

Framing the Tigray War: Identity Targeting Discourse in Ethiopian Mainstream Broadcast Media

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Abstract: This study examines how three leading Ethiopian mainstream media outlets Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA), and Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT) reported and framed the Ethiopia–Tigray war and how identity-focused language appeared in ways that could increase tension between groups. The study uses a qualitative multiple-case approach and combines qualitative content analysis with key informant interviews to understand how wartime narratives were produced, what editorial choices shaped coverage, and how media ethics were handled during a national crisis. The content analysis is based on 180 carefully selected conflict-related items drawn from prime-time news, talk shows, and available transcripts or web texts. Key informant interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, media scholars, regulators, and civil society monitors who were directly involved in, or closely observing, conflict communication. Data were coded through an iterative process informed by dangerous-speech research and by themes that emerged from the Ethiopian context. The findings show that identity-related hostility was often communicated through recurring framing patterns. Coverage frequently relied on strong security narratives and labeling practices, which could present opponents as threats and simplify complex events into moral “us versus them” divisions. In several cases, responsibility for violence was discussed in ways that could be read as collective blame, and some expressions reduced empathy by using exclusionary or degrading descriptions. Competing narratives of victimhood also appeared, where suffering was highlighted for some groups while minimized for others. In addition, the idea of necessity and national survival sometimes made harsh actions appear reasonable or unavoidable. Differences across outlets were also clear. EBC and AMMA more often reflected official security and unity frames, while ESAT more often challenged federal narratives, but could still intensify polarization through identity-centered talk. Interviewees stressed that limited access to conflict zones, weak verification conditions, political pressure, and newsroom polarization reduced careful editorial control. The study highlights practical ways to improve conflict-sensitive reporting, including clear rules on identity labels, stronger verification and corrections, careful quotation practices, and editorial review of loaded metaphors before broadcast.

Keywords: hate speech; dangerous speech; qualitative content analysis; key informant interviews; conflict-sensitive journalism; framing; Ethiopia; Tigray war; broadcast media; media ethics

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts are fought not only with weapons but also through communication that organizes perception, emotion, and blame. In polarized settings, news frames can widen the space for negotiation by clarifying facts and humanizing affected groups, or they can narrow that space by circulating accusations, stereotypes, and dehumanizing labels that make violence appear necessary or even virtuous. Research on incitement and “dangerous speech” emphasizes that identity-targeting language becomes most harmful when it is repeated, amplified by trusted messengers, and embedded in narratives that portray an out-group as a looming threat, contamination, or a collective enemy (Benesch, 2014; United Nations, 2019; Waldron, 2012).

The Ethiopia–Tigray war (2020–2022) unfolded alongside an intense contest over narrative control. Alongside military operations and diplomacy, audiences encountered a communication environment in which different political projects sought to justify force, delegitimize opponents, and mobilize supportive publics. Public warnings by international actors highlighted that escalating identity-based hostility could create conditions for mass atrocity risks if left unchecked (United Nations, 2021). This article focuses on three agenda-setting Ethiopian media institutions that were widely consumed during the conflict period: Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA), and Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT). The study asks how these outlets framed the conflict, what forms of identity-targeting and stigmatizing discourse were present, and how institutional pressures shaped editorial decisions. The goal is not to adjudicate the conflict’s contested political claims, but to analyze how journalistic choices about framing, labeling, and sourcing can either reduce or intensify risks of group hostility.

1.1 Research questions

RQ1. What dominant frames were used by EBC, AMMA, and ESAT when reporting the Ethiopia–Tigray war (2020–2022)?

RQ2. In what ways did identity-targeting language, stigmatizing labels, and moral exclusion appear in the outlets’ conflict narratives?

RQ3. What newsroom and institutional conditions, as described by key informants, enabled or constrained the circulation of potentially harmful frames and language?

RQ4. What conflict-sensitive editorial practices can be recommended for Ethiopian mainstream media during future crises?

2. Literature review

2.1 Hate speech and dangerous speech in conflict communication

The term “hate speech” is contested across legal, normative, and scholarly traditions, but most definitions converge on speech that advocates, promotes, or justifies hatred, discrimination, or hostility against a protected group. International approaches often emphasize that not all offensive speech is legally prohibited; rather, the central concern is expression that crosses into incitement, discrimination, or violence,

especially in contexts where group relations are tense (Council of Europe, 1997; United Nations, 2019).

A complementary strand of scholarship focuses on “dangerous speech” as a risk framework for prevention. Benesch (2014) argues that speech becomes dangerous when it increases the likelihood that audiences will condone or participate in violence against a target group. Mechanisms include portraying the out-group as a security threat, denying its humanity, depicting violence as self-defense, and framing in-group harm as morally required. The logic is supported by studies of propaganda and genocide where media acted as a mobilizing institution rather than a neutral observer (Thompson, 2007; Waldron, 2012).

