



Evaluation of Journalists' Knowledge and Application of Peace Journalism Principles in Reporting Secessionist Agitations in South-East, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: While conventional news reporting primarily informs the public about events, journalism also has the potential to facilitate conflict de-escalation and promote peacebuilding. Against this background, this study examines journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.

Objective: The study assesses journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting the secessionist agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), examines their perceived contribution to tension reduction, and identifies strategies for strengthening peace-oriented reporting.

Method: The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to journalists across the five South-East states. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed through proportionate stratified random sampling, 389 were retrieved. Data were analysed using weighted arithmetic means based on a five-point Likert scale.

Theoretical Framework: The study was anchored in Peace Journalism Theory and Social Responsibility Theory.

Results: The findings revealed that 94% of the journalists demonstrated knowledge of peace journalism principles, while 75% reported applying them frequently when covering secessionist agitation. Despite this knowledge-application gap, respondents perceived practices such as objective reporting, avoidance of inflammatory language, conflict-sensitive reporting, and contextual reporting as contributing to conflict de-escalation.

Unique Contribution: The study provides empirical insights into journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation. It also offers evidence-based recommendations for journalism education, media policy, and professional practice in Nigeria.

Recommendations: Media stakeholders, including the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), Nigerian Press Council (NPC), and civil society organisations, should organise continuous training, strengthen ethical monitoring, and establish clear guidelines for peace journalism. Journalists should prioritise objectivity, fairness, non-inflammatory language, and diverse perspectives, including the voices of non-elite civilians. Tertiary institutions should also integrate peace journalism into journalism curricula.

Keywords: Peace journalism, peace journalism principles, secessionist agitation, conflict reporting, peacebuilding, journalists, South-East Nigeria.



INTRODUCTION

Peace journalism originated through the pioneering work of Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who conceptually distinguished it from conventional war journalism by critiquing established reporting practices. Galtung and Ruge (1965), in their study *The Structure of Foreign News*, demonstrated how conventional news values tend to favour negativity, conflict, and elite actors, potentially reinforcing structural biases towards violent escalation. Building on these foundational observations, subsequent scholars developed peace journalism into a normative framework for newsrooms, positioning it as a counter-narrative to sensationalism and binary “us-versus-them” framing (Elega et al., 2022). Peace journalism advocates a non-violent, truth-oriented, and people-centred approach that examines the root causes of conflicts, humanises the parties involved, and highlights non-violent solutions rather than focusing exclusively on casualties, physical destruction, and security responses.

In conflict reporting, peace journalism seeks to transform news organisations from passive amplifiers of political tension into facilitators of constructive social dialogue (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023). When applied to civil unrest and secessionist agitation, its principles encourage journalists to look beyond official statements and militant propaganda to investigate underlying socio-economic and political grievances (Zeng & Akinro, 2013). By promoting diverse sourcing, avoiding inflammatory language, and resisting zero-sum framing, journalists can contribute to conflict de-escalation and foster empathy among opposing parties. This approach is particularly important in postcolonial, pluralistic societies, where media representations can influence public perceptions, peacebuilding opportunities, and conflict-resolution strategies.

Since independence, Nigeria has grappled with subnational consciousness, disputes over resource allocation, and localised insurgencies that challenge national unity (Okocha & Akpandem, 2022). The Nigerian media landscape frequently reflects these conflicts, which may be framed along regional, political, and ethnic lines, potentially undermining professional impartiality. Consequently, reporting on national security challenges sometimes relies on sensationalism, official government sources, and biased framing, which may exacerbate communal mistrust rather than promote national integration.

Secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria has historical roots in the mid-twentieth century, particularly the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu in May 1967. The declaration followed political instability, military coups, and anti-Igbo pogroms in northern Nigeria, and led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Following the war, grievances relating to political marginalisation, economic disadvantage, and structural exclusion persisted. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) renewed calls for Biafran self-determination (Kobo, 2020). The agitation subsequently intensified with the emergence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which used digital media and calls for a referendum on independence to advance its demands. Sit-at-home directives, militant rhetoric, and violent



confrontations involving agitators and security forces have contributed to insecurity across the region (Chukwu et al., 2023).

The media plays an influential role in constructing public perceptions and shaping conflict outcomes. Local and national news organisations can contribute to de-escalation through contextual and solution-oriented reporting or intensify ethnic tensions through hate speech, partisan framing, and alarmist headlines (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023). Because news framing can influence government responses and public behaviour, journalists serve as important gatekeepers who can either reinforce confrontational narratives or promote dialogue, democratic engagement, and peacebuilding.

Despite the theoretical significance of peace journalism, questions remain about journalists' understanding of its principles and their ability to apply them consistently in routine news production. Existing scholarship has focused substantially on content analyses of published newspaper reports and audience perceptions, leaving a need for further empirical investigation into journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles when covering secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria (Elega et al., 2022). Against this background, the present study examines journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting the conflict involving IPOB and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The escalation of secessionist agitation associated with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in South-East Nigeria has contributed to socio-political instability, economic disruption, loss of life, and recurrent clashes between agitators and security forces (Chukwu et al., 2023; Gevers et al., 2023). In such situations, conventional reporting may resort to sensationalising violence, prioritising official security sources, and presenting conflict in ways that deepen ethno-political polarisation. Peace journalism offers an alternative by encouraging journalists to investigate the root causes of conflict, reduce inflammatory framing, and promote non-violent resolution (Elega et al., 2022; Zeng & Akinro, 2021). However, uncertainty remains about journalists' knowledge of these principles and the extent to which they apply them under institutional pressures, censorship concerns, and security threats in South-East Nigeria (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023; Gevers et al., 2023).

