

Whose Report? The Biases of Nigerian #EndSARS Protest Media Coverage

Ibrahim Oluwajoba Adisa¹, Golnaz Arastoopour Irgens²

^{1,2}Clemson University, South Carolina, United States.
iadisa@clemson.edu, garasto@clemson.edu

Abstract

Media coverage plays a critical role in the way people perceive and respond to protests. This study uses quantitative ethnography (QE) to investigate how foreign and domestic media organizations covered the Nigerian EndSARS protest. Results indicated that while domestic media coverage focused on human rights abuses and confrontations during the protest, foreign reports emphasized the role feminists, queer groups, and social media played during the protest. These findings support how the media frames public interpretation of protest events.

Keywords: EndSARS, Media, Coverage, Protest, Framing.

1 Social Movements and Media Framing Theory

Mainstream media play a critical role in the sustainability of protests and how protests are perceived by the public [2]. Media outlets use multiple narrative conventions and interpretive structures, known as *frames*, to develop persuasive stories that emphasize certain aspects of a social movement at the expense of others [1, 4]. Media organizations often adopt four key frames when covering protests: (a) debate frame that focuses on protesters' views and agitations, (b) spectacle frame that highlights the drama, celebration, and queer characteristics of protesters, (c) confrontation frame that emphasizes conflicts between protesters and the police, and (d) riot frame that portrays protesters as dissidents and emphasizes the conflict between protesters and the society [4]. Studies [6, 2, 3] have shown that social factors such as the location of protests and media organizations, tactics adopted by protesters, and protest issues also influence how the media frame a protest. The current study uses media framing theory as a theoretical lens to understand how media organizations framed their stories when covering the EndSARS protest. This study asks, *how did local and foreign media organizations connect multiple frames when reporting the EndSARS protest?*

2 Methods

This study used quantitative ethnography (QE) [8] and Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA) [7] to understand and establish connections among the frames adopted by local

and foreign media organizations when reporting the EndSARS protest. Reports sampled in this study consisted of 10 online articles published on the EndSARS protest. Articles were selected through Google search, using the key word #EndSARS. The criteria for inclusion were that the article must (a) have been published by mainstream news sources between October-December 2020 and (b) not be less than 800 words. In all, ten reports by four foreign media organizations (BBC, CNN, The Washington Post, and Al Jazeera) and two domestic ones (Premium Times, Foundation for Investigative Journalism) met these criteria. Each report was segmented into sentences (lines) and each sentence was coded for aspects of media framing theory adapted to fit with the content in the articles (Table 1). The codes will be validated in future studies.

Table 1. Codebook for Media Framing of EndSARS Report

Primary Code	Secondary Code	Definition	Example
Spectacle Frame	Feminists & Queer	Reference to the experiences and impact of non-dominant populations-specifically feminists and LGBTQ- during the protest.	...the Feminist Coalition spoke up in solidarity with queer protesters...
	Social Networking	Statements highlighting the use of social media for awareness and networking.	#EndSARS: How Nigerians harness social media against police abuse
	Sense of Community	Accounts of celebration, bonding, and volunteering during the protest.	On the first day I was there, there were people making sure everyone got food.
Debate Frame	Youth Activism	Reports stating what triggered youths to start and take responsibility for the protest.	Even when you are not the one experiencing it, it still affects you...
Confrontation Frame	Call for Change	Statements highlighting the demands of protesters.	All we did was ask for change.
	Government Denial	Government agents' denial of protesters death and eyewitnesses accounts.	...the Nigerian Army denied that its personnel fired upon protesters.
	Human Right Abuse	The arrest and killing of protesters by government agents during the protest.	Three arrested, never to be seen again.
Others	Governance and Economy	Statements that refer to socio-economic condition of Nigeria and Nigerians.	Economic inequality has reached extreme levels in Nigeria.

