

Newspaper Coverage of COVID-19 Issues in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: This study examined the Nigerian newspapers' coverage on the fight against COVID-19 using the Guardian, Daily Sun, Daily Trust, and This Day Newspapers as a study. This study was anchored on McComb and Shaw's agenda-setting theory which describes the "ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda". The theory was used to facilitate the understanding of the level of newspapers coverage on COVID-19 prevention and control in Nigeria.

Method: Using content analysis, the study analysed the COVID-19 reports published in the three selected Nigerian newspapers from March 2020 to July 2020 to determine their level of coverage, prominence and reportorial approaches given to COVID-19 issues in Nigeria.

Results: The analysed data shows that Nigerian newspapers gave wide coverage to COVID-19 issues. The study also found that majority of COVID-19 coverage and reports in the selected Nigerian dailies were published in the forms of hard news, features and editorials. Considering the news placement, space allocated for the news and frequency of report of such issues in the selected newspapers, the study therefore concludes that though Nigerian newspapers gave a wide coverage to COVID-19 issues, they do not give a significant prominence to COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Conclusion: Based on the research findings, the study therefore recommends that the Nigerian newspapers should intensify publications on COVID-19 in Nigeria so as to further sensitize the public on COVID-19 menace.

Keywords: Newspaper; Coverage; COVID-19; Outbreak; Prevention; Control

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Introduction

For the past three decades, Nigeria and many sub-Saharan Africa countries had been under the canopy of epidemic which shed them from rapid development [1,2]. Many citizens in most of these countries have been ravaged by diseases such as measles, whooping cough, malaria, yellow fever, typhoid fever, HIV/AIDS, polio, Lassa fever, Ebola, and recently COVID-19 (corona virus). The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019. It became known as a respiratory infection with momentous concern for public health across the globe. Starting with early suspicions of animal to the human transmission for earlier cases, the paradigm has shifted towards human to human transmission through droplets, contacts and fomites [3]. The virus is caused by a novel and more powerful type of Coronavirus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) [4]. As of 21 May 2020, the COVID-19

pandemic has affected 213 countries around the world with about 5, 171, 936 cases worldwide. Over 2, 068, 371 people recovered from the disease, while about 333, 100 were dead [5].

In Nigeria, the first confirmed case of the pandemic was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus [6]. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, involving a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen [7]. As of 21 May 2020, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) reported 4971 cases, 1070 recovered and 164 deaths [8].

The widespread of COVID-19 has attracted the attention of medical and health organizations, research scientists (epidemiologist) as well as the media, who have contributed immensely in finding out the cause of this sickness, its symptoms and prevention as well as creating awareness of the necessary

information that will aid in the eradication of this ailment. It is often said that education is the vaccine against every ailment [9]. Thus, many media organizations are rising to the challenge by promoting awareness of COVID-19 and educating the public on the prevention and containment measures. Unlike diseases such as the flu and other agents, media coverage has described COVID-19 as a unique threat, which further exaggerates the panic, stress and the potential for hysteria [10]. The mass media is considered a source of health information that helps to shape the way people act and react towards health issues [11].

Thus, the relationship between the mass media and the spread of disease is mutual and complex. On one hand, the mass media reports concerning the COVID-19 may influence the attitude of the public towards the epidemic as well as enhance their self-protecting awareness. People informed by the mass media reports tend to change their behaviours by taking correct precautions, such as frequent hand-washing, use of hand sanitizer, wearing protective masks and keeping social distances. Moreover, the degree of mass media interest over the COVID-19 will inform the public on the severity of the outbreak. No wonder, the mass media has long been recognized as a powerful tool for shaping how people experience the world and themselves [8,12,13].

