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# **‘Nigeria as a country of interest in terrorism’: newspaper framing of Farouk Abdulmutallab, the underwear bomber**

## **Abstract**

Media coverage of the ‘war on terror’ has generated different frameworks of understanding that have been shaped by meanings and images that emerged after September 11, 2001. These frameworks of meanings are routinely used to structure and contextualise news stories and events associated with terrorism. This article investigates news frames that four Nigerian newspapers applied to the coverage of an attempted suicide attack on a United States-bound aircraft on Christmas Day, 2009. It analyses the newspapers’ interpretation of the aborted act of terrorism by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year old Nigerian man, which resulted in the United States categorising Nigeria as a ‘country of interest in the context of terrorism.’ The article outlines recurrent themes and issues that the newspapers primed for their audiences by interrogating a selection of editorial contents of the publications. It seeks to highlight how discursive fields in the coverage emphasised specific understanding of the event. The article argues that the constructed accounts of the foiled attack were framed and structured to create a distance between Abdulmutallab and his country and that the news frames the newspapers used narrowed public understanding of the significance of Abdulmutallab’s radicalisation and its possible implications for Nigeria.

## **Keywords**

Terrorism, framing, radicalisation, Islamic extremism, ‘war on terror.’ Nigerian newspapers

## **Introduction**

Since the events of September 11, 2001, terrorism has become an increasingly critical subject of public discourse as well as an important area of research. The debris from the collapse of the Twin Towers is still falling around the world at many levels. As a result of the attack, every action perceived to threaten the security of the United States now provokes immediate political action. To some extent, it could be argued that the events of September 11, and what they signified, have become critical issues in the foreign policy of the United States. The attack on what Simon Cottle describes as America’s ‘symbols of

hegemony – economic, political and military’ (2006:152) has legitimised subtle and overt acts of aggression and intimidation by the United States towards its real and imagined enemies. This perception was reinforced by the country’s reaction to a botched act of terrorism by a young Nigerian man on Christmas Day 2009. Within days of the incident, the United States categorised Nigeria as a ‘country of interest in the context of terrorism’, (*Washington Post*, January 4. 2010) and a member of a group of countries made up of Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Pakistan, which the United States associates with terrorists. As this article argues, one man’s action provided a justification for the imposition of wide-ranging sanctions against Nigeria and the basis for associating the country with terrorism and states perceived to be sponsors of terrorist acts.

This paper examines Nigerian newspaper coverage of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s attempt to bring down a Detroit-bound aircraft with improvised explosives that were strapped to his underwear. It interrogates a selection of news stories and identifies recurrent themes and issues in the coverage of Abdulmutallab’s action by four Nigerian national newspapers. The paper deconstructs the news frames that underpinned the coverage of the incident to explain how they shaped in and conversely ruled out certain interpretations of Abdulmutallab’s action. It argues that the frames used presented a nuanced view of the incident and the issue of Islamic extremism and radicalisation in Nigeria by curtailing in-depth public debate. It also makes the point that the coverage imposed a certain order on the understanding of the making of a would-be suicide bomber. Overall, the papers demonstrated a binary characterisation of Nigerians versus others with Abdulmutallab presented as ‘the other’.

Starting with a brief summary of key issues in news framing, the article provides a detailed analysis of the coverage of the aborted act of terrorism. It identifies the dominant frames that were used to construct and structure news reports. The article’s conclusion echoes the understanding that the issues and events the news media present as important are the ones members of the public perceive to be salient. It asserts that the news frames used in the coverage narrowed public understanding of Abdulmutallab’s action and the subsequent response of the United States.

