

Down, Set, Frame: Second-Level Agenda Building and the NFL Network Carriage Dispute

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This study used second-level agenda-setting and agenda-building theory as a framework for investigating media coverage of the NFL Network carriage dispute and how NFL and cable operators attempted to frame this issue via their respective public relations efforts. National, regional, and trade media stories over a 2-year period were content analyzed along with corporate press releases. Results indicated that the NFL and cable operators in particular were framed negatively in media coverage. However, the percentage of positive media stories was much higher for the NFL than for the cable operators. The findings suggest that initially the NFL was more effective in having its messages resonate with the media than were the cable operators. As the issue evolved over time and fans were faced with the prospect of missing key games, the media framing of the debate shifted the blame from the cable companies to both cable operators and the NFL.

Keywords: framing, agenda setting, information subsidies

The NFL Network aired its first live regular-season game on November 23, 2006, despite limited nationwide distribution. At the time, only about 40 million of the nearly 111 million U.S. television households had access to the NFL Network, which incited a public debate. At issue was whether the NFL Network's desire to be carried on a basic cable tier was in the best interest of the consumer because not all cable subscribers are fans of the NFL and want the programming. The counterargument concerned whether cable operators were deliberately targeting the NFL Network for exclusion.

This study investigates not only how the media framed the NFL Network carriage debate but also how the NFL and cable operators attempted to frame the issue via their public relations efforts. Second-level agenda-setting and agenda-building theories offer a framework for considering the interplay of the framing attributes used to construct media coverage of the NFL Network carriage issue. This study provides insights into how the two sides in this dispute competitively used information subsidies to implement their respective framing strategies. Fur-

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thermore, the investigation uses agenda-building, agenda-setting, and framing theories in an underinvestigated context—sport communication.

Literature Review

Televised sports programming is by far the most highly demanded programming in the United States. Audiences for the National Football League's (NFL) Super Bowl are often the largest television audience for any one program in a given year. In fact, nine of the all-time top 10 television programs in the United States based on audience size are Super Bowls (Gratton & Solberg, 2007). Given the audience demand for NFL programming, it is not surprising the league commands higher fees for its television rights than any other sports entity in the United States. During its last media-rights sale in 2006, the NFL received contracts from CBS, Fox, NBC, ESPN, and DirecTV totaling more than \$3.75 billion per season (Fortunato, 2008). Excluded from these contracts is a package of eight late-season games on Thursdays and Saturdays that the NFL awarded to its own private network, the NFL Network. In awarding the games to the NFL Network, the NFL declined an offer from Comcast Corporation in excess of \$300 million. Games would have been shown on Comcast's OLN Network, since renamed Versus. In effect, the NFL was choosing to raise the profile of its own network rather than assist Comcast with the growth of its network (Bernstein, 2006).

Fortunato's (2008) study of the NFL programming schedule concluded that the NFL's decision to place games on its own network provided the league a "communication vehicle to promote its own agenda as well as an asset that fans desire, increasing the long-term profitability of the network" (p. 40). Fortunato observed that changes made by the NFL were designed to increase revenue and exposure for the league, a finding in line with Gaustad (2000), who noted that the cost structure of televised sports creates a "strong incentive for expanding television audiences through attracting new groups of viewers and sales to new markets" (p. 111). This conclusion regarding audience expansion explains some, if not all, of the motivation for the NFL to bypass a guarantee of more than \$300 million per year from Comcast Corporation in favor of placing games on the NFL Network.

Chipty's (2001) study of the effects of vertical integration between programming and distribution in the cable television industry illustrated this concept when she concluded that "vertical integration between cable operators and premium program services results in the exclusion of rival services" (p. 450). Similarly, the NFL has argued that cable operators have excluded the NFL Network in favor of networks that are integrated with the cable operators.

The Situation: The NFL Network Versus Cable Operators

When the NFL announced plans to form its own cable network in 2003, sport-industry executives were skeptical of its long-term viability. Barry Frank, vice chair of IMG Media, said, "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” (Kaplan, 2003, ¶ 2). Four years later, Denver Broncos President and then-chairman of the NFL’s Broadcasting Committee Pat Bowlen justified the league’s decision to forego the \$300 million per year from Versus and place games on the NFL Network, stating,

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. (Consoli, 2007, ¶ 4)

When the NFL Network aired its first live regular-season game during November 2006, only a little over one third of U.S. television households subscribed to the network. This sparked public debate as to whether the NFL Network’s wish to be carried on a basic cable tier was in the best interest of subscribers. The NFL argued that cable operators were deliberately attempting to exclude the NFL Network, ostensibly because the NFL denied Comcast’s desire to be awarded a package of games for one of its own networks.

