



Prominence and Format of Covid-19 Reportage by the Media

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Abstract

This study examined the prominence and format of media reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria by focusing on the frequency of reportage, prominence and format used by the selected newspapers in the reportage of COVID-19 related stories. This study employed the content analysis method by analysing the content of The Guardian and The Nation newspapers between February 2021 and April 2021. This study found out The Guardian and The Nation newspapers gave adequate coverage to COVID-19 related stories, though; The Guardian newspaper reported COVID-19 related stories more than The Nation newspaper, The Nation newspaper gave more prominence to COVID-19 stories more than The Guardian newspaper and the major format of presentation of COVID-19 stories by the selected newspapers is the straight news among others. This study recommended that there should be more feature articles, interviews and editorials in the reportage of the pandemic and that journalists should refrain from panic reporting in the straight news to avoid putting the citizens in a state of panic.

Keywords: Reportage; COVID-19; Media; Prominence; Format

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Introduction

Coronavirus is a global pandemic that began in Wuhan, China's capital, in December of 2019. (Oyeniran, Oyeniran, Oyeniyi, Ogundele and Ojo, 2020). Early genetic study of the outbreak revealed that the virus was similar to but not identical to SARS-CoV, however the closest genetic match was found in a coronavirus isolated from bats (WHO, 2020). Fever, cough, shortness of breath, and diarrhea are some of the symptoms of the coronavirus, however, the infection can cause pneumonia, renal failure, and death in some cases (Al-Hanawi, 2020; Riou and Althaus, 2020; Chan et al., 2020). Close contact with infected people's respiratory droplets, which are frequently formed by sneezing and coughing, are thought to be the most common way for the virus to spread from person to person [1].

The media, like healthcare officers, has been working hard to keep the public updated about COVID-19's fight. Journalists have also been on the front lines, reporting on cases, death tolls, and precautions that the general public should take to avoid getting the virus [2]. In addition to informing the public about the pandemic, the media has worked to improve public understanding

of the virus's transmission and preventative measures that can help bring it to a halt. Given the virus's nature, the media plays a critical role in molding public opinion and perception of issues like the virus's outbreak. The way the media portrays the epidemic will influence how people react to it and whether or not they take preventative measures [3].

The news of the Coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria caused citizens anxiety, panic attacks, and tension, and made some citizens so vulnerable that they digested and swallowed every available piece of information about COVID-19 hook, line, and sinker without questioning its veracity, resulting in actions that were more harmful than the virus itself [4]. According to Ogundele (2021), the virus's rapid spread increased citizens' fear and anxiety, triggering an urgent need for rapid crisis communication, enlightenment, sensitization, and education among Nigerian citizens by the Federal Government and concerned bodies through various mass media channels such as radio, television, film, and the internet, among others, to promote healthy practices.

Health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which are of public concern, draw media attention. This can be in the form of print,

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electronic, internet, or social media attention, or a combination of all of these (Nwakpu, Ezema and Ogbodo, 2020). Whatever shape it takes, the extent or impact of media intervention in health crises, particularly disease outbreaks, is what matters most (Anwar, Malik, Raees and Anwar, 2020). Anwar et al., (2020) added that the American Society of Medical Practitioners claims that while mass media cannot cure a virus, it can inhibit it from spreading. This declaration emphasizes the importance of the media in health reporting, particularly in preventing the spread of infectious disease outbreaks.

The function of the media in health promotion and intervention comprises not only raising awareness about a particular health concern or disease epidemic, but also emphasizing the angle or direction in which such issue or outbreak is reported [5]. These media angles of presenting health issues take the form of media framing, which is used to affect public perception and generate attitudinal responses, which leads to beneficial behavioural changes [6].