## News framing: A conceptual framework

The media are important sources of information and contribute significantly to the formation of public opinion and attitude (McCombs, 2005, McNair, 2009). They play a critical social role by providing information about issues, events and conditions in society; explaining, interpreting and simplifying complex information, prioritising issues, upholding dominant culture and social values and campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics and economic development. (McQuail, 2010: 98-99). Significantly, these roles are played out in the ways news organisations package and disseminate information. As Stuart Allan (2010:71) argues, the construction of news as an 'impartial form of social knowledge' is informed by news practices that journalists take for granted but which are underpinned by conventions that influence and shape the outcomes of news production. Journalists' discretionary power to assign salience on issues and events enables them to influence public opinion by drawing attention to, or conversely withdrawing it from, information that is not in the public domain. McCombs and Shaw's seminal study provided the original starting point for a research agenda that seeks to explain a causal link between level of coverage of events and issues and public understanding and awareness of the subjects covered. Thus, if news media convey salience on an issue, it would be perceived by the public to be important. Invariably, as Bernard Cohen (1963) pointed out in his much-cited observation, the news media are very effective in directing people's thinking to particular subjects and issues.

A key device for conveying salience is news framing. Although a conclusive operational definition of the concept still eludes scholars, there is a shared understanding of how it is applied to news narratives. Entman, a proponent of news framing, conceptualises it as a process of selecting and excluding certain issues that enables the media to influence knowledge formation and public cognition of events. Entman writes: 'to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the 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' (1993:55). Framing provides linkages and enables readers to make connections among issues. News frames 'facilitate the ordering of the world in conjunction with hierarchical rules of inclusion and exclusion (Allan, 2010:75). Or as Gitlin argues: 'Frames enable journalists to process large

amount of information quickly and routinely: to recognise it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences' (Gitlin, 1980:7). Framing also 'provides the evidence that mass media accounts do more than just prime certain issues or values' accessibility; news frames provide "psychological weight" or belief importance to specific arguments' by tapping into 'information already stored in the long-term memory that individuals have already judged as significant. Because frames are the structuring devices of cultural narratives, they evoke what is already within an individual' (Johnson-Cartee (2005: 27).

Frames provide the scales for weighing up the importance of conflicting information. They can enlarge or miniaturise events and issues (Entman, 1991). Invariably, frames limit and define available information. Consequently, the frames journalists use influence and shape social and political reality and provide the building blocks with which we construct our understanding of the world. Gitlin assigns a pivotal role to media frame by arguing that 'What makes the world of direct experience look natural is a media frame' (Gitlin, 2003: 6). He moves the argument further by noting that 'we frame reality in order to negotiate it, manage it, comprehend it, and choose appropriate repertoires of cognition and action' (Gitlin, 2003:6-7). Through the use of news frames, journalists are able to simplify, clarify and summarise complex information by constructing accounts in ways that resonate with their audiences. In that context, it can be argued that news frames are products of the socio-cultural and political environment of news organisations that use them. As Kennamer (1992: 8): has observed:

Journalists don't operate in social or cultural vacuums. They very much reflect their societies and cultures in which they operate. Thus they apply the standards and expectations of that dominant culture to everyday news stories, to provide the 'framing' consistent with the standards and expectations of the dominant culture. In fact, these are the standards journalists and others judge their stories to be 'objective' (cited by Johnson-Cartee, 2005:133)

Following on from the above, it could be argued that frames focus attention on specific aspects and themes of a story to deepen the cultural resonance. Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) in their review of news framing theory and research explains that 'A frame is what unifies information into a package that can influence audiences' (2009: 19). They observed that frames can build associations and 'invite people to think about an

issue in a particular way' (Tewsbury and Scheufele, 2009:19). Stephen Reese (2001) has noted that frames work through texts to structure social reality through interpretative principles. Or as Phalen and Ece (2001:302) summed it up, 'through framing, journalistic choices create a context for the reader. Although the characteristics of the text itself do not totally determine readers' interpretations, they can have a powerful effect.'

From this summary of the significance of framing in news construction, it is clear that journalists use news frames to construct a particular perspective of events and issues by controlling the information accessible to audiences. This is of particular significance when readers do not have firsthand experience of the issues and events in the news, that is when the reporting is about far away and unfamiliar events. Against this backdrop, framing provides an insight into the coverage of the aborted Christmas Day terrorist attack on a Detroit-bound aircraft. The critical textual choices made by the newspapers produced distinct frames that were applied to the story to produce a specific trajectory that was out of synch with the response of the United States government to the incident.

