Problematising, Blaming, Moralising, and Recommending: Media Framing of Super Eagles’ Performance and Effect on Fans

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Abstract
This study investigates frames that the Nigerian media use in analysing performance of the Nigerian national soccer team’s performance during eight football tournaments since 2000 – two World Cup finals and six African Nations Cup finals. The study investigates two questions – one designed to identify frames used by the media in analysing the team’s performance and the second investigating whether those frames align with schema used by fans. The method involves analysing 78 online media reports of the team’s performance at the eight tournaments and 32 discussion threads posted by the team’s fans on a board Eagles Nest hosted by the website Cybereagles.com. The study finds that the media use various frames and devices, including the following: various blame targets, distancing, dismissal of responsible persons, use of locally-based players, and hiring competent coaches to assess the performance of the national soccer team. Those frames were found to largely resonate with fans on Eagles Nest but the report also notes cases of non-alignment.

Key Terms: Media framing, media effects, agenda-setting, problematising, blaming, moralising, Super Eagles, Cybereagles.com, Eagles Nest.

Résumé

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l’analyse des performances de l’équipe, une autre sur l’analyse sur oui ou non ces approches sont en droite ligne avec ce qui se dégage de l’opinion des supporters. La méthodologie se base aussi bien sur l’étude de 78 rapports publiés en ligne et portant sur la performance de l’équipe dans huit tournois que sur 32 discussions sous forme de commentaires postés par les supporters sur le site Eagles’ Nest dont le hôte est Cybereagles.com. L’étude montre que les médias utilisent différentes approches et outils consistant au blâme ciblé, à la distanciation, au rejet des personnes responsables, à l’usage de joueurs locaux, au recrutement d’entraîneurs compétents qui peuvent évaluer la performance de l’équipe nationale de football. Ces approches en général sont en conformité avec l’opinion des supporters sur EaglesNest, mais sont quelques fois en dissonance.

Introduction

Media effects on people have been widely studied for decades, leading to various media theories, from early phase of strong effects on attitudes (Park and Pooley 2008) through limited effects (Klapper 1960), and strong cognitive effects (Beniger and Gusek 1995), to current focus on reality constructivism (McQuail 2010). Reality constructivism theories include theories like cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli 1986) and agenda setting (McCombs 2004), among several others. More recently, scholars have begun to focus attention on media framing and its effects as part of this social reality constructivism. By media framing, we refer to media selection of ‘some aspects of a perceived reality, making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman 1993:52).

These media effects, particularly earlier media effects theories, have been applied to studies on Nigeria but rarely have they been applied to media reports on sporting events in the country. Sports, particularly football (soccer), is important in the lives of Nigerians because Nigeria’s participation in football often brings social life to a halt as thousands watch the game live or on television. Symbolising this importance was an announcement by the country’s President, withdrawing Nigeria from participating in international football competition after the national team – The Super Eagles – performed poorly at the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa (Jordan 2010; Smith 2010). Many Nigerians, including top government officials, publicly state their fan-attachment to specific teams, some
of them foreign clubs, but all Nigerians unite in support of the Super Eagles. Nigerians, largely learn about the Super Eagles’ performance from media coverage as the team played more than 69 per cent of its games, in the last decade, away from Nigeria.¹

What is not understood is how the media frame performance of the Super Eagles and perhaps how such framing shapes action or attitudes towards the team. The purpose of this article is to:

1. Identify frames that the Nigerian media use in discussing performances of the Nigerian national soccer team (The Super Eagles); and
2. Assess whether media frames of performance resonate with the Nigerian football fan.

To accomplish this purpose, the article proceeds by describing media framing, providing in-depth analysis of how football is reported in the Nigerian media, specifying focus on performances of the Super Eagles in a historical analysis, identifying a methodology for our analysis, evaluating how the media frames Super Eagles’ performances, and then discussing frames of those performances.

**Media Framing and Theory**

We have previously introduced the concept of framing by referring to Entman’s work. However, it is important to clearly differentiate framing from other similar concepts such as agenda setting, and also clarify the meaning of media framing in order to differentiate it from other types of framing existing in scholarly literature.

Agenda setting focuses on how media accentuates importance of a particular event (e.g. a Super Eagles preparation for a tournament) by focusing on it and repeatedly reporting on it. Note that during this period of focus, there may well be other sporting events taking place at the same period e.g. the National Football League, the Shell Cup for high school students, among others. However, the media choice, albeit an intentional one, to focus on the Super Eagles rather than other events essentially sets an agenda for the public. Thus, this example of Nigeria media focus on Super Eagles before a particular tournament heightens public interest on the team, as the public takes its cue on what is important at that particular time – the Super Eagles. Unlike agenda setting, framing refers to a concept different from what we just described. Instead, framing refers to
how those stories of the Super Eagles are constructed. For instance, the
decision to emphasise some attributes above other attributes, e.g., crises
in camp instead of player injuries, improved performance, among others.
Some scholars have referred to framing as an extension of agenda setting
(see McCombs and Ghanem 2001; Maher 2001). They argue that the first
level of agenda setting focuses on transmission of an object’s importance
while the second (extension) is transmission of the attribute’s importance.

