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FRAMING OF THE 2016 BUDGET CONTROVERSIES ON THREE NIGERIAN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS

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CHAPTER EIGHT

FRAMING OF THE 2016 BUDGET CONTROVERSIES ON THREE NIGERIAN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS

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INTRODUCTION

The act of budgeting is a regular activity of government across the world. It is the process for determining how to raise, allocate and spend resources in a given fiscal year (Egbide and Agbude, 2012). Before the popularisation of democracy, the activity of budgeting was an issue of government exclusive concerns. With the growth and expansion of democracy in the last few decades, citizens have become more enlightened on human right issues, including the right to hold their leaders accountable to their actions and policies. Democracy also offers citizens greater freedom of information and access to the media to monitor government officials and make them more answerable to the people. Leaders in democratic societies have broader range of constituencies to consult before making decisions. The wider participation gives citizens a stronger sense of policy ownership; and such policies are more sustainable. In such environments, economies grow, human welfare improves, political stability and capacity deepen, and good governance is enhanced (Abdella, 2003).

Meanwhile, studies such as Tivde (2011) and Egbide and Agbude (2012) try to establish a close tie between good governance and good budgeting. Such studies argue that if politics is defined as “who gets what, when, and how” as enunciated by Lasswell (1936), then, budgeting is an integral part of politics or governance because the process of allocating resources is embedded in this popular definition. They also argue that even the major attributes of good budgeting: effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, accountability and discipline are also ingredients of good governance.

This important annual government tradition of budgeting was observed by the Buhari's administration of Nigeria when on 22nd of December 2015, he presented the budget of N6.08 Trillion for the 2016 appropriation year to a joint session of the National Assembly - a budget

which the government tagged “The Budget of Change”, being the first to be presented by the All Progressives Congress (APC) 'change' government. It was expected from many quarters that the budget would be highly transparent to bring about the desired “change” the people had yearned for, and push towards rebuilding the economy and the 'battered' image of the Nigerian nation. On the contrary, the supposed 2016 “budget of change” turned out to be “budget of controversy” (Johnson, 2016).

Disagreements began when one of the lawmakers, Honourable Abdulmumuni Jibrin, All Progressives (APC) member representing Kiru/Bebeji Federal Constituency of Kano State in the House of Representatives and hitherto the Chairman, House Committee on Appropriation, was on Thursday July 21, 2016 relieved of his position. According to Abdulrazak Namdas, Chairman of the House Committee on Media and Public Affairs, Abdulmumuni's removal was based on 'sundry acts of misconduct, incompetence, total disregard for his colleagues and abuse of the budgetary processes'. The following day, Mr. Jubrin reacted to his sack and opened up on the padding of the 2016 budget, implicated the Speaker, Mr. Dogara, his deputy, Yussuf Suleimon Lasun, the Chief Whip of the House, Alhassan Ado Doguwa and the Minority Leader, Leo Ogor as those who influenced the illegal act (Ogundipe, 2016). Jibrin in his letter of accusation which he termed No. 21, said Dogara diverted a water project in the budget to his farm in Nasarawa State (Krishi, 2016).

As the controversy lingered, more allegations and counter-allegations surfaced from both camps - the camp of the House Speaker Yakubu Dogara and that of the former Appropriation Committee Chairman of the House, Hon. Abdul Jibrin. The later alleged that the speaker and his team were involved in the padding to meet their selfish interest. Leadership of the house on the other hand claimed that Hon. Jibrin was fired as Appropriation Chairman for introducing certain projects in the budget to please the President even when the projects were not in the original proposal of the Presidency. The entire scenario amounted into what Ezekwesili, (2016) refers to as a case of “you Takar me, I Daboh you” (Nsude and Nwafor, 2016).

Amidst all these, the House constantly denied any tampering with the said budget, insisting that the matters were either personal or in-house problems, or better still, part of the legislative process which would soon be reconciled.

Be that as it may, Oyota, (2016) argues that “padding” of budgets in whatever form, is one of the elements of corruption, and has the tendency of rubbishing the image of Nigeria before the international community. At the local angle, stories of the event were also awash in the media for public consumption. Meanwhile, many communication studies such as those of McCombs, (2004) and Nwafor, Odoemelam, and Duru, (2013) show that the manner in which the news media frame issues in the society goes a long way in shaping perceptions and attitude. This implies that understanding how the three Nigerian newspapers framed the 2016 budget padding controversies can help push the frontiers of our understanding in this area and contribute to igniting intellectual discourse on possible ways of curbing corruption in the country and promoting good governance in the land. But a search for literature on this chosen area revealed paucity of intellectual academic conversations on the subject-matter except for a few on rebranding and national image, of which majority dwelt on nations other than Nigeria. Lacking also, are information on the patterns, prevalent and dominant frames adopted in reporting the incident. An attempt at filling up this academic gap and knowledge lacuna has prompted this study.

