International Journal of Education, Culture, and Society

e-ISSN : 3024-8973
p-ISSN : 3024-8981

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/IJECS.v3i3.7447

Newspapers and Human Rights Violations in North-East Nigeria: an Agenda-Setting Perspective

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Aug 11, 2025	Sep 2, 2025	Sep 15, 2025	Sep 20, 2025

Abstract

This study examines how newspapers shape public attention to human rights issues in Northeast Nigeria through their agenda-setting function. The research objective is to assess the capacity of newspapers to foreground human rights concerns and the factors that constrain this role. Anchored in agenda-setting theory, the study employs a review of extant literature. Key findings indicate that newspapers can amplify marginalized voices by consistently highlighting their struggles and, through advocacy and investigative reporting, raise awareness and stimulate public discussion of critical human rights issues. However, effectiveness is limited by political bias that fosters selective reporting, commercial pressures that privilege profit over social responsibility, and media ownership influences that skew the framing of human rights stories, jointly impeding objective and comprehensive coverage. The study concludes that, despite these constraints, newspapers remain crucial in the digital media era for promoting accountability, transparency, and social justice. The contribution and implication are that strengthening editorial independence and ethical standards within newspaper organizations can enhance agenda-setting on human rights and sustain their role in holding power to account.

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Keywords: Newspapers; Agenda-Setting Theory; Human Rights Reporting; Media Bias; Northeast Nigeria; Investigative Journalism; Press Accountability

Introduction

Globally, human rights violations remain a subject of research interest across various disciplines. Several reasons fuel this interest. Firstly, human rights are a fundamental entitlement of everyone irrespective of the person's nationality, religion or social status. Secondly, there are reported cases of human rights violations in almost every region of the world, especially in conflict-prone areas. This among other reasons makes human rights violation a subject of discussion at both the global and local scene.

The significance of human rights has over the years resulted in several discourses and policy formulation in the different parts of the world. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other international treaties such as a framework and catalyst for promoting human rights (United Nations, 1948).

Nigeria has over the years been faced with diverse issues of human rights violations. Lately, these violations are noticeable and obvious in North-eastern Nigeria as a result of insurgent activities and other heinous criminal activities. Some of the common human rights-related issues in North-eastern Nigeria range from unlawful killings forced displacements, and sexual violence to restrictions on freedom of expression and access to justice (Amnesty International, 2020). It is apposite to note that vulnerable populations especially women and children are internally displaced as a result of these violations. Therefore, addressing the issues of human rights violations in Nigeria remains sacrosanct.

The mass media especially newspapers have an indispensable role to play in addressing the incessant cases of human rights violations in Nigeria. This is achievable through the media's agenda-setting role which underscores the media's ability to influence public discourse by setting agenda as stipulated in the agenda-setting theory. Therefore, newspapers which are vital channels of communication have the potency to project human rights issues in such a manner that would shape public opinion, and pressure policymakers to make decisions. (Donnelly, 2013; Asemah, Edegoh, & Ezebuenyi, 2013).

From the foregoing, it is apposite to infer that newspapers through reporting atrocities on human rights violations and amplifying the voices of the victims can mobilise

both societal and government responses. Despite this auspicious potency of the media in advocating against human rights violations, newspapers, in northeast Nigeria an avalanche of challenges that hamper their agenda-setting role, especially in reporting human rights-related issues. Some of these challenges include a threat to journalists' safety, limited access to conflict-prone areas, inadequate resources and a lack of editorial independence.

Despite these challenges, the prospects for newspapers to effectively set the agenda on human rights issues in North-East Nigeria remain promising. The increasing integration of digital platforms, collaboration with non-governmental organisations, and the rising demand for accountability provide opportunities for newspapers to enhance their role in advocating for human rights. Moreover, regional frameworks like the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Union, 1981) emphasise the importance of media in promoting justice and equity. It is against this backdrop that this paper evaluates the agenda-setting role of newspapers in highlighting human rights violations in North-East Nigeria. It explores the challenges faced by newspapers in this context and examines the prospects for leveraging media influence to address human rights concerns.

