

# New Perspective on Vigilantism: Unveiling the Influence of Private Broadcast Stations on Haiti's 'Bwa Kale' Vigilante Movement and its Interplay with the Police Force in Port-au-Prince

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This study's objective is to explore the overlooked role of broadcast media in catalyzing the emergence of Haiti's Bwa Kale vigilante movement, which has gained prominence as a grassroots response to escalating physical insecurity. It also analyzes the dynamics between this movement and the police force. No prior research exists on these specific topics. Grounded theory methodology is employed, with data collected from various sources including broadcast plays, four in-depth interviews and autoethnographic elements. The conceptual framework is rooted in social movement theory, emphasizing three key components: the framing of vigilantism as a social movement, the role of broadcast media in influencing its emergence and visibility, and the progression of the movement in relation to the police force. The findings reveal that the ways Haitian media approach social mobilization and information dissemination have been in the favor of Bwa Kale's start. However, due to the complexity of media's influence on this movement and the study's limited scope, further research is needed to better understand Haiti's population reactions to broadcast media coverage. The study also reveals that the relationship between vigilantes and law enforcement is characterized by a co-dependent dynamic. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the interactions between broadcast media, grassroots movements, and law enforcement within the context of Haiti. The findings offer several practical implications for various stakeholders like the need for enhanced collaboration between vigilante groups and police forces in improving security outcomes. Also, the need for training local journalists to promote responsible reporting and broadcast shows.

**Keywords:** Vigilantism, Broadcast media, Mass media, Bwa kale, Community empowerment, Social movement

## Introduction

On the evening of April 24, 2023, Haitian police stopped a minibus carrying 14 men with weapons and ammunition in the Canapé Vert neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. An attack, reportedly orchestrated by individuals who identified themselves as members of gangs, was underway. News of the arrest quickly spread, with suspicions that the men were there to aid the gang. In response, local residents lynched the suspects in the presence of the police. This violent episode marks the abrupt emergence of the Bwa Kale movement, which soon spread across various localities.

Bwa Kale, a Haitian Creole term meaning "peeled wood," has since come to represent a form of direct action by citizens against gangs, sidestepping formal legal procedures and law enforcement. This practice, where people take the law into their own hands to punish perceived criminals, aligns with the broader concept of vigilantism. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, vigilantism is "the practice of ordinary people in a place taking unofficial action to prevent crime or to catch and punish people they believe to be criminals."

The rise of the Bwa Kale movement is closely tied to the escalating insecurity in Haiti, which has worsened since 2018 and peaked in 2023. Heavily armed gangs have carried out kidnappings, murders, and rapes, while territorial conflicts have left many homeless and claimed over 2,400 lives. In the first six months of 2023 alone, 300 kidnappings were confirmed—nearly matching the total for all of 2022 and tripling the number from 2021. However, many cases went unreported, suggesting the real figures are even higher. Even police officers were not spared, with 14 killed by gangs as of January 2023 (according to BFM news), leaving the force as vulnerable as the rest of the population. Furthermore, on March 28, 2023, less than a month before the Bwa Kale vigilante movement began, *Le Nouvelliste*, a popular newspaper, published that the National Police Force had only 900 active officers—below international norms—while being infiltrated by gang members and severely under-equipped.

The media's constant reporting on these situations may have further escalated aggressive behavior, especially in areas most affected by violence, contributing to the rise of the Bwa Kale movement. Indeed, research over the past half-century shows that both exposure to violent content in the media—such as

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news, television, and movies—and growing up in a violent environment increase the likelihood of violent behavior.

However, the most common view in popular broadcast media is that the vigilante movement emerged as a normal reaction to the population’s exhaustion and the inefficiency of the police force. Yet, in January 2023, three months before the Bwa Kale movement began, police efforts to reinforce security were actually working, as the first alleged gang members were killed while being arrested. This suggests that public attitudes toward security may have been influenced by factors beyond the police’s actual effectiveness at that time.

This idea is reinforced by the fact that the term “Bwa kale” was first used during protests against the prime minister in 2022, before being linked to the vigilante movement against gangs in April 2023. Media coverage of these protests, along with differing interpretations of the term, likely shaped public understanding and its later association with the vigilante movement. Hence, the first part of my research question is the following: How did broadcast media, through private stations, influence the emergence of Haiti’s “Bwa kale” vigilante movement? Then comes the second one: How did “Bwa kale” function in relation to the police force in Port-au-Prince? These questions represent the very essence of our study.

### A Landscape Overview of Media in Haiti

To understand the focus on broadcast media in this study—while much contemporary research emphasizes social media’s role in movements—it’s essential to consider Haiti’s media landscape. Despite the rise of social media as a news source, broadcast media, particularly radio, remains the primary medium in Haiti. Moreover, broadcast media in Haiti often functions similarly to social media, rapidly disseminating information and fostering discussions across communities. With interactive call-ins, live reports, and community-driven content, radio stations serve as a real-time forum for public opinion, much like social media platforms. Affordable portable transistor radios allow nearly every Haitian to access news, making radio the most widely reaching medium in both urban and rural areas. Its aural format is especially effective given the country’s high illiteracy rate and the prevalence of Haitian Creole, in contrast to major newspapers that are typically published in French.

