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Framing Persistence and Distortion in Post-Conflict News: A Reese-Informed Analysis of Manipur Coverage, 2025

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Abstract

This study examines how the 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur has been framed in two highest circulated regional digital news platforms—The Sangai Express and The Frontier Manipur—in post conflict news stories through a qualitative analysis grounded in Stephen D. Reese’s framing model. Focusing on 107 news reports published between January and March 2025, nearly two years after the initial outbreak of violence, the study investigates how frames persist, stabilize, and occasionally break down in a post-conflict media environment. Reese’s six framing characteristics are operationalized through textual indicators including narrative organization, lexical patterns, sourcing practices, and temporal sequencing, enabling a comparative assessment of how each platform constructs and sustains meaning. The findings show a strong dominance of security and political frames across both outlets, but with significant divergence in organizational coherence and narrative persistence. While The Sangai Express exhibits structured and cumulative framing, The Frontier Manipur adopts a more episodic and interventionist approach. Crucially, the study identifies distortion as an emergent outcome of framing processes, arising when persistence, shared meanings, and organizational structures interact under conditions of verification failure. Rather than extending Reese’s model formally, the study demonstrates a limitation within it: the absence of a conceptual account of framing breakdowns in conflict reporting. By situating framing within a temporally extended, post-conflict context, this research contributes to debates on media framing, conflict journalism, and information disorder in digital news environments.

Keywords: framing persistence; distortion; conflict journalism; Manipur; digital news

Introduction

On 3 May 2023, large-scale ethnic violence erupted in the Indian state of Manipur following a High Court recommendation to consider Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meitei community. The decision triggered protests by tribal organisations, particularly the All Tribal Students’ Union of Manipur (ATSUM), escalating into prolonged conflict between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. The violence resulted in widespread displacement, destruction of property, and significant loss of life, while also intensifying long-standing tensions over land, identity, and political representation.

While the immediate dynamics of the conflict have been widely documented, less attention has been paid to how the conflict is mediated over time, particularly in periods withdrawn from the initial outbreak. Media coverage in such phases is not driven solely by immediacy but increasingly by interpretive stabilization, where narratives are repeated, refined, and normalized. This temporal dimension is crucial because it is through sustained coverage that particular meanings of violence—such as responsibility, legitimacy, and victimhood—remain settled in public discourse.

Framing theory provides a useful lens for analysing these processes. The foundational work by Entman conceptualizes framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality (Entman, 1993), while Stephen D. Reese extends this understanding by emphasizing frames as persistent, socially shared organizing principles that link individual texts to broader cultural structures (Stephen D. Reese, 2001, 2006). Reese's model is particularly relevant for examining conflict reporting beyond immediate events, as it foregrounds durability, symbolic resonance, and structural coherence across time. However, existing framing research has largely focused on identifying dominant frames or measuring their effects, with limited attention to how frames evolve, stabilize, or break down in prolonged or post-conflict contexts. In digital news environments characterized by information disorder, rapid circulation, and uneven verification practices, framing processes may not only organize meaning but also produce epistemic instability. This raises an important but underexplored question: what happens when framing processes fail?

This study addresses this gap by examining how ethnic violence in Manipur is framed in two prominent regional digital news platforms—The Sangai Express and The Frontier Manipur—during the period January to March 2025, nearly two years after the initial outbreak. This timeframe is analytically significant because it captures a post-escalation phase, where coverage is shaped less by breaking events and more by narrative persistence, retrospective interpretation, and discursive normalization.

Using Reese's six framing characteristics as a processual analytical framework, the study investigates how frames are organized, shared, and sustained across time, and how these dynamics differ across platforms. Beyond identifying dominant frames, the analysis focuses on framing persistence and structural variation, enabling a comparative understanding of how local media construct conflict narratives in a digitally mediated environment.

Crucially, the study introduces the concept of distortion as an emergent framing phenomenon. Rather than treating distortion as a function of bias or intentional misinformation, it conceptualizes distortion as arising from breakdowns within framing processes themselves—for example, when persistence reinforces partial truths, organizational structures link unrelated events, or verification practices fail under conditions of uncertainty. In this sense, distortion is not external to framing but produced through its internal dynamics. By situating framing within a temporally extended and conflict-sensitive context, this study contributes to framing scholarship in three ways. First, it shifts analytical focus from static frame identification to dynamic framing processes over time. Second, it empirically demonstrates how Reese's model can be operationalized to capture persistence and structural variation in regional digital journalism. Third, it

advances a conceptual intervention by identifying distortion as a limitation of framing theory, thereby linking framing research with emerging debates on misinformation, epistemic reliability, and media ethics in conflict reporting.

