

Nigerian Newspapers Framing of the 2012 Flooding Disaster in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the framing of the 2012 flooding disaster by Nigerian newspapers. This is based on expert views that the 2012 flooding disaster was one of the most challenging disasters that occurred in Nigeria in at least half a century with unprecedented floods that ravaged several parts of the country. The study used Frame Analysis to analyse 828 stories related to the flood disaster published in four purposively selected newspapers: *Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *The Guardian* and *Vanguard*. Relief/aid/recovery efforts (347), disaster assessment (130) and human interest (91) frames received the highest framing in the papers' coverage. The findings show that although the papers seemed to have the same focus in framing the disaster stories, they differ in the intensity/depth of coverage given to the disaster. The findings also indicate a shift in the pattern of coverage from what the newspapers are used to be emphasising as regards environmental and natural disaster reportage. One of the significant contributions of this research is the application of framing theory to natural disaster reporting by the media instead of political conditions as the theory originated.

Keywords: Framing Theory, Framing Analysis, Natural Disaster, Flooding, Newspapers, Nigeria

Introduction

This research is about press coverage of natural disasters in Nigeria with specific focus on the floods that affected various parts of the country in 2012. The floods disaster caused damage in all the 36 states of the federation. According to the 2012 Annual Disaster Statistical Review, the 2012 flooding in Nigeria occurred between the months of July to October. The flooding affected and displaced millions of people, killed over 363 persons and destroyed or damaged about 597, 476 houses (Soriwei, 2013).

Until recently, harsh flooding was not a common environmental problem in Nigeria. Before the 2012 flood, the country had never experienced a natural disaster of that magnitude. "All it had contended with were plane crashes and collapsed

buildings,” (Nwosu, 2013, p. 42). “It is generally agreed that the most intense, most widespread, and most devastating of the floods that have ever affected Nigeria is the 2012 flood” (Olofin, 2014, p. 2). From the interim report submitted by a Presidential Technical Committee set up by the then President Goodluck Jonathan to visit all affected areas with a view to properly assessing the impact of the floods., the states were categorised into four groups (A-D) based on the damage caused by the flood (Times, 2012). Category A states were: Oyo, Kogi, Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Delta, Bayelsa and Anambra. Category B states include: Jigawa, Kano, Bauchi, Kaduna, Niger, Nasarawa, Taraba, Cross-River, Edo, Lagos and Imo. Category C states: Kwara, Katsina, Gombe, Ogun, Ondo, Ebonyi, Abia and Rivers. Category D states were: Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Yobe, Enugu, Ekiti, Osun, Akwa-Ibom, Borno and FCT.

This study was carried out to find out how mass media in Nigeria, particularly newspapers, framed stories of the 2012 floods in the country in order to understand the role the mass media played in reporting the disaster.

The media could have a very important role in taking essential information, helping to win the hearts and minds of people so that they understand what they need to do. The media has another vital role of finding out what were the exact circumstances of a disaster. Why does it happen? What were the reasons for it? (Gordon, 2014, p. 39).

As such, looking at how media cover natural disasters, “permits an examination of how man is trying to predict, prevent or lessen their impact” (Shorthouse, 1984, p. 130). The reality is that, the images were out there and the media have to make the senses of those images to the public and that was the role of the media (Gordon, 2014).

Scott (2009, p.533) contends that: “Despite a general decline in circulation, newspapers are considered by many to have an important role to play in informing and or influencing citizens”. By focusing on how press covered natural disasters, it is possible to investigate whether there are basic patterns to how the media react during disasters and how they can be overcome. The aim of the study, therefore, is to identify the dominant frames used by the selected newspapers and to determine which of the identified frames has the highest coverage by the papers.

Research Questions

1. How did the selected Nigerian newspapers frame the 2012 floods disaster in Nigeria?
2. Which of the identified frames received the highest coverage by the selected newspapers in their reporting of the floods?