Objectives of Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the prominence and format of media reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study are

1. To examine how frequently the Guardian and the Nation newspapers reported COVID-19 related stories in Nigeria. This is highly essential in order to ascertain whether these newspapers perform their informative role by giving timely updates with respect to the pandemic in Nigeria. The findings of this study in this regard will aid media houses to evaluate their performance in relation to timeliness and frequency, which can as well be a means of awareness to the audience and a benchmark to the Government in making media related policies with respect to pandemic control.
2. To determine the level of prominence given to COVID-19 related stories by the Guardian and the Nation newspapers in Nigeria. This is to determine the positioning of COVID-19 related stories whether it is important and the attention given to it by the media who are the gatekeepers
3. To establish the format of presentation of COVID-19 related stories by the Guardian and the Nation newspapers in Nigeria. This is to ascertain whether the readers are given varieties of presentation of COVID-19 related stories, which needed to ensure that the readers' interests are put into consideration by the media houses.

Research Questions

1. What is the frequency of reportage of COVID 19 by the select newspapers?
2. What is the level of prominence given to COVID 19 stories by the select Newspapers?
3. What is the format of presentation of COVID-19 stories by the select Newspapers?

Literature Review

Communication is an aspect of human nature that plays an important role in information transmission since it symbolizes human symbolic capacities and also serves a ceremonial function that reflects so much about humans as members of society, among other things. According to Akinfeleye (1987), health communication is a type of communication that is transmitted through the media in order to provide sufficient health care.

The coronavirus outbreak has sparked a tremendous public outcry, with the media regularly broadcasting it across borders to bring everyone up to date on the pandemic situation [7-9]. According to Reuben, Danladi, Saleh, and Ejembi (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has become a serious public health concern around the world, with governments taking unprecedented Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) efforts to halt the virus's spread. Health communication, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, is the study and practice of disseminating promotional health information, such as through public health campaigns, health education, and between doctor and patient.

According to Okunna (1999), mass media are a range of platforms through which mass communication occurs, yet fake news and conspiracy theories have thrived in recent years, particularly on social media. Furthermore, constant exposure to pandemic news and updates, even when accurate, can instill fear and panic in some people (Ogundele, 2021). However, it is correct to assert that health communication is the dissemination of health-related information by the media in order to influence people's health decisions and improve their health literacy for long-term health development.

The newspaper industry is bombarded with newsworthy events on a daily basis. In deciding which news to report and which to censor, newspaper corporations make decisions, both deliberately and unconsciously, that influence the general public's opinion of what is significant and what is not, and thus news prominence is born. As a result, journalists aim to write pieces that appeal to the audience and are simple to comprehend as short phrases and paragraphs are one of the most noticeable features that are intended to make the text simple to read and comprehend [10].

The depth of a news story is a major deciding factor of the level of understanding the readers or audience will have about the situation. As such, the depth of reporting a news story as straight news is not the same when reporting the same event as a feature story or when expert opinion is examined via interview reporting. In reporting about a certain issue, the media employs different formats of reporting, in some instances, they are reported as straight news, this is usually to create awareness and let the majority know what is going on in their immediate and extended environment.

Another format that can use is a feature, this gives a more detailed information about an already existing or about to exist, it takes a look at the advantages and disadvantages and how its existence or non-existence can affect the populace. This format of reporting is not an opinion piece and only lays the fact of the issue before the reader to make a decision. A feature could also

be done to expose the effect of a phenomenon on the larger populace while an editorial is a corporate voice or position of a media organization on any given issue of public interest. Another format that could be used is interview with professionals who can shed more light on the issue at hand; an interview can be conducted to get updates about an issue from the source. This will include discussing on-going efforts to combat the issue and the current state of activities.

Journalistic writing is, for the most part, impartial, relying on facts and data rather than opinions or emotional appeals. Journalists are responsible for giving readers with accurate facts on an event as it occurred, as well as differing and sometimes contradictory viewpoints on the subject [11]. Furthermore, a good news piece will offer the facts of the event, perhaps with charts or graphs, and will take the time to clarify the numbers or contributing elements so that the reader understands the information better [12].

The Agenda Setting Theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this research. This hypothesis is based on a 1972 study by Maxwell McComb and Donald Shaw, who claimed that the media set the agenda for public debate and discussion based on their focus on a particular issue. As a result, Cohen stated in 1963 that the press is much more than a source of information and opinion. It may not be successful in telling people what to think about most of the time, but it is spectacularly successful at telling its readers what to think about most of the time.

