

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

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The NFL Network aired its first live regular season game on Nov. 23, 2006, despite limited nationwide distribution. Approximately 40 million of the nearly 111 million U.S. television households had access to the NFL Network, inciting 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 as not all cable subscribers are fans of the NFL and desire the programming. The counterargument concerned whether cable operators were deliberately targeting the NFL Network for exclusion. Much debate ensued regarding the carriage issue and several Congressional hearings were held in an attempt to further elucidate the issues (Consoli, 2007). These hearings, held during the period when the NFL Network was broadcasting its first season of live programming, framed the public debate. The NFL Network contended consumers were being denied access to desired programming by cable operators who refused to carry the network. Cable operators argued the increased subscriber fee the NFL Network was seeking was not in the interest of consumers because the NFL wanted it placed on a basic tier where all subscribers had to pay for it, and not all subscribers were fans of the NFL (Ourand & Kaplan, 2007). Public debate intensified in late 2007 as fans were faced with the prospect of not being able to watch a game between two 10-1 teams, Green Bay and Dallas, and later the game between New York and New England in which the Patriots became only the second team in league history to complete the regular season without a loss.

This study uses agenda setting theory as a framework for investigating not only how the media framed the NFL Network carriage issue, but also how the NFL and cable operators attempted to competitively frame the issue via their respective public relations efforts. Agenda setting is the process through which increased media focus on an issue raises its salience in the minds of media consumers. Framing, or second-level agenda setting, proposes that not only does increased media coverage determine issues saliency, but that the media - through the process of selecting particular themes, words, and imagery to present a story - also determine the salience of specific issue attributes that determine how the issue is perceived (Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006). The use of press releases, Web sites, spokesperson, and other information subsidies represents the efforts of organizations such as the NFL and cable companies to determine how an issue is framed in the mass media. These activities are sometimes referred to as agenda building, a process that can take place at both the first-level of issue salience and at the second-level of issue attribute salience. To examine the role of second-level agenda setting and agenda building in this very public debate, four research questions addressed the following: (a) how did the media frame the NFL Network carriage dispute? (b) which side, the NFL or the cable operators, were more successful in framing the debate? (c) did the framing of the issue evolve over time as fans were faced with the prospect of missing important games? and (d) was the carriage dispute framed differently by different media outlets?

The analysis included national, regional and trade media as well as corporate press releases appearing between Jan. 1, 2006 and Dec. 31, 2007. The time period was selected to include key events such as the inception and early development of the NFL Network, the hearings about the NFL Network carriage issue in late 2006, and two games during the 2007 season which sparked intense scrutiny of the carriage issue. Each article and press release was coded for the presence or absence of mentions of the NFL, cable operators/associations, sources supporting pro-NFL or pro-cable viewpoints, source type, and valence of the article's tone regarding the NFL Network, the NFL, cable operators, and the carriage issue itself. The coders also evaluated each article to identify who the predominant framing of the issue within the article favored and who the predominant source was for the attributes. Results indicated both sides, the NFL and the cable operators, were framed equally negative (40.3% for the NFL and 39.8% for the cable operators) in media stories. However, the percentage of positive media stories was much higher for the NFL, 23.5%, than for the cable operators, 5.3%, suggesting the NFL was more effective in having its messages resonate than the cable operators. As fans were faced with the prospect of not watching key match-ups, the media framing of the debate shifted from a 'blame Cable' attribute to a 'blame NFL' attribute in the last month of the study period. Practical implications of the study will be presented along with suggestions for future research using agenda setting theory in sport management research.