Theoretical Framework

This position paper is built on two theoretical underpinnings which are the agenda-setting theory and the framing theory. These two theories were adopted as a result of the nexus between the theories and this study.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, explores how the media shapes public priorities by determining which issues receive prominence in public discourse. In their seminal study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, McCombs and Shaw observed that the media's repeated emphasis on certain topics influenced public perception of their importance. The theory posits that while the media does not dictate what individuals should think, it significantly influences what they think about by directing attention to specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

At its essence, agenda-setting theory underscores the media's power in shaping societal priorities. By selectively reporting and repeatedly covering certain issues, the media elevates these topics to the forefront of public consciousness, leaving others marginalised. This process determines the "salience" of issues, shaping public perception of what is important. This is particularly crucial in contexts such as human rights advocacy, where

public awareness and action are pivotal for addressing violations and achieving justice (Asemah, 2011).

Agenda-setting operates on two levels. The first level focuses on issue salience, the frequency and prominence of media coverage make certain issues more significant to the public. The second level examines how the media frames these issues, shaping the attributes and interpretations associated with them. For example, coverage of human rights violations can highlight specific aspects such as government accountability, the role of insurgent groups, or the humanitarian impact on vulnerable populations (Griffin, 2012).

In the context of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria, agenda-setting theory provides a critical framework for understanding the role of newspapers. This region has been plagued by persistent violations due to insurgency, particularly by *Boko Haram,* and counter-operations by security forces. Violations such as extrajudicial killings, forced displacements, and the destruction of livelihoods are rampant. Newspapers have the power to bring these issues to the forefront, ensuring they are not overshadowed by other news priorities. By consistently covering human rights abuses, newspapers can elevate these issues to the top of national and international agendas, prompting action from government agencies, civil society, and international organisations (Asemah, 2011).

Through their agenda-setting function, newspapers can draw attention to critical concerns such as the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs), systemic abuses by state and non-state actors, and the lack of accountability for violations. This coverage can lead to heightened public awareness, stimulate policy discussions, and galvanise international responses. The media's role in setting the agenda is particularly vital in conflict zones like North-East Nigeria, where access to information is limited and often controlled by a few actors (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Moreover, newspapers can frame human rights violations not merely as isolated events but as part of broader systemic challenges requiring long-term solutions. For instance, framing these violations within the context of governance failures, poverty, and insecurity can shift public discourse toward addressing root causes rather than temporary relief measures. Such framing can influence policy priorities, ensuring that interventions go beyond immediate humanitarian responses to include sustainable development and structural reforms.

From the foregoing, the agenda-setting theory provided a clear lens for analysing the media's role in conflict-prone regions such as North-East Nigeria. By setting the public agenda around human rights violations, newspapers can drive attention to these critical issues, shape public opinion, and influence policy discussions. This ensures that human rights remain a priority in a region where they are most vulnerable, fostering accountability and paving the way for long-term solutions (Asemah, 2011).

Framing Theory

Framing theory builds on the concept of agenda-setting by examining not just what the media focuses on, but how it presents and interprets issues. Initially conceptualised by Goffman (1974) and later refined by Entman (1993), framing theory argues that the media selectively emphasises specific aspects of reality, constructing narratives that shape public understanding and emotional responses. This selective emphasis influences how issues are perceived, evaluated, and discussed, effectively guiding public discourse (Entman, 1993).

Framing involves four critical processes: defining the problem, diagnosing its causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). For instance, a news report on poverty might frame it as a systemic issue tied to unemployment and inequality or as a consequence of individual choices. These frames shape public opinion by influencing whom audiences hold responsible and what solutions they consider viable. This makes framing a powerful tool for shaping societal perspectives and policy outcomes (Asemah, 2011).