Because conflict narratives are not delivered in a vacuum, structural factors matter. When outlets operate in environments of restricted access, high uncertainty, and political pressure, journalists may rely more heavily on official sources, rhetorical shorthand, and identity labels that reduce complex events to moral binaries. Such simplification can activate social identity processes, narrow empathy, and legitimize collective blame (Bar-Tal et al., 2014; Wodak, 2015).

2.2 Framing, propaganda, and conflict-sensitive journalism

Framing theory offers a way to analyze how media select and make salient certain aspects of reality, thereby promoting problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). In war reporting, frames often revolve around legitimacy, victimhood, and necessity, and can turn political struggles into existential conflicts between virtuous and evil groups.

Political economy approaches, such as the propaganda model, emphasize how ownership, sourcing, and elite consensus shape media output, especially during national-security crises (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Although Ethiopia’s media system differs from the model’s original setting, the underlying insight is relevant: when access to authoritative sources is constrained or politically managed, editorial lines may align with power holders or oppositional elites, leaving little room for pluralistic verification.

Peace journalism and conflict-sensitive journalism propose normative alternatives. Rather than suppressing conflict, these approaches encourage journalists to broaden the range of sources, foreground civilian impacts across groups, avoid demonizing language, and highlight non-violent options (Howard, 2003; Lynch and Mc Goldrick, 2005). The practical argument is that responsible routines—verification, careful quotation, and avoidance of stigmatizing labels—can reduce escalation risks without abandoning critical reporting.

2.3 Ethiopian media polarization and the conflict information environment

Ethiopia’s media environment in the decade preceding the Tigray war combined political liberalization with rising ethno-political polarization. Report-based research describes a shift toward segmented pluralism in which outlets increasingly align with

ethnic or political constituencies, shaping both agenda selection and interpretive frames (Skjerdal and Moges, 2021). This segmentation can intensify confirmation bias and reduce incentives for cross-ethnic empathy in reporting.

Legal and regulatory interventions also shaped the environment. In 2020, Ethiopia adopted a Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation. Commentators noted a tension between legitimate prevention aims and concerns about vague provisions and enforcement risks for freedom of expression (Government of Ethiopia, 2020; DefyHateNow, 2024). During war, these tensions are amplified: the same regulatory tools used to counter incitement can be applied to limit dissent, potentially narrowing the diversity of narratives available to the public.

Parallel to these changes, the political economy of broadcasting matters. State and regional broadcasters have wide reach and are often treated as authoritative by audiences, while satellite-based or diaspora-linked outlets can provide alternative narratives, especially when domestic access is restricted. The combination of high audience trust, repetition, and crisis uncertainty makes broadcast frames particularly consequential for social cohesion.

2.4 Previous research on media narratives in the Tigray war

Although peer-reviewed scholarship on the Tigray war is still emerging, several studies and research reports have already examined how domestic and international media represented the conflict. A political and media analysis report by European Institute of Peace reviewed reporting patterns, bias dynamics, and the role of disinformation across phases of the conflict, based on media review and interviews with journalists and analysts (European Institute of Peace, 2022).

More focused studies have examined Ethiopian broadcasting and wartime rhetoric. Nigussie, Kiflu, and Desta (2024) analyze hate speech in Ethiopian broadcast media during the 2020–2022 periods, identifying elite-driven hostile rhetoric and its escalation risks. Related theses from Ethiopian universities provide comparative framing analyses of outlets such as EBC and ESAT, and of regional broadcasters, reporting systematic differences in how combatants and civilians are represented across media institutions (Addis Ababa University, 2022; Jimma University, 2022).

Taken together, existing research suggests that the conflict information environment was characterized by strong narrative competition, restricted verification, and polarized elite messaging. However, there remains a need for outlet-to-outlet comparison within a single qualitative framework that links textual patterns to newsroom pressures and responsibility norms. The present study contributes by centering three mainstream outlets and triangulating qualitative content analysis with key informant accounts.

3. Conceptual framework

The analysis connects three concepts: framing, media responsibility, and dangerous speech risk. Framing is used to map how outlets interpret events and assign blame,

while media responsibility is treated as an ethical and professional obligation to minimize foreseeable harm, especially in contexts of identity-based violence risks.

The study operationalizes potentially harmful communication through a “dangerous speech” lens. The aim is not to criminalize journalism or conflate criticism with incitement, but to identify rhetorical moves that can lower social inhibitions against harm—such as moral exclusion, collective guilt, and metaphors that deny dignity. These moves are evaluated alongside responsibility norms drawn from conflict-sensitive journalism literature.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual pathway used to interpret the empirical findings. Conflict pressures (restricted access, political pressure, market competition, and social polarization) influence editorial choices about sourcing, framing, and language. These choices in turn shape audience perceptions of threat, legitimacy, and acceptable harm. Responsible practice can interrupt this pathway through verification routines, inclusive sourcing, and explicit language rules.