Existing studies on Biafran agitation have largely focused on the conflict itself or employed content analysis of newspaper reports (e.g., Kobo, 2020; Zeng & Akinro, 2021), leaving journalists' knowledge and practical application of peace journalism principles insufficiently examined. Furthermore, limited empirical research has systematically examined journalists across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states in relation to IPOB's secessionist agitation. This leaves a gap in empirical evidence concerning how journalists understand and apply peace journalism principles in reporting the conflict. To address this gap, the study examines journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective of the study is to assess journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess journalists' knowledge of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation associated with IPOB in South-East Nigeria.
2. Determine the extent to which journalists apply peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation associated with IPOB in South-East Nigeria.
3. Examine journalists' perceptions of the contribution of peace journalism practices to reducing tensions associated with secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.
4. Identify strategies for strengthening the application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Peace Journalism

According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005, p.5), "Peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices of what to report and how to report it that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict". At its core, Peace journalism equips media practitioners with practical tools to analyse conflict, evaluate the real world consequences of news framing, and proactively highlight non-violent avenues for conflict resolution. Rather than functioning as a passive chronicler of immediate physical violence or relying exclusively on elite, state-sanctioned sources, peace journalism advocates for a contextual, truth-oriented approach that humanises all conflicting parties and uncovers underlying socio-political grievances. De Michelis (2018) further conceptualises it as a transformative framework that challenges conventional news routines, urging journalists to move beyond oversimplified, binary "win-lose" narratives and instead illuminate the broader socio-historical dimensions of societal unrest. According to Musa and Ferguson (2013), to report violence without background or context is to misrepresent it, since any conflict is at root, a relationship of parties setting and pursuing incompatible goals.

When synthesised within the context of secessionist agitations, peace journalism serves as an essential lens for evaluating how journalists report on regional and national agitations. In Nigeria's volatile conflict environment, Musa and Ferguson (2013) opines that traditional news reporting frequently defaults to "enemy framing," sensationalism, and biased sourcing, which inadvertently stokes division, reinforces ethnic stereotypes, and exacerbates civil strife. Addressing these operational defects requires journalists to actively understand and apply conflict-sensitive principles in their daily routines. Applied to this study, the concept provides the normative benchmark against which journalists' knowledge and practical application are evaluated when covering secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria.



Principles and Dimensions of Peace Journalism

The concept of peace journalism rests on a set of principles and analytical dimensions designed to constructively counter the structural biases embedded within traditional news reporting. In their foundational study, Galtung and Ruge (1965) demonstrated that standard news gathering routines naturally favour negativity, immediacy, elite actors, and conflict, thereby tilting towards violent escalation. To remedy these operational flaws, Galtung (1986, 2003) articulated the core principles of peace journalism by contrasting the "Low Road" of war/violence journalism which is reactive, elite-oriented, and victory-focused, with the "High Road" of peace/conflict journalism. When reporting on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria, taking the low road manifests as a reactive, focus on physical violence, security crackdowns, sit-at-home enforcements, and body counts (Gever et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2025). Conversely, taking the high road requires reporters to adopt a proactive, context-driven approach that seeks to illuminate root causes, humanise all affected groups, and prioritise pathways toward conflict transformation (Ciftcioglu & Shaw, 2021; Elegu et al., 2022). Analytically, what this means is that journalists covering the South East security landscape needs clear behavioural shifts in daily news reporting in the following ways:

1. De-emphasising Body Counts & Arrests: Instead of writing alarmist headlines about casualties, high-road reporting leads with the socio-economic impacts on local communities and the broader human cost of prolonged instability (Chukwu et al., 2023; Osimen et al., 2024).
2. Investigating Root Causes: Rather than treating sit-at-home orders purely as criminal disruptions, journalists investigate the underlying socio-political factors and governance failures driving youth participation in such agitations (Imaobong, 2023; Zhizhi & Fanen, 2021).
3. Highlighting Peacebuilding Efforts: Reporters should actively track and report on mediation efforts led by local peacebuilding organisations, inter-religious councils, and community leaders, positioning peace as an achievable process rather than an abstract ideal (Okocha & Akpandem, 2022; Zeng & Akinro, 2013).

By replacing sensationalised event-based reporting with the above structural analysis, balanced sourcing and language discipline, journalists transition from passive reporters of conflict escalation to constructive agents of regional stability and conflict transformation (Elegu et al., 2022; Rafeeq, 2023). Rafeeq (2023) highlights that applying these dimensions require journalists to move beyond reporting surface-level violence and instead illuminate the broader socio-economic and political structures driving secessionist agitations. Similarly, Ciftcioglu and Shaw (2021) emphasise that operationalising peace journalism dimensions transforms media practitioners from passive amplifiers of elite propaganda into critical gatekeepers who contextualise civilian suffering and prioritise de-escalation frames. When applied to this study, these dimensions provide the essential analytical basis to measure whether journalists covering secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria possess functional knowledge of conflict-sensitive principles and whether they effectively manifest these dimensions in their day-to-day reporting routines.



Peace Journalism and Conflict Reporting

The intersection of peace journalism and conflict reporting underscores the media's dual capacity to serve as either an accelerant of societal violence or a catalyst for peaceful conflict resolution. While in traditional conflict reporting, news organisations adopt "war journalism" frames characterised by sensationalised coverage of physical atrocities, exclusive reliance on security or political elites, and the demonisation of opposing factions (Adisa, 2012). This reactive paradigm contributes directly to the escalation of hostilities by heightening public anxiety, deepening social polarisation, and legitimising violent measures. Galtung (2003), posits that peace journalism provides a transformative framework for conflict-sensitive reporting by shifting the focus from immediate violence to the structural, historical, and socio-economic root causes of disputes. By humanising all parties, giving voice to non-elite civilian perspectives, and highlighting non-violent resolution efforts, peace journalism actively works to de-escalate tension, build empathy, and create a discursive space conducive to constructive dialogue.