In the context of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria, framing theory offers a lens to understand how newspapers influence public perceptions of the crisis. The region, severely affected by the *Boko Haram* insurgency, has witnessed extensive human rights abuses, including forced displacement, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings. How these violations are framed in media narratives can significantly impact public understanding and policy responses.

For example, newspapers may frame the violations as the direct result of terrorism, portraying insurgent groups like *Boko Haram* as the sole perpetrators. This frame emphasises the need for military action and security measures while potentially overlooking abuses committed by state actors or systemic governance failures. Alternatively, newspapers might frame these violations within a broader context of institutional neglect, corruption, and inadequate governance, highlighting the role of state actors in perpetuating

these abuses. Such framing shifts the focus to structural reforms and accountability as necessary solutions (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Framing also extends to the portrayal of victims and perpetrators. Insurgents may be labelled as "terrorists" or "freedom fighters," while government forces might be depicted as "protectors" or "oppressors," depending on the narrative adopted by the media. These portrayals influence public opinion on who bears responsibility and what actions should be taken. For instance, framing insurgents as the primary violators could direct public anger exclusively toward them, fostering support for counter-terrorism efforts. Conversely, framing that highlights state-sanctioned abuses could lead to public demand for governmental accountability and reform.

In North-East Nigeria, framing shapes public reactions to human rights violations. When newspapers present these abuses as systemic and state-enabled, they can provoke widespread outrage and calls for international intervention or domestic policy reforms. This framing places pressure on the government to address these violations. On the other hand, framing these abuses as "unavoidable collateral damage" in the fight against terrorism might normalise the violations, reducing public demand for change and allowing systemic issues to persist.

Additionally, framing influences international perceptions and responses. Media narratives that focus on government failures may attract global attention, leading to diplomatic pressure and increased humanitarian aid. Conversely, frames that emphasise insurgent violence might prioritise military solutions over addressing root causes, such as poverty and lack of education, which contribute to the insurgency.

Ultimately, framing theory underscores the media's power to shape not only public opinion but also policy decisions and international responses. By constructing narratives around human rights violations in North-East Nigeria, newspapers influence how these issues are understood and addressed. Understanding these frames is essential for analysing public discourse and fostering meaningful interventions aimed at resolving the crisis.

Role of Newspapers in Reporting Human Rights

Newspapers have historically served as a powerful medium for advocating human rights, informing the public, and holding governments accountable. Their role in reporting human rights issues is critical, as they provide a platform for marginalised voices, highlight injustices, and influence public opinion and policy. From colonial times to the digital age,

newspapers have been instrumental in exposing human rights abuses and fostering societal change.

One of the key roles newspapers play in reporting human rights is agenda-setting. The agenda-setting theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1993), highlights how media outlets influence the public's focus by prioritising certain issues over others. Newspapers, through their

choice of stories, headlines, and editorial emphasis, shape public awareness of human rights concerns. For instance, extensive coverage of police brutality, child labour, or gender-based violence signals the urgency of these issues to readers. In Nigeria, newspapers like *The Punch* and *Vanguard* have been pivotal in bringing human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings and unlawful detentions, to national and international attention (Asemah, Edegoh, & Anatsui, 2013).

Framing is another critical strategy used by newspapers to influence how human rights issues are perceived. By presenting stories in specific ways, newspapers guide public interpretation of events. For example, framing a protest against oppressive laws as a "peaceful demonstration for justice" rather than a "disruption of public order" can shape public sympathy and support. Iyengar (1994) demonstrated how framing affects public understanding of social issues, and this applies to human rights reporting as well. During the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, newspapers framed the movement as a fight against police brutality and systemic oppression, amplifying the voices of protesters and garnering widespread support.

Investigative journalism, a hallmark of newspapers, plays a crucial role in uncovering hidden human rights abuses. Through in-depth reporting, journalists expose violations that might otherwise remain unnoticed. For instance, investigative reports by *Premium Times* on corruption within Nigeria's security agencies have revealed how systemic failures contribute to human rights abuses. Such reports not only inform the public but also pressure authorities to act. Globally, initiatives like the Panama Papers investigation have shown how investigative journalism can uncover abuses of power and promote accountability (Asemah, 2014).

