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# A scoping review of anglophone scholarship on trauma and journalism in sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract**

This scoping review maps anglophone scholarship on trauma and journalism in and/or about sub-Saharan Africa published between 1990 and 2025. Rather than assuming a single universal definition of trauma, the review examines how trauma is implicitly and explicitly conceptualised within this literature. Drawing on 139 peer-reviewed journal articles identified through searches of four academic databases, the review analyses patterns in trauma type, methodology, country focus, authorship location, and media platform. The findings indicate that trauma is conceptualised inconsistently across the literature, with only 28% of studies explicitly employing the term. Trauma coverage nevertheless closely mirrors regional crisis contexts. Conflict and war dominate studies focused on Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia, while political and societal trauma cluster around election-related violence in Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. Violence and crime, particularly gender-based violence, are most prominent in South African scholarship. Since 2010, journalist safety has emerged as a growing area of concern, particularly in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and South Africa, while health-related trauma remains comparatively marginal despite the continent's significant disease burden. Qualitative methods dominate the reviewed literature, while quantitative and mixed-methods research remain limited. Patterns of authorship further suggest differences in knowledge production in which Africa-based scholars more frequently produce locally grounded qualitative research, while non-Africa-based scholars

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disproportionately publish conceptual or theoretical work. The review identifies important conceptual, geographic, and methodological gaps and argues for more contextually grounded and trauma-informed approaches to journalism research relating to sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords**
trauma, scoping review, sub-Saharan Africa, journalism

## Introduction and rationale

Journalists across the world often focus on telling stories about horrific events that impact their communities. In fact, approximately 70% of people globally will experience a potentially traumatic event during their lifetime (Kessler et al., 2017) of which a minority will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result (Koenen et al., 2017). An estimated 3.9% of the world population has experienced PTSD at some point in their lives (Koenen et al., 2017). While traumatic experiences affect populations globally, certain professions face heightened exposure to potentially traumatic events through the nature of their work. Journalists, for example, bear witness to war, illness and pandemics, poverty, criminal activities, accidents, and natural and man-made disasters including humanitarian crises (Heywood et al., 2024; Yaméogo et al., 2024). They work as interpreters for their communities explaining both the events themselves and societal responses to them. Moreover, journalists themselves are indirectly and directly exposed to physically and psychologically dangerous situations as part of their professional duties (Bradley and Heywood, 2024). Hence, the field integrating trauma studies and journalism has exploded as a legitimate discourse of study in the last two decades. Trauma is understood differently across disciplines, professional contexts, and societies. In psychology and psychiatry, trauma is often used to refer either to exposure to overwhelming stressors, such as war, violence, abuse, or disaster, or to the psychological, emotional, social, and physiological responses associated with such experiences (e.g., Blehm, 2025; Engelhard et al., 2026; Krupnick, 2019; Saraiya et al., 2025). Within journalism studies, trauma may additionally function as a framing category through which suffering, crisis, violence, and journalist experiences are interpreted and narrated. For the purposes of this review, trauma is understood broadly as encompassing both exposure to traumatic stressors and the consequences of that exposure. This includes experiences such as war, violence, disaster, repression, illness, and abuse, alongside their psychological, emotional, social, and professional effects. The review further recognises that trauma may be explicitly defined by authors or remain implicit within discussions of suffering, crisis, violence, and journalist safety. Rather than assuming a single universal definition of trauma, this scoping review examines how trauma is explicitly and implicitly conceptualised within anglophone scholarship relating to journalism and sub-Saharan Africa. Existing journalism and trauma scholarship has largely emerged from Global North contexts, particularly around war reporting, migration, disasters, and PTSD frameworks (Feinstein et al.,

2002; Osmann et al., 2020; Rentschler, 2009). However, these frameworks may not always fully account for culturally specific understandings of suffering, distress, resilience, and collective violence within African contexts.

Research on trauma across the continent has frequently focused on experiences such as war, political violence, interpersonal violence, sexual and gender-based violence, and childhood abuse (Byansi et al., 2023; Kuupiel et al., 2024; Machisa et al., 2016; Musisi and Kinyanda, 2020). At the same time, studies have highlighted the importance of cultural interpretations of distress, stigma surrounding mental illness, collective experiences of violence, and community-based coping mechanisms in shaping responses to traumatic events. Recent research on local journalism in conflict-affected West Africa illustrates these challenges. Heywood et al. (2024), for example, found that "trauma" is used in multiple and inconsistent ways in contexts where mental health disorders remain taboo. This reflects a broader tendency in journalism and trauma research to privilege diagnostic categories such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a framework that has dominated Global North studies of war, disaster and migration reporting (Feinstein et al., 2018; Osmann et al., 2020; Papadopoulou et al., 2022), yet does not always travel well across contexts. Journalists in the Sahel, for example, are increasingly required to report on conflict amid deteriorating security conditions, despite lacking formal training or psychological support, with consequent negative effects on their mental health. Comparable findings emerge from Burkina Faso, where Heywood et al. (2024) demonstrate how local reporters, deeply embedded in their communities, must adapt emotionally, professionally and even morally to survive amid escalating violence. Stigma further compounds the problem, as those affected may be ostracised by their communities (Alemu et al., 2023; Faleti and Akinlotan, 2025; Spittel et al., 2019). This aligns with research on the social and cultural aspects of mental health in Africa, which highlights the enduring stigma surrounding psychiatric illness and the reliance on non-biomedical forms of care (Sorsdahl et al., 2009; WHO, 2020). More broadly, perceptions of traumatic events in Africa are deeply shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors, producing distinctive interpretations, coping strategies, and expressions of distress. Research across African contexts has highlighted the importance of cultural interpretations of distress, collective experiences of violence, stigma surrounding mental illness, and the role of social and community-based coping mechanisms in shaping responses to traumatic events. PTSD among journalists has nevertheless received scholarly attention in African contexts (Feinstein et al., 2015). Despite the growing body of scholarship connecting journalism, conflict, violence, and emotional harm in African contexts, there has been limited synthesis of how trauma is conceptualised across anglophone journalism scholarship relating to sub-Saharan Africa. Trauma is sometimes explicitly defined and theorised (e.g Radoli, 2024), but in other cases remains implied through discussions of violence, crisis, repression, conflict, or journalist safety. This scoping review therefore maps the extant literature on trauma-related journalism scholarship relating to sub-Saharan Africa in order to identify conceptual, thematic, geographic, and methodological trends and gaps. Appropriate to a scoping review, the article identifies patterns and concepts as a foundation for future research development.