Haiti’s broadcast media landscape consists of three types: religious, state-owned, and privately-owned. Religious stations focus on sharing religious content, while state-owned stations often present news with a pro-government bias, limiting the diversity of viewpoints and failing to meet the public’s expectations. Privately-owned stations, the most prevalent, address local issues and feature music, call-in shows, and discussions. Notable examples include Caraibes FM, Vision 2000 FM, and Radio Kiskeya. These stations not only produce news and talk shows on politics, education, and public affairs but also play

a crucial role in informing the public about governance and development. While some privately-owned stations openly criticize the government, others sensationalize protests, relying on awareness and public participation to amplify their impact in Port-au-Prince.

This overview highlights the significance of broadcast media in Haiti, providing context for evaluating its role in the emergence of the Bwa Kale movement. It is important to note that analysis in this study will specifically focus on privately-owned stations, as they are the most prevalent in the country and play a crucial role in shaping public discourse.

Last but not least, this paper situates “Bwa Kale” within a broader understanding of media’s influence on movements globally, where public engagement is driven as much by broadcast messaging as by societal grievances. Therefore, while the influence of private broadcast stations in shaping Haiti’s ‘Bwa Kale’ vigilante movement may seem assumed in the research question, many social movement studies acknowledge the undeniable presence of media in facilitating group coordination. For instance, previous studies on movements such as the Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter highlight how media exposure enables marginalized groups to find resonance and mobilize swiftly. This is why this paper focus on analyzing how media actively channels and amplifies these dynamics, rather than merely documenting media presence.

### Conceptual Framework

To better understand the influence of broadcast media on the Bwa Kale vigilante movement and its interaction with the police force, this paper adopts a conceptual framework rooted in social movement theory. Here are the key components:

1. Positioning vigilantism as a type of social movement. This approach allows to draw on existing theories about how social movements operate and grow, particularly in relation to mass media.
2. Broadcast Media’s Influence: Broadcast media can shape public perceptions, amplify the visibility of the movement, and potentially encourage or discourage participation. This study analyzes how media impacted the Bwa kale movement in Haiti.
3. Interplay with the Police Force: Finally, this study explores how the Bwa kale movement interacts with the police force, which could involve collaboration, conflict, or tension between the two entities. The conceptual framework is visually represented below to highlight the relationships between these key elements: [Broadcast Media] → [Social Movement (Vigilantism)] → [Interplay with Police Force]

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## Review of Related Literature

This section focuses on the review of related literature on various definitions and characteristics of vigilantism, definitions and characteristics of social movements, discussions on the influence of mass/broadcast media on social movements and vigilantism, and how scholars have found vigilantism in different regions to function in relation to the police force. A thematic analytical pattern is used, organizing the section into subsections that correspond to different key aspects of the conceptual framework.

### Framing Vigilantism as a Social Movement

First of all, there are many forms of collective behaviors. These can be nonviolent, such as marches, strikes, or praise in sermons, and they can be violent, like panics, mobs, riots, fads, sects, revolutions, and social movements. Vigilantism, we may already say, falls within this spectrum. By situating vigilantism within the broader context of collective behaviors, both peaceful and violent, we can better understand its shared characteristics with other movements. These include the capacity to mobilize individuals toward a common goal, whether through peaceful or aggressive means. This framing sets the stage for defining vigilantism as a type of social movement.

Indeed, social movements have been defined by sociologist Sidney Tarrow as “collective challenges [to authorities or other powerful groups] based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities”<sup>1</sup>. However, as with vigilantism, “no definition of social movement enjoys a scholarly consensus”<sup>2</sup>. Eduardo Mondaca<sup>3</sup> similarly notes that the concept of vigilantism suffers from “a lack of conceptual clarity within existing research.”

As we delve deeper into the literature, we encounter more complex and sometimes conflicting views on the nature of vigilantism. Consequently, vigilantism has been conceptualized with six defining features. One of these features is its role as “a form of autonomous citizenship”<sup>4</sup>, which still allows us to define vigilantism in simpler terms as a social movement. This perspective suggests that vigilantism, like social movements, emerges when citizens feel the need to take matters into their own hands.

There are many other theories and perspectives on the characteristics and functioning of social movements that can be linked to those of vigilantism. For example, like other social movements, vigilantism is driven by a collective desire for change and a belief that existing systems are inadequate. As Herbert Blumer<sup>5</sup> observed, “they have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living.”

Furthermore, “in its beginning, a social movement is amorphous, poorly organized, and without form”<sup>5</sup>. This contrasts

with Abraham’s portrayal of vigilantism as an “organized attempt,” showing that both perspectives can be relevant depending on the type of vigilantism and the circumstances in which it arises. For instance, crime control vigilantism, which often starts as unorganized collective action, is seen in movements like Haiti’s “Bwa kale,” which began as spontaneous citizen responses to escalating violence. This exemplifies how vigilante movements may initially lack structure but can evolve over time.

By framing vigilantism within the framework of social movements, this paper provides a comprehensive analytical tool for understanding vigilante actions. This approach proves particularly valuable given the limited research available on this topic. Moreover, by understanding vigilantism as a social movement, we can explore how media shapes collective behavior, amplifies grievances, and mobilizes individuals in ways similar to other social movements.