Historically, newspapers have been at the forefront of human rights advocacy. In colonial Nigeria, newspapers like *The West African Pilot* championed the fight for independence and highlighted the oppression of colonial rule (Sobowale, 1985). By

documenting and disseminating stories of resistance and resilience, these newspapers galvanized public support for human rights and self-determination. Similarly, during the apartheid era in South Africa, newspapers like *The Guardian* defied censorship to report on racial injustices, inspiring global solidarity against apartheid.

In contemporary times, newspapers continue to play a watchdog role by monitoring government actions and exposing abuses. This role is particularly vital in countries with weak democratic institutions, where human rights violations often go unchecked. By holding governments and corporations accountable, newspapers foster transparency and promote justice. For example, reports by *This Day* and *Daily Trust* on the displacement of communities by oil exploration in the Niger Delta have brought attention to environmental injustices and the violation of indigenous rights (Omachi et al., 2023).

However, newspapers are not immune to challenges in their human rights reporting. Media ownership and political affiliations can influence coverage, potentially skewing the narrative. In Nigeria, where many newspapers are owned by political elites, editorial policies sometimes reflect the interests of proprietors rather than the public (Apuke, 2016; Ojo, 2018). This bias can result in underreporting or misrepresentation of human rights issues, undermining the credibility of the press.

Additionally, societal biases can affect how newspapers portray marginalised groups. Research has shown that newspapers often perpetuate stereotypes in their reporting, such as framing women and minorities in ways that reinforce existing prejudices (Bossey, Obaje, & Asemah, 2024). For instance, coverage of ethnic conflicts in northern Nigeria has sometimes been framed in ways that exacerbate tensions rather than promote understanding and reconciliation (Ojebode, 2018).

The digital age has further complicated the role of newspapers in reporting human rights. While online platforms have expanded the reach of human rights stories, they have also introduced challenges such as misinformation and declining trust in traditional media. Newspapers must now compete with social media and citizen journalism, which often disseminate unverified information. Despite these challenges, newspapers remain critical gatekeepers of credible information, ensuring that human rights issues are reported accurately and responsibly (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In conclusion, newspapers play an indispensable role in reporting human rights by setting the agenda, framing narratives, and holding powerful institutions accountable. They

amplify the voices of the oppressed, expose injustices, and influence public opinion and policy. However, challenges such as bias, ownership influences, and the rise of digital media require newspapers to adapt and reaffirm their commitment to ethical and accurate reporting. As society continues to evolve, newspapers must remain steadfast in their mission to advocate for human rights and promote social justice.

Challenges of Newspapers in Setting on Human Rights Violations

Agenda-setting by newspapers plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse and determining which issues gain prominence in society. However, this process is not without its challenges. Newspapers face numerous obstacles that can hinder their ability to effectively set the agenda, ranging from financial constraints and ownership biases to the rise of digital media and audience fragmentation. These challenges have significant implications for the quality, diversity, and impact of news coverage.

Commercial Pressures and Financial Constraints: One of the most significant challenges in agenda-setting is the financial pressure faced by newspapers. With declining print circulation and advertising revenue, many newspapers struggle to sustain their operations. This financial instability often forces newspapers to prioritise profit over public interest, leading to sensationalism and the prioritisation of entertainment-oriented content. Instead of focusing on substantive issues like health crises, governance, or climate change, newspapers may opt to highlight celebrity scandals or sensational crime stories to attract readership and advertisers (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012). Such commercial pressures can distort the agenda-setting function, diverting attention from critical societal issues.