Konig (2005) has also argued that frame analysis, as used today, dif-
ers from Goffman’s frame analysis. Goffman is considered the father of
frame analysis and his 1974 book entitled, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on
the Organization of Experience,* is perhaps the most cited work in the
field. Konig cites, as one of the differences, the fact that today’s re-
search on media framing treats the choice of frames as a ‘deliberate’
process. Goffman argued otherwise: ‘He (the user of a frame) is likely to
be ‘unaware’ of such organised features as the framework has and un-
able to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet those
handicaps are no bar to his easily and fully applying it’ (p. 21). Today’s
researchers on media framing follow Entman’s definition which begins as
follows; ‘to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and
make them more salient in a communicating text. . .’ (1993:52). In es-
sence, unlike Goffman’s position of the framer being unaware, Entman
points to an active selection of frames.

Media framing, in spite of its ubiquitous use in today’s research of
media reports covering a variety of issues, is convoluted and, as Entman
noted, ‘fractured, with pieces here and there but no comprehensive state-
ment to guide research’ (p.51). Fortunately, a few scholars, including
Scheufele (1999) and de Vreese (2005), have attempted to provide such a
guide by introducing theoretical models. We describe those models here
as guide to our study of the Nigerian case. Scheufele and Vreese provide
similar models that describe media framing as a process, interactive, and
dynamic. These characteristics are exhibited among what Entman (1993)
describes as locations of framing – the communicator, the text, the re-
ceiver, and the culture.

Scheufele explained that media framing has four processes: frame
building, frame setting, individual-level effects of framing; and journalists
as audience. Frame building involves manufacturing of frames on which
storylines are, thereafter, organised. This is influenced by several sources,
according to Tuchman (1978) and Shoemaker and Reese (1996) who sug-
gested some of such sources of interaction – journalistic (professional
news values, personal ideology), organisational (ideological orientation of
the medium), and external sources (interest groups, elites, social norms and values, among others). Frame setting involves making important certain aspects of a story. Here, de Vreese points to media setting resulting from interaction with an ‘individual’s (journalist’s) prior knowledge and predispositions’ (p. 52). This interaction helps select what is perceived as important while ‘driving out other possible responses’ (Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1995:23). Scheufele argues that the process of individual-level effects of framing is not well understood. However, scholars have severally predicted relationships between media frames and individual beliefs. Entman (1993) and Edelman (1993) propose that media framing has effects on how individual receivers of the frame build their own ‘frame’. However, they also point that these effects may not be universal and that individual receivers may modify media frames. The fourth process, which describes journalists as audiences is better conceived as the feedback process, i.e., a process which Scheufele describes as journalists becoming ‘equally susceptible to the very frames that they use to describe events and issues’ (p. 117). Scheufele cites Fishman’s 1980 study, which found that journalists framed stories based on frames previously used by other media.

De Vreese provides a further description of individual-level effects, which is investigated in the second question of our study. He argues that a particular media frame resonates with frames of individuals when such frame meets certain criteria. If such alignment fails to occur, individuals largely ignore such media frame, discount, discard or easily forget it. The criteria are as follows: The frame must have easily identifiable linguistic characteristics; there must be a relationship between the frame and the larger belief-system of its receivers; the frame should be commonly used in journalistic practice; and it must be distinguishable from other frames. We will discuss the first two criteria in detail as the other two focus largely on identification of a media frame as separate from other possible frames.

The first criterion of identifiable linguistic characteristics was lucidly described in a study by Kahneman and Tversky (1984), in which language used in framing, determined the extent of alignment with receiver. They proposed alternative programmes to counter an imagined outbreak of an unusual Asian disease predicted to kill 600 persons in the United States of America, and asked people which of the programmes they would prefer. Programme A would save 200 people; with Programme B, there is one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and two-third probability that no one will be saved; with Programme C, 400 persons will die, and with Programme D, there is one-third probability that nobody will die and
two-third probability that 600 persons will die. Kahneman and Tversky found that when people were presented with only choices of A and B, they overwhelmingly chose A. Choice C and D involved similar options as A and B but framed in terms of likely deaths instead of likely lives saved. This linguistic difference was significant as the choice switched when people were offered Programme C or D only. In that case, Programme D (similar to programme B that had far less preference when presented alongside A) was significantly chosen. In essence, this confirms that how a story is framed by the mass media matters.

