

News Framing of Nigeria's Seventh National Assembly: Implication on Perception and Political Actions of the Publics

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&

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Abstract

This study is undertaken to achieve two objectives: identify the dominant frames selected newspapers use to cover Nigeria's seventh National Assembly, and to determine the extent to which framing influences public perception and their political actions. Population of the study is all Nigerian dailies and senior civil servants. The study purposively selects five dailies and 200 respondents from two capital cities namely Kaduna and Ikeja, Nigeria. Findings reveal among other things that based on newspaper reports, 55% respondents have negative perception on the National Assembly. In addition, 36% are discouraged to participate in elections and 28% hold the legislature to low esteem against 12%, who hold the National Assembly to high esteem. Consequently, the study recommends that the legislature should exhibit high sense of responsibility and newspapers should appropriately frame the legislature. It also recommends media literacy among readership to avoid being easy prey to how newspapers frame stories.

Keywords: *News framing, public, perception, legislature, media*

Introduction

Framing refers to the methods by which the mass media organize and present issues and events (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). News framing, as a strategy of communicating images to members of the public, is a dominant feature in media coverage of the legislature. Hardly does one come across any media reports about the legislature devoid of frames. Even reports that are presumably without visible frames are deliberately presented to achieve an objective. In other words, journalists consciously construct legislative news stories to appear in a given way. Thus, the Nigerian National Assembly can be framed in the mass media as either a patriotic and responsible legislature or an irresponsible one. Constructing the legislature as a responsible arm of government earns it positive perception and ultimately spurs citizens to support it and involve in political activities. If presented, on the contrary, the likelihood is for the public to construe it as an inherently corrupt and irresponsible arm of government and withdraw its support.

Several advantages are associated with news framing. News framing simplifies complex issues for public understanding. Besides, in the midst of several issues that come up on a daily basis competing for media space and time, editors and reporters streamline those issues they consider salient leaving out those they consider less significant. News

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writers and editors achieve this through a selection of stories and the way such stories are constructed. Gamson (1992) attests to this that news framing has a significant impact on how people come to understand social, cultural, and political realities. This way, media reports are not considered neutral but are constructed to influence members of the public. As Collins, Abelson, Pyman, and Lavis (2006) pointed out when the mass media produce news stories about an issue, the news stories circulate certain knowledge, and then the knowledge influences people's opinions about the issue. Consequently, the public does not only perceive issues, individuals, and organisations or institutions through media prism but also take certain political decisions based on media reports.

Researchers like D'Angelo and Kuyper (2010) are of the view that, often it is the interaction between media frames and previous experiences that shape people's attitudes. It could be argued that public perception and political decision regarding an issue is a product of other factors like experience, knowledge, social ties, belief system among others, media influence is not the least. This supports the hypothesis that the power of the media to influence public perception is through news framing. Building on this premise Ofori-Birikorang (2010) contends that through news framing the media provide knowledge to their audiences, and such knowledge, in turn, exerts crucial influence in deciding the direction of citizens' understanding and possible actions they take. This position by Ofori-Birikorang reiterates the allusion that news framing enables people to make an informed decision about their socio-economic and political lives.

The use of frames differs depending on circumstances, news writers, and context. In the political realm specifically the legislative arm of government, choice of frames cannot be detached from the actors involved and disposition of news writers shaped by their political leanings. However, irrespective of the likely differences in the way reporters frame their stories, one common denominator is to simplify an overly complex issue and influence audiences' perception about an issue or a given entity.

In our context, which is the Nigeria's seventh National Assembly, both members of the public and the mass media are generally interested in that organ of government because of its vital roles. The National Assembly, among other things, oversees other arms, legislates, and the elected members are expected to be true representatives of their respective constituencies. Therefore, what the legislature does is under close inspection of members of the public and the mass media that frames its activities. It is against this backdrop that this study is undertaken to bring to perspective the extent to which news framing influences public perception as well as political decisions they take regarding Nigeria's National Assembly.

