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Nigeria's Media Framing of COVID – 19 Pandemic: A Content Analysis of Selected National Dailies

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is a ravaging pandemic shaking the world to its foundation and so all hands are on deck to put a stop to the plague. This paper essentially examines the role of the Nigerian press in providing needed coverage of the pandemic by supplying needed information on the novel coronavirus. This is important because the right information is a vital ingredient of efforts channeled towards the containment of the disease. Content analysis research method is chosen for this study and three national daily newspapers are examined. The selected daily newspapers are: This Day, The Nation, and Independent. A total of 729 newspaper contents are considered relevant to the study. Analysis of the data reveals that the majority of the articles published in the selected newspapers, that is 22.9%, COVID-19 related articles are on economic matters, this is followed by articles on precautionary measure/prevention with 11.8%. The share of COVID-19 lockdown is 15.4%, donation of funds and medical equipment is 8.4%. Articles on testing, infections and treatment/discharge are 3.7%, 4.4% and 3.3% respectively. Newspaper materials on the development of drug/vaccine is a meager 1.1%. The Nigerian press is more interested in the effect of COVID-19 on the economy and less concerned about the development of vaccine/drug, testing, isolation/treatment as well as the state of the health facility.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, coronavirus, press, media

1. INTRODUCTION

The world suddenly found itself amid of pandemic that it did not prepare for. Within a few months after the World Health Organization declared coronavirus popularly called Covid-19 a pandemic of international proportion, the virus has claimed over a million lives and it has infected millions of people across the globe. Covid-19 is caused by coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. Pandemic is not alien to the world. For example, Taubenberger & Morens cited in Duhé, & Cho, (2009: 125) emphasized the fact that the World Health Organization (WHO) “alerted the nations of the world in 2005 about the possibility of a pandemic flu outbreak on a scale similar to that of the Spanish Flu of 1918”. About 50 million people lost their lives as a result of that pandemic. The message is clear. The epidemic has the capacity to wipe out a substantial percentage of the world population within months. COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in December 2019. According to Cascella et al., cited in Kumar, & Raj, (2020:54), clinical conditions associated with the disease include “acute respiratory distress, sepsis, septic shock, and multiple organ failure”.

Nigeria, just like many other nations around the globe, is not spared from the scourge of the pandemic. The first case was reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020.

The rapid spread of infection across the globe is a thing of concern to all and sundry. Another level of concern is the negative impact of information overload on the populace (Rathore, & Farooq, 2020). This is characterized by an avalanche of online information on COVID-19 which could lead to confusion (Farooq, Laato, & Islam, 2020) and adversely affect audience morale and mental health (Rathore, & Farooq, 2020). This complicates efforts geared towards the containment of the disease. Conventional media, therefore, become one of the most veritable channels of information on the COVID-19 pandemic by the populace.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Like never before, the extreme measure taken by many governments across all the continents by locking down the entire system has serious socio-economic implications on all spheres of human life. Lockdowns have a negative impact on virtually every facet of human life including but not limited to the following: economy, (Nicola, et al., 2020 and Açıkgöz, & Günay, 2020; Sułkowski, 2020), with the possible economic recession in many countries across the globe (Hosain & Rasel, 2020), peoples’ health in general, (Omer, Malani, & Del Rio, 2020 and Solomon, et al., 2020) and mental health in particular, (Pfefferbaum, & North, 2020 and Cullen, Gulati, & Kelly, 2020), education, (Daniel, 2020, Sadniman, et al. 2020) etc.

Response of Nigerian government to coronavirus’ outbreak

WHO warned countries across the globe to prepare for the pandemic as it spreads around nations of the world like wild fire. The Federal Government of Nigeria heeded the warning by setting up coronavirus preparedness team that operated under the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). It was this body that discovered the index case on February 27, 2020. To reflect the seriousness of the matter, Nigerian government thereafter set up the Covid-19 Presidential Task Force (see Monsudi and Ayodapo, 2020). This happened on March 9, 2020. All other Agencies relating to Covid-19 pandemic response teams are now operating under the umbrella of Presidential Task Force of Covid-19. According to Ajisegiri, Odusanya & Joshi,

(2020), Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 engages in several activities including but not limited to the following:

- i. screening of travellers as they entered the country through Nigeria's major international airports as well as sea ports and land borders,
- ii. contact tracing of potential patients,
- iii. strengthening of the National Reference Laboratory with diagnostic capacity for epidemic-prone pathogens,
- iv. training of healthcare workers, dissemination of information,

Further measure introduced by the government that were aimed at containment of the disease were:

- i. nationwide lockdown, that is, restriction of movement within the country. For example, schools, religious gatherings, market places were shut down across Nigeria,
- ii. Nigerian borders were also shut down,
- iii. creation of isolation centres for treatment of patients,
- iv. enforcement of social or physical distancing,
- v. wearing of masks and
- vi. hand washing with soap/hand sanitizers.

