



## Reinvigorating the Framing Theory: Appraising Reports on Nigerian Military and Boko Haram Insurgency

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**Abstract:** Framing has been fundamental in how topical issues have been presented and dissected during discourse. In presenting the Boko Haram insurgency, the Nigerian press has been accused of misrepresenting the conflict by a number of studies. This was observed in the lopsidedness of reporting which have been influenced to a great extent by the government-press relationship. The media are seen as willing tools of the government in some instances by presenting government and military agenda in the course of reporting the conflict leading to a frame that point to a government victory when in reality it is far-fetched. In other instances, there is a dissonance between their points of view. This paper advocates for the synergy of thought between the military and media when reporting the conflict and for the press to focus more on the root causes of such conflicts rather than dwelling on the effects as the main function of the press should be tilted towards the resolution of the conflict not to serve as a tool of the government or an opposition by using sensational reporting to destabilize the society.

**Keywords:** Framing, Nigeria, Military, Boko Haram, Insurgency

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Framing theory is regarded by some scholars as the second dimension of the agenda setting theory. It is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another because of how the issue is projected by the press in their coverage. In the field of communication, framing theory in recent years has taken over from the agenda-setting theory as the most commonly applied research approach (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Van Gorp, 2007). The main thrust of this paper appraises representations of the Nigerian military by the press reporting their engagements with the Boko Haram insurgent group. Some scholars have faulted news accounts about the Boko Haram conflict as being misrepresented by the media and only serve to inflame the already volatile conflict (Shehu, 2015; Hamid & Baba, 2014, 2014; Lawrence, 2011). Some have gone far to accuse news accounts of demoralizing troops fighting the insurgents in the past (Erunke, 2017; Haruna, 2017; Audu, 2013).

### 2. FRAMING THEORY

The framing ideology with regards to media communication, however, does not belong exclusively to the field of communication science. Its origins can be traced to fields of cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932) and anthropology through the works of Gregory Bateson (1955; 1972). Successively, it was adopted by other fields of scholarship, usually accompanied with a slight shift from its original meaning, including sociology (Goffman, 1974), economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), linguistics (Tannen, 1979), social-movements research (Snow & Benford, 1988), policy research (Schön & Rein, 1994), communication science (Tuchman, 1978), political communication (Gitlin, 1980), public relations research (Hallahan, 1999), and health communication (Rothman & Salovey, 1997).

The ideology behind framing is that the media places emphasis on specific attributes of events and then attempts to place them within a field of meaning for the audience to decode intentionally or unintentionally. With our focus on the message conveyed in reports about military operations against the Boko Haram group, the question becomes what meanings do media messages create in the minds

of the audience? Framing is an important theme as it has the capacity to influence opinions and shape attitudes. Frames are abstractions that help to structure message meaning especially with the information they are framed to convey. Baresch, Hsu and Reese (2010) emphasise that news media are no doubt the most crucial players in developing frames. They generate, organise, and transmit frames, connecting social structure and the individual understanding of the reported events.

Ghanem (1997) describes framing along four features: the prominence with which a story is presented (such as, frequency, story format, and placement), the specific subtopics addressed, other attributes (such as, the central actors, sources etc.) and the effect of the story (whether, positive, negative or neutral). Pictures are also included as part of news components under prominence as it gives salience to the issue being addressed because images have a lasting impression in the minds of readers while reporting casualties in this research is a subtopic addressed. Miller et al. (2012) suggests that how the media describes specific issues is important because the chosen narrative can result in varying assessments of the seriousness of the observed problem, its antecedents and solutions, and the motivation of the main characters involved.

The research adaptations of framing theory by other disciplines are manifestations of a strong credence in the research potentials and applicability of the framing concept. Due to its myriads of applicability, Entman (1993) characterized framing as a fractured paradigm devoid of clear conceptual definitions and a comprehensive statement to guide research. Various scholars have advocated for creating a more integrated approach that clarifies the framing concept within different domains (Scheufele, 1999; Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; Brosius & Eps, 1995; Yows, 1995; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Hallahan (1999) advocates that framing has been adopted as a textual, psychological, and socio-political construct, where depending on the situation; its meaning varies based on the adopted research questions, level and method of analysis, or the fundamental psychological process of interest.