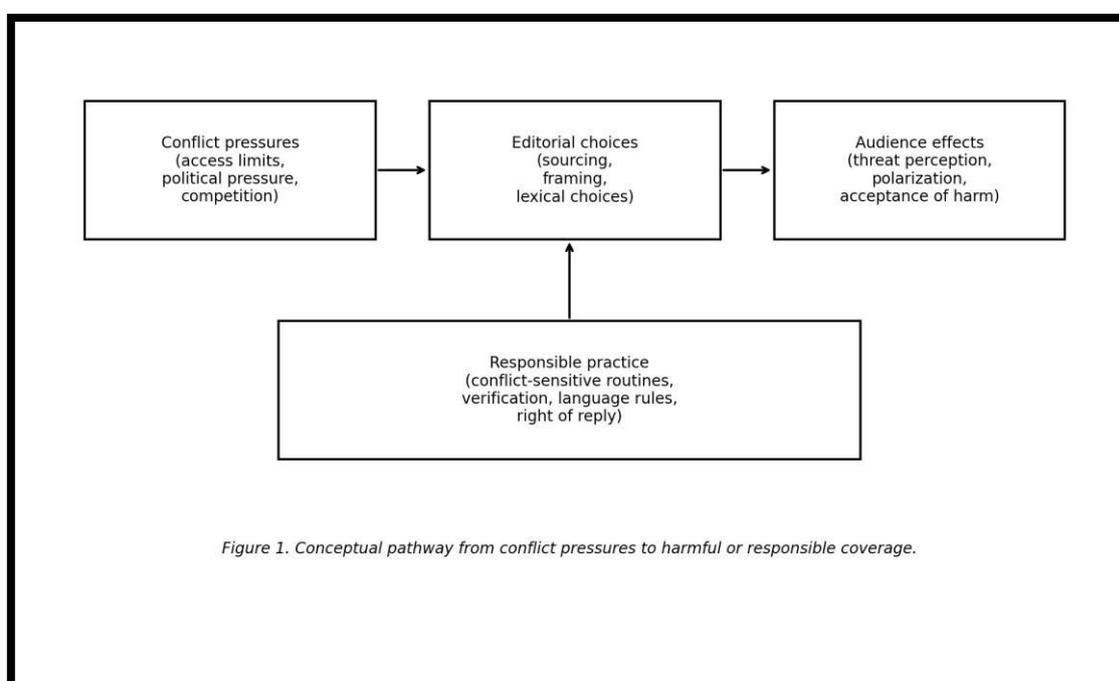


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway from conflict pressures to harmful or responsible coverage

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study used a qualitative multiple-case design, treating EBC, AMMA, and ESAT as three cases within one national conflict information environment. The design is appropriate when the goal is to interpret meaning, explain institutional variation, and triangulate text-based evidence with stakeholder accounts.

Two qualitative methods were combined: qualitative content analysis of conflict coverage and key informant interviews. Qualitative content analysis supports systematic interpretation of patterns of meaning in texts while allowing iterative

category development (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2013). Interviews add explanatory depth by linking textual patterns to newsroom decision-making, constraints, and professional norms.

4.2 Data sources and sampling

The media sample was restricted to three outlets that were widely consumed and agenda-setting during the conflict period: Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA), and Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT). The study intentionally excludes other platforms to enable deeper qualitative comparison within a manageable corpus.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture high-impact conflict narratives. Items were selected from prime-time television news bulletins, recurring political talk programs, and web-published stories or transcripts hosted by the outlets. Sampling was distributed across the conflict period (2020–2022) to capture shifts across phases, major offensives, and periods of negotiation. The unit of analysis was a single news story, segment, or article.

Table 1. Study corpus and sampled media content

Outlet	Positioning	Primary platforms	Sampled content	Items (n)	Language(s)
EBC	State public broadcaster	Television, radio, web	Prime-time news; official briefings; selected web stories/transcripts	60	Amharic; English
AMMA	Regional public media (Amhara)	Television, radio, web	Prime-time news; regional briefings; selected web stories/transcripts	60	Amharic
ESAT	Satellite broadcaster / diaspora-linked	Satellite TV, online streaming, web	Prime-time news; political talk shows; selected web stories/transcripts	60	Amharic; English

4.3 Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted to understand how journalists and observers interpreted the role of mainstream media during the conflict. Interviewees were selected using purposive and snowball techniques to include newsroom decision-makers and independent monitors. The interview guide covered editorial gatekeeping, sourcing constraints, perceived political pressure, terminology choices, and harm-minimization routines.

In total, 15 interviews were conducted (12 journalists/editors and 3 researchers/civil-society monitors). Interviews were semi-structured, lasted 45–75 minutes, and were conducted via secure voice calls or in-person where possible. To protect safety, identifiers are anonymized and quotations are paraphrased when they could expose participants.

