



AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF SELECT BROADCAST MEDIA REPORTAGE OF CHILDREN AFFECTED BY CONFLICTS IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the audience's perception of select broadcast media reportage on children affected by conflicts in North Central Nigeria. In the context of sensitive reporting on vulnerable populations, particularly children in conflict zones, understanding how audiences interpret and respond to such content is crucial. The objectives of the study was Investigate the extent to which select broadcast media outlets in North Central Nigeria (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States) prioritise the coverage of children affected by conflict, as guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory. The study adopted agenda-setting theory and framing theory as theoretical framework. The study adopts the survey design, the study population are 25 broadcast media houses located in Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States and the total population of the three major cities Jos, Lafia, and Makurdi. The sampling procedure adopted for this study is Purposive Sampling. The findings of the study revealed that 50% strongly agreed that broadcast media outlets report on issues related to children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria. The study recommended that media organizations should establish and adhere to clear ethical reporting guidelines, especially when covering sensitive issues such as the impact of conflict on children. These guidelines should prioritize responsible reporting, safeguarding the well-being of affected individuals, and avoiding unnecessary sensationalism.

Key words: Broadcast media, conflict, children, Agenda-Setting, framing

Introduction

First and foremost, mass media serve as a primary source of information in contemporary society. It collects, processes, and conveys news and narratives, ensuring that the public remains informed about local, national, and global events. Whether through traditional outlets like newspapers and television, or modern digital platforms. Mass media provide access to a wealth of information that informs citizens about politics, economics, culture, and more. In this capacity, it empowers individuals to make informed decisions, participate in democratic processes, and engage with their communities (University of Illinois, 2023; Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). This aligns with the current study, highlighting the central role of the mass media in shaping public understanding and responses to conflicts, particularly concerning children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria, as it emphasizes the media's power to control what issues are prioritized and how they are framed (Agenda-Setting Theory) and how this influences audience perceptions (Framing Theory).

Moreover, the media can frame stories in various ways, emphasising particular aspects and viewpoints. This framing power is a cornerstone of the Framing Theory, indicating that how



information is presented can affect how people interpret it. For example, mass media can frame an economic downturn as a consequence of government policies or as a result of market forces, leading to different public perceptions and policy responses (Carter, 2013; Yahya, 2019). This underscores the relevance of Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories to the current study, as it highlights how the media's agenda-setting function influences public perceptions and debates on issues, including the portrayal of children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria, and how framing choices can impact audience understanding and responses to these issues. In essence, mass media's role as an information disseminator and agenda-setter underscores its influence in shaping public understanding, values, and priorities. It not only provides a window to the world but also constructs the very frame through which we view that world, making it a critical force in modern society's development and decision-making processes (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019).

Media play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding and responses to conflicts and humanitarian crises (UNESCO, 2016). How media outlets report on such issues can significantly influence how audiences perceive them. Therefore, understanding how the media portrays children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria and how this portrayal is perceived by the audience is of paramount importance. Media play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding and responses to conflicts and humanitarian crises by serving as a bridge between the events occurring in distant or complex environments and the global audience (Engblum, 2021). Broadcast media portrays children affected by conflict through a blend of visual imagery and narrative storytelling, humanising their experiences and raising awareness of the challenges they face. Ethical reporting is crucial, emphasizing the need to balance informative coverage with the protection of children's dignity and privacy. Broadcast media portray children affected by conflict through a variety of visual and narrative techniques. They often use news reports, documentaries, and interviews to convey the stories of these children to the audience (Saunders & Goddard, 2002). Broadcast media frequently rely on powerful visuals to depict the plight of children in conflict zones. Images of children living in dire conditions, fleeing violence, or coping with the loss of family members can evoke strong emotions and capture viewers' attention (United Nations, 2022). Broadcast media outlets often highlight individual stories of children to humanize the broader conflict. These personal narratives help viewers connect with the children on a more emotional level, fostering empathy and understanding (UNICEF, 2018). Broadcast media may feature interviews with experts, aid workers, or child psychologists who provide context and analysis on the challenges faced by children in conflict. This commentary can help audiences comprehend the deeper implications of the crisis (United Nations, 2023). This further justifies the relevance of the study by emphasizing the multi-dimensional approach that broadcast media use to portray children affected by conflict. Broadcast media often cover the impact of conflict on children's education, health, and overall well-being. This helps viewers understand the long-term consequences of these crises on the affected children and their communities (Lemish & Maya, 2014). Broadcast media may also highlight efforts to support and protect children in conflict zones. They often showcase the work of humanitarian organizations and initiatives aimed at providing aid and finding solutions (Uzochukwu et al., 2015).

