



## IMPACT OF SELECTED ONLINE NEWSPAPERS' FOLLOW-UP STORIES IN SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF BANDITRY AND KIDNAPPING IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Banditry and kidnapping are becoming major security challenges in Nigeria. The menaces are becoming security threats to the people's livelihood, and social cohesion. The criminal activities have erred the day-to-day life in some areas in Kwara State. The state normally regarded as peaceful but now has inflicted fear and grieve on people and communities. The advent of online news media has developed the interest of the citizens and making them more dependent on websites like The Nation, ThisDay and Independent Newspaper among others to keep them informed about the happenings in insecurity cases, analysis and follow up to the events. This paper analysed the influence of the follow-up coverage of the same news by the chosen online newspapers on how the audience is affected by the news on their perceptions on banditry and kidnapping with respect to emotional reactions, risk evaluation, blame attribution, and mobilization. The use of structured questionnaires with 500 respondents (urban and rural) and the interviews with journalists and discussion groups. Results showed that recurring follow-up coverage does have a great influence on the perception of the public, increasing the level of fear and worry, as well as affecting the opinion on the effectiveness of government and social responsibility. Some of the negative consequences were found to be ethical issues and sensationalism, and the positive ones were increased awareness and active involvement on the part of the community. The research highlights the dualistic nature of online media in enlightening and influencing the society in dealing with insecurity.

**Keywords:** Banditry, Kidnapping, Public Perception, Online Newspapers, Media Framing

### Introduction

Banditry and kidnapping are some of the most urgent and widespread security issues that faced Nigeria in the last ten years posing a significant threat to the safety of people, socio-economic, and political stability in the country. The consequences of such acts of violent and criminality are far-reaching and do not only affect the victims, but also affecting the social cohesion, social trust and fostering an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The adverse effects of these insecurities have been experienced especially in places such as Kwara State which has always been known as a relatively secure and peaceful state in the geopolitical sub-region.

To address these mounting pressures, the citizens have sought the services of online news outlets as the main sources of information, and it is on these media houses that the citizens have been seeking to rely on but not only reporting events but also giving updates, analyses, and follow-up stories to put events into perspective and thus understanding the current security threats. Online newspapers also enjoy the advantage of real time reporting, round the clock coverage, unlike the traditional print media which are

usually characterised by time lags, limited reach and space that constrain reporting. These benefits have been exploited by major online sources like The Nation, ThisDay, and Independent Newspaper to update on banditry and kidnapping cases within minutes and in most cases, publish a detailed follow-up story. Although the main purpose of such reporting is to inform the population, the character and the formation of such follow-up stories have important consequences on the population perception. Sustaining follow up coverage can potentially affect personal and group attitudes to insecurity, produce fear, influence the ratings of risk and can create perceptions of governmental and institutional action (Sambo & Awwal, 2025; Olajuwon et al., 2025).

This paper, thus, aims at analysing the influence of the follow-up coverage of the chosen online newspapers on the societal outlook of banditry and kidnapping in Kwara State with specific emphasis on how these narratives lead to the development of the concept of fear, assigning blame, trust or distrust to the security organs and the response at the community level. Considering the interaction between media text and viewer comprehension, the study aims to shed more light on how online journalism can affect the way society perceives the meaning of insecurity. The conceptual framework of the proposed project is based on the agenda-setting theory and the framing theory according to which media do not only define what people can think about and can become interested in but the manner in which the issues should be perceived, interpreted, and felt (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). These models give the research a platform to explore the way that repeated coverage of banditry and kidnapping through follow-up coverage has the potential to create social facts, shape mass behavior, and shape policy discourse in a situation dominated by insecurity and popular fear.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The research aimed at the following objectives:

1. To examine the rate, nature, and framing of the follow-up of banditry and kidnapping stories in sampled online newspapers in Kwara State.
2. To test how these stories have changed the perception of the masses especially fear, anxiety, and confidence in security institutions in Kwara State.
3. To identify how exposure to follow up stories affected the attribution of responsibility of insecurity incidences in Kwara State.
4. To determine whether there is ethical implication and sensationalism of continuous reporting or not in Kwara State.
5. To make policy recommendations to responsible media reporting and better awareness by the population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical downfall of the research work is mainly rooted in the agenda-setting theory and framing theory which offer a sound theoretical framework on how the media shape the perception of the masses especially when it comes to issues of insecurity and coverage of crime. It is important to understand these frameworks since they explain how the repeated media coverage, particularly the follow-up stories that determines the audience attitude, emotional reactions, and social interpretation of the event.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

The theory of agenda-setting, which was initially described by McCombs and Shaw (1972), states that the media do not inform the population on what to think, but it is very effective in informing the population on what to think about. That is, the more often and the more pronounced is the media coverage of an issue, the

more importance it is perceived by the audiences. The theory is especially useful in the context of studying how the online newspapers covered banditry and kidnapping in Kwara State since constant follow-up stories and the repetitive coverage of the events can bring the issue to the mainstream of the mind of the people. Afterward, the relevance of the agenda-setting theory to crime reporting has been solidified by the findings of other authors who have shown that long-term media coverage does not only make the population focus on a particular threat to their safety but also causes the social and political discussion to prioritize this or that threat (McCombs, 2014; Weaver et al., 2020).