The second criterion points to the frame fitting into existing cultural myths and narrations of individual receivers. In addition, the frame had to rank high in such system of myths and narrations. In essence, a frame’s resonance depends on high degree of alignment to existing belief system of receivers; it cannot be mere imagination.

Our brief theoretical analysis of media framing establishes frames as process, as interactive, and as dynamic going through the process of frame building, setting, individual effects, and feedback with public resonance depending on criteria of language, relationship to existing belief system, common usage in journalistic practice, and distinguishable from other frames. It is the above understanding that guides our analysis of the Nigerian case. Below, we analyse how football is reported in Nigeria.

Historicising Agenda Setting: The Nigerian Football Media Reports

As McCombs and Ghanem (2001) noted, agenda setting precedes media framing. In fact, they argue that media framing is a second phase of agenda setting. Media focus on certain sports, defining which sport or sports should be considered important, and the relationship between media coverage and support for certain sports is present in Nigeria. However, support of certain sports has changed overtime as media coverage change.

Football is, currently, the most popular sport in Nigeria and, thus, it has the widest media coverage of any sport in the country. Not only do newspapers cover the sport, there are print magazines also dedicated to football coverage (e.g. Complete Football, KickOff) and sports dailies (e.g. Soccer Star and SportsDay) dedicated to the game. Broadcast media also report extensively on the game with one radio station – Brila FM — dedicated to reporting sports, particularly football; and SuperSport TV and HiTV dedicating multiple channels to 24-hour football coverage. Most of
these media houses also have websites, thus extending football coverage beyond Nigeria.

It is notable that this type of coverage has not always been the case. In fact, football coverage was minimal in the early twentieth century and the most covered sport at that time was cricket (Onwumechili 2010, 2009 and 2001; Solaja 2010; Giulianotti 2004 and Boer 2004). The coverage of football was minimal and focus was on reports of few games that took place in the United Kingdom, satisfying the interest of British colonialists resident in Nigeria at the time. There were no print magazines dedicated to football. Radio and television broadcasting did not arrive until the 1930s and 1959, respectively. The broadcast media, on the air only for a few hours, did not focus on sports coverage.

Significant media reports on Nigerian football did not begin until in the late 1930s and at the time it was limited to coverage in the daily newspapers of the day, such as the *Daily Service* and the *West African Pilot* (Onwumechili 2009). The coverage changed from reports of games played in the United Kingdom to the local game played as part of the Lagos Divisional Football Association (LDFA) league. The coverage of football overtook that of cricket in newspapers starting particularly in late 1950s. Also, radio began to cover important local games in Lagos and elsewhere, further spreading interest in football. Television quickly joined the coverage with live games in the late 1960s.

A major economic downturn in the mid-1980s changed the coverage of football in Nigeria. The downturn affected several parts of the economy and led to migration of significant labour from Nigeria to other parts of the world. Football was not an exception as top football players migrated to other African countries such as the Ivory Coast and Benin Republic and to Europe, particularly Portugal, Belgium and Holland. This type of migration was significant as it was clearly an economic escape, different from earlier migratory period when footballers left to advance their education in places like the United Kingdom and the United States. To underline the poor economy as a driver of migration during this period, Onwumechili (2010) said:

the economic depression in Nigeria during the mid 1980s and early 1990s forced some stunning defections by players from Nigeria who disappeared from their clubs when on overseas trips. The most memorable was in 1992 when several players of the ‘Shooting Stars’ one of Nigeria’s major football teams, defected in Italy as the team transited from a 0-2 first leg CAF Cup loss to FC Bizerte of Tunisia (p. 80).
Importantly, the media lacked the funds, in this economic environment, to provide extensive coverage of local football as was the case in the previous years and decades. For instance, the regular coverage of weekend league games on radio and television disappeared; newspaper coverage of local games became limited as media houses had little funds to send journalists to game venues. Instead, newspapers filled their sport pages with stories of football from foreign countries, initially from clubs where Nigerian players had migrated but later to entire foreign leagues (Onwumechili 2009). It was cheaper to do so as stories were merely reprinted from foreign press dispatches.

The improvement of the economy in the 1990s did not lead to the return of significant coverage of the local league and clubs. Instead, other developments stifled a return. For instance, media liberalisation, particularly in broadcasting, led to the emergence of sports radio (Brila FM), sports television (SuperSport TV, HiTV) and expanded availability of sports dailies. However, these outlets increased their focus on coverage of foreign football to match the taste for this type of football that developed following years of economic downturn. The only constant feature in coverage for a Nigerian team was the coverage of the national team – the Super Eagles. This is not surprising, since players of the Super Eagles, who played in foreign leagues, were already well known to the Nigerian audience. Nigerians read about them, hear about them, or watch them regularly on Nigerian television. It is the coverage of the Super Eagles that is the focus of this study.