Efforts to address and resolve these conflicts have been challenging, and they have had far-reaching implications for the affected communities, including children who often bear the brunt of the violence. International organisations, national authorities, and civil society groups have been engaged in various initiatives to mitigate the impact of the conflict and promote peace



and reconciliation in the North Central region. However, achieving lasting stability remains a complex and multifaceted challenge, requiring comprehensive approaches that address the root causes of the conflicts and promote intercommunal dialogue and understanding (Yusuf, 2007). Nigeria's North-Central states are Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau. Broadcast media in North Central Nigeria encompasses a range of television and radio outlets that serve as crucial sources of news, information, and entertainment for the region's diverse population. North Central Nigeria is home to various ethnic and cultural groups, and broadcast media play a significant role in disseminating content that caters to this diversity. North Central Nigeria hosts both state-owned and private television stations. These channels broadcast a mix of news, entertainment, cultural programming, and educational content. They play a vital role in informing the public about local, national, and international events (Njoku & Pérez Tornero, 2019). This background information justifies the current study by highlighting the central role of broadcast media in North Central Nigeria in disseminating information to a diverse population, emphasizing the relevance of examining how these media outlets portray and influence public perception of children affected by conflict in the region.

Radio remains a prominent medium, particularly in rural areas with limited access to television and the internet. Local radio stations broadcast in various languages and dialects, providing news, agricultural information, health tips, and entertainment programs (Muritala et al., 2018). Broadcast media outlets in North Central Nigeria report on a wide range of topics, including conflicts, politics, agriculture, health, and education. They cover both local and national news, and some may have dedicated segments or programs focusing on regional issues, including conflicts in the area (BBC, 2019; Isaac & Roper, 2021). This justification underscores the relevance of the current study by emphasising broadcast media outlets in North Central Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of examining their portrayal of children affected by conflict in the region.

Statement of the problem

In the North Central region of Nigeria, enduring conflicts have given rise to profound humanitarian crises, with children bearing the brunt of the turmoil (Ojewale, 2021). The role of broadcast media in shaping public understanding and responses to these conflicts is underpinned by the Agenda-Setting Theory, which posits that media has the power to dictate what issues capture public attention, and the Framing Theory, which highlights how media can influence perception through the framing of news stories (Edafienene, 2010; Garba & Msughter, 2023). The problem lies in the potential disparities between media representations and the actual experiences of these children. Broadcast media have the power to shape public perceptions, influence attitudes, and mobilise resources (Uzochukwu et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear how the media's coverage of children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria aligns with the complex realities on the ground and how these portrayals affect audience understanding and responses. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas surrounding the representation of child victims within these theoretical frameworks remain unresolved. Striking a balance between informing the public and safeguarding the dignity and privacy of these children is a complex challenge, rooted in the interplay between Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories. Therefore, this study endeavours to address the problem of audience perception of select broadcast media reportage of children affected by conflict in North Central Nigeria through the lens of Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories. It aims to understand how these theories influence media coverage, shape audience perceptions, and navigate the ethical



complexities surrounding reporting on these vulnerable children. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to an enhanced understanding of media's role in influencing public discourse and responses to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the region.

Objectives of the study

1. Investigate the extent to which select broadcast media outlets in North Central Nigeria (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States) prioritise the coverage of children affected by conflict, as guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory.
2. Find out the ethical dimensions of media reporting on child victims of conflict, considering the tension between Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories in North Central (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States).

