

Trauma Exposure, Coping Mechanisms and the Mental Health of Journalists in Northern Nigeria: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis

By

David Opeyemi Ogundele

Department: Mass Communication

University: Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State

E-mail: ogundele@babcock.edu.ng

Mobile Phone: +2319060396058

and

Omolayo Jegede

Department: Mass Communication

University: Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State

E-mail: jegedeo@babcock.edu.ng

Mobile Phone: +2348034889388

and

Kolade Ajilore

Department: Mass Communication

University: Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State

E-mail: ajilorek@babcock.edu.ng

Mobile Phone: +2348055134044.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualisation and study design: **David Opeyemi Ogundele.**

Development of theoretical framework and literature synthesis:

Omolayo Jegede and David Opeyemi Ogundele.

Drafting, critical revision and final approval of the manuscript: **Professor Kolade Ajilore.**

Abstract

Journalists working in conflict-affected societies are exposed to ongoing violence, human suffering and insecurity, so that the risk of injury occurs as a structural condition of news production and not as an episodic occupational hazard. In Northern Nigeria, where insurgency, terrorism, banditry, communal clashes and humanitarian emergencies persist, journalists are repeatedly exposed to distressing incidents that are potentially threatening to the psychological well-being. Global institutions like World Health Organisation (WHO), UNESCO-IPDC, the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma and the International Centre for Journalists have come to recognise the issue of trauma exposure and mental health as core issues for press freedom, ethical journalism and democratic stability. This article provides conceptual analysis of trauma exposure, coping mechanisms and mental health among journalists in Northern Nigeria. Drawing from current research in the psychology of trauma, occupational health and journalism studies, it synthesises the global and Nigerian evidence on the psychological sequelae of crisis reporting including issues of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and moral injury. The article suggests an integrative framework for trauma-informed journalism in Nigeria and offers implications for policies in newsrooms, journalist safety programmes, journalism education and future empirical studies of journalists and mental health in conflict-prone situations.

Keywords: trauma exposure; journalists; mental health; Northern Nigeria; coping mechanisms

Introduction

Mental health has been a key theme in the studies of recent journalism, in particular of those environments where news making is structurally intertwined with conflict, insecurity and humanitarian disasters. According to the World Health Organisation (2022), mental health is an individual's state of well-being that is manifested in the ability of individuals to deal with stress, work productively and contribute meaningfully to their communities. This ideal is often compromised in journalism, as a consequence of constant exposure to violence, trauma and human suffering. Studies from a variety of different regions have shown that journalists covering warfare, terrorism and disasters display higher levels of post-traumatic stress and depression, as well as patterns of anxiety and burnout similar to those of first responders and military personnel (Feinstein, 2018; Feinstein & Audet, 2020; Smith et al., 2023). Accumulating evidence has added to worldwide debate about the psychological risks of reporting about crisis and its impact on journalistic performance, ethical decision making and democratic communication.

Journalist safety has increasingly become a major concern for international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2023), the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ, 2023). These organisations emphasise that the safety of journalists should extend beyond physical protection to include psychosocial well-being, trauma awareness, and structured mental health support. Research suggests that untreated psychological distress influences how journalists behave editorially and make decisions in ways that harm the journalist credibility and function of journalism (Pate & Jibril, 2023; Wilson & Clarke, 2021). In the Global South, these dynamics are exacerbated in the context of weak institutions, political intimidation and insufficient mental health infrastructure, which means that journalists are much more vulnerable. A focus of African scholarship has been on the emotional cost of reporting conflict, elections, epidemics and disasters, often costs not buffered by formal organisational structures, enough remuneration or professional mental health assistance (Chuma & Moyo, 2021; Wasserman & de Beer, 2022).

Nigeria is a case in point in that it provides an acute manifestation of these challenges. In the past decade, the country has been torn by Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency, general rural banditry, farmer herder conflicts, communal violence and recurrent political unrest. Harassment, arbitrary arrest, digital surveillance and physical attacks on journalists are all documented by civil society reports on a regular basis (CJID, 2024; RSF, 2025). Beyond the physical risk, journalists are routinely exposed to bomb attacks, killings, kidnappings, crisis of displacement and humanitarian emergencies in Nigeria. Empirical studies show that Nigerian journalists who regularly cover violent incidents suffer from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, hypervigilance, fear, avoidance and emotional exhaustion (Mohammed & Idris, 2024; Adetunji & Oluwole, 2025).

Existing Nigerian studies (Mohammed & Idris, 2024; Adetunji & Oluwole, 2025) have identified symptoms of distress including intrusive memories, emotional numbing, fear and psychological exhaustion but often stop short of analysing how coping strategies and organisational contexts interact to shape long-term well-being and professional behaviour. Journalists are often forced to use coping practices without the benefit of formal psychosocial support (Olufemi, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022), but these strategies can be the source of deeper vulnerabilities that contribute to the development of compassion fatigue, moral injury and reduced sensitivity to ethics over time (Figley, 2017; Pate & Jibril, 2023; Wilson & Clarke, 2021).