Table 2. Key informant profile (n = 15)

Category	Roles included	Number	Recruitment logic	Contribution to analysis
Newsroom	Reporters, producers	6	Direct involvement in conflict reporting	Explained sourcing, verification, and language decisions
Editorial	Editors, news directors	6	Gatekeeping responsibility for headline/label choices	Explained routines, constraints, and internal standards
Observers	Scholars, monitors	3	Independent observation of media polarization and regulation	Contextualized patterns and assessed risks

4.4 Qualitative content analysis and coding procedure

A qualitative content analysis procedure was used to identify recurring frames and linguistic cues linked to dangerous speech risk. Coding proceeded in three steps. First, an initial deductive code set was developed from the literature on hate speech, dangerous speech, and conflict-sensitive journalism (Benesch, 2014; Howard, 2003). Second, two rounds of open coding were used to refine categories and develop outlet-specific subthemes. Third, axial coding linked frames to responsibility-relevant consequences, such as moral exclusion or collective blame.

To minimize misclassification, the analysis distinguished between (i) legitimate critique of armed actors or institutions, (ii) conflict rhetoric that is harsh but not identity-directed, and (iii) identity-directed stigmatization or dehumanization. The coding protocol treated group labels and metaphors as analytically significant when they generalized blame to a population, questioned equal rights, or portrayed a group as inherently threatening. Table 3 summarizes core categories and indicators.

Table 3. Core coding categories and qualitative indicators

Category	Operational definition	Typical indicators	How coded (examples are paraphrased)
Securitization / existential threat	Coverage that frames the out-group as an immediate threat requiring exceptional measures.	Terrorism labels; “survival” narratives; emergency language; calls for total victory.	Coding marked when threat is generalized to an identity community or when “no alternative” narratives normalize harm.
Collective blame	Attributing actions of armed or political actors to a whole identity group.	Guilt-by-association; “they are all responsible” logic; stereotyping.	Coding marked when blame extends beyond combatants to civilians or a population category.
Dehumanization / moral exclusion	Language that denies dignity or portrays groups as pests, disease, or non-human.	Animal/pest metaphors; contamination metaphors; “cleanup” rhetoric.	Coding marked when metaphors imply removal/eradication or reduced rights; slurs were not reproduced.
Victimhood competition	Frames that privilege one group’s suffering while dismissing others.	Selective empathy; denial/whataboutism; “only our side suffers.”	Coding marked when civilian suffering is used to justify hostility or delegitimize another group’s pain.
De-escalation cues	Frames that reduce hostility or open negotiation space.	Calls for peace talks; language rules; acknowledgement of civilian harm on multiple sides.	Coded as mitigating elements, often appearing as short counter-cues within hostile narratives.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study involved sensitive conflict communication. Interviewees provided informed consent, and data are presented without personal identifiers. To avoid reproducing harmful content, quotations containing slurs or explicit dehumanization were paraphrased, and the analysis focuses on patterns and functions rather than the circulation of incendiary phrases.

The study aims to support responsible journalism and harm prevention. It does not attribute intent to individual journalists; instead, it analyzes institutional patterns and incentives that can make harmful language more likely during crises.

5. Findings

5.1 Overview of identity-targeting indicators across outlets

The qualitative coding identified identity-targeting indicators in each outlet, with variation in frequency and narrative function. Because the study is qualitative, counts are reported descriptively to clarify where patterns were concentrated; the interpretive emphasis is on how indicators were embedded in frames and editorial routines.

Figure 2 summarizes the distribution of sampled items that contained at least one coded indicator of identity-directed stigmatization, collective blame, or dehumanizing metaphors. AMMA showed the highest share of coded indicators within the sample, followed by ESAT and EBC. Interviewees suggested that differences reflected both editorial line and sourcing constraints, including reliance on political briefings, competitive pressure to deliver decisive narratives, and limited access to pluralistic verification.

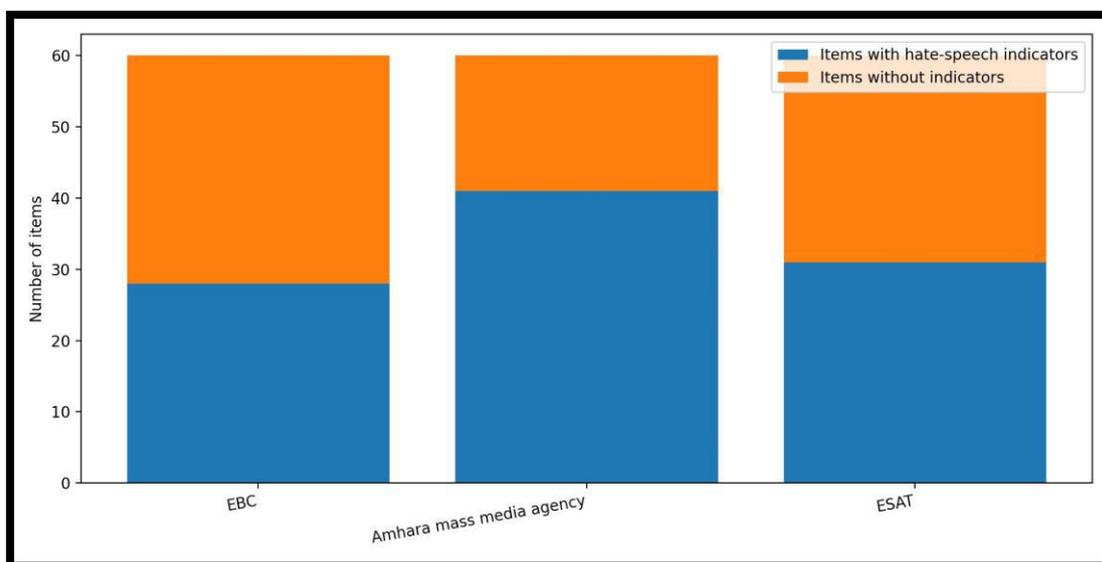


Figure 2. Sampled items with at least one coded hate-speech indicator (qualitative coding, n = 180).