## **Research objective**

This study interrogates the way in which four Nigerian newspapers framed the story of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to bring down an airliner on Christmas Day 2009. Specifically, it analyses the particular ways in which the newspapers framed the event and the issues they primed for the public. The papers chosen were: *The Guardian*, *This Day*, *The Punch* and the *Daily Trust*. All the titles, except the last one are elite newspapers and circulated nationally. *The Guardian*, which was founded in February 1983, is one of the most prestigious newspapers in the country. It claims to be the flagship of Nigerian journalism. *The Punch* first hit the newsstand in 1971 and today is one of the largest circulating dailies in the country. *This Day* was first published in January 1995 and is recognised as one of Nigeria's top quality newspapers. The fourth newspaper, *The Daily Trust*, is the widest circulating English language newspaper in northern Nigeria. It was chosen because it is perceived to be a mouthpiece of the north and pro-Muslim. Given the centrality of ethno-religious cleavages in Nigerian politics and public discourse, the paper was selected to provide a nuanced perspective.

The time frame for the analysis was two weeks after the foiled terrorist attack on the aircraft. The analysis focused on all the stories about the attempted attack in the four

newspapers between December 27, 2009 and January 9, 2010. In all, 183 stories were examined. Although the incident occurred on Christmas Day, it was not in printed copies of the papers until the 27<sup>th</sup> of December because most Nigerian newspapers are not published on Boxing Day. The time frame was informed by the intensity of the coverage during that period. This study set out to answer one key question: how did Nigerian national newspapers present the Abdulmutallab story and what were the dominant frames that shaped their narratives?

## **Framing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab**

The sociologist Robert Park as far back as 1940 said news should be conceptualised as being epistemic – a source of knowledge. The view echoed Walter Lippmann's argument that the 'world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight and out of mind' (as cited by Johnson-Cartee, 2005: p148). The news media are the main sources of information about events and issues beyond direct experience. In a mediated world, gatekeepers of news play a critical role in people's knowledge of international events. Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to bring down an airliner in the United States was a distant story, out of reach of readers of Nigerian newspapers and had to be narrated by the media for audiences in Nigeria.

Although the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 has produced dominant paradigms for the coverage of the 'war on terror', reporting a 'what-a story' event like Abdulmutallab's attempt was an unexplored terrain for Nigerian newspapers. Consequently, the newspapers were challenged by the problem of covering what was at one level an international event and at another a domestic issue. In the immediate aftermath of the event, the newspapers — with no obvious template to frame their coverage — had to select a paradigm that would both inform their primary audiences and also uphold national interest, especially when the United States responded to the attempted terrorist act by including Nigeria on the list of countries associated with terrorism. To determine the frames that were used to construct and structure newspaper accounts of the incident, this article examines issues that the newspapers selected as salient. It takes as its starting point the understanding that to frame the story of Abdulmutallab's action, the newspapers had a selection of possible vantage points, voices, and frames that amplified a particular perspective of the event and created a certain resonance with the public. The dominant perspective that delineated the news frames in the coverage of Abdulmutallab's action was



Nigeria's national interest. This was expressed through two key news frames: (1) A distance frame and (2) a denial frame. The newspapers achieved the former by creating a distance between Abdulmutallab and Nigeria and Nigerians and the latter by denying any linkages between his radicalisation and suicide mission with Nigerian values and culture.

## Framing Distance

The 'distance' frame came into place quite early in the coverage of Abdulmutallab's attempted act of terrorism. It was a dominant frame that was used to articulate reactions and responses to the botched terrorist act. This frame was expressed through the use of Abdulmutallab's national identity in 110 out of 183 stories even when his identity was no longer necessary once the story was in the public domain. Interestingly, *This Day*, in its first report of the story, identified Abdulmutallab as the son of the former chairman of First Bank PLC, Nigeria's premier banking institution but in subsequent stories, used his national identity. A day after the attempted terrorist attack, *The Daily Trust* reported that: '**A Nigerian** student at the University College, London, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, has been arrested for detonating an explosive device aboard a Northwest/Delta Airlines flight 243' (*The Daily Trust*, December 27, 2009, all emphasis by author). *The Guardian* reported on the same day: 'The arrest of a **Nigerian**, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, over an attempt to blow up a United States airliner belonging to Delta airlines, has raised fresh concerns about aviation security in not just Nigeria alone but all over the world (*The Guardian*, December 27, 2009).