Statement of the Problem

It is common knowledge that newspapers are indispensable part of society. They therefore, have a long tradition of reporting stories. In attempt to purvey information, newspapers perform several functions. Graber (2002) identifies four of these functions. The first two are clearly positive: surveillance and interpretation. They are two aspects of one process, informing the public and telling them what that information means. The third, socialization which could have positive or negative connotations, depending on

what values and traditions are being instilled. The fourth possible function, manipulation which could also have both positive and negative connotations. It is the ability of the newspaper to interpret and inform the public that makes the news media an indispensable part of a modern democratic system. However, newspapers are seemingly not to be neutral in reporting stories but strive to influence how people construe the subject reported. It is on account of this that the study is carried out to analyse the dominant frames reporters employ to construct stories with a view to influencing the public with close reference to Nigeria's seventh National Assembly..

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the dominant frames newspapers construct stories about the National Assembly.
2. To ascertain the extent to which news framing influence the public.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on framing theory which pre-supposes that how an issue is characterized to an audience will influence how it is understood (Pande, 2010; Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007). Therefore, the information presented to the public will change the way that they view an issue. Researchers (Cherkaoui, 2010; Weaver, 2007) view frames as providing meaning about social phenomena through the highlighting and packaging of information. Presentation of issues could be with the use of episodic frames or thematic frames. Episodic frames adopt a case-study perspective on an issue or portray just one incident. On the other hand thematic frames provide greater contextualization and background, linking that particular incident to larger concerns.

Most studies on framing theory focus on the power of framing as a tactic for the mass media and even political elites, including politicians, to manipulate the public opinion in order to achieve a certain political goal. In the light of this communicators manipulate opinions by regarding the public as the passive message receivers (Sheafer, 2007). Thus, the justification for adopting framing theory lies in its ability to make clear that the identification of the particular patterns of the representations within the informative narratives of the National Assembly can potentially influence the way the institution is perceived by a large number of audiences and the attendant political actions they take.

Literature Review

Studies on framing vary in terms of context, aims and objectives. In their study of the Kenyan, Korean and Turkish legislatures, Kim, Bakkan, Turan and Jewell (1984) thoroughly analyzed citizens' perception towards their legislatures in those countries. Their aim was to uncover attitudes and behaviors of the public (both as individuals and as members of various elite segments) towards specifically the representative body and the representatives themselves. They also wanted to ascertain the dynamics of support for the legislature and its role in the dynamics of support for the political system as a whole.

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Based on their findings, when asked about the level of satisfaction of their legislatures, 78 percent of the Turkish constituents said the legislature performed well. The level of satisfaction dropped considerably when the constituents referred to MPs (members of parliaments) individually considered. Giving perspective on this, Leston-Bandeira (2002) posited that this difference may be there but what is significant is the overall image of the institution that contributes to the maintenance of the political system.

Deducing from this is the fact that unworthy conduct of a member of the legislature smears and impinges his integrity and personality. But his character deficit does not automatically affect the overall image of the legislature as an institution. It should be recognized that when it becomes a common practice involving a large magnitude of legislators, their battered image could ruin not only their dignity but that of the legislature as an entity.

In a survey undertaken by Afrobarometer (2005-2006), the study records a comparatively high level of trust in parliament at around 56 percent across the continent. They also record high levels of trust in other governing institutions, and this average masks possibly the widest regional variation. For example, trust in the Tanzanian Parliament sits at around 84 percent while, in Nigeria, it is 35 percent (Afrobarometer, 2005-2006). The Afrobarometer (2005-2006) study provides a high level of trust and this appears convincing. But when the level of trust respondents has on Nigeria's National Assembly vis-à-vis her Tanzanian counterpart, there is a negligible and disappointing 35 per cent trust for the former and a plausible 84 percent for the latter. Relying on this is an indictment on the Nigerian National Assembly.