When narrowed down to the secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria, the media's reporting approach carries profound implications for the trajectory of regional security. Conventional media coverage of the conflict predominantly involving the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Nigerian state security forces has frequently contributed to conflict escalation (Amadi et al., 2025). Such reporting dynamics amplify fear, fuel mutual suspicion between ethnic groups, and exacerbate localised crises such as sit-at-home enforcements and armed enforcement actions. Fulfilling a de-escalatory function requires journalists covering the South East to uphold peace journalism principles. By avoiding partisan bias, reporting accurately without sensationalising violence, and foregrounding community-level peacebuilding initiatives, journalists can mitigate ethno-social hostility and foster an environment oriented toward democratic engagement and peacebuilding.

Knowledge and Application of Peace Journalism Among Journalists

In examining journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles when reporting on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria, reveals a critical gap between cognitive awareness and newsroom execution (John & Elem, 2025; Gever et al., 2023). While journalists may possess an abstract awareness of ethical reporting standards, their actual newsroom outputs frequently struggle to reflect consistent peace-oriented frames (John & Elem, 2025; Gever et al., 2023). When covering sit-at-home enforcements, violent enforcement actions, and state security operations across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states, reporters routinely operate under intense institutional pressures, commercial deadlines, and severe physical security threats (De Michelis, 2018; Gever et al., 2023). Consequently, application often falters as journalists default to safe, official state press releases, sensationalised headlines, and reactive event-based reporting rather than conducting deep, solution-focused conflict analysis (Musa & Ferguson, 2013; Okocha & Akpandem, 2022). In view of this pressure, journalists highlight immediate acts of physical violence or sit-at-home enforcement disruptions, and deploy sensationalised language that polarises the government and separatist agitators into binary "us versus them" categories (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gever et al., 2023). This reflects an operational landscape where structural routines such as tight publication deadlines, commercial pressures for high-impact headlines, and limited specialised training in



conflict transformation hinder journalists from translating peace journalism concepts into daily newsroom practices (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Musa & Ferguson, 2013).

Grounded in these realities, this study evaluates both the internal knowledge level and the practical application of peace journalism principles among journalists across the region, identifying the specific professional barriers that prevent the application of peace-oriented conflict reporting (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023; John & Elem, 2025). Crucially, this application demands language discipline avoiding inflammatory, demonising labels such as "maniacs," "terrorists," or "barbarians" and diversifying news sources beyond official state or security mouthpieces to include peace advocates, civil society groups, and grassroots community members (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023; Elegba et al., 2022).

Secessionist Agitation in South East Nigeria

Historically, the "secessionist agitation movement in South East Nigeria" stems from deep-seated ethnic tensions, violent pogroms in northern Nigeria, and political instability during the post-independence era, which culminated in Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu declaring the independent Republic of Biafra in May 1967 (Kobo, 2020). The resulting Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) caused large human casualties and severe economic devastation across the South East (Chukwu et al., 2023). Following the war, official federal policies aimed at national reconciliation such as the "No Victor, No Vanquished" declaration still failed to resolve underlying systemic grievances, leaving widespread perceptions of political exclusion, economic disenfranchisement, and structural marginalisation to persist among generations of Igbos (John & Elem, 2025; Okocha & Akpandem, 2022). These unresolved historical grievances resurfaced during the late 1990s and early 2000s, transforming into a modernised wave of self-determination movements spearheaded by groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and, more prominently, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Kobo, 2020). The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), like the MASSOB, is an Igbo separatist group that was founded in 2014 (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). The movement wants South-East Nigeria, to separate from Nigeria as a state and form an independent nation of Biafra. The organisation was meant to carry out its agitation through unarmed protests, media messages, radio broadcasts and civil disobedience (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). However, this has changed in a way with the coming up of Eastern Security Network (ESN) which is an armed group within IPOB created by the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, to secure the people of South-East Nigeria from the attacks by herdsmen.

However, their recent attitudes and threats to the sovereignty of Nigeria have forced many to see them as people seeking for political opportunities (Amadi et al., 2025). The change in their attitudes and threats to the Nigerian government, stem from their claim of government's attacks and alleged killing of the peaceful protesters, who for the most parts are civilians (Amadi et al., 2025). In November 2015, Biafran independence protests erupted in cities across Nigeria's South-East. Analysts believe the scale of these protests was unprecedented (Amadi et al., 2025). Scores had been reportedly killed, while many were injured and others arrested. Amnesty International documented 115 as the number of IPOB members killed (Onyeji, 2022).



On December 23, 2015, the Federal Government charged Nnamdi Kanu with treasonable felony in the Federal High court in Abuja (Amadi et al., 2025). On 24th November, 2022. IPOB protested the non-release of Nnamdi Kanu from detention. Some members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) staged a protest in Aba, Abia State over the non-release of their leader, Nnamdi Kanu, by the Nigerian government (Sahara Reporters, 2022). The protesters warned that they would be forced to not only shutdown the economy of the state and South-East, but the entire country until their leader was released from the detention (Sahara Reporters, 2022). These activities are reported frequently on Radio Biafra, an organ of IPOB. In most of the allegations of attacks on Nigerian security personnel, IPOB has consistently denied any involvement, describing itself as a non-violent organisation (Sahara Reporters, 2022).