## Methods

### Overview

The use of concepts of trauma in anglophone journalism scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa was explored using a scoping review. A scoping review protocol was created and is outlined below. This article adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). Scoping review methodology was selected because the field remains conceptually and methodologically heterogeneous, making it better suited to mapping patterns, themes, and gaps across the literature. Peer-reviewed journal articles were selected because they represent an accessible and standardised form of scholarly communication across disciplines, facilitating consistent searching, screening, and comparison. The focus on journal articles improved comparability across a geographically and conceptually diverse body of scholarship.

### Eligibility criteria

For the current review, articles related directly to trauma and journalism within Sub-Saharan Africa were included. Eligible studies were full peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 1990 and 2025. The post-1990 timeframe was selected because it reflects major transformations in African media systems associated with post-Cold War political change, media liberalisation, and the expansion of journalism scholarship relating to conflict, crisis, and trauma. Only published journal articles were eligible: book chapters, book or article reviews, and biographical articles were excluded. Articles were considered eligible for inclusion if they discussed traumatic stressors or traumatic reactions in anglophone journalism scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa. Consistent with the broad conceptualisation of trauma adopted in this review, scholarship addressing traumatic stressors, trauma-related harm, or journalist exposure to violence and crisis was included regardless of whether the term "trauma" was explicitly used by the authors. Studies were required to discuss media representation or factual reporting of traumatic experiences, trauma experienced by journalists, and/or journalist psychological and physical safety. Peace and war journalism were included so long as trauma was explicitly mentioned or implied through the paper topic. African news organisations and African media reporting on conflicts in African regions and outside regions were included to capture how trauma is framed by African media within and outside of African regions. Articles could also include a focus on other countries outside Sub-Saharan Africa so long as the Sub-Saharan African context emerged strongly. To ensure analytical relevance, included studies were required to engage substantively with trauma, violence, emotional harm, crisis, or journalist safety as a central focus of the article rather than as a brief or incidental reference. To ensure depth of analysis in the included articles, trauma must be a central part of the thesis, rather than referenced in passing.

Exclusion criteria were applied to scholarship on cinema, literature or theory, cultural explanations of journalism, biographies, soap operas, dramatisations, or other

imaginative forms of media rather than factual reporting. Articles were also excluded if they were based on non-African news sources and also addressed topics or regions outside Sub-Saharan Africa. Articles primarily focused on political commentary, democracy building, or general journalism without explicit engagement with trauma as a topic were excluded. Further, articles on systemic fragility or democracy building without explicit references to trauma, were excluded.

## Information sources

An information specialist at the University of Sheffield conducted a comprehensive search of four citation databases from 1990-present (2025): The International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) via ProQuest, The Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA) via ProQuest, Scopus and PsycInfo (See Figure 1). These databases were selected because trauma research relating to journalism spans multiple disciplines, including journalism and media studies, communication, sociology, political science, and psychology. Together, the databases provided broad coverage of scholarship likely to engage with trauma, journalism, conflict, and media practice. The final search was conducted on April 14th, 2025.

## Search

A full electronic search strategy was developed and adapted for each database. The search strategies used index terms and free text terms to identify the following concepts: journalism (journalis* OR "the press" OR reporting OR broadcast* OR "news gathering"), Sub-Saharan Africa ("Sub saharan" OR "sub sahara" OR "Republic of Congo" OR Rwanda OR Burundi OR Sudan OR Kenya OR Tanzania OR Uganda OR Djibouti OR Eritrea OR Ethiopia OR Somalia OR Angola OR Botswana OR Lesotho OR Malawi OR Mozambique OR Namibia OR "South Africa" OR Swaziland OR Zambia OR Zimbabwe OR Benin OR "Burkina Faso" OR Cameroon OR Chad OR "Côte d'Ivoire" OR "Equatorial Guinea" OR Gabon OR "The Gambia" OR Ghana OR Guinea OR "Guinea-Bissau" OR Liberia OR Mali OR Mauritania OR Niger OR Nigeria OR Senegal OR "Sierra Leone" OR Togo OR "Cape Verde" OR Comoros OR Madagascar OR Mauritius OR "São Tomé and Príncipe" OR Seychelles OR Mayotte OR Réunion OR Afric*), and Trauma/Violence ((Atrocit* OR trauma OR ptsd OR "post traumatic stress disorder" OR "posttraumatic stress disorder" OR violence OR rape OR war OR crime OR terrorism OR extremism OR military OR "child abuse" OR "human rights" OR massacre* OR oppression OR suppression OR harassment OR conflict OR suffer* OR emotion).

