

Down, set, frame: Second-level agenda building and the NFL Network carriage dispute

Stephen W. Dittmore, University of Arkansas
Trent Seltzer, Texas Tech University

The Network is Born

- “They created it to have viable alternatives if everybody doesn’t pay what the NFL thinks they ought to. It won’t be a meaningful network until they have live games on it.”



- Barry Frank, vice chairman of IMG media, quoted by Kaplan in *Sports Business Journal*, May 5, 2003, para. 2

Four Years Later

- “The owners’ decision to put the games on the NFL Network was to help build a 24-7 network about football. That is our goal. We are not concerned about making more money on another TV rights deal. We want to create a year round football network.”

- Pat Bowlen, Denver Broncos President and Chairman of the NFL’s Broadcasting Committee, quoted by Consoli in *MediaWeek*, April 23, 2007, para. 4

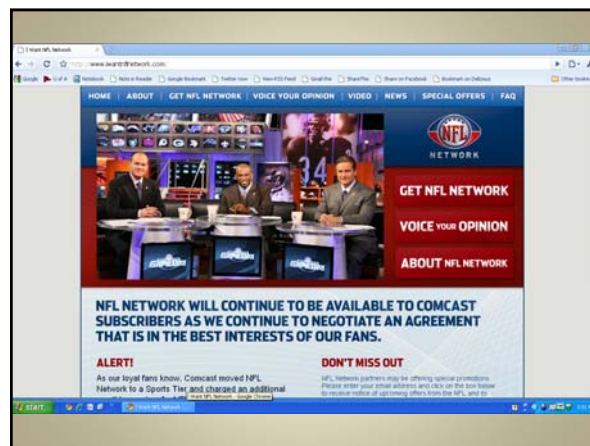
NFL Network Situation

- In placing games on NFLN, the league turned down approximately \$300 million/year from Comcast-owned Versus network
- Comcast and other major cable operators refused to carry NFLN on widely-distributed basic tiers
- Public debate intensified in late 2007 as fans were faced with missing important games between Green Bay-Dallas and New England-New York



Senate Judiciary Committee

- “Competition in sports programming and distribution: Are consumers winning?” (Nov. 14, 2006)
 - NFL
 - Time Warner Cable
- “Vertically integrated sports programming: Are cable companies excluding competition?” (Dec. 7, 2006)
 - Comcast





Agenda Setting

- Process through which increased media focus on a topic raises the salience of that issue relative to others in the minds of media consumers (e.g., Kioussis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs 2004, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972)
- Sports-related issues
 - Denham (2004) = SI and MLB Drug Policy
 - Fortunato (2000, 2001) = NBA and broadcasting strategies
 - Fortunato (2008) = NFL and broadcasting schedule
 - Seltzer & Mitrook (in press) = Heisman Trophy and expert opinion

Framing

- Framing, sometimes referred to as second level-agenda setting (McCombs, 2005), proposes that the media – through the process of selecting particular themes, phrases, images, and sources to present a particular story – also determines the salience of specific attributes attached to an issue and thus determines how the issue is perceived (Entman, 1993; Ghanem, 1997; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001)
- Whereas first-level agenda setting suggests that the media tell the public *what* issues the public should think about (Cohen, 1963), the framing of issues that occurs at the second-level of agenda setting suggests that the media also tell the public *how* to think about issues (Golan & Wanta, 2001)

Research Questions

- RQ1 – Which issue attributes were used by the media to frame the NFL Network carriage dispute?
- RQ2 – Was the NFL Network carriage dispute framed differently in national, regional, and trade media?
- RQ3 – Who had more success in framing the carriage issue in the media – pro-NFL or pro-cable forces?
- RQ4 – Which sources were used by the media in its coverage of the NFL Network carriage dispute?
- RQ5 – Did the framing of the carriage issue evolve over time as real-world events unfolded?

Methodology

- Content analysis of national, regional, and trade media as well as corporate press releases between Jan. 1, 2006-Dec. 31, 2007
- Keyword searches of Lexis/Nexis database
 - National media = *USA Today*, *New York Times* (Winter & Eyal, 1981)
 - Regional media = *Newsday*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Los Angeles Times*
 - Trade media = *Mediaweek*, *Sports Business Journal*
- Unit of analysis was individual article or press release
 - Coded for presence or absence of mentions of the NFL, cable operators, sources supporting pro-NFL or pro-cable viewpoints, source type, and valence (negative, neutral, or positive)

Methodology

- Pro-NFL framing attributes
 - “Blame cable” = fans are not getting to see games because of cable operators
 - “Broad appeal” = NFL Network should be on basic cable because of its broad appeal
 - “Expanded coverage” = NFL Network provides fans with expanded coverage of football
 - “Competition” = cable operators are opposed to NFL Network because they are worried about competition with their own sports channels
 - “Premium tier” = cable operators want subscribers to pay for a premium sports tier

