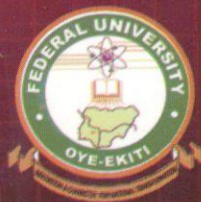
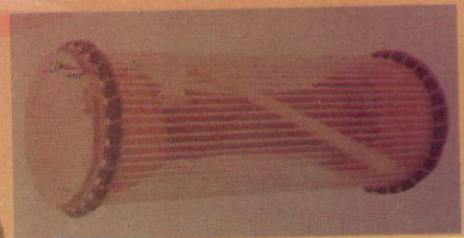


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Newspaper Framing of Nigeria's Seventh National Assembly

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Abstract

The study investigates public's assessment of newspaper framing of Nigeria's seventh National Assembly. The aim was to identify the dominant frames newspapers used as well as explain public perception on the way selected newspapers cover the National Assembly. Anchored on framing theory, the study adopts mixed research; content analysis and survey. It purposively selects five dailies in 2012 and 200 senior civil servants from two state capitals namely Port-Harcourt and Yola, Nigeria. Using the 12th interval, it systemically selected three frames – morality, conflict/human interest and economic consequence. Data revealed that conflict/human interest frame were dominant among the frames. Results also showed among other things that newspaper reports were not well contextualised and publics had less interest in newspaper reports on the National Assembly. The study concluded that newspapers reports suffered integrity deficit. It recommended quality assurance in newspaper reports to restore the eroded public confidence and interest publics have on reports.

Key words: News Framing, Newspaper, Public, Perception, National Assembly.

Introduction

Often, the public knows about the Nigerian National Assembly through the mass media. This is because people do not always have direct interpersonal contact with members of the National Assembly or their deliberations. Thus, the media serve as a link between citizens and the distant world of the legislature. Popoola (2015) maintained that people depend, to a large extent, on the information obtained from the media to create images, form opinions and find their ways in the midst of baffling statistics in political, social, economic and

cultural as well as other spheres of life. Popoola further averred, it is therefore logical not to discountenance that the way and manner a particular volatile and sensitive issue or institution is reported by the media may be germane to the understanding of such issue or institution, and thereby affect the views and opinions of the media audience. Similarly, how the media report an issue or institution affect public perception of the media outfits themselves.

News writers convey information about the National Assembly to members of the public by way of news framing which is an acknowledged strategy of news production and representation. News framing is regarded as a process through which the media emphasize some aspects of reality and downplay other aspects (Miller, 2005). Through framing, editors and reporters select what they consider news worthy and strategically place what has been selected in the media using appropriate frames. The selection of what constitute news worthy is based on criteria defined by timeliness, prominence, proximity, consequence, human interest, oddity, and conflict. Besides, selectivity is borne out of the conviction that numerous issues come up on daily basis competing for limited media space and time. As a mode of presentation journalists and other communicators use frames to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This implies audience has some cumulative knowledge and stored beliefs about issues. In other words, the audience does not wholly rely on media reports but process information based partly on the existing information they have about issues.

Members of the public with varying degrees of literacy that consume news are expected to be critical as they consume news. This means, irrespective of their level of literacy, at least those who read newspapers and magazines, should be able to make an informed appraisal of how news is constructed about an issue. This does not absolve them from their personal belief system, cultural and political orientations that may interfere with the way they value newspaper reports. In the case of the Nigerian National Assembly, the print media ceaselessly churn out stories about the activities of the institution as a whole and individual legislator either during plenary, at committees' sittings or in their respective constituencies.

What newspapers present by way of framing is a conscious act to interpret and ultimately, shape public thinking about the issues reported. That is probably why Scheufele cited in Miller (2005), and Sparks (2006) observed that framing influences how audiences think about issues, not only by making aspects of the issue more salient but by invoking interpretative schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information. Therefore, frames favorably depicting the National Assembly as being patriotic, responsive and responsible or otherwise is a deliberate act by news writers to portray it in a particular way. Premised on this background this study seeks to find out how readership

perceives the way news writers frame stories about the Nigerian National Assembly, being a vital organ of government.