Considering the deadly nature of this disease, the lives claimed, the damages it has cost the country, as well as the media enormous influence in educating and empowering individuals towards the prevention and control of the pandemic, it became pertinent to assess the Nigerian newspapers coverage of COVID-19 outbreak as well as the campaign of its precautionary measures towards the prevention and control of the pandemic in the Nigeria, thus, the thrust of this study.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the Nigerian newspapers' coverage of COVID-19 cases and campaigns in Nigeria. Specifically, this study seeks to;

1. To examine the level of coverage Nigerian newspapers gave to reports and campaigns on COVID-19 issues.
2. To ascertain the degree of prominence Nigerian newspapers gave to COVID-19 issues.
3. To assess the reportorial approach of Nigerian newspapers on COVID-19 outbreak and campaigns of its precautionary measures.

This study was anchored on McComb and Shaw's agenda-setting theory which was proposed in 1972. Agenda-setting theory describes the "ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" [14]. Agenda-setting theory maintains that the media plays an influential role on how issues gain public attention. The theory instituted a relationship between the rate of media coverage of an issue and the value people place on such a story. This indicates that the media determine the issues to be considered more important by the public [15]. This can be achieved *via* frequency of reporting, reportorial approach as well the prominence given to the reports through headline display, news placement, pictures, layout/space allocation in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or timing on radio and television.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative content analysis to analyze the manifest content of the selected editions of four widely read newspapers: The Guardian, This Day, Daily Trust, and Daily Sun newspapers. These newspapers were selected because of their national reach and wide readership. In addition, the selected newspapers present views from both popular and elite Nigerian publics and they offer a fairly relative representation of different political, geographical and ethnic divides in the country.

The content analysis was used as a tool to analyze the frequency, prominence or importance as well as direction/slant of news on COVID-19 from February 2020 to August 2020. This period was selected because it was the alarming period of COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria. More so, the unit of measurement or analysis included news stories, features, editorials, special reports, columns and advertorials. The sample size of the study was 104 editions of the four selected Nigerian newspapers. This size was chosen based on the recommendation that selecting one edition per week would be appropriate for a newspaper study extending up to a period of six months and since this study is up to six months, selection of one newspaper edition per week would be considered suitable [16,17]. Hence, for each of the four newspapers used in this study, 26 editions were selected (one from each of the 26 weeks that make up the six months period-27th February-27th August 2020). However, not all the daily editions were used; the reviewed editions were picked alternately. For the first week of each newspaper, Monday edition was chosen. For the second week, Tuesday edition was selected and this was used for the remaining weeks and months. This format helps to gather a total of 104 editions across the four selected newspapers. Coding sheet which was accompanied by a coding guide was developed and used to gather news stories, features, editorials, columns, pictorials, opinion articles, advertorials/campaigns and cartoons relating to COVID-19, thus the unit of analysis.

A number of content categories were developed to aid the coding of the newspaper materials analyzed. They were as follows: Newspaper Title, Study Time Frame, Geographical Focus of COVID-19 Campaigns/News, Reportorial Approach, News Placement, Volume of space allotted for the story, source of the report, tone of reportage (alarming', 'neutral' or 'reassuring') as well as frequency and depth of daily reportage of COVID-19 issues. For inclusion, articles that reported on COVID-19 in Nigeria; thus, articles on COVID-19 that focused on other countries were excluded. More so, articles that only mentioned COVID-19 in the body were also excluded. Descriptive analysis was employed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to interpret the statistical relationships among the relevant variables.

Results

Level of Nigerian newspapers coverage of COVID-19 issues

In examining the level of coverage Nigerian newspapers gave to reports and campaigns on COVID-19 issues, the data gathered were analyzed and presented in the **Table 1** below:

A total of 1300 articles were published between March and August 2020. However, the data in table one indicates that after categorizing the newspapers contents, 389 articles were found useful for analysis. The analyzed data comparatively shows a significant difference in the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria; Daily Sun (M=3.48, SD=1.82, P<0.001) (n=111, 28%) reported more stories on COVID-19 than The Guardian (M=3.19, SD=1.53) (n=98, 26%), This Day (M=2.59, SD=1.48) (n=93, 26%) and Daily Trust (M=2.46, SD=1.42) (n=87, 22%). Generally, Nigerian national dailies significantly covered the pandemic in Nigeria (F(4, 389)=11.72, P<0.001).