Against this background, this article has two key objectives which are primarily aimed at analysing the effect of trauma exposure and coping mechanisms on the mental health of journalists reporting in the conflict-affected Northern Nigeria and secondly, to develop an integrative conceptual framework that will link individual coping responses and organisational support/ lack of support to broader communicative and professional outcomes. By synthesising scholarship from trauma studies, stress-and-coping theory, organisational support literature and research on compassion fatigue, this conceptual analysis illuminates the multi-layered mechanisms by which trauma shapes journalistic work and identifies implications for newsroom policy, journalist safety programming, journalism education and future empirical research.

Literature Review

The study of trauma and journalism has gone beyond a cataloguing of the symptomatic effects on individual reporters towards a more structural interrogation of the way in which institutional cultures, professional ideologies and political economies, in concert, produce psychological vulnerability. Rather than viewing trauma as an unfortunate by-product of newsroom work, contemporary scholarship is increasingly taking trauma as an inseparable dimension of reportage carried out in conflict-affected societies. This review has adopted a funnel-like approach in that it starts with global discussions on trauma and journalism, moves through literature from the African region, gets down to the Nigerian context and finally to Northern Nigeria specifically. Across these scales, the review questions the conceptualisation of trauma exposure, coping practice and mental health and identifies tensions and blind spots that have persisted and call for an integrated approach to analysis.

Global Debates: From Clinical Symptomatology to Structural Understandings

Early scholarship on journalists and trauma was largely controlled by a clinical paradigm to measure post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and associated symptoms in war correspondents and disaster reporters (Feinstein, 2018). This body of work was influential in demonstrating that journalists are not immune to trauma; their rates of trauma-related symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety can be comparable to those of first responders and soldiers. However, as a number of scholars have noted, symptom-

based research tended towards individualism, attributing psychological consequences to personal vulnerability or resilience whilst paying comparatively little attention to institutional power, political economy or professional norms (Backholm & Björkqvist, 2020).

More recent scholarship contests such limitation by drawing on Trauma Theory to contextualize the theme of journalistic distress in much wider frameworks of risk, precarity and witnessing. Trauma has been reconceptualized not just as a discrete event but as an ongoing state, which is the result of cycles of exposure, deadlines of editorial messages, organisational demands and the continuous circulation of graphic content online (Smith et al., 2023). The spread of user generated content, live streamed violence and 24 hour news cycles means that journalists may be exposed to traumatic imagery multiple times without ever having to set foot in a war zone. This has led to a renewed examination of vicarious trauma: the editing of footage of atrocities, or the processing of graphic material submitted by users, can be a psychologically corrosive activity in ways that are counter-heroic to heroic narratives of the front line correspondent.

Simultaneously, the professional ideology of emotional detachment has been subject to more and more scrutiny. Trauma theorists suggest that expectations of stoicism can unhelpfully foster the avoidance of processing distress and therefore exacerbates poor longer-term outcomes (Feinstein & Audet, 2020). In this respect, Trauma Theory works as an expose of the culture of journalism in which newsrooms often impose on journalists displays of invulnerability that are incompatible with genuine psychological health. Nonetheless, much of this international literature is still based on well-resourced Western news organisations, where access to counselling and institutional assistance whilst imperfect at least exists. This causes major doubts about the transferability of these assumptions to under-resourced and politically unstable settings such as Northern Nigeria..

African Media Ecologies: Compound Trauma and Constrained Coping

African scholarship has complicated these global debates by bringing the realities of journalistic practice in environments of fragile democracy, economic pre-ariousness and chronic violence to the fore. Research in East and Southern Africa underscores the fact that journalists do not only observe traumatic events but are also confronted with threats posed by state security agencies, armed groups and political actors who view the media as their enemy (Chuma & Moyo, 2021; Wasserman & de Beer, 2022). Traumatic exposure is therefore inextricably intertwined with structural violence and authoritarian leanings, and gives rise to what scholars have coined to be compound trauma environments, in which emotional and physical indignation are coupled with the politics of repression.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is especially relevant in these settings but is still in dispute. On the one hand, the model provides insight into how the appraisals of journalists regarding threat and available resources affect their emotional reactions. On the other hand, critics claim the model, created without a focus on what happens in relatively safe societies, underestimates constraints on coping when journalists are in precarious employment with little institutional support and limited access to mental health services. The idea of the rational and individually optimised process of coping does not sit well in media systems where declining a dangerous assignment can lead to job loss and in which help-seeking is stigmatised or structurally impossible.

African scholarship also brings into the forefront collectivist and spiritual repertoires of coping. Faith communities, extended family networks and collegial solidarity are for many journalists the assumed primary resources that challenge the Western-centric assumption that formal psychological counselling is the default or best response. African scholarship therefore exposes a tension between survivance and resignation evident to a lesser extent in a great deal of global discourse.