Mass Media and Coronavirus pandemic

The important role of the media during national emergency is in their capacity to enlighten the populace. Adekunle & Adnan (2016: 362) opine that "mass media cannot cure virus but can cure its spread". Even though several health science researchers link media exposure during national emergency with negative consequences such as cycle of distresses (Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020; Maarefvand, Hosseinzadeh, et al., 2020) mental stress (Dos Santos, 2020), culture of fear and anxiety (Chaiuk, & Dunaievska, 2020), problem with psychological wellbeing and suicide tendency (Kumar, & Raj, 2020) but many researchers also believe that mass media play a significant role in enlightenment of the populace (Olapegba, et al., 2020). Chaiuk, & Dunaievska, (2020) believe that fear emanated from British press reportage of the coronavirus pandemic assisted in communicating the danger of the disease and unpreparedness of British government at containment of spread of the virus.

The Nigerian Media reportage of Covid-19 pandemic

The mass media, according to Msughter, & Phillips, (2020:590) are generally referred to in liberal theory as the "fourth estate of the realm" and the "watchdog of the society". The mass media exist as an organ of information gathering, processing and dissemination, as well as educational promotion, surveillance, social enlightenment and mobilization.

Even though the Nigerian media failed to provide early warning messages before the index case of COVID-19 pandemic was reported in the country (Gever, & Ezeah, 2020), they swung to full action immediately the virus reached the shores of Nigeria. According to Smith, Smith, & Ajayi, (2020) Nigerians have relatively high knowledge of the disease and that 81.5 percent of the sampled population sourced their information about COVID-19 from the traditional (conventional) media.

Study period

The index case of the dreaded coronavirus in Nigeria was discovered on February 27, 2020 in Lagos. The data for this study therefore covers February 28, 2020 to June 27, 2020.

Study universe

Three national daily newspapers were selected for this study i. This Day ii. The Nation and iii. Independent. The selection of the three national newspapers is informed by the fact that the newspapers appeal to national audience, they are consistent in publication and are truly independent as they are privately owned. One copy (each) of the three newspapers were examined per week. The newspapers are accessed online.

The days are selected based on constructed week with a purposive start (beginning from February 28, 2020, that is, a day after the first index case was reported in Nigeria. 45 copies of the newspapers were content analysed and 729 newspapers’ contents are considered relevant to the study.

CONSTRUCTED STUDY CALENDAR 2020

Days/Weeks	Months				
	February	March	April	May	June
Mon					
Tue					
Wed			*		*
Thur					
Fri					
Sat		*		*	
Sun					
Mon					
Tue					
Wed					
Thur			*		*
Fri					
Sat					
Sun		*			
Mon		*		*	
Tue					
Wed					
Thur					
Fri					*
Sat					
Sun					
Mon					
Tue		*		*	
Wed					
Thur					
Fri	*				*
Sat					
Sun					

8th, April 2020; 3rd, June 2020

7th, March 2020; 2nd, May
10th, May 2020

16th, April 2020; 11th, June 2020

15th, March 2020

23rd, March 2020; 18th, May 2020

19th, June 2020

31st, March 2020, 26th, May 2020

28th, February 2020

27th, June 2020

Adopted from Okon, (2014: 66)

The graph above shows the newspapers' issues selected for the study in graphic form.

Unit of analysis

Unit of analysis of the study includes story headlines, articles, cartoons, graphics, and any other illustrations.

Problem of the study

COVID-19 pandemic was declared global health emergency by WHO. Even though the pandemic is undoubtedly a health problem, it, however, affects every facet of life and a multifaceted approach is therefore required to tackle the global health challenge. Mass media play a significant role in the enlightenment of the populace. There is a need to find out how effective the Nigerian mass media have fared in reporting the pandemic as well as the area of reportage-focus of the press.

Objectives of the study

- 1) to find out the prominence given to the coverage of COVID-19 by the selected newspaper.
- 2) to examine prominent genres of newspapers' reportage of the disease.
- 3) to find out the frequency of the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4) to examine the tone/slant of coverage of the selected newspapers.
- 5) to identify the most important theme of the newspapers' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research questions

- 1) What is the prominence accorded the coverage of COVID-19 by the newspapers selected for this study?
- 2) What are the most prominent genres of newspapers' reportage of the disease?
- 3) What is the frequency of the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 4) What is the tone/slant of coverage of the newspapers selected for the study?
- 5) What are the most important theme of the newspapers' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing theory is adopted for this study. According to Chong, & Druckman, (2007: 104-105) "framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue". De Vreese, (2005:51) "Framing of events and issues in particular ways" is the sure way by which the mass media can shape public opinion. According to the scholar, "framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue".

