

# Media, Intelligence, and Humanitarian Governance in Asymmetric Conflict Zones: A Political–Security Analysis of North-Eastern Nigeria in a Digitally Converged World Order

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## Abstract

*The prolonged crisis in North-Eastern Nigeria, shaped by the Boko Haram insurgency and the state's multifaceted response, has become one of the most complex humanitarian and security emergencies in contemporary Africa. This article offers a theoretically grounded and empirically anchored analysis of how media systems, intelligence institutions, humanitarian governance, and cyber-infrastructure interact to produce, transform, and sometimes undermine political stability in this conflict environment. Drawing strictly on the literature provided, including Kegley's global political transformation framework, Wolfsfeld's media–conflict model, Lowenthal's intelligence–policy nexus, McQuail's public interest theory of media, and extensive humanitarian and Nigerian security literature, the study develops a multi-layered conceptual architecture linking information flows, strategic communication, intelligence gathering, and humanitarian action.*

*The article argues that North-Eastern Nigeria represents a paradigmatic case of twenty-first-century hybrid conflict, where insurgency is not only fought with guns and bombs but also through narratives, digital infrastructures, humanitarian governance, and intelligence credibility. The Boko Haram conflict illustrates how state fragility, media convergence, and intelligence failures converge to produce cycles of violence, displacement, and mistrust between civilian populations and governing institutions. The media environment, transformed by digital convergence and pervasive computing, has radically altered how conflict is perceived, reported, and politicized, often creating what Wolfsfeld describes as a “political contest over meaning” in which insurgents, governments, and humanitarian actors struggle for narrative dominance.*

*Using a qualitative analytical methodology rooted in political communication theory, intelligence studies, and humanitarian governance literature, the article examines how Nigerian and international media representations, intelligence failures and reforms, and humanitarian operational dilemmas shape both local realities and global perceptions of the conflict. It finds that weak intelligence coordination, politicized media narratives, and inconsistent humanitarian strategies have collectively contributed to an environment in which civilian trust is eroded, accountability is weakened, and conflict resolution is delayed.*

*The study further integrates cyber and intelligence scholarship to demonstrate how digital infrastructures, cyber vulnerabilities, and information warfare now play a constitutive role in both insurgent operations and state responses. Boko Haram's use of digital communication, combined with Nigeria's limited cyber-intelligence capacity, has introduced a new layer of insecurity that traditional military strategies cannot adequately address.*

*Ultimately, the article concludes that sustainable peace and reconstruction in North-Eastern Nigeria depend not only on military success but on the rebuilding of information ecosystems, intelligence professionalism, media accountability, and humanitarian legitimacy. By situating the Nigerian case within broader trends in world politics and digital transformation, the article contributes to both theoretical debates on contemporary conflict and practical discussions on how fragile states can better manage the intersection of security, media, and humanitarian governance.*

**Keywords:** Media and conflict, intelligence operations, humanitarian governance, Boko Haram, cyber security, digital convergence

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## 1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a profound transformation in the nature of political conflict, security governance, and humanitarian intervention. As Kegley argues, world politics is no longer defined solely by traditional inter-state rivalry but by a complex mixture of transnational insurgencies, fragile states, global media systems, and digitally mediated power struggles that blur the boundaries between war, peace, and politics (Kegley, 2007). Within this evolving global order, North-Eastern Nigeria has emerged as one of the most revealing and troubling theatres of contemporary conflict. The Boko Haram insurgency, which has displaced millions, killed tens of thousands, and devastated entire communities, is not merely a local or regional security problem but a manifestation of deeper structural transformations in how power, information, and legitimacy are contested in the modern world (Momoh, 2018; Ngwodo, 2017).

The Nigerian state's struggle against Boko Haram has unfolded in an environment of weak institutions, contested authority, and intense media scrutiny. Unlike many twentieth-century conflicts that were largely invisible to the global public, the crisis in North-Eastern Nigeria has been continuously mediated through international news outlets, humanitarian reports, social media platforms, and digital advocacy campaigns. As McQuail notes, modern mass communication systems are not passive channels but powerful actors in their own right, shaping public understanding, political priorities, and even the operational decisions of governments and humanitarian agencies (McQuail, 1992). In Nigeria's case, media representations of Boko Haram violence, humanitarian suffering, and state responses have had direct implications for domestic legitimacy, international aid flows, and counter-insurgency strategies.