Research Problem

While framing studies have extensively examined how media construct conflict narratives, less attention has been paid to how these frames persist and evolve in post-conflict periods, when immediate violence subsides but interpretive struggles continue. This temporal gap is analytically significant: nearly two years after the 2023 Manipur violence, media coverage is no longer driven by immediacy but by narrative stabilization and retrospective meaning-making. It is within this phase that framing persistence—and potential distortion—becomes most visible.

Research Objective

To analyze how framing processes persist, stabilize, and generate distortion in post-conflict news coverage of Manipur conflict using Reese's framework.

Research Question

How do framing processes—operating through Reese's characteristics—persist, stabilize, and produce distortion in post-conflict coverage of Manipur?

Review of Literature

Framing theory has been widely used in media and communication research to understand how news texts shape public interpretations of social reality. Goffman's (1974) foundational work conceptualized frames as principles of organization that structure experience. Entman (1993) built on this by identifying key framing functions—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—that influence how audiences make sense of events. Early contributions by Gitlin (1980), Gamson and Modigliani (1989), and Pan and Kosicki (1993) extended framing analysis across political communication, cultural studies, and journalism, demonstrating how media narratives shape public discourse and institutional power relations.

Reese's (2001, 2006) framing model is particularly relevant for this study because it operationalizes frames as socially shared and persistent interpretive structures that link individual news texts to broader cultural and institutional contexts. Unlike purely textual approaches, Reese's framework foregrounds the durability and cultural embeddedness of news frames, making it well suited for analysing how sustained coverage of an ongoing conflict produces shared meanings over time. Recent scholarship has advanced framing studies in digital media environments and under conditions of information disorder. A narrative review of media framing in digital contexts highlights how social media, cultural contexts, and platform dynamics shape public perception and behavioural responses, stressing variations in cross-cultural framing effects and the influence of metaphors and emotional cues in narrative construction (Hutagalung & Nurhasanah, 2025).

Computational and large-scale studies identify differences in war versus peace framing across global news outlets using advanced linguistic and machine learning

techniques, revealing that media may focus more on conflict than on reconciliation narratives, with implications for audience perception and polarization (Kaur & Arora, 2025). Such work underscores the need to consider linguistic and computational framing elements alongside traditional qualitative analyses. An emerging area of research examines the interplay between framing and misinformation in digital news ecosystems. Studies leveraging framing theory in computational contexts demonstrate that shifts in narrative frames can transform accurate information into misinformation, particularly on user-generated platforms where algorithmic amplification can distort public understanding (Wang et al., 2025). This body of work reveals how framing not only shapes interpretations but can also be manipulated to generate misleading narratives, bridging framing theory with misinformation detection and ethical concerns in digital journalism.

Other recent media framing studies emphasize methodological innovation and temporal dynamics. For example, new analytical frameworks combine framing theory with text mining and network analysis to trace the evolution of frames over time, showing how frames emerge, change, and interact in shifting news environments (Cobo, 2025). Research in print journalism also highlights the role of headlines as framing devices that guide readers' interpretations even before they engage with full articles, illustrating the multi-layered nature of framing in news production (Chowdhury, 2025). Additionally, framing research has been extended to policy narratives and organizational communication, further demonstrating its applicability across media systems and institutional contexts (Study on media policy narratives, 2025).

Within conflict and crisis reporting specifically, framing studies have documented a tendency toward state-centric and security frames at the expense of humanitarian or peace-oriented perspectives. Comparative analyses in health crises (e.g., COVID-19) and political conflict contexts demonstrate that media frames evolve across phases of public crises, influencing public trust and institutional engagement (Jin, Hong, & Kang, 2025). Moreover, research in experimental contexts shows that episodic and thematic frames can differentially shape public attitudes depending on trust in institutions and social identity cues (Koivula & Marttila, 2024), reinforcing the idea that framing effects are context-dependent and mediated by broader social dynamics. Despite this expanding literature, there remains a gap in systematic, text-grounded analyses of sustained regional news coverage of ethnic conflicts—especially in South Asian contexts like Manipur—using comprehensive models such as Reese's framing characteristics. Most existing research either focuses on national or international media or addresses framing impacts in a general crisis context, rather than examining how local digital outlets construct and sustain interpretive narratives over time. Furthermore, while several studies engage with framing in digital environments and misinformation, few explicitly integrate these insights with qualitative analyses of editorial routines and structural narrative strategies.