The frames the newspapers adopted in December in their first reports of the incident were also in use in January although the identity of the accused was not in dispute. Thus, the papers were still referring to a '23-year old **Nigerian** who allegedly attempted to bomb an American airline' (*The Punch* January1), even though by then the story had been in the public domain for many days. Most of the reports referred to him as a '**Nigerian terrorist**,' '**a Nigerian suspect**,' '**the Nigerian airplane bomber**,' '**23-year old Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab**,' '**a Nigerian student**' '**the Nigeria-born Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab**,' '**Nigerian attempted airplane bomber**, '**Nigerian terror suspect**,' '**Nigeria's Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab**.'



It could be argued that Abdulmutallab's national identity label was introduced into the narratives by international news agencies, the main sources of the information that the newspapers used to construct their narratives. However, this was also evident in stories that were sourced locally. For example, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Dr Goodluck Jonathan, then Vice President of Nigeria, and The Assembly of Moslems in Nigeria were all quoted in stories in which Abdulmutallab was identified as a Nigerian, a suggestion that the label was not limited to reports based on information from international sources.

To contextualise the paradox of the 'Nigerian' label as evidence of distance, it is worth noting that national identity is a contested concept in Nigeria. The country, as Barrington, Bosia and Bruhn have argued, has only achieved partial success in its effort to get 'all major ethnic groups to buy into the idea that they are part of an overarching national identity' (2009: 34). In principle, Nigerians are citizens of Nigeria irrespective of their ethnic identity. However, 'Nigeria's challenge is how to get ordinary Nigerians to accept this identity and place it at the top of their collective loyalty hierarchy' (Barrington, Bosia and Bruhn (2009:176). Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of Nigeria's leading nationalists, echoed this understanding when he argued: 'There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English' or 'Welsh' or 'French'. The word 'Nigeria' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not.' (Awolowo, as cited by Onwubu, 1975: 399).

From the above, it can be argued that by identifying Abdulmutallab primarily as a Nigerian in Nigerian newspapers, published in Nigeria for Nigerian audiences, the newspapers created a false sense of neutrality and as a result created a distance between him and other Nigerians because within the country, as it has been pointed out, national identity is irrelevant given that Nigerians identify themselves primarily by their ethnicity. Thus, the use of the national identity label that underpinned the coverage created a discursive frame that represented Abdulmutallab as a distant 'other' by denying him a connection with his ethnic roots and consequently from Nigerians from the same background. As Scheufele has noted, 'framing influence how audience think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient, but by invoking interpretative schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information' (2000: 309). Given that there are no 'Nigerians' in Nigeria, it was difficult, if not impossible, for people who see themselves primarily as Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio or Hausa to identify with someone who appeared to lack an ethnic

identity because the interpretative schemas that deconstruct information about identity in Nigeria are essentially ethno-geocentric.

Using Abdulmutallab's national rather than his ethnic identity was probably meant to convey objectivity by avoiding associations with particular ethnic groups or specific parts of the country. In view of the sensitivity of the issue, the use of a seemingly neutral label, his national identity, could have been an attempt to reduce inter-ethnic tension in the country. A realistic portrayal of Abdulmutallab as a Muslim from the northern part of the country could have reinforced ethno-regional and religious differences, especially as the sanctions imposed on the country by the US were not selective but on all Nigerians irrespective of their ethnic identity and religion. In contrast, the newspapers did not apply the same discursive construction to Richard Reid, a UK citizen who attempted to bring down a passenger airplane with bombs that he had hidden in his shoes. References to Reid in Nigerian newspapers did not emphasize his nationality, as was the case in the coverage of Abdulmutallab, rather, he was identified as the 'shoe bomber' first before his nationality was given. For example, in 'since the shoe bomber (the Briton, Richard Colvin Reid) did not lead to a blacklist of his country...' (*The Guardian*, January 6, 2010). Emphasising Abdulmutallab's national identity in most of the reports did not achieve a sense of connection with Nigerians, it created a distance.

