

Media, Language, and Conflict Management in Africa: The Power of Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Media institutions play a central role in shaping public perception and understanding of conflict and peace processes across Africa. Through language choice, framing, and narrative construction, the media can either escalate tensions or contribute meaningfully to conflict management and resolution. This paper examines the nexus between media, language, and conflict management in Africa, with particular emphasis on the power of narrative in constructing social realities, mobilizing identities, and influencing political behaviour. Anchored in framing theory, peace journalism, and critical discourse analysis, the study interrogates how dominant and alternative media narratives shape perceptions of “self” and “other” in contexts of ethnic, religious, and political conflict. Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis of selected print, broadcast, and digital media texts from conflict-affected African societies, the paper demonstrates that sensationalist framing, inflammatory language, and ethnically-coded narratives often reinforce polarization and legitimize violence. Conversely, peace-oriented narratives, characterized by inclusive language, contextual reporting, and solution-focused framing, have the potential to de-escalate tensions and support dialogue and reconciliation. The paper further highlights the under-explored role of indigenous languages and vernacular media in either amplifying conflict narratives or fostering communal consensus and moral restraint. The paper contributes to scholarship by moving beyond the conventional focus on media as a driver of conflict escalation to foreground its normative and practical role in conflict management. It argues that effective conflict transformation in Africa requires deliberate narrative interventions, ethical journalism, and the institutionalization of peace-oriented communication frameworks. By situating African experiences within broader debates on media, discourse, and peacebuilding, the paper offers theoretical and policy-relevant insights for scholars, media practitioners, and conflict management institutions seeking to harness the power of narrative for sustainable peace.

Keywords: Media, Conflict, Narrative Framing, Peace Journalism, Language and Discourse, and Conflict Management

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that conflict remains a persistent feature of political and social life in many African societies, manifesting in ethnic clashes, religious violence, election-related crises, self-determination struggles, insurgency, and communal disputes. While structural factors such as poverty, weak institutions, colonial legacies, and governance deficits are often emphasized in explaining these conflicts, the role of media and language in shaping these conflict dynamics has increasingly attracted scholarly attention. Media narratives do not merely report conflicts; they actively construct meanings, frame identities, and legitimize particular interpretations of violence and peace [1]. In Africa’s plural societies, where ethnicity, religion, culture, class character, and history intersect with fragile state structures, media representations and linguistic choices can either escalate tensions or facilitate conflict management. Essentially, language serves as a powerful symbolic resource through which actors mobilize support,

demonize opponents, and justify violence [2]. Conversely, responsible media narratives can promote dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation. Despite growing interest in media and conflict, much of the literature focuses disproportionately on media as an instrument of conflict escalation, particularly in cases such as Rwanda's 1994 genocide [3]. Less attention has been paid to the constructive potential of narrative framing and language in conflict management across African contexts. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how media narratives shape conflict trajectories and how deliberate narrative interventions can contribute to conflict management and peace building. The central argument advanced here is that media narratives, mediated through language and framing, constitute a critical arena of conflict management in Africa. The paper proceeds by examining theoretical frameworks, reviewing relevant literature, analyzing patterns of media discourse in conflict contexts, and drawing policy-relevant conclusions.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