Nigeria: Precarity, Repression and the Limits of Institutional Care

Within the rubric of the region, Nigeria epitomises the collision of the strong demands of the news-work and the minimal institutional care. Reports from civil societies organisations including the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development and the International Press Centre report regular harassment, beating, arbitrary arrest and intimidation of journalists by law enforcement and political actors. Such material threats are added to the daily experience of exposure to violence in the electoral, terrorism and banditry contexts and make trauma not an isolated experience but rather an embedded feature of reporting.

Nigerian empirical research has started to record the psychological effect of this environment. Journalists covering crime, insurgency and disasters report the symptoms of anxiety, intrusive memories, emotional exhaustion, fear of personal safety and distrust of institutions (Adetunji & Oluwole, 2025; Olufemi, 2022). The

organisational dimension of coping is under developed in this literature. Most Nigerian media organisations do not have any formal safety policies in place, trauma awareness training, debriefing protocols or access to psychosocial services. From the perspective of Organisational Support Theory, this is a critical shortcoming as when workers do not perceive their organisations as caring and supportive they are more likely to experience stress as overwhelming and to disengage from their professional roles.

A professional culture that identifies emotional fortitude with competence is also evident among Nigerian scholarship. Admitting distress is often interpreted as an admission of weakness or inadequacy, especially within the hegemonic masculinities of the journalist profession which valorise stoicism, especially among male journalists. This dynamic overlaps with Compassion Fatigue Theory, which argues that journalists may allow themselves to take on more traumatic assignments while at the same time blocking out empathy as a way to protect themselves - this eventually compromises both psychological health and the quality of the individual story.

Northern Nigeria: Embedded Witnessing and the Double Exposure

Studies of trauma in high-risk journalism have regularly focused on the psychological salience of proximity to violence. This proximity is particularly strong in Northern Nigeria. More than a decade of Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency, rural banditry, mass kidnappings, revenge killings and inter-communal warfare has placed journalists not simply as the observers, but often as members of the communities in which violence is taking place. Unlike foreign correspondents who go to conflict zones on a temporary basis, local journalists routinely cover traumatic events involving people they know neighbours, colleagues, family members or longstanding contacts. This breakdown of the personal boundary of the work setting enhances the salience of emotional experience and disorganization of meaning-making processes that are fundamental to trauma recovery and have been documented in other sustained conflict settings such as Syria and Afghanistan (Feinstein & Audet, 2020; Smith et al., 2023).

This embeddedness has some material consequences. Studies show that journalists reporting on massacres, displacements, military operations and the aftermath of terrorist attacks on known communities produce cycles of emotional shock, numbing and survivor guilt (Mohammed & Idris, 2024). Such proximity is likely to have adverse impacts on individual levels of threat appraisals and compromise perceived control, which increases stress reactions consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Trauma Theory further states that traumatic experiences become more difficult to assimilate when a symbolic distance between witness and victim collapses and there is more vulnerability to intrusive memories, hyperarousal and emotional fragmentation (Feinstein, 2018).

Institutional conditions cause this vulnerability to be compounded. Reports from the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID, 2024) indicate that journalists in Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Borno and Niger States frequently work without insurance, protective equipment or editorial support, whilst facing harassment from both state and non-state actors. Psychosocial support and debriefing are rarely included and freelancers, who comprise a large segment of the northern press corps, are in the most danger with the least structural protection.

The literature therefore sets the context of Northern Nigeria as one of double exposure: journalists are exposed to trauma as the subject of their professional work and the texture of their lived experience. This embeddedness has the effect not only of multiplying psychological risk but also of defying international scholarship on the basis according to which reporters have affective distance with the events they cover.

Coping as Contested Terrain: Between Agency and Structural Constraint

In the global and Nigerian scholarship, coping is defined at once as exercise of agency and also as a response that is strongly affected by conditions of structure within which the response occurs. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping conceptualises coping as situationally contingent on people's appraisals of demands in relation to available resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Yet empirical studies that are rooted in African and Nigerian contexts point that coping cannot be sufficiently theorised as a solely rational or discretionary process. Working under unsafe conditions often forecloses meaningful choice: refusing dangerous work assignments runs the risk of being out of work; finding psychological help runs the risk of being stigmatised; taking rest may be unaffordable financially (Wasserman & de Beer, 2022).

Coping therefore often involves a response to restricted options and not an exercise of free agency. Common strategies among Nigerian journalists include: spirituality, prayer, peer solidarity, humour and emotional

suppression (Olufemi, 2022), which is consistent with findings among journalists in sub-Saharan Africa where faith and social networks are important emotional buffers in contexts where formal psychosocial services do not exist (Ahmed et al., 2022). Whilst prayer and support from the community can restore a sense of purpose and emotional equilibrium, such support can lead to a decrease in motivation for institutional advocacy, especially if trauma is explained in religious or fatalistic terms.