## Selection of sources of evidence

All search results from the four databases were imported into Covidence for screening. Duplicates were identified and removed. Screening occurred in two stages. First, two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts. Conflicts were resolved with a third independent reviewer. At this stage, articles were excluded if they did not address

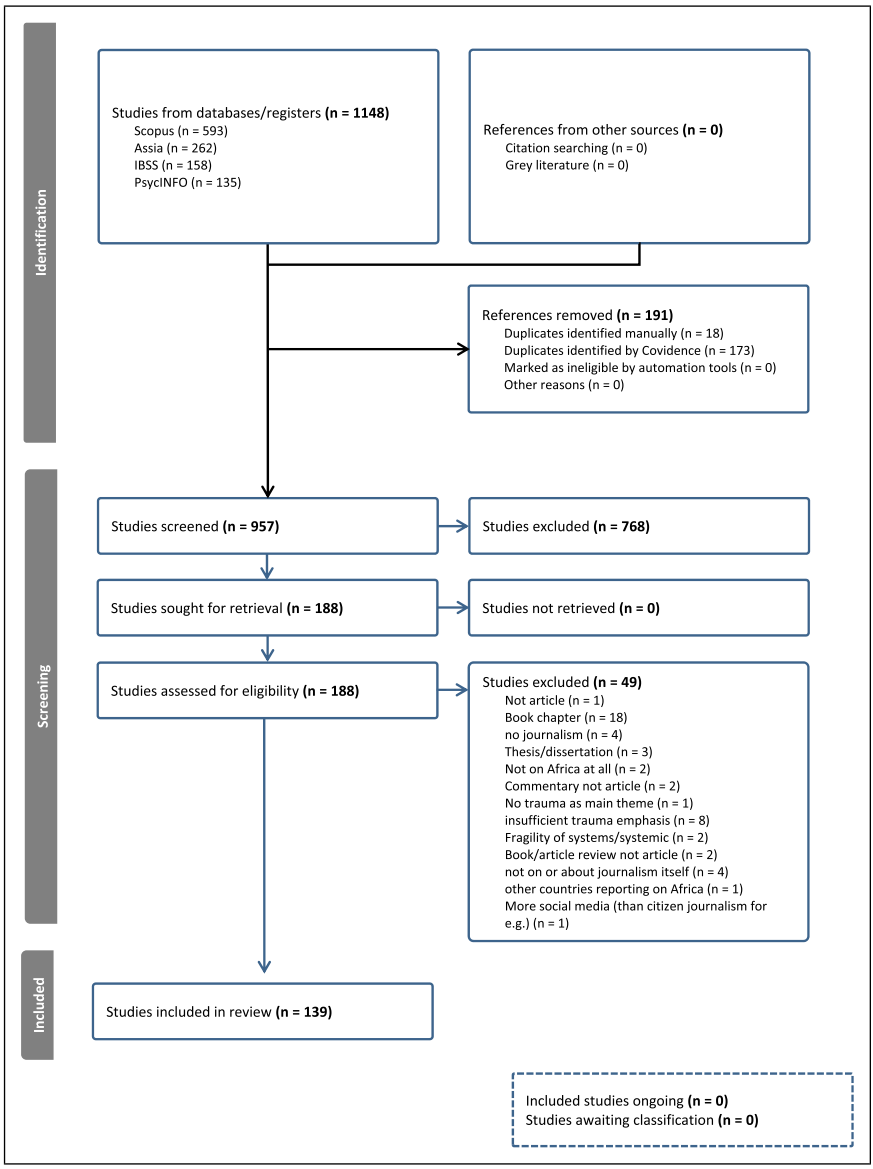



**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the literature search and study selection process across four bibliographic databases (IBSS, ASSIA, Scopus and PsycINFO), resulting in 139 studies included in the review.

trauma in the context of journalism, were not peer-reviewed or journal articles, or contained any other exclusion criteria. Second, full-text screening was conducted with two independent reviewers and conflicts were addressed by a third independent reviewer.

### Data charting process

A codebook to extract data was approved by the research team. The extraction process was conducted by two of the researchers (EH, MG). An initial data extraction of 10 articles chosen alphabetically from the Covidence list was conducted to check agreement with the codebook. Additional items were added to the codebook after discussion and research team approval. A further 15 articles were then coded and checked again. Researchers MG and EH then completed the data extraction coding. Initial pilot coding achieved 90% agreement across the coded variables, with disagreements resolved through discussion among the research team. The initial checks were confirmed by the third reviewer (EN).

### Data items

Extracted data included article characteristics (year of publication, origin of article (Africa/non-Africa), location/affiliation of first author, article type, type of media platform, type of trauma, sub-set of type of trauma, type of method used, year of data collection, country of study, focus on peace or conflict journalism, pedagogic focus, African News Organisation, and which. A single response option was used for the majority of the codes to characterise the article best. Multiple codes could be applied to the coding of trauma type, the media platform studied, and whether, and which, any African news organisations were mentioned. Coded items were then analysed using the pivot-table feature on Excel spreadsheets.

## Principle findings

After duplicates were removed (see Figure 1) and exclusion criteria were applied, 139 articles were included in the final analyses.