The U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary held two hearings in less than a month to examine the state of sports programming on cable television. These hearings, held during the period when the NFL Network was broadcasting its first season of live programming, exposed the initial framing of the issue by the parties engaged in the dispute. The NFL Network claimed that cable customers were being prevented from having access to programming that they wanted by cable operators who refused to carry the network. Meanwhile, cable operators claimed that the increased subscriber fee that the NFL Network was seeking was not in the interest of consumers because placing the NFL Network on a basic tier would force all subscribers to pay for the NFL Network regardless of whether the subscribers were fans of the NFL (Ourand, 2006a).

Two advocacy Web sites emerged. The American Cable Association founded www.sportschoicenow.org to explain the “facts versus myths” of the debate and to facilitate communication with members of Congress. The NFL launched its own site, www.iwantnflnetwork.com, to provide the “truth about cable monopolies” and provide consumers with information regarding alternatives to cable systems such as satellite providers (Ourand, 2006b).

Public interest in the debate intensified in November 2007 when a game between the Green Bay Packers and the Dallas Cowboys, both 10–1 at the time, would not be seen by roughly two thirds of U.S. television households. Scrutiny reached a climax during the final week of the NFL’s 2007 season when the New York Giants played the New England Patriots in a game in which the Patriots were seeking to become only the second team in league history to complete the regular season without a loss. Because of the heightened public interest in the game, the NFL eventually allowed over-the-air networks NBC and CBS, two of its regular broadcast partners, to simulcast the game nationwide. The result was that 34.5 million viewers tuned in to watch the game, the largest television audience for a regular-season NFL game since a Thanksgiving Day game in 1995 (“34.5 Million Watch,” 2007).

Second-Level Agenda Setting and Agenda Building

To understand how the carriage issue was portrayed in the media and how the opposing parties in this dispute attempted to shape media coverage of the debate, this study looked to second-level agenda-setting and agenda-building theories. Agenda setting is the 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., Kiouisis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2004, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The agenda-setting perspective has been used previously to examine sports-related issues (e.g., Denham, 2004; Fortunato, 2000, 2001, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, in press). This study used the second-level agenda-building and agenda-setting processes as a framework for investigating not only how the media framed the NFL Network carriage debate but also how the NFL and cable operators attempted to competitively frame the issue via their respective public relations efforts.

Framing, sometimes referred to as second-level agenda setting (McCombs, 2005),¹ proposes that not only does increased media coverage determine issue saliency but also the media—through the process of selecting particular themes, phrases, images, and sources to present a particular story—determine the salience of specific attributes attached to an issue and thus determine 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 they 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). The framing of issues in the media can not only suggest how audiences should view the issue itself but also assign blame, suggest how the issue became a problem, and propose what course of action is necessary to solve that problem (Entman, 1993). Therefore, the following research question was proposed to investigate the NFL Network carriage dispute:

Research Question 1: Which issue attributes were used by the media to frame the NFL Network carriage dispute?

Researchers have asked, if the media frames an issue or sets the agenda, then what forces in turn are working to set the media agenda in the first place (Gandy, 1982). One possibility could be the media *per se*; that is to say, the agendas of individual mass-media outlets could influence each other, a phenomenon referred to as intermedia agenda setting (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). Previous studies have noted an intermedia agenda-setting effect between newspapers and television news programs (e.g., Reese, & Danielian, 1989); between elite newspapers, local newspapers, and television news programs (e.g., Golan, 2006; Protess & McCombs, 1991); and between national magazines and newspapers (e.g., Denham, 2004).

The mass media may also engage in framing issues at the second level of agenda setting for other media. Golan, Kiouisis, and McDaniel (2007) observed a

second-level intermedia agenda-setting effect of political advertisements on media coverage. This may take place through a process where journalists themselves become active audience members who internalize the framing of issues present in the media they consume; these frames are then reproduced in the stories that those journalists create, resulting in a “news wave” of preferred issue frames (Fishman, 1980; Patterson, 1994; Scheufele, 1999). Therefore, the following research question was proposed:

Research Question 2: Was the NFL Network carriage dispute framed differently in national, regional, and trade media?

Another possible influence on media-issue salience and framing could be the result of information sources, policy and political actors, interest groups, and other elites attempting to influence the media to build an issue agenda or frame an issue in a way they desire. These activities are sometimes referred to as agenda control (Iyengar & Simon, 2000) or agenda building (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Curtin, 1999; Lang & Lang, 1981; Scheufele, 2000; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Weaver & Elliot, 1985), a phenomenon that can take place at both the first level of issue salience and at the second level of issue attribute salience (e.g., Kioussis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006).