Methodology

- Pro-Cable framing attributes
 - “Blame NFL” = fans are not getting to see games because of the NFL Network
 - “Narrow appeal” = NFL Network should be on a premium sports tier because of its narrow appeal
 - “Make money” = NFL Network is only concerned with trying to make money
 - “Pay content” = NFL Network wants all subscribers to pay for content that only a few people want

Methodology

- Two graduate students with previous content analysis experience were trained by the primary researcher
 - Scott’s π (1955) used to assess intercoder reliability
 - Coders demonstrated >87% agreement for all variables except NFL valence and “broad appeal” frame attribute; however, all were well above recommended 75% agreement for π (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000)
 - 149 relevant media articles
 - 18 relevant press releases

Results – RQ1

Which issue attributes were used by the media to frame the NFL Network carriage dispute?

$X^2 = 50.75, df = 2, p < .001$

Attribute	Media Content	Pro-NFL Release	Pro-Cable Release
Blame cable (pro-NFL)	55	4	0
Premium tier (pro-NFL)	54	0	0
Broad appeal (pro-NFL)	48	5	0
Blame NFL (pro-Cable)	47	0	2
Make money (pro-Cable)	33	0	2

Results – RQ2

Was the NFL Network carriage dispute framed differently in national, regional, and trade media?

	LAT	DMN	USAT	News	SBJ	Media
NYT	.365	.588*	.629*	.500*	.530*	.236
LAT		.610*	.532*	.657*	.129	.549*
DMN			.637*	.780*	.558*	.657*
USAT				.617*	-.303	-.303
News					-.424	-.566*
SBJ						-.375

* - $p < .05$
** - $p < .01$

Results – RQ3

- Who had more success in framing the carriage issue in the media – pro-NFL or pro-cable forces?
 - Used one-tailed Kendall’s tau rank order correlation
 - No significant correlation between the media and the pro-NFL releases or between the media and the pro-Cable releases
 - Significant negative correlation between ranking of frame attributes in pro-NFL and pro-Cable releases ($\tau = -.702, p < .05$), confirming two sides attempted to frame dispute in distinctly different ways

Results – RQ4

- Which sources were used by the media in its coverage of the NFL Network carriage dispute?
 - 68 media stories with a pro-NFL source
 - Official NFL spokespersons used 80.9% of time
 - 39 media stories with a pro-Cable source
 - Official cable operator spokesperson used 90% of time
 - Series of McNemar Tests for correlated proportions, indicated pro-NFL sources were present in a significantly higher proportion of media stories than pro-Cable sources ($X^2 = 18.23, p < .001$)

Results – RQ5

Did the framing of the carriage issue evolve over time as real-world events unfolded?

T₁ = Jan. 1, 2006-Oct. 28, 2007
 T₂ = Oct. 29, 2007-Nov. 29, 2007
 T₃ = Nov. 30, 2007-Dec. 31, 2007

Attribute	T ₁ (n = 69)	T ₂ (n = 32)	T ₃ (n = 44)
Premium tier (pro-NFL)	29	13	12
Broad appeal (pro-NFL)	23	8	14
Blame cable (pro-NFL)	18	13	15
Blame NFL (pro-Cable)	18	13	16
Make money (pro-Cable)	18	10	5

Discussion

- In general, the overall media framing of the NFL Network carriage dispute was negative in its tone
- Pro-NFL attributes of “blame cable” and “broad appeal” along with pro-Cable attributes of “blame NFL” and “make money” were used to frame the issue most frequently in the media
- Focus on assigning blame for the problem and providing a sinister motive for the “responsible” party’s actions
- Consistent with previous research’s suggestion that media frames act as a plotline for a narrative, part of whose function is to identify problems and their underlying causes (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 2008)

Discussion

- Part of the reason for the NFL’s success relative to cable operators in framing the issue may have been the media’s reliance on NFL sources, primarily official NFL spokespeople
- Lack of fan support in the pro-NFL stories suggests the NFL missed an opportunity to involve grassroots advocates; this might have served the NFL better in the long run as the issue developed and may have led to further success in building an issue frame that would have continued to appeal to the media

Limitations & Future Research

- Limited content available that could be used in determining the public relations agenda of the NFL and cable operators
 - Future investigations should be expanded to include other types of public relations information subsidies such as organizational spokespersons’ speeches or testimony as well as content from each party’s advocacy Web sites
- Future studies could examine the ability of leagues and governing bodies to frame media stories during periods of public debate or controversy. Given the speed at which weblogs and message boards spread rumor and innuendo, the ability of a sport organization to set an agenda and have its message resonate is more difficult – and more critical – than ever

Questions?

dittmore@uark.edu
 trent.seltzer@ttu.edu