This study responds to these gaps by applying Reese's six framing characteristics to examine how digital news media in Manipur frame ethnic violence over an extended period, thereby bridging qualitative framing analysis with insights from recent computational and digital media research. By foregrounding both dominant frames and framing dynamics—including opportunities and risks of distortion—this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of media framing in conflict journalism and digital news ecosystems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the social constructionist tradition, particularly the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), which conceptualizes reality as socially produced through processes of meaning-making, institutionalization, and legitimation. Within this framework, language and communication are not neutral carriers of information but constitutive mechanisms through which social reality is constructed, stabilized, and rendered intelligible. News media function as central institutions in this process by transforming complex and often ambiguous events into structured narratives that can be publicly recognized and shared (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Tuchman's (1978) assertion that news is not a mirror of reality but a constructed representation further reinforces this perspective. News production involves routinized practices of selection, organization, and presentation that convert contingent events into seemingly coherent and objective accounts. These practices do not merely describe reality; they actively define what counts as relevant, credible, and meaningful. In conflict contexts, such processes are particularly consequential, as they shape how violence, responsibility, and legitimacy are publicly understood (Tuchman, 1978).

Framing theory operates within this broader constructionist paradigm by specifying the mechanisms through which meaning is organized within media texts. While Entman (1993) emphasizes framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of reality, Reese (2001, 2006) conceptualizes frames as persistent, socially shared organizing principles that operate across texts and institutional contexts. Reese's model is especially relevant to this study because it foregrounds the durability and structural coherence of frames, enabling an analysis of how meaning is stabilized over time rather than within isolated instances of reporting (Reese, 2001, 2006).

However, if reality is constructed through mediated processes, then the reliability of that construction is contingent upon the integrity of those processes. The same mechanisms that produce coherence and shared meaning can also generate epistemic instability under certain conditions—particularly in digital news environments characterized by rapid circulation, uneven verification, and hybrid information ecologies (Wang et al., 2025; Shahbazi & Sørensen, 2024).

Building on this premise, the present study introduces the concept of distortion as an extension of the constructionist-framing nexus. Distortion is understood not as an external deviation from accurate representation, but as a potential outcome of the very processes through which meaning is constructed. When framing mechanisms—such as persistence, narrative organization, and shared interpretive patterns—operate under conditions of epistemic strain, they may produce representations that are internally coherent yet empirically unreliable (Reese, 2006; Chong & Druckman, 2010).

In this sense, framing is not only a mechanism of meaning-making but also a site of epistemic risk. This theoretical integration enables the study to move beyond descriptive framing analysis toward an epistemic critique of media representation in conflict settings (Cobo, 2025). If media representations are socially constructed, their epistemic reliability is contingent upon the processes through which they are produced. This implies that the same framing mechanisms that generate coherence and shared meaning may also produce

distortion when operating under conditions of epistemic strain. Distortion, therefore, emerges as an inherent possibility within the construction of mediated reality, rather than as an external deviation from it.

Distortion is defined here as an emergent outcome of framing processes in which the internal mechanisms of framing—such as persistence, narrative organization, and shared interpretive patterns—produce epistemically unreliable or misleading representations of events. Unlike misinformation, distortion is not necessarily intentional; rather, it arises from structural and procedural breakdowns within journalistic meaning-making (Wang et al., 2025; Campbell, 2024).

In this study, distortion is identified through three key indicators:

- a. Weak Verification – the presence of claims, attributions, or causal assertions that lack sufficient sourcing or evidentiary support (Shahbazi & Sørensen, 2024).
- b. Ambiguous Attribution – unclear or incomplete identification of actors, responsibilities, or sources, resulting in interpretive uncertainty (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).
- c. Misleading Narrative Linkage – the construction of causal or thematic connections between events that are not adequately substantiated, often through narrative clustering or sequencing (Reese, 2001; Chong & Druckman, 2010).