Within the field of communication, scholars have adopted framing to break down the meaning of media texts and point readers to the desired direction journalists want the audience to look at. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) expounded that the framing theory is based on the concept that how an issue is portrayed in media texts can influence audience perception of the news story to promote a particular ideology. They further elucidate that how the public classify information also complements the framing theory and framing is a macro level and a micro level construct, where the macro and micro constructs are “media” and “individual” frames respectively. “As a macro construct, the term ‘framing’ refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience” (p. 12).

Scheufele (1999) enjoins that the macro and micro components of framing have to be taken into account when reading a journalistic piece, where media frames like the macro constructs are considered as the main organizing objective or story line that conveys meaning to happenings that are unfolding. Scheufele (1999) further explained that by “viewing media or news frames as necessary to turn meaningless and non-recognizable happenings into discernible events can lead to the story being framed” (p.106). In other words, how the press presents news accounts can influence how the audience understands the incidents being covered in the long run. Whether the public maintain a positive or negative disposition towards the characters depends on their portrayal especially if the portrayal cumulates and is consistent.

Continuing further, Scheufele (1999) canvasses that in relation to the micro construct, readers of a news article develop their perceptions about topics in the public domain based on how the news article was framed and their own personal frames. Receivers may construe and process information based on the pattern of frames adopted in the news story. Journalists thereby play a crucial role in how the public forms their opinion and when they focus the news frame only on negative or positive aspects of the subject, the other aspects of the story they consider less crucial are excluded in order to achieve the desired effect on the news audience. Herein lies its distinction from agenda setting theory, whereas agenda setting deals with issues, framing is more concerned with perception; how the issue is presented and the meaning the readers imply from the text of journalistic endeavors.

Goffman (1974), and Tuchman (1978) had earlier pointed out the central position journalists and media practitioners occupy for framing to achieve its purpose. Reporters use framing to simplify a

story for easy comprehension and perception by their audience. Micro construct clarifies how individuals use the information they receive to form opinions about the issue under consideration (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). These variables each add to how the audience views the issues under examination. The influence of the media is so much that it has the potential to generate a specific response from the readers and public in general by the way the story is characterized (Freyenberger, 2013).

In a simple description that is applicable to the framing theory, we can look at “frames” like a picture frame. It tells the story of what was captured by the camera at a point in time. For example, we can visit the zoo and take a picture close to the section where elephants are kept only and use this picture to describe our experience at the zoo. In our description based on the picture we took at the zoo, we will lay more emphasis on what was captured by the frame of the camera — the elephants. Thus even though there were other animals in the zoo, the frame with the elephant will be the most highlighted and discussed more than the sections for monkeys or lions. Newspapers use this same technique on issues they report on, by focusing on their frames of interest selecting the frames, emphasizing on their points of view, excluding other details, and elaborating on the angles they want to cover.

For scholars in communication studies, the study of media frames are important because according to Entman (1993) a frame “is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text” (p. 55). The way news is framed has the potential to influence its assimilation by the audience (Iyengar, 1987; Entman, 1993), propagate stereotypes in the society and is capable of creating an impression of empathy or aversion toward a group of people or their ideology (Robinson, 2002; Evans, 2010). Reporting positively about military operations and the latest gadgets to be deployed in the fight against Boko Haram can strike fear into the insurgents and dissuade new converts to the ideologies of the sect. At the other spectrum, media could also frame Boko Haram as religious ideologists who deserve the freedom to practice their brand of Islam in their region. Thus, frames can be critical in acceptance or rejection of government policies and positions as well as escalating conflicts or in conflict resolution.

News stories can also be framed as conflict where such conflicts could be between countries, institutions, groups or individuals (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Valkenburg and Semetko (1999) highlighted that this brand of reporting makes winning and losing the central themes of such coverage where languages common in wars and conflicts are present. This also applies to the battle between the Nigerian military and the Boko Haram sect. The frequency of reporting military victories and Boko Haram’s casualty figures could affect the recruitment of new members to the group as the thinking will be that they are more likely to become casualties themselves. On the other hand, reporting military deficiencies and losses will embolden members of the group and such reports can also be used to successfully recruit new members with the promise of powers that come with being politically independent of the government.

The media in reporting military operations against the Boko Haram group may choose to highlight pieces of information that portrays government forces as victorious, such as pointing out the casualty estimates of the terrorists while downplaying or out rightly omitting such estimates for the government forces thereby making the enemy casualty figures salient in the report. Entman (1993) defines salience as “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audience” (p.53). By applying salience to negative aspects of Boko Haram shortcomings, while omitting those of the military and government forces, it may discourage other Jihadis from faraway places with the intention of joining the insurgent group in fighting the government.