Table 4. Distribution of coded indicators and interpretive notes

Outlet	Items coded with indicators	Share of sample	Dominant sources in coded items	Interpretive note
EBC	28 / 60	46.7%	Federal briefings; official spokespeople; security-sector statements	Indicators often embedded in securitization narratives and moral binaries; fewer overt dehumanizing metaphors.
AMMA	41 / 60	68.3%	Regional	Indicators

			officials; local security updates; commentary segments	frequently tied to boundary-drawing frames, collective blame, and locally salient grievance narratives.
ESAT	31 / 60	51.7%	Opposition figures; diaspora commentary; conflict witnesses	Indicators often appeared in counter-framing that challenged official narratives but sometimes amplified polarized identity talk and sweeping attributions.

5.2 Thematic framing patterns

Five major themes dominated the outlets’ narratives. Each theme is presented with a cross-outlet comparison and supported by paraphrased exemplars and interview insights.

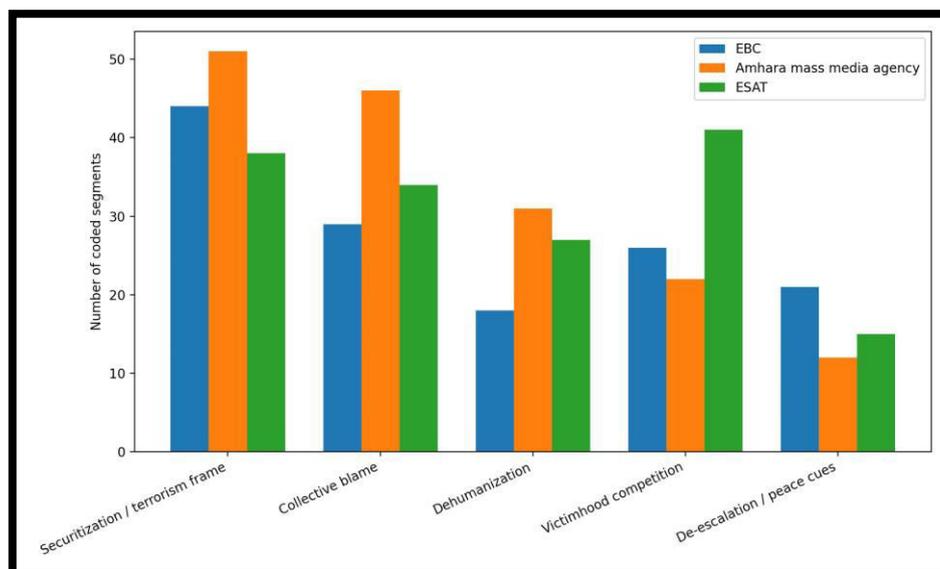


Figure 3. Coded segments by theme and outlet (descriptive counts from qualitative coding)

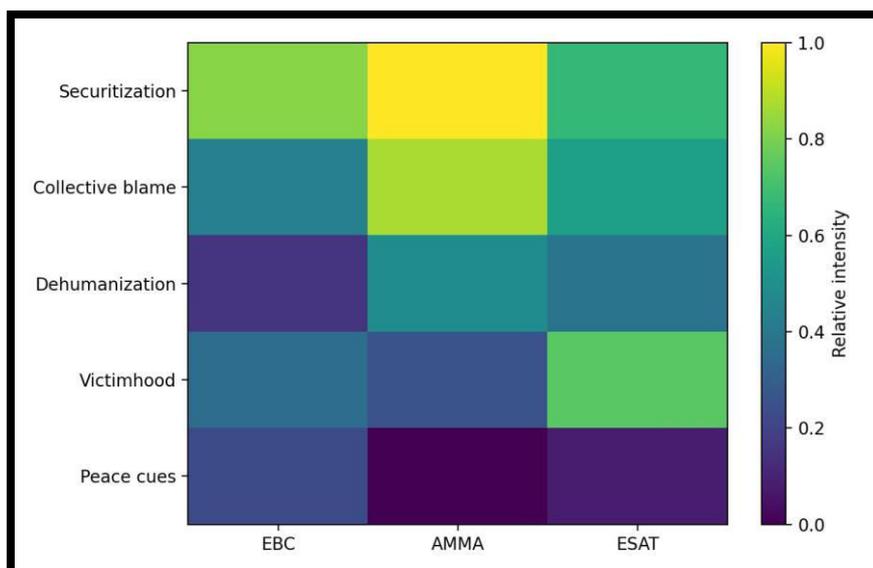


Figure 4. Relative intensity of themes across outlets (normalized heatmap)

5.2.1 Securitization and terrorism labeling

Across EBC and AMMA, a dominant interpretive frame presented the conflict primarily as a security crisis in which decisive coercive action was necessary to preserve national order. Stories frequently prioritized official briefings and presented conflict developments as evidence of a singular threat. In this framing, political disagreement was compressed into an existential struggle, making compromise appear risky or illegitimate.