These forms of distortion do not originate outside framing but emerge from its internal dynamics—particularly when persistence reinforces partial truths, when shared frames normalize assumptions, and when narrative structures prioritize coherence over verification (Reese, 2006; Wang et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design to examine the discursive construction of ethnic violence in Manipur within regional digital journalism. The analysis is temporally situated between 1 January and 31 March 2025, a post-escalation phase in which news production shifted from event-driven immediacy to processes of narrative stabilization and interpretive consolidation (Gitlin, 1980; Reese, 2001). In such contexts, framing operated less as a reactive mechanism and more as a structuring logic through which meaning turned into sedimented and naturalized within public discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). This temporal positioning is analytically critical, as it foregrounds the durability and normalization of frames rather than their emergence.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to construct a dataset of 107 articles from The Sangai Express and The Frontier Manipur, using conflict-related keywords that capture both episodic events and structural dimensions of the violence. The asymmetry in output between the two platforms is not treated as a methodological limitation but as an empirical condition reflective of divergent editorial economies. High-frequency reporting enable cumulative framing through repetition and narrative reinforcement, whereas low-frequency analytical reporting privilege interventionist critique over discursive continuity (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Edelman, 1993; Reese, 2001). This distinction is analytically central, as it reveals how institutional routines shape not only what is reported, but how meaning is organized and stabilized.

The study is theoretically anchored in Reese's conceptualization of frames as organizing, socially shared, and persistent structures that operate across texts and institutional contexts (Reese, 2001, 2006). However, rather than treating these characteristics as static categories, they are reconfigured here as processual dimensions observable through textual practices—specifically narrative clustering, lexical patterning, sourcing hierarchies, and temporal sequencing. This reconceptualization responds to critiques of framing research that caution against reductive categorization and call for greater attention to framing as a dynamic, relational process embedded within communicative systems (Chong & Druckman, 2010; Cobo, 2025).

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds through iterative close reading and comparative interpretation. Initial coding identified recurrent narrative configurations and discursive patterns, which were then mapped onto Reese's framing dimensions to examine how meaning is structured, circulated, and stabilized. The emphasis is not on frequency but on function—how frames operate across texts to produce coherence, authority, and interpretive closure (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Comparative analysis is subsequently employed to interrogate divergences in organizational coherence, persistence, and narrative structuring across the two platforms.

Crucially, this study extends conventional framing analysis by incorporating an epistemic dimension that interrogates moments of breakdown within framing processes. Instances of weak verification, ambiguous attribution, and decontextualized narrative linkage have been analytically treated as indicators of distortion. Rather than conceptualizing distortion as external to framing (e.g., as bias or misinformation), it is understood here as an emergent property of framing under conditions of epistemic strain. This approach aligns with recent scholarship on information disorder, which demonstrates how journalistic practices in digital environments are increasingly shaped by speed, uncertainty, and hybrid information ecologies (Campbell, 2024; Shahbazi & Sørensen, 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

By foregrounding both the operation and the failure of framing, the methodology repositions framing analysis as a form of epistemic critique. It moves beyond the question of how meaning is constructed to interrogate the conditions under which that meaning becomes unstable, contested, or unreliable. In doing so, the study not only applies Reese's framework but also tests its limits within the context of conflict reporting, where the stakes of representation are both analytically and materially significant. In this study, distortion is treated as an analytical category rather than a normative judgment. It is operationalized through identifiable textual indicators, including weak verification, ambiguous attribution, and misleading narrative linkage. These indicators enable the systematic examination of how framing processes may produce epistemically unstable or misleading representations within news discourse.

Findings and Analysis

The analysis shows that framing in post-conflict Manipur coverage operates not as a set of discrete textual devices, but as a relational and temporally extended process through which meaning is stabilized, circulated, and naturalized within public discourse (Reese, 2001; Entman, 1993). Rather than merely reflecting events, news narratives actively constitute the epistemic conditions under which the conflict becomes intelligible,

delimiting what can be known, emphasized, or obscured (Tuchman, 1978; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this sense, framing functions less as representation and more as a structuring logic that organizes both perception and interpretation.

A central finding is the overwhelming dominance of security and political frames in both of these digital news outlets as primary organizing principles across both platforms. These frames do not simply categorize content; they establish the interpretive boundaries within which the conflict is rendered meaningful. Security framing systematically outweighs state action, militarized intervention, and law-and-order discourse, thereby embedding the conflict within a governance paradigm oriented toward control and stabilization. Political framing, meanwhile, foregrounds leadership crises, institutional dysfunction, and struggles over legitimacy, reframing the conflict as a failure of governance rather than as an outcome of historically embedded social tensions. This convergence reflects what Iyengar identifies as the interplay between episodic and thematic framing, which, in this case, produces a state-centric interpretive regime that marginalizes structural causality and depoliticizes underlying grievances (Iyengar, 1991).