Literature review

Conceptual Discourses on Mass Media, Conflict and Conflict De-escalation among Children

Surveillance of the environment is the foremost function of the media. It involves getting the public to be informed about issues that are required for understanding the development in their environment for enlightenment and education for appropriate responses. Ravai (2012) posits that the first function of mass media is surveillance of the environment. He adds that, it is so because it informs the people about what, when, where, who, why and how things are happening about personalities or institutions. He states further that the media keeps the public informed about national and international news, ranging from world stock-market prices and revolutionary uprisings to local traffic and weather conditions or as to the actions and policies of government agencies and officials. The Correlation function of the mass media is on the one hand, to know how the mass media selects, explains, interprets and comments on the meaning of events and information about the environment. On the other hand, it relates to the response of the whole society to the environment – that is, developing public opinion. An informed or enlightened opinion is essential for a healthy democracy (Alimba & Ngige, 2020). The media functions as a social agent that engages in the transmission of values from one generation to another. This is also called the cultural transmission or socialization function of the mass media. This third function refers to the media's ability to communicate the norms, rules and values of a society (Alimba & Ngige, 2020). This is the fourth function of the media. Entertainment is the media's ability to present messages that provide escapism and relaxation. Sometimes entertainment is called the diversion function because it diverts us from the real world (Alimba & Ngige, 2020). The major roles of entertainment are to promote a state of relaxation and encourage emotional release, which helps people to relax and also to get rid of stress in their bodies, for effective operation. Conflict is a major element that can easily be attracted by the functionality of the media.

For instance, Akpan, Ering and Olofu-Adeoye (2013) observe that the media can either be used to “destroy” or “build” humanity through their stock in trade. Similarly, while Alimba & Ngige, (2020) asserts that as a result of their ability to reach and influence large numbers of people, the media carry immense power in shaping the course of a conflict, by often contributing to the escalation of tensions and conflict. It is important to note that while conflict is inevitable in social relations, its outcome may not necessarily be dysfunctional. Olu and Abosede (2003) observe that conflict might escalate and lead to nonproductive results, or



conflict can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products. For this reason, the term “conflict” has been interpreted in various ways, but most definitions reflect the presence of incompatibility. Ngige, Badekale, and Hammanjoda, (2016) posit that conflict denotes the incompatibility of subject positions. This definition emphasizes that incompatibility is at the heart of conflict, and it occurs between individuals, groups or societal positions; whether they rest in different interests or beliefs; or whether they have a material existence or come into being only through discourse. Ngige, Badekale, and Hammanjoda (2016) considered conflict as a felt struggle between two or more independent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals or differences in desires for esteem, control and connectedness. In most cases, such irreconcilable differences are bound to trigger conflict, because parties may not be willing to shift grounds on issues; change their stand on their cherished values and goals which they considered as “a must to achieve”.

According to Alimba (2014), despite the differences on how conflict is viewed, the following factors are essential elements that characterise conflict: (i) Conflict is a process. It passes through a series of stages before it can become a felt struggle. (ii) Conflict occurs where people are interdependent. People must be connected in one way or the other, either through their views, goals, aspirations, position, or blood relationship, before they can be enmeshed in a conflict. (iii) Conflict can be expressed in manifest or latent form. In manifest form, the parties concerned will exhibit felt struggle, which will blow the problem out of proportion for people to know about its existence. Manifest conflicts can easily attract interventions because people are aware of its existence.

Arik (2011) views conflict de-escalation as when assertive communication skills are used to: (i) calm down someone who is agitated, angry or temporarily out of control; (ii) take charge of a situation to reduce potential violence; and (iii) deal with past hurt, take action in the present, and move toward a future solution. Conflict de-escalation is crucial even in a workplace to calm down parties in a heated state of disagreement to allow for consideration of the issues that led to an altercation. Therefore, it is a technique that can be used during a potential crisis to prevent parties from causing more havoc to themselves, and equally to ensure its mitigation.