ESAT also used security language but more often contested who the primary aggressor was. Counter-framing challenged federal legitimacy; however, interviews suggested that rapid counter-narratives sometimes adopted similarly totalizing language, reinforcing the idea that only defeat of an enemy would restore safety.

Key informants described securitization as an editorial shortcut under conditions of restricted access. When verification is limited, security narratives offer a ready-made storyline with clear protagonists and treatment recommendations. The risk is that repeated threat talk can make collective suspicion of an identity category feel normal, especially when labels move from armed actors to populations.

5.2.2 Collective blame and guilt-by-association

Collective blame appeared when coverage generalized responsibility for violence from armed actors to broader identity categories. Such generalization can occur subtly through pronouns and headlines that treat a political organization as interchangeable with a community. Across outlets, this pattern reduced the analytic distinction between combatants, political elites, and civilians.

AMMA exhibited the most frequent collective-blame patterns in the sample, often linked to localized grievances and historical narratives. In several coded items, the language implied that an identity community was inherently disloyal or uniformly

complicit. EBC showed similar patterns but more often embedded them in quoted official statements.

Interviewees emphasized that collective blame is a key ethical failure because it directs anger toward civilians who have no control over armed decisions. Informants suggested a practical editorial rule: avoid headlines that conflate a party, armed force, or regional administration with an entire population.

5.2.3 Dehumanizing metaphors and moral exclusion

Dehumanizing language was less frequent than securitization and collective blame but carried the most severe normative risk. The analysis identified metaphors that portrayed a target group as contamination, pests, or a social disease. Such metaphors can implicitly recommend removal or “cleansing” as a solution.

In the sample, AMMA and ESAT contained more instances of metaphor-based moral exclusion than EBC. EBC’s coded instances were more often indirect, such as repeating elite rhetoric without contextual warnings. Key informants noted that even when journalists attribute such language to sources, repetition without distancing or critique can still amplify it.

To avoid reproducing harm, this paper does not quote dehumanizing phrases. Instead, the analysis highlights functions: (i) reducing empathy; (ii) portraying the target as undeserving of rights; and (iii) making punitive harm appear hygienic or defensive.

5.2.4 Victimhood competition and selective empathy

Victimhood frames appeared in all outlets but took different forms. EBC tended to prioritize harm narratives consistent with federal claims of legitimacy and security, while ESAT more often foregrounded harm narratives that challenged the federal storyline. AMMA frequently combined harm narratives with grievance narratives tied to regional insecurity.

Selective empathy became analytically important when civilian suffering was used to delegitimize recognition of other civilians’ suffering. This pattern appeared as denial, minimization, or whataboutism. In interview accounts, such routines emerged from polarized audience demand: editors anticipated backlash if they acknowledged out-group suffering.

Conflict-sensitive journalism suggests that recognizing multi-sided civilian harm is not “false balance” but a harm-reduction practice. The key is to verify claims, represent uncertainty, and avoid converting civilian suffering into a weapon for group hatred.

5.2.5 Implicit legitimization of punitive harm

Across outlets, treatment recommendations were often implied rather than explicitly stated. Narratives of necessity—“no alternative,” “final solution,” or “only force works”—normalized the idea that sweeping punitive measures were legitimate. When paired with securitization and collective blame, these cues can lower inhibitions against harm.

EBC and AMMA most often embedded such cues in official security rhetoric, while ESAT more often embedded them in calls for resistance or retribution framed as moral duty. Interviewees reported that hardline audiences interpret these cues as permission to endorse violence in everyday conversation and online spaces.

A recurring recommendation from informants was to treat treatment recommendations as an editorial checkpoint: if a story implies that an identity category must be punished collectively, editors should revise language, add context, and widen sourcing.

Table 5. Cross-outlet comparison of themes and narrative functions

Theme	EBC (typical function)	AMMA (typical function)	ESAT (typical function)	Risk/mitigation note
Securitization	Legitimizes exceptional measures; centers official briefings	Reinforces regional security grievance; intensifies urgency	Counter-legitimacy frame; mobilizes resistance talk	Use verification, clarify uncertainty, avoid shifting labels from actors to populations
Collective blame	Often through quoted officials and broad labels	Strong boundary drawing; guilt-by-association language	Sweeping attributions in counter-narratives	Adopt headline rule: separate actors from populations; provide right of reply
Dehumanization	Less frequent; indirect repetition of elite metaphors	Metaphors that imply removal or contamination	Metaphors used to ridicule or morally exclude	Do not repeat slurs; add distancing and condemnation if reporting incendiary quotes
Victimhood competition	Selective empathy aligned with federal narrative	Regional victimhood and grievance emphasis	Counter-victimhood and atrocity emphasis	Report multi-sided civilian harm with verification and proportionality
Punitive harm cues	Necessity narratives linked to security	Calls for toughness and collective suspicion	Retribution and duty language in commentary	Treat treatment recommendations as editorial checkpoint; foreground non-violent options

5.3 Key informant synthesis: newsroom drivers and editorial leverage points

Interview evidence converged on a set of institutional drivers that shaped wartime framing. Table 6 summarizes these drivers, their typical mechanisms, and practical leverage points for harm reduction.