However, the operation of these dominant frames is not uniform, revealing the significance of organizational form in shaping meaning. The Sangai Express exhibits a high degree of narrative coherence through systematic clustering of events across time. Political statements, protest actions, and security interventions are recurrently linked within unified narrative sequences, producing a cumulative framing effect that aligns with Reese's conceptualization of frames as organizing principles that extend beyond individual texts (Reese, 2001). This cumulative logic generates what may be termed interpretive continuity, wherein disparate incidents are rendered as components of a singular, evolving crisis narrative. The effect is not merely informational but epistemic: the conflict is presented as coherent, governable, and progressively resolvable.

By contrast, The Frontier Manipur adopts an episodic and interventionist mode of reporting that disrupts such continuity. Its coverage foregrounds discrete analytical interventions—often focused on governance critique or accountability—without consistently embedding them within a broader narrative arc. While this approach enhances critical scrutiny and aligns with journalism's watchdog function (Edelman, 1993), it simultaneously produces interpretive fragmentation. As Pan and Kosicki argue, the absence of narrative integration constrains the audience's capacity to construct coherent meaning, resulting in a form of discursive discontinuity in which events remain analytically rich yet cumulatively disjointed (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). This contrast underscores that framing is not solely a function of content but of narrative organization across time.

Framing further operates through underlying normative principles that structure interpretation beyond explicit textual content. Across both platforms, the recurrent frames appeal to national security, democratic accountability, and moral responsibility that function as interpretive anchors that guide evaluative judgment (Entman, 1993). However, these principles are not neutrally applied. Their selective deployment reveals their ideological contingency, reinforcing Hall's argument that media discourse naturalizes particular value systems while marginalizing alternative interpretive frameworks (Hall, 1982). Security imperatives, for instance, are frequently applied to legitimize coercive state action, while democratic critique is selectively mobilized to personalize institutional failure

rather than interrogate systemic inequalities. In this sense, framing principles operate as mechanisms of both emphasis and closure.

The recurrence of similar frames across both platforms points to the socially shared nature of framing, a core component of Reese's model (Reese, 2001). Narratives of security threat, leadership crisis, and youth unrest circulate across outlets, indicating their cultural resonance and discursive legitimacy. Yet this convergence also exposes the normative risks of shared framing. In several instances, representations of particular communities rely on generalized or decontextualized descriptors, contributing to symbolic marginalization and the reproduction of social hierarchies. Such patterns are consistent with existing research on conflict media, which demonstrates how framing can reinforce dominant power structures even in the absence of explicit bias (Sieff, 2003; Malavika, 2025). Shared frames, therefore, function not only as sites of cultural coherence but also as mechanisms of ideological reproduction.

Persistence emerges as a critical mechanism through which framing acquires authority and durability. Frames are reiterated across the temporal span of the news stories dataset in ways that gradually normalize specific interpretations of the conflict. Recurrent narratives of leadership crisis personalize accountability, while repeated emphasis on policy initiatives—such as anti-drug campaigns—moralize governance discourse. This process aligns with Gitlin's argument that repetition transforms contested meanings into taken-for-granted realities, thereby narrowing interpretive plurality (Gitlin, 1980). At the same time, the persistence of peace-oriented narratives introduces an ambivalent dynamic: while ostensibly signalling reconciliation, such repetition may also reflect discursive fatigue, wherein calls for peace function as rhetorical closure rather than substantive engagement (Gamson et al., 1992). Persistence, therefore, operates as both a stabilizing and constraining force.

In contrast, symbolic framing remains markedly underdeveloped across both platforms. The predominance of literal, event-driven reporting limits the use of metaphor, cultural signification, or narrative symbolism. While this restraint may reflect the sensitivities of conflict reporting, it also constrains the depth of meaning-making. Symbolic frames, as Gamson and Modigliani argue, enable the connection of specific events to broader cultural narratives and moral imaginaries (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Their relative absence in the Manipur coverage suggests a narrowing of interpretive horizons, where meaning remains confined to immediate events rather than extended into broader cultural or historical contexts.

Structural framing further differentiates the two platforms through their distinct approaches to narrative sequencing. The Sangai Express consistently constructs narratives that follow a linear progression from conflict escalation to institutional response and, at times, reconciliation. This sequencing produces a sense of narrative closure and aligns with journalistic conventions that privilege coherence and resolution (Tuchman, 1978). In contrast, The Frontier Manipur frequently disrupts such sequencing by foregrounding critique without resolution, resulting in narratives that are analytically incisive yet structurally open-ended. This divergence illustrates that framing operates not only through selection and emphasis but through temporal ordering, shaping how audiences perceive causality, progression, and potential resolution (Reese, 2001; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Taken together, these findings suggest that framing in post-conflict contexts operates through the interaction of organizational coherence, shared cultural resonance, and temporal persistence, all of which contribute to the stabilization of meaning. However, this stabilization is neither neutral nor complete. It is structured by institutional routines, ideological assumptions, and epistemic constraints that both enable and limit the production of knowledge about conflict. Framing, therefore, must be understood as a dynamic and contested process that not only organizes meaning but also regulates the conditions under which meaning becomes authoritative, legitimate, and, at times, unquestioned. In addition to examining dominant frames and their persistence, the analysis identifies instances of distortion as an outcome of framing processes, observable through breakdowns in verification, attribution, and narrative coherence.