### Social Movements (vigilantism) and Broadcast Media

Although there is limited research on how broadcast media directly influences vigilantism, we can gain valuable insights by examining it through the framework of social movements we have previously detailed. Building on this understanding, the development of research on media effects provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how media can influence the emergence of vigilantism. Indeed, the history of research on media effects has known four stages of development, with the two first stages emphasizing the influence of media messages on attitudes. From this, the first thing to remember is that mainstream media, which includes broadcast media (Cambridge dictionary) do not only provide information. According to James W. Carey<sup>6</sup>, it is also the representation of shared beliefs and common experiences. Even more, mainstream news media have historically had the power to validate or undermine social movements. Consequently, we can explore the role of alternative media in promoting marginalized political perspectives and inspiring individuals to see themselves as part of a collective that shares similar experiences and grievance<sup>7</sup>. This shift, being a more cognitive effect of mass media<sup>8</sup>, defines the third stage in the history of research on media effects, especially relevant in Haiti, where radio has historically awakened the population and spurred action against injustice. As Michele Montas-Dominique<sup>3</sup> notes, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Haitian broadcast media was controlled by a small elite, with no involvement from the broader population. Journalism, often a tool for political power, rarely sought the truth. Journalists who defied government press restrictions were jailed, tortured, or exiled.

In the early 1970s, Jean Dominique and Radio Haiti sparked a media revolution by broadcasting in Creole, the language of the people, breaking away from the French-dominated media. Montas-Dominique<sup>3</sup> emphasized that this shift empowered the

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majority, giving them a voice to discuss their issues, propose solutions, and revive the spirit of resistance rooted in Haiti's revolutionary past. He wrote: the use of Creole in the news also meant empowerment for the majority who, for the first time, could express themselves directly via a microphone to a listening audience, discuss their own problems, and suggest their own solutions. It also spread the spirit and the methods of resistance to repression, anchored in Haiti's revolutionary past.

This hasn't changed over the years, mostly since journalists now enjoy more freedom to report than they did in the past. Although this increased freedom has enabled a wider range of perspectives through a more diverse Haitian media landscape, it has also intensified competition for audience share and underlined the need for a regulatory framework, which is missing.

In the context of our study, these implications are significant. The competition for audience share has led to sensationalized reporting, which often appeals to people's curiosity and amplifies their emotions (fear or excitement), keeping them invested and coming back for more. Moreover, the emphasis on empowering the majority to discuss their own problems and suggest their own solutions through media channels could potentially contribute to a heightened sense of local activism, collective mobilization and a kind of independence to official responses perceived as inadequate.

The fourth and present stage of the history of research on media effects started in the early 1980s, is characterized by "social constructivism". In other words, media discourse has been found to be part of the process by which individuals construct meaning and social reality. This present stage of media effects research is more significant than the previous stages because it reflects advancements in understanding the profound role media plays, not just in influencing attitudes, but in shaping entire social realities. Building on it, this study considers how media participated in constructing the social reality of the Bwa kale vigilante movement within Haitian society, beyond the perception of it being a simple reaction to the persistent insecurity.

Social constructivism, much like the approach of this study, doesn't dismiss the media's power to shape individual attitudes, such as increasing punitiveness in response to crime coverage, but rather expands upon it by investigating how these attitudes contribute to constructing broader social norms and collective actions.

### **Influence of Media on Penal Attitude**

Researchers have found that consumption of various crime-related media, as well as total hours of television viewing may increase punitiveness by decreasing support for rehabilitation<sup>9</sup>. As stated by Gerbner & Gross<sup>10</sup>, "Ritualized displays of any violence (such as in crime and disaster news, as well as in mass-produced drama) may cultivate exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world and lead to demands

for protection". These studies align with this research question, allowing the evaluation of how the consumption of crime-related news prior to the emergence of the Bwa kale movement may have also influenced the population's decision to take justice into their own hands.

It's important to note that existing studies on the influence of media on penal attitudes primarily focus on crime dramas and reality shows. This is a limitation addressed by this study, as in the case of Haiti, all crime-related news is experienced firsthand by the population. This real-life exposure may potentially have a more significant impact on punitive attitudes than fictionalized media portrayals.

There has been increasing violence-related news prior to the Bwa kale movement. In the beginning of the year 2023, at least 21 police officers had been killed. Two journalists had been killed by projectiles and burned in the prior year, as well as a senator and his nephew. And we can't forget the high rate of kidnapping prior to the movement. Parents of the victims frequently sought assistance from gangs through appeals aired on popular radio stations, imploring gang members to release their loved ones. Many opted for this approach over involving formal law enforcement. Journalists, in turn, assisted by attempting to persuade gang members to reconsider their demands, given the financial constraints of the affected families. This may have fueled the perception that the formal law enforcement is useless and listeners of these widely listened-to radio stations, where such appeals were common, may have become more vigilant and punitive toward gangs.

### **Perception of the Relation between Vigilantism and the Police force**

Understanding how the relationship between vigilantism and the law enforcement have been perceived in other contexts can offer insights into the conditions that lead to vigilante movements emerging alongside or in opposition to official police forces.

As a reminder, this study focuses on a case of crime control vigilantism, a category of vigilantism outlined by Pedahzur A. & Perliger<sup>11</sup>. This category is particularly relevant to North American history, which provides an abundance of examples of private groups who took steps to restore "justice". In Latin America, this phenomenon was implemented by death-squads, who acted in numerous countries and often included former law enforcement personnel (p. 12). It is also relevant to Africa, because crime control vigilantism has found out to be frequent in its various regions, being the focus of many scholars' studies.