Objective of the Study:

1. To determine the patterns of news frames employed in reporting the 2016 budget padding controversies in three Nigerian online newspapers.
2. To identify the dominant frames adopted in reporting the budget padding controversy in the three selected Nigerian online newspapers.
3. To find out the prevalent frames adopted in reporting the budget padding controversy in the selected online newspapers.
4. To ascertain the nature of frames employed in reporting the budget padding controversy in the three Nigerian online newspapers.

Research Questions

1. What were the patterns of news frames of the 2016 budget padding controversies in three Nigerian online newspapers?
2. What was the dominant frame employed in reporting the budget padding controversies in the three selected Nigerian online newspapers?
3. Which of the frames were prevalently adopted in reporting the budget padding controversies in the selected online newspapers?
4. What is the nature of frames employed in reporting the budget padding controversy in the three Nigerian online newspapers?

Review of Literature

Governance, Budget Padding and Perception Issues in Nigeria

When we talk about governance, people view it from different perspectives. Perhaps one of the most generally accepted definitions of the concept is that presented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2007) which defines it as “the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It further sees good governance as, among other things, participatory, transparent, and accountable, effective and equitable, and it promotes the rule of law. It ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in the society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources.

Similarly, a World Bank Report (2008) entitled *Governance for Sustainable Human Development*, argues that the core characteristics of good governance must include: Participation, Rule of law, Transparency, Responsiveness, Consensus orientation, Equity, Effectiveness and efficiency, Accountability, and Strategic vision; while bad governance is where these processes and characteristics are abused or misused, and the process of budgeting is the only means through which this can be measured. This is because a good and transparent budget is a sign of good governance; and a bad or padded budget breeds bad governance.

Padding of budget simply implies 'overestimating costs and underestimating revenue' (Tivde, 2011). To pad a budget means to make the budget proposal larger than the actual estimates for the project. This is done either by increasing a project's expenses or decreasing its expected revenue.

According to DeLee, (2016), “padding the budget is a practice that some people use in business when submitting a budget for approval. It artificially inflates the proposed budget in order to give the project room to expand or to cover unexpected costs. Budgets can also be padded for personal aggrandizements as was the case alleged with Nigerian lawmakers of the lower legislative chambers. In this context, budget padding is not only fraudulent, it is also a destructive crime

against the future of the people. In fairness to the people, and in line with our orchestrated “change” and the “fight against corruption” perpetrators of this, are not only economic saboteurs, but betrayers of public trust (Callaghan, Karen and Frank Schnell (2015). Agreeing with the above submission, Dicker and Boyer (2016) note that:

Padding is a social evil. It is operated by transgressors who lack social conscience and sobriety. It has the venomous tendency to destroy the economy and the polity of any country that fails to forestall its growth. Ghana was a victim of a padded economy. But when the ruling elite were ready to sincerely combat corruption, a disciplined and motivated leadership-by-example became the norm of public office, and Ghanaians followed suit.

Chong and Druckman's (2017) observation above is also consistent with that of Dicker and Boyer, (2016) when they note that even the advanced countries at various stages went through such uncivilised and barbaric governance. But the difference between many of them and the case with Nigeria now is that they took steps to ameliorate the situation and embraced civilisation before it became too late. Citing the United Kingdom as an example, he observes that the state of affairs in England at the ascension of Henry VII, after the War of the Roses in 1485, (a 30 years of civil war) was chaotic. The barons kept personal armies and did not care for the law. “Devastation of crops led to famine; and the disbanding of baronial forces led to increase in the number of sturdy beggars”. Records have it that the coasts of England were infested with pirates; farmers and merchants were in constant peril of robbery and destruction; judges were corrupt; the House of Commons was too weak, and its members did not even have the ambition to make it strong. The country was not united; it needed a strong government to restore law and order. The situation then was worse than what we have in Nigeria today. But when the masses observed that the leadership was ready to salvage the country, they followed suit (Johnson, 2016).

In the case of Nigeria, the controversy that rocked the House revolves around the N60 billion the executive provided for the funding of constituency projects by federal law makers which was increased to N100 billion and addition project Honourable Abdulumuni Jibrin was accused of adding to the budget to impress the Presidency. Further report on the controversy obtained by *Vanguard* has it that the law makers ingeniously removed some projects proposed by the executive or drastically reduced their cost and introduced many others which were never contemplated by the Presidency who prepared the budget (Vanguard, 2016).