Methodology

The study uses frame analysis of both media products and online comments from soccer fans in order to address study questions. Though numerous studies of media framing use experiments and content analysis, it is important to apply more qualitative methods to the study of media frames. Kinder (2007) has argued for diversification in methods for measuring frames by noting the importance of methods ‘oriented to the world outside’ (p. 157). In essence, these are methods that are not laboratory-bound or lost in a mesh of numbers without deep and real meanings attached. Some scholars have responded to this by using qualitative analysis as the method of frame analysis of particular importance. Konig (2004) and McCaffrey and Kayees (2000) have advanced this method.

In this study, we apply a frame analysis of online issues of five Nigerian newspapers – The Guardian, Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation,
This analysis focuses on 78 media reports following the national team’s performance at important international tournaments during the last decade (2000-2010). These tournaments include six African Cup of Nations finals (2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010) and two World Cup finals (2002 and 2010). Nigeria did not participate in the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany; hence that tournament is of no interest to this study. In essence, the sample is selected using a judgmental sampling method, i.e., selecting a sample that is appropriate for the stated study.

Frame analysis, using a qualitative research method, allows deep reading of relevant texts, i.e., those focusing on the national team’s performance at listed tournaments. The intent is to discover frame guiding elements or devices. The framing devices are non-facts embedded in stories used in building a frame that organises the story. They are often represented frequently in occurring phrases, words, images and/or volume of coverage, from which inferences of media frames are possible. It is difficult to uncover framing devices since framing is usually implied rather than explicit. Nonetheless, the uncovering process, according to de Vreese (2005), requires iterated reading of selected texts, carefully separating framing devices from the facts included in the text. Van Gorp (2007) also notes that ‘the text and the frame (emphasis added) must be seen as independent from one another’ (p. 63). The frame devices are then pooled to identify an overarching frame, meaning, or patterns of the pool of devices for each text and then for the preponderance of text samples. This deliberate and systematised process, previously discussed by several scholars (see de Vreese 2005 and Fisher 1997), allows credible identification of media frames. Furthermore, the important process of distinction between core story elements and framing devices have been used in frame analysis by several scholars including Vreese (2004) and Cappella & Jamieson (1997).

In addition, the study includes analysis of frame alignment with football fan schemata. For this, the study analysed 32 online threads on the www.cybereagles.com website during the same period covered by sampled media articles. The website hosts a major discussion board – *The Eagles Nest* – where fans of the team meet in cyberspace to discuss football, mostly on the Super Eagles, for 24 hours each day. Board statistics includes 15,680 members by the end of 2010; about 3 million posts on over 171,000 topics. Highest recorded traffic was 454 members simultaneously online on 6 June 2010 when the Super Eagles played against North Korea in preparation for the 2010 World Cup finals. However, online traffic on a game day is multiple times larger than the highest recorded simul-
Participation on board discussions rises significantly a few days to a major game and continues till a few days after. This coincides with periods when threads reviewed for this study were posted. Unfortunately, the archival system of the forum goes back only to 2003 and, thus, threads following two Nations Cup tournaments (2000 and 2002) and the 2002 World Cup finals were not accessible. Frames used in the accessible period were then reviewed to ascertain alignment with media frames.

**Media Framing of Super Eagles’ Performance**

After iterated reading of several stories published about the team’s performance at the selected tournaments, we arrived at several frame devices suggesting particular frames. The most dominant frames were linked to a master frame of ‘blame or assigning responsibility’ for the team’s loss at these tournaments. Frames also included ‘identification of problems’, which was important because it suggested the target of the blame frame. This particular frame focused on identifying the cause of a problem (see Entman 1993) and then led to assigning of responsibility (i.e., blame) and, thus, frames of problem identification and responsibility-assignment were linked in most of the stories where blame was prominently mentioned. Additional frames included ‘distancing from Nigerians and dismissal of responsible persons’, using ‘local/other players, or hiring “competent” coaches’. In essence, several frames were apparent from media reports.

Notably, the Nigerian team failed to win any of the tournaments selected for this frame analysis. The team lost at the group stages of both the 2002 and 2010 World Cup finals in Korea/Japan and South Africa, respectively. At the six Nations Cup tournaments, the team finished second at home in 2000; placed third in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2010; and was unplaced in 2008.

The devices for the dominant frame were not universal but included analysis of selected episodes (some internal or within the game and others external), citation of perceived experts, and use of other subjectively created factors which were then analysed in order to provide justification for blame frames.