Many of the vigilante groups have found out to be rooted in their communities and to often work in close collaboration with the formal Police<sup>12</sup>. In Nigeria, for example, the traditional concept of vigilante groups exclusively referred to unarmed voluntary citizen groups, created in local communities to help the security forces confront common crimes and social violence,

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by arresting suspected criminals and handing them over to the Police<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, according to Bruce Baker's studies<sup>14</sup>, as cited in Ana Kantor Mariam Persson's<sup>15</sup>, policing in Africa is not a monopoly of the state police. It is carried out by formal and informal agencies outside the realm of the police and often outside the realm of the state. From African citizens' point of view, formal and informal security providers complement each other, rather than appearing as incompatible alternatives<sup>15</sup>.

An initial observation that can be made based on these studies is the fact that while they indicate collaboration between African vigilantes and formal police forces, these vigilantes aren't armed and they bring people they arrest to formal police officers, while in Haiti, during the Bwa kale movement, it was all the opposite. This can be considered a limitation of existing black studies on the web of vigilantes and formal security networks, as research focused solely on African cases might overlook more extreme forms of vigilantism and their implications. This study will address this limitation by providing a different setting for understanding the relationship between vigilantes and formal security forces. Therefore, we can predict that the findings of this research may reveal divergent approaches to collaboration between vigilantes and the police force in the case of Haiti.

## Methodology

The study follows a grounded theory methodology. A theoretical sampling was done for this study, using data like journal articles, media coverages, talks, broadcast plays, and four interviews. Data collection lasted about 8 weeks and new data collection was guided by emerging theoretical concepts or areas of uncertainty identified during analysis. This iterative process helped in refining and validating emerging theories.

The first two interviews were conducted by video call with two Haitian journalists who hold political shows in two of the most known radio stations in Port-au-Prince : Radio Tele Pacifique and Radio Mega. The journalist of the second interview is also a reporter. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted about 50 minutes to one hour. Due to conducting the interviews over a WhatsApp call, we opted to take detailed notes instead of using a transcript. Some selected notes were read out loud (those that express ideas that are likely to be misunderstood) during the call to ensure accuracy and give the interviewee the opportunity to confirm if I captured their intended meaning correctly. This method allowed for real-time feedback and ensured clarity in the information gathered.

The third interview was conducted on Zoom and recorded through this platform. The interviewee is an American journalist who has about 23 years of experience in reporting on different topics, among them, crime, social movements, politics etc. I also had a fourth and last interview while I was almost done with my open coding. It was with a Haitian Criminologist who studied at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and spent 20

years in the New York Police. This interview lasted more than one hour.

All data is stored and secured digitally, and all the interviewees are anonymous in the paper. Some of them were informed about that before the interviews to ensure that they could express themselves more freely.

Only four interviews were conducted due to difficulties in obtaining contact information for more journalists within the timeframe. As a student with limited resources, the small sample size was supplemented with a comprehensive literature review to ensure a well-rounded analysis. The conclusions drawn are not based solely on the interviews but are supported by insights from both the interviews and the literature, with the interviews primarily serving to provide deeper insights into the topic.

About the procedure for applying the grounded theory methodology, thematic coding is used in three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding to analyze the data.

- **Open Coding:** It involved systematically examining the notes from interviews and all other data (from different sources like journals etc.) line by line to identify and label concepts, categories, and themes that emerge from the data. It is done for each part of the research question (first and second). A sample list of media sources consulted in the open code stage can be found in Appendix A.
- **Axial Coding:** Once initial codes have been identified, we proceeded to axial coding, which involves making connections between the codes and organizing them into broader categories or themes. This stage helped in identifying relationships between different concepts and understanding the core phenomena.
- **Selective Coding:** In the selective coding phase, we focused on integrating and refining the core categories that have emerged from the data. This involved identifying the central themes that tie together the data and developing a coherent storyline or theoretical framework based on these core categories.
- **Constant Comparison:** Throughout the coding process, new data was continually compared with previously coded data to ensure consistency and refinement of emerging categories. This iterative comparison helped in developing a nuanced understanding of the data and refining theoretical concepts.
- **Memoing:** Alongside coding, we engaged in memoing throughout the data analysis which involved writing reflective notes or memos about thought processes, interpretations, and emerging insights. These include notes from YouTube talks, specifically past shows by journalists related to the Bwa kale movement. They served as a way to

document the analytical journey and capture new ideas for further exploration.

The flexibility and adaptivity of the grounded theory method are advantageous to exploring how media can influence the emergence of vigilante actions, which is an under-researched topic. It allows me to frame the analysis gradually but in a non-linear sequence as we gain insights from the data. Moreover, it aligns with the exploratory nature of both the first and second part of the research question and allows to drive from the particular elements of this case study to a general hypothesis. This process helps to fill gaps in the existing knowledge on vigilantism, expanding the world of knowledge. In terms of contextual understanding, this qualitative method is also perfect for a deep exploration of the social and contextual factors influencing the Bwa kale movement, which is our phenomena of interest. This is particularly valuable as this study involves understanding human experiences and social processes.

Having been on the ground, experiencing the Bwa kale movement, this study does incorporate elements of autoethnography. A thematic reflection in the autoethnographic analysis of literature is used by considering how the themes identified in external literature relate to personal experiences. Although these connections are not explicitly outlined in the paper, this reflective process informs and enriches the critical analysis made in the literature review section.