Compassion Fatigue Theory further complicates this ambiguity by showing how the process of sustained empathic engagement with no adequate recuperation depletes emotional reserves and can lead to cynicism, disengagement and empathic numbing (Figley, 2017). Studies of journalists covering violent extremism in Kenya, Nigeria and South Sudan show that prolonged exposure to victims trauma with no institutional debriefing leads to emotional blunting often misrecognised as professional equanimity (Chuma & Moyo, 2021). In Northern Nigeria this distancing may serve as a means of continuing to function in a chronic trauma environment but puts people at risk for long-term psychological deterioration, including irritability, withdrawal in relationships and moral disorientation (Feinstein & Audet, 2020).

Mental Health, Ethics and Democratic Communication: Unresolved Tensions

An emerging body of scholarship has made the argument that the psychological well-being of journalists has direct implications for the ethical quality of the news and the health of the democratic communication. Social Responsibility Theory places journalism in a normative model which focuses on fairness, accuracy, empathy and commitment to the public good (Siebert et al., 1963). Extending this paradigm, researchers imply that such normative obligations become challenging to maintain under circumstances of chronic psychological stress when journalists operate. Mental distress interferes with the cognitive and affective processes that are central to moral decision-making, such as ethical reasoning, making decisions about a situation, and empathic sensitivity towards the victim (Pate & Jibril, 2023).

These tendencies are clearly evident in the Nigerian context, where, according to journalists, fear of reprisal and emotional fatigue after repeated exposure to violence directly informs their editorial decision. In Northern Nigeria precisely, journalists are faced with pressures that all combine to affect the ability to report well on nuanced issues with contextuality, including threats by security agencies, intimidation by armed factions, editorial autonomy deficits, and emotional depletion caused by being constantly exposed (CJID, 2024; Feinstein, 2018; Smith et al., 2023).

What is still left to theoretical development is an accurate description of the intersection of mental health, institutional neglect and democratic communication. Mental health tends to be dealt with as an individual as opposed to a structural issue with implications for press freedom and informational quality. On the contrary, the trauma literature tends to describe ethical lapses as peripheral effects of psychological distress, rather than as symptoms of systemic break down. Northern Nigeria exposes the insufficiency of both framings: the psychological vulnerability of journalists is the result of intersects of trauma-exposure, institutional abandonment and political repression and it itself is the reconstitution of the informational environment available to citizens.

The literature does thus reveal a conceptual gap. Existing studies recognise the prevalence of trauma as well as the lack of institutional support but few integrate these insights into a broad-based communicative theory explaining the impact of trauma on news production, public discourse and democratic resilience. Addressing this gap requires a framework which synthesises Trauma Theory, coping models, organisational behaviour and normative media theory an approach which is taken in the following section.

Materials and Method

This article adopts a conceptual and integrative literature review methodology in examining the nexus between trauma exposure, coping mechanisms and mental health outcomes amongst journalists in Northern Nigeria. This approach is appropriate because the psychological vulnerability of journalists in conflict-affected settings is produced through a complex interplay of structural, cultural and organisational factors which are not adequately captured through a single empirical data set. Conceptual research allows for the interrogation of what is already known, identification of theoretical gaps and integration of disparate literatures into a coherent explanatory framework (Jaakkola, 2020; Torraco, 2005).

The literature search was carried out in the following academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google

Scholar, PsycINFO and Communication Abstracts. Search terms were used in combination and included: 'journalist mental health', 'trauma AND journalism', 'coping mechanisms AND journalists', 'Northern Nigeria AND conflict reporting', 'compassion fatigue AND media', 'organisational support AND newsroom' and 'press freedom AND psychological well-being'. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and institutional reports published between 2018 and 2025, a time frame chosen because of the intensification of digital trauma exposure, the (≥ 2018) consolidation of the Northern Nigerian crisis and the onset of a more structurally oriented scholarship of journalist well-being.

Inclusion criteria included that sources deal with at least one of the following areas: trauma experiences in journalism; coping mechanisms amongst journalists; organisational or institutional responses to journalist mental health; and psychological health in relation to journalistic practise. Sources that solely focused on physical safety without reference on psychological dimensions were excluded as were studies that did not report methodological transparency. In addition to peer-reviewed academic literature, the review draws on institutional reports by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural and Sports Organisation (UNESCO-IPDC), the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, International Centre for Journalists, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID). These sources offer empirically based evidence of international safety standards and localised documentation of the state of journalists in Nigeria.

The theoretical architecture of the synthesis is organised around four complementary lenses: Trauma Theory, which explains the emotional and cognitive consequences of chronic exposure to violence and suffering; and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which explains appraisal processes and coping responses; Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020), which highlights the role of institutional care or neglect in shaping psychological outcomes; and Compassion Fatigue Theory (Figley, 2017), which accounts for the erosion of empathic capacity under conditions of sustained traumatic engagement. These theories are deployed not as stand-alone constructs, but rather as complementary interpretive instruments which are able to provide a means of systematic critique and constructive synthesis of the existing literature.