**Identification of Problem and Blame Frames**

Frequently mentioned blame frames were coaches, players and football administrators, which followed identification of each as the primary problem for the team’s failures. Before analysing devices and frames, it is important to note that the frames are selectively chosen by the media from a pool of
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possible explanations for the team’s defeats in each of those tournaments. This is important because there are varied reasons for defeat in a competitive environment. For instance, defeat could arise from poor tactics, injuries to key players, poor preparation, being outplayed on a particular day, the other team being more talented, poor luck and/or unfair officiating, among other possible explanations. Below, we discuss aspects of the blame frames.

Blame Coaches

The coach was a key target blamed by the media. *The Vanguard*, reporting on 28 January 2010 after the team was eliminated by Ghana at the Nations Cup, wrote as follows:

> When you lose a match and it is clear that the opponents are better, then you take the defeat in good faith. But when you lose due to tactical blunders, then everybody is bitter. Nigeria could not read the game yesterday. I did not see any direct tactics to win the match.

The journalist cites perceived experts (a frame device) such as a previous coach of the team, Clemens Westerhoff, and a former international player, John Oganwu, to support this frame that the coaches were to blame. The journalist, citing Westerhoff, mentioned the substitution of a particular player as an example of tactical blunder. *The Punch* cited a player to support its assertion that coaching was to blame for another loss at the 2008 Nations Cup. In this case, the player disagreed with the coach on whether the team should attack more after the opponent had a player disqualified. *The Punch* went on to state ‘Vogts (The coach), instead of admitting that his old school, safety-first tactics had no place in modern football, blamed the press for his woes’. This followed a long article railing against Vogts’ denial of access to the team during the tournament. *ThisDay* newspaper also blamed coaching for the loss at the 2004 Nations Cup in Tunisia with the following statement:

> With all sincerity, this is the worst assembled Super Eagles I have ever seen. For the first time since I started watching football, I am not eager to watch the national team. I don’t even understand what they are playing. It looks like football, all right. . . . I just seem to see a bunch of players running up and down. . .

Blame Players

The media citation of players as responsible for the team’s poor performance is just as strong as the responsibility often assigned to coaches. In fact, a major attack on players was central to media reports following
the team’s loss at the 2002 Nations Cup in Mali. The media created the term ‘tired legs’ to describe players who were written off as too old to represent the country and these players were blamed for the loss in Mali. It is a popular theme for the Nigerian media after each tournament loss. The 2010 loss at the Nations Cup in Angola was not different, based on this citation from The Vanguard:

Now, I want you to note this. Abedi Pele (of Ghana) was still playing up till 1995 to 1996. Therefore, he played at the time of Kanu Nwankwo. Today, his two children are playing for Ghana and Kanu is still playing for Nigeria. What does that tell you? Where is our plan for the future?

However, the blame was not always about the age of players but included other issues. For instance, players were accused of poor discipline by The Nation. Here is a quote from The Nation of 14 February 2010, following Nigeria’s defeat at the 2010 Nations Cup in Angola:

[There is] the growing trend of players’ lackadaisical attitude towards national assignments vis-à-vis the team’s poor showing at the just concluded Nations Cup in Angola. . .’

**Blame Administrators**

The media also cite football administrators for blame, using several devices, including player payment crises, lack of exhibition games, late departure to tournaments, among other framing devices. What is surprising is that these incidents also occur when Nigerian teams travel to tournaments and win but they are rarely mentioned except when defeat occurs, as amply demonstrated in reports sampled for this study. The Vanguard used these devices to support the team’s failure at the 2002 Nations Cup in Mali. Under a headline titled ‘Mali/Nigeria: Why Eagles Failed’, The Vanguard wrote on 18 February 2002:

While teams like Cameroon and South Africa were organizing camping sessions in different parts of Europe and in Africa, and hosts Mali were having a rash of friendly games across Europe, the Nigerians were busy postponing the day they would resume camping.

What The Vanguard failed to mention is that Nigeria finished ahead of both South Africa and Mali in that tournament and, thus, the rationale about poor preparation may not be a very strong one. The same medium wrote again under a different heading ‘Nigeria: The Shame that Departed with Eagles’:

The confusion and shame that were Nigeria’s participation at the Nations Cup manifested itself as the Eagles left Bamako (Mali) in batches yester-
day. The EAS Airline that was sent to bring back the failures did not arrive
till 12 pm and when they were to leave, there was scramble for seats.

*The Vanguard* of 10 February 2002 cited one of the team’s coaches to
support its blame of administrators. The assistant coach, Stephen Keshi,
was quoted as stating; ‘I don’t know who sent Ekeji (Director in the Sports
Ministry) to come and destabilise the team here’.