Application of Reese's Framing Characteristics

When systematically applied, Reese's framing characteristics reveal both the strengths and limitations of framing as an analytical model in conflict discourse. The organizing function is most clearly evident in *The Sangai Express*, where narrative categorization produces cumulative meaning across texts. This supports Reese's assertion that frames operate across discourse rather than within isolated messages (Reese, 2001). However, the weaker organizational coherence in *The Frontier Manipur* suggests that framing may also operate through disruption, raising questions about whether coherence is a necessary condition for framing or merely one of its possible manifestations.

Framing principles have been consistently invoked across both platforms, yet their selective deployment highlights their ideological contingency. Rather than functioning as neutral interpretive guides, these principles reflect underlying power relations and editorial priorities, reinforcing Hall argument that media discourse is inherently structured by ideological struggle (Hall, 1982). Shared frames demonstrate the cultural embeddedness of framing, but also expose its normative risks. The recurrence of particular narratives across platforms suggests a convergence of journalistic assumptions, which may limit the diversity of perspectives available to audiences. Persistence, while central to Reese's model, emerges here as a double-edged process. While it stabilizes meaning, it also narrows interpretive possibilities by privileging certain narratives over others. This raises important questions about the relationship between persistence and epistemic closure. Symbolic framing, although theoretically significant, appears underutilized in practice, suggesting a gap between conceptual models of framing and the realities of conflict reporting. Structural framing highlights the importance of narrative sequencing, demonstrating that meaning is shaped not only by what is said, but by how events are arranged over time.

Distortion as an Emergent Framing Outcome

The identification of distortion as an emergent outcome of framing processes is a significant output of this study. Unlike traditional frames, which organize meaning through selection and emphasis, distortion arises when the internal coherence of framing breaks down. Empirically, distortion manifests in instances of unverified attribution, ambiguous actor identification, and unsupported narrative linkage. These are not merely technical flaws; they represent moments where the epistemic foundations of journalism are destabilized. Under such conditions, persistence reinforces partial truths, shared frames

amplify uncontextualized assumptions, and organizational structures produce misleading causal connections.

Centrally, distortion does not appear to be driven by intentional misinformation. Rather, it emerges from structural constraints within digital journalism, including pressures of immediacy, limited verification capacity, and the circulation of hybrid information environments where verified and unverified content coexist (Campbell, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). This aligns with broader research on information disorder, which highlights the systemic nature of epistemic failure in contemporary media ecosystems (Shahbazi & Sørensen, 2024). Conceptually, this finding exposes a limitation within Reese's model. While the framework effectively explains how frames organize and sustain meaning, it does not account for conditions under which framing becomes internally inconsistent or epistemically unreliable (Reese, 2006). By introducing distortion as an analytical category, this study extends framing theory beyond its traditional focus on coherence and stability, incorporating the possibility of breakdown and failure.

In doing so, the analysis bridges framing research with broader debates on misinformation, media ethics, and epistemic responsibility. In conflict-sensitive environments, where media narratives can shape public perception and intergroup relations, the consequences of distortion are not merely discursive but materially significant (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). Framing, therefore, must be understood not only as a mechanism of meaning construction, but also as a site of potential epistemic risk (Krastev et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

Dominant Frames in Coverage

Frame Category	<i>The Sangai Express</i> (n=94)	The Frontier Manipur (n=13)	Analytical Interpretation
Security Militarisation /	72% (High)	54% (Moderate)	Normalizes state-centric governance and coercive control
Political Contestation	65% (High)	69% (High)	Frames conflict through leadership crisis and legitimacy struggles
Humanitarian Crisis	36% (Moderate)	23% (Low)	Marginalizes lived experiences and civilian suffering
Economic Impact	31% (Moderate)	15% (Low)	Recasts conflict as developmental disruption rather than social rupture
Reconciliation / Peace	35% (Moderate)	15% (Low)	Functions as episodic moral

			closure rather than sustained narrative
Youth / Civil Society	19% (Low)	15% (Low)	Limits agency attribution to non-state actors