In the context of media relations activities intended to influence the salience and framing of issues on the media agenda, agenda building refers to public relations practitioners’ attempts to influence the media agenda via the use of information subsidies (Curtin, 1999; Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986). McManus (1994) proposed that the media are increasingly reliant on information from external sources because of the increasing financial pressures on media outlets. As a result, it has been suggested that anywhere from 25% to 80% of media content is influenced by public relations sources (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997). This use of press releases, advocacy Web sites, spokespersons, and other information subsidies represents the efforts of organizations to determine media coverage of an issue (Gandy; Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer, & Harrison, 1995; Turk, 1985). These public relations activities play a critical role in determining the media issue agenda (Berger, 2001; Curtin) and the framing of those issues, as well (Kioussis et al., 2006; Ohl et al.; Tedesco, 2001).

This effort to frame issues in a manner desirable to an organization is particularly relevant to public relations efforts, especially in cases in which there are multiple actors attempting to simultaneously frame the same issue. Hallahan’s (1999) definition of an *issue* positions issues as the focal point of an inherently competitive framing process wherein public relations professionals act as “frame strategists” (p. 224) whose objective is to frame issues in a manner favorable to their clients. The tactics employed by the public relations practitioner serve to implement strategic framing efforts; for example, Ohl et al. (1995) examined how information subsidies were used by public relations practitioners to frame an issue within the competitive environment of a corporate takeover. Similarly, Kioussis et al. (2006) investigated how information subsidies originating from candidates contending for the same political office were used to frame the campaign issue agenda. Therefore, the following research questions are offered:

Research Question 3: Who had more success in framing the carriage issue in the media—pro-NFL or procable forces?

Research Question 4: Which sources were used by the media in their coverage of the NFL Network carriage dispute?

In addition, real-world events can influence the media issue agenda (Corbett & Mori, 1999; Gonzenbach, 1996; Johnson et al., 1996). For the NFL Network carriage issue, the ongoing dispute between the NFL Network and the cable operators threatened to keep fans from seeing coverage of key games as the season progressed. These real-world events may have changed the nature of the media framing of the carriage dispute as the public was faced with the prospect of missing marquee matchups, causing particular frame attributes to be favored by the media at various points in time. Thus, the final research question:

Research Question 5: Did the framing of the carriage issue evolve over time as real-world events unfolded?

Method

Consistent with existing second-level agenda-building and agenda-setting research (e.g., Kiousis et al., 2006), a content analysis was conducted that investigated the competitive framing of the NFL Network carriage issue across multiple agendas. The analysis included national, regional, and trade media, as well as corporate press releases, appearing between January 1, 2006, and December 31, 2007. This time period was selected to include key events such as the early development of the NFL Network, the hearings about the NFL Network carriage issue in late 2006, and the two games during the 2007 season that sparked intense scrutiny of the carriage issue—the November 29 game between the Green Bay Packers and the Dallas Cowboys and the December 29 game between the New England Patriots and the New York Giants.

To construct the national and regional media agenda, a keyword search of the LexisNexis database was used to identify articles from *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Dallas Morning News*, *USA Today*, and *Newsday* that mentioned the carriage issue. *The New York Times* was included because of the extent to which it approximates coverage of an issue by the national media overall (Winter & Eyal, 1981). *Mediaweek* and the *Sports Business Journal* were selected to represent coverage of the carriage issue in the trade media. NFL and cable operator press releases appearing in the LexisNexis company press release database were included in the analysis to represent the competing public relations agendas. In all cases, *NFL Network* was used as the search term. Articles that only mentioned the NFL Network as part of a program listing or that did not mention the NFL Network carriage issue in the first three paragraphs were discarded. The unit of analysis was the individual article or press release.

Each article and press release was coded for the presence or absence of mentions of the NFL, cable operators, sources supporting pro-NFL or procable viewpoints, source type, and valence (negative, neutral, or positive) of the article's tone

regarding the NFL Network, the NFL, cable operators, and the carriage issue itself. If a pro-NFL or procable source was present, the type of source was also identified. The coders also evaluated each article to identify which side of the debate the predominant framing of the issue in the article favored—the NFL Network’s framing of the carriage issue, the framing of the issue advocated by the cable operators, or that the overall framing of the issue in the article was balanced and did not favor either side’s interpretation of the carriage issue.