Banjo (2013) carried out a study titled: Leadership crisis in the parliament of Nigeria: The case of the senate in the fourth republic. The objective was to explore the political dynamics that explain the rapidity of the impeachment processes and resignation of Nigeria's Senate Presidents in the fourth republic. By means of narrative analysis and utilising content-analysis of primary and secondary sources (books, journal articles, monographs, occasional papers, bulletin, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, as well as encyclopedias and yearbooks.), gathered from fieldwork in Lagos and Abuja, the study captured the crisis-ridden character of the Nigerian Senate from 1999 to 2007. The study probed the elements of corruption, intra-elite struggle and the dimensions of legislative-executive conflict in the determination of the internal power struggle and leadership instability within the Nigerian Senate (1999-2007) and concluded with the need to address the problem of poor representation in Parliament.

In her research which was poised to establish the tripartite relationship between the National Assembly, the mass media and the public by comparing media coverage and public perception of the National Assembly, Adedeji (2011) concluded that the media have a strong influence on public perception of the National Assembly by the way they portray them in their reports. According to her, this is so because both parliamentary media portrayal and public perception are largely negative. Although she used mixed research methods of survey and quantitative content analysis of selected newspapers, the study falls short of extending the frontier of media coverage of National Assembly since news framing in the context of offering interpretation is lacking.

Evidence of newspaper framing of parliamentary activities exists in other countries. Empirical evidence supporting media influence on the public is the research focusing on the Spanish 1996 regional and municipal elections carried out by McCombs et al (2000) cited in Roessier (2008) in which findings show that newspapers greatly influenced the voters' image of parliament candidates. Putting to perspective how newspaper shapes the people's socio-political direction through prioritisation of issues for public discourse and action, Darah (2010, p.5) concluded that:

Much of what most adults learn about government – its institutions and members, their activities, decisions, defects, strengths, capabilities – stems from the mass media. The self-same media have the power to decide which issues will be brought before the public...by dint of its subjects they cover (and do not cover) and the ways they structure them.

Three things are certain here. First, newspapers constitute an integral source of information for people. Second, newspaper depiction of the National Assembly and government in general result from a series of choices such as whether an issue will make the news or not. Third, the way newspaper frames or constructs news influences opinion people to form on government and its institutions. This is because facts do not speak for themselves; it is the way information communicators construct the reality towards them and contribute to the formation of the popular opinion. Usually, the information communicators frame issues in a certain way by attaching an affective attribute to the issue consciously or unconsciously (Sheafer, 2007) so that it is easier for the information receivers to resonate with them.

Regarding the role of negative coverage, Moy and Pfau (2000) investigated the role of negative media tones. The authors criticized existing research for two reasons, the restricted media sample and its focus on the presidency and the congress. Moy and Pfau (2000) addressed those voids and combined data from two extensive media content analyses of depictions of specific institutions and data from multiple surveys conducted over a period of time. They analyzed the linkages between how specific media presented certain institutions, people's media use and the individual perceived confidence of the institution. Their Finding was huge variations of media effects. The use of newspapers and televisions was associated positive with some institutions and negative with others. Regarding the relative lack of mass media influence on perceptions of the presidency the authors referred to balanced reporting as one aspect that might account for it.

Method

The study made use of content analysis and survey. Population of the study was in two folds. The first was all Nigerian dailies which a sample of five dailies was purposively drawn. The second was all senior civil servants in Kaduna and Ikeja, State capitals of Kaduna and Lagos respectively from which a sample of 200 respondents was purposively drawn. To arrive at the chosen editions, the researcher systematically selected the editions using the 12th number. Beginning from June 2, 2011 an average of two editions per week yielded 390 editions (78 editions from each of the five titles) for

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the period June 2, 2011, to December 31, 2014. Out of these editions, 199 frames were identified. In the case of sample for the survey, the researcher randomly sampled 200 respondents from the chosen state capitals, 20 respondents each from five Ministries. These included Finance, Works and Housing, Labour and Productivity, Information, and Education. In both methods data was analysed and expressed in percentages and tables.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The data was presented with recourse to the two research questions. Research question one deals with the dominant frames identified in the five newspapers. In the case of research question two, analysis and presentation was made in the context of data obtained from survey. This is presented in the ensuing tables.