Most scandalous in the controversy according to the report, was the case of the Ministry of Works, Power and Housing where 82 new projects, with total provision of about N50.63billion were inserted in the budget (Krishi, 2016). There is no doubt that as the controversy lingered, the image of the country was at stake. This perhaps was evident in the recently released Transparency International's Report which ranked Nigeria as one of the least transparent nations in the world. The report was a ten-year report which ranked Nigeria 136 out of 175 countries surveyed.

More worrisome was the finding of a similar study by Dicker and Boyer, (2016) which indicates that Nigeria is perceived to be the most corrupt among 60 countries evaluated, according to data from the 2016 Best Countries ranking. The rankings are a characterization of 60 countries based on a survey of more than 16,000 people from four regions. Available data indicate that in the survey, respondents answered how closely they related each of the 60 countries to the term

"corrupt." Respondents were given no further specifications of the term, so interpretation of the word "corrupt" was left to survey respondents. The study also rated Russia, seen as the second-most powerful country in the world as the sixth most corrupt, and Colombia a country synonymous with illegal drug kingpins gives Nigeria a run for its money as the second most corrupt country, based on perception study.

In one of the numerous reactions to these startling statistics, the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron categorized Nigeria and Afghanistan as countries that are 'fantastically corrupt'. Cameron was quoted to have said this while speaking to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth on preparations for a 2016 anti-corruption summit in the UK in 2016. "We have got the leaders of some fantastically corrupt countries coming to Britain ... Nigeria and Afghanistan, possibly the two most corrupt countries in the world" (Don, 2016).

Media framing and governance issues in Nigeria

The media is robust in Nigeria. They play a pivotal role in shaping public knowledge and perception of government policies and programmes such as budgeting. The controversies that surrounded the 2016 appropriation processes was no exception. Framing, to start with, refers to how messages are encoded with meaning so that they can be efficiently interpreted in relationship to existing beliefs or ideas (Chilisa, 2012). Hallahan (1999) sees media framing as the process by which an issue is portrayed in the news media. Goffman (1974) was the first to study framing as a form of communication and defines the concept of "framing" as a "schemata of interpretation" that enables individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' occurrences or life experiences". Robert Entman modernised this definition by specifying that "to frame a communication text or message is to promote certain facets of a 'perceived reality' and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 51).

Media frames provide boundaries around a news story. They help to determine what is and is not newsworthy or notable (Shah, 2002). Journalists rely on media frames to decide what to include in a story and what to leave out, a process that may be conscious, instinctive or culture-bound (Scheufele, & Iyengar, 1999). Just as a picture frame may draw attention to certain details and relegate other elements to the background, a media frame may draw a viewer's attention to specific parts of a journalist's news story, de-emphasize other parts, and leave out some aspects completely (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem, 2015). Meanwhile, Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon (2005, p. 13) cited in Okoro and Odemelum (2013, p. 86) write that:

When the media place stories in specific frames, they lend a different meaning to the news. The media increase or decrease the salience of issues which allows the public to remember and make judgements on such issues. In this manner, framing assumes subtle changes in the wording of the description of a situation and affects how audience members think about the situation.

Today, media effects can be characterized as "social constructionism" (Scheufele, 1999). This is because, mass media construct social reality by "framing images of reality in a predictable and patterned way" (McQuail, 2004, p. 112). Gamson and Modigliani, (1989) agree that "media discourse is part of a process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse" (Gamson and Modigliani, 2013).

To, (2012) believes that the news media generally employ two main kinds of frames: episodic and thematic. Episodic news frames are the predominant frames on news media that depict public issues in terms of concrete instances. They focus on discrete events that involve individuals located at specific places and at specific times. Episodic news frames are used about 80 percent of the time in newscasts (Gyong, 2013). Thematic news frames, used about 20 percent of the time, are news frames that place public issues in a broader context by focusing on general conditions or outcomes such as reports on poverty trends (Mato, 2012).

Studies such as those of Semetko and Valkenburg, (2011), Abubakar, (2014), and Odoemela and Okoro, (2013) have shown that the type of news frames employed in a study have profound effects on the way in which target audience understand the message and attribute responsibility. Iyengar, (1991, p. 5) shares the same view that the use of either the episodic or the thematic news frame affects how individuals assign responsibility to political issues: "...while episodic framing tends to elicit individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility, thematic framing has the opposite effect". Since television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad societal forces (Iyengar, 2011).

Theoretical underpinning

Two theories were adopted for the study: Framing and agenda setting theories.