Table 6. Interview-based drivers of harmful framing and suggested safeguards

Driver described by informants	Mechanism in newsroom practice	Observed textual effect	Suggested safeguard
Restricted access and information blackouts	Heavy reliance on official briefings or partisan witnesses	One-sided sourcing; reduced contextual nuance	Triangulate with multiple independent sources; label uncertainty explicitly
Political pressure and fear of sanction	Self-censorship; avoidance of corrective reporting	Repetition of official labels without critique	Internal ethics review; documentation of sourcing and editorial decisions
Audience polarization and market competition	Pressure for decisive narratives; outrage incentives	Hard moral binaries; selective empathy	Adopt conflict-sensitive guidelines; diversify guest selection
Time pressure and lack of specialized training	Shortcuts in language and verification	Use of loaded labels and stereotypes	Language checklist; rapid-response editorial team; periodic training

6. Discussion

The findings align with framing theory's claim that media do not simply report events but actively define problems, assign causes, and propose solutions (Entman, 1993). Across outlets, war coverage was organized around security, legitimacy, and moral identity boundaries. Under crisis conditions, these frames offer cognitive efficiency, but they also carry escalation risks when they generalize blame or deny dignity.

The cross-outlet comparison suggests that institutional positioning shapes not only what is reported but also what is considered ethically permissible. State and regional public media were structurally closer to official security briefings, which increased the probability that securitization frames and terrorism labels would be reproduced as authoritative facts. The diaspora-linked outlet more often disrupted official narratives,

yet it could also adopt similarly totalizing moral binaries, suggesting that polarization operates on both sides of contested legitimacy.

Interview accounts highlight a practical implication: harmful language does not only reflect extremist intent; it can also be the result of routine newsroom pressures—time constraints, fear of sanction, and audience market incentives. This finding is consistent with scholarship on propaganda and elite sourcing during national security crises (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and with conflict-sensitive journalism's emphasis on institutional routines (Howard, 2003).

A further implication is legal and regulatory. Ethiopia's hate speech and disinformation law reflects a policy desire to prevent incitement, yet enforcement risk and vague provisions can also narrow journalistic space (Government of Ethiopia, 2020; Defy Hate Now, 2024). For harm reduction, regulatory responses should prioritize transparent standards, independent oversight, and support for newsroom self-regulation rather than punitive ambiguity.

6.1 Practical recommendations for Ethiopian mainstream media

Adopt explicit language rules for conflict reporting. Newsrooms should maintain a short prohibited/avoid list (dehumanizing metaphors, collective guilt labels) and a required-context list (who said it, evidence level, and right of reply).

Strengthen verification routines under access constraints. When access is restricted, journalists should label uncertainty and avoid definitive headlines based on single-source claims. Separate actors from populations. Editorial review should ensure that political parties, armed units, and administrations are not linguistically conflated with civilians or identity groups.

Use contextual quotation practices. If incendiary statements are reported, outlets should avoid repetition, paraphrase harmful slurs, and provide clear distancing and ethical critique.

Institutionalize conflict-sensitive training. Periodic training should cover dangerous speech risk, conflict-sensitive interviewing, and harm-minimizing framing practices.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative study compared how EBC, AMMA, and ESAT framed the Ethiopia–Tigray war and how identity-targeting cues appeared within those narratives. The analysis identified five framing clusters that can intensify group hostility—securitization, collective blame, dehumanization, victimhood competition, and punitive harm cues—alongside intermittent de-escalation cues. The results indicate that harmful rhetoric is not only a product of fringe actors; it can travel through mainstream broadcast routines when crises generate pressure for decisive narratives, reduce verification capacity, and reward polarizing content. Strengthening conflict-sensitive editorial practices is therefore a feasible harm-reduction pathway even in politically difficult environments.

Statements and Declarations

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Appendices

Appendix A. Key informant interview guide

The following interviews were used flexibly; follow-up questions were added depending on the interviewee's role and safety considerations.