### Conceptualisations of trauma

The term "trauma" is seldom used, with only 28% of studies using it explicitly. The limited use of this specific term has two implications. First, scholars interested in understanding traumatic events or their impact on journalists and journalism may need to use other search terms to include sub-Saharan African scholarship. Using the term "trauma" risks excluding African scholarship from international reviews if researchers outside the continent rely solely on trauma-specific terminology. Second, it suggests that African scholarship itself may not always draw on broader trauma studies when developing culturally grounded approaches to journalism and trauma. The result is conceptual ambiguity and a lack of consensus across the field. To identify and embrace locally developed trauma theory, different vocabularies may need to be identified and sought out that can then be compared, distinguished from and/or integrated into non-African scholarship. When the term trauma is used, it is rarely defined explicitly. Across the literature, trauma is variously conceptualised as a traumatic stressor, a psychological

or emotional response to adverse events, a professional risk associated with journalism, or an implicit feature of conflict, violence, repression, and crisis reporting.

Trauma categories were developed inductively during the coding process to reflect recurring patterns within the literature. While some categories appear similar, they capture distinct forms of trauma exposure. *War* referred to articles that discussed armed conflict as a broad reporting topic or journalistic context. By contrast, *direct conflict/war exposure/massacre* referred to immediate exposure to combat, bombardment, massacres, or other forms of life-threatening violence. This distinction reflects trauma scholarship which suggests that direct exposure to life-threatening events may have different psychological consequences from indirect reporting on conflict more broadly (Feinstein et al., 2002; Seely, 2019). Similarly, *terrorism* referred to ideologically or politically motivated violence intended to create fear or influence political outcomes. *Crime and terror*, conversely, captured reporting on criminal violence, such as organised crime or violent criminal activity, where fear was an effect of the violence rather than its primary political objective. These findings suggest that trauma functions less as a single coherent concept and more as a flexible category applied to a range of experiences associated with violence, suffering, insecurity, and journalist risk. While some studies draw explicitly on trauma theory or PTSD frameworks, many engage with trauma-related phenomena without using trauma terminology directly. This conceptual diversity reflects both the interdisciplinary nature of the field and the challenges of applying universal trauma frameworks across different social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent definitions of trauma incorporate the wider stressful conditions associated with traumatic experiences, such as fatigue and adverse environmental circumstances, rather than focusing exclusively on experiences characterised by threat to life and intense fear.

## Articles' research methods and type of journalism studied

### *Research methods*

The methodological profile of the corpus reveals a reliance on qualitative approaches (75 studies, 54%). Over half of the studies (54%) employed qualitative methods, including interviews, discourse analysis, and ethnographic approaches. This methodological preference reflects the field's interest in narrative, lived experience, and media framing, which are well-suited to qualitative approaches. By contrast, quantitative designs are rare (13, 9%), often limited to surveys of journalists or audiences. Even fewer studies adopt mixed methods (14 or 10%) or quasi-experimental designs (2 or 1%). The scarcity of experimental or causal research designs is notable, especially in contexts where journalism intersects with psychosocial outcomes and political behaviour. Systematic, comparative, or longitudinal designs remain rare. The field would benefit from greater methodological pluralism, particularly the integration of quantitative and mixed methods to triangulate findings and expand generalisability.

In examining patterns between methodology and other coded variables, a few patterns were noted. Theoretical or non-empirical work (20% or 14%) is more common among authors not based in Africa, who often publish conceptual essays or normative critiques of

journalism in conflict and crises. These articles contribute to theory-building but may inadvertently reinforce existing imbalances between theoretical and empirical knowledge production. With respect to type of trauma and methodology, it was striking that conflict and war studies are largely qualitative, while election-violence and journalist-safety studies sometimes incorporate surveys.

## Publication journals

The distribution of publications across journals is highly fragmented, with 139 articles spread across more than 70 outlets, but there is also evidence of clustering in a handful of core titles. *African Journalism Studies* (6 articles) and *Journalism* (6) lead the list, followed by *International Communication Gazette* (4), the *International Journal of Communication* (4), *Journalism Studies* (4), *Journal of African Media Studies* (3), *Journalism Practice* (3), and *Media, War & Conflict* (3). Together, these journals account for roughly one-third of the total output (36 of 138, or around 26%). Beyond these hubs, there is a wide scattering across journals with only one article each, indicating highly dispersed publication patterns.

In terms of disciplinary positioning, journalism and media studies are the dominant venues. Established titles such as *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Media, War & Conflict*, *International Communication Gazette*, and *African Journalism Studies* collectively anchor the field. African-focused journals are also central, including *African Journalism Studies*, *Journal of African Media Studies*, *African Identities*, *African Security*, *African Security Review*, and *African Studies Review*. This dual emphasis highlights a balance between globally oriented communication journals and regionally grounded African outlets. At the same time, the spread of articles into psychology (*BMC Psychiatry*, *Current Psychology*, *Psychological Reports*), health (*Lancet*, *AIDS Care*, *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases*, *Open Public Health Journal*), political science (*American Journal of Political Science*, *Review of African Political Economy*, *Third World Quarterly*), and sociology (*Sociological Forum*, *Sociology*) underscores the interdisciplinary reach of trauma scholarship.