Framing Theory

Framing theory has attracted extensive literature (Norris, 2015; Entman, 2013; Callaghan, 2015; Chong, 2017; McCombs, (2014); Kuypers, 2012). According to communication and media scholars, framing was viewed from the point of either theory or approach of analysing media content and messages (Entman 2012; Druckman 2017; and Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2017). The theory states that readers or consumers of media messages are able to interpret and evaluate new information based on the frames used by the media (Norris, 2015). This suggests that journalists place 'figurative picture frames around the ever-moving target of events and actions, thereby focusing our attention on particular issues, ideas, and individuals while obscuring what lies outside the frame' (Boykoff, 2011).

According to McQuail (2015), framing theory is defined as a philosophical postulation that explains "the way in which news content is typically shaped and contextualised by journalist". This explains that journalists deliberately create, select and shape news stories in particular frames to reflect the reality they wish to form or create. Entman (2013) agrees that framing involves selection and salience, which means a certain aspect of issues are constructed to appear as perceived reality and made more pronounced in a communication text in a way that "promotes a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 2013, p. 52 cited in Brown, 2014, p. 5). Entman (2010) however argues that a frame must provoke existing elements for it to be successful.

However, despite the justification of framing theory, the theory has come under criticism. McCombs, (2004) argues that framing is not strong enough to be seen as a theory but, rather a part or sub-set of agenda setting theory. Nevertheless, some media scholars raise a counter point against McCombs' criticism of framing theory. In their view, there exists a meeting and difference point among framing, agenda setting and priming (Lee 2010; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; and Weaver 2007). The suitability of this theory to the study derives from the

Nwafor, Odoemelam, and Duru, (2013) argument which suggests that while agenda setting and priming deal with “which” issue received media prominence, frequency and what effects on readers, framing deals with “how” such issues are constructed in the media. This justifies the suitability of this theory to this study because it seeks to ascertain 'how' the online news sites framed the budget padding controversies.

Agenda-Setting Theory

This theory according to Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008) was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in the early 1970s. But Baran (2009) argues that Benard Cohen was the man who initiated the idea and that Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw were only responsible for empirically confirming the theory. Meanwhile, Wimmer and Dominick (2011) believe that the notion for agenda setting by the media can be traced back to the works of Lippman (1922), who suggested that the media are responsible for the “pictures in our heads” and that “the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about”. McQuail (2010, p. 548) reinforces this notion by observing that “the mass media force attention to certain issues, suggesting what individuals should think about, know about and have feelings about”.

This theory assumes that the attention and coloration the media give to a topic to a large extent determines the importance attributed to it by the media audience. This implies that if the media give much air-time or space (in a repetitive manner) to an issue or event and frame or portray it as important, the audience see it as such. Severin and Tankard (1977), cited in Daramola (2003, p. 60) explain the theory in these words: "the media have a great part in determining what most people will be talking about, what most people will think the facts are, and what people will regard as the way problems would be solved."

Applying agenda setting to this study, it implies that the colorations the studied online newspapers gave to the 2016 budget padding controversies in the House of Representatives contributed in shaping public understanding of the issue.

Study Focus/Frames of Analysis

Frames examined included: Political **frame**, Conspiracy frame, Conflict frame, Issues frame and Value frame. Okoro and Odoemelam (2013) hint that these framing measures were first developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000); Iyengar (1991) and De Vreese (2005) for analysing media portrayals of matters of public interest.

As adopted in this study, Political frames mean frames that emphasize giving subject colorations that connote interest in acquisition of power among entities. Conspiracy frame is the portrayal of a subject as a mere plot to discredit. Conflict Frame is coloration that suggests a clash of interest for whatsoever reason. Issue Frame is the portrayal of matters as they were; while value frame is presentation of issues in a manner that brings out the inherent benefits.

Similarly, 'Pattern of frames' as used in this study simply means the order, routine or sequence in which the frames appeared. 'Dominant frames' represent the most occurring frames in terms of number of times irrespective of being prevalent across or not. While 'Prevalent frames' are the commonest frames. They are the frames that appeared across the news sites in the highest order.

Method of Study

This study adopted the content analysis research design. Websites of three Nigerian online newspapers: **www.vanguardngr.com**, **www.saharareporters.com** and **www.premiumtimesng.com** were purposefully sampled from the list of top fifty Nigerian online newspapers as presented by **Chinyem, (2015)**. The justification for their selection was based on their active online presence and readership strengths. Again, their ownership cuts across both the nation's common religious and ethnic divide and also for the purpose of comparison.

The study period was from April 1, 2016 to September 30, 2016. That was the time when the budget padding controversy was at its peak and made most headlines in the media. A sample of three days per-week was made through a systematic random sampling of calendar dates with the exclusion of Saturdays and Sundays. Scholars such as Wimmer & Dominick (2013) and Nwofe, (2016) have used this method and it yielded precision and equal opportunity of selection. Dates selected included: **April:** 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27 and 29. **May:** 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25, 27 and 30. **June:** 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24, 27 and 29. **July:** 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27 and 29. **August:** 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, 24, 26, 29 and 31. **September:** 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 26, 28 and 30.