At the same time, the conflict has revealed profound weaknesses in Nigeria's intelligence and security architecture. Effective intelligence is the backbone of modern security operations, particularly in asymmetric

warfare where insurgents rely on secrecy, mobility, and civilian cover (Lowenthal, 2009; Ngboawaji, 2013). Yet Nigeria's intelligence agencies have repeatedly been criticized for their inability to anticipate Boko Haram attacks, protect civilian populations, and coordinate with humanitarian actors. These failures have not only cost lives but have also undermined public trust in the state, feeding into what Ngwodo describes as the broader "disintegration" of Nigerian statehood (Ngwodo, 2017).

The humanitarian dimension of the crisis adds another layer of complexity. Millions of internally displaced persons in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states depend on international aid for survival, yet humanitarian operations are themselves deeply politicized and securitized. Reports from the Nigeria INGO Forum, McIlreavy and Schopp, and Olojo all highlight how aid delivery is shaped by military priorities, access restrictions, and government suspicion of international organizations (Nigeria INGO Forum, 2018; McIlreavy and Schopp, 2017; Olojo, 2019). The temporary banning of UNICEF by Nigerian authorities, for example, reflected not only security concerns but also deep anxieties about information, sovereignty, and international scrutiny (The Economist, 2018).

These dynamics cannot be understood without considering the broader transformation of the information environment. Digital convergence, pervasive computing, and cyber-infrastructure have fundamentally altered how conflicts are fought, represented, and managed (Meikle and Young, 2012; Melon, 2002; Graham, 2010). Boko Haram has used digital media to spread propaganda, recruit followers, and intimidate communities, while the Nigerian state has struggled to develop the cyber-intelligence and information warfare capabilities necessary to counter these strategies (Brantly, 2013; Caplan, 2013; Lindsay, 2015). Cyber vulnerabilities in critical infrastructures further complicate humanitarian logistics, security coordination, and public communication, making the

conflict not only a physical struggle but also a digital one (Brahmanian et al., 2015; Graham, 2010).

Despite a growing body of literature on Boko Haram, humanitarianism, and Nigerian security, there remains a significant gap in integrative analysis that brings together media studies, intelligence theory, humanitarian governance, and cyber security within a single coherent framework. Much existing research treats these domains separately, failing to capture how they interact to shape both the lived realities of civilians and the strategic calculations of state and non-state actors. This article seeks to fill that gap by developing a comprehensive political–security analysis of North-Eastern Nigeria as a digitally mediated conflict zone. By drawing on the theoretical insights of Kegley, Wolfsfeld, McQuail, and Lowenthal alongside empirical studies of Nigeria’s humanitarian and security environment, the article offers a holistic understanding of how power, information, and legitimacy are negotiated in this crisis.

The central problem this study addresses is the persistent mismatch between the complexity of the Nigerian conflict and the fragmented institutional and analytical approaches used to manage it. Military strategies focus on kinetic operations, humanitarian agencies prioritize immediate relief, media organizations emphasize dramatic narratives, and intelligence agencies operate within bureaucratic silos. Yet in a world of media convergence and cyber-enabled insurgency, these spheres are deeply interconnected. Understanding Boko Haram and its consequences therefore requires an integrated lens that recognizes the co-production of security, information, and humanitarian governance.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven analytical methodology grounded in interpretive political analysis, media studies, intelligence theory, and humanitarian governance research. Rather than relying on statistical datasets or quantitative modeling, the article draws on the rich conceptual and empirical insights contained within the provided references to construct a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the North-Eastern Nigeria conflict. This approach is particularly appropriate because the core phenomena under investigation—media narratives, intelligence practices, humanitarian legitimacy, and cyber-security dynamics—are inherently qualitative, relational, and embedded in complex social and political contexts (McQuail, 1992; Lowenthal, 2009; Wolfsfeld, 1997).