The media arouses public concern about specific topics by constructing and instilling in the people's minds the mental image that some concerns are more significant than others. The public is expected to follow the agenda established by the media. The majority of the images, thoughts, and concerns we have are based on what we read, listen to, or watch on various forms of media [13]. According to Okoro and Agbo (2003) the media can set agenda or ascribe importance to an issue through;

- Number of times and issue is reported.
- Using headlines and picture display strategies to play up a report in the media.
- Reports that give room for points and counter-points

According to Baran and Davis (2009), Bernard Cohen is credited for refining Lipmann's ideas into the theory of Agenda Setting, despite the fact that he, like Lipmann, did not use the name himself. According to Cohen, the press is much more than a conduit of information and opinion; it may not always succeed in telling its readers what to think, but it is eminently successful in telling them what to think about, and as a result, the world appears to different people depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read draw for them.

There are characteristics that identify public issues and topics that have gotten the media's and public's attention. Because some traits are stressed and others are given less attention when the media and the public think and discuss about an issue, each subject has an agenda of attributes. Another facet of the media's agenda-setting influence is the agenda of qualities. As a

result, McCombs believes that while controlling public attention is important, altering the agenda of qualities for a topic or even a public figure is the pinnacle of political power [14].

Methodology

This study employed the content analysis research method which is the systematic procedure designed to examine the content of recorded information [15-18]. pointed out that content analysis is a research tool for the scientific study of speeches, records and other written communications to determine key ideas, themes, words or other messages contained in the record.

Editions of The Nation and The Guardian newspapers that fall within the period of the study were randomly selected to form the sampling size. The study is principally concerned with The Guardian and The Nation newspaper's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing the contents of the Guardian newspapers from February, 2021-April 2021 and The Nation newspaper from February, 2021 - April, 2021. The total sampling frame of the selected newspapers from February, 2021 to April 2021 is 178 editions [19-22].

The sample size of this study was determined using the Taro Yamane sampling method of method.

$$n = N / (1 + N (e^2))$$

Where:

n is the sample size

N is the population of the study

E is the margin error of 0.05

$$n = 178 / (1 + 178(0.0025))$$

$$n = 178 / (1 + 0.445)$$

$$n = 178 / (1.445)$$

$$n = 124 \text{ (derived sample size)}$$

The sample size of this research is 124 editions from The Guardian and The Nation newspapers.

This research employs simple random sampling. Editions of The Nation and The Guardian newspapers that fall within the period of the research are randomly selected to form the conclusion of this research. Prominence was measured by scoring the position occupied by news article in the news article in the news article in the newspaper. Front Page (FP) – Most prominent, Back Page (BP) - Prominent, Inside Page (IP) -Least prominent

Format of presentation of COVID-19 stories: the following will form the unit of analysis.

Straight news, B-Editorials, C- Interview, D- Features

Discussions

One hundred and twenty-nine (124) editions were analyzed from The Guardian and The Nation newspapers. These provide insight into the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic as reported by The Guardian and The Nation newspapers between February 1st 2021 and April 30th 2021. The data were analyzed using the

simple percentage, frequency tables and presented in charts.

RQ1: What is the frequency of reportage of COVID 19 by the select newspapers? (Table 1).

Majority of COVID-19 related stories were published in the inside pages of the newspapers with The Guardian newspaper publishing 40.2% and The Nation newspaper publishing 23.5%. Stories on the front page are always considered the most important and COVID-19 made front page 31 times. Back page stories are considered important just after front page stories and COVID-19 related stories made back page 17 times during the period under review. It can thus be deduced that COVID-19 stories were given a high level of prominence and considered very consequential but The Nation newspaper gave more prominence to COVID-19 stories more than The Guardian newspaper between February 2021 and April 2021 (though The Guardian newspaper reported more).

RQ2: What was the prominence given to COVID 19 stories by the select Newspapers? (Table 2).

This is in line with the position of Lighare (2019) that as the gatekeepers of information, the media is constantly faced with a lot of information that needs to be put out but due to lack of space, they have to prioritize the news they put out. Even at that, the media still needs to allocate the available space to the selected news stories and the positioning of a news story is important and also a big determinant in whether a news story would be missed by a reader. The positioning and the perception of how important it makes a story appear is illustrated as; Front Page-Most Important stories, Back Page – Important stories, Inside Page – Not too important stories.