Among all the stories found on the websites of the three newspapers, only 158 of them were on the budget padding. Saharareporters.com had 57(36%), Premiumtimesng.com recorded 53(34%) and Vanguardngr.com had 48(30%). The 158(100%) quantitative data were studied in entirety because the figure was quite manageable. Code sheets were used in the coding of the data, and code guide served as instructional or training/resource material for the coders.

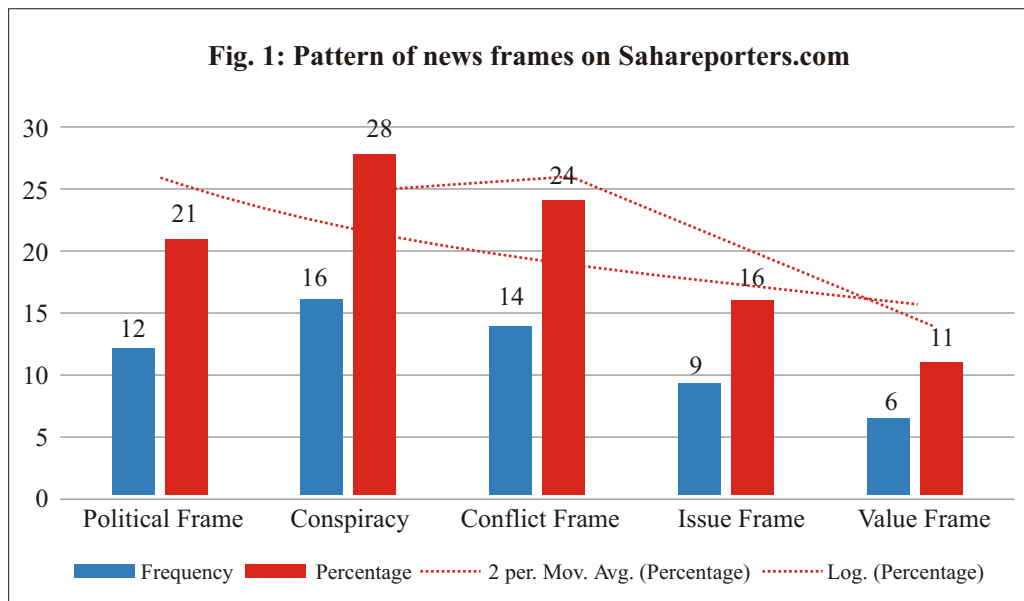
The Inter-coder reliability stood at 0.86. This was calculated using Holsti's inter-coder reliability formula of Reliability =
$$\frac{2M}{N1 + N2}$$

Where: M = the number of coding decisions which two coders agree, and N1 & N2 = the number of coding decisions by the first and second coder respectively.

The content categories for research questions 1, 2 and 3 were: Political **frames**, Conspiracy frames, Conflict frames, Issues frame and Value frames; while that of research question 4 included: news, feature article, opinion article, and editorial comment.

Data Presentation

Research Question One: What were the patterns of news frames of the 2016 budget padding controversies in the selected online news sources?



The data shown above indicate that a total of 57 stories on the 2016 budget padding controversies appeared on the news website of *Sahara Reporters* within the period of study. This represents 36% of the entire news stories on the budget padding found on the websites of the three news sources. Out of this, 16, representing 28% was devoted to the conspiracy frames. This was followed by conflict frames which occurred 14 times, representing 24%. Next was political frames which were 12, representing 21%. Issue frames appeared 9 times (16%), while Value frames were 6(11%). These findings mean that Sahareporters.com presented the matter mostly as a conspiracy among the lawmakers than from any other viewpoint.

Political, conflict and conspiracy frames appeared predominantly in the *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* online news sites; issues and value frames conspicuously manifested in greater dimensions in the *Vanguard* news website.