A clear understanding of the central concepts in this paper is essential for analyzing the intricate relationship between media, language, and conflict management in Africa. In this paper, media is conceptualized broadly to encompass print, broadcast, and digital platforms that produce, package, and disseminate information to varied audiences. Media is not merely a neutral conduit for information; it actively shapes perception, constructs social reality, and influences behaviour [4]. Language, similarly, is more than a tool for communication; it is a social practice embedded in power relations, capable of legitimizing authority, marginalizing groups, or mobilizing populations [5]. Within this context, narrative refers to the structured representation of events, designed to convey meaning, assign causality, and articulate moral judgments [6]. Narratives in media are thus instruments of sense-making, framing experiences in ways that either escalate tensions or promote understanding. Finally, conflict management is understood as the strategies and interventions aimed at containing, mitigating, or transforming conflicts without necessarily addressing the deeper structural or historical causes [7]. This focus on management over resolution underscores the practical realities in many African contexts, where protracted conflicts often defy simple resolution. To analyze the interplay between media, language, and conflict management, this paper is anchored on three complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is the "*Framing Theory*," which, as articulated by [8], emphasizes that media do not merely report reality; they actively construct it by selecting, highlighting, and omitting particular aspects of events. Through framing, media influence how audiences interpret the causes of conflict, assign responsibility, and conceptualize potential solutions. For instance, when the media frames a violent clash in ethnic terms, audiences are more likely to perceive it as a zero-sum struggle, reinforcing polarization [9]. Complementing this, *Peace Journalism*, as advanced by [10], offers normative guidance for media engagement in conflict contexts. Peace journalism advocates a manner of reporting that foregrounds historical context, humanizes all actors, emphasizes shared interests, and highlights potential avenues for reconciliation, rather than privileging elite perspectives or sensationalizing violence. In African settings, peace journalism principles have informed community radio programs in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which focused on dialogue and reconciliation rather than blame and vengeance [11], [12].

Finally, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) provides a lens for examining the subtle ways in which language constructs, reproduces, or challenges power hierarchies [13, 2]. CDA is particularly useful for understanding how ethnic, religious, or political identities are framed in media narratives, and how such framing can legitimize dominance or marginalization. For example, CDA enables the unpacking of how dehumanizing terminology in Rwandan radio broadcasts or ethnically coded language in Kenyan post-election reporting reinforced exclusionary and violent social norms [9], [14]. Taken together, these three theoretical anchors offer a multidimensional toolkit for analyzing media narratives in Africa. They illuminate not only the mechanisms through which narratives escalate conflict but also the pathways through which media can foster dialogue, social restraint, and community-based conflict management. By integrating these frameworks, this paper situated media narratives at the intersection of communication, power, and ethics, providing a nuanced understanding of their role in both exacerbating and mitigating conflicts on the continent [15].

Review of Related Literature

Scholarly literature demonstrates that media play both constructive and destructive roles in African conflicts, often mediated through framing and language choices. Framing, in this context, refers to how media select, emphasize, or omit aspects of events to shape public perception [8]. In Africa, media narratives play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of conflicts, functioning not merely as conduits of information but as powerful instruments that can either exacerbate or mitigate violence [16]. The power of media lies in its capacity to construct social realities, frame identities, and influence public perception, often determining whether tensions spiral into open conflict or are transformed through dialogue and reconciliation. This dual capacity underscores the critical importance of analyzing how narratives are crafted and deployed in diverse African contexts.

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 offers the most chilling illustration of the destructive potential of media narratives. During this period, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM)*, alongside select newspapers, actively framed the Tutsi population as a mortal threat to the Hutu majority, employing language that dehumanized victims and

legitimized violence [3]. By referring to Tutsi individuals as “*inyenzi*” or cockroaches, and broadcasting their locations to potential perpetrators, the media became an accelerant of mass violence, demonstrating that narrative framing can transform societal tensions into collective action with catastrophic consequences. Here, the media did not merely report events but orchestrated them, illustrating how narrative and language can be weaponized in ethno-political conflicts. A similar dynamic unfolded in Kenya during the 2007–2008 post-election violence, where political competition was persistently framed along ethnic lines. Newspapers and broadcast outlets frequently emphasized the ethnicity of presidential candidates and voters, portraying communities as existentially threatened by rival groups [14]. This framing reinforced communal divisions, heightened perceptions of injustice, and contributed to a cycle of retaliatory violence that resulted in over a thousand deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. In both Rwanda and Kenya, the strategic deployment of fear-laden and ethnically charged narratives underscored the capacity of media to escalate conflict by amplifying social anxieties and mobilizing populations toward violence.