Statement of the Problem

Certainly, people read about the Nigerian National Assembly daily. In the course of reading stories about the legislature, they are presumably conscious of the way newspapers frame news. On the other hand, reporters' selection of stories and use of generic or specific frames to construct news about the legislature and subsequent placement of stories is to achieve a preconceived objective. News writers justify this on account of limited media space and time to accommodate numerous stories and interpret with a view to influencing public opinion. Despite the magnitude of existing literature on framing, little or nothing is written about how the public perceive the way newspapers frame the Nigeria's seventh National Assembly. In order to fill the void created by lack of studies on newspaper framing of the legislature, this study investigates how Nigerian newspapers frame stories pertaining to the Nigerian National Assembly.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the dominant frames newspapers used to construct stories about the Nigerian National Assembly.
2. Investigate how the public perceives the way newspapers framed stories about the Nigerian National Assembly.

Theoretical Framework

This study used framing theory as a theoretical framework for understanding how newspapers constructed stories on Nigerian National Assembly. The basic assumption of framing theory is media selection of certain aspects of issues, emphasis the media place on such issues and how issues are constructed or structured in news stories. In order to efficiently process new information, Goffman argued, individuals apply interpretive schemes or 'primary frameworks' to classify information and attribute meaning to it (Goffman, 1984 cited in Galli, 2011).

Several researchers on framing theory including de Vreese, Boomgaarden and Semetko (2011) and Kostadinova and Dimitrova (2012) have declared that framing has become one of the most used concepts in communication discipline giving direction to both inquiries of media content and examination of the connection between the media and public opinion. Writing on framing theory, Balmas and Sheaffer (2010) argued that the focus at the first level agenda-setting which emphasizes media's role in telling people "what to think about" is shifted

to media's function of telling people "how to think about" at the second-level agenda-setting.

In news writing, news writers apply different frames to construct stories. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified some of these frames to include conflict, human interest, economic consequence, and attribution of responsibility. Other frames include but not limited to label, morality, metaphor, and catch phrase. According to Darwish (2006), one of the major areas of framing news occurs at the semantic level. Semantic framing occurs at the lexical level of text which is the choice of words used to frame the news report. Another major area of semantic framing is the adjectives which function as modifiers of a noun and refer to an attribute of that.

Framing theory applies in this study because it makes clear that the identification of the particular patterns of the representations within the informative narratives can potentially influence the way the phenomena are perceived by a large number of audiences (Valeda, 2002). The justification also finds expression in the words of Entman (1993), who posited that framing theory explains how media promote a particular angle of definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

Literature Review

Newspapers could be strong enough through its surveillance function, but stronger through interpretation depending on choice of frames. In the process of the social construction of political affairs, the newspapers often adopt a framing strategy (Verdoolaege, 2005). Due to this fact, media can influence the public opinion (Sadaf, 2011). While newspapers influence public perception about issues, they also shape the way members of the public perceive quality of newspaper content. Some worthwhile literature exists on newspaper coverage of legislatures that render credence to the study of news framing. One of the empirical studies will suffice.

In his study, Mchakulu (2011) compared and examined parliamentary rhetoric against newspapers editorials in Malawi to establish whether or not there are parallels in the way political issues are presented in both arenas. The purpose of the study was to establish whether or not newspapers in Malawi provide critical and analytical voices for newspaper readers or whether or not they simply reflect the political positions of their owners' political parties by reflecting those political parties' rhetoric in parliament. The study used three case studies. Specifically, these were the one hundred days following 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections because newly elected governments tend to use the early days of their election into the office to articulate and lay the foundations of implementing their policies. The study used frame theory analysis as a theoretical and analytical tool. The four main components of a frame: Problem Definition, Causal Interpretation, Moral Evaluation and Treatment

Recommendation were used to detect frames in the corpora. Data were coded in accordance with the grounded theory method. Findings indicate that in 1994 and 1999, newspaper editorial writers framed political issues by reflecting the positions of their owners. However, in the 2004 case study, while the newspapers' framing of political issues did not differ from parliamentary framing, changes in ownership and owners' political re-alignment affected framing. The newspapers no longer reflected the position of the political parties, there was no division along political party-lines, and they did not take cues from parliament.

Taking to consideration the use of frames for scholarly endeavours, studies reveal that researchers make use different typologies of frames. The frame typologies include episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1993). Both of these frames have different approaches to an issue and can have a dramatic impact on how that issue is subsequently read and understood. As the name suggests, episodic framing is where a writer approaches an issue in terms of a specific event or episode. Thematic framing on the other hand approaches an issue as part of a continuing topic or theme, rooted within wide social trends or functions.