Media and Peace-building: What Role for the Journalists?

Journalists have a significant role to play in peace-building because they are the drivers of the media. They can use the media to intervene positively in peacebuilding by pursuing a public agenda. Journalism should exist to serve the people as envisaged in the theory of social responsibility, which “involved a view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private franchise” (McQuail, 2005, p.171). Similarly, Malakwen (2014, p. 4) noted that “the only justification that journalism needs for its existence is that it serves society. The highest manifestation of this service is when the media not only helps to distribute information but also when it counters hate speech...” The presence or absence of the right or wrong information plays an important role in conflict. Journalists can provide relevant information to allay the fears of the people. Where there is no information, ignorance will prevail and people can be easily manipulated due to their fears. This is very important because our perception about others comes from the media, especially in a multi-cultural society like Nigeria, where the media are divided along ethno-religious lines. Journalists can bring issues and concerns of the people to the plane of discussion, thereby preventing conflicts and contributing to peacebuilding. According to Manoff (1997), as cited in Howard (2002), the media serve the same function as those in the conflict resolution process



as they analyze conflict, disseminate information that addresses issues of mistrust and misperceptions. The role of journalists must go beyond just disseminating information to being an advocate in the peace-building process.

Also, as Malakwen (2014) observes that information dissemination cannot bring about peace-building, but people accessing the information and using it. Otherwise, there will not be a change in behaviour for peace, which is what peace-building seeks to achieve. Journalists can play a key role in peace-building by creating awareness and helping people to see that a solution exists through telling compelling stories that can move people to engage in the peace-building process by letting people know that they can always choose peace (African Media Network, 2016).

Theoretical framework

Framing Theory

Sociological approaches to framing theory could be traced to Goffman (1974), who assumed that individuals cannot understand the world fully and therefore consciously interpret and classify their experiences to make sense of the world around them. Framing is, therefore all about news ideation. The theory assumes that the media focus attention on certain events and then place them within a field of meaning. Thus, framing affects how a story is told and influences public perception and attitudes. One reason for this is that the public's lack of awareness, along with a reliance on media for information and decision making, makes people more likely to be influenced by framing (Okoro & Odoemelam, 2013). It is further noted that when the media place stories in specific frames, they lend a different meaning to the news. The media increase or decrease the salience of issues, which allows the public to remember and make judgments on such issues. Framing assumes that subtle changes in the wording of the description of a situation might affect how audience members think about the situation. (Auerbach & Block-Elkon, 2005, as cited in Okoro & Odoemelam, 2013, p. 86)

Thus, the major assumption of framing theory of the media is that how the media reports are presented to their audiences influences perceptions and interpretations of the information and consequently reactions to the messages. Relating this theory to this article, it shows that the direction of coverage and the frame used by the selected newspapers under study in reporting the clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Plateau State, Nigeria, would influence the way the people understand and interpret the conflict as well as the way they perceive the contending parties. Besides, the theory offers an explanation to suggest that media coverage and framing of the clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Plateau State, Nigeria, influence public perception, concerns, and reactions about the conflict. In other words, advocating for peace in the news reports on the conflict is significantly a function of how the media choose to frame and report the crisis.

Agenda-setting theory

Agenda-setting theory states that the news media have a large influence on audiences, in terms of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. The foundational contributions to this theory are credited to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972). Their research demonstrated a strong correlation between the salience of issues covered by local news and the issues considered most important by voters during the 1968 U.S.



presidential election. This finding suggested that the media's focus on specific topics influences what audiences consider significant and deserving of their attention.

Agenda-setting theory's main postulate is salience transfer. Salience transfer is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their news media agendas to public agendas.

Agenda-setting theory rests upon two central assumptions:

1. Media Selects what's Newsworthy: The media acts as a gatekeeper, selecting which events and issues are deemed newsworthy and presented to the public. This selection process is influenced by factors like news values, editorial decisions, and commercial interests (McCombs, 2009).