Yet, media narratives in Africa are not uniformly destructive. During the Liberian civil wars (1999–2003), community radio stations such as *Radio UNMIL* and *ELWA Radio* demonstrated the de-escalatory potential of inclusive, solution-oriented storytelling. By framing former combatants as agents capable of reintegration and emphasizing shared community values, these outlets fostered dialogue and social healing, contributing to peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict zones [17]. Similarly, in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, where farmer-herder clashes frequently erupt, media framing exhibits a dual character. While some outlets sensationalize incidents through ethnic and religious lenses, reinforcing polarization [18], local media and civil society platforms often highlight mediation efforts, conflict resolution meetings, and traditional reconciliation mechanisms, subtly promoting narratives of coexistence and moral restraint.

The South African experience with xenophobic violence further illustrates the duality of media influence. During the 2008, 2015, and 2019 waves of attacks against foreign nationals, mainstream outlets initially framed migrants as economic and social threats, fueling public resentment and mob violence [19]. In the aftermath, however, community media and NGO-led campaigns deliberately reframed narratives, emphasizing shared humanity, legal protections, and the ethical obligations of citizens, thereby contributing to temporary reductions in violence and reinforcing social cohesion [20]. Across these diverse African contexts, three salient patterns emerge. First, narratives that employ ethnicized, fear-inducing, or dehumanizing language consistently escalate conflicts [21]. Second, inclusive, dialogue-driven, and solution-focused narratives have the potential to reduce tensions and foster reconciliation. Third, the choice of narrative is rarely neutral; media framing shapes public perception, moral judgment, and civic behavior, often filling governance vacuums in societies where institutional responses are weak or absent. These patterns highlight the dual-edged nature of media in African conflicts, demonstrating that while narratives can mobilize violence, they also possess the transformative capacity to promote peace when intentionally structured to emphasize dialogue, inclusivity, and human dignity. Ultimately, the African experience underscores a critical insight for scholars and practitioners: the power of narrative is neither inherently benign nor inherently destructive. Its impact depends on the ethics of language use, the intentions behind framing, and the broader socio-political context [22]. Recognizing the media’s central role in conflict escalation and management is essential for building strategies that harness narrative power toward sustainable peace, moral accountability, and social cohesion across the continent [23].

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in discourse and narrative analysis. Data were drawn from selected newspaper articles, broadcast transcripts, and digital media reports covering conflicts in Nigeria, Rwanda, Liberia, Kenya, and the Horn of Africa. Texts were purposively selected based on their relevance to major conflict episodes. Analytical emphasis was placed on language use, framing devices, metaphors, and representations of actors. The analysis followed CDA principles by situating media texts within broader socio-political contexts [13]. Ethical considerations included sensitivity to conflict-affected communities and avoidance of reproducing harmful narratives. While the study does not claim statistical generalizability, it provides analytically transferable insights.

Media, Language, and Conflict Management in Africa

While media in Africa have sometimes been implicated in conflict escalation, they simultaneously possess significant potential for conflict management, reconciliation, and social cohesion. The key lies in how narratives are framed and the type of language employed. Peace-oriented journalism emphasizes narratives that foreground inclusivity, ethical responsibility, historical context, and the voices of marginalized or non-elite actors [10, 24]. Rather than sensationalizing violence or reinforcing polarizing identity markers, peace journalism seeks to inform audiences about the root causes of conflict, humanize all parties involved, and highlight possibilities for resolution. The post-conflict experience in Liberia illustrates the constructive role of media in conflict management. During the country’s civil wars and subsequent peacebuilding period, radio stations such as *ELWA Radio* and *Radio UNMIL* adopted programming that encouraged dialogue between former combatants and civilians [25]. By framing narratives

around shared community experiences, reconciliation, and accountability rather than blame, these programs helped restore social trust and reduce tension in communities that had been deeply fragmented by years of violence [26]. This approach underscores the idea that media can act as agents of moral and social regulation, guiding public perception toward restraint and cooperation [27].