Ownership and Political Influence: Media ownership and political affiliations significantly impact the agenda-setting role of newspapers. In many cases, newspaper owners have vested interests that influence editorial policies and the selection of stories. For instance, in Nigeria, several prominent newspapers are owned by politicians or business magnates with close ties to political elites. This often results in biased reporting, where newspapers prioritise issues that align with the interests of their owners while neglecting topics that might challenge their positions (Nwabueze, 2020). Consequently, the public agenda is shaped not by the objective needs of society but by the subjective interests of powerful individuals or groups.

Audience Fragmentation and the Rise of Digital Media: The advent of digital media has transformed the media landscape, posing a significant challenge to traditional newspapers in their agenda-setting role. Online platforms and social media have democratised access to information, allowing individuals to consume news from a wide range of sources. While this has broadened the availability of information, it has also fragmented audiences and diluted the influence of traditional newspapers. Many people now rely on social media algorithms that prioritise personalised content, often based on user preferences and engagement patterns, rather than on the editorial judgment of newspapers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This shift makes it increasingly difficult for newspapers to set a unified public agenda, as audiences are exposed to diverse and sometimes conflicting narratives.

Misinformation and Fake News: The proliferation of misinformation and fake news in the digital age presents another significant challenge. Newspapers, traditionally seen as gatekeepers of credible information, now operate in a media environment where false or misleading content can spread rapidly through social media. This undermines the agenda-setting role of newspapers, as their ability to establish credible and coherent public narratives is often overshadowed by the influence of viral misinformation. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, newspapers in Nigeria faced difficulties in countering misinformation about the virus, vaccines, and government responses, despite their efforts to provide accurate reporting (Omojola et al., 2021).

Resource Limitations and Investigative Journalism: Effective agenda-setting often requires in-depth reporting and investigative journalism to uncover and highlight critical issues. However, resource limitations have made it increasingly difficult for newspapers to invest in investigative reporting. Budget cuts and staff reductions mean that many newspapers cannot conduct thorough investigations, leading to a reliance on superficial or pre-packaged content. This weakens their ability to bring important but less obvious issues, such as systemic corruption or environmental degradation, to the forefront of public discourse (Asemah, 2013).

Prospects for Human Rights Reporting: Human rights reporting plays an essential role in raising awareness, advocating for justice, and influencing policy changes. In an era where human rights violations are rampant across the globe, the media, especially newspapers, have a critical responsibility to highlight abuses, hold governments and

institutions accountable, and give a voice to marginalised communities. Despite the challenges inherent in human rights reporting, there are promising prospects for its growth and impact, particularly as the media landscape continues to evolve. This section explores the potential for human rights reporting to thrive, considering technological advancements, global partnerships, and increasing public demand for accountability.

Technological Advancements and Digital Media: The rise of digital media has opened up new avenues for human rights reporting, offering opportunities for greater reach, interactivity, and real-time reporting. The internet, social media platforms, and citizen journalism have enabled individuals and organisations to document and share human rights violations as they occur, often bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become powerful tools for human rights activists, allowing them to mobilise support, expose injustices, and demand action from governments and international bodies (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This democratisation of information has amplified the voices of those affected by human rights abuses and provided a platform for global solidarity.

Furthermore, advancements in multimedia technologies, such as video and interactive graphics, enable human rights stories to be told in more engaging and impactful ways. For example, virtual reality (VR) and 360-degree video can immerse viewers in the experiences of victims, fostering empathy and understanding. These technological innovations make human rights reporting more compelling and accessible to diverse audiences, offering new prospects for advocacy and awareness (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012).

Increased Public Awareness and Demand for Accountability: In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in public awareness regarding human rights issues, driven in part by global movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and climate justice campaigns. As public concern for human rights grows, so does the demand for media outlets to cover human rights violations comprehensively. This shift in societal attitudes presents an opportunity for human rights reporting to gain prominence in mainstream media (Omachi, Alemoh, & Asemah, 2023).