2. Media Affects Public Salience: The media's emphasis on particular issues shapes the public's perception of their importance. By repeatedly covering certain topics, the media elevates their salience in the public's mind, making them more likely to be considered important and relevant (Weaver et al., 2007).

Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors, etc, focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media. Related to agenda setting is agenda-building theory, which explores how an issue comes to the attention of policymakers and media. The media agenda is the set of issues addressed by media sources and the public agenda, which are issues the public considers important. While agenda-setting theory offers valuable insights into the media's influence, it is not without its critics:

1. Limited Scope: Critics argue that the theory focuses primarily on the media's ability to set the agenda, neglecting other factors that shape public opinion, such as personal experiences, interpersonal communication, and social media (Scheufele, 2009).

2. Overestimation of Media Power: Some argue that the theory overestimates the media's power to unilaterally set the public agenda. Individuals possess selective exposure habits, meaning they actively choose what information to consume, potentially limiting the media's direct influence (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

3. Neglect of Public Opinion's Influence: The theory primarily focuses on a one-way flow of influence from the media to the public, overlooking the potential for public opinion itself to influence media coverage (Annenberg School for Communication, n.d.).

Conversely, news reports that contextualize the suffering of children within a broader historical, political, and social landscape can serve a more empowering function. By highlighting systemic issues such as resource scarcity, marginalization, and ethnic tensions, these media outlets can shape public opinion towards understanding the root causes of the conflict (Weaver et al., 2007). This type of reporting can potentially galvanize audiences to demand accountability, support long-term peace initiatives, and advocate for a more just and equitable society. A significant challenge lies in the limited systematic research dedicated to both the content analysis of broadcast media coverage in North Central Nigeria and its impact on audience perception. More research in this area, utilizing a blend of content analysis and



surveys or focus groups, would shed light on how audiences interact with and interpret the information presented to them about these vulnerable children. Agenda-setting theory highlights the immense responsibility of broadcast media outlets in shaping public discourse surrounding the conflict in North Central Nigeria. By framing the narratives, broadcasters influence not only the perceived importance of addressing children's plight but also the overall understanding of the complex factors contributing to the ongoing crisis. Careful, responsible, and contextualized reporting can potentially catalyze meaningful public engagement and a drive towards lasting solutions.

Methodology

The study adopts the survey design. A survey is a research method that collects information through carefully designed questions from a sample of individuals to gain an understanding of larger populations. Surveys are valuable sources of data and insights for various sectors, including business, media, government, and academia. These questions can take various formats, including multiple-choice, rating scales, and open-ended inquiries. Survey results are instrumental in making informed decisions related to products, services, policies, and more (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2021). The study population are 25 broadcast media houses located in Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States and the total population of the three major cities—Jos, Lafia, and Makurdi—sums up to 1,798,632. In 2023, according to the World Population Review, the population of Jos (970,129), Lafia (374,084) and Makurdi (454,419). The sampling procedure adopted for this study is Purposive Sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method employed in research to deliberately choose individuals or groups based on specific criteria relevant to the research objective. It is particularly useful when the study population is limited in size, challenging to access, or highly diverse. Purposive sampling is justified for this study because it allows for a targeted and efficient selection of media outlets that are most relevant to the research question, ensuring that the study's objectives are met effectively and that the findings are credible and comprehensive. The purposive sampling technique was used as regards the choice of three states (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa) out of the six states in North Central Nigeria. The primary method of data collection was the questionnaire. The study adopted secondary data.

Data presentations and analysis

1. **Objective one:** Investigate the extent to which select broadcast media outlets in North Central Nigeria (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States) prioritise the coverage of children affected by conflict, as guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory. Ejike (2012) opined that “the media should be in the best position at all times to educate the nation on the fact that conflict is an inevitable situation and part of human existence”. This, however, does not call for deliberate misunderstanding or direct misinterpretation of media messages in cases of crisis or conflict. Special attention should also be given to the activities of “Search for Common Ground” and its booming Partnership with Plateau state and Nigeria at large, coming down to PRTVC. To this effect, a radio drama runs on Peace FM, which pertains to promoting peaceful co-existence and security tips. It important for broadcast media to report on the impact of conflict on children, even if it means revealing sensitive details. Journalists have a significant role to play in peacebuilding because they are the drivers of the media. They can use the media to intervene positively in peacebuilding by pursuing a public agenda. Journalism should exist to serve the people as envisaged in the theory of social responsibility, which “involved a



view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private franchise” (McQuail, 2005, p.171).