Indigenous language media are particularly influential in African conflict management because they communicate values in culturally resonant ways [28]. For instance, in Sierra Leone, community radio broadcasts in Krio and local languages highlighted traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, emphasizing the moral obligations of individuals to their families, clans, and broader communities [12]. Similarly, in Nigeria, vernacular radio stations in the Middle Belt have been leveraged by civil society organizations to promote peace between herders and farmers, using locally understood proverbs, storytelling, and cultural idioms that reinforce communal norms of compromise and consensus [18]. Such approaches align with African traditions of communalism and consensus-building, which prioritize collective welfare over individual gain, demonstrating the unique capacity of vernacular media to translate universal principles of conflict management into locally meaningful practices [29]. Moreover, the strategic use of inclusive and non-violent language can counteract the polarizing effects of sensationalist reporting. Research from Kenya shows that radio programs that framed election disputes in terms of dialogue, legal processes, and shared national identity were able to reduce the likelihood of immediate retaliatory violence, even in highly tense environments [14]. In this way, media become not merely reporters but active mediators of public sentiment, shaping both perception and behavior in ways that favor reconciliation. In sum, media and language are powerful tools in African conflict management. Through careful framing, peace-oriented reporting, and culturally resonant communication, media can foster dialogue, curb the spread of hate narratives, and reinforce communal norms of restraint and cooperation [30]. Leveraging these strengths requires deliberate strategies that prioritize ethical responsibility, inclusivity, and respect for local cultural contexts, highlighting the potential of media not just to inform, but to transform conflict dynamics across the continent [31].

The Power of Narrative in Shaping Conflict Outcomes

Narratives occupy a central position in the social construction of conflict and peace. Far from being neutral accounts of events, narratives are interpretive frameworks through which societies make sense of violence, assign blame, define identities, and imagine possible futures. In conflict settings, narratives shape how actors perceive threats, justify actions, and mobilize support, thereby directly influencing whether conflicts escalate, stagnate, or move toward de-escalation and transformation [6], [32]. In Africa, where conflicts are often intertwined with colonial legacies, ethnic pluralism, and contested statehood, the power of narrative is particularly pronounced. At the core of narrative power is its ability to define “who we are” and “who they are.” Conflict narratives often rely on binary constructions of identity, victim versus aggressor, insider versus outsider, patriot versus enemy, which simplify complex realities and harden group boundaries [33]. Media narratives that repeatedly frame conflicts in ethnic or religious terms can reify these identities, transforming political or economic grievances into existential struggles. In Kenya’s 2007–2008 post-election violence, for example, vernacular radio stations and partisan media outlets circulated narratives that portrayed political competition as a zero-sum ethnic contest, thereby legitimizing violence against perceived “others” [14, 34]. Such narratives did not merely reflect violence; they actively contributed to its intensity and spread.

Narratives also shape conflict outcomes by assigning moral responsibility and causality. Through selective storytelling, certain actors are cast as villains while others are portrayed as innocent victims or heroic defenders. This moral framing influences public attitudes toward compromise, accountability, and reconciliation. In the Rwandan genocide, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM) employed dehumanizing metaphors and historical revisionism to construct the Tutsi population as an existential threat, thereby normalizing mass violence as a form of self-defense [9, 2]. The catastrophic outcome illustrates how destructive narratives can foreclose nonviolent options and legitimize extreme brutality.

Conversely, narratives can also open pathways to de-escalation and peace. Peace-oriented narratives challenge zero-sum thinking by emphasizing shared suffering, interdependence, and the human costs of violence. [10], The peace journalism framework underscores the importance of narratives that contextualize conflicts, highlight nonviolent responses, and give voice to ordinary people rather than political elites. In post-conflict Sierra Leone and Liberia, media narratives that foregrounded forgiveness, reintegration of ex-combatants, and collective recovery contributed to reshaping public attitudes toward reconciliation [11, 12]. These narratives did not deny past atrocities but reframed them within a forward-looking discourse of healing and coexistence.