Framing started to be developed in the 1970s, initially by researchers in cognitive psychology and later by Sociologist Erving Goffman. According to Ardèvol-Abreu, (2015:428) Erving Goffman's "renewed sociological perspective is adopted in communication studies.

4. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is the method selected for this study. Content analysis is a research method that makes possible the study of the manifest content of recorded information in such a systematic and orderly manner.

Operationalization of terms

Testing: This refers to newspapers' reports on the level of COVID-19 testing in Nigeria

Infection: By infection, we mean newspapers' reports on the rate of spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Precautionary measure/Prevention: This is all about newspapers' contents on precautionary measure/prevention of the virus gear towards containment of the spread of the disease among the populace.

State of health facility: Newspapers' contents on the state of health facilities in Nigeria.

Isolation/Treatment: Newspapers' reports on contact tracing, isolation, and treatment of COVID-19 patients.

Recovery/Discharge: Newspapers' contents on recovery and discharge of COVID-19 patients.

Development of vaccine/Drug: Newspapers' publications on the development of drugs for the treatment of the COVID-19 or vaccine against the virus.

Fatality figure: Newspapers' reports on COVID-19 fatality rate in Nigeria.

Donation of funds/medical equipment: Donation of money or medical equipment by philanthropists and development partners.

5. DATA PRESENTATION

The data for this study is hereby presented in tables below.

Table 5.1. Distribution showing the three newspapers selected for the study.

Newspaper	Frequency	Valid Percent
This Day	189	25.93
The Nation	82	11.25
Independent	458	62.82
Total	729	N = 100 or 100%

Table 5.1 reveals that the Independent newspaper’s share of all the COVID-19 relevant materials of all the three newspapers selected for this study is 62. 82%, This Day newspaper’s share is 25.93% and The Nation newspaper’s share is 11.25%

Table 5.2. Distribution showing prominence of COVID-19 related newspapers’ contents.

Newspaper	Front Page		Inside Page		Back Page		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
This Day	14	1.9	170	23.3	5	0.7	189	25.9
The Nation	17	2.3	61	8.4	4	0.6	82	11.2
Independent	13	1.8	442	60.6	3	0.4	458	62.8
Total	44	6.0	673	92.3	12	1.7	729	100

In terms of prominence given to COVID-19 related stories, 2.3% of stories published by Nation newspaper appeared on the front page, while This Day and Independent have 1.9% and 1.8% of their stories published on their front pages respectively. In all, 6% and 1.7% of all the materials appeared on either front or back pages of the newspapers.

Table 5.3. Distribution showing genres of the newspapers’ reportage.

Newspaper	News story		Editorial		Feature		News analysis/Opinion		Foreign news		Interview		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
This Day	96	13.2	6	0.82	38	5.2	23	3.2	20	2.7	6	0.8	189	25.93
The Nation	47	6.5	2	0.27	16	2.2	5	0.7	8	1.1	4	0.5	82	11.24
Independent	307	42.1	4	0.5	73	10	28	3.8	40	5.5	6	0.8	458	62.82
Total	450	61.8	12	1.6	127	17.4	56	7.7	68	9.3	16	2.1	N = 729 or 100%	

Table 5.3 shows that 61.8% of all the contents in the three newspapers were straight or hard news, followed by feature stories with 17.4%, foreign news with 9.3%, and news analysis/opinion with 7.7%.

Table 5.4. Distribution showing slant of the newspapers' coverage.

Newspaper	Positiv		Negative		Neutral		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
This Day	14	1.9	88	12.1	87	11.9	189	25.9
The Nation	5	0.7	42	5.8	35	4.8	82	11.2
Independent	27	3.7	176	24	255	35	458	62.8
Total	46	6.3	385	52.8	377	51.7	N = 729 or 100	

Table 5.4 shows that 52.8% of the newspapers' contents were negative, 51.7% were considered neutral while just 6.3% were positive.

Table 5.5. Distribution showing themes of the newspapers' coverage.

	Newspaper						Total	
	This Day		The Nation		Independent			
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Testing	9	1.2	1	0.1	16	2.3	26	3.7
Infection	7	1.0	11	1.5	14	1.9	32	4.4
Precautionary measure/Prevention	14	1.9	2	0.3	70	9.6	86	11.8
State of health facility	10	1.4	3	0.4	13	1.8	26	3.6
Isolation/Treatment	9	1.2	4	0.5	9	1.2	22	3.0
Recovery/Discharge	9	1.2	5	0.7	10	1.3	24	3.3
Development of vaccine/Drug	1	0.1	-	-	7	1.0	8	1.1
Donation of funds/medical equipment	9	1.2	3	0.4	49	6.7	61	8.4
Effect of COVID-19 on economy	49	6.7	19	2.6	99	13.6	167	22.9
Palliative	15	2.1	4	0.5	31	4.3	50	6.9
Fatality figure	9	1.2	5	0.7	15	2.1	29	4.0