Patterns of emphasis within this distribution are also visible. Research on trauma and conflict is anchored in *Media, War & Conflict* and, regionally, in *African Journalism Studies* and the *Journal of African Media Studies*. Studies on journalist safety and emotional labour cluster in mainstream journalism outlets such as *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*. African contributions are more often published in regional or smaller-scale journals, suggesting barriers to entry in high-impact international outlets. The wide scattering across journals with only one article each, for example, *Journal of Applied Volcanology*, *Soccer and Society*, and *IBIMA Business Review*, likely reflects context-specific or experimental studies rather than consolidated research streams.

From a structural perspective, the dominance of anglophone journals highlights structural imbalances linked to language and infrastructure in the field. Most of the outlets represented are English-language and Western-based, with francophone and lusophone journals almost absent, aside from *Traduction et Langues* and *Contratexto*. Occasional publications in global health and medical journals such as *Lancet* or *PLoS* demonstrate

that trauma and media scholarship sometimes gains visibility beyond communication studies, but these remain isolated cases.

Overall, the picture is one of concentration and dispersion: a small number of journalism and communication journals provide consistent outlets, African regional journals play a critical role in representation, and the wide scattering across one-article venues highlights both the interdisciplinary nature of trauma research and the lack of a single, dominant home for scholarship on trauma, media, and Africa.

## *Media platforms*

Table 1 displays the journalism or media type each article focused upon. Since articles could focus on multiple journalism types, the frequencies far exceed the number of articles. The most frequently discussed topics were newspapers and their websites ($n$ = 41) and traditional/legacy media ($n$ = 30). Other forms appear less frequently: general reporting/foreign correspondents, television + websites, broadcast news, and radio. Less frequently studied but still notable categories include citizen journalism, journalism in exile, undercover journalism and cell phone coverage. Very few studies explicitly examined the internet and only 2 cases were marked as not specified. In addition to examining media platforms such as newspapers and television, a number of articles concentrated on journalism as a professional practice, reflecting concern not only with media outputs but also with the conditions under which journalism is carried out. Within this category, the coding identified studies on journalism practice more broadly ($n$ = 38), general reporting such as the work of foreign correspondents ($n$ = 3), and journalism in exile ($n$ = 1).

Overall, the data highlights a research bias toward institutional, legacy media, which does not fully reflect the diverse and rapidly evolving media ecology of the African information environment. Journalism practice, newspapers, and traditional/legacy media dominate the research, but radio, represented in only 26 studies, is the most widely accessed medium in Africa, particularly in rural areas. Television (33) and broadcast news (27) also appear relatively underexplored. When considered alongside the analysis

**Table 1.** Media platforms studied in the articles.

| Journalism type | Frequency ($n$) |
|---|---|
| Newspaper + websites | 41 |
| Traditional/legacy media | 30 |
| Radio | 13 |
| Television + websites | 11 |
| Citizen journalism | 4 |
| Broadcast (news) | 3 |
| N/A or not specified | 2 |
| Undercover journalism | 1 |
| Cellphone coverage | 1 |
| Internet | 1 |

of the studies' research methods, the limited reflection of the African mediascape can be partly explained by data accessibility. Newspaper articles are more easily studied because large databases such as Nexis/Lexis provide extensive archives. By contrast, radio broadcasts are less frequently archived, making them harder for researchers to access despite radio's central role in the African mediasphere. Another factor to be considered is language. Many national newspapers and television programmes may be produced in the country's colonial language increasing their accessibility to many researchers. It was interesting to note the prominence of studies that focused on newspapers combined with websites. Perhaps this may reflect the growth of digital access, often driven by mobile phones as the growing gateway to news. On the other hand, cell phone coverage itself is captured in only 10 studies.

## Author location

First authorship patterns reveal both balance and divergence in African journalism trauma research. Just over half of studies (53%) are led by Africa-based scholars, while 41% come from those outside the continent. Qualitative research dominates (54%), with near parity between African-based (36%) and non-African-based (38%) first authors, though the former emphasise empirical, locally grounded case studies and the latter broader discourse analysis. Quantitative (9%) and mixed-methods (9%) studies remain rare, but African-based scholars lead slightly in both, and are solely responsible for the two quasi-experimental designs, signalling methodological innovation despite resource constraints. Location also shapes thematic focus: African-based scholars engage more with conflict, war, and journalist safety, while non-African-based authors gravitate towards political and societal trauma, such as election violence or propaganda. These patterns highlight the value of epistemic diversity; local researchers bring contextual depth, while external scholars frame structural debates, but also expose a methodological divide, with immersion locally and abstraction externally. Greater collaboration across locations could integrate these strengths, combining grounded insights with comparative frameworks. These patterns also raise broader questions about the politics of knowledge production within journalism and trauma studies. While Africa-based scholars frequently generate empirically grounded research based on lived realities, conflict contexts, and direct engagement with journalists and communities, non-Africa-based scholars are more likely to produce conceptual or theoretical contributions. Although both forms of scholarship are valuable, the pattern risks reproducing an epistemic hierarchy in which African contexts function primarily as sites of data collection while theoretical interpretation is concentrated elsewhere. Similar concerns have been raised within wider debates on decolonising knowledge production, which question whose experiences become evidence, whose voices become authoritative, and where theory is assumed to originate. Future research would benefit from greater collaboration across locations and institutions in ways that integrate empirical knowledge production and theoretical development. These findings are based on authors' locations rather than nationality or self-identification and should therefore be interpreted as patterns of institutional location rather than author identity.