Another typology is media frame or frame in communication and frame in thought or individual frame. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) describe the frames used by the media as macro-constructs, necessary to reduce the complexity of the issues and to adapt it to the needs and constraints of the media and the audiences, as well as to the interpretive schemas they were used to. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) further explained that once in the minds of individuals, frames become micro-constructs that allow audiences to use the received information to form their own impressions and images of the world.

There are also strong frames and weak frames which researchers have proposed. Giving perspective on this typology, Chong and Druckman (2007) argued that if one accepts that there are different types of frames, one cannot refuse the idea that frames are not all equal in strength. The strength of a frame can be equated with the appeal of the frame for the individual or for the public, and its capacity of persuasion against an alternative frame. However, as Chong and Druckman (2007) recognised, the strength of the frame is difficult to measure.

Besides the above are generic and specific frames. The use of generic frames facilitates the comparison of the results of different research works carried out in different places and on different topics. The specific frames can only be applied to a specific topic or event, while generic frames can be applied with greater flexibility to different events, and sometimes even in different physical, temporal and cultural spaces. Examples of generic frames are attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, morality and economic consequences (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). A responsibility frame deal with the responsibility or blame

for the cause or the solution is placed on individuals and groups. Economic frame emphasizes the manner in which an issue will affect economically.

Another type of generic frames that is widely used is the 'strategy' frame, proposed by Rhee (1997) cited in Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) in opposition to 'issue' frame. The strategy frame focuses on aspects such as the style of political candidates, their personality, the tactics and development of the electoral campaign, etc. In this type of framing the language of war and game are frequently used. To capture the reader's interest, newspapers tend to highlight the human aspects of the campaign, and underrepresent the role of institutions or the underlying political discourse. Issue coverage, on the other hand, focuses on how to deal with social problems or the consequences of the policies carried out or suggested by individuals. This type of coverage also highlights the role of institutions (parties, levels of government, etc.) against the role of individuals (Rhee, 2007 cited in Ardèvol-Abreu (2015).

In analysing how newspapers use frames, Pan and Kosicki (1993) cited in Chang (2009) suggested that at least three ways are involved. First, news texts are considered being composed of organized symbolic devices that interact with individuals' memory to construct meanings. Second, there is a systematic procedure of gathering messages to identify significant elements that might be selectively received by audiences. Finally, frames in a news text are not likely to be independent of the interpretations of the readers of that text. This is why Scheufele (1999) suggests while media frames are characteristics of the news text, individual frames are mentally stored principles audience members use for information processing. Therefore, the mental representations resulting from exposure to a news frame can be conceived as an understanding of what is in the news coverage that guides an audience member's interpretation of initial information.

In spite of the several frame typologies, this study made use of the generic ones postulated by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Ashiekpe (2014) made use of the similar frames typology to analyse newspaper framing of issues. This strengthens the researchers' belief in the chosen frames as basis for the study.

Method

The study adopted mixed method using qualitative content analysis and survey. The study population was 1,830 editions of the five newspapers. To arrive at this figure 366 per edition was multiplied by the 5 select newspapers. In addition to the newspapers editions was senior civil servants drawn from five ministries in Portharcourt, Rivers State, and Yola, Adamawa State both in Nigeria. A sample of the select newspapers was drawn and 200 respondents, 100 each from the two States were purposively selected. Selection of the five dailies was based on the fact that they are among the leading dailies in Nigeria. Choice of the senior civil servants from state capitals was informed by the fact that they are literate and

most likely to read newspapers. Subsequently, with the aid of some assistants, three frames were systemically identified between January 2012 and December 2012. Similarly, 200 copies of the questionnaire were administered to respondents with the return rate of 191 copies representing 96%. While data from the newspaper was descriptively interpreted and analyzed, data from the survey was quantitatively analyzed and presented in percentages and tables.