The unceasing reporting that is carried out in online newspapers in the context of Kwara State where banditry and kidnapping have become more common serves as an agenda-setting mechanism, continuing to emphasize the acts of violence, ransom demands, and the action that the law enforcement took to the problem. The benefit of such coverage is that it tends to make people aware that the security issues are highly regarded in the society, and are likely to influence the perception of threat and susceptibility. In addition, the agenda-setting theory states that repeated exposure to such problems may also affect the expectations of the citizens toward government and security agencies as people tend to turn to institutional actors to solve the problems that have been exaggerated by media coverage (Shaw and McCombs, 2021).

### **Framing Theory**

Although the agenda-setting theory describes what is regarded as important by the audience, the framing theory describes what the audiences understand and perceive regarding the issues. The conceptualisation of the framing theory as proposed by Entman (1993) proposes that media frames are cognitive constructs, which determine how information is packaged, which parts of the information should receive more focus, and which interpretations are salient. Frames, as a matter of fact, define the meaning and importance of news events and determine the attitude and emotional response of a person as well as behavioral response. In the case of banditry and kidnapping reporting on the Internet, the framing theory can be especially helpful in explaining the existence of the follow-up stories that continuously accentuate the risk, victimisation, or ineffectiveness of governmental agencies.

As an example, when headlines emphasise on the number of kidnappings or the atrocities of bandit attacks, they assemble an interpretive prism by which viewers interpret the danger as both a close and extensive one when in reality the empirical crime statistics may point to the contrary (Ishaku, 2025). In the same way, framing which emphasises the inaction of the government or makes certain groups appear guilty can influence attribution of responsibility in the population, and thus may have an effect on social cohesion and institutional trust. Media frames have been suggested to increase fear and anxiety, create normative judgments and impact policy preferences, and therefore they are especially applicable to insecurity reporting research in developing settings (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Olajuwon et al., 2025).

### **Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories should be integrated**

Though the two theories (agenda-setting and framing) are different, they are complementary in their approach to explain the intricate nature of the relationship between media coverage and perception by the people. Although the agenda-setting theory can shed some light on the salience of issues, the framing theory clarifies the interpretive frames and emotional colors in which issues are manipulated by readers. Collectively, these theories imply that the perceived significance of the security concerns and manner in which people perceive, interpret, and react to banditry and kidnapping is simultaneously defined by the repetition of the coverage by online newspapers (McCombs, 2014; Entman, 1993; Sambo and Awwal, 2025).

Practically, this combined theoretical framework can be used to understand why the residents of Kwara State who frequently read follow-up stories can think of insecurity as widespread and dangerous than the statistical analysis. Constant exposure to narratives that have been carefully framed increases awareness, strengthens the emotional reaction of fear and anxiety, and even may create the expectation of the public, about the intervention of government and law enforcement bodies. Moreover, the framework offers a prism through which the adverse effects of sensationalized reporting, including panic and even social tension are perceived, as well as the positive ones, including heightened awareness, vigilance, and mobilization at the community level (Olajuwon et al., 2025; Ekhaguebor et al., 2025).

## **Research Methods**

This research paper adopted a mixed-method design combining both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to make sufficient data collection and have a comprehensive view of the impact of the follow up stories by online newspapers on the overall perception of banditry and kidnapping in Kwara State. This method provided an opportunity to triangulate the results and, therefore, both the quantitative and the qualitative contextual information were obtained, which contributed to the validity, reliability, and enrichment of research results.

## **Content Analysis**

The content analysis of online newspapers on the subject was done in a systematic way to investigate the nature, framing, and frequency of follow-up news on incidents of banditry and kidnapping in the period between 2020 and 2025. The newspapers that were used to analyse them were The Nation, ThisDay and Independent Newspaper, as they are of national prominence, have a readership base and have history of reporting security-related matters in Kwara State. Content analysis was done on several dimensions such as frequency and persistence of follow-up report, prominence of headlines, and how the stories were constructed to emphasize insecurity.

The sources referred to in the articles, such as official statements, eyewitness testimonies, and expert commentary, were also paid particular attention to in terms of lexical choices that were used to create a sense of urgency, fear, or sensationalism. The balance of views brought had also been taken into account during the analysis. It was evaluated whether there were reports of neutral tone, alarmist or biased view of the picture. These elements were systematically studied, and, therefore, the study could assess the strategies that were used by online newspapers to frame banditry and kidnapping and outline the pattern in the way the stories are constructed and how these approaches might affect the perception of the population (Ishaku, 2025).