Based on a review of both the media coverage of the issue and the statements and public relations materials available via the NFL Network’s and cable supporters’ respective advocacy Web sites (www.iwantnflnetwork.com and www.sports-choicenow.org), two sets of potential frame attributes were constructed, one representing pro-NFL framing of the carriage issue and the other representing pro-cable operator framing of the carriage issue. Each media story and press release was coded for the presence or absence of each individual frame attribute. The pro-NFL framing attributes included “blame cable” (fans are not getting to see games because of cable operators), “broad appeal” (the NFL Network should be on basic cable because of its broad appeal), “expanded coverage” (the NFL Network will provide fans with expanded coverage of professional football), “competition” (cable operators are opposed to the NFL Network because they are worried about competition with their own sports channels), and “premium tier” (cable operators want subscribers to pay for a premium sports tier). The pro-cable operator frame attributes included “blame NFL” (fans are not getting to see games because of the NFL Network), “narrow appeal” (the NFL Network should be on a premium sports tier because of its narrow appeal), “make money” (the NFL Network is only concerned with trying to make money), and “pay content” (the NFL Network wants all subscribers to pay for content that only a few people want).

Two graduate students with previous content-analysis experience were trained by the primary researcher. They coded a 10% subsample of content to check intercoder reliability and then refined the coding scheme in consultation with the primary researcher. A second intercoder-reliability check was conducted using another 10% subsample of the media and public relations content. Scott’s pi (1955) was used to assess intercoder reliability given the limited number of categories used to code each variable. Table 1 presents the results of the intercoder-reliability check for each individual substantive and affective attribute. The coders demonstrated greater than 87% agreement for all the variables with two exceptions (NFL valence and the “broad appeal” frame attribute); however, all were well above the recommended level of 75% agreement for pi (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000).

Results

In all, 149 relevant media articles appearing in the national, regional, and trade media outlets during 2007 and 2008 were included in the analysis. This included 42 *New York Times* articles, 17 articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, 11 articles in the *Dallas Morning News*, 33 in *USA Today*, 7 in *Newsday*, 21 in *Sports Business Journal*, and 18 in *Mediaweek*. Of the 149 articles included in the analysis, 110 represented the national and regional media agenda (73.8%) and 39 articles reflected the trade media agenda (26.2%). To represent the public relations agenda,

Table 1 Intercoder Reliability for Substantive and Affective Issue Attributes

Variable	Scott's pi
Issue valence	87.9
NFL presence	100
NFL valence	80.7
Cable-operator presence	100
Cable-operator valence	87.5
Predominant framing of carriage issue	88.6
Pro-NFL source presence	100
Pro-NFL source type	100
Procable source presence	100
Procable source type	100
Blame cable	96.6
Broad appeal	82.9
Expanded coverage	95.8
Competition	100
Premium tier	100
Blame NFL	92.1
Narrow appeal	100
Make money	100
Pay content	100

18 relevant press releases were coded, including 13 pro-NFL press releases and 5 procable operator releases. Table 2 presents the frequency of occurrence of individual frame attributes in the media coverage of the carriage dispute, as well as the occurrence of the framing attributes in the pro-NFL and pro-cable-company press releases.

Media Framing

The first research question asked how the media framed the NFL Network carriage dispute. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test² was conducted comparing the frequency of occurrence of media stories that were negative, neutral, and positive in tone regarding the evaluation of the carriage issue itself. If the coverage was balanced, the expected frequencies of stories falling into each category should be equal. The resulting significant chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 50.75$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) suggests that the media framing of the carriage issue was not balanced. Most of the media coverage portrayed the carriage issue itself in a negative light (59.7% of all media articles) compared with just 26.8% that framed it neutrally and 13.4% that framed it positively.

The media did not frame the two major players involved in the carriage issue in the same manner. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test considering the framing of

Table 2 Frequency of Occurrence of Issue Attributes in Media Coverage and Press Releases

Issue attribute	Media content	Pro-NFL press release	Procable press release
Blame cable (pro-NFL frame)	55	4	0
Premium tier (pro-NFL frame)	54	0	0
Broad appeal (pro-NFL frame)	48	5	0
Blame NFL (procable frame)	47	0	2
Make money (procable frame)	33	0	2
Expanded coverage (pro-NFL frame)	17	7	0
Pay content (procable frame)	14	0	2
Narrow appeal (procable frame)	12	0	2
Competition (pro-NFL frame)	0	1	0

Note. Attributes are ranked in order of their occurrence in media coverage.

the NFL in the coverage was not significant; a second chi-square goodness-of-fit test considering the framing of cable operators in the coverage was significant ($\chi^2 = 51.67$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). This suggests that the overall media framing of the NFL was balanced, with the NFL framed negatively in 40.3%, neutrally in 36.2%, and positively in 23.5% of all media stories. The coverage of cable operators, on the other hand, was unbalanced, skewing toward more negative coverage; of the 133 stories mentioning cable operators, 39.8% were negative, 54.9% were neutral, and 5.3% were positive in their framing of the cable operators.

