischer, 2011).

The impact of cognitive dissonance extends beyond individual perception to the broader functioning of governance and policy implementation. Disoriented citizens who distrust media narratives or government communication may be less willing to cooperate with security measures, support policy initiatives, or participate in civic programs. This erosion of public trust complicates the efforts of governments and development agencies to mobilize citizens for coordinated security responses. Moreover, cognitive dissonance can lead to policy paralysis, as decision-makers may hesitate to act decisively due to fear of public backlash, conflicting opinions, or political pressure (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). The media's antagonist role—through sensationalism, biased reporting, or dissemination of conflicting information—amplifies these effects by creating division, confusion, and social polarization. Conversely, understanding

the mechanisms of cognitive dissonance provides opportunities for designing effective communication strategies. By delivering balanced, verified, and contextually framed information, the media can help reduce public dissonance, restore trust, and encourage constructive engagement, ultimately supporting national security and facilitating broader development goals.

Conclusion

The dual role of the media as both a protagonist and antagonist in relation to insecurity and national development is a reflection of its immense power to shape public perception and influence policy. While the media can play a constructive role in promoting awareness, accountability, and national unity, it can also contribute to cognitive dissonance and ideological fragmentation through conflicting reports, driven by ownership interests and the proliferation of diverse media outlets. Understanding this dual role is crucial for policymakers, media practitioners, and the public, as it highlights the need for a responsible and ethical media landscape that prioritizes national development and the accurate portrayal of security issues.

Recommendations:

1. Media literacy campaigns should be developed to help the public critically assess information from different media outlets, reducing the impact of misinformation and cognitive dissonance.
2. Media practitioners should adhere to ethical standards, particularly in reporting on sensitive issues by presenting balanced, accurate information.
3. While diversity in media ownership is essential for representing different viewpoints, there must be mechanisms to ensure that diverse media outlets operate transparently and are held accountable for spreading false or biased information.
4. Training programs should be provided to citizen journalists to improve their understanding of journalistic ethics, especially in crisis reporting.

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