## Framing Denial

The media, as has been argued before, play a pivotal role in the construction of reality. They have the power to define important issues, offer explanations, and marginalise contradicting positions and views. As Fürsich has noted, 'the media's power to steer attention to and from public issues often determines which problems will be tackled or ignored by society. Only those issues that gain publicity have the potential to make people think about social and political ramifications beyond their immediate experience' (2010:113). This discretionary power of the media to determine what dominates public discourse was demonstrated by the use of denial as a dominant frame in the coverage of Abdulmutallab's action. An examination of the textual choices that framed the coverage identified an attempt to deny any Nigerian connection to Abdulmutallab's action. The denial frame suggested he was radicalised and equipped for his action outside Nigeria. Every reference to any of his religious activity that bordered on extremism occurred outside his home country. At home, he was a regular young Muslim but elsewhere, he

manifested radicalised tendencies. The newspapers noted how much time he had spent outside Nigeria, in particular highlighting the role of other countries and their agents in his radicalisation. On December 27, two days after the attempted terrorist attack, the *Daily Trust* carried a profile of Abdulmutallab in which it focused attention on his educational background. The paper noted that:

He spent most of his formative years outside Nigeria and can best be described as British-educated. He had his secondary education at British School of Lome, Togo, a school established 25 years ago to cater for the needs of British expatriates in the West African country.... While there, Abdulmutallab became known for his radical views. (*The Daily Trust*, December 27, 2009).

*The Daily Trust's* claim that Abdulmutallab became radicalised while at the British School, in Lomé, was challenged by reports by other newspapers. For example, *The Punch* quoted a former classmate of Abdulmutallab who claimed that he did not express extremist views while they were in the boarding school but 'became more serious about his religion' when he moved to London. (*The Punch*, January 1, 2010)

Although the papers reported that Abdulmutallab attended Islamic classes in Nigeria, they stressed that he was taught to be a good Muslim and was not radicalised by those lessons. *The Daily Trust* reported that Abdulmutallab was not exposed to extremist teachings in Nigeria:

But when he travelled out to the UK for higher education and later to Yemen where he said he learnt Arabic; it was from there he learnt this extremist views and not in Nigeria. Before he left Nigeria, he was a very calm and gentle boy and also very devoted to Islam. But what he did is very unfortunate and I know he got all that as a result of his exposure to foreign ideas like that of the al-Qaeda.' I want to still emphasise that Farouk learnt what he tried to do outside this country because nowhere in Nigeria is terrorism taught. It is alien to our culture and this has been proved by the confession of the people who claimed to have sent him. That is the al-Qaeda." (*Daily Trust* January 10, 2010)

While the newspapers were quick to deny Nigeria's role in the radicalisation of Abdulmutallab, they were not so reticent in naming countries that they considered to be responsible for turning the young man into a potential suicide bomber. On January 3, 2010, *The Guardian* reported on its front page that American President Barack Obama blamed Yemen for Abdulmutallab's action. According to *The Guardian*, President Obama said Abdulmutallab joined an affiliate of Al-Qaeda and that this group 'trained him,

equipped him with those explosives and directed him to attack a plane headed for America (*The Guardian*, January 3, 2010, p.6). The paper implicitly absolved Nigeria of any responsibility for Abdulmutallab by emphasising that: 'for the first time, the United States President, Barack Obama, directly stated that the world terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, was responsible for the Christmas day-terror attempt on a US jetliner by a Nigerian suspect, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab' (*The Guardian*, January 3, 2010).