To manage reflexivity biasness despite the inclusion of autoethnography, the following methods are employed:

- **Diverse sampling:** For instance, one journalist interviewee emphasized that media cannot trigger a movement, drawing no clear link between broadcast media and the start of the Bwa Kale movement. This diversity of perspectives helped ensure a balanced view.
- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources are used to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic.

## Results

The first question is: How did broadcast media influence the emergence of Haiti’s “Bwa kale” vigilante movement? The following table lists the codes that were generated in response to this research question.

### Open codes for research question A

- **Encouragement of violence :** The Haitian interview participants acknowledged that Haitian popular media sometimes encourages violence in its reporting. Additionally, the American journalist we spoke to expressed her belief

Open code	Properties	Representative quotes
Encouragement of violence	Amplification of personal opinions in talk shows Emphasis on individual responsibility amidst turbulent situations Selective promotion of positive aspects of violent movements	“Certain Haitian broadcast media that I will avoid citing did indeed push the population to violence”
Lack of objectivity	Selective emphasis on biased perspectives Corruption	“Many journalists choose their party but not the truth. There is a lack of objectivity”
Community empowerment	Bad or misinterpreted cultivation of collective agency Bad or misinterpreted encouragement of solidarity: us versus them	“I’ve always asked my audience to change their mentality and be united in order to fight against the insecurity.” “Deciding how to tell a story, how to present it is everything. It sets the mindset”
Adding flavor to news reporting	Beautification or production of information Use of protest music during reports	“When there is a movement, many radio stations will cover it. The population will choose to listen to the one who makes the reporting hotter.” “Some journalists don’t take the time to verify all their information when reporting movements. They sometimes use ‘They say that...’ in order to add flavor to a news and keep people interested” “Some media produce information”

that media can incite violent behaviors depending on how they present the situation.

- **Lack of objectivity :** All Haitian participants unanimously acknowledged the lack of objectivity in Haitian media. Conversely, our foreign interviewee went further, stating that achieving complete objectivity isn’t possible, suggest-

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ing that some degree of bias is generally unavoidable. What is important according to her is striving to be fair and adopting a broader perspective.

- **Community empowerment:** Community empowerment, as defined by the World Health Organization, is a process of enabling communities to take greater control over their lives. It goes beyond mere involvement or participation—it involves community ownership and action that aims for social and political change. It’s about re-negotiating power dynamics to grant communities more control.

In a country grappling with crises, Haitian journalists feel a deep responsibility to contribute to improving living conditions through empowerment-focused messaging. Haitian interview participants echo this sentiment, recognizing the media’s dual role in informing the public and fostering education and awareness.

However, the question arises: to what extent can the media control the interpretation and impact of their words? While the intention behind community empowerment is positive, it can blur boundaries, especially in a volatile context. When communities are encouraged to take ownership, there’s a risk of misinterpretation that could lead to actions crossing into the domain of formal authorities. This overlap can inadvertently foster vigilantism, where the line between defending rights and overstepping legal bounds becomes dangerously unclear.

#### **Axial and selective codes (in bold) based on the open codes**

- **Social mobilization**
  - Media Framing and Advocacy :
    - \* Encouragement of violence
    - \* Amplification of personal opinions in talk shows
    - \* Emphasis on individual responsibility in turbulent situations
- **Information dissemination**
  - Selective Representation :
    - \* Selective promotion of positive aspects of violent movements
    - \* Lack of objectivity
    - \* Selective emphasis on biased perspectives
- **Ethical Concerns and Corruption :**
  - Lack of journalistic objectivity
  - Corruption in media practices
  - Journalists prioritizing party over truth
- **Public Perception**

- Community Dynamics :
  - \* Community empowerment
  - \* Bad or misinterpreted cultivation of collective agency
  - \* Encouragement of solidarity : us versus them

- **Narrative Influence :**

- Decision in storytelling
- Setting the mindset through storytelling
- Adding flavor to news reporting

- **Sensationalism and Production Techniques :**

- Beautification or production of information
- Use of protest music during reports
- Lack of information verification for sensationalism

#### **Open codes for research question B**

The second question is : How did “Bwa kale » function in relation to the police force in Port- au-Prince? The following table lists the codes that were generated in response to this research question.

- **Unwanted collaboration:** The perspective on collaboration between the Bwa kale movement and the police force is ambivalent. The Haitian journalists interviewed and other sources involved in this study display a complex collaboration between the police force and vigilantes. This collaboration is marked by a sense of reluctant partnership, where both parties have been compelled to work in the same time, at the same environment and under the same circumstances (so, closely) despite their differences in approach and methodology. The vigilantes have undertaken several actions that somehow benefited the police force, such as encouraging the population to report gangs or individuals with suspected gang affiliations in their communities, as well as to bolster surveillance in their neighborhoods. On the other hand, vigilante actions have frequently coincided with police officers’ arrests of individuals believed to have ties to criminal gangs. Vigilantes have taken advantage of these moments to target and harm the arrested individuals.
- **Police-community confrontation :** First, our interviewed criminologist has a different perspective regarding the police force and the Bwa kale movement. His viewpoint emphasizes the absence of collaboration or any formal relationship between the police and vigilante movement. Moreover, he attributes the non relationship between the two to concerns about human rights violations, the role of the police and the eyes of the international community.