Freyenberger (2013) provides more clarity by stating that an increase in salience increases the chances that the public will remember the reported news. Taking the cited example of the casualty estimates of Boko Haram from a military operation, the public will tend to remember the figures mentioned, and when such reports are repeated intermittently, it creates an image in the mind of the public that the military is winning the war against the group. Information can be removed or included based on what message the media want to communicate to the public. The media in this situation can decide to promote government operations, or the terrorists’ agendas, or remain neutral.

The framing of any issue can influence public opinion and this particular issue deals with the democratic process that depends on public opinion usually translated in elections, where public

opinion is measured by votes garnered. Media framing can possibly affect any issue that is being depicted in the media and framing has become a widely accepted concept in discussing media research studies globally. The Nigerian media generally framed former President Jonathan as weak and unable to tackle the corruption hydra that has plagued Nigeria and affected economic growth (Yusuf, 2016; Ibekwe, 2015). Analysts and political commentators say the inability of the former president to control members of his inner circle was the main reason he lost both local and international support in the lead up to the 2015 general elections (Stein, 2016; Siollun, 2015; Zane, 2015).

A number of reasons make the press to frame issues to suit a particular narrative; some may include reporter bias, editorial policy, source or quote selection, and the influence of civil society organisations (Entman 2004; Scheufele 1999). Studies for example (Auwal, 2015; Kinder 2007; Scheufele, 2004; 1999; Van Gorp, 2007) have however pointed out that media practitioners are not immune to frames. Barrett and Barrington (2005) are of the view that existing public discourse and citizen action surrounding a given issue also plays a role in the way journalists choose to construct and frame their reports.

### **3. FRAMING NEWS**

News framing is an essential attribute journalists use when writing stories. Ghanem (1997) describes framing along four features: the prominence with which a story is presented (such as, frequency, story format, images and placement), subtopics addressed, and other attributes of the story (such as, the central actors, sources etc.) and the effect of the story on the readers (whether, positive, negative or neutral). Fairhurst & Star (1996) assert that “a frame refers to the way media and media gatekeepers organize and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audience interprets what they are provided” (p.2). McQuail (2010) adds that framing is a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items of fact thereby linking isolated events to a situation with shared meanings to buttress a viewpoint.

Obaje (2017) notes that the idea of framing news has been broadly and freely used to refer to terms like: theme, context, frame of reference, or news angle. In making their news reports, journalist’s stories are given meaning by making reference to some particular news value that links one occurrence with other similar occurrences. To bring in the frame building process, similar narratives are continuously espoused by journalists and on a regular basis employing mechanisms such as front cover, bold headlines and bold letters and images that embody the narrative being portrayed. To give credence to such stories, more space is given to sources with favourable ratings to the journalist’s narratives and if they are government sources, they provide a better credibility for the story as they are seen as official sources, knowledgeable on the subject matter and authorized to speak about it. When reporting about military operations, only the official army spokesman is authorized to issue statements on behalf of the army, the version he sends out is regarded as authentic and official.

Entman (1993) intimated that frames in the news can be appraised and identified by “the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (p.52). In similar vein, Gamson and Lasch (1983) supported by other scholars (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007) earlier identified framing devices that summarize information that enables readers focus on the highlights as posited by the media. They include: (a) Metaphors (b) Exemplars (c) Catch – phrases (d) Depictions, and (e) Visual images. Metaphors and catch-phrases are employed more in the headlines while depictions and exemplars are implied in the body of the news mainly and when trying to connect similar occurrences in order to further propagate the strength or the weakness of an institution or individual.

In furtherance of news framing, Tankard (2001) provides a list of framing devices that the media can apply in characterizing and evaluating new frames, they include: headlines, subheads, photos, logos, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, statistics and charts, and, concluding statements. All feasible framing devices that portend at the same central idea make up the manifest part of a frame being projected. These frames are held together under the heading of a central organizing theme that provides coherent structure for the narrative the readers are meant to perceive either of positive or the negative frame as the case may be. Our study applies some of the devices to identify frame patterns use by the selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting military operations



against the group in order to determine if the coverage has been positive, negative or objective towards the military. We applied headlines, subheads, photos, logos, photo captions, leads, source selection, statistics and concluding statements in determining portrayal of the Nigerian military by the sampled newspapers.