## Trauma, country context, and temporal trends

Table 2 presents how frequently different types of traumatic stressors or types are discussed in scholarly literature. 'Direct conflict/war exposure' was the most consistently studied trauma type across the dataset (n = 29, 16.6%), reflecting the enduring centrality of armed violence in African trauma research. Many of these studies originated from contexts of protracted instability, such as Nigeria (n = 6), Sudan (n = 6), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (n = 2). The frequency of this category demonstrates the extent to which large-scale chronic conflict remains the dominant frame through which trauma is conceptualised and documented. This pattern mirrors the history of studies on journalism and trauma outside Africa, where war reporters were the primary focus of

**Table 2.** Trauma type (*n*).

| Trauma type | Frequency *(n)* |
|---|---|
| Direct conflict/War exposure/massacre | 29 |
| Journalist safety (physical) | 22 |
| Election/political violence | 19 |
| Sexual assault/violence or gender-based violence | 15 |
| Interethnic/religious disputes/conflicts | 15 |
| Terrorism | 11 |
| General violence | 11 |
| Emotional trauma | 7 |
| Online harassment/online safety (of journalists) | 6 |
| Journalist safety (psychological) | 6 |
| Abduction | 5 |
| Crime and terror | 4 |
| Lack of freedom of press, impunity | 3 |
| Illness or disease | 2 |
| Mass illness | 2 |
| Child neglect or child abuse | 2 |
| Journalist exile | 2 |
| Suicide | 2 |
| N/A | 1 |
| Police brutality | 1 |
| Murder trial | 1 |
| Human trafficking | 1 |
| Incitement, propaganda, hate broadcasting | 1 |
| Trauma-informed education | 1 |
| Homicide | 1 |
| Insurgency | 1 |
| Displacement | 1 |
| Urgency | 1 |
| Witnessing | 1 |
| War | 1 |

initial scholarship (Newman, 2001). The prominence of conflict, war exposure, and journalist safety also suggests that trauma within African journalism scholarship has largely been conceptualised through visible, event-based forms of violence. Several factors may contribute to this pattern. First, armed conflict, terrorism, political violence, and attacks on journalists are highly newsworthy events that attract both media and scholarly attention (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). Second, much of the foundational journalism and trauma literature emerged from studies of war correspondents and conflict reporting (Feinstein et al., 2018; Newman, 2001; Newman and Shapiro 2006), creating frameworks that continue to shape subsequent research agendas. Third, physical violence is often easier to identify, document, and measure than more diffuse forms of emotional, psychological, or cumulative harm. As a result, less visible forms of trauma, including chronic stress, emotional distress, moral injury (Feinstein et al., 2018), and the emotional consequences of reporting crisis and disaster (Osmann et al., 2020; Papadopoulou et al., 2022), as well as the long-term consequences of displacement, poverty, or illness, remain comparatively underexplored within the literature. Concerns about journalist safety formed the second largest group ($n$ = 28, 16%), split between physical threats ($n$ = 17, 9.7%) and psychological harms ($n$ = 6, 3.4%). This has emerged as a distinct focus of study since 2010, reflecting both global debates on press freedom and localised crackdowns on media activity (e.g., Krøvel et al., 2023). Scholarship was concentrated in Kenya ($n$ = 9), Nigeria ($n$ = 9), South Africa ($n$ = 3), and Zimbabwe ($n$ = 3). More recent work increasingly references online harassment ($n$ = 6, 3.4%) and journalist exile ($n$ = 2, 1.1%), signalling the recognition of digital-era threats that supplement traditional risks of intimidation and violence, often focusing on gender-based violence as well (e.g., Zviyita and Mare, 2023).

Election-related and political violence ($n$ = 19, 10.9%) and interethnic or religious disputes ($n$ = 15, 8.6%) together accounted for nearly one-fifth of all cases ($n$ = 34, 19.5%). These categories highlight how struggles over political authority and communal identity constitute central drivers of trauma. Ghana ($n$ = 3) and Ethiopia ($n$ = 11 across both categories) were notable sites where electoral contestation and intercommunal tensions intersected with violence. Sexual assault and gender-based violence also featured prominently ($n$ = 15, 8.6%). Although smaller in number than conflict or political violence, these cases demonstrate the gendered dimensions of trauma that cut across diverse settings, including Kenya ($n$ = 3), Nigeria ($n$ = 3), South Africa ($n$ = 1), and the DRC ($n$ = 1).

Other mid-range categories included terrorism ($n$ = 11, 6.3%) and general violence ($n$ = 11, 6.3%). Terrorism was particularly concentrated in Ethiopia ($n$ = 8), while general violence was dispersed across multiple contexts, including Nigeria ($n$ = 2), Zimbabwe ($n$ = 2), and Niger ($n$ = 2). "Emotional trauma", as opposed to physical trauma, ($n$ = 7, 4%) emerged as a term in several studies, often as a stressor type or form but sometimes conceptualised as the impact of a stressor, especially in South Africa ($n$ = (2) and Zimbabwe ($n$ = 2). Use of this term in studies may need to be further scrutinised to understand its use and meaning across contexts.

Despite Africa's long history of epidemics and the salience of HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and COVID-19, discussion of health-related traumatic events or responses remain rare within the dataset. Only one study directly addressed illness and disease, while a small number

focused on suicide ($n$ = (2) and emotional trauma ($n$ = 7). South Africa ($n$ = 2), Uganda ($n$ = 1), and parts of West Africa featured sporadically, but there is no sustained or systematic focus on health-related trauma. This under-representation contrasts sharply with the significant role of disease outbreaks in shaping experiences of suffering across the continent and suggests that trauma scholarship has tended to emphasise political and conflict-related violence over public health crises. However, not automatically considering all pandemic and health-related public stressors as traumatic stressors has been advised by experts in the field (Norrholm et al., 2021).