Table 1: Level of Nigerian newspapers coverage of COVID-19 issues.

Nigerian newspapers	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard deviation
The Guardian	98	26%	3.19	1.53
This Day	93	24%	2.59	1.48
Daily Trust	87	22%	2.46	1.42
Daily Sun	111	28%	3.48	1.82
Total	389	100%	11.72	6.25

The degree of prominence Nigerian newspapers offered to COVID-19 issues

To ascertain the degree of prominence Nigerian newspapers gave to COVID-19 issues, the data gathered on the news placement, space allocation and frequency of daily reportage of COVID-19 issues were analyzed and presented in the **Table 2** below:

Table 2: COVID-19 news placements on the selected newspapers.

	The guardian	This day	Daily trust	Daily sun
Front Page	15%	12%	12%	16%
Inside Page	73%	69%	74%	75%
Back Page	12%	19%	14%	9%
Total	100% (N=98)	100% (N=93)	100% (N=87)	100% (N=111)

The data in table two shows that majority of COVID-19 news items published were placed in the inside pages of all the selected newspapers. The data also reveals that 19%, 14%, 12%, and 9% of the news items published were placed at the back pages of The Guardian, This Day and Daily Trust and Daily Sun newspapers respectively, while 16%, 15%, 12%, and 12% of the news items published were placed at the front pages of This Day, The Guardian, Daily Sun, and Daily Trust newspapers respectively (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Volume of space allocated for COVID-19 news items.

Volume of space	The guardian	This day	Daily trust	Daily sun
Full Page	2%	3%	1%	4%
Half Page	34%	32%	39%	42%
One Column	6%	12%	8%	11%
Quarter Page	48%	45%	47%	38%
Classified Page	10%	8%	5%	5%
Total	100% (N=98)	100% (N=93)	100% (N=87)	100% (N=111)

The data in table three shows that majority of the COVID-19 news items published in the selected newspapers were allocated quarter pages, followed by the news items that were allocated half a page, one column and classified pages. The data also shows that in The Guardian and Daily Trust newspapers, only 2% and 1% of the COVID-19 news items were allocated full pages respectively (**Table 4**).

Table 4: Frequency of daily reportage of Lassa fever news items.

Number of news items	The guardian	This day	Daily trust	Daily sun
1-2 news items	51%	58%	53%	52%
3-4 news items	35%	22%	25%	23%
5-6 news items	14%	20%	22%	25%
Total	100% (N=98)	100% (N=93)	100% (N=87)	100% (N=111)

The data in table four shows that 1-2 COVID-19 news items were mostly published in each edition of all the selected newspapers, followed by 3-4 new items and lastly 5-6 news items in each edition of the selected newspapers. The analyzed data indicates that the selected newspaper gave regular and wide coverage to COVID-19 issues in Nigeria over the period of study.

Therefore, results in tables 2, 3 and 4 suggest that the selected Nigerian newspapers do not give a significant prominence to COVID-19 issues covered and published in their newspapers.

Reportorial format used in the coverage of the COVID-19 issues in Nigeria

To assess the reportorial approach of Nigerian newspapers in covering COVID-19 issues, the data gathered were analyzed and presented in **Table 5** below:

The type of new contents identified in table five were hard news, features, advertorials/campaigns, editorials, columns, pictorials, cartoons, and other news items that relates to COVID-19. The data in table five reveals that COVID-19 news items published in all the selected newspaper were mostly reported in the form of hard news, with The Guardian newspaper rating the highest. This is followed by COVID-19 issues reported in the form of advertorials/campaigns, features, pictorials, editorials, columns, cartoon, and other news items.

Table 5: Lassa fever news reportorial approach.