The review process was organised in an analytical manner following a funnel approach. Initial searches were conducted on global scholarship to determine foundational debates; subsequent, more narrow searches were conducted, focusing on increasingly on Africa regional contexts, Nigerian scholarship and studies specifically taking conflict-prone northern contexts. This funnel organisation ensured that there was both breadth and specificity to context. Sources were reviewed against criteria of methodological rigour, its relevance to trauma and journalism, theoretical coherence and contribution to understanding of coping and institutional support. Divergent findings in the literature were not found to represent discrepancies that needed to be resolved but, rather, to provide productive conceptual tensions to highlight the need for a more integrated framework.

The methodology is interpretive instead of aggregative. It does not aim at quantifying themes or estimating effect sizes but rather it questions underlying assumptions, identifies conceptual blind spots and bridges strands of scholarship rarely examined in conjunction. Analytical validity is enhanced by the fact that the arguments have been based on well-established theoretical traditions while retaining the flexibility needed to build a framework sensitive to the socio-political specificities of Northern Nigeria. This approach is consistent with established conventions in the communication research, where conceptual synthesis plays a foundational role in theory-building, agenda-setting and critical reflection (Cornelissen, 2017).

Toward an Integrative Framework for Trauma-Informed Journalism in Northern Nigeria

The foregoing literature review reveals that trauma exposure, coping strategies and mental health outcomes amongst journalists in Northern Nigeria can not adequately be theorised through any single disciplinary lens. Psychological approaches highlight individual distress at the cost of institutional and political determinants. Organisational behaviour frameworks shed light on the structural neglect but will potentially underestimate the importance of cultural and professional norms. Normative media theories account for democratic obligations but do not usually account for the psychosocial conditions that those obligations are carried out or not carried out under. What is needed is a framework that incorporates these dimensions in a coherent and multilevel explanatory model. This section makes such a proposal, organised around three interacting levels, macro-contextual, meso-organisational and micro-individual, and based on the four theoretical traditions reviewed above.

Level 1: Macro-Contextual Factors — The Structural Production of Trauma

At the macro-level, the framework identifies the political, economic and security conditions that result in what this article terms a structural trauma environment. In Northern Nigeria, this environment is made up of continued insurgency (Boko Haram, ISWAP), widespread banditry, communal violence, state fragility and systemic impunity for attacks on journalists (CJID, 2024; RSF, 2025). These conditions are no more episodic; they are part of the chronic issue of the journalistic setting in which trauma exposure has become routine rather than exceptional.

Macro-contextual factors work in two major ways. First, they define the frequency and intensity of traumatic exposure by defining what events journalists are expected to cover and under what conditions. Second, they constitute the wider political economy of journalism patterns of media ownership, precarious employment, wage insecurity and editorial dependence that limit the ability of journalists to exercise protective agency. From the perspective of Trauma Theory, chronic macro-level instability creates what can be called structural traumatisation: a situation in which there have been repeated cycles of exposure in which there is insufficient opportunity to psychologically process and recover (Feinstein, 2018; Smith et al., 2023).

Crucially, the cultural scripts that can be used to make sense of trauma are also a function of macro-contextual factors. In Northern Nigeria where religious beliefs and communal solidarity are integral, journalists usually interpret their experience within a spiritual and communitarian framework. Whilst these interpretive resources can be genuinely protective, they may also cause suffering to be naturalised, advocacy for system reform and engagement with formal support mechanisms to be inhibited (Ahmed et al., 2022). The macro level thus not only generates trauma, but also influences the very terms in which trauma is recognised, narrated and responded to.

Level 2: Meso-Organisational Factors — Institutional Support or Abandonment

At the meso level the framework is concerned with the role of news organisations and professional bodies in absorbing or enhancing the impact of trauma at the macro level. Organisational Support Theory suggests that employee perceptions of institutional care is a major factor in determining psychological resilience and professional engagement (Eisenberger et al., 2020). In the Northern Nigerian media environment however, perceptions on organisational support are systematically undermined by the lack of trauma-sensitive policies, poor levels of safety equipment, the absence of debriefing protocols and the marginalisation of freelance journalists who make up a large segment of the regional press corps.

The meso level has important interactions with the macro level. Structural trauma environments increase the need for institutional support at the very time when organisational resources are likely to be more scarce. The lack of adequate funding for media organisations in Nigeria, and political pressures which affect the media's editorial independence, foster newsroom cultures where emotional stoicism is promoted as professional competence. This culture actively discourages help-seeking, and pathologises vulnerability (i.e. makes it socially unacceptable), effectively delegitimising the very responses psychological health requires. From the perspective of Compassion Fatigue Theory, organisational abandonment not only fails to interrupt the accumulation of empathic strain but is actually part of the problem by normalising continued exposure without adequate rest, debriefing or relational support (Figley, 2017).

Professional bodies, regulatory institutions, civil society organisations and international actors in the media development also operate at this level. Their presence or absence in these processes of providing safety training, of advocacy, legal protection and mental health resources, constitutes a critical variable in the framework. Where these actors are active, they are able to supply least some compensation for organisational deficits; where they are absent or ineffective, their absence or ineffectiveness is further to entrench vulnerability.