The denial frame was also evident in the selection of sources the newspapers quoted to underpin the dominant perspective of their coverage. They chose self-validating sources and recognised opinion leaders who could speak with authority and conviction. Prince Bola Ajibola, a former judge of the International Court of Justice, and one time Attorney-General of Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon, former head of state, Professor Dora Akunyili, minister of information, all argued that Abdulmutallab was radicalised abroad. General Gowon was emphatic that: 'The young man must have been brainwashed and indoctrinated abroad, not here. He has lived much of his life abroad.' (*This Day*, January 7, 2010). Dora Akunyili also traced Abdulmutallab's radicalisation to locations outside Nigeria: 'It is noteworthy that Mr Farouk Abdulmutallab, though Nigerian-born, has been educated and bred outside Nigeria and only transited through Nigeria for less than 30 minutes on the fateful day...(*This Day*, January 7, 2010). The minister also emphasised that 'the man in question has been living outside the country for a while. He sneaked into Nigerian on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 and left the same day' (*This Day*, January 7, 2010). Interestingly, none of the papers questioned the suggestion that he was a fugitive.

The recurring motif in the denial frame was the suggestion that Abdulmutallab's action was driven by his experience outside Nigeria. The phrase 'abroad' had a symbolic importance and served as a condensational symbol – a shorthand that summed up all that was not Nigerian in Abdulmutallab. As Johnson-Cratee (2005:167) writes: 'condensational symbols evoke stored meanings already residing in the minds of individuals sharing a given political culture.' In this particular case study, suicide bombing was a non-Nigerian action. Thus, anyone engaging in or attempting it could not have gained any significant life experience in Nigeria or been socialised into its dominant culture and value system and consequently was the 'other.' Moreover, as the minister of information pointed out: 'Nigerians do not have terrorist tendencies' (*The Punch*, January 6, 2010). On that premise, the *Daily Trust* argued that Abdulmutallab, having spent a greater part of his life outside Nigeria, was

'more of a citizen of other countries than of Nigeria. It is just that he had on him a Nigerian passport' (*Daily Trust*, January 7, 2010). The paper went on to explain that:

When news of the attempted terror plot first filtered through, many Nigerians (Christians and Muslims alike) initially swore that Abdulmutallab wasn't Nigerian. We couldn't come to terms with the fact that one of us would even contemplate committing this heinous transnational murder-suicide of innocents. But when it emerged that Abdulmutallab's radicalization actually took place between London, Dubai and Yemen—and that he hardly grew up in Nigeria—our initial incredulity turned out to have some basis in truth. In fact, a recent Reuters report quoted Abdulmutallab's Yemeni Arabic language teacher as saying that when the would-be bomber first arrived in Yemen, he was "closer to being secular" and that he only became religious "during his visit last year. (*Daily Trust*, January 9, 2010)

From the above analysis, it can be argued that the news frames and direction of discourse identified in the coverage of Abdulmutallab's action were aimed at protecting Nigeria's national interest. The newspapers in constructing their narratives extended the distance and denial frames beyond his attempted act of terrorism and inadvertently mythologised Nigeria as being terrorism free, contrary to reality. Although there were no reported case of suicide bombing prior to Abdulmutallab's botched attempt, other forms of terrorist acts were common in many parts of the country. Yet, the discursive constructions applied by the newspapers created meanings around Abdulmutallab's action that suggested that his country had played no role in his radicalisation and subsequent manifestation of terrorist tendencies.

## **Nigeria as a country of interest**

The United States' categorisation of Nigeria as a 'country of interest in the context of terrorism' evoked a great deal of grievance in the country. Ayogu Eze, a former journalist and now spokesperson for the Nigerian Senate, voiced this when he called on the United States to note that Abdulmutallab had no link with any fundamental group or any interest group within Nigeria, not even with his parents' (*The Guardian*, January 6, 2010). Eze even blamed the United States for Abdulmutallab's action: 'This was a boy whose disappearance was reported to security agencies, the American authorities and America did nothing; for them to turn around to punish Nigeria for the sin of an isolated person like this is completely unacceptable to the Nigerian government and to the Nigerian senate' (*The Guardian*, January 6, 2010). A week before Yemen and Al-Qaeda were explicitly linked to Abdulmutallab's action, the newspapers had reported that the investigation by the

Federal government had shown that 'Abdulmutallab spent less than 30 minutes at the Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos, before boarding the flight to Amsterdam.' (*The Punch*, January 1, 2010). This information was significant in that it was used as evidence to prove that the bombs the young man strapped to his underwear were not given to him in Nigeria.