#### 4. FRAMING INSURGENCY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The development of communications technologies has led to not just the public becoming witnesses and reporters of wars and conflicts, it has also enabled the actors to tell their own stories. New media technologies has led to an increased sophistication by insurgent groups which has enabled them to upload images and videos of their activities direct to the public bypassing the mainstream media who receive the news like the rest of public. Modern day ideological insurgents who are tech savvy bypass the journalists who acted like the gatekeepers by actively engaging in their own broadcast production and dissemination. The Bin Laden tapes, for example, are relatively sophisticated in terms of their rhetoric targeting the Arab as well as global audience (Tuman, 2003). Boko Haram terrorists have extensively used YouTube to release videos of their confrontation with military forces, debunk government claims and also use them to show captives when trying to demand ransom like the video of the kidnapped Chibok school girls (Dearden, 2016), kidnapped policewomen (Odunsi, 2017) or lecturers of geology department, University of Maiduguri who were kidnapped in July 2017 in an operation that left scores of persons dead (Idowu, 2017).

Tumber (2008) highlights the growing Influence of new media markets and concentration of media ownership which has enabled international and global coverage as well as national. Different terrorist groups may now follow examples of the activities of other group by following the new media landscape or mainstream media for inspiration in carrying out their own local terrorism activities. With this, news organizations have inadvertently become abettors for media savvy terrorist groups. The demands of news elements ensures that journalists seek exclusives and breaking information that will put the individual and the media organization they represent on the top echelon of the media world as they increasingly seek more dramatic and “bloody” events, this also raises the threshold for a successful terrorist attack (Tuman, 2003).

#### 5. FRAMING CASUALTIES IN CONFLICT REPORTING

Reporting casualties is a sensitive aspect of the media function in covering insurgencies, terrorist attacks and conflicts generally. The media generally is expected to report truthfully how events unfold, at the same time, their reporting should be a rallying call that unites the country against internal and external threats to the continued existence of the nation, rather than reporting events to cause panic, unnecessary tension that heats up the polity and disrupt economic and commercial activities which are inimical to development.

Studies have analyzed how government has managed conflicts and how casualties have affected public opinion and support for military engagements with terrorists (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2006; Gartner & Segura, 1998; Gartner, Segura & Wilkening, 1997; Larson, 1996), some others have looked at how the media helped to shore up support for the government where such insurgencies and terrorists are active (Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010; Karol & Miguel, 2007; Ludvigsen, 2007; Berrebi & Klor, 2006; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2006).

Broadly, it is generally acknowledged that the public in a democracy are sensitive to casualty figures reported in the media. Researchers have found a pattern that show declining public support for governments with increasing casualties when fighting and managing conflicts (Karol & Miguel, 2007; Berrebi & Klor, 2006; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2006; Larson, 1996). The public support for such war efforts will be in the upswing initially when government announces measures to tackle internal and external forces that have disrupted and terrorized the society and also when they are reported to be victorious with little or no casualties. A protracted conflict with increasing casualty figures is likely to lose public support and can cause unrest and civil disobedience (deLeon, 2015; Biello, 2010). This is more so when such casualty numbers are boldly written in the headlines and leads of news stories.

Casualty estimates especially in the headlines and leads are good examples of negative framing because it appeals to the emotions of people and groups affected by the losses and are capable of leading to mass actions against government policies and programmes relating to the conflict being

reported more especially when they cumulate. Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) in support notes that negative framing could spur people to reflect more about a message and how it could impact the society. Thus the journalists needs to understand how to apply the processes of exclusion and less emphasis on details such as casualty estimates capable of affecting government efforts in resolving military conflicts. Devices like putting them in the body of the story or towards the conclusion can also diminish the significance of casualty reports. Also, writing them as an afterthought in a sentence can also play them down as collateral to the main subject in the sentence which could be the losses suffered by the opponents.

Rising casualties are issues not to be treated lightly as it can go a long way in determining support or opposition against government policies and can play a crucial role during elections. One of the reasons attributed for the loss of the incumbent President Jonathan in the 2015 general election in Nigeria was the Boko Haram crises and the casualties from the war reaching its peak with the kidnap of the Chibok school girls in 2014 (Nwafor, 2017; Zane, 2015). The failure of Jimmy Carter's re-election bid in the US was also attributed to how the government handled the Iranian hostage situation coupled with the public anger against the Nixon era Vietnam War (Meenagh, 2014).