Level 3: Micro-Individual Factors — Appraisal, Coping and Psychological Outcomes

At the micro level, the framework borrows from the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to explain processes by which individual journalists will appraise the experience of trauma exposure and select coping strategies. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model identifies two appraisal stages, primary appraisal where an individual evaluates whether an event is threatening and the secondary appraisal where an individual assesses the resources available to him to cope with the threat. In Northern Nigerian context, both the stages are deeply influenced by the macro and meso conditions. Primary appraisals are intensified by the embedded witnessing described in the literature the collapse of professional and personal distance that characterises local conflict journalism. Secondary appraisals are limited by the limited organisational and structural resources available to journalists, and result in a consistent pattern of perceived helplessness and inevitability.

Coping strategies at the micro level therefore are not freely chosen responses but rather responses to limited fields of possibility. Spirituality, peer solidarity, humour and emotional suppression are the coping repertoire most found among Northern Nigerian journalists (Olufemi, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022). These strategies are not necessarily either adaptive or maladaptive, but their psychological consequences are dependent on the wider contexts in which they are deployed. Emotional suppression may facilitate professional functioning in the short term but becomes maladaptive if it is the only available strategy that will be available to them, over time contributing to emotional numbing, relationship withdrawal and moral disorientation consistent with Compassion Fatigue Theory (Figley, 2017).

Mental health outcomes at the micro level including symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, burnout, compassion fatigue and moral injury are thus best understood as products of the interaction between the macro structural conditions with the meso organisational environments and micro appraisal and coping processes. These outcomes are neither individual nor structural but are collectively constituted at all three levels of the framework.

The Communicative Dimension: Mental Health and Democratic Function

A unique contribution of this framework is extending beyond psychological consequences to the communicative and democratic consequences of journalist mental health. Drawing on the Social Responsibility Theory (Siebert et al., 1963) and recent scholarship, which connects trauma and journalistic ethics, the framework proposes a fourth dimension: the democratic communicative results born out of the interaction between structural trauma, institutional neglect and individual psychological erosion.

Specifically, the framework contends that psychological vulnerability at the micro level manifests in communicative deficits at the societal level by means of three main mechanisms: self-censorship caused by fear and exhaustion; narrative simplification caused by cognitive overload and empathic numbing; and editorial deference to official sources caused by reduced investigating capacity caused by burnout and compassion fatigue. Each of these mechanisms decreases the informational diversity, critical depth and empathic register of public discourse, contributing to the loss of the ability of journalism to provide for informed citizenship and democratic accountability in conflict affected contexts.

Framework Propositions

The integrative framework leads to the following propositions that are open to empirical tests in future research:

Proposition 1: Chronic macro-level conflict and political repression result in an increase rate and frequency of traumatic exposure amongst journalists that creates a structural traumatised state that exceeds the individual-level coping capacity.

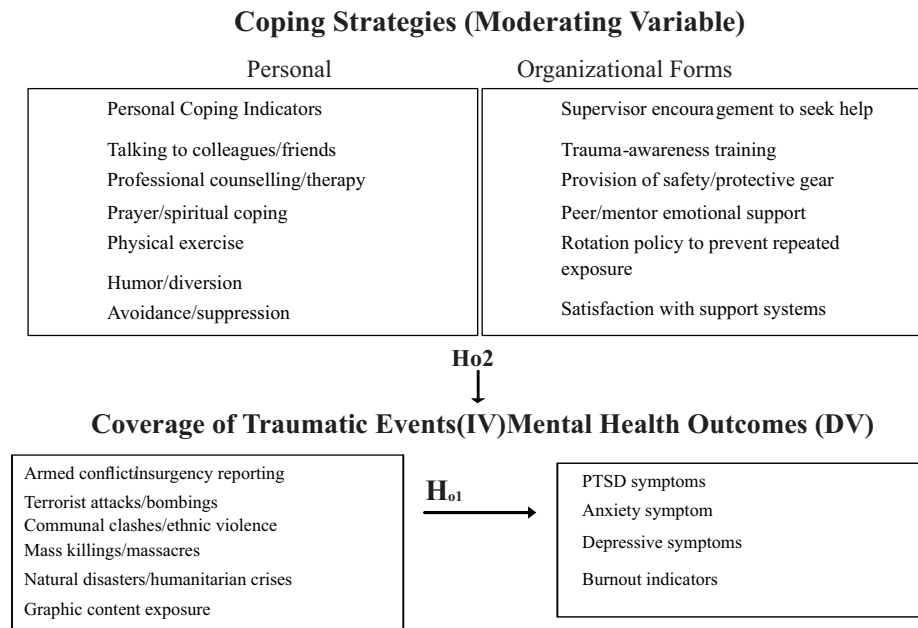
Proposition 2: The absence of meso-level organisational support including safety policies, debriefing, counselling and employment security has a significant moderating effect on the association between trauma exposure and adverse mental health outcomes, such that journalists with lower levels of perceived organisational support have higher levels of psychological vulnerability.