Open code	Properties	Representative quotes
Unwanted collaboration	Efforts from the police force not to be involved in the Bwa Kale vigilante movement. But there were underground collaborative efforts in apprehending criminal elements. The population denouncing gangs or suspected people affiliated to gangs in their neighborhoods Reinforcement of security measures in many neighborhoods (use of identity cards, barriers, minutious control of moves to keep an eye on strangers, restriction of late night moves, establishment of community chiefs etc.) Presence of vigilantes when suspected gangs get arrested	“Due to lack of equipments, the National police collaborated with the population in order to catch gangs”.
Police-community confrontation	Willingness of vigilante groups to fight against police officers if they were to prevent them from killing suspected gangs (This happened on a district of the capital of Haiti called laboule 12)	“The population didn’t want the arrested gangs on « Laboule 12 » to go to court since they knew they would get released. If police officers resisted, they would be victims of the Bwa kale too.”
Temporary results and ongoing challenges for both parties	Concerns about human rights, the role of the police force and the eyes of the international Immediate decrease in the kidnapping rate which re-started later until today Short duration and inconsistency of the movement (less than 9 months)/ periodic resurgence Corruption within the police force, preventing it from properly securing and reassuring the population	“If a policeman openly sent a bandit they arrested at the mercy of vigilantes, they would be under the sanction of human rights organizations.” “Bwa kale wasn’t successful because the kidnapping remains.” “Gangs slowed down only to understand what was happening. After that, they resumed their activities.” “Vigilantism isn’t a sustainable solution because it is too vulnerable. It tends to corruption.” “With the high level of corruption within the society, it would be impossible for the police force to progress by itself “ “Bwa kale is a cosmetic movement”
Intimidation of gangs	Gangs’ chiefs used social media to insult and warn on the movement (which was considered a sign of weakness and fear)	“Gangs are not afraid of police officers but they are afraid of the Bwa kale movement”
Balancing community involvement and Police responsibilities	Officials encouraging the population not to take action into their own hands but some media saying the opposite or suggesting collaboration. Attribution of accomplishments in which the police force was involved primarily to the vigilante movement, blurring the distinction between official law enforcement and community-based groups.	“I encourage police officers not to be afraid because we are stronger. The police in front, the population behind!”
Socio-economic factors	Many vigilantes were young people, which is perceived to be caused by youth unemployment Lack of education/ decline of the society	“Many young people participated in the Bwa kale movement because they aren’t working.” “With the decline of society, the police also decline.”

Although he did acknowledge the weakness of the police force, he argues that the only way we may possibly talk about cooperation is in the case of a police officer who deliberately cooperated with the vigilantes. Police officers always try to prevent vigilantes from accessing and killing people they arrest, but they always fail. And these situations always involved the vigilantes fighting with police officers until they get what they want. However, our criminologist also acknowledges that police officers have

an affinity with the pain of the population, because they get into trouble when people they arrest get released by political leaders.

- **Balancing community involvement and Police responsibilities** : Officials emphasized the importance of community members refraining from taking matters into their own hands. However, a contrasting narrative emerges in some media outlets, suggesting collaboration between the

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vigilante movement and the police. One notable aspect contributing to the complexity is the attribution of accomplishments primarily involving the police to the vigilante movement. This blurs the distinction between official law enforcement and community-based groups, raising questions about the perceived roles and achievements of each entity.

Moreover, the discourse during talk shows held during the Bwa Kale movement period reveals an interesting perspective. Journalists actively encourage police officers, assuring them not to be afraid, and promote a united front with the police at the forefront and the population standing firmly behind, portraying a sense of collective strength. This narrative further adds to the multifaceted nature of the relationship between the police force, the vigilante movement, and the broader community.

- **Intimidation of gangs:** Some interpreting the use of social media by gang leaders to insult and warn against the vigilante movement as a sign of weakness and fear. The fact that a well-known broadcast media highlighted this behavior adds a layer of significance, possibly reflecting public perception. The journalist's assertion that gangs are not afraid of police officers but fear the Bwa Kale movement further underscores the unique and potentially influential role the vigilante movement plays in the community.
- **Temporary results and ongoing challenges :** The movement, spanning less than nine months with periodic resurgences, demonstrated a short duration and inconsistency. Moreover, gang activities persist in the country until today. However, both the police force and vigilantes fail to provide the country with security. While vigilante movements represent human rights violations, corruption within the police force also contributes to human rights violations by weakening the justice system.
- **Influenced by socio-economic factors :** Analysis of the Bwa kale movement and the police force can barely be detached from broader socio-economic factors. The same societal decline that affects law enforcement may contribute to the rise of vigilantism as a response to perceived inadequacies. In essence, the socio-economic factors at play in the Bwa Kale movement highlight the interconnectedness of youth experiences, education, societal decline, and the effectiveness of law enforcement.

#### Axial codes

#### Multifaceted relationship with both cooperative and adversarial elements.

- Unwanted collaboration efforts between vigilantes and the police force

- Challenges arising from collaboration without mutual consent
- Balancing community involvement and police responsibilities
- Tensions and conflicts in defining roles and responsibilities between the community and the police

#### Socio-Economic Contextualization of Vigilante-Police Dynamics :

- Influence of socio-economic factors like youth unemployment leading to the participation of many young people in the movement
- Corruption and political affiliation within the police, which prevent it from combating gangs properly

#### Parallel Challenges and Temporal Dynamics :

- Temporary results and ongoing challenges for both parties
- Immediate decrease in the kidnapping rate after the Bwa kale movement with subsequent resurgence
- Short duration and inconsistency of the « Bwa kale » movement
- Gangs slowing down and then resuming activities
- Recognition that vigilantism isn't a sustainable solution due to vulnerability and corruption tendency
- The police force lacks equipments and members and it is a young institution

#### Discussion

This section discusses the key results, highlighting their significance and broader implications.