Table 1. Frequency of COVID-19 related stories.

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
The Guardian	74	56%
The Nation	58	44%
Total	132	100%

Indicates the Frequency of COVID-19 related stories covered by The Guardian and The Nation newspapers between February 2021 and April 2021. The Guardian newspaper covered a total of 74 articles in the period under review with COVID-19 related articles (56%) while The Nation newspaper covered a total of 58 articles (44%). This implies that The Guardian newspaper reported COVID-19 related stories more than The Nation newspaper between February 2021 and April 2021.

Table 2. Prominence given to COVID 19 stories.

Prominence	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
Front Page	14 (10.6%)	17 (12.9%)	31 (23.5%)
Inside Page	53 (40.2%)	31 (23.5%)	84 (63.7%)
Back Page	7 (5.3%)	10 (7.5%)	17 (12.8%)
Total	74 (56.1%)	58 (43.9%)	132 (100%)

On this table, it can be deduced that the newspapers published a total of 132 COVID-19 related stories but 23.5% of COVID-19 related story made it to the front page of both The Guardian and The Nation newspaper with The Nation newspaper having more report on the front page (12.9%) while 10.6% made front page of The Guardian newspaper during this period. Also, The Nation newspaper published more COVID-19 stories at the back page (7.5%) while 5.3% of the back page news stories were published by The Guardian newspaper.

RQ3: What was the format of presentation of COVID-19 stories by the select Newspapers? (Table 3)

This corroborates the conclusion of Apuke and Omar (2020) that the coverage was not in-depth; most stories were short and were mostly straight news. They added that the media should feature more articles, opinions and editorial to help inform and educate Nigerians about the pandemic as well as provide detailed analysis of the steps to take in curtailing the spread of the virus

Table 3. Format of presentation of COVID-19 stories.

Newspaper	Straight News	Editorials	Features	Interviews	Total
The Guardian	38 (28.8%)	6 (4.5%)	21 (15.9%)	9 (6.8%)	74 (56.1%)
The Nation	33 (25%)	8 (6.1%)	10 (7.6%)	7 (5.3%)	58 (43.9%)
Total	71 (53.8%)	14 (10.6%)	31 (23.5%)	16 (12.1%)	132 (100%)

It can be seen that the newspapers deployed the use of straight news than any other formats of reporting followed by features. In reporting the COVID-19 situation in Nigeria by the newspapers in review, straight news constitutes 53.8% of the total news stories while feature news constituted 23.5% and interviews constituted 12.1% followed by editorials (10.6%). This implies that the major format of presentation of COVID-19 stories by the selected newspapers is the straight news followed by features.

Conclusion

This study examined the prominence and format of media reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria by focusing on the frequency of reportage, prominence and format used by the selected newspapers in the reportage of COVID-19 related stories. It has been established by this study that The Guardian and The Nation newspapers gave adequate coverage to COVID-19 related stories, though; The Guardian newspaper reported COVID-19 related stories more than The Nation newspaper between February 2021 and April 2021.

Majority of COVID-19 related stories were published in the inside pages of the newspapers followed by the front page. The Nation newspaper gave more prominence to COVID-19 stories more than The Guardian newspaper between February 2021 and April 2021 (though The Guardian newspaper reported more). The study concludes that the major format of presentation of COVID-19 stories by the selected newspapers is the straight news followed by features thereby ensuring the public is aware of what is going on in their immediate and extended environment through timely publishing of news, running of feature stories on how to stay safe during the period of the pandemic.

The study concludes that both The Guardian and The Nation newspapers did not fail in their assignment as the informants in the society as they frequently give updates to Nigerians on the pandemic. The newspapers provided prompt report of happenings related to the COVID-19 pandemic within and outside the country and also provided information on how to stay safe during the pandemic.

This study recommends that there should be more feature articles, interviews and editorials to help inform and educate Nigerians more about the pandemic and journalists should refrain from too much panic reporting in the straight news to avoid putting the citizens in a state of panic.

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