Importantly, narratives are not only disseminated through formal media but are also embedded in cultural memory, oral traditions, and indigenous communication systems. In many African societies, storytelling, proverbs, and communal dialogue serve as powerful narrative tools for conflict regulation and moral instruction [35, 36]. When integrated into contemporary media practices, such culturally grounded narratives can enhance legitimacy and foster communal restraint. Indigenous-language broadcasting, in particular, has proven effective in promoting inclusive dialogue and countering hate speech when guided by ethical standards [37].

Ultimately, the power of narrative lies in its capacity to shape not only how conflicts are understood but also how they are acted upon. Narratives influence emotional responses, policy preferences, and collective behavior, thereby affecting the trajectory and outcomes of conflict. In the African context, where media reach is expanding rapidly through digital platforms, the struggle over narrative control has become increasingly consequential. Recognizing narrative as a site of power underscores the need for deliberate, ethical, and context-sensitive communication strategies as integral components of conflict management and peacebuilding efforts [38].

Findings and Discussion

This section synthesizes the empirical and analytical insights generated by the study and situates them within broader theoretical and scholarly debates on media, language, and conflict management in Africa. Drawing on comparative evidence from Rwanda, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and South Africa, the findings demonstrate that media narratives constitute a critical, though often underestimated, arena in which conflicts are escalated, moderated, or transformed.

Findings of the Study

The first major finding is that media narratives actively shape conflict dynamics rather than merely reflecting them. Across the cases examined, media were not passive chroniclers of violence but powerful agents in constructing meanings, framing identities, and legitimizing particular interpretations of conflict. Through narrative selection, emphasis, and omission, the media influenced how audiences understood causality, responsibility, and legitimacy. Conflict, therefore, unfolded not only on physical battlegrounds but also within a symbolic arena where meaning and moral judgment were continuously negotiated. This finding reinforces the view that narrative framing is central to conflict trajectories in plural and fragile political contexts.

Second, the study finds that ethnicized and dehumanizing language consistently escalates conflict. In Rwanda's 1994 genocide, Kenya's 2007–2008 post-election violence, and episodes of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, media narratives that framed violence in ethnic, religious, or cultural terms played a critical role in normalizing hostility and legitimizing aggression against "out-groups." Dehumanizing metaphors and fear-laden language reduced moral restraint and transformed political competition or socio-economic grievances into existential struggles. In these contexts, language functioned as a symbolic weapon that prepared societies psychologically for violence.

Third, the analysis demonstrates that peace-oriented and inclusive narratives possess significant de-escalatory potential. Media interventions grounded in peace journalism principles, such as contextualization, humanization, and solution-oriented reporting, contributed meaningfully to conflict management in post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone. Dialogue-focused radio programming facilitated reintegration of former combatants, fostered social trust, and reframed public discourse away from vengeance toward coexistence and accountability. These findings highlight the capacity of media narratives to reshape collective imagination and expand non-violent pathways.

Fourth, the study reveals that indigenous and vernacular media play a uniquely powerful role in conflict management. By communicating through culturally resonant idioms, proverbs, and communal moral frameworks, vernacular media countered hate narratives and reinforced norms of restraint and consensus. This underscores the importance of culturally grounded communication in African peacebuilding, where communal values and moral obligations often carry greater legitimacy than abstract legal or institutional appeals.

Fifth, the findings show that media narratives frequently fill institutional and governance gaps in conflict-prone African societies. Where state institutions are weak or inaccessible, media narratives often function as informal arbiters of meaning, legitimacy, and moral authority. This dual role explains why irresponsible framing can have devastating consequences, while ethically grounded narratives can exert disproportionate positive influence on social behavior and conflict outcomes.