The media in Nigeria in 2015 and in America in 1980 painted the Presidents as weak and lame as well as not having the capacity to take tough decisions leading to their overwhelming defeats in their respective elections with both Presidents conceding defeats to their opponents well ahead of official announcements like they knew the results already before the polls. They were both the earliest concessions in the respective countries election histories (Owen & Usman, 2015; Meenagh, 2014; Democratic Underground, 2012).

The trend of reporting is said to be negative when military casualties are made more prominent than Boko Haram casualties. Public support will remain high for military operations as long as the causality estimates are negligible with little impact to the socioeconomic lives of the public. The media has a crucial role in how casualties can be presented to the public, knowledge of framing devices will help the journalist to tell his story objectively while yet not serving as fodder for the Boko Haram insurgents or not providing the complete account of events when reporting.

## **6. THE FRAMING DIVIDE**

Thomas (1993) showed that news articles frames one culture as subordinate to the dominant. This portrayal takes on the character of a social myth and creates negative perceptions which are eventually translated into negative actions toward the subordinate culture. These myths reproduce power relations, establishing boundaries between the dominant and subordinate culture (Santos & Proffitt, 2002). The two main political actors in our study are the military and the Boko Haram group. It is expected that if the military has dominant political power over Boko Haram, newspaper frames will be aligned towards the values attributed to the military and reports about their activities will be glowing to inspire the citizenry into support of its activities against the sect as the news sources will also be composed primarily of the dominant player.

There is an argument that framing is a multi-faceted process-not a one-way street in which prominent political actors manipulates the public's evaluation of the government, leaders or their policy agendas. Schudson (1989) acknowledged this when he expounded on the functionality of frames. He remarks that frames are the conduit by which government officials, activists and crusaders shape meanings and communicate their demands, criticisms, and propositions over those of opposing views. They use cultural resources, beliefs, ideologies, values, and myths to make their goals persuasive.

Moreover, political office holders, activists and crusaders strive to make their propositions reverberate among certain audiences by connecting them to popular beliefs, whether by amplifying previously muted themes or re-expressing old ideas in new idioms. The study by Demers and Viswanath (1999) acknowledge the complex nature of media frames, others researchers have found out that the elites and major actors still hold all the aces with regard to framing (Altschull, 1984; Bennett, 1988; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980) as political power to a large extent determines whose interests are framed in media reports.

News is also framed as conflict. The conflict frame lays emphasis on conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Valkenburg & Semetko (1999) reported that

this kind of coverage makes winning and losing the central concern when reporting conflict stories. This makes it the more important for the group that considers itself super ordinate to the subordinate group(s) to control the flow of information in the media. In the case of reporting military operations against Boko Haram, the military (super ordinate group) tries to maintain this superiority by controlling media information about its activities against Boko Haram (subordinate group) and when the need arises uses aggression, threats and arrests against the press to ensure that they conform to military dictates as was seen in Nigeria (Ibekwe, 2017). Setbacks and casualties for the super ordinate group is expected to be played down while amplifying losses for the subordinate group

The press however, is used to such tactics and always tries to assert some form of independence from the super ordinate group (government) because public trust and confidence in journalistic articles stems from the perceived independence of the press from interference either from government officials or elites in the society. Losing this independence in the eye of the public erodes public image and will see newspaper reports as extensions of government information unit and promotes government and officials positions and contrary views are to be played down or entirely neglected..

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The press traces its origin in presenting alternative points of view from the established political actors or the political elite. The press in Nigeria being no different developed as tools used by anti-colonial proponents to attack the colonial government in Nigeria (Ngara & Esebonu, 2012; Aro, 2011; Adesoji, 2006). We do not see the press giving up this position now or any time in the future, however, in the case of the Boko Haram insurgency, there should be a synergy of ideas and robust cooperation as the solution to the conflict may not just be military, but by addressing some root causes that gave rise to the conflict. With greater access to the areas controlled by the insurgents, journalists in their reports could highlight the developmental challenges hoping that the government will on its own rise up to the challenge and address such issues. To end the insurgency, a multi-approach method should be adopted which involves readiness for dialogue and at the same time letting the insurgents know that they can never win a military campaign against the government and its security forces.

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