Proposition 3: Micro level coping strategies are structurally limited by macro and meso conditions; the strategies such as emotional suppression and spiritual coping, although offering short-term coping relief, in the absence of organisational support, add to the long-term vulnerability.

Proposition 4 Psychological outcomes including Psychological Trauma Symptoms, Compassion fatigue, Burnout and Moral Injury Mediates a Relationship between Trauma Exposure and Communicative Deficits, including Self-censorship, Narrative Simplification and Deference for Official Sources.

Proposition 5: Communicative deficits created by journalist psychological vulnerability add to the structural conditions that perpetuate the deficits, in a recursive cycle of relation between mental health and democratic resilience.¹⁰²

Conceptual Model
Figure 2.1: Conceptual Model of the Study;
Coverage of Traumatic Events, Coping Strategies, and Mental Health of Journalists in Northern Nigeria.



Source: Researcher's Model (2026)

H_{03a-f} DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS (Control Variable)

Age – Gender - Marital status - Years of experience - Type of media organization (print, broadcast, online)
- Media ownership (government, private, community, international)

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model showing the hypothetical relationships between the key variables of this study. The conceptual model is premised on the assumption that the level of traumatic event coverage serves as the primary independent variable predicting adverse mental health outcomes (PTSD, anxiety, depression, and burnout) among journalists in Northern Nigeria. Coping strategies, conceptualized as a single moderating construct comprising both personal responses and organizational support systems, are theorized to weaken or intensify this predictive relationship. Hence, coping does not function as a stand-alone predictor but acts upon the coverage–mental health pathway. Demographic characteristics are only included as control variables to test whether mental health outcomes differ across subgroups. The hypotheses are therefore logically positioned against the model's causal logic, with the direct effect labelled under H₀₁, the moderating influence under H₀₂, and demographic comparison hypotheses represented under H_{03a-f}.

It has consistency with theoretical assumptions of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and is supported by the international frameworks of the safety and wellbeing of journalists developed by the UNESCO, IPDC (2023), the Dart Center of Journalism and Trauma (2022), and the Open Society Foundations (2023). Together, the model provides an integrative pathway that proves that mental health outcomes among journalists in Northern Nigeria are the result of the interaction between exposure to traumas and availability and effectiveness of coping resources.

Analysis: Applying the Framework to Northern Nigeria

At the macro level, the framework explains why trauma exposure for Northern Nigerian journalists would have to be understood in light of its structural rather than episodic nature. The region's chronic conflict ecology characterised by more than a decade of insurgency, banditry, communal violence and state fragility creates conditions where traumatic events neither are aberrations but are ways of life in the professional incapacitating routine of the population. Trauma Theory's conceptualisation of ongoing traumatising, as distinct from discrete traumatic incidents, is particularly suited here: Northern Nigerian journalists are not able to recover from one exposure before moving on to the next, and the cumulative burden of repeated exposure cycles of witnessing, emotional processing and professional performance under duress means that a qualitatively different form of psychological burden is produced (Feinstein, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). The framework's macro level also brings to the forefront the role of political economy: the underfunding of regional media organisations, the

precariousness of freelance employment and the reliance of many outlets on advertising revenue subject to political interference all limit the capacity of journalists to take protective agency over their working conditions.

At the meso-level, the framework highlights the important role played by institutional abandonment in the development of psychological outcomes. The near universality of the lack of formal safety policies, trauma informed management practices and psychosocial support services in the newsrooms of Northern Nigeria is not the result of a lack of resources; it is a communicative message to journalists that their well-being is not an organisational priority. Organisational Support Theory predicts systematic erosion of that perceived organisational support that buffers against psychological distress, when such signals are present (Eisenberger et al., 2020). The specific vulnerability of freelancers who do not have even the weakest of protections that salaried employees have access to is a good example of how meso-level conditions intersect with macro-level precarity to create compound risk. Newsroom cultures of stoicism and help-seeking stigmatisation perpetuate this further by making visible manifestations of distress professionally expensive and effectively sealing off an avenue of psychological relief already limited structurally.

At the micro level, the framework helps to understand the logic of coping strategies that may look individually irrational but are coherent at the structural level. When journalists use the strategy of emotional suppression, spiritual frame and peer solidarity in the absence of formal support, they are not selecting maladaptive responses, they are making the most adaptive use of available resources in a severely limited field of possibility. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping helps to understand why such strategies are of short-term benefit: they allow continued professional functioning by managing the immediate phenomenology of the experience of distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Yet the framework also explains why these same strategies can become maladaptive as time passes: in the absence of meso-level institutional support to supply rest, debriefing and emotional processing, coping resources are increasingly used up, and what had started out as functional suppression shades into pathological numbing, burnout and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2017).