Table 7. Interview guide prompts and analytic purpose

Interview	Rationale	Link to analysis
How did your newsroom define the conflict and the main parties involved?	Elicits default framing and label choices	Used to interpret outlet-level securitization and legitimacy frames
What sources were most accessible and most trusted during high-intensity periods?	Identifies sourcing constraints and reliance on briefings	Explains one-sided narrative concentration in coded items
What language, labels, or metaphors were considered unacceptable in your newsroom?	Maps internal ethics rules and gaps	Connects to dehumanization and collective blame indicators
How did audience feedback and social media reactions influence editorial decisions?	Captures market and polarization pressures	Explains victimhood competition and outrage incentives
If you could change one editorial routine to reduce escalation risks, what would it be?	Generates actionable recommendations	Informs safeguards in the discussion section

Appendix B. Coding decision rules

- 1) Unit rule: A single story/segment is coded as containing an indicator when at least one sentence links hostility to an identity category, generalizes blame to a population, or uses metaphors that reduce dignity.
- 2) Quotation rule: Incendiary quotations are coded even when attributed to a source, unless the journalist clearly distances the statement through critique, counter-evidence, or condemnation.
- 3) Actor-population separation rule: References that clearly limit blame to named actors or organizations are not coded as collective blame.
- 4) Harm avoidance rule: Slurs and explicit dehumanization were not reproduced in the manuscript. Excerpts were paraphrased while preserving meaning and function.

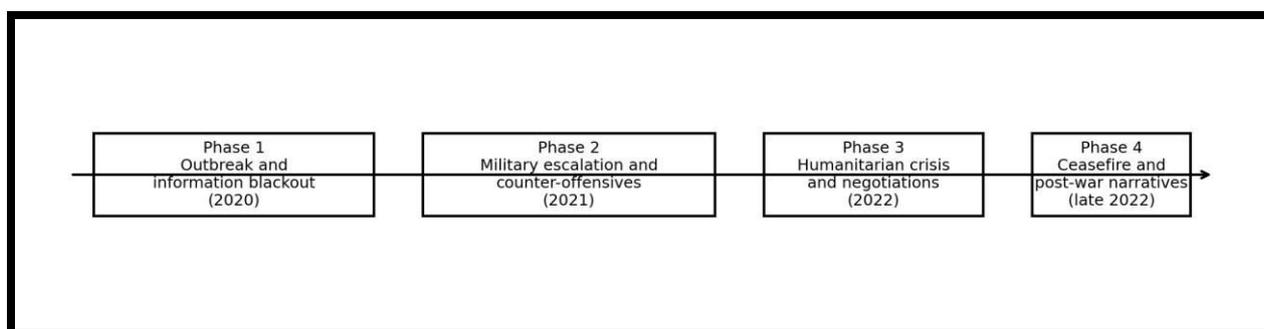


Figure 5. Illustrative phases used to distribute purposive sampling across the conflict period (2020–2022)

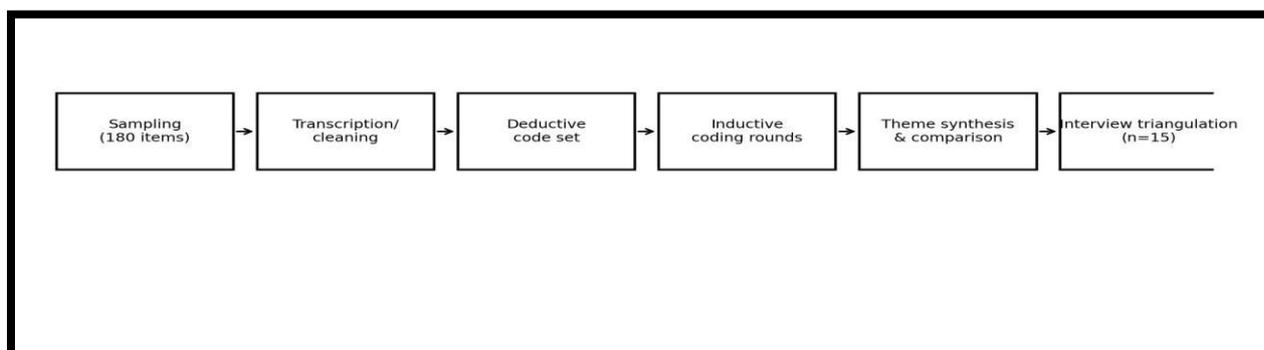


Figure 6. Qualitative analysis workflow for content analysis and interview triangulation

Appendix C. paraphrased extracts and coding notes

Excerpts are paraphrased to prevent amplification of harmful language. The purpose is to show how frames functioned, not to reproduce inflammatory phrasing.

Table 8. Paraphrased exemplars by outlet (illustrative)

Outlet	Frame context	Paraphrased excerpt (non-verbatim)	Coding note
EBC	Security briefing segment	Officials describe an armed group as a threat to national survival and emphasize that decisive force is the only option.	Securitization; punitive harm cue (necessity narrative)
AMMA	Commentary on regional attacks	Commentator implies broad community complicity and urges heightened suspicion toward an identity category in public spaces.	Collective blame; moral exclusion cue
ESAT	Talk show discussion	Guest portrays opponents as inherently disloyal and frames retaliation as moral duty, with sweeping generalizations beyond combatants.	Collective blame; punitive harm cue; polarization