RQ1:What are the dominant frames newspapers construct stories about the National Assembly?

The frame clusters selected newspapers used to construct stories about the National Assembly were based on Semetko and Valkenbug's (2000) postulation as presented on table 1 below. Out of the 199 frames identified, data reveal that the dominant frame newspapers used is conflict/human interest frame. This is followed with attribution of responsibility frame while consequence frame comes next in dominance closely followed with label/metaphor frame. Trailing behind are catchphrase and appeal to principle frames. Findings reveal that *Daily Trust* dominantes in the use of frames followed by *The Nation*. While *Thisday* is ranked next in dominance followed by *Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune* is the least to use the frames.

Table 1: The frames used in stories about Nigeria's seventh National Assembly (2011-2014)

Frames	The Nation	Daily Trust	Thisday	Nigerian Tribune	Punch
Total					
Conflict/					
Human Int	13(30%)	10(22%)	12(30%)	11(32%)	10(27%)
Consequence	8(19%)	9(20%)	8(20%)	5(15%)	3(8%)
Attribution of					
Responsibility	9(21%)	8(17%)	7(18%)	8(24%)	6(16%)
Catchphrase	4(10%)	7(15%)	4(10%)	2(6%)	5(14%)
Label/					
Metaphor	4(10%)	7(15%)	6(15%)	5(15%)	8(21%)
Appeal to					
Principle	4(10%)	5(11%)	3(7%)	3(8%)	5(14%)
Total	42(21%)	46(23%)	40(20%)	34(17%)	37(19%)
					199(100%)

RQ2:To what extent does news framing influence the public?

A Likert scale was used to measure the extent to which newspaper reports influence respondents. Data obtained depict that while majority were undecided on newspaper influence, 39% and 34 admitted and did not admit respectively that they are influenced by the newspaper reports. This implies majority of respondents are influenced by newspaper reports.

Table 2: Influence of newspaper reports

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	31	16
Agree	44	23
Undecided	52	27
Disagree	38	20
Strongly Disagree	29	14
Total	194	100

In table 3 below, data show that more than half (55%) of the respondents have a negative perception on the National Assembly as reported by newspapers. While some (42%) admit that they have positive perception on the National Assembly, few others are undecided.

Table 3: Public perception on the National Assembly based on newspaper reports

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Negative (Corrupt/irresponsible/unpatriotic)	107	55
Positive (Not corrupt/responsible/patriotic)	81	42
Undecided	6	3
Total	194	100

When respondents were required to indicate political behaviour they exhibit on account of newspaper reports about the National Assembly, most of them (36%) indicate their discouragement to participate in elections against those (24%) who answered on the contrary. Similarly, whereas 28% indicate that by virtue of newspaper reports, they are spurred to hold the National Assembly to low esteem, response of the remaining respondents which is the least admit holding the National Assembly to high esteem.

Table 4: Political behaviour of respondent

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Hold National Assembly to high esteem	23	12
Hold National Assembly to low esteem	54	28
Encouraged to participate in elections	46	24
Discouraged to participate in elections	71	36
Total	194	100

On commitment to hold legislators accountable based on newspaper reports, almost half of the respondents (48%) answer in the affirmative closely followed by 44% respondents, who express a contrary opinion.