Less frequently documented forms of trauma included abduction ($n$ = 5, 2.9%), crime and terror ($n$ = 4, 2.3%), child neglect and abuse ($n$ = 2, 1.1%), and exile ($n$ = 2, 1.1%). Although these categories attracted fewer studies, they signal important vulnerabilities extending beyond conflict and political instability. Singular cases of illness or disease, police brutality, homicide, human trafficking, incitement and propaganda, trauma-informed education, displacement, witnessing, urgency, and war (each $n$ = 1, 0.6%) illustrate the diversity of lived experiences that remain underexplored.

## Patterns over time

The year-by-year distribution of how frequently different types of trauma are addressed in the literature reveals a shifting emphasis in both scholarly research and reporting practices over time. Early studies from the 1980s and 1990s were sparse, with isolated attention to child neglect (n = 1, 1987–91) and interethnic or religious conflict (n = 1, 1990s). More systematic engagement began in the 2000s, particularly from 2004 onwards, where the

**Table 3.** Trajectory of data over time.

| Period | Key patterns of trauma research/ Documentation | Representative trauma types ($n$) |
|---|---|---|
| Pre-2000s | Isolated cases, largely undocumented. | Child neglect ($n$ = 1), Interethnic/ religious conflict ($n$ = 1) |
| 2000s–early 2010s | Concentration on war, political violence, and sexual/gender-based violence. | Direct conflict/war ($n$ = 3), Election/ political violence ($n$ = 1), sexual/ gender-based violence ($n$ = 1) |
| 2012–2016 | Diversification to include terrorism, abduction, mass illness, and journalist safety. | Terrorism ($n$ = 1), Abduction ($n$ = 1), Mass illness ($n$ = 2), Journalist safety (physical) ($n$ = 2), Political violence ($n$ = 4) |
| Post-2015 | Growing attention to psychosocial and digital-era harms (emotional trauma, online harassment, exile), while conflict remains central. | Emotional trauma ($n$ = 3), Online harassment ($n$ = 1), Journalist exile ($n$ = 1), Direct conflict/war ($n$ = 2), Political violence ($n$ = 2) |
| 2020 onwards | Scattered attention to health and disease, but no sustained body of work. | Illness/disease ($n$ = 1), suicide ($n$ = 1), Terrorism ($n$ = 2), sexual/gender-based violence ($n$ = 2) |

focus broadened to include sexual and gender-based violence (n = 1, 2006), direct conflict and massacres (n = 2, 2008), and political violence (n = 1, 2012).

Between 2012 and 2016, a diversification of trauma categories emerged. Election and political violence ($n$ = 4, 2012–2016), interethnic and religious conflict ($n$ = 2, 2012; 2014–15), terrorism ($n$ = 1, 2014), abduction ($n$ = 1, 2014), and mass illness ($n$ = 2, 2015–16) reflect heightened attention to both overt violence and emergent health crises. Journalist safety (physical) also appears recurrently from 2012 onwards, with scattered cases in 2012, 2015, 2017, and 2019, suggesting a gradual recognition of press freedom and safety as distinct concerns.

The period after 2016 shows further thematic broadening, including online harassment ($n$ = 1, 2016–17), insurgency ($n$ = 1, 2016–19), and emotional trauma ($n$ = 3, 2016–19). By 2018–2021, sexual and gender-based violence re-emerges ($n$ = 2), alongside more diffuse categories such as terrorism ($n$ = 2, 2018–2021) and general violence ($n$ = 1, 2018–2019). This phase reflects a shift towards psychosocial dimensions of harm and digital-era threats, while conflict-related categories remain prominent.

Table 3 illustrates a clear trajectory:

## Conclusion

This article provides a scoping review of how trauma is conceptualised within anglophone journalism scholarship relating to sub-Saharan Africa. A central finding of the review is that trauma is conceptualised inconsistently across the literature. In some studies, trauma refers to direct exposure to conflict, violence, disaster, or repression, while in others it denotes the psychological, emotional, and professional consequences of such experiences. Many studies engage with trauma-related phenomena without explicitly using trauma terminology at all. As a result, trauma operates less as a clearly defined theoretical construct than as a flexible and often implicit category through which suffering, crisis, and journalist risk are understood. It shows that trauma in African journalism is largely reported through the lens of visible crises. Conflict, war, and election violence dominate, framing trauma as a collective, public experience tied to national upheaval, while every day or "silent" traumas such as mental health struggles, displacement, or chronic poverty remain comparatively invisible. Since 2010, growing attention to journalist safety has signalled recognition that reporters are not merely observers but also trauma-bearers, exposed to physical attack, censorship, exile, and psychological strain. Yet research on trauma-informed journalism remains uneven and fragmented. The way trauma is reported closely mirrors political and social structures. In electoral autocracies such as Zimbabwe or Kenya, trauma is tied to repression, propaganda, and election violence; in conflict zones like South Sudan, Somalia, or the DRC, it is anchored in war and mass violence; while in South Africa, reporting centres on crime and gender-based violence. This underscores that what "counts" as trauma in journalism is highly context-contingent, shaped by local crisis landscapes.