**Distancing from Nigerians**

We have identified this frame as the team ‘distancing from Nigerians’. This is an impression the media created in reports evaluating those defined
as responsible for the team’s failure and the effect of their acts. Entman
(1993:52) describes this as making ‘moral judgments’ in evaluating causal
agents and their effects. The media frame is designed as emotional appeal
against the causal agent. An example appears in a report in *The Punch* (6
February 2008) following the 2008 Nations Cup defeat:

They could have earned some sympathy if they had been just that little bit
nicer . . . while other teams saw nothing wrong in greeting their fans, taking
pictures with them and signing autographs, the Nigerians found it even
difficult to wave to the fans, who had made the long trek from all over
Ghana just to see them . . . with their concentration, (they) won only one
game, against a team that lost all its matches.

Note that in this frame, the media could have framed the team’s activity in
a positive light, indicating that they were designed to focus players on the
competition but instead the media chose a different frame. In another
example, *The Vanguard*, specifically distancing the coach from aspirations
of Nigerians at the 2010 World Cup, cited a Nigerian player’s lament; ‘I
want(ed) to help ‘my country’ but [it] is a big disappointment that I did not
play enough. . . These people (the foreign coaches), they did not want to
play me’ (28 June 2010). The same paper had similarly written about the
2008 Nations Cup:

Whoever finally becomes the next Super Eagles coach should start listen-
ing to the 140 million Nigerians who pine as the Eagles refuse to fly. Many
of them are better coaches than Vogts, but nobody would listen to them
because they are not world class.

**Dismissal of Responsible Persons**

Other media frames focused on solutions as diverse as the problem frame.
In some cases, reports framed stories calling for dismissal of persons
allegedly responsible for the team’s failures. For instance, *The Punch* (6
February 2008) noted: ‘Incidentally, the feeling (of blame) is mutual between the press and the coach, who was once described as the ‘wrong German’ by the Scottish press after nearly strangling their football to death. If members of the press had their way, the German would have been sent packing after the draw with Mali.’ The rest of the text pointed to reasons why the coach should be sacked. After the loss at the 2002 Nations Cup in Mali, ThisDay (25 February 2002) framed its story under the title ‘Amodu: One Down, Who Next?’ signifying that the coach (Amodu) has been duly fired and that next in line to be dismissed should be the Sports Minister (Ishaya Aku).

Using Local/Other Players

Other frames included recommendation that locally-based players or other foreign-based players should replace poorly performing players. This recommendation frame often accompanied stories blaming players for team failure. Here, citations of experts were used liberally to support the recommendation. This, perhaps, served the purpose of convincing fans who may wonder how a locally-based player would outperform a professional playing in Europe. For instance, The Vanguard (28 January 2010) cited a former coach of the national team, Westerhoff, in making such recommendation. It claimed that Westerhoff had asked; ‘But why didn’t Nigeria have any player from Heartland, Kano Pillars and some other clubs?’ Both Heartland and Pillars are locally-based clubs. In essence, Westerhoff’s question alone justified inclusion of such players in the national team.

Hiring ‘Competent’ Coaches

In Nigeria, the media is replete with recommendations for a ‘competent’ or a ‘foreign coach’ as solution to failures at tournaments. This was the case with the sample reports for this study. ThisDay (February 2004) offered this solution after it described the team’s performance as nondescript; ‘. . . he (Coach Chukwu) should bow out . . . With a coach like Chukwu in charge, we will never go back to the glorious days of Clemens Westerhoff and Jo Bonfere. We may never experience the “artistry boom” of the 1990s again’! In essence, Nigeria needed a coach such as the foreign coaches it had in the 1990s. Specific reference to Westerhoff and Bonfere is designed to compare the team’s dominant period to the failure at the 2004 Nations Cup finals in Tunisia. Furthermore, The Vanguard (28 January 2010) supported this view six years later by referring to Westerhoff in an interview as ‘. . .the man who built Nigeria’s football and who is now
watching it plummet’. The text of *The Vanguard* focused on ills of the Nigerian team, comparing the team to the glory of Westerhoff period and pointing out the need to return to that period under a ‘foreign’ coach.

**Frame Alignment with Fan Schema**

There is considerable alignment between media frames and the fans’ schema in terms of Super Eagles performance. Schema is differentiated from frame. Schema refers to a person’s organised knowledge developed over sustained period of experiences about and attitudes toward an object or subject. It is a belief system used in evaluating messages or new information. Frames, as described previously, are more stable and culturally-embedded, invisible and used for perceiving and describing social reality. The focus, here, on frame alignment with fan schema directly addresses the second question this study sought to answer. Importantly, there are contributors to the *Eagles Nest* who self-identify as journalists and use that identity and the insider information/’credibility’ that comes with it to influence significant number of participants about the team’s performance. Secondly, not all ‘cybereagles’ participants share the dominant media frames of the team’s performance and thus, they debate at length on various threads with those that are aligned to those frames. Below, we report examples of these alignments with earlier identified media frames.