Literature review

Natural disasters are classified as climatological (extreme temperatures, droughts and wildfires), hydrological (floods and wet mass movements) and meteorological

(storms) disasters (UNDP, 2013). But Svensen (2009) argues that there is also biological disaster, such as epidemics and insect infestations. However, hydrological disasters, according to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), “took the largest share of natural disaster fatalities in 2012, causing 3,574 deaths, and representing 39% of global disaster mortality” (Guha-Sapir, Hoyois, & Below, 2013, p. 21). In sum, according to the Emergency Disaster Database (EM-DAT) as provided by CRED, an event qualifies as a disaster if, at least, one of the following criteria are fulfilled: “Ten or more people are reported killed; 100 or more people are reported affected, injured, and/or homeless; there has been a declaration of a state of emergency; or there has been a call for international assistance,” (Eisensee & Strömberg, 2007, p. 695).

Flood, as one of the hydrological disasters, is defined as a state of being under water: the situation that results when land that is usually dry is covered with water as a result of a river overflowing or heavy rain (Microsoft Corporation, 2009). “Flooding is something of a catch-all term, referring to events of varying magnitude with different causes. A typology of flooding can comprise overflow of rivers produced by prolonged seasonal rainfall, rainstorms, snowmelt and dam-breaks,” (Few, 2003, p. 44).

Quarantelli (2002) studied the role of the mass communication system in natural and technological disasters. The study aimed at identifying the kind of roles local and regional mass media played during disasters and analysed two bodies of data. One was fairly large number of publications on social aspects of mass communication and the other was series of studies that the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center (DRC) conducted for around two decades on mass communication, almost all of which were done in a disaster context.

The 2002 study found that media organizations that provide information about disasters in their communities provide very extensive coverage. In one DRC study, local newspapers examined in nine communities struck by a disaster found the range of coverage was from 44 to 160 stories, with an average of almost 90 concerning the disaster in each newspaper. Of these news accounts, 33% appeared on the front page and 55% within the first three pages. In addition, a total of almost 700 photographs accompanied the 904 stories (Quarantelli, 2002).

In 2012, Houston, Pfefferbaum and Rosenholtz also studied eleven major natural disasters in the US from 2000–2010 to examine mass media depictions of major natural disasters that occurred between the period specifically on national newspapers and broadcast television news. The study found that, on average, mass media covered natural disasters for shorter periods of time than other issues; that media coverage tended to focus on the impact of disasters on humans, the built and the natural environment; disaster economics were an important topic; disaster media coverage generally focused on the state and region related to the event; and disaster news were largely about what was happening during the event (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012).

While there is a well developed literature on media coverage of natural disasters, “there has been little systematic research into media coverage of flooding and other extreme weather events” (Escobar & Demeritt 2014, p.454). In a study of British broadsheets, Escobar and Demeritt analysed 2,707 news stories to explore the framing of flooding in Britain over the past quarter century and the displacement of a once dominant understanding of flooding as an agricultural problem of land drainage by the contemporary concern for its urban impacts, particularly to homes and property. The analysis focused on the national broadsheet newspapers: *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *Independent*, plus their sister Sunday papers.

The study found substantial shifts in broadsheet reporting about flood in Britain over the last twenty-five years. Once an agricultural problem of land drainage, flood was subsequently understood primarily as a threat to homes and personal property, and this urban-economic focus dominates later coverage of the flooding incidence. Furthermore, the findings also showed that unlike in the past, individual flood events later attract greater volumes of coverage than a generation ago. The focus of reporting was also broadened to encompass discussion of its wider causes, longer term impacts, and the responsibilities for dealing with them, so there was sustained discussion of flooding and the risks it poses in the period between major events (Escobar & Demeritt 2014).

In her study, Colistra (2010) examined the flood caused by the Buffalo Creek coal mine of 1972 in West Virginia. The disaster was proved to be one of the most tragic events in West Virginia history. The study investigated the dominant frames presented by two regional newspapers with historical different stances on the coal industry and unions. It determined which paper, between *Logan Banner* and *Charleston Gazette*, chose to cover the attribution of responsibility/conflict frame most often and which paper gave it the most prominent placement. The findings of the study indicated how proximity, ownership and the possible views of a coal company came into play while covering a disaster involving the most important business industry in the area. The study, which was said to have greatly developed both disaster coverage and framing scholarship, also explained the story of those who were affected by it while examining how the papers chose to inform their readers throughout the long road to clean-up and recovery (Colistra, 2010).