When coding for predominant frame, 65 of the stories framed the issue using the predominant frame of the NFL (43.6%), 29 used the cable companies' frame (19.5%), and the remaining 55 articles were balanced (36.9%). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was significant ($\chi^2 = 13.91$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the predominant framing of the issue was not represented evenly across media coverage.

Considering the individual carriage issue frame attributes used in the media, the primary framing attributes used included "blame cable," "premium tier," "broad appeal," "blame NFL," "make money," and "expanded coverage." That is to say, the top three issue attributes were pro-NFL frames; in fact, four of the top six issue attributes were pro-NFL frames, with the "competition" frame attribute being the only pro-NFL issue attribute that did not appear in the media coverage of the carriage issue. The pro-cable-company frames of "blame NFL" and "make money" were two of the top five issue attributes, with the "pay content" and "narrow appeal" framing attributes receiving limited use.

Framing Across Media Outlets

The second research question asked whether the NFL carriage dispute was framed differently in national, regional, and trade media outlets. Table 3 presents the fre-

quency distribution of the carriage issue framing attributes across the seven media outlets included in the analysis.

A one-tailed Kendall's tau rank-order correlation was calculated to compare the ranking of the frame attributes across the various media outlets. Kendall's tau was used not only because of the high occurrence of tied ranks but also because it could provide a better estimate of the actual correlation of ranked attributes in the population than Spearman's rho (Field, 2005). The resulting correlations are presented in Table 4.

There was a significant positive correlation in framing of the carriage issue between *The New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News*, *USA Today*, *Newsday*, and the *Sports Business Journal*. The *Los Angeles Times* exhibited a significant, positive correlation with the *Dallas Morning News*, *USA Today*, *Newsday*, and *Mediaweek*. The *Dallas Morning News* was significantly correlated with coverage across all outlets. *USA Today* demonstrated a significant, positive correlation with all outlets except *Mediaweek* and the *Sports Business Journal*. *Newsday* demonstrated a significant, positive correlation with all outlets except the *Sports Business Journal*. *Sports Business Journal* was significantly correlated with *The New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News*, and *Mediaweek* was significantly correlated with the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and *Newsday*.

Competitive Framing

The third research question asked whether the pro-NFL or procable forces were more successful in framing the debate over the carriage issue in the media. A one-tailed Kendall's tau rank-order correlation was calculated to compare the ranking of the frame attributes in the media coverage, pro-NFL press releases, and procable releases. There was not a significant correlation between the media and the pro-NFL releases or between the media and the procable releases. However, there was a significant negative correlation between ranking of frame attributes in the

Table 3 Frequency of Issue Attributes Across Media Outlets

Issue attribute	NYT	LAT	DMN	USAT	ND	SBJ	Mwk
Blame cable (pro-NFL frame)	21	4	4	15	3	4	4
Premium tier (pro-NFL frame)	22	2	4	10	2	12	2
Broad appeal (pro-NFL frame)	8	5	4	11	4	8	8
Blame NFL (procable frame)	20	7	3	14	2	0	1
Make money (procable frame)	15	1	1	11	0	4	1
Expanded coverage (pro-NFL frame)	2	2	3	7	0	1	2
Pay content (procable frame)	6	2	1	2	0	2	1
Narrow appeal (procable frame)	4	2	1	2	0	0	3
Competition (pro-NFL frame)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note. NYT = *The New York Times*; LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; DMN = *Dallas Morning News*; USAT = *USA Today*; ND = *Newsday*; SBJ = *Sports Business Journal*; Mwk = *Mediaweek*. Attributes are ranked in order of their occurrence in overall media coverage.

Table 4 Correlation of Issue Attributes Among Media Outlets

	Los Angeles Times	Dallas Morning News	USA Today	Newsday	Sports Business Journal	Mediaweek
The New York Times	.365	.588*	.629*	.500*	.530*	.236
Los Angeles Times	—	.610*	.532*	.657*	.129	.549*
Dallas Morning News	—	—	.637*	.780**	.558*	.657*
USA Today	—	—	—	.617*	.303	.303
Newsday	—	—	—	—	.424	.566*
Sports Business Journal	—	—	—	—	—	.375

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

procable and pro-NFL press releases ($\tau = -.702, p < .05$), confirming that the two competing organizations attempted to frame the carriage issue in distinctly different ways.

We adapted a procedure suggested in Golan and Wanta (2001) for investigating second-level agenda-setting effects in a presidential primary to investigate the salience of individual frames across media and public relations agendas. In their study, Pearson's chi-squares were used to indicate the presence or absence of an agenda-setting effect. Here, a second-level agenda-building effect would only be suggested if a nonsignificant chi-square was present, indicating that media coverage was similar to the public relations materials. Because these comparisons resulted in contingency tables that included cells in which the expected cell counts were less than 5, we conducted a series of Fisher's exact tests³ for comparing proportions in lieu of chi-square tests of independence (Agresti & Finlay, 1997); the results are presented in Table 5.