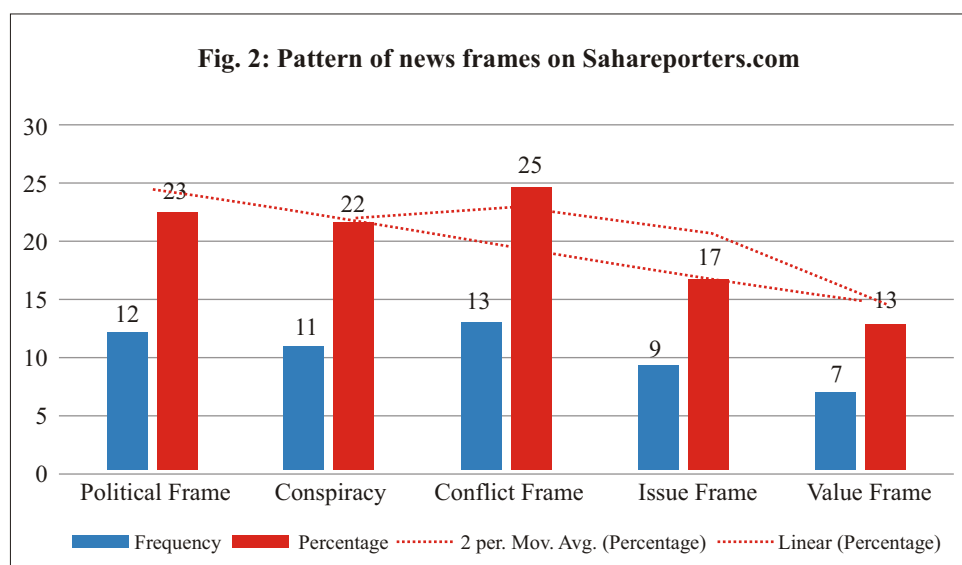
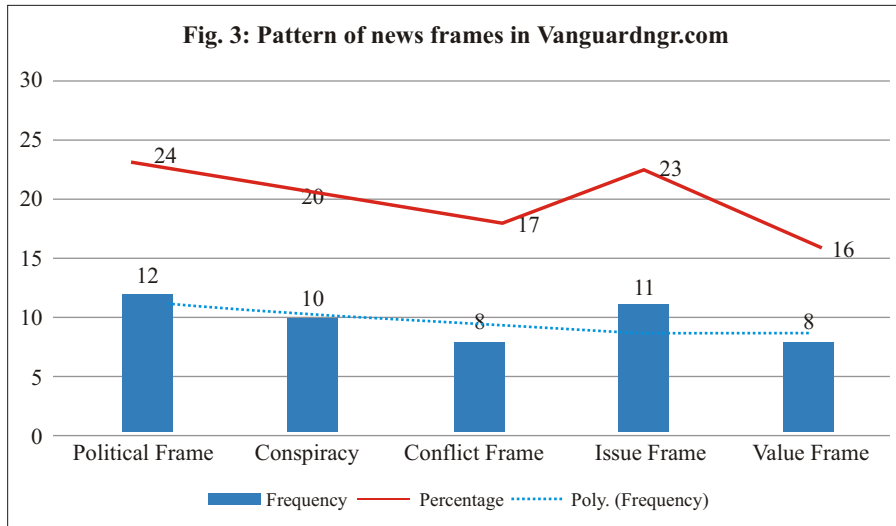
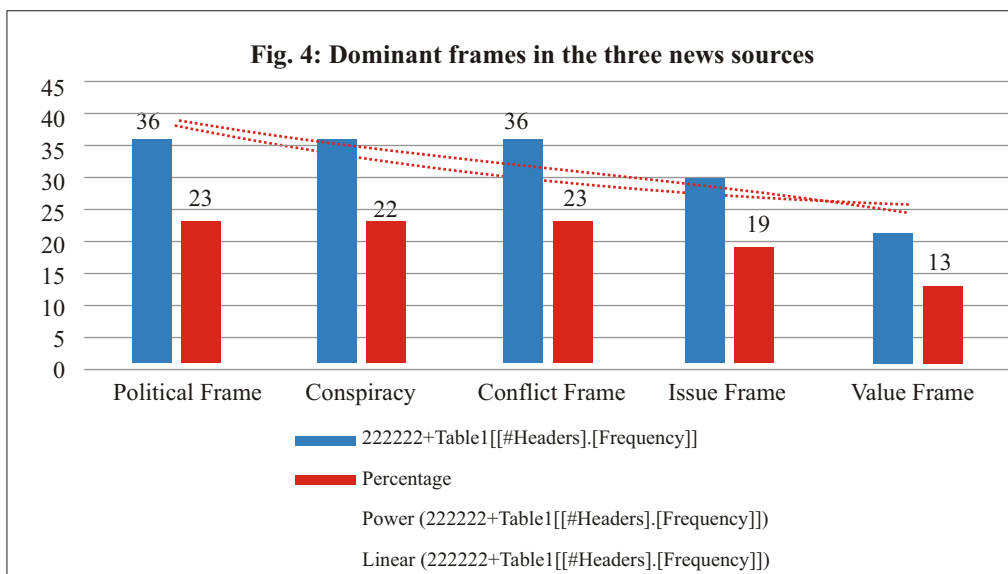


Table 2 above shows that 53 news stories on the budget padding appeared on the website of *Premium Times* within the period investigated. This figure represents 34% of all the news stories on the budget padding got from the websites of the three news sources. Out of this, 13, which is 25% gave the matter conflict coloration; 12(23%) reported it with political undertone; 11(22%) adopted conspiracy frame, while issue frames were 9(17%) and value frames 7(13%). This means that Premiumtimesng.com reported the budget padding controversies more as a conflict in the House.