In Nigeria, Mu'azu (1991), used agenda setting theory and investigated press coverage of environmental issues in Nigerian newspapers. The study found that the environmental issues that received significant coverage in the newspapers are those in which government had strong involvement, and they were among the most important issues of major concern. A 2016 study on people's perception of and attitude toward mass media reportage of the 2012 flood in rural Nigeria, Ajaero, Okoro and Ajaero (2016) examined perception and attitude of 300 households in rural communities in Delta and Anambra states. The study found that more than 75% of the respondents received information about the flood from either radio or television; mass media

reportage of the flood was not too effective in influencing people's attitude and there were significant spatial variations in perceptions of the flood reportage.

Theoretical Background

This study used framing theory as theoretical background. Framing theory involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue. de Vreese (2005, p. 51) state that: "The notion of framing has gained momentum in the communication discipline, giving guidance to both investigations of media content and to stories of the relationships between media and public opinion". He further argues that most previous studies of framing were either focused on content (e.g., frames in the news) or framing effects.

Entman (1993) says frames *define problems*-determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes*-identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*-evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*-offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (Entman, 1993). From the Entman's definition, framing can be understood as a communication source presenting and defining an issue (de Vreese, 2005). Framing theory is considered to describe how the selected papers presented some aspects of a perceived reality and made them salient in communicating issues related to the 2012 flooding in Nigeria.

Method

Frame analysis, as a technique employed by this study, according to de Vreese (2005, p. 51): "... has gained momentum in the communication disciplines, giving guidance to both investigations of media content and to studies of the relationship between media and public opinion". One of the ways in which the media can shape public opinion is by framing events and issues in particular ways.

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 3).

A sentence can perform more than one of the four functions outlined, although many sentences in a text may perform none of them. A frame in any particular text may not necessarily include all four functions (Entman, 1993). Frame analysis was used in studying and analysing the contents of the *Daily Trust*, *The Guardian*, *Leadership and Vanguard* newspapers. The study counted number of the flooding stories published by the papers, categorise how the stories were framed and generated information or data the study analysed and subsequently be able to answer research questions raised.

Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select the editions of the papers and stories analysed in this study. The need to properly describe and interpret how the papers framed the coverage of the 2012 floods in the country informed this decision. “Purposive samples are used if description rather than generalisation is the goal”. In this type of sample it is not possible to specify the possibility of one person being included in the sample,” (Dawson, 2002, pp. 48-49).

The time period selected would allow a comprehensive study of the newspapers' coverage from the commencement of the disaster up to the time when the flood became a “national disaster” (Anon, 2012). The study analysed any news story, news analysis, feature article, editorial or opinion article that mentions the word flood or disaster or any term referring to the coverage of the 2012 flooding during the months in which the disaster occurred (July - October, 2012). A total of 828 stories related to the flood published in the selected newspapers were analysed. SPSS version 20 was used as a tool for analysing data in the study.

The newspapers were selected to ensure some geographical or regional variability and include only two newspapers from each region. Two of the papers, *Daily Trust* and *Leadership*, circulate largely within the northern region while the other two, *The Guardian* and *Vanguard*, circulate mostly in the southern part of the country. This decision was informed as a result of the almost absolute absence of any newspaper that can be considered national in Nigeria. Smith (1964) argued that, before the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by the British Colonial Governor, Frederick Lugard, the protectorates of northern and southern Nigeria were independent of each other, “yet the establishment of institutions and the political character of the country, including the news media, is still influenced by this colonial mindset” (Smith, 1964, cited in Yusha'u, 2009, p. 14).