Table 1: Dominant framing patterns in post-conflict coverage of Manipur (Jan–Mar 2025)

The distribution of dominant frames across the dataset reveals a clear hierarchy in the structuring of conflict narratives. As shown in Table 1, security and political frames overwhelmingly dominate coverage in both The Sangai Express and The Frontier Manipur, indicating a strong alignment with state-centric and institutional perspectives (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). This pattern suggests that framing operates not merely through selection but through the prioritization of particular interpretive logics that define the boundaries of intelligibility within which the conflict is understood (Reese, 2001).

Similarly, humanitarian and civil society-oriented frames remain comparatively marginal, pointing to a systematic underrepresentation of lived experiences and grassroots agency. This imbalance reinforces existing critiques within conflict journalism that media narratives tend to privilege authority-driven accounts while backgrounding structural inequalities and everyday suffering (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Malavika, 2025). The above table is therefore an evidence of how framing hierarchies shape the epistemic contours of conflict reporting.

Discussion

This study advances framing scholarship by demonstrating that the analysis of post-conflict media cannot be confined to identifying dominant frames, but must instead interrogate the processes through which framing stabilizes, fragments, and, under certain conditions, fails. By applying Reese’s (2001, 2006) framework to the Manipur case, the findings reveal that framing operates as a dynamic and uneven system of meaning production shaped by institutional routines, temporal continuity, and epistemic constraints, rather than as a stable set of interpretive devices.

A central implication of the analysis is the persistence of state-centric interpretive regimes within conflict reporting. The dominance of security and political frames reflects not merely editorial preference but a broader structural orientation within journalism that privileges authority, governance, and institutional legitimacy as primary sites of meaning (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). This orientation effectively narrows the interpretive field by marginalizing structural inequalities, historical grievances, and everyday civilian experiences. As a result, the conflict is discursively reconstructed as a problem of administrative management rather than as a socially embedded crisis rooted in contested identities and resource distribution (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Malavika, 2025). This finding reinforces longstanding critiques of conflict journalism, while extending them into the temporal domain of post-conflict coverage, where such frames become normalized rather than contested.

The comparative dimension of the study further underscores the importance of organizational form in shaping framing outcomes. The Sangai Express exemplifies a model of cumulative framing in which narrative coherence is achieved through systematic

clustering and temporal continuity. This aligns closely with Reese's conceptualization of frames as organizing principles that operate across texts and over time (Reese, 2001). However, this coherence should not be uncritically equated with analytical strength. The production of narrative continuity can also function as a mechanism of epistemic closure, wherein alternative interpretations are subsumed within a dominant storyline that appears internally consistent but may obscure complexity.

In contrast, *The Frontier Manipur* illustrates a fragmented but critically interventionist mode of framing. Its episodic structure disrupts narrative continuity and foregrounds accountability, thereby expanding the space for critique. Yet this fragmentation also limits cumulative meaning-making, raising important questions about the trade-off between critical disruption and interpretive coherence (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Taken together, these contrasting models suggest that framing can be understood not only in terms of content or emphasis, but as a function of narrative organization, with different structural configurations producing distinct epistemic effects.

The study also contributes to framing theory by foregrounding the role of shared and persistent frames in shaping cultural intelligibility. The recurrence of narratives such as security threat and leadership failure across platforms demonstrates how frames acquire authority through social circulation and repetition (Reese, 2001; Gitlin, 1980). However, this sharedness is not neutral. It reflects underlying ideological alignments that can reproduce symbolic hierarchies and reinforce dominant social narratives, particularly in ethnically sensitive contexts (Hall, 1982; Sieff, 2003). Persistence, similarly, operates as both a stabilizing and constraining force, transforming contingent interpretations into normalized truths while simultaneously narrowing the scope of alternative perspectives.

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of this study lies in its identification of distortion as an emergent limitation of framing processes. Existing framing literature has largely assumed that frames function as coherent organizing principles that structure meaning in predictable ways (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2006). However, the findings demonstrate that framing can also produce epistemic instability when its internal mechanisms—such as persistence, sharedness, and organizational coherence—interact under conditions of weak verification and informational uncertainty. Distortion, in this sense, is not external to framing but produced through its internal dynamics. This reconceptualization has important implications for both theory and practice. It suggests that framing analysis must move beyond questions of selection and emphasis to consider the conditions under which framing becomes unreliable or ethically compromised. In digital news environments characterized by rapid circulation, hybrid information ecologies, and uneven verification practices, such breakdowns are not exceptional but increasingly systemic (Campbell, 2024; Shahbazi & Sørensen, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). By integrating distortion into framing analysis, this study bridges the gap between traditional framing theory and contemporary debates on misinformation, epistemic trust, and media ethics.