To some extent, the newspapers implicated the UK and the US by suggesting that they had information about Abdulmutallab and were capable of proactive action. For example, *The Guardian* reported that 'British intelligence officials may have had prior knowledge of the Nigerian Umar Abdulmutallab's connection with Muslim extremists. (*The Guardian*, January 4, 2010). They quoted the Senate spokesperson extensively in their reports and emphasised the fact that Abdulmutallab's father had informed American security agents about his son's association with Yemen but no action was taken. The newspapers stressed that 'the fact that his father reported him to the United States embassy 'confirms the attitude and philosophy of Nigerians towards acts of terror' (*This Day*, January 7, 2010).

Attribution of responsibility to the UK for the radicalisation of Abdulmutallab was achieved through a detailed account of his educational experiences. The papers reported that in the UK while studying at the University College London, he headed a Muslim Students Association that was said to hold extremist views. *The Guardian* reported that 'that plane bomb suspect, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was made literarily in Britain... he, in fact, joined the feared group (al-Qaeda) in London' (*The Guardian*, January 8, 2010). The *Daily Trust* made similar claim when it quoted an Islamic teacher who said that Abdulmutallab was recruited by Al-Qaeda while he was in the United Kingdom (*Daily Trust*, January 11, 2010). *The Daily Trust* almost absolved him of any blame by arguing that he was bound to pick up alien values as a result of his foreign education:

It is not unexpected that a young man like Farouk who had spent most part of his study-years in foreign schools from Togo to the United Kingdom, would be without alien influences bearing upon his mindset and character. This consequence, of course, is the cumulative effect of a strange education system which philosophy, structure and pattern completely negate the national orientation, ideals, values and aspirations of the Nigerian society (*Daily Trust*, January 9, 2010).

The denial frame was also visible in the representation of Abdulmutallab's family in reports. All the reports highlighted his father's concern and the unexpected steps he took



when he reported his son to security agents. The newspapers did not explicitly criticise him for sending his son abroad at a young, impressionable age. The blame was instead put on the schools the young man attended. According to the *Daily Trust*, the alleged would-be suicide bomber was 'just a devoted Muslim youth who was concerned about his religious duties in addition to his regular studies' (*Daily Trust*, December 27, 2009). But away from home, he became radicalised.

## **Framing a terrorist act**

Useful to this study is Gans' argument that 'much of news is about the violation of values' (1980:40) and, as this article has illustrated, Abdulmutallab's action was reported as a violation of Nigerian social and cultural values. The media frames that underpinned the narratives organised and interpreted his action to present him as a distant 'other.' As Gitlin has noted, 'media frames, largely unspoken, and unacknowledged, organise the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports' (Gitlin, (1980: 7). The two frames identified in this study were used to tell a novel story but they quickly outlined the direction of public discourse on the issues raised by Abdulmutallab's action. The two frames reflected a national interest perspective in the coverage and were similar in terms of the context in which they were applied but different in objectives. The distance frame, while emphasising his national identity ironically distanced him from Nigerians whose self-identity is primarily ethnic, and the denial frame denied his 'Nigerian-ness' by concentrating on the role of other countries in his radicalisation and explicitly ruling out any contribution by Nigeria. The first frame could be seen as being inward, for internal effect, and the second as being for external impact. The rhetoric resonated with Nigerians who perceive suicide bombing to be un-Nigerian and may have persuaded those who did not hold that view to accept the influence of other countries on Abdulmutallab. In this way, the coverage promoted an understanding that the United States decision to identify Nigeria with terrorism was not only inappropriate, but also unacceptable.

As studies on agenda setting have shown, the media are said to play a pivotal role in defining issues that dominate public discourse. Fürsich in a summary of research approaches in mass communication notes that framing suggests that the 'media play a role in defining how audiences understand an issue of public concern (Fürsich, 2010:115).