## **Public Opinion Survey**

A structured survey of the public opinion of five hundred people that live in Kwara State was carried out in order to supplement the content analysis. The sampling method used was a stratified random sampling procedure that was aimed at representing the urban and rural societies and also various age brackets, sexes, and socio-economic status. The survey instrument was able to obtain the data on the level at which the respondents perceive the severity of banditry and kidnapping, their emotional response to the news of the same, how much they trust the security agencies and governmental reaction, and their habit of using the media including the frequency and sources of online news. The survey was conducted to obtain quantitative data that was analysed by descriptive statistical methods and correlation studies to allow the study to establish patterns and relationships between exposure to follow-up stories and perceptions of insecurity. The approach offered empirical data of the impact of narrative repetition by media on the general comprehension, perceptions, and emotional state concerning security concerns (Olajuwon et al., 2025).

### **Interviews and Focus Group Discussion.**

Besides the quantitative data, the qualitative data were gathered by conducting in-depth interviews with twelve journalists and editors who were in charge of creating content on the topic of banditry and kidnapping on the chosen online newspapers. In these interviews, ways and reasons of editorial decision making were discussed in terms of publication of follow-up stories, the interest of the people, and the attitude toward impact of media coverage on the behaviour and awareness of the audience. To supplement these interviews, the six focus groups discussions were held with the community members who were selected based on different regions in Kwara State. These interviews examined how residents had interpreted repeated media reporting, what they feared and were anxious about and how follow-up stories influenced their personal and social risk perceptions. The interviews and the focus group discussions were used jointly to achieve a very sensitive perception of media production and audience reception, both in terms of the ethical concerns and social effects that were involved when covering insecurity. Through such combination of content analysis, survey data and qualitative evidence, the study adopted methodological triangulation to enable the study to be more reliable, deeper in understanding and comprehensive (Sambo & Awwal, 2025).

### **Results and Findings**

The results of this research elucidate the sheer extent of the effects of media framing on the perception of the people on insecurity especially on the cases of banditry and kidnappings in Kwara State. The analysis of content demonstrated that the framing styles used by online newspapers share certain features such as repetition, severity, and dramatising criminal events. Violence and kidnappings are recurrent acts of violence and kidnapping which are usually highlighted and the language used is that which gives an urgency, danger and social disturbance. This recurrence is also part of the fabrication of a narrative where insecurity is understood as an ever-present and ubiquitous danger regardless of the statistical frequency or geographical concentration of occurrences. Follow-up stories in the chosen online newspapers also indicated that high risk and vulnerability perceptions were experienced significantly by residents who were regular consumers of follow-up stories.

These impressions were maintained even in cases when the official crime statistics showed variability in insecurity or local phenomena and not crises pervasive and systematic. Simply put, how news events are framed does not only communicate but can directly influence the interpretive framework through which the general public perceives the nature, extent, and consequences of banditry and kidnapping that can be argued that social reality is constructed by the media narratives (Olajuwon et al., 2025).

### **Fear and Anxiety are Reinforced by Follow-Up Stories.**

The research also found that follow-up stories that are published in online newspapers affect the emotional reactions especially fear and anxiety in a quantifiable way. It was always mentioned by the respondents that ongoing media coverage increased their feeling of individual vulnerability and worry about the safety of their family members, neighbours, and the community at large. The cycling of stories about violent acts, ransom requests, and the police reaction to them fuels the perception of increased danger which frequently resulted in an overestimation of the real danger. The observed phenomenon is consistent with the literature on the effects of the media, which postulates that chronic exposure to crime-related coverage may cause more fear of becoming a victim and lead to anxiety in the general population despite not experiencing the criminal activity in reality (Ekhaguebor et al., 2025). In most instances, respondents narrated how they had a constant sense of insecurity and that anxiety had a role to play in their day-to-day lives patterns of traveling, and the way they related with others which means that the psychological effect of the follow-up stories went past awareness into the actual experience of the citizens.

### **Ethical Issues and Sensationalism**

The research also found that there were ethical issues of production and distribution of follow-up stories. According to interviews with journalists, editorial choices tend to be based on the balancing of readership activity, online readership, and commercialism, which can prompt the desire to report sensational stories. Such orientation on dramatic or alarming materials, although possibly making people more aware and visible on the media, may inadvertently contribute to fear and anxiety in citizens.