There was no significant difference between the frequency distribution of the pro-NFL "blame cable," "broad appeal," and "competition" attributes in the media coverage and the pro-NFL releases; both the media and the pro-NFL releases used the "blame cable" and "broad appeal" attributes (ranked first and third, respectively, among the media framing attributes) extensively. The "competition" frame was not used by the media or in the pro-NFL releases to frame the issue. Although the "expanded coverage" attribute was featured prominently in the pro-NFL releases, it was not a salient attribute of the media's issue framing. Conversely, the "premium tier" attribute was the second most frequently used attribute in the media framing of the issue, but it was not used in the pro-NFL releases.

There was no significant difference between the frequency distribution of the procable framing attributes "blame NFL," "narrow appeal," "make money," and "pay content" in the media coverage and procable releases; both the media and the procable releases employed these attributes (ranked fourth, eighth, fifth, and seventh, respectively, among the media framing attributes) to frame the issue. Each

Table 5 Comparison of Media Content and Organizational Press Release Use of Issue Attributes

issue attribute	Fisher's exact test
Media vs. Pro-NFL Frames	
blame cable	.770
broad appeal	.759
expanded coverage	.001
competition	.080
premium tier	.005
Media vs. Procable Frames	
blame NFL	.654
narrow appeal	.066
make money	.319
pay content	.084

of the procable framing attributes appeared in about half of the procable releases, but they were rarely used in the media's framing of the issue. Although cable operators were successful in getting their frame attributes on the media agenda, those attributes were not used to the same extent as the pro-NFL frame attributes.

Use of Sources

The fourth research question asked which sources were most frequently used to frame the carriage issue in the media. Of the 68 media stories featuring a pro-NFL source (45.6% of all stories), official NFL spokespersons were used 80.9% of time, with the remaining 19.1% consisting of a mix of sports journalists, sports analysts, owners, and coaches. Procable sources were featured in 39 of the media stories (26.2%). In 90% of these cases, an official cable operator spokesperson was used; the remaining 10% consisted of sports journalists, sports analysts, and sports fans.

To identify which side, procable or pro-NFL forces, was more successful in placing supportive sources in media coverage, a series of McNemar tests for correlated proportions was conducted. When considering all media coverage, the test was significant ($\chi^2 = 18.23, p < .001$). Pro-NFL sources were present in a significantly higher proportion of media stories than procable sources. The same was true for national and regional media only ($n = 110$), as indicated by a significant test statistic ($\chi^2 = 12.90, p < .001$); pro-NFL sources were present in a significantly higher proportion of national and regional media stories (49.1%) than procable sources (30%). However, the opposite was true when focusing solely on trade media. A McNemar test was significant ($\chi^2 = 4.08, p < .05$), indicating that procable sources were present in a significantly higher proportion of trade media stories (84.9%) than pro-NFL sources (15.4%).

Framing Over Time

The fifth and final research question asked whether the framing of the NFL carriage issue evolved over time as the public was faced with the prospect of missing marquee matchups. To investigate this question, the content was divided into three time periods. Time 1 (T_1) included all media content from January 1, 2006, through October 28, 2007 ($n = 69$ stories); this period represents a "precrisis" phase and includes coverage of the carriage issue up to the month before the Green Bay at Dallas game. Time 2 (T_2) included all media content from October 29, 2007, through November 29, 2007 ($n = 32$ stories); this period represents the month just before the Green Bay at Dallas game, when the carriage issue gained increased relevance. Time 3 (T_3) included all media content from November 30, 2007, through December 29, 2007 ($n = 44$ stories); this period represents the month between the Green Bay at Dallas game and the climactic New England at New York game. One-month lags between T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 were appropriate because 4–6 weeks has been suggested as an ideal time period for observing agenda-setting effects (Tedesco, 2005; Winter & Eyal, 1981). Table 6 presents the frequency distributions of the individual framing attributes across the three time periods.

Table 6 Frequency Distribution of Issue Attributes in the Media Over Time

Issue attribute	Time 1 (n = 69)	Time 2 (n = 32)	Time 3 (n = 44)
Premium tier (pro-NFL frame)	29	13	12
Broad appeal (pro-NFL frame)	23	8	14
Blame cable (pro-NFL frame)	22	18	15
Blame NFL (procable frame)	18	13	16
Make money (procable frame)	18	10	5
Expanded coverage (pro-NFL frame)	11	2	4
Pay content (procable frame)	5	5	4
Narrow appeal (procable frame)	5	5	1
Competition (pro-NFL frame)	0	0	0

Note. Attributes are listed in order of their occurrence in overall media coverage during Time 1.