The review highlights several critical gaps in the literature that warrant attention in future scholarship on journalism, trauma, and Africa. The first of these relates to geographic imbalances. Research is disproportionately concentrated in a handful of countries (Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Zimbabwe) while vast regions of the continent remain

underexplored. States with histories of protracted violence (e.g., Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea) or significant media repression (e.g., Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Rwanda) are absent from the articles coded here. The dominance of Anglophone countries may reflect researcher accessibility, English-language archives, widespread use of colonial English in national media, and greater visibility of anglophone outlets in international databases. Francophone and especially Lusophone Africa remain underresearched in the English-speaking literature, suggesting structural biases linked to language, accessibility of sources, and possibly funding networks concentrated in anglophone academic settings.

Several methodological decisions necessarily shaped the scope of the review. The focus on peer-reviewed journal articles excluded books, book chapters, reports, and other forms of grey literature that may contain valuable insights into trauma and journalism. Similarly, the use of English-language databases may have limited the visibility of relevant scholarship published in French, Portuguese, Arabic, or local African languages. Finally, the broad conceptualisation of trauma adopted in this review enabled the inclusion of studies that addressed trauma-related harm without explicitly using the term "trauma" but inevitably required interpretive judgement during screening and coding.

Multi-country comparative studies are also rare, limiting opportunities for cross-national insights. Collaborative projects that foreground African scholars while engaging with global comparative frameworks would advance both rigour and equity. Addressing these gaps will not only strengthen the evidence base but also ensure that scholarship on African journalism and trauma reflects the diverse realities and challenges faced across the continent. Another area for future research could focus on broadening the scope of topics. Trauma-related studies emphasise conflict, political violence, and journalist safety. While these are crucial, other trauma categories are notably neglected. Health-related trauma (e.g., HIV/AIDS, Ebola, COVID-19, mental health) is seldom discussed. Suicide and emotional stress are rarely named explicitly, revealing a narrow conceptualisation of trauma that privileges the political and physical over the psychosocial. This is reinforced by limited uptake of trauma language in the literature: only around one-quarter of studies explicitly reference "trauma," with most framing events as violence, conflict, or crisis. The absence of trauma vocabulary constrains the potential for trauma-informed reporting that foregrounds psychological and social harm. The predominance of conflict, political violence, and journalist safety within the literature may reflect both the realities of many African media environments and broader tendencies within journalism and trauma scholarship to privilege visible, event-based forms of violence. Consequently, emotional distress, chronic stress, and the long-term consequences of poverty, displacement, or illness receive comparatively limited attention. This raises important questions about which forms of trauma become recognised as legitimate objects of scholarly inquiry and which remain comparatively marginal.

Similarly, emerging themes such as online harassment, exile, and digital era press repression receive minimal coverage compared to physical violence. Research in this field also has methodological limitations. The dominance of qualitative designs provides depth but restricts generalisability. Quantitative, mixed methods, and experimental approaches remain marginal. Few studies employ longitudinal designs to track change over time, or comparative analyses across multiple contexts. The scarcity of survey-

based, statistical, or causal inference approaches constrains the ability to test hypotheses about trauma's effects on journalists, institutions, and societies. Finally, but not exhaustively, conceptual gaps emerge. Many articles engage trauma-adjacent issues, such as normative stress, burnout, malevolent but not traumatic environmental factors, without naming them as such, suggesting a lack of conceptual coherence. Going forward, more explicit theorisation of trauma (drawing on psychology, sociology, and media studies) would enhance analytical clarity and strengthen connections across cases.

## Implications for journalism practice

This review reveals that African journalism engages extensively with trauma, but in ways that are selective, context-bound, and often implicit. The findings have several implications for journalism practice and professional development. The first relates to the fact that trauma reporting emerges as being crisis-driven and narrow. Journalists cover trauma when it is spectacular, collective, and politically salient (wars, election violence, journalist repression). This focus reflects both newsroom priorities and audience demand but risks side-lining less visible yet equally damaging forms of trauma, such as mental health struggles, chronic displacement, and disease-related suffering. By shifting more towards everyday trauma reporting, the broader civic and societal function of journalism could be reinforced. Similarly, the surge of post-2010 scholarship on journalist safety coded in the study demonstrates that practitioners are not immune to trauma but deeply entangled in it. Recognition of occupational trauma, both physical and psychological, is vital for newsrooms in an African context. Trauma-informed training, peer-support systems, and institutional safety protocols are needed to mitigate risks faced by African reporters. However, traumatic experiences are not always explicitly framed or discussed as trauma, despite extensive reporting on violence, crisis, and suffering. Without recognising and naming trauma, journalism can underplay the psychological and social consequences of such events for both affected communities and journalists themselves. Training programmes should therefore encourage trauma-aware approaches that are accurate, ethical, and sensitive. Embedding trauma literacy, including an understanding of psychological effects, ethical dilemmas, and self-care, would help journalists cover crises responsibly while also protecting their own well-being.

Progress in this regard is hindered by the underuse of trauma vocabulary in journalism. This suggests that while traumatic events are widely reported, they are not consistently framed as trauma. Without naming trauma, journalism can underplay the psychological and social toll of violence and crisis. Training programmes should encourage the adoption of trauma-aware language that is accurate, ethical, and sensitive. Embedding trauma literacy, i.e. understanding psychological effects, ethical dilemmas, and self-care, would also contribute to preparing journalists to cover crises responsibly while protecting their own well-being.

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