3 Results

Results showed that foreign media outlets were more likely to adopt the spectacle and debate frames than domestic ones. The ENA visualization (Figure 1) of the groups' subtracted network showed that foreign media outlets made stronger connections to protesters' use of social media, their sense of community and the role of feminists and queer groups during the protest. This bias is evident in a headline by Al Jazeera stating "*#EndSARS: How Nigerians harness social media against police abuse.*" The Washington Post also had a headline that pointed out that "*#EndSARS is a huge moment in*

Nigerian queer history.” Conversely, domestic media outlets made stronger connections between the confrontation and debate frames, emphasizing how youth lost their lives during the protest and continued to be intimidated by the government. A headline by FIJ stated “Portraits of Blood (1): Death Threats, ‘Murders’, Indiscriminate Arrests....” Similarly, Premium Times tagged their report as “Investigation: *Bullets, Blood & Death*: Untold Story of what happened at Lekki Toll Gate”, suggesting that they were more interested in unraveling the violence perpetrated against youths during the protest.

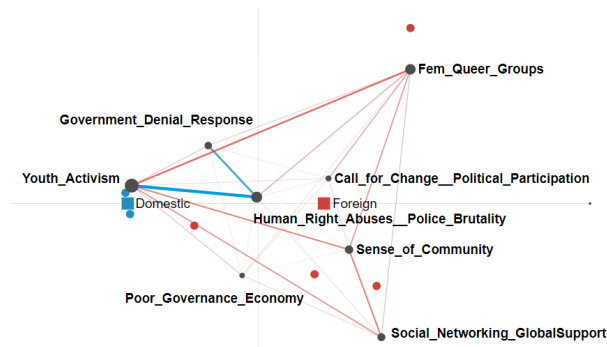


Fig. 1. ENA Subtracted Network for Foreign (Red) and Domestic (Blue) Media.

A closer examination of the foreign outlet, BBC, reveals an emphasis on the youthfulness and attributes of protesters by pointing out that “...the country's massive *young population is finding its voice and demanding reforms* in Africa's most populous country.” When reporting the gains of the protest, BBC highlighted the role women and members of the LGBTQ played and suggested that some of them did not receive enough recognition from the public. The outlet noted that “The EndSars protest went as far as it did *because of the role women played.*” BBC appeared to have adopted more of the spectacle and debate frames. The consistent description of protesters as “peaceful” also suggests that the outlet tended to use supportive devices in framing protesters. Visualizing BBC’s report as an ENA network, aligns with this finding (Figure 1). The outlet’s strongest connections were made between feminist and queer group (spectacle frame), youth activism (debate frame), call for change (debate frame), and government denial (confrontational frame). This is evident by the thicker lines between these nodes.

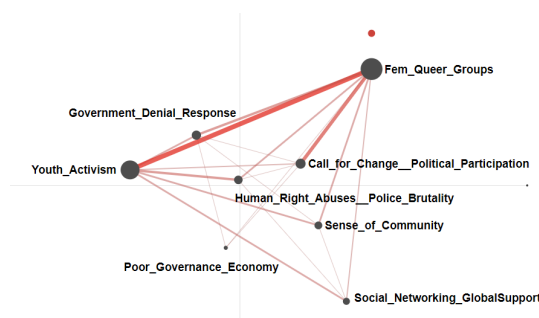


Fig. 2. BBC’s ENA Network.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated how foreign and domestic news media outlets made connections among multiple frames when reporting the Nigerian EndSARS protest. Overall, foreign media outlets emphasized the role of feminists and queer groups during the protest while domestic ones focused more on the human right abuses that occurred. This suggests that the popular culture of locations of media organization plays a crucial role in their framing of protests. Many of the foreign media outlets sampled in this study are headquartered in the UK and US where queer groups are celebrated. This is in sharp contrast to Nigeria where LGBTQ people face a jail term of up to 14 years and are criminalized under the criminal code act [5]. Moreover, many Nigerians remain opposed to queer rights [5], suggesting why domestic media outlets chose to ignore the LGBTQ community. This tendency of media outlets to promote the norms and popular culture of their own region while covering protests raises a troubling pattern for social movements as protesters' demands and activities are likely to be underreported if they do not fit into popular biases and culture. Additionally, the results showed that domestic media outlets made stronger connections among codes in the confrontation and debate frame. However, their stories were more critical of the Nigerian government and delegitimized the approach of states security agents, suggesting a push-back against studies that predicted that media organizations would likely delegitimize protests and protesters when using the confrontation frame [6]. All in all, this preliminary work used media framing theory to further understand the role of domestic and foreign media in shaping the perceptions of the public during social movements.

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