A one-tailed Kendall's tau rank-order correlation was calculated to compare the ranking of the frame attributes in the media coverage over time. Significant positive correlations were found between T_1 and T_2 ($\tau = .618, p < .05$), between T_1 and T_3 ($\tau = .609, p < .05$), and between T_2 and T_3 ($\tau = .725, p < .001$). It does not appear that the overall media framing of the NFL carriage issue changed dramatically over time. However, it should be noted that the most frequently occurring frame attributes did change somewhat. The three most frequently occurring framing attributes during T_1 were pro-NFL frames: "premium tier," "broad appeal," and "blame cable." During T_2 , although the pro-NFL "blame cable" frame attribute was the most frequently occurring, the procable "blame NFL" frame attribute was tied with the pro-NFL "premium tier" framing attribute. By T_3 , "blame NFL" was the most frequently occurring framing attribute, with the pro-NFL framing attributes of "blame cable" and "broad appeal" close behind. So although there was no significant difference in the overall framing of the carriage dispute, there was some "reshuffling" of the predominant frames over time.

Discussion

In general, the overall media framing of the NFL Network carriage dispute was negative in tone. The issue itself was framed in a negative light, as were cable operators. Although the overall coverage of the NFL itself was balanced, it was still framed negatively in more stories than positively (40.3% negative vs. 23.5% positive). Both the NFL and the cable operators were framed negatively in media stories, but the percentage of positive media stories was much higher for the NFL than for the cable operators. In addition, the predominant framing of the issue in the media tended to favor the NFL, with pro-NFL frames appearing as the top three issue attributes. Essentially, the preferred media framing of the issue allocated blame for the problem (cable operators), attributed a motive for the cable operators' actions (a desire for subscribers to pay for a premium sports tier), and presented the NFL's counterargument (that the NFL Network should be on a basic

cable tier because of its broad appeal). This seems to indicate that the NFL was more effective than cable operators in having its messages resonate with the media. This would suggest that other regional sports networks involved in carriage battles, as well as organizations considering starting a regional sports network, might find the media receptive to messages that place cable operators in a negative light.

In the battle of competitive framing between the NFL and the cable operators, it appears that the NFL was somewhat more successful in framing the debate, at least initially, than were the cable operators. This is congruent with the generally balanced coverage of the NFL compared with the somewhat negative coverage of the cable operators. Overall, the nonsignificant Kendall's tau between the ranking of the issue attributes in the media and those used in the NFL and cable operator releases seems to indicate that second-level agenda building did not take place; however, when looking at the distribution of the individual issue attributes across agendas, it does appear that the pro-NFL attributes of "blame cable" and "broad appeal," as well as the procable attributes of "blame NFL" and "make money," were used to frame the issue in the media, mirroring their use in each side's press releases.

Again, these attributes seem to focus on assigning blame for the problem—why fans were not getting to see the games—and providing a sinister motive for the "responsible" party's actions. That is to say, assigning blame seemed to be the most effective framing strategy used by each side; the NFL simply seemed to be more successful than cable operators. This would be consistent with previous research's suggestion that media frames act as the plotline for a narrative, part of whose function is to identify problems and their underlying causes (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). Although the media did not wholeheartedly commit to adapting one side or the other's overall framing of the issue, they did seem to selectively use specific frame attributes from each side to ultimately assign blame to both the NFL and the cable operators, thus playing into the outrage exhibited by the fans that make up the sport-media audience.

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. This was particularly true for national and regional coverage, in which the NFL was more successful than cable at placing sources. The lack of fan support in the pro-NFL stories suggests that the NFL missed an opportunity to involve grassroots advocates; this might have served the NFL 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. Organizations involved in similar disputes in the future should consider cultivating a network of fans to help deliver their messages. However, looking only at trade media, cable operators were far more successful at placing sources than the NFL. It may be that trade media reporters who spend more time covering the sports-media industry have cultivated closer relationships with cable industry sources and therefore had greater access to those sources when constructing stories that framed the carriage debate.

The findings regarding intermedia agenda setting would seem to reinforce this interpretation, with the national and regional media outlets appearing to be

correlated with each other but not with the trade outlets. Given the perceived audience of each type of publication, it is likely each outlet was framing the carriage debate in a manner that would resonate with its readership. For example, *USA Today* was strongly correlated with all the regional and national outlets but not the trade outlets. This may be because *USA Today* is more likely to be read by sports fans, an audience that may be more concerned about who is to blame for the “crisis.” Meanwhile, *Mediaweek* and *Sports Business Journal* are more likely to be read by sports executives who have an interest in the particulars of the debate and solutions for its resolution.