**The Problem Identification and Blame Frames**

There were substantial alignment on blame frames found in media reports, i.e., the coach, the player(s), and administrator. However, there were also ‘cybereagles’ participants who opposed or dismissed those media frames. Participants copied reports and posted on the *Eagles Nest* in support of a particular frame, thus demonstrating alignments. For instance, following the 2004 loss in Tunisia, a member opened a thread on 12 February, titled ‘Paul Bassey echoes Ayo’s sentiment on CCC and SE’. The opening post was an article from *The Punch* titled ‘Chukwu Blamed for Eagles Ouster’. The acronyms SE represent Super Eagles and CCC represent the then coach Christian Chukwu. Ayo is a known antagonist who stirs debates on the board. The reference in this particular thread showed the *Punch* newspaper reporting a top football official (Paul Bassey) subscribing to views that align to Ayo’s schema blaming the coach for the tournament defeat. Predictably, many members of the forum confirmed support for the media frame but a few disagreed and one wrote the following:

Paul Bassey is all mouth (lips to be precise). . . Abeg make Paul Bassey go siddon, im no sabi soccer [Please Paul Bassey should sit down, he does
not understand soccer]. I’ve watched and read his comments on football, he doesn’t cut the juice!!!

Also, there are similar examples of alignment on Eagles Nest to the frame of player blaming. One member posted the following after Ivory Coast eliminated Nigeria from the 2006 Nations Cup in Egypt:

The Ivorians (sp) outplayed us because our players like Enakhire, Taiye Taiwo, Kaita and many others were busy snoring on the field. None of the players played to their potential.

Others also cited media frames while discussing administrators as responsible for the team’s failures. They used similar frame devices, i.e., posting selected media reports and referring to perceived experts. In certain cases, they simply claimed knowledge of the Nigerian environment in citing administrators as responsible. One posted the following on Eagles Nest after the 2004 loss:

Abeg you ppl should relax, crack a Heineken & CHILL OUT. goodness... we lost, but we did well considering the bullsh** of the last 3 months by the NFA. Hiring then not hiring a coach, not playing one single friendly in the run up to the match, getting our team together late (by every possible standard), kicking out 3 players for reasons no one fully explained to us... I mean c’mon. If England went through this, someone would have lost their life!! Look to the future folks, don’t become relics of the past.

**Distancing from Nigerians**

The media pointed to amount of wages paid to coach Vogts in their frame, showing how the coach distanced the team from Nigerians. Fans, in derisive comments about the coach, made subsequent comments referring to this. For instance, one post wrote; ‘i’ve said it that sister Berti V don’t know how to coach . . .the best job for him now is to go fishing or go touring in the island of CUBA, to enjoy all his tricky contract wealth.’ In that short statement, the poster craftily points at the coach not being man enough (sister), not having ability (don’t know how to coach) and then advising the coach to use wealth from his Nigerian contract to go on vacation fishing or touring. Another wrote in response to a media framing ‘distancing from Nigerians’ (7 February 2008); ‘It boils down to players that are unpatriotic and think they are better off than the regular Nigerians themselves. They have no allegiance to the country nor do they intend to scratch their skins for the country either. . . . When some of you guys finally wake up and smell the roses, the better off you will be. These crop don’t give a toss about the SE. Only a handful do. Same guys that were out partying and chasing Ghanaian (whores) a few hours after the game.
tells you the story. Did you see their faces after the game? They could really care less. It was the most annoying thing ever.

**The Solution Frames**

There was also alignment solution frames presented by the media. Here, we cite two examples of this alignment. In one case, an *Eagles Nest* member was responding to a thread titled ‘Osaze, Olofinjana: Tactical Blunders Cost Us Victory!’ The thread was a posted media story citing the coach of the 2008 team as responsible for the defeat at the Nations Cup. Here, the member responded by citing another player who confirmed the ‘tactical blunders’ and then implored the football association to act by making this statement: ‘also yakubu spoke about leaving some players out in kickoffnigeria [Football online sportsnews site], I think nfa should know what to do now is to sack the coach’. However, as we noted already, not all contributors supported predominant media frames and this was evident regarding solution frames presented by the media. One dissenter, on 7 February 2006, responded to an alignment comment made by another contributor by stating the following:

> Don’t give us the same line that an FC (foreign coach) is the solution. Ivory Coast is a good team even without an FC and have been for more than a decade albeit a slight blip. Remember that Senegal and Egypt also have FCs. It says a lot that most of the teams with FC crashed out like a pack of cards while there are still 3 ICs (indigenous coaches) standing.