As gatekeepers, journalists have the power to select information that can invoke a particular resonance and this was apparent in the coverage of Abdulmutallab's attempted act of terrorism. The four national newspapers selected for this analysis framed their coverage by choosing certain keywords, themes and sources to steer public attention in specific directions. The papers influenced people's cognition of the event through their content. Although the event lent itself to a macro approach in the coverage, the newspapers chose to individualise the story, thus narrating the account from a biographical perspective rather than in structural terms, which would have entailed confronting the possible contribution of Nigeria to his extremist action. By attributing responsibility to the 'other, the newspapers distanced Nigeria from the event and its perpetrator.

The newspapers' indigenisation of the botched terrorist attack, an international event, created distance, thus confirming that 'indigenising' an international event can distance it from its local audience (Leung, 2009). This argument is based on the understanding that it is through the process of indigenisation that events happening in distant places are interpreted and framed for local audiences. As explained in this article, the attempted act of terrorism was a distant story that had to be made intelligible and resonant to the home audience. As this analysis has shown, the newspapers, in their coverage, were overly concerned about distancing Nigeria from Islamic extremism and portraying the United States' action as unjustified and heavy-handed. As a result, they 'framed out' a link between Abdulmutallab's action and his country and represented him to Nigerians as the 'other.' To achieve this, the newspapers used news frames to select, organise and emphasise certain aspects of the reality to the exclusion of others (De Vreese et al, 2001). Their lexical selection helped to shape and direct public opinion (Montgomery, 2005), while the news frames provided central story lines that enabled the journalists to attribute 'meaning to issues, events and actors involved' (Melkote, 2009:549). The frames were significant not only for what was made salient or memorable but also by what were omitted (Watkins, 2001).

## **Conclusion:**

This article has, through the lens of framing theory, examined the coverage of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to blow up a United States bound airliner. It identified the dominant perspective that underpinned the coverage and the news frames that four

Nigerian national newspapers used to structure their accounts of the event. The frames were mediated at different levels. First, by international news agencies that produced the reports that Nigerian journalists used to reconstruct their stories and secondly by the journalists through several levels of selection and interpretation of the raw facts. However, the event was not contextualised to produce meaningful accounts for their audiences partly because this was a 'distant' story – distant in location and in cultural proximity. As already explained, suicide bombing was deemed to be alien to Nigerians; consequently, that understanding suggested that Abdulmutallab was not a typical Nigerian. The interpretation frameworks that the newspapers employed were underscored by this generally understood perception. The frameworks, once selected, structured the coverage and interpretation of the event and defined in and out particular understanding of Abdulmutallab's action. The frames created distance and alienated Abdulmutallab from his compatriots and denied Nigeria's contribution to his radicalisation and subsequent extremist action. As a result, the news frames reinforced consensual perceptions about Islamic extremism and radicalisation in Nigeria. They limited and underpinned the direction of the debate. Apart from official spokespersons and former teachers, the papers did not enable public debate even though the aborted act of terrorism challenged the common understanding that Nigerians were not prone to acts of terrorism. As Daniela V. Dimitrova and Kyung Sun Lee have pointed out: 'frames often appeal to principles and employ emotionally charged symbols. Frames therefore rely on various symbolic devices in order to resonate with the public' (2009:538). The frames the newspapers used did not prompt Nigerians to accept responsibility for Abdulmutallab's action. Rather, the newspapers' stance was skewed to create the impression that terrorism was alien to Nigeria. In contrast, other countries were represented as being more prone to radicalisation and Islamic extremism. This study suggests that the papers may have influenced their readers to think that radicalisation was not a problem in Nigeria even though frequent outbreak of violence in some parts of the country seems to contradict that view.

From this analysis, it is apparent that although the 'war on terror' is a global phenomenon, the frames used in newspaper coverage are culturally sensitive and reflect commonly held public assumptions. Nigerian journalists might not have deliberately encoded their accounts to achieve a particular outcome but the unexpected consequences of their chosen frames suggest that their approach was effective in creating a distance between Abdulmutallab and his compatriots and in reinforcing the understanding that his action was

a product of alien cultural and religious values. This perception explains why Nigerians challenged the United States' categorisation of their country as a security risk.

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## Newspapers

*The Daily Trust*

*This Day*

*The Guardian*

*The Punch*

*Washington Post*