In the recent years, the country witnessed neo-Biafran movements, a coalition of some Igbo speaking Nigerians who claim to be Biafrans rather than Nigerians (Brown and Oghabgonbgon, 2016). Leveraging digital media platforms, international advocacy, local sit-at-home civil disobedience orders, and confrontational rhetoric, IPOB intensified demands for a UN-monitored referendum on Biafran independence (Chukwu et al., 2023; Gever et al., 2023). This contemporary phase generated severe socio-economic volatility and volatile security dynamics marked by militarised state responses, violence, and clashes involving security agencies, non-state actors, and local populations (De Michelis, 2018; Gever et al., 2023). Within the context of this study, the ongoing secessionist agitation serves as the localised conflict environment required to evaluate how media practitioners construct, frame, and report complex sub-national security crises in South East Nigeria.

Media Reporting of IPOB-Related Secessionist Agitation

Media reporting of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria reflects a complex interplay of newsroom routines, ownership interests, and acute security pressures. Extant scholarship demonstrates that traditional press coverage of the conflict consistently defaults to "war journalism" frames, which prioritise immediate physical violence, security operations, sit-at-home disruptions, and official government press releases over non-violent alternative perspectives (Amadi et al., 2025; Obi-Ani et al., 2020). Scholars observe that mainstream newspapers and broadcast outlets frequently employ sensationalised headlines and binary "us versus them" framing, presenting crisis strictly as a zero-sum confrontation between state authority and sub-national agitators (Sahara Reporters, 2022; Musa & Ferguson, 2013). This reactive, event-centered approach often ignores the structural drivers of the unrest, increasing public anxiety and deepening ethno-political polarisation across both regional and national spheres (Bello & Igbashangev, 2023; Okocha & Akpandem, 2022).

Media reporting on the IPOB agitation is heavily shaped by a dual narrative environment split between conventional mass media and digital broadcasting channels. While conventional outlets grapple with state censorship, proscription orders, and commercial pressures, alternative channels notably Radio Biafra and social media platforms have been used to bypass traditional gatekeeping, disseminate agitational rhetoric, and mobilise public sentiment (Amadi et al., 2025). In reference to this study, evaluating media coverage of IPOB-related agitations highlights the urgent need to assess whether journalists across the five South East states possess the knowledge



and capacity to apply peace journalism principles as a constructive, conflict-sensitive alternative (John & Elem, 2025; Elegu et al., 2022).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Ugbo and Dunu (2018), carried out a study on "Mediating Peace in Conflict Reporting: Newspaper Coverage and Framing of Conflicts in South East and South South Nigeria". The study provides critical foundational insights into media framing, peace journalism adoption, and operational disconnects within Nigerian newsrooms. Utilising a mixed-methods design combining a quantitative survey of 582 journalists with a content analysis of 168 editions across four national newspapers, the study investigated how media practitioners cover regional security crises, specifically the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) conflicts. Their findings revealed a pronounced ambivalence between self-perception and actual practice. While journalists overwhelmingly claimed high cognitive awareness and endorsement of peace journalism principles, the manifest newspaper content overwhelmingly reflected traditional "war journalism" frames, characterised by event-driven coverage, security sourcing, and sensationalism. The authors concluded that despite conceptual knowledge, peace journalism has not been pragmatically translated into newsroom routines, primarily due to structural, commercial, and safety constraints.

Their study evaluated journalists and national newspapers across a broad multi-regional scope (South East and South South) alongside multiple conflicts (IPOB and NDA), leaving a specialised data gap focusing exclusively on the primary population of active journalists across all five South East states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo specifically in relation to the ongoing IPOB secessionist agitation. Furthermore, while Ugbo and Dunu highlighted the disconnect between knowledge and manifest content using mixed methods, existing scholarship lacks a dedicated survey-based empirical assessment evaluating how working journalists across these five states assess their own functional knowledge, daily newsroom application of peace journalism principles, and their subjective perceptions of how such principles contribute to tension reduction during regional security crises. These gaps were filled by this study.

The study by Elegu, Aluç, Arqoub, and Ersoy (2022), titled "Charting the progression of a journalism subarea: A meta-analysis of peace journalism scholarship," provides crucial insights into the global trajectory and methodological characteristics of peace journalism literature. Through a rigorous meta-analysis and systematic review of peer-reviewed articles published over two decades, Elegu et al. (2022) mapped the evolution, regional focus, and methodological approaches of peace journalism research. Their findings revealed that while the field has experienced significant global expansion, the existing body of literature remains disproportionately dominated by qualitative media content analyses that evaluate published news frames after an event has occurred. Their meta-analysis highlighted geographical disparities in research distribution, with sub-Saharan African conflict contexts receiving insufficient empirical attention relative to European or Middle Eastern crises.



This meta-analytic review exposes significant empirical, methodological, and contextual gaps that directly justify the present study. Methodologically, Elegba et al. (2022) demonstrated that peace journalism scholarship overwhelmingly prioritises manifest text analysis over survey-based assessments that measure journalists' active knowledge, daily operational challenges, and perception of peace-oriented strategies. Empirically, while global peace journalism literature has expanded rapidly, there remains a distinct scarcity of empirical data focused on localised, non-state security crises driven by sub-national secessionist movements. Consequently, despite the overall growth of peace journalism scholarship, empirical evidence remains limited regarding journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting specific secessionist agitations within a particular regional context, such as South East Nigeria. However, the present study adopted Survey method to generate the data.