**Conclusion: Discussing Frames of Performance**

What is clear from results of media framing of Super Eagles’ performance at key tournaments, in the last decade, and alignment of such frames with fan schema is that the Nigerian media frequently framed the problem to blame coaches, players or administrators. In addition, they offered frame solutions based on those problems. Yet, there were possibilities of other frames different from those offered by the media. In any case, media choices need further interpretations of why they were preferred and how subsequent actions by Nigerian football authorities may have been affected by those choices.

It appears that media expectations of team performance are high. This may have been caused by at least a few factors. First, the team dominated Africa in the mid-1990s when it seemed invisible. Second, there is a high level of Nigerian footballer migration to leagues in Europe, fuelling a sense of continued production of highly talented players. Third, there are continued achievements at the youth level by Nigerian teams, confirming
production of highly talented players mentioned in the previous sentence. Therefore, failures of the Super Eagles may be difficult to explain for the Nigerian media and, thus, the media seeks to close this gap between expectations and performance by using frames that problematise external causes (i.e. causes external to ‘talent availability or unavailability’). This tendency to seek external attributions for failures has been confirmed in previous studies and is extensively discussed in Heider’s attribution theory (see Dardis 2007; Alicke 2000).

It is notable that solution frames, particularly those referring to a return to coaches of previously successful era, give credence to media expectations mentioned as benchmark for the team’s performance. But why did fans connect or align to media frames? Van Gorp (2007) proposed that alignments are eased because fans’ schema (i.e., collections of their personal organised knowledge) make then already familiar to media frames derived from culture. De Vreese (2005), supporting this idea, argues that a resonating frame must have easily identifiable linguistic characteristic and relate to larger belief system of receivers. In the case of this study, the frame language is understood by Nigerian football fans, i.e., language pertaining to importance of a coach, player, administrator, preparation, among others. Fans, who do not share the belief system, predictably disagreed with the frames or sought to modify them.

A surprise result is similarity of frames used by different media. On the other hand, fans demonstrated more diversity in their schema, compared to media diversity in frames. However, we found support from the literature for this rather surprising phenomenon. Van Gorp suggests that this is possible because many media rely on same sources of information and they also serve as information sources for one another. However, the fact that several journalists participate in Eagles Nest leads to a discussion expectation that they would be affected by diversity of opinions shared on the Eagles Nest by other contributors, including those rejecting prevalent media frames.

Importantly, we find that the theory of framing as well as findings from studies of media frame confirm or are related to some of those found in this particular study. Entman’s (1993) delineation of frame functions as problem definition, diagnosis of causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies are confirmed by results of this study. The problem definition and diagnosing of causes are linked in most media frames of performance of the Super Eagles, and were the predominant frames used by the media. In certain cases, text carrying these frames also suggests remedies linked to problem definition and blame. In a few cases, moral judgment frames also appeared, using devices such as emotional appeals.
Though not researched for this study, it is possible that media framing of Super Eagles performance may have led to larger effects such as actions taken by football administrators or by others in more powerful decision making positions. For instance, the decision by President Goodluck Jonathan to suspend the team from international competition, following the 2010 World Cup, may have been aligned to limited frames the media used to frame the team’s performance. It certainly could not have derived from alternative frames such as being unfortunate, losing to better teams, or mere individual player error, which were all ignored by the media. Football administrators also acted in alignment with media frames, including sacking coaches after World Cups of 2002 and 2010 and five of six Nations Cup tournaments covered in this study. They also blackballed specific players after the 2002 Nations Cup.

In essence, media framing of Super Eagles performance may have limited possible interpretations for the team’s failure at the studied tournaments and possibly precluded certain solutions. As some scholars have demonstrated, the power of media framing on the public and decision makers can be extensive (see Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber & Fan 1998; Cappella and Jamieson 1996). In fact, Fiske and Taylor (1991) inform us that human beings are cognitive misers who prefer to do very little thinking and frames provide them means to easy thinking, aligning media frames to their existing schema.

Notes

1. The team played 95 of 138 games, since 2000, away from the country.
2. Van Gorp, 2007, argues otherwise. He points out that frame analysis originates from Bartlett’s 1932 work on cognitive psychology.
3. While Scheufele refers to this step as ‘Journalists as audiences,’ de Vreese uses the term ‘Societal-level consequences’.
4. Here, we use the concept thread to refer to a string or series of online posts on a particular topic posted on the Eagles Nest. Thus, each thread usually includes several posts by individuals interested in a particular topic.
5. The team played 95 of 138 games, since 2000, away from the country.
References