COVID – 19 Lockdown	31	4.3	17	2.3	64	8.8	112	15.4
COVID – 19 and sporting activities	12	1.7	7	1.0	29	4.0	48	6.6
Funding of health sector	4	0.6	1	0.1	7	1.0	12	1.6
Corruption	1	0.1	-	-	1	0.1	2	0.2
Others	-	-	-	-	24	3.3	24	3.3
Total	189	25.9	82	11.1	458	62.8	458	100

Table 5.5 reveals that the four most important themes covered by the selected newspapers were the effect of COVID-19 on the economy with 22.9%, COVID-19 lockdown with 15.4%, precautionary measure/prevention with 11.8%, donation of funds/medical equipment with 8.4%, palliative with 6.9%. Development of vaccine/Drug and corruption were the least important with meagre 1.1% and 0.2% respectively.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The researcher based the discussion on five researcher questions that were derived for the study.

Question 1. What is the prominence accorded the coverage of COVID-19 by the newspapers selected for this study? Table 5.2 provides an answer to this question. 92.3% of all COVID-19 related newspapers’ contents were buried on the inside page while only 7.7% appeared on either front or back pages of the selected newspapers. In terms of prominence, it could be said that the newspapers did not give the pandemic required prominence.

Question 2. What are the most prominent genres of newspapers’ reportage of the disease? The answer to this question is derived from table 5.3. As much as 61.8% of all the COVID-19 related contents were straight or hard news. Feature stories’ share is 17.4%, and news analysis/opinion’s share is 7.7%. The implication of this is that less of the contents were on interpretative news reporting style that could well educate the media audience.

Question 3. What is the frequency of the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic? In terms of frequency of coverage, an average of 16.5 newspapers’ contents on COVID-19 appeared in the three newspapers on daily basis. This shows a very high frequency of reportage of COVID-19 related issues.

Question 5.4. What is the tone/slant of coverage of the newspapers selected for the study? The tone of the newspapers’ contents on COVID-19 is 52.8% negative, 51.7% neutral, and 6.3% positive. COVID-19 news stories were more of bad news than good news.

Question 5. What is the most important theme of the newspapers’ coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?

According to Table 5.5, five themes that are considered most important are the following: effect of COVID-19 on the economy has 22.9% of all the COVID-19 related contents, COVID-19 lockdown has 15.4%, precautionary measure/prevention has 11.8%, donation of funds/medical equipment has 8.4% while palliative has 6.9% share of the reportage. Only 3.6%

of the newspapers' contents were on the state of the health facility, 1.6% and 1.1% of the contents were on of both the development of vaccine/drug as well as funding of health sector.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Even though COVID-19 is considered by WHO as a world health emergency, the effect of the pandemic on the nation's economy as well as people's economic well-being attracted the attention of the Nigerian mass media more than anything else. 22.9% of all the COVID-19 related newspapers' contents were on the economy. This is followed by issues relating to lockdown which is also closely related to the economy. Lockdown dealt a deadly blow on the common people who totally rely on their daily economic activities for economic survival.

This set of people dominate the informal section of the economy which plays a significant role in the Nigerian economy as it contributes 38% to the Nigerian gross domestic product (GDP) (Onwe, 2013). The government was quick at announcing lockdown but the targeted 3.5 trillion Naira loan-support given to some sectors of the economy didn't do much to save the Nigerian economy from slipping into recession (Ozili, 2020). COVID-19 indeed aggravated people's economic suffering (Kanu, 2020).

Unfortunately, less attention is given to the development of the health care delivery system of Nigeria by the government. Akande-Sholabi, & Adebisi, (2020), corroborate this finding by decrying the poor state of Nigerian health infrastructure that is poorly funded by the government.

Recommendations

- 1) Nigerian government needs to run a system of government that is more people-centered. COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the government weakness in this area, as poor masses were almost totally neglected.
- 2) COVID-19 also exposed the country's economic weakness, the government needs to address the country's economic structural defects.
- 3) Most importantly, Nigerian weak health infrastructure needs to be revitalized by the government.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Aderogba Adeyemi studied Journalism at Belorussian State University, Minsk, Belarus. He travelled to the former Soviet Union in August 1984 and returned to Nigeria in Summer 1996 after he completed his doctorate programme. He lectured at Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State from 2002 to 2007. Dr. Adeyemi served as the Coordinator of the Department of Human Communications, Bowen University from 2006 to 2007. Dr. Aderogba Adeyemi moved from Bowen University to Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria in September 2007 where he lectured for three years before joining the services of Osun State University in 2010. Dr. Aderogba Adeyemi is the pioneer and current Acting Head, Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, Osun State University.

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