Table 5: Commitment to hold legislators accountable based on newspaper reports

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	41	21
Agree	52	27
Undecided	16	8
Disagree	48	25

Strongly Disagree	37	19
Total	194	100

The data on table 6 is meant to explore newspaper stories respondents usually read about the National Assembly that inform their political decision. As shown, most of them (42%) read features/opinions/columns followed by news (37%). While few read editorials, a negligible number of respondents indicate that they usually read letter to the editor.

Table 6: Stories usually read

Options	Frequency	Percentage
News	71	37
Editorials	36	19
Features/Opinions/Columns	82	42
Letter to the editor	5	2
Total	194	100

Discussion of Findings

The mass media have a duty to report about the Senate and they strive to live up to that responsibility. This responsibility of the media is crucial because the citizens cannot make informed decisions without the input of the media to interpret, inform and educate them with relevant information about the legislative arm of government. However, beyond simply mirroring activities that take place in and about the Senate, journalists select the information to be reported (Asemah, Nwammuo & Edegoh, 2014) and use certain frames to influence readership. The essence of using frames is contextualised by Entman (1993), who argues that frames have several functions: they define problems or issues, offer a causal interpretation of the problem or issue and suggest a certain moral evaluation or treatment recommendation. Consequently, the dominant frame identified in the study is conflict/human interest frame followed remotely by attribution of responsibility and economic consequence. Choice of these frames could be informed by the subject matter, journalist biases and even economic and political bent of the media. Some people may not be comfortable with an overly use of conflict frames due to its sensational clout. Probably, the pre-eminence of conflict/human interest revealed in table 1 affirms Ladd's (2006) conclusion that people may have grown to dislike the press generally because of its increasing focus on sensationalism and conflict rather than on the substance of policy debates.

Against the backdrop that newspapers influence readers to form an opinion about Senate activities and as an institution, 49% respondents answer in the affirmative. This is consistent with Kostadinova's (2012) argument that frames influence people's understanding, opinions and attitudes toward issues, institutions and events. Nevertheless, more than half the respondents have a negative perception on the Senate. They perceive the Senate as corrupt, irresponsible and unpatriotic arm that reneges on its constitutional responsibility.

Perhaps, as a product of the negative public perception on the Senate, some respondents demonstrate a lukewarm political behaviour towards politics. This is evident in table 4 which depicts that most of the respondents (36%) admit that they are discouraged to participate in elections. Similarly, 28% hold the Senate to low esteem against 12%, that hold it to high esteem. That notwithstanding, majority (48%) of respondents are inclined to hold the Senate accountable for their actions based on newspaper reports in conformity with Ofori-Birikorang's (2010) assertion that newspapers lead people to be informed, and informed citizens, in turn, are better able to hold public officials accountable. Interestingly, news format respondents usually read is features/opinion followed by news (37%). The implication is that readers have little interest in editorials (19%), which incidentally is the soul of a newspaper.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggested that Nigerian newspapers have substantially conflict/human interest frame to construct stories about Nigeria's seventh National Assembly. This is evidently demonstrated by the 28% response accorded to the it. On the basis of this, the conclusion is that less emphasis was placed on other frames. The study also concludes that Nigerian public have a negative perception on the National Assembly and that most of them are indisposed to participate in elections. Despite all these, the fact that newspapers exert considerable influence on members of the public remains incontestable.

Recommendations

It is recommended that audiences should be media literate. This will fully equip them not to be gullible to stories newspapers frame. This way, audiences will be able to reshape their perception of the National Assembly, hold the institution to high esteem and actively participate in elections.

Journalists should be more professional in interpreting and explaining National Assembly activities so as to galvanise interest among members of the public to be able to hold the National Assembly accountable on their actions or inactions. This is predicated on the fact that in spite of admission of many people that they are influenced by newspapers reports in a given way, they are not motivated to hold the National Assembly accountable.

On account that most people read features and opinion or columns at the expense of other news formats which are equally informative, the study recommends that readership should diversify their reading habit by reading news and editorials to have a broad spectrum of various ways newspaper reports are presented or constructed.

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