The methodological foundation of the article is rooted in what Kegley describes as systemic analysis in world politics, which emphasizes the interaction of multiple levels of analysis, from global structures to local actors (Kegley, 2007). In applying this approach to Nigeria, the study treats Boko Haram not simply as an insurgent group but as a node within a broader global system of political communication, humanitarian governance, and security practices. This allows the analysis to move beyond narrow explanations of terrorism and instead explore how international media, development partners, intelligence agencies, and cyber infrastructures collectively shape the trajectory of the conflict (Momoh, 2018; Meikle and Young, 2012; Brantly, 2013).

The primary sources for this study are the academic books, journal articles, humanitarian reports, and policy analyses listed in the reference set. These texts provide both theoretical models and empirical observations that are systematically compared, contrasted, and synthesized. For example, Wolfsfeld’s theory of media and political conflict is used to interpret Nigerian and international media coverage of Boko Haram, while McQuail’s normative framework of media performance helps assess the public interest implications of that coverage (Wolfsfeld, 1997; McQuail, 1992). Similarly, Lowenthal’s model of the intelligence–policy relationship and Ngboawaji’s empirical analysis of Nigerian joint task force operations are combined to evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of Nigeria’s security architecture (Lowenthal, 2009; Ngboawaji, 2013).

Humanitarian governance is analyzed through the lens of McIlreavy and Schopp’s concept of collective shame, Momoh’s examination of development partners, and Olojo’s critical assessment of aid in the North-East (McIlreavy and Schopp, 2017; Momoh, 2018; Olojo, 2019). These sources are not treated as isolated accounts but as components of a broader discursive and institutional field in which humanitarian action is both a moral imperative and a political instrument. Cyber and intelligence dimensions are integrated using the works of Andress and Winterfeld, Brantly, Caplan, Lindsay, Brahmanian and colleagues, and Graham, which collectively provide a framework for understanding how digital infrastructures and cyber operations now shape national security and conflict dynamics (Andress and Winterfeld, 2014; Brantly, 2013; Caplan, 2013; Lindsay, 2015; Brahmanian et al., 2015; Graham, 2010).

The analytical process involves three interrelated stages. First, each reference is examined to identify its core theoretical propositions and empirical claims. Second, these propositions are mapped onto the Nigerian case to assess their explanatory power and relevance. Third, the resulting insights are synthesized into a coherent narrative that explains how media, intelligence, humanitarian governance, and cyber security interact in North-Eastern Nigeria. This iterative process ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the provided literature while also generating new conceptual linkages that extend beyond any single source.

Importantly, the study adopts a critical interpretive stance rather than a purely descriptive one. This means that the arguments of each author are not simply reproduced but interrogated in light of the Nigerian context. For instance, while McQuail emphasizes the normative role of media in serving the public interest, the Nigerian case reveals how political pressure, security constraints, and digital misinformation can distort that role (McQuail, 1992; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Similarly, Lowenthal's model of intelligence as a rational input to policy is complicated by evidence of politicization, bureaucratic rivalry, and capacity gaps in Nigeria (Lowenthal, 2009; Ngboawaji, 2013).

By combining these perspectives, the methodology produces a layered analysis that captures both structural patterns and contingent dynamics. It does not claim to offer predictive certainty but rather to provide a deeply contextualized understanding of how contemporary conflict operates at the intersection of information, security, and humanitarianism. This approach is particularly well suited to a case like North-Eastern Nigeria, where formal institutions, informal networks, and global media systems interact in unpredictable and often contradictory ways.