Okocha, and Akpandem (2022) explored “Assessment of peace journalism in the quest for harmony in Nigeria’s pluralistic society”. The work focused on the role of peace journalism in achieving harmony in Nigeria’s pluralistic society. It looked at the tendencies that have created and fostered strife and conflicts between the various components and groups in Nigeria, the role journalism has played in fuelling and sustaining the situation and what journalists can do to change the narrative and create a pathway for achieving and sustaining harmony among the peoples. The work was hinged on the Social Responsibility Theory and in-depth interview was employed to gather data. The authors concluded that commercial pressures, ethno-religious biases, and newsroom ownership interests significantly undermine the practical adoption of peace journalism, causing media narratives during national security crises to frequently default to "war journalism" frames that exacerbate crisis situation.

Okocha and Akpandem evaluated peace journalism broadly within the general umbrella of Nigeria’s pluralistic society, without isolating the specific, volatile dynamics of secessionist agitations. Methodologically, their assessment relied heavily on media observations and qualitative analysis of published content, leaving a gap in directly generating a primary data from field journalists. There remains a lack of empirical data regarding how journalists perceive the direct contribution of peace-oriented practices to conflict de-escalation. The present study addresses these gaps through direct survey of journalists across the five South East states on the functional knowledge, practical application, and perceptions of peace journalism in mitigating secessionist agitations.

Gever, Talabi, and Chinweobo-Onuoha (2023), in their study titled "Impact of safety threats on detailed reporting of separatists' agitations in South-East Nigeria," presents critical insights into how environmental hazards alter newsroom behaviour during regional security crises. In the study Gever et al. (2023), utilised a quantitative survey design targeting practicing journalists across selected urban centers in the region, to determine the extent to which physical safety threats originating from both state security forces and non-state armed agitators hinder comprehensive journalism. Their findings established that pervasive fear of bodily harm, arbitrary arrest, and equipment destruction force journalists to engage in self-censorship, drastically reducing their capacity to conduct detailed, investigative, or multi-perspectival reporting on Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitations, compelling them to rely on press



releases and superficial event-based coverage, which ultimately perpetuates reactive "war journalism" frames across the region.

While Gever et al. (2023) sampled journalists from selected urban clusters, their study did not systematically capture the total primary population of registered journalists across all five South East states, leaving a regional empirical deficit. The present study addresses these gaps through a targeted survey of journalists across the five South East states to evaluate their knowledge, application, and perceptions of peace journalism as a mechanism for regional conflict transformation.

The study by John and Elem (2025), titled "Imperativeness of peace journalism in surmounting security challenges in South-East Nigeria – A review," present vital conceptual and analytical insights into the media dynamics surrounding regional instability. Through a qualitative synthesis and systematic analysis of secondary literature, media texts, and observational reports, they evaluated how news outlets cover security crises across the South East, focusing on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitations. Their findings underscored that mainstream press coverage remains overwhelmingly sensation-driven, reactive, and reliant on official statements, a pattern that worsens regional hostility and deepens socio-political polarisation.

However, the qualitative and literature-driven design of John and Elem's (2025) review leaves significant empirical, methodological, and population gaps that necessitated the current investigation.

Auwal and Ersoy (2022), in "Peace journalism strategy for covering online political discourses in a multipolar society and the new public sphere," create vital insights into media framing, conflict-sensitive journalism, and public discourse within Nigeria's multi-ethnic landscape. Investigating news framing dynamics during the 2019 Nigerian presidential election, Auwal and Ersoy (2022) examined how media practitioners navigated volatile political campaigns, user-generated digital content, and ethno-religious polarisation. Their findings revealed that conventional media coverage and unmediated online political commentary frequently defaulted to sensationalism, hate speech, and partisanship, which significantly heightened political tension among diverse electorate groups. The authors demonstrated that applying peace journalism principles such as verifying digital rhetoric, avoiding dehumanising language, and prioritising issue-based dialogue over zero-sum political rivalries are essential for de-escalating conflicts.

Although their study gave valuable insight regarding peace-oriented framing, distinct empirical, methodological, and contextual gaps remain in the literature. Their inquiry focused predominantly on electoral media coverage and digital discourses, relying on content analysis and qualitative evaluations of published text rather than a primary survey measuring journalists' internal capacities. While Auwal and Ersoy (2022) examined online political discourse and media coverage during the 2019 presidential election, the current study focused on journalists' knowledge and application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work was anchored on the Peace Journalism Theory and Social Responsibility Theory

Peace Journalism Theory

Peace Journalism Theory, pioneered by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, in late 60's, provides the primary conceptual baseline for assessing how reporters cover conflict situations (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Galtung argued that traditional news routines suffer from a structural bias toward "war/violence journalism," which prioritises physical violence, immediate events over structural causes, elite military actors, and zero-sum "us versus them" framing (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). In contrast, Peace Journalism Theory advocates a normative, solution-oriented approach that equips journalists to humanise all opposing factions, contextualise historical grievances, use non-inflammatory language, and explore non-violent avenues for conflict resolution (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Applied to secessionist agitations in the South East region, the theory posits that reporters should move beyond functioning as passive megaphones for security briefings or agitator propaganda, operating instead as proactive agents of conflict transformation who expose underlying socio-political realities (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

Social Responsibility Theory

Historically, Social Responsibility Theory was propounded by F.S. Siebert, T.B. Peterson and W. Schramm in 1963. The idea however, owes its origin to the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, set up in the United States of America in 1942 to re-examine the concept of press freedom. The Commission saw the Social Responsibility Theory as being a safeguard against totalitarianism and extreme freedom, as guaranteed by the Libertarian Theory. The media must be given freedom to exercise their responsibilities but that freedom should be exercised with self-restraint as Journalists have a responsibility to balance their reporting roles with responsibility in the larger public interest, particularly the need to build consensus towards national peace and public harmony (Agboola, 2020). Within violent conflict environments, this framework obligates reporters to exercise professional self-regulation, avoid sensationalism that incites panic or ethnic hostility, and provide an inclusive forum for public discourse. Social Responsibility Theory outlines the duties media practitioners must fulfil, mandating that journalists provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of events within a context that give the citizens meaningful understanding. The SR theory is therefore appropriate for this work because it challenges journalists to strive at all times to report responsibly in ways that de-escalate tension especially with regards to secessionist agitations in south east Nigeria.