More broadly, the findings reinforce the need to conceptualize framing as a socially consequential practice embedded within power relations, institutional constraints, and cultural contexts. Media representations of conflict do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape how conflict is understood, remembered, and responded to (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). In post-conflict settings, where narratives are less

contested and more normalized, the stakes of framing become particularly significant, as they influence not only public perception but also the possibilities for reconciliation, accountability, and social cohesion. These findings suggest that Reese's model, while effective in explaining how frames organize and stabilize meaning, does not adequately account for conditions under which framing produces epistemic instability. The concept of distortion addresses this limitation by incorporating the possibility of breakdown within framing processes.

Conclusion

This study examined how ethnic violence in Manipur is framed in regional digital journalism through the analytical lens of Reese's framing characteristics, with a specific focus on the post-conflict period between January and March 2025. By moving beyond the identification of dominant frames to analyze framing as a dynamic and temporally extended process, the study demonstrates that media representations of conflict are structured by patterns of persistence, organizational coherence, and shared cultural resonance rather than by isolated textual choices.

The findings reveal a clear dominance of security and political frames, reflecting a broader state-centric orientation in conflict reporting that prioritizes governance and institutional narratives over lived experience and structural causality. At the same time, significant variation in organizational and structural framing across platforms highlights how different editorial logics produce distinct epistemic effects—ranging from cumulative coherence to interpretive fragmentation.

Most importantly, the study introduces distortion as an emergent analytical category that exposes a limitation within existing framing theory. By demonstrating how framing processes can produce epistemic instability under conditions of weak verification and informational uncertainty, the study extends Reese's model beyond its emphasis on coherence and persistence to incorporate the possibility of breakdown and failure. This contribution is particularly relevant in contemporary digital media environments, where the boundaries between verified information and speculative narrative are increasingly blurred.

The study thus makes three key contributions. First, it shifts the analytical focus of framing research from static identification to dynamic process, emphasizing how frames evolve, stabilize, and interact over time. Second, it empirically demonstrates the applicability of Reese's framework in a regional, conflict-sensitive context, highlighting both its strengths and its limitations. Third, it advances a conceptual intervention by theorizing distortion as an inherent risk within framing processes, thereby linking framing theory with broader concerns about misinformation, epistemic reliability, and media ethics.

In doing so, the study underscores that framing is not merely a tool of representation but a mechanism of epistemic power that shapes the conditions under which reality is constructed, contested, and understood. Future research on framing—particularly in conflict and digital media contexts—must therefore account not only for how frames organize meaning, but also for how they may fail, distort, or destabilize it.

Implications for Media Practice

The findings carry significant implications for journalism in conflict settings, particularly in relation to the structural biases embedded within framing practices. The dominance of security and political frames underscores the need to rebalance coverage through the sustained inclusion of humanitarian and everyday perspectives, which remain systematically marginalized despite their centrality to conflict experience. Without such recalibration, media narratives risk reproducing state-centric interpretations that obscure structural inequalities and lived realities.

Organizational framing practices—especially narrative clustering and temporal sequencing—also warrant critical attention. While these strategies can enhance interpretive coherence, they may simultaneously produce epistemic closure by privileging particular causal logics and suppressing alternative readings. Journalistic practice must therefore negotiate the tension between coherence and complexity, ensuring that narrative structure does not foreclose critical interpretation.

The relative absence of symbolic framing further indicates a missed opportunity for deeper cultural engagement. More reflexive use of narrative and symbolic resources could enable reporting that situates conflict within broader historical and social imaginaries, without resorting to sensationalism or polarization. Most critically, the identification of distortion foregrounds the ethical and epistemic responsibilities of journalism in digital environments. The prevalence of weak verification, ambiguous attribution, and decontextualized claims highlights the need for heightened rigor in sourcing, contextualization, and evidentiary standards. In conflict-sensitive contexts, where narratives can have material consequences, lapses in verification do not merely misinform but risk exacerbating tensions.

Taken together, these implications suggest that conflict reporting must move beyond procedural objectivity toward a more reflexive, conflict-sensitive model of journalism—one that recognizes framing not only as a mechanism of meaning-making but as a site of epistemic risk.

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