### 3. Results

The analysis reveals that the conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria is shaped by a complex and often dysfunctional interaction between media systems, intelligence operations, humanitarian governance, and digital infrastructures. One of the most significant findings is that information, rather than being a neutral resource, has become a central arena of struggle between Boko Haram, the Nigerian state, and international actors. This aligns closely with Wolfsfeld's argument that modern political conflicts are fought not only on the battlefield but also in the media arena, where competing narratives seek to

define reality, legitimacy, and responsibility (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

Media coverage of Boko Haram has played a crucial role in shaping both domestic and international perceptions of the conflict. Graphic reporting of attacks, kidnappings, and humanitarian suffering has generated global outrage and mobilized donor support, but it has also reinforced images of Nigeria as a failed or collapsing state (MacLean, 2018; McIlreavy and Schopp, 2017; Ngwodo, 2017). From McQuail's perspective, this raises serious questions about media performance in relation to the public interest, as sensationalism and episodic framing can obscure structural causes and long-term solutions (McQuail, 1992). The result is a public discourse that oscillates between humanitarian sympathy and security panic, often without a nuanced understanding of the political and socio-economic roots of the insurgency.

At the level of intelligence and security operations, the findings indicate persistent weaknesses in Nigeria's ability to translate information into effective action. Ngboawaji's analysis of joint task force operations highlights problems of coordination, intelligence sharing, and trust between military and civilian agencies (Ngboawaji, 2013). Lowenthal's framework suggests that such failures are not merely technical but institutional, rooted in unclear mandates, politicization, and the absence of professionalized analytic cultures (Lowenthal, 2009). In the Nigerian case, these weaknesses have allowed Boko Haram to exploit gaps in surveillance, infiltrate communities, and carry out high-profile attacks that undermine state credibility.

The humanitarian sector, rather than operating as a neutral space of relief, emerges as deeply entangled in these information and security dynamics. Reports by the Nigeria INGO Forum and McIlreavy and Schopp show that access to displaced populations is tightly controlled by the military, often justified by security concerns but resulting in severe humanitarian shortfalls (Nigeria INGO Forum, 2018; McIlreavy and Schopp, 2017). Olojo's analysis further suggests that aid can inadvertently prolong conflict by creating new incentives for manipulation, diversion, and political leverage (Olojo, 2019). These findings complicate the assumption that humanitarian assistance is an unambiguously positive force, revealing instead a field of contested authority and competing narratives.

Digital convergence and cyber vulnerability add another layer to these results. Meikle and Young's concept of

networked digital media helps explain how Boko Haram has been able to amplify its message far beyond the physical boundaries of the North-East, reaching sympathizers, funders, and media outlets around the world (Meikle and Young, 2012). At the same time, the Nigerian state's limited cyber-intelligence capacity, as described by Brantly and Caplan, leaves it vulnerable to disinformation, online recruitment, and infrastructure sabotage (Brantly, 2013; Caplan, 2013). Graham's analysis of infrastructural fragility further indicates that disruptions to communication networks, power grids, and data systems can have cascading effects on both security operations and humanitarian logistics (Graham, 2010).

Taken together, these findings point to a conflict environment in which traditional distinctions between war and peace, civilian and combatant, and information and action are increasingly blurred. Boko Haram operates not only as a violent insurgency but as a media-savvy, digitally connected actor capable of shaping narratives and exploiting institutional weaknesses. The Nigerian state, for its part, struggles to integrate military, intelligence, media, and humanitarian functions into a coherent strategy, resulting in fragmented and often contradictory responses.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this study have far-reaching implications for how scholars and practitioners understand contemporary conflict, particularly in fragile states embedded within a globalized and digitally converged information environment. The North-Eastern Nigeria case illustrates with particular clarity what Kegley describes as the transformation of world politics, in which non-state actors, global media, and transnational networks play roles once reserved for sovereign states (Kegley, 2007). Boko Haram's ability to influence international opinion, attract foreign fighters, and shape humanitarian agendas underscores the extent to which power now flows through information and networks as much as through territory and firepower.

One of the most important theoretical implications concerns the relationship between media and political legitimacy. Wolfsfeld's model of media and political conflict emphasizes that news coverage is not simply a reflection of reality but a site of strategic contestation (Wolfsfeld, 1997). In Nigeria, this contestation takes the form of competing narratives about state competence, humanitarian suffering, and the nature of the insurgency.

Government attempts to control information, such as restricting journalist access or banning organizations like UNICEF, can be understood as efforts to manage this narrative battlefield, even when they undermine transparency and trust (The Economist, 2018). From McQuail's normative perspective, such actions represent a failure of media systems to fulfill their public interest role, as citizens are deprived of the information needed to hold authorities accountable and engage in informed debate (McQuail, 1992).