2. **Objective two:** Find out the ethical dimensions of media reporting on child victims of conflict, considering the tension between Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories in North Central (Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa States).

There should be stricter regulations or codes of conduct for journalists reporting on children in conflict zones. Journalists have the chance to play an important role in the peace-building process, but journalism and journalists are sometimes perceived to be the instigators of violence instead of promoting peace. This is the reason the issue of how journalists perceive their role in the peace-building process is important because it has an effect on their reportage. Conflict reporting by journalists must be geared towards peace-building and the complexities must be understood. Also, contexts must be understood by the journalists. Otherwise, there will not be fair representation of happenings, thereby further deepening the divides between people in the conflict situation. There is a counter-narrative to conflict and war and people must know this through the reportage of journalists. Ravi (2012) states that though society expects journalism to serve the interest of the people, yet, the journalists are often conflicted on whom they should be responsible to. The media owners, the people or the editors. This is one of the reasons journalists must understand their role in society.

Conclusion

The media serves as a powerful tool for informing, educating, and influencing public opinion. In conflict-ridden regions, media coverage can shed light on the plight of vulnerable populations, providing a platform for their stories to be heard. However, the way these stories are presented can significantly impact how the audience interprets and responds to the information. One of the key findings of the study is the audience's recognition of the importance of media reporting on the impact of conflict on children. However, this acknowledgment comes with a caveat – a demand for stricter regulations or codes of conduct for journalists reporting on such sensitive issues. This highlights the ethical considerations involved in reporting on vulnerable populations and emphasizes the need for responsible journalism. The study highlights the importance of media literacy programs to enhance the audience's understanding of media ethics, sensitivity in reporting, and the positive impact of media in peace-building efforts. Educating the audience on how to critically evaluate news content can contribute to a more informed and discerning public. Policymakers may consider the findings when formulating regulations related to media reporting on sensitive topics, ensuring a balance between transparency and ethical considerations. Policies that encourage responsible journalism and prioritize the protection of vulnerable populations, such as children in conflict zones, could be explored. The audience perception of select broadcast media reportage on children affected by conflicts in North Central Nigeria is a complex and nuanced landscape. Ethical considerations, the balance between sensitivity and information dissemination, and the role of social media in peace-building are critical aspects that demand attention. This study provides valuable insights for media professionals, policymakers, and peace-building entities, contributing to a broader understanding of the role of media in conflict reporting and its impact on societal perceptions.

Recommendation



The following recommendations were made:

1. Media organizations should establish and adhere to clear ethical reporting guidelines, especially when covering sensitive issues such as the impact of conflict on children. These guidelines should prioritize responsible reporting, safeguarding the well-being of affected individuals, and avoiding unnecessary sensationalism.
2. Peace-building organizations engaging in social media activities should establish clear ethical guidelines. These guidelines should ensure that information shared aligns with the principles of accuracy, sensitivity, and constructive engagement. Training programs for social media managers within these organizations can contribute to effective implementation.
3. Implement regular training programs for journalists focused on ethical reporting, particularly when covering children in conflict zones. These programs should emphasize sensitivity, accuracy, and the potential impact of news coverage on the well-being of children. Journalistic organizations can collaborate with relevant bodies to develop and deliver comprehensive training modules.
4. Journalistic organizations should work collaboratively with child protection agencies and relevant stakeholders to develop clear and comprehensive guidelines for reporting on children in conflict zones. These guidelines should outline ethical considerations, best practices, and protocols for ensuring the safety and well-being of children featured in news coverage.

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