Another interesting aspect of the carriage dispute was how framing of the issue evolved over time in response to real-world events. When initially looking at the totality of salience of the issue attributes, overall framing of the issue did not seem to change dramatically over time. However, on closer inspection, the top issue attributes used to frame the issue were “reshuffled” somewhat in the later stages of the dispute, seemingly in response to triggering events. As the two marquee games approached, media framing of the NFL Network carriage issue shifted slightly. Initially, the most frequently used attribute was “premium tier.” Before the Green Bay–Dallas game, the most frequently used attribute shifted to “blame cable.” As the Giants–Patriots game approached, “blame NFL” and “blame cable” were virtually tied as the most frequently occurring attribute. At the same time, the “make money” and “premium tier” framing attributes—which provided the pro-NFL and procable arguments against the other side—declined in prominence. This suggests that as the perceived importance of the games increased, the arguments concerning which side was “right” in the carriage debate became less important. Instead, the media sought to provide its audience with a villain. The end result was that instead of blaming one side or the other and attributing motives to their intractability, *both* parties were blamed, with less and less attention devoted to explaining why one side or the other was justified in their actions. The media, along with the public, simply wanted to see the issue resolved.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitations of this study are associated with the nature of the content used in the investigation. There was limited content available that could be used to determine the public relations agendas of the NFL and cable operators. The current study used only press releases; future investigation of this issue could 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 site. In addition, the study only investigated three time periods when considering the evolution of the various public relations and media agendas; future research could include more time periods so that more elaborate time-series analysis, such as autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA), could be used.

An additional limitation to this study was that it only considered framing of a single issue, the carriage dispute. Future studies could consider first-level agenda-building and agenda-setting effects by including additional issues in the analysis

that make up the larger tapestry of football media coverage. This would be beneficial for sport communication research because studies involving agenda-building and agenda-setting efforts by professional sports organizations are not common. In particular, 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 blogs 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.

Fortunato's (2001, 2008) studies have focused on the agenda-setting strategies of leagues in constructing programming schedules with their broadcast partners; the current study examined the relative success or failure of the NFL and cable operators to have their message in a business dispute represented in the media. In this sense, the current study was more concerned with how a professional league sets an agenda for its programming in the absence of any broadcast partners. As other organizations seek distribution for their start-up regional sports networks, such as the Mid-Atlantic Sports Network, it would be useful to compare message development across these different networks, as well.

Conclusion

This study provides an analysis of the NFL Network carriage dispute by focusing on how the media framed their coverage of the dispute in national, regional, and trade outlets, as well as how the two opposing sides—the NFL and cable operators—simultaneously attempted to frame the issue through the use of information subsidies to the media. To our knowledge, no previous studies have attempted to investigate competitive framing strategies in a sport communication context.

The study presents sport practitioners with possible strategies for affecting the framing of issues related to carriage of regional sports networks by cable operators. Several regional sports networks (e.g., Mid-Atlantic Sports Network, Big Ten Network) have fought with cable companies for distribution of their programming. The lessons of which attributes were most effective in framing the NFL Network carriage issue might help these practitioners increase their networks' viewership while avoiding prolonged, and potentially costly, public debates over which side is correct in the dispute.

In addition, the findings contribute to sport communication research by helping to locate the media's role in the framing of sport business disputes. The study also contributes to the broad body of knowledge regarding second-level agenda building and agenda setting; it does so by, first, situating application of these theories in a sport communication context and, second, extending the theoretical investigation of second-level agenda building and second-level intermedia agenda setting.

Notes

1. It should be noted that there is a vigorous ongoing discussion regarding the intersection of framing and second-level agenda-setting theories; however, resolving this debate is beyond the scope of this study. Here, we have used the concept of "framing" as analogous to second-level

agenda setting of thematic issue attributes (e.g., McCombs, 1997, 2005). See Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) and McCombs (2005) for concise summaries of the alternate perspectives, as well as Reese (2007) for an analysis of the possibility of reconciling these various approaches.

2. Because of the number of chi-square tests used, Bonferroni's correction was applied ($\alpha = .05/4 = .0125$) to control for the increased chance of making a Type I error. It should be noted that by applying a more conservative significance level, we increased the probability of making a Type II error (Field, 2005).

3. Because the sampling distribution of small samples may be "insufficiently close to normality" (Agresti & Finlay, 1997, p. 224), Fisher's exact test should be used. The direct test produces a p value only; no test statistic is calculated. Some statistical software packages such as SPSS will calculate Fisher's exact test when a cell in a 2×2 contingency table has an expected frequency count of less than 5. See Agresti (1996) for the procedure for calculating the p value for Fisher's exact test by hand.

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