Community respondents felt that constant exposure to frightening stories usually produced a greater sense of panic and in other cases a distorted perceived size of insecurity. The conflict between the journalistic obligation to inform and the ethical obligation of not unnecessarily alarming people is one of the factors that demonstrate the multifaceted character of the dilemma of reporting on sensitive security matters and highlights the necessity of the media houses to reconcile between the interests of the population and responsible and factual reporting (Sambo & Awwal, 2025).

### **Positive Impact: Awareness and Community Mobilization**

Although, there might be fear exaggeration and sensationalism, the research discovered that follow-ups also have positive impacts, especially in regard to community mobilisation and awareness of the masses. Regular users of the online news updates proved to be more aware of the patterns, trends and possible preventive strategies concerning the banditry and kidnapping. According to many citizens, they used this information to engage in local security programmes, to form communities and neighbourhood watch programs, and to hold community conferences on safety measures. It implies that long-term media coverage could lead to informed citizenship and active community participation, which can demonstrate the dual impact of follow-up reporting: on the one hand, it could raise anxiety and risk perceptions, but on the other hand, it would equip the communities to react more appropriately to insecurity (Olajuwon et al., 2025). All these effects interact to contribute to the complexity surrounding the concept of online media in modern society, as the very narratives that cause fear can be employed to spread knowledge and perform collective action.

### **Conclusion**

The researchers concluded that online newspapers that are selected in Kwara State have a dramatic effect on the perception of the people about banditry and kidnapping. It was established that follow up stories did influence emotional and cognitive responses to a great extent and that they contributed greatly to the fear levels, perceived threat, and confidence in the security institutions. The construction of the news coverage also significantly influenced how people ascribed blame on the insecurity and this indicates the power of narrative in the process of creating social meaning and influence judgments regarding both governmental and collective responsibility. The results also highlight the significance of ethical reporting and keeping sensations at bay since sensational or panic-inducing reporting can lead to unjustified panic and misrepresentation of the actual issue of insecurity by people. Simultaneously, follow-up reporting was demonstrated to possess both positive and negative effects; on the one hand, it is capable of intensifying fear and social tension, still on the one hand, it may also provide education to citizens, raise awareness, and activate communities to be pro-active in terms of security and preventive actions. The above experiences indicate that media houses must ensure that the accurate and responsible reporting is coupled with the necessity to have the people informed at all times and that coverage must add to the social clarity and community strength in the events of insecurity.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study on the impact of follow-up stories in selected online newspapers such as The Nation, ThisDay, and Independent Newspaper, the following recommendations are made:

### **1. Responsible and Ethical Reporting**

Online newspapers should prioritize balanced, factual, and context-based reporting when covering banditry and kidnapping. While follow-up stories are important for continuity and accountability, media houses must avoid sensational headlines and exaggerated framing that may unnecessarily heighten public fear. Editorial policies should emphasize accuracy, proportionality, and sensitivity in reporting security-related matters.

### **2. Adoption of Conflict-Sensitive Journalism**

Media organizations should adopt conflict-sensitive and peace journalism approaches when reporting insecurity. This involves framing stories in ways that promote understanding, social cohesion, and constructive dialogue rather than panic or blame. Journalists covering insecurity should receive regular training in ethical security reporting.

### **3. Inclusion of Diverse and Credible Sources**

To avoid biased or one-sided narratives, journalists should include multiple perspectives such as security experts, community leaders, victims, and government officials. This will enhance credibility and reduce the risk of reinforcing stereotypes or assigning blame without evidence.

### **4. Media Literacy Programs for Citizens**

Government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions in Kwara State should promote media literacy programs. Citizens need to understand how media framing works and how repeated exposure to certain narratives can shape perception. This will enable audiences to critically evaluate online follow-up stories rather than internalize fear uncritically.

### **5. Strengthening Collaboration Between Media and Security Agencies**

Security institutions should maintain transparent and timely communication with the media to reduce speculation and misinformation. Regular briefings and verified updates can help ensure that follow-up stories are based on accurate data rather than assumptions.

### **6. Policy Guidelines for Reporting Insecurity**

Media regulatory bodies and professional associations should develop clearer guidelines for reporting banditry and kidnapping cases. These guidelines should address issues such as disclosure of ransom payments, graphic descriptions of violence, and protection of victims' identities.

## **Recommendations for Further Studies**

1. Future research should conduct comparative studies between online and traditional print newspapers to determine differences in framing and impact on public perception.
2. Longitudinal studies should be undertaken to examine the long-term psychological effects of repeated exposure to insecurity-related follow-up stories.
3. Further studies could explore the role of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, X, WhatsApp) in amplifying or reshaping online newspaper narratives on insecurity.
4. Experimental research designs may be used to directly measure how different framing techniques influence fear levels, trust in government, and policy preferences.
5. Similar studies should be replicated in other Nigerian states to determine whether the observed effects in Kwara State are generalizable across different geopolitical regions.

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