Data from Content Analysis

Table 1: Frames used by the select newspapers

Frame	Newspapers	Daily Trust	Nigerian Tribune	Thisday	Punch
Economic Consequence				The Senate yesterday said the use of the rule of a plea bargain has failed to achieve the end of justice but merely serve the cause of the rich (2012, April 3, p.9).	
Morality		The National Assembly is strongly opposed to the passage of a bill that will allow same-sex marriage despite threats by some Western nations (2012, May 23, p.3).			
Human Interest/	a.The Federal Government	a. The attempt by President	a. The House of	a. A mild drama	a.The investigation

Conflict	had attempted to prevent the House of Representatives from sitting on Sunday by citing religious sentiments and other unidentified issues, but the lower chamber sat, had productive deliberations, and with an overwhelming voice vote agreed to recommend to the president the suspension of fuel subsidy removal (2012, January 10, p.64).	Goodluck Jonathan to get the approval of the Senate for the removal of Alhaji Mohammed Ari Gwaska (Nasarawa South) from the Federal Character Commission (FCC) suffered a setback yesterday as Senators queried why he should be sacked (2012, May 23, p.4). b. The plenary session of the Senate witnessed a mild drama, yesterday as eight committees expected to present reports failed to do so (2012, May 23, p.9).	Representatives, after long politicking and horse trading, okayed for second reading the request by President Goodluck Jonathan for approval of the supplementary budget (2012, March 12, p3). b. The House of Representatives is presently angry with the executive arm of the government and the reason is not far-fetched (2012, April 3, p.43).	occurred during PPPRAs 2013 budget defence session. The law makers were said to have been infuriated at the agency's use of its Internally Generated Revenue (IGR), which amounted to N5,725,920,533.00, as running cost to pay salaries of 209 members of staff of PPPRA ((2012, November 28. p.10).	by the House of Representatives of the Nigeria Capital Market took a dramatic twist on Thursday as the Director-General of the Securities Exchange Commission, Ms. Arunma Oteh, accused the Chairman, House Committee on Capital Market and other Institutions, Mr. Herman Hembé, of corruption (2012, March 16, p.2).
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Data from Survey

Table 2: Level of coverage the select newspapers gave the Seventh Nigerian National Assembly

Option	Frequency	Percentage
High	67	35
Average	93	49
Low	31	16
Total	191	100

The data on Table 3 show that while majority (n=74 or 39%) of respondents indicated that awareness creation is the most significant contribution of newspapers reports on the legislature, others (n=59 or 31%) opted for shaping of public perception as the major contribution of newspapers reports.

Table 3: Most significant contribution of the select newspaper report about seventh NASS

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Awareness creation	74	39
Knowledge building	22	12
Shaping of public perception	59	31
Critiquing of NASS activities	36	18
Total	191	100

As regards the content of newspapers reports, most (n=78 or 41%) respondents indicate that the newspapers reports on Nigeria's National Assembly are not well contextualised. On the contrary, 63 (33%) respondents indicate that the newspapers reports are well contextualised while the remaining 50 (26%) respondents indicate that the newspapers reports almost have no context.

Table 4: Contextualisation of newspapers reports

Option	Frequency	Percent
Well contextualised	63	33
Not well contextualised	78	41
Almost no context was given	50	26
Total	191	100

In order to find out the capability of newspapers report to enhance or inhibit comprehension of National Assembly activities, data in table 5 show that majority (n=83 or 43%) respondents agree that the reports are capable of enhancing comprehension. On the other hand 57 (30%) respondents are of the view that the newspapers reports have the capability of inhibiting comprehension.

Table 5: Capability of newspaper reports to enhance or inhibit comprehension

Option	Frequency	Percent
They have the capability to enhance	83	43
They have the capability to inhibit	57	30
They lack the capability to enhance	15	8
They lack the capability to inhibit	36	19
Total	191	100

The data on Table 6 show that more than half of total respondents (n=112 or 59%) are seldomly interested in newspapers reports about the National Assembly. While 63 (33%) indicate that they are always interested in the reports, responses from the remaining 16 (8%) respondents show that they are never interested in newspapers reports about the Nigeria's National Assembly.

Table 6: Frequency of interest in stories on NASS

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Always	63	33
Sometimes	112	59
Never	16	8
Total	191	100

When respondents were required to indicate how best they could describe newspapers reports on the National Assembly, 109 (57%) indicated that the reports unfavourably depict the legislature as against the 78 (41%) respondents, who indicate on the contrary. A negligible 4 (2%) respondents are neutral.