The rise of global connectivity and social media activism has empowered individuals to demand accountability from governments, corporations, and international organisations. Human rights violations that were once ignored or downplayed are now being exposed on a global scale. For example, the global outcry over the 2014 abduction of

the Chibok girls in Nigeria was largely fueled by social media, which brought international attention to the issue and pressured the Nigerian government to take action. Similarly, the coverage of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and the ongoing conflict in Yemen has sparked international condemnation and calls for intervention (Asemah, 2013). This increased public demand for transparency and accountability is a promising prospect for human rights reporting, as it places pressure on media outlets to prioritise these issues.

Collaborations and Partnerships with Human Rights Organizations: Human rights reporting stands to benefit from greater collaboration between media outlets and human rights organisations. Many organisations, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Human Rights Council, have vast networks and resources that can assist journalists in investigating and reporting human rights abuses. These partnerships provide access to reliable data, eyewitness accounts, and expert analysis that can enhance the quality and credibility of human rights reporting (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012).

Additionally, these collaborations can help amplify the voices of human rights defenders and victims who may otherwise be silenced. For instance, investigative journalism that is backed by human rights organisations can uncover systemic abuses that governments or corporations may attempt to conceal. By working together, media outlets and human rights organisations can create a more powerful advocacy platform for those whose rights are violated (Asemah, 2014).

Global Human Rights Frameworks and International Pressure: International human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, provide a solid foundation for human rights reporting. These frameworks offer universal standards that can guide journalists in their coverage of human rights issues and provide a benchmark for assessing violations. As global awareness of human rights issues grows, international pressure on governments to comply with these standards is also increasing. This pressure creates an environment where human rights reporting can have a tangible impact on policy and governance.

For example, international organisations like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC) often rely on media coverage to highlight human rights violations and push for accountability. In some cases, media reports have led to sanctions, investigations, or international resolutions aimed at addressing human rights abuses. The

growing recognition of the role of the media in shaping global human rights discourse presents a promising prospect for the future of human rights reporting (Omachi, Alemoh, & Asemah, 2023).

The Role of Investigative Journalism*:* Investigative journalism continues to be a vital tool for uncovering human rights abuses and holding perpetrators accountable. While investigative reporting is resource-intensive and often met with resistance, it has proven to be one of the most effective ways to expose systemic violations. Human rights violations, such as torture, forced disappearances, and political repression, are often hidden from public view. Investigative journalists play a crucial role in uncovering these abuses by gathering evidence, interviewing victims, and working with human rights organisations to build a comprehensive case (Asemah, 2013).

In many instances, investigative journalism has led to significant changes in policy or public opinion. For example, the Panama Papers investigation, which exposed widespread corruption and financial malfeasance by politicians and business leaders, had a global impact on how governments and corporations are held accountable. Similarly, the reporting of the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War was pivotal in bringing international attention to human rights violations by U.S. military personnel (Bossey, Obaje, & Asemah, 2024). The continued importance of investigative journalism in human rights reporting presents a promising future, particularly as news organizations invest in long-form and in-depth reporting.

Social Media as a Tool for Advocacy and Change: Social media has become an indispensable tool for human rights reporting, offering both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it provides a platform for real-time reporting and grassroots activism. Activists and human rights defenders can now bypass traditional media outlets to report abuses directly to a global audience. The viral nature of social media allows for rapid dissemination of information, helping to garner support for human rights causes and mobilize action (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

On the other hand, social media also presents challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and the risk of online censorship. Despite these challenges, the role of social media in amplifying human rights reporting cannot be understated. It provides a space for marginalized voices to be heard, empowers individuals to act, and holds governments and corporations accountable for their actions.

Conclusion

The prospects for human rights reporting are bright, thanks to technological advancements, increased public awareness, and growing international collaboration. As digital media continues to evolve, newspapers and other media outlets will have more tools at their disposal to report on human rights violations, expose injustices, and advocate for policy change. While challenges such as misinformation and commercial pressures remain, the increasing demand for accountability and the role of investigative journalism offer promising avenues for human rights reporting to thrive. By leveraging these opportunities, media outlets can continue to play a pivotal role in advancing human rights and fostering a more just and equitable world.

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