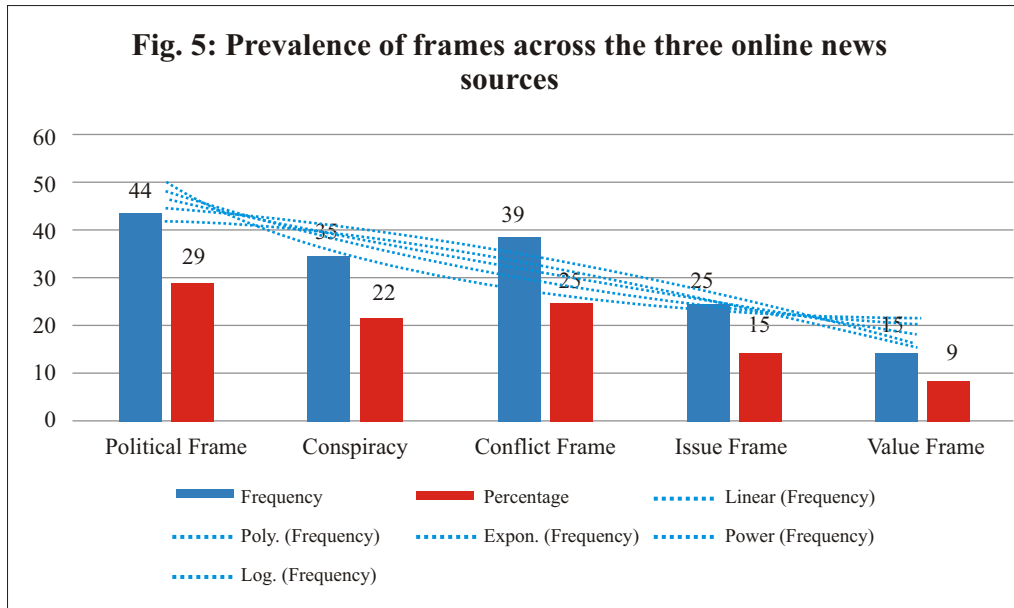
The data presented above shows that Vanguardngr.com had a total of 48 news stories on the budget padding saga during the period studied. This represents 30% of all news stories on the website of the three news sources during the time. Out of this figure, political frame was the highest. It occurred 12 times, representing 24%. This was followed by Issue frame which appeared 11 times and amounts to 23%. Then, Conspiracy frame 10(20%), Conflict frame 8(17%) and Value frame 8(16%). These findings imply that Vanguardngr.com reported the matter mostly as a political tussle.

Research Question Two: What was the dominant frame employed in reporting the budget padding controversies in the online news sources?



Data in fig. 4 above reaffirm that a total of 158 news items on the budget padding were generated from the websites of the three online news sources during the study. Out of this figure, Political and Conflict frames were predominant. Each appeared 36 times, representing 23% respectively. Conspiracy frames appeared 35 times, amounting to 22%; Issue frame was 30(19%) and Value frame was 21(13%). The implication is that majority of the online news sources reported the act with political, conflict and conspiracy undertones.

Research Question 3: Which of the frames were prevalently adopted in reporting the budget padding controversies in the online news sources?



Political frame was the most prevalent. It occurred 44 times, representing 29%. Conflict frame was the next. It appeared 39 times (25%). Conspiracy frame came third. It manifested 35 times (22%). Issues and Value frames were the least. They occurred 25 times (15%) and 15 times (9%) respectively. This implies that all the five frames were prevalent in the three online news sources, differences only exist in the level of prevalence.

Research Question 5: What is the nature of frames employed in reporting the budget padding controversy in the online news sources?

The nature of the report was determined in relation to the treatment given to the stories in terms of the content categories. These were: news, feature article, opinion article, and editorial comments as presented in the table below.

S/N	Content Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	News Stories	81	51.3%
2	Feature Articles	32	20.2%
3	Editorials	24	15.8%
4	Opinion Articles	21	12.7%
Total		158	100%

The table above indicates that majority of stories found on the websites of the three Nigerian online newspapers were news items. This was 81 (51.3%). This implies that the reports were largely objective. This is because news by its very nature is an accurate account of events and not opinionated. The incident also got a fair amount of editorial comments which was the only avenue for the newspapers to ventilate their opinions on the incident. This took 15.8%, while feature articles and opinion articles received 20.2% and 12.7% respectively.