Integrating both theories establishes a cohesive framework for evaluating journalists' knowledge of peace journalism and its application during crises. While Peace Journalism Theory provides the operational blueprint showing "HOW" journalists can fulfill that duty offering actionable framing tools, language choices, and strategies to navigate complex security crises without sacrificing truth or objectivity, Social Responsibility Theory defines "WHY" journalists owe a civic duty to uphold fairness, accuracy, and harm avoidance. Together, these theories provide the necessary benchmarks to empirically evaluate whether media workers in South East Nigeria possess the requisite understanding of conflict-sensitive reporting and effectively apply these professional standards when covering secessionist agitations.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive survey research design with the five States in the South-east as the area of focus. A total of 1,508 registered journalists in the five South-Eastern States served as the population of the study. They were strictly those registered with the state councils of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) in the states who constitutional pay their checkoff/practicing fees. The breakdown is shown below:

Table 1: Registered Journalists in South-East Nigeria

State	No. of Registered Journalists
Ebonyi State	304
Abia State	234
Anambra State	400
Enugu State	350
Imo State	220
Total	1508

Source: Nigeria Union of Journalists, South-East zonal records (February 2024).

The sample size was determined based on the population of registered Journalists, using the Yamene (1967) formula as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size;

N = given population;

e = margin of error = 5% = 0.05

1 = constant

$$n = \frac{1508}{1 + 1508 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1508}{1 + 1508 \times 0.0025}$$



$$n = \frac{1508}{1509 \times 0.0025}$$

$$n = \frac{1508}{3.7725}$$

$$n = 399.7 \text{ approximately } 400$$

$$n = 400$$

Bowler's proportional sample determination formula was used to get the number of questionnaires that were administered to journalists in each State. The use of the formula ensured that each selected State was proportionally represented. The formula is stated as follows:

$$n1 = \frac{n(n1)}{N}$$

Where n = Overall sample size; n1 = Population of the registered journalists in each State; N= the Total Population.

$$\text{Ebonyi State} = \frac{400(304)}{1508} = 81$$

$$\text{Abia State} = \frac{400(234)}{1508} = 62$$

$$\text{Anambra State} = \frac{400(400)}{1508} = 106$$

$$\text{Enugu State} = \frac{400(350)}{1508} = 93$$

$$\text{Imo State} = \frac{400(220)}{1508} = 58$$

$$\text{Total} = 400$$



Table 2 below illustrates it further;

State	Population	Allocated sample
Ebonyi	304	81
Abia	234	62
Anambra	400	106
Eungu	350	93
Imo	220	58
Total	1508	400

Using proportionate stratified random sampling technique to select specific participants, the research instrument underwent face and content validation by three communication experts from the Department of Mass Communication, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, to guarantee methodological rigor. Furthermore, the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire were established through Cronbach's alpha via a test-retest reliability procedure which established its correlation coefficient.

Data collection was personally executed by the author at the 8th Triennial Delegates Conference of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), held in Imo State on 27th November, 2024. The conference brought together registered journalists from all states of the federation and gave the author the opportunity to meet only registered journalists from the South East zone, the area of study. During the administration of the instrument, strict ethical considerations were observed to protect the rights of journalists as well as voluntary participation. Informed consent was secured prior to distribution, and complete anonymity was guaranteed by omitting all personally identifiable information. However 389 questionnaires were returned and upon retrieval, the primary quantitative data were collated and analysed using tables of frequency and simple percentages descriptive statistics. The arithmetic mean derived from a 5-point Likert scale was utilised to evaluate the respondents' knowledge, daily application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitations in South East and its impact regarding tension reduction.

RESULTS

Overall, 389 copies (97%) were retrieved from the 400 administered on registered journalists from across the five South-East States. This means that 97% of the administered questionnaire was retrieved as against 3% that was unaccounted for due to human error. SPSS was used to analyse the data, and the results presented using tables.



Table 3: Analysis of data relating to the level of journalists' knowledge of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation associated with IPOB in South-East Nigeria

S/N	South-East Journalists' knowledge of peace Journalism principles	SA	A	U	D	SD	N	Weighted score	Weighted Mean	Rank	Decision
6	You have knowledge of peace journalism principles for reporting conflicts.	275	91	7	4	12	389	1780	4.58	2 nd	Accepted
7	You know the importance of the application of peace journalism principles in the reporting of conflicts.	254	127	4	4	12	389	1810	4.65	1 st	Accepted
8	You have participated in a conference on peace journalism reporting.	14	73	7	107	188	389	785	2.02	3 rd	Rejected
	Grand mean (11.25 ÷ 3)								3.75		

Source: Researcher's computations (2025) from SPSS using the survey data.

To obtain the weighted mean in Table 3, the frequency for each response category was multiplied by the corresponding weights of the responses and cumulated. Then the weighted score was divided by the total number of responses (N) to obtain the weighted arithmetic mean. To illustrate Item 6 in the table: the weighted score of 1780 was obtained as follows: $275 \times 5 + 91 \times 4 + 7 \times 3 + 4 \times 2 + 12 \times 1$. Then the mean of 4.58 was obtained as follows: $1780 \div 389$. The same procedure was applied to evaluate the other statements in the table. The author noticed that Items 6 and 7 are accepted being greater than the Likert mean (3.0). On the other hand, Item 8 is rejected because its weighted mean of 2.02 is less than the Likert mean of 3.0, which is the reference point for acceptance or rejection. This means that most of the respondents disagreed that they had participated in a conference on peace journalism reporting. This means that although majority have not participated in a conference on peace journalism reporting but they have knowledge of peace journalism principles in reporting conflicts in the area.