Coverage Frames

This study adopted coverage frames used by Colistra (2010) in a study of Regional Newspaper Framing of the Buffalo Creek Mine Disaster of 1972. The flood caused by the Buffalo Creek coal mine disaster in West Virginia. They are:

- 1. Disaster Facts/Assessment:** This frame reports only the facts and assessment of the disaster, such as time of occurrence, how it happened and damage caused.
- 2. Attribution of Responsibility/Conflict:** This frame presents the disaster in such a way as to assign a party responsible for its occurrence, which may be through negligence, lack of prevention, suggesting solutions, or suggesting that an involved party could alleviate the problem.
- 3. Mortality/Survivor:** This frame deals with stories focusing on the number of deaths and survivors of the disaster. It does not include stories with information on relief and recovery efforts.

4. **Economic:** This frame reports the disaster in terms of the economic consequences it will have on residents, industries, or the region.
5. **Human Interest:** This frame puts a human face on the disaster. It emphasises how individuals are personally affected. Any story that provides information that might generate feelings of outrage, sympathy, empathy, caring and or compassion fall under this frame.
6. **Relief/Aid/Recovery Efforts:** Stories in this frame focus primarily on types of relief efforts. Some examples include rallying for donations /aid, donations or aid money by organizations (e.g., mosques, churches, schools, community groups, national relief groups, religious-based charity groups), donations or aid money by businesses, aid money from state or national government, temporary housing, medical assistance, or clean-up efforts.
7. **Other/No Frame:** This category contains those news stories with frames not falling into one of the previous categories or those stories not presenting a frame (most cases dealt with the latter). If a story simply presented a "potpourri" of information regarding the disaster, it was placed in this category.

Findings

The selected newspapers adopted different approaches to informing the public about the 2012 flooding disaster in Nigeria. The papers ran a total of 828 stories from July – October 2012 pertaining to the floods. *Daily Trust* with 266, *the Guardian* with 145,

Table 1: Framing Disaster Stories by the Newspapers

Coverage Frame	Newspaper							
	Daily Trust		The Guardian		Leadership		Vanguard	
	C	%	C	%	C	%	C	%
Disaster Facts/ Assessment	36	13.5	20	13.8	29	17.1	45	18.2
Attribution of Responsibility/ Conflict	17	6.4	15	10.3	17	10.0	12	4.9
Mortality/ Survivors	27	10.2	12	8.3	15	8.8	30	12.1
Economic	37	13.9	11	7.6	14	8.2	12	4.9
Human Interest	33	12.4	17	11.7	20	11.8	21	8.5
Relief/ Aid/ Recovery Efforts	102	38.3	65	44.8	63	37.1	117	47.4
Other/ No Frame	14	5.3	5	3.4	12	7.1	10	4.0

Daily Trust dedicated 38.3 percent of its coverage to informing the public of relief and recovery efforts. The stories in the economic consequences of the disaster constituted 13.9 percent with disaster assessment/facts, human interest and mortality/survivors frames tallying 13.5, 12.4 and 10.2 percents, respectively. The remaining frames (attribution of responsibility & no frame) combined to make up only 11.7 percent of the *Daily Trust's* coverage.

The Guardian with little more than half the total number of the disaster stories covered by *Daily Trust*, was also more devoted to keeping its readers informed of the relief, assistance and recovery efforts offered to mitigate the suffering that surrounded the disaster tragedy. This frame accounted for 44.8 percent as shown in Table 1. Apart from this frame, no other frame has up to 15 percent in *The Guardian's* news framing. Disaster assessment/facts frame constituted 13.8 percent of the stories, followed by the human interest frame with 11.7 percent, then attribution of responsibility/conflict with 10.3 percent, and mortality/survivors frame with 8.3 percent. The remaining frames were low on the news agenda as they constituted only 11 percent of the combined coverage of the paper.

Although *Leadership* newspaper also prioritised relief and recovery efforts on the news coverage of the disaster, 37.1 percent of the frame by the paper was the lowest among the percentages allocated to the same frame by the other papers. Coverage of disaster assessment/fact followed this frame with 17.1 percent, human interest 11.8 percent and attribution of responsibility/conflict 10.0 percent. Mortality/survivors and economic frames constituted 8.8 and 8.2 percent respectively. *Leadership* has the highest number of percentage of stories allocated to the other/no frame category with 7.1 percent.