The intelligence dimension further complicates this picture. Lowenthal's conception of intelligence as a bridge between information and policy assumes a degree of institutional coherence and professional integrity that is often absent in fragile states (Lowenthal, 2009). In Nigeria, intelligence failures have not only had operational consequences but have also fed into media narratives of incompetence and corruption, reinforcing a vicious cycle of mistrust and instability (Ngboawaji, 2013; Ngwodo, 2017). This suggests that intelligence reform is not merely a technical matter but a political and communicative one, requiring greater transparency, inter-agency cooperation, and engagement with civilian populations.

Humanitarian governance, too, must be rethought in light of these dynamics. McIlreavy and Schopp's notion of collective shame captures the moral and political tensions that arise when the international community is unable to protect vulnerable populations despite extensive knowledge of their suffering (McIlreavy and Schopp, 2017). In North-Eastern Nigeria, these tensions are exacerbated by the securitization of aid, which limits access and undermines the neutrality of humanitarian actors (Nigeria INGO Forum, 2018; Olojo, 2019). From a theoretical standpoint, this challenges traditional humanitarian principles and calls for new models of engagement that recognize the information and power politics embedded in relief operations.

The cyber and digital dimensions of the conflict further expand the analytical horizon. Andress and Winterfeld, Brahmanian and colleagues, and Lindsay all emphasize that cyber-space has become a critical domain of national security, yet Nigeria's institutional capacity in this area remains limited (Andress and Winterfeld, 2014; Brahmanian et al., 2015; Lindsay, 2015). Boko Haram's use of digital platforms for propaganda and coordination demonstrates how insurgent groups can exploit this gap, turning the global information infrastructure into a force multiplier. Graham's work on infrastructure failure

highlights how vulnerabilities in communication and data systems can magnify the impact of physical violence, disrupting everything from emergency response to international reporting (Graham, 2010).

There are, of course, important limitations to this analysis. Because it relies on secondary sources, it cannot capture the full diversity of local experiences and perspectives within North-Eastern Nigeria. Nor can it provide real-time assessments of rapidly evolving cyber or security dynamics. However, by integrating insights from multiple disciplines and bodies of literature, the study offers a robust conceptual framework that can guide both future research and policy development.

Looking ahead, the Nigerian case suggests several avenues for future inquiry. Scholars might examine how specific digital platforms shape insurgent and counter-insurgent strategies, or how humanitarian information systems can be made more transparent and accountable. Policymakers, meanwhile, must grapple with the challenge of building integrated security architectures that combine military, intelligence, media, and cyber capacities in ways that respect human rights and democratic norms. As Kegley reminds us, the transformation of world politics is ongoing, and cases like North-Eastern Nigeria are both symptoms and drivers of that transformation (Kegley, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

The conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria stands as a powerful illustration of how contemporary wars are fought not only with weapons but with information, narratives, and digital infrastructures. By bringing together media theory, intelligence studies, humanitarian governance, and cyber security scholarship, this article has shown that Boko Haram's insurgency is embedded in a complex ecosystem of communication, perception, and institutional power. Media systems shape how the conflict is understood and responded to, intelligence agencies struggle to convert data into effective policy, humanitarian organizations operate within politicized and securitized environments, and digital networks amplify both violence and vulnerability.

The central conclusion of this study is that sustainable peace and reconstruction in North-Eastern Nigeria cannot be achieved through military means alone. They require a profound rethinking of how information is gathered, shared, and governed across all sectors of society. Strengthening intelligence professionalism,

ensuring media accountability, protecting humanitarian neutrality, and investing in cyber-security are not separate tasks but interdependent components of a broader strategy to rebuild state legitimacy and social trust.

In a world of accelerating digital convergence and globalized communication, the Nigerian case offers lessons that extend far beyond its borders. It reminds us that the struggle for security is inseparable from the struggle for meaning, and that in the age of networks, the most decisive battles may be fought not only on the ground but in the minds and media of a global audience.

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