Table 7: Description of newspaper reports about NASS

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Favourable	78	41
Unfavourable	109	57
Neutral	4	2
Total	191	100

Discussion of Findings

Discussion is guided by the two research questions. In research question one which seeks to identify and explain the dominant frames newspapers use to construct stories about the National Assembly, results show conflict/human interest frame as the dominant frame used. This is followed by economic consequence and lastly, morality frame. The dominance of conflict/human interest frame is at variance with findings by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which indicate that conflict frame is the second most common frame that could be found in news reports. As evident in table 1, the conflict and human interest used to construct the various stories explain the unhealthy relationship between the executive particularly the president and the legislators. Besides, the frames reveal the rancorous sessions in the National Assembly as an entity. Newspapers and the mass media in general achieve this through framing as amplified by Ashiepe (2014) that through framing reporters use a particular narrative structure and invoke public opinion in a particular way.

Unlike research question one which deals with the dominant frames, research question two deals with perception of publics on newspaper reports about the National Assembly. One of the items used to proffer solution to it is

level of importance respondents attach to newspapers reports about Nigeria's seventh National Assembly. Many respondents attach high importance to newspaper reports. This could be due to the fact that the reports contain the desired substantive information about the legislature in affirmation of Graber's (1984) assertion cited in Ladd (2006) that news reports actually do contain the more substantive information that the publics claim to crave. This implies, rather than news content, it is citizens' direct perceptions of the style of news coverage, which either notice or do not show interest in more issue-focused coverage that causes them to dislike news reports. Therefore, high quality news is easily available. The high importance people attach to the newspapers reports is further justified by result in table 5. Based on data, publics believe newspaper reports have the capability to enhance comprehension of National Assembly activities. When required to indicate the most significant contribution of newspaper reports about the National Assembly, result in table 4 reveals that respondents opted for awareness creation followed with shaping of publics' perception, and then critiquing of National Assembly activities while knowledge building is the last contribution.

It is worthy to note that despite the importance respondents attach to newspaper reports on the legislature coupled with their firm belief in the capability of newspaper reports to enhance comprehension; majority of respondents (59%) submitted that they are occasionally interested in newspaper reports about the National Assembly. This is trailed by less than half of the respondents (33%), who indicate that they are always interested in the newspaper reports. On the other hand, a negligible number (8%) admitted that they are never interested in the reports. It is not surprising; therefore, that majority of respondents (41%) did not conceal their feelings when they admitted that newspaper reports lack context. But when required to indicate the direction of newspaper reports about the National Assembly, more than half (51%) indicated that the reports do not favour the National Assembly.

Summary and Conclusion

The study was conducted to determine the dominant frames newspapers used to construct stories about the National Assembly as well as find out how publics perceive the newspaper reports. Guided by two research questions, the study, which used mixed methods analysed frames identified. This was complemented with analysis of data obtained from survey.

Based on findings of the study, the general impression created, which forms the basis for the conclusion is that despite the high importance members of the public attach to newspaper reports on the National Assembly as well as their belief in the capability of the newspaper reports to enhance comprehension of reports, there are serious shortcomings associated with how newspapers frame

stories. One of the shortcomings is the apparent lack of professionalism evident in poor context.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the study recommends that;

1. Newspapers should always explain and interpret activities of the National Assembly with a view to informing and educating readership more. This is predicated against the lack of contextual reporting of the legislature that attracts poor rating by members of the public.
2. Members of the National Assembly should be seen as being proactive rather than heard in discharging their constitutional mandate of legislation, representation and oversight. This will create and build newspapers confidence, trust and support to the institution through favourable reports about the legislatures.
3. Newspapers should not only have as their preoccupation to inform, create awareness and shape public perception on the National Assembly. As the Fourth Estate of the realm, they should vigorously criticize activities of the National Assembly as the case may be. By doing this they would be holding the arm of government accountable.
4. Against the backdrop that the public are not interested in newspaper reports either because of dismal performance of the National Assembly or shallow reportage or both, it is recommended that both the legislators and newspapers should adjust their performance to meet the needs and expectations of the public. In the case of the legislators, their legislations should have direct impact on average citizens. On their part, journalists who purvey legislative activities should be more incisive to the extent of reporting the behind the scenes and not simply relying on handouts from legislature.

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