To provide context, it is worth recalling that the study was an attempt to find out private broadcast stations' power to affect the start of Haiti's 'Bwa Kale' vigilante movement, as well as the dynamics between this movement and the police force. Its significance lies in its unique focus. Unlike most previous research on media's influence on social movements, this study examines a vigilante movement as a case study, specifically the Bwa Kale movement- the first research of its kind on this topic. Additionally, it offers a fresh perspective for analyzing the relationship between vigilantes and police forces, which has predominantly been studied in African contexts. Finally, it sheds light on the unexplored role of broadcast media- not only in amplifying social movements but in laying the foundation for their emergence, particularly in cases of vigilantism.

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Data from coding stages reveal that Haitian private broadcast stations influenced the emergence of the Bwa kale movement by the way they approach social mobilization, information dissemination and public perception. Indeed, their social mobilization approach, even unintentionally, often involves encouragement of violence, an overflow of negative critics on law enforcement that hinder the efforts that they are doing, biased opinions in talk shows in which there is a lack of self-awareness and openness to considering alternative viewpoints. There is also a focus on individual responsibility and community empowerment, encouraging the population to take action independently, thus positioning the people against a government that is often seen as allied with gangs. In turbulent situations, this behavior can be negative when it isn't part of a broader strategy that addresses the structural factors underlying the crisis like electing truthful leaders, allowing collaboration between government, communities, civil society, and other stakeholders.

Reflecting on past efforts for a broad strategy like this, we can look back to 2021, when Haiti witnessed the emergence of various civil society platforms, including the Montana Accord. This initiative aimed to create a comprehensive solution to the political, economic and security crisis by promoting union between sectors. Based on the predicted good incomes of that unity- which never took place- the Montana Accord set the stage for national elections in 2023, but those elections have yet to take place, leaving us in 2024 without a clear electoral process. Instead, in 2023, the Bwa Kale movement emerged. If the Montana Accord had succeeded in fostering collaboration across government, civil society, and communities, it might have reduced the need for movements like Bwa Kale where only one party—the population—takes action. Instead of isolated vigilance, a united approach might have created the foundation for collective security and structural reform, diminishing the conditions that led to such grassroots initiatives. This idea aligns with recommendations I'll outline in the conclusion.

To continue, information within radio stations since 2018 is always and consistently on violence (kidnapping, killings, gang confrontations etc.) which is normal since it has been the everyday life of Haitians. However, this isn't without consequences, particularly on penal attitudes, as explored through a few studies in the literature review. Furthermore, the population not only hears and watches violence but they live it, having lost their acquaintances in gang wars, having to move from houses to houses, escaping dangerous neighborhoods etc. Therefore, the Haitian population's punitiveness increased, leading to vigilante actions.

Going back to media's role in that situation, it is worth noting that this point is somehow related to journalist Lincoln Steffens' remarks in the beginning of the 20th century and scholars' views like Antunes and Hurley<sup>16</sup> who suggested that media constructs moral panics around particular types of crime. We can just add that media may construct moral panics not only around

particular types of crime but also around particular stakeholders based on the reasoning behind their actions. Speaking from my own experiences, the Bwa kale movement, which involved lynching did not awake people's sensibility like it did when gangs did it, since vigilante actions were perceived as a normal reaction to the wrong they have been done. To further validate that remark, during the period, a sermon was witnessed in a Christian church where the preacher urged the congregation to remain grounded in moral values, cautioning them against falling into the trend of taking pleasure in the killings of the movement, even if it's killings of wrongdoers.

These findings are consistent with those of Celestine V. Gever<sup>17</sup>, who suggested that factors enhancing audience understanding of broadcast media campaigns include frequency, simplicity of language, timing, content richness, and persuasiveness. While we couldn't gather empirical evidence, it's also possible that the early use of the term Bwa kale by demonstrators protesting Prime Minister Ariel Henry in 2022 contributed to its later adoption in the vigilante movement. This prior exposure may align with Gever's factors, as the term's initial use could have subtly shaped public perception, making it more recognizable and impactful in later contexts.

### **Key findings regarding how the Bwa Kale vigilante movement functioned in relation to the police force**

Findings here present a little contrast from the findings of Chukwuma in 2002<sup>12</sup>, which suggested that vigilantes often work in close collaboration with the formal Police. Indeed, data from coding stages indicate that the vigilantes involved in the Bwa kale movement didn't consistently and openly work in close collaboration with the formal police due to factors like the perceived inefficacy of the police force and the fact that there's corruption within it. Instead, my findings highlight a complexity in their relationship characterized by a reluctant and indirect partnership where both parties have been compelled to work in the same time, at the same environment and under the same circumstances despite their differences in approach and methodology. However, this reluctance was mostly found on the side of the police force.

Indeed, the institution still wanted to maintain a positive image, mostly in the eyes of the international community, by showing disagreement with the vigilante movement. On the other hand, one has taken advantage of the other. Indeed, vigilantes have killed many people that were under arrest knowing that they would be released after getting to the national prison, an issue that police officers had long complained about. However, both remain distinct. In instances where police officers tried to block vigilante actions, they got into confrontations with each other. This shows a sense of independence of the Bwa kale vigilantes from formal law enforcement. This point is further confirmed with the fact that we transitioned from a police-led

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crackdown on gangs and their allies to a vigilante movement led by the population. Indeed, there was a movement led by police officers in 2021, called "mache pran yo", which consisted of arresting gangs and their allies. And later in 2023, the Bwa kale vigilante movement emerged, being led by the population who kills gangs and their allies: two parallel situations.