As was the case with other newspapers, *Vanguard* reported more of relief and recovery efforts stories in the coverage of the disaster. In sum, the paper had 47.4 percent coverage of the frame, a proportion exceeding others presented by all the papers under study on this frame as shown in Table 1. Apart from disaster assessment/facts and mortality/survivors frames with 18.2 and 12.1 respectively, no other frame constitute up to 10 percent of the paper's total coverage of the disaster. The stories from other frames were combined to make up 22.3 of the total coverage as shown in Table 1.

Coverage of the frames based on the months under study also showed that relief/aid/recovery efforts frame was the most reported frame in all the months of the disaster except in July where stories on attribution of responsibility/conflict frame constituted the highest percentage of coverage of almost a quarter of the total coverage in the month as Table 2 indicated. More than fifty percent of total disaster stories covered by the papers in October were dedicated to relief/aid/recovery efforts frame. The scenario was similar with what was reported in August and September with 24.1 and 33.9 of the total coverage dedicated to relief/aid/recovery efforts frame in the months respectively.

Table 2: Frame Coverage by Month of Publication

Coverage Frame	Month of Publication							
	July		August		September		October	
	C	%	C	%	C	%	C	%
Disaster Facts/ Assessment	17	18.7	14	13.0	29	17.3	70	15.2
Attribution of Responsibility/ Conflict	20	22.0	13	12.0	10	6.0	18	3.9
Mortality/ Survivors	16	17.6	19	17.6	26	15.5	23	5.0
Economic	4	4.4	9	8.3	21	12.5	40	8.7
Human Interest	13	14.3	17	15.7	17	10.1	44	9.5
Relief/ Aid/ Recovery Efforts	12	13.2	26	24.1	57	33.9	252	54.7
Other/ No Frame	9	9.9	10	9.3	8	4.8	14	3.0

Discussion

As the findings in this study indicated, the newspapers under investigation, *Daily Trust*, *The Guardian*, *Leadership* and *Vanguard* adopted different approaches to informing the public about the 2012 flooding disaster in Nigeria. The number of total disaster stories framed by the papers was not similar and the differences in coverage among the papers is noteworthy as indicated on Table 1. The findings also indicated that all the papers reported relief/aid/recovery efforts frame more than any other frame in their total coverage of the disaster. Out of the 828 flooding stories framed by the papers, 347 were framed to either report donation of relief assistance to the victims, call for help to the victims or recovery efforts of the affected areas. Disaster assessment with 130 stories was the second most reported frame then human interest 91 stories.

The papers seemed to have assured the readers that although there was a serious disaster in the country but government, relief agencies, religious and corporate organizations and individuals were doing their best to mitigate the suffering of the victims and recovery of the affected areas. In all most all the states affected by the 2012 flooding disaster in Nigeria, once the flood hit, then relief and recovery efforts also came in the form of assistance, donations and helping hands to mitigate

the suffering of the victims and to help recovery efforts in the areas.

For example, A July 1 story by the *Vanguard* reported how the Lagos State government advised residents living in flood plains to vacate in the meantime to avoid the loss of lives and property. The advice was given the state Commissioner for the Environment, Tunji Bello, during an inspection tour of drainage channels in the Orile Agege area to assess the impact of the disaster that left several parts of the state flooded with residents forced to vacate their houses (Akoni, 2012).

In another relief story by the *Daily Trust* in August, the paper reported that NEMA delivered relief materials to the victims of the flood that ravaged Rikkos, a community in the Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State. The then Director-General of the agency, Alhaji Muhammad Sani Sidi, said the relief items worth N35m were delivered to the displaced victims in two camps located at the Muslim Community Education Centre in Rikkos and Government Secondary School in Gangare. The story also portrayed a sense of the coordinated efforts of assisting the victims of the disaster where Mr. Ayo Ajayi of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, said he was happy with NEMA's approach to the disaster and its wisdom in inviting the agency to complement the Federal Government's effort in managing disasters in Nigeria (Lalo, 2012).