Table 4: Data relating to determine the extent to which journalists in South-East Nigeria apply peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitators in the study area

S/N	To determine the extent journalists in South-East Nigeria apply peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation by IPOB in South-East, Nigeria.	SA	A	U	D	SD	N	Weighted score	Weighted Mean	Rank	Decision
9	You have applied peace journalism principles in reporting conflicts.	212	111	24	28	14	389	1646	4.23	1 st	Accepted
10	In the IPOB agitation for the Independent State of Biafra, you have applied peace journalism principles in reporting the conflict.	188	94	76	31	0	389	1606	4.13	2 nd	Accepted
11	You apply peace journalism principles frequently in the reportage of the IPOB's secession agitation.	11	62	67	81	168	389	834	2.14	3 rd	Rejected
Grand mean (10.5 ÷ 3)									3.50		

Source: Researcher's computations (2025) from SPSS using the survey data.

As shown in Table 4, Items 9 and 10 each has a weighted mean score greater than the theoretical mean of 3.0. Consequently, both are accepted as measures to determine the extent journalists in South-East Nigeria apply peace journalism principles in their reportage of the secessionist agitation by IPOB in the area. As analysed table 4 shows that journalists in the study area apply peace journalism principles in their reportage of the conflict but not frequently.



Table 5: Data relating to examining journalists' perceptions of the contribution of peace journalism principles to reducing tensions associated with secessionist agitations in South-East Nigeria.

S/N	Examine journalists perceptions of the contribution of peace journalism principles to reducing tensions associated with secessionist agitations in South East Nigeria.	SA	A	U	D	SD	N	Weighted score	Weighted Mean	Rank	Decision
12	You have used peace journalism principles to report on the alleged killing of secession agitators by security operatives in Nigeria.	234	70	44	41	0	389	1664	4.28	1 st	Accepted
13	You have used peace journalism principles to report on the alleged killing of individuals suspected to be IPOB members by security operatives.	217	89	31	52	0	389	1638	4.21	2 nd	Accepted
14	You feel that your reports on the IPOB secessionist agitation have helped to reduce the tensions.	106	111	131	41	0	389	1449	3.72	3 rd	Accepted
15	You feel that your application of peace journalism principles to report on the sit-at-home order has helped to reduce the practice in South-East Nigeria.	79	89	106	98	17	389	1282	3.30	4 th	Accepted
16	You are of the opinion that your use of peace journalism in the reportage of IPOB secessionist agitation has helped in the reduction of the killings associated with the conflict.	52	114	114	99	10	389	1266	3.25	5 th	Accepted
Grand mean: 18.76 ÷ 5									3.75		

Source: Researcher's computations (2025) from SPSS using the survey data



With the weighted grand mean of 3.75 all the statements listed in Table 5 shows that journalists perceive that their application of peace journalism principles have helped to reduce tensions resulting from the secessionist agitation by IPOB in South-East, Nigeria.

Table 6: Data relating to identifying the strategies for strengthening the application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.

S/N	Strategies for strengthening the application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria.	SA	A	U	D	SD	N	Weighted score	Weighted Mean	Rank	Decision
17	Your deviation from the principles of objectivity, balanced and conflict-sensitive reporting in the reportage of secessionist agitation by IPOB has proved effective in reducing the conflict in South-East Nigeria.	55	52	91	52	139	389	999	2.57	3 rd	Rejected
18	Your stories on IPOB agitators and the policy makers/stakeholders over the secession agitation have helped to reduce the tension.	108	57	107	94	23	389	1300	3.34	2 nd	Accepted
19	The peace journalism principles you have so far applied have not yielded any positive results.	28	29	92	165	75	389	937	2.41	4 th	Rejected
20	Peace Journalism is the best way to report on IPOB agitation for the Independent State of Biafra.	134	191	55	0	9	389	1608	4.13	1 st	Accepted
Grandmean:14.69 ÷ 5									2.94		

Source: Researcher's computations (2025) from SPSS using the survey data

Table 6 as shown by items 18 and 20 implies that the adoption of objectivity, balanced and conflict sensitive reporting are effective strategies in strengthening the application of peace journalism principles in reporting the secession agitation by IPOB in South East, Nigeria.



DISCUSSION

The main findings of the study include:

1. Majority of the practicing journalists, 94%, in the South-East have knowledge of peace journalism principles in reporting conflicts.
2. Although (75%) journalists reported applying peace journalism principles in reporting IPOB-related agitation, the approach was not consistently or frequently applied. This suggests that knowledge of peace journalism does not necessarily translate into routine professional practice.
3. In examining journalists' perceptions of the contribution of peace journalism principles to reducing tensions associated with secessionist agitations in South-East Nigeria, the surveyed journalists perceived that peace-oriented reporting has contributed to reducing tensions in selected aspects of the conflict between the Federal Government of Nigeria and IPOB agitators in the South-East. This is so because (78%) agreed to objectively reporting on the alleged killing of security operatives by suspected IPOB members in Nigeria, while (79%) also use same pattern in reporting suspected killing of IPOB members by security operatives.
4. 75% of the respondents most times uses objective, balanced and conflict sensitive reporting in the coverage of the views and actions of relevant conflict stakeholders, including government officials and representatives of the agitating movement. From the data, what the finding entails is that to strengthen the application of peace journalism principles in reporting secessionist agitation in South-East Nigeria, the respondents identified objectivity, balanced and conflict sensitive reporting as central principles for strengthening peace-oriented reporting, although attention to contextual reporting, and other peaceful alternatives should not be overlooked.