Vigilante groups emerged as more influential than police officers to the point where some talk shows perceived them to be a backup for police officers. The criminologist interviewed about the topic said that the population engaged in vigilante actions with the expectation that police officers would take over, which also explains, according to him, the short duration of the movement.

Moreover, while acknowledging prior studies suggesting that vigilantism can decrease crime rates<sup>2</sup>, this study emphasizes that such positive outcomes may be transient, potentially reinstating previous crises or exacerbating them, as exemplified by the case of Haiti. Additionally, vigilante actions involving young individuals may yield unintended social ramifications, such as heightened rates of youth violence when young people participate in vigilante actions, and may even incite phenomena like lone-wolf terrorism, growing the issues of a law enforcement that struggles already.

### Implications and Limitations

This study recognizes that it is difficult to measure exactly how much broadcast media- particularly private broadcast stations influenced the start of the Bwa Kale movement, given the police force's inability to put an end to gang terror once and for all, compounded by significant challenges such as a lack of equipment and personnel. Additionally, the population, being direct daily victims of gang violence could serve as a strong enough motivation to seek justice on their own. In Haiti, it is also common for arrested individuals to be released by corrupt police officers or government officials, further eroding trust in the justice system.

However, this study offers important insights into how media can contribute as one of many factors, reflecting broader challenges in media studies research. Indeed, since it's hard to isolate media's effect when it's so widespread, this study helps advance the field by acknowledging that even subtle or small media influences can be important. It contributes to understanding the direction of the relationship—how media played a role—rather than trying to pinpoint the exact strength of that role, which is often difficult to measure in media studies.

Regarding the overall findings, they may be different if studied with data from a larger sample size. Moreover, getting access to all the popular shows held prior to the emergence of the Bwa kale movement wasn't possible, which would probably provide us with a better understanding of how reportings and messages were framed by this time, even though there aren't noticeable

changes in the way they are today.

Based on the limitations of this study, suggestions for future researchers include:

1. Conducting more interviews or survey a larger pool of journalists and members of the population to better understand their reactions to broadcast media coverages.
2. Analyzing a wider range of broadcast media content from the weeks and perhaps months leading up to the Bwa Kale movement, as well as after its initial appearance in Canapé Vert (before it evolved into a full-scale movement). Using grounded theory methodology with open, axial, and selective coding could reveal patterns in how the movement developed. Similarly, early broadcasts that used the term "Bwa kale" during the 2022 protests against the prime minister (before it was linked to the vigilante movement) can be analyzed to trace how the term evolved into a vigilante symbol.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that, while not a direct cause of the uprising of the Bwa Kale movement- as grievances and real community issues are the roots- private broadcast stations were a necessary component of the uprising process. They carried this role with:

- Social Mobilization (framing and advocacy promoted violence and emphasized individual responsibility, galvanizing community action)
- Information Dissemination ( The prevalence of corruption and a lack of journalistic objectivity worsen public trust of law enforcement)
- Public Perception: (Media narratives cultivated a sense of community empowerment but also misinterpreted collective agency, fostering an "us versus them" mentality. The use of sensationalist production techniques engaged viewers but often compromised factual accuracy).

Regarding the relationship between the Bwa Kale vigilante movement and the formal police in Haiti, it can be described as a "co-dependent dynamic." It highlights the imbalance where one party (the police, in this case) may manipulate the other (the vigilantes) to maintain a semblance of authority or control, while the vigilantes operate with the expectation of supporting or supplementing police efforts.

In such dynamics, the "taker" (the police) often benefits from the actions of the "giver" (the vigilantes) without reciprocating in a meaningful way, leading to an unhealthy relationship where the needs of the vigilantes remain unmet.

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This finding about the codependent yet imbalanced relationship between vigilantes and formal authorities contributes to the broader field of security and conflict studies, as well as criminology, by illustrating a nuanced form of informal justice and public order in a state where official law enforcement is perceived as ineffective or corrupt. Moreover, it adds a distinct case to the broader field, diverging from typical African examples where vigilantes often collaborate directly with police.

For policymakers, this finding underlines the importance of developing inclusive security frameworks that incorporate formal and informal actors in a balanced way.

Based on the findings of this study, the paper makes the following recommendations:

- The National Association of Haitian Media (ANMH) and relevant organizations, including government agencies should form a synergy in ensuring that broadcast stations remain highly professional in carrying their campaigns on security related issues.
- If peace and security is to be guaranteed in Haiti, a structured community policing devoid of politics and corrupt practices must be in place, allowing for a symbiotic relationship between the police and members of the society. Local communities should be involved directly in security initiatives by creating structured entities like neighborhood councils or advisory boards that connect with civil society and law enforcement and benefit from training programs that improve the capacity of all involved parties.
- The security crisis in Haiti requires a well-implemented collaboration across government, civil society, and communities, grounded in effective, transparent, and inclusive accords. Such agreements should prioritize open communication and accountability, ensuring that all stakeholders, from public officials to community members, have a voice in shaping security measures.

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