Finally, the study establishes that narrative power is contingent rather than deterministic. Media narratives are neither inherently violent nor inherently peaceful; their effects depend on political economy, ownership structures, professional norms, historical context, and ethical orientation. Narratives thus emerge as contested sites of power, shaped by struggle rather than operating as autonomous drivers of conflict.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these findings affirm the central argument of the paper: media narratives and language constitute a decisive dimension of conflict management in Africa. The evidence aligns strongly with Framing Theory by demonstrating how narrative emphasis and omission shape audience interpretation and moral judgment. It also validates insights from Critical Discourse Analysis by revealing how linguistic choices reproduce or challenge power relations, while peace journalism emerges as a viable normative framework for ethical media engagement in conflict settings. Importantly, the findings move beyond a reductive portrayal of African media as merely agents of violence. Instead, they reveal a complex landscape in which the same narrative tools that escalate conflict can also be harnessed for restraint, reconciliation, and social healing. Conflict management in Africa, therefore, cannot be understood solely through material or structural explanations. It must also account for the symbolic power of language and narrative in shaping identities, emotions, and imagined futures. In essence, the struggle over conflict in Africa is

simultaneously a struggle over meaning. Recognizing, governing, and ethically deploying this narrative power is indispensable for sustainable peacebuilding and effective conflict management on the continent.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy-relevant and practice-oriented recommendations emerge for strengthening the role of media and language in conflict management across Africa. First, institutionalization of peace-oriented journalism practices should be prioritized. Media regulatory bodies, journalism unions, and training institutions should mainstream peace journalism and conflict-sensitive reporting into professional codes of ethics and curricula. Journalists operating in conflict-prone areas require continuous training on ethical framing, inclusive language, and the dangers of ethnicized and sensationalist reporting.

Second, strengthening indigenous and vernacular media for peacebuilding is essential. Governments, civil society organizations, and international development partners should support community and indigenous-language media platforms that promote dialogue, reconciliation, and culturally grounded conflict management.

Third, the establishment of early-warning and rapid-response narrative monitoring mechanisms is recommended. Media monitoring bodies and civil society groups should systematically track hate speeches, dehumanizing language, and inflammatory framing, especially during elections and periods of heightened tension.

Fourth, promotion of media pluralism and independence is critical. Concentrated media ownership, political capture, and economic vulnerability undermine ethical reporting and increase susceptibility to manipulative narratives. Fifth, integration of media narratives into formal conflict management and peacebuilding strategies should be encouraged. Peacebuilding initiatives by governments, regional organizations, and international actors should treat media and language as strategic tools rather than peripheral concerns.

Finally, strengthening ethical accountability in digital and social media spaces is increasingly urgent. As digital platforms amplify narratives rapidly and often without editorial oversight, regulatory frameworks, platform accountability mechanisms, and digital literacy programs must be enhanced to curb the spread of hate speech and disinformation while protecting freedom of expression.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that media narratives and language occupy a central position in shaping conflict dynamics and outcomes in Africa. Far from being neutral conveyors of information, media actively construct meanings, frame identities, and legitimize particular interpretations of violence and peace. Through comparative analysis of conflict contexts across the continent, the study shows that ethnicized and dehumanizing narratives consistently escalate conflict, while inclusive, peace-oriented, and culturally grounded narratives can contribute meaningfully to conflict management and social healing. The findings underscore that conflict in Africa is not only material or structural but also deeply symbolic. Narratives shape how societies remember the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future. Media, therefore, function as both potential accelerants of violence and powerful instruments of restraint, reconciliation, and moral accountability. Crucially, the impact of media narratives is contingent on ethical orientation, institutional context, and socio-historical conditions, highlighting narrative as a contested space of power rather than a deterministic force. In conclusion, sustainable conflict management and peacebuilding in Africa require deliberate engagement with the power of narrative. Recognizing media and language as strategic resources, rather than peripheral actors, offers a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to understanding and managing conflict on the continent. Harnessing this narrative power ethically and inclusively is not merely desirable but indispensable for fostering coexistence, resilience, and long-term peace in Africa.

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