The observed gap between knowledge (94%) and application (75%) aligns closely with the structural limitations documented by Okocha and Akpandem (2022). Their assessment of media performance in Nigeria's pluralistic society emphasised that ethno-political polarisation, ownership interests, and institutional biases hinder the routine execution of peace journalism, forcing journalists into reactive rather than being proactive during conflicts. However, the survey data disagree with Okocha and Akpandem's broader implication that regional reporting is inherently captured by divisive framing; the high level of reporting on casualties 78% for security personnel and 79% for IPOB members demonstrates that South East journalists actively attempt to maintain parity, using balanced reporting as a deliberate strategy to lower regional tension.

The reported knowledge of peace journalism (94%) suggests that the concept has gained considerable professional recognition among the journalists surveyed. This finding may reflect the growing scholarly and professional attention given to peace journalism. Although Elegba et al. (2022) did not directly measure journalists' awareness, their meta-analysis documented the continuing development and expansion of peace journalism scholarship, providing broader context for the high level of knowledge observed in this study. However, knowledge alone



should not be interpreted as evidence of consistent application, particularly because the present findings also suggest that reported use of the approach is not frequent.

In relation to Gever et al. (2023), the finding that 75% of respondents apply peace journalism periodically provides empirical confirmation of how some threats disrupt journalistic routines during IPOB-related agitations. Gever et al. (2023) demonstrated that acute physical safety threats, arbitrary arrests, and harassment from both state security forces and non-state armed groups force journalists to adopt self-preservation strategies, which compromises their ability to conduct detailed and consistent peace-oriented reporting. However, while this study agrees with Gever et al. (2023) by illustrating that some factors prevent journalists from translating knowledge (94%) into continuous professional routines, the present study still shows that 75% of journalists strive to represent both government officials and separatist movements, indicating that field reporters actively push back against threat-induced bias to uphold conflict-sensitive standards.

The finding that South East journalists rely heavily on objectivity, balance, and symmetrical stakeholder representation (75%) to reduce tension intersects directly with the conceptual arguments of John and Elem (2025). John and Elem (2025) asserted that adopting peace journalism principles is imperative for surmounting security challenges and de-escalating ethno-political friction in the region. The survey findings agree with their core premise, as journalists overwhelmingly perceive that balanced, objective coverage of IPOB agitations directly aids in lowering public anxiety and preventing communal clashes. The survey data therefore implies that strengthening peace reporting requires moving beyond surface-level balance to consistently incorporating structural context and conflict transformation mechanisms.

Finally, comparing these findings with Auwal and Ersoy (2022) highlights how media practitioners navigate polarised public spheres during volatile political crises. Auwal and Ersoy (2022) observed that unmediated political commentary and sensationalised news coverage during the 2019 presidential election amplified hate speech and social friction, prompting their call for peace journalism strategies to counter digital polarisation. The present survey findings agree with Auwal and Ersoy (2022) regarding the necessity of non-inflammatory, de-escalating narratives in multipolar societies, as 78% and 79% of South East journalists deliberately employ objective framing when covering sensitive IPOB and state casualties to prevent digital or physical retaliation. However, whereas Auwal and Ersoy (2022) examined macro-level electoral discourses driven by partisan elites, the current findings contextualised peace journalism within a high-risk, sub-national secessionist movement. This demonstrates that while journalists in the South East recognise the de-escalatory value of peace journalism in digital and print spheres, localised security dynamics and physical dangers make its daily, routine application more complex than in standard electoral reporting.



CONCLUSION

This study concludes that media practitioners in South East Nigeria are not lacking in knowledge or conceptual understanding of peace journalism principles. The knowledge baseline (94%) indicates that journalists recognise the imperative of conflict-sensitive reporting when covering volatile regional movements like the IPOB secessionist agitation. Furthermore, journalists' subjective perceptions confirm that when peace-oriented frames are deployed such as maintaining symmetrical casualty reporting and balanced stakeholder representation, they serve as an effective mechanism for tension reduction and de-escalation in conflict zones.

However, the disconnect between knowledge and routine application (75%) reveals that individual practitioner intent maybe constrained by some barriers indicating the need for further professional capacity development and more systematic application of peace journalism principles into newsrooms routines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings, the study puts forward the following recommendations:

1. Media organisations, journalists' professional bodies like Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), and civil society peacebuilding organisations should organise specialised, periodic training and continuing professional development programmes on peace journalism, non-inflammatory language usage and conflict-sensitive reporting.
2. Relevant NUJ structures and media regulatory or self-regulatory mechanisms should strengthen professional monitoring and ethical guidance on conflict-sensitive reporting, including advisory guidelines and appropriate review mechanisms.
3. Journalists should give greater attention to possible nonviolent responses and peaceful alternatives while representing the perspectives of relevant stakeholders, including affected communities, civil society, government actors and other voices directly affected by the conflict. Journalists' coverage should actively feature non-elite civilian voices, traditional leaders, human rights advocates, and local peacebuilders to humanise conflict narratives and foster democratic dialogue.
4. Journalists should strengthen adherence to objectivity, accuracy, fairness, contextualisation, multiple-perspective reporting, non-inflammatory language and solution-oriented approaches when reporting secessionist agitation. For further strengthening, tertiary institutions should integrate Peace and Conflict-Sensitive Journalism as a core mandatory course within undergraduate, equipping emerging media professionals with practical tools for conflict transformation prior to field entry.



Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

The author, Chinaza Peculair Chukwunenye, PhD, conceived and conducted the study, including the design, data collection and collation, analysis and interpretation, The author has critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and is responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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