In an article with disaster assessment frame on September 22 by *The Guardian*, the paper reported facts about the floods disaster in several communities of Cross River, Niger, Jigawa and Benue states. The paper presented the facts and assessed the extent of damage by the floods in the states. The paper said: "Over 200 communities and states and federal roads have been affected and 11 persons have been reportedly killed by the flood and hundreds of houses submerged or pulled down, displacing thousands of persons in the process" (Akpan, 2012, p. 8).

In an October 16 human interest story framed by the *Leadership*, the paper reported how rapists invaded Bayelsa flood camps, thereby making life in the camps even more dangerous and scary to the women refugees. The paper said many of the rapists were usually caught in the act after their victims cried out for help, while others carry out their evil acts with dangerous weapons held over their victims. "Women are ambushed and raped," a woman at the Sports Complex camp, who pleaded anonymity, told the *Leadership* reporter. She said: "The girls are in danger because they are constantly harassed sexually by the boys who have thrown caution to the winds; but police have arrested some of the suspects" (Okhomina 1, 2012, p. 4).

In general, the papers showed significant difference in the coverage of the disaster. In the *Daily Trust's* newspaper total coverage of the disaster, relief efforts, economic and disaster assessment frames were the dominant frames covered by the paper. This has clearly shown that the paper was more concerned about assisting the victims of the disaster, economic implications of the floods and general assessment to understand how it all happened and how it can be more professionally addressed in case of future occurrence.

In *The Guardian's* framing of the floods disaster stories, relief and recovery efforts frame was the dominant reported frame by the paper and was followed by disaster facts/assessment frame. Human interest framed ranked third in the papers total framing of the floods stories though with a very low percentage as Table 1 indicated. This has indicated that although the paper had more concern on helping the affected persons and recovery of the affected communities, it had also focused attention on general assessment of the disaster and how people were physically touched by the floods.

Leadership newspaper had the same pattern of framing the flooding stories with *The Guardian* only that the paper framed more disaster facts/assessment and human interest stories more than *The Guardian*. This may not be unconnected to the fact that the *Leadership* covered more of the disaster stories than *The Guardian*. This has shown that in the coverage of 2012 flooding disaster by *The Guardian* and *Leadership*, the papers had the same framing agenda.

In the *Vanguard* total framing of the disaster stories, the paper had more framed relief and recovery efforts stories more all the papers under investigation. Disaster facts/assessment frame was ranked second in the paper's framing of the disaster and was closely followed by mortality/survivors frame. This has indicated that in the *Vanguard's* framing of flooding apart from reporting relief efforts, donations towards assisting the victims and general assessment of the floods, the paper also gave more emphasis to reporting number of those killed and those that survived the floods to indicate the gravity of the disaster and possibly motivate governments and relief agencies towards addressing the situation.

The findings from this study fall in line with major tenets of framing theory and previous studies regarding framing of disasters (see for example Colistra 2010 study). The findings have shown that although the papers seemed to have the same focus to framing the disaster, they differ in the intensity of coverage given to the disaster. Most importantly, the papers also chose to have different approach towards how they set agenda in the framing of the disaster stories.

Conclusion

Analyses of findings in this study have indicated a departure from what the press used to give much emphasis in the past as regards to environmental journalism and coverage of natural disasters in particular. The findings have equally indicated how papers framed relief and recovery efforts by donors, government and relief agencies to extent that this particular frame dominates the coverage of all the papers under investigation. This seemed to play a key role in mobilising the government and donors towards helping victims and controlling the disaster. In sum, and as stated above, the findings from this study fall in line with previous studies regarding framing of disasters from other climes.

Recommendations

Future studies should investigate why there is this departure from what the press used to report in relation to coverage of environmental issues and natural disasters in particular in Nigeria. Another empirical study is also recommended to find out perceptions of disaster management agencies on the role media played in covering and framing the 2012 flood in the country.

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