Discussion/Summary of Findings

The first objective sought to determine the patterns of news frames of the 2016 budget padding controversies in the selected online news channels. Data generated from this indicate contrasting framing patterns in the portrayal of the incident in the three online news channels. Whereas Saharareporters.com framed the budget padding incident mostly as a conspiracy among the lawmakers, Premiumtimesng.com reported the act more or less as an internal conflict in the House, and Vanguardngr.com portrayed it mostly as a political tussle. This finding supports that of Nwafor and Ogbodo (2015) in a study entitled 'Media Frames of Group Identities in the 2014 National Dialogue in Nigeria: Analysis of *the Daily Sun* and *Leadership* Newspapers' in which they found that hardly do two newspapers frame issues alike in Nigeria; each medium rather frames in accordance with ownership interest - political, ethnic and religious inclinations and affiliations.

The second objective which invariably formed research question two sought for the dominant frames employed in reporting the budget padding controversies in the news sites. A total of 158 news items on the padding saga appeared on the websites of the three online news channels during the time under study. Political and conflict frames appeared predominantly. Both occurred 36 times, representing 23% apiece. Meanwhile, previous studies had identified similar framing patterns. Okoro and Odoemalam (2013) investigated 'Print Media Framing of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria: A Content Analytical Study of *the Guardian*, *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* and *Thisday* Newspapers' and found that the sampled newspapers framed the Boko Haram insurgency as predominantly a policy response to conflict. This pattern was conspicuously manifest in *The Guardian* and *ThisDay*, while the findings in the *Vanguard newspaper* contrasted with the pattern identified in the *Daily Sun* newspaper, which emphasized ethnic and religious frames.

Objective three and research question three sought for the prevalence of frames adopted in reporting the budget padding controversy in the online news sources. The result shows 100% percent prevalence of frames in the three news sites though they occurred in differing levels and dimensions. This means that all the frames appeared in each of the online news channels but appeared more in some than in others. For instance, whereas Political frames appeared 44 times, representing 29%, conflict frame was 39 times or 25%. Conspiracy frame manifested 35 times (22%), issues and value frames occurred only 25 times (15%) and 15 times (9%) respectively. This finding is consistent with the observations of Ogunsiji, (1989), that important happenings in the society constitute newsworthiness and should make headlines in all news media. The 100% prevalence of frames however contrasts with the dimensions found in the similar studies of Okoro and Odoemalam (2013) on 'Print media framing of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria: A content analytical study of *the Guardian*, *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* and *Thisday* Newspapers' which found only 60% prevalence of frames out of the 10 framing categories investigated. But Nwofe (2016) observed 90% prevalence of frame in a study of 'Dimensions of Negativity in the Coverage of the Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election'.

The fourth and final objective and research question indicated that news stories dominated the entire reports in the three online newspapers. This suggests that majority of the reports were more of objective than biased. It also implies that majority of the stories got to the audience as timely as possible. This is because news reports are accounts of recent event.

Conclusion/Contribution to knowledge

The study has provided insights into online news media frames of the budget padding controversies that rocked the Nigerian Red Chambers of the 8th National Assembly in 2016. The study observed differences in patterns, dominance and prevalence of frames employed in reporting the act among the online news sources. Political, conflict and conspiracy frames appeared predominantly on the *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* online news sites; while issues and value frames conspicuously manifest in greater dimensions on the *Vanguard* news website. The implication of this finding is that majority of the online news sources reported the act with political, conflict and conspiracy undertone. Such approach in the reportage could have denied majority of citizens the opportunity of understanding the core issues, values and implications of such acts on their day-to-day lives because issues and value frames appeared least in two of the three online news sources studied.

Recommendations

Sequel to the above findings, a shift of media attention from conflict, politics and oddity to a more socially responsible approach to news reportage is highly recommended. Perhaps, some of the universally acclaimed criteria for news worthiness that place crises, disasters and catastrophes above human interest and development need be revised to accommodate more emerging issues of values in line with the current realities of contemporary societies. This recommendation has theoretical leanings on the postulations of social responsibility and development media theories which trace their origins to the Robert Hutchins Commission Report of 1947.

Further studies are recommended in this area to expand and accommodate more framing categories and other forms of media to provide wider understanding of how media frame corruption and similar vital issues in the society. This recommendation is on the ground that many of the available studies on this matter limit their analysis to primordial manifest content categories such as prominence, placement, frequency, depth and direction of which the revelations of this study have proved to be inadequate and need be expanded.

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