The communicative dimension of the framework raises consequences that are usually not addressed by psychological or organisational analyses. Studies of Nigerian journalists suggest that self-censorship, dependence on official sources (and simplification of narrative) are not only reactions to the external forces of threats of intimidation and editorial pressure; they are reactions to the internal landscape of psychological erosion (Pate & Jibril, 2023; Adetunji & Oluwole, 2025). Journalists who are emotionally exhausted or empathically numbed may gravitate towards sources and stories that minimise additional psychological cost and they produce a systematic bias in the informational environment available to citizens in the region. Social Responsibility Theory's normative commitments to accuracy, fairness and public service are therefore empirically contingent: They can only be fulfilled when journalists have the psychological resources to put them into practice. In Northern Nigeria those resources are depleted structurally by very conditions which make robust journalism most necessary.

The recursive feedback loop that is suggested in the framework is also clearly evident in the Northern Nigerian context. The informational deficits created by traumatised journalism including inadequate investigative coverage of state accountability and humanitarian crises and conflict dynamics contribute to the decreased public knowledge base from which civil society pressure for reform might emerge. In this way, the psychological vulnerability of journalists is part of the reproduction of the political and institutional conditions that sustain the psychological vulnerability of journalists. Breaking this cycle requires interventions at all three levels of the framework simultaneously - structural and political reforms at the macro level, institutional capacity-building and cultural change at the meso level, and evidence-based psychological support and professional training at the micro level.

Conclusion/ Recommendation

This article has discussed the complex interaction between trauma exposure, coping mechanisms and mental health among journalists in Northern Nigeria arguing that this relationship is not simply a matter of purely psychological responses to violence but must be understood in relation to the broader communicative, institutional and political context in which journalists operate. Trauma in Northern Nigeria is not structural to the news incidentally but part of the structure of newswork, created by incessant insurgency, communal violence, socio-economic precarity and institutional negligence. The literature reviewed shows that journalists in this region undertake a form of embedded witnessing where the boundaries between the professional observer and member of the community are routinely collapsed, as part of a greater intensification of emotional resonance and

an impediment to integration of traumatic experience. The resulting patterns of distress of intrusive memories, emotional numbing psychopathies, moral injury and burnout are not the signs of individual failure of resilience but predictable reactions to a structurally hostile environment.

Coping in this sense is characterised by agency crutching together with constriction. Strategies drawing on spirituality, peer solidarity, humour and emotional suppression are very much part of local cultural repertoires but are deployed within very confined institutional options. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping offers insight into such patterns in terms of the roles of exposure-related appraisals and perceived resources and their influence on coping responses. In the Northern Nigerian environment, however, these responses are profoundly conditioned by the lack of formal psychosocial support, financial insecurity and physical threat. Coping therefore appears to be a negotiated form of survival, rather than a noncompulsory psychological magnitude, which highlights the fact that resilience should be theorised not as an individual magnitude, but as a systemic property of the environments within which journalists operate.

The integrative framework outlined in the present article integrates four traditions of thought into a multi-level framework with a communicative dimension, and builds up five propositions that can be tested and point to the importance of the recursive relationship between mental health and institutional neglect and democratic resilience, and claim that to have a successful response, intervening on all three levels needs to be done simultaneously rather than having isolated initiatives that focus only on the capacity of individuals to cope.

The implications of the article stretch over a number of domains. For the newsroom, the framework requires the institutionalisation of safety measures, the availability of counselling, workload rotation and debriefing after the assignment. For journalism education, it involves incorporating trauma literacy, emotional ethics and psychological self-care to curricula. For civil society organisations, regulators and media development donors, it re-focuses mental health as a crucial foundation dimension of media capacity building and not solely the welfare category. For normative media theory, it shows that the commitments of Social Responsibility Theory can only be operationalised when journalists have the psychological resources needed to sustain them resources that currently denied to a significant proportion of reporters working in conflict-affected Northern Nigeria.

There are a number of avenues for future empirical research. Longitudinal studies are therefore needed to monitor the psychological journey of Northern Nigerian journalists over long periods of exposure. Comparative research in other sites of conflict in Africa would bring clarity to the point of asking whether the dynamics described here are a specifically Nigerian configuration or some more general continental trend. Mixed-method studies using both psychological assessment instruments and in-depth narrative analysis would advance knowledge of the subjective narrative processing of violence and aftermath by journalists. Research attentive to intersectional variables including gender, employment status, beat specialism and organisational type would reveal as much differential patterns of vulnerability and resilience which are obscured in aggregate analyses.

In conclusion, the relationship between trauma, coping and mental health among journalists in Northern Nigeria transcends disclosing a fragile communicative ecosystem where psychological vulnerability, institutional weakness and democracy are interlaced. Addressing these challenges requires a response on many levels that makes mental health a professional and a democratic imperative. Without such an integrated approach, the psychological toll of structural trauma will keep influencing not only the lives of individual journalists, within which the problem should be tackled, but will preponderate over the quality of public knowledge and the projections for democratic resilience in the region.

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