Subject of story	The guardian	This day	Daily trust	Daily sun
Hard News	32%	27%	29%	26%
Features	22%	20%	16%	21%
Advertorials/ Campaigns	24%	20%	27%	28%
Editorials	4%	11%	10%	5%
Columns	3%	5%	2%	4%
Pictorials	10%	11%	10%	9%
Cartoons	2%	1%	2%	2%
Others	3%	5%	4%	5%

Total	100% (N=98)	100% (N=93)	100% (N=87)	100% (N=111)
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The findings therefore suggest that majority of COVID-19 news coverage in the selected Nigerian dailies were published in the forms of hard news, followed by features to advertorials/campaigns.

Discussion

The study examined the Nigerian newspapers' coverage of COVID-19 issues in Nigeria over a period of six months (27th February-27th August 2020). The presentation and analysis of the data above shows in clear terms the level of coverage the Nigerian newspapers gave to COVID-19 issues. Specifically, the study focused on the level of coverage and prominence given to COVID-19 issues by the four selected Nigerian dailies (The Guardian, This Day, Daily Trust and Daily Sun). The study also assessed the reportorial approach the selected newspapers used in reporting COVID-19 issues.

In assessing the frequency of coverage of COVID-19 issues in Nigeria, the study found that 389 (5%) out of 8,213 news items in the four selected newspapers between February 27 to August 27, 2020, were classified as COVID-19 stories, while 7,824 news items representing 95 percent of the news items were reports that covered other aspects of human life. During the first month (February 27-March 27) of the out-break in Nigeria, the media had fewer stories; in the second and third month (April and May), there was an increase in media coverage; while the fourth, fifth and sixth month (June, July and August) triggered a huge news wave. The study observed that newspapers based in the Northern part of Nigeria had more stories on COVID-19, and a possible explanation for this could be because the northern part of Nigeria has witnessed increased cases of COVID-19. By implication, it could be deduced that the Nigerian media increased their interest on the reportage of the pandemic because the pandemic intensified from March.

More so, the data in table four shows that 1-2 COVID-19 news items were mostly published in each edition of all the selected newspapers, followed by 3-4 new items and lastly 5-6 news items in each edition of the selected newspapers. The clear implication of this is that the selected newspapers relatively gave regular and wide coverage to COVID-19 issues within the period under study. In other words, the four selected Nigerian Newspapers have published many articles and news about the outbreak, spread, symptoms, prevention and control of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The sensitization programmes and media fight against the spread of the epidemic were assisted by these newspaper house in order to enlighten the citizens on the deadly nature of the virus and how to detect, prevent, cure and control the spread. These findings concur with the findings made in earlier studies that Nigerian newspapers give wide coverage to health issues in Nigeria [18-22].

To examine the depth of coverage, the study found that though the Nigerian media had a considerable number of stories on COVID-19 outbreak, yet, most of these stories were short, suggesting a lack of in-depth writing to explain more about the virus. In the contemporary digital news environment, journalists are under pressure to deliver content quickly, and this may be the reason why most of the newspapers had shorter stories.

In an attempt to find out the prominence given to COVID-19 reports by the selected Nigerian newspapers, the data analyses in table two shows that majority of these COVID-19 reports were placed on the inside pages of the selected newspaper, followed by the back page placement to front page placement in the selected newspapers. More so, the data in table three shows that majority of the COVID-19 news items published in the selected newspapers were allocated quarter pages, followed by the news items that were allocated half a page, one column and classified pages respectively. On the other hand, the data in table 4 shows that 1-2 COVID-19 news items were mostly published in each edition of all the selected newspapers, followed by 3-4 new items and lastly 5-6 news items in each edition of the selected newspapers. The analysed data indicates that the selected newspaper gave regular and wide coverage to COVID-19 issues in Nigeria over the period of study.

Therefore, results in Tables 2, 3 and 4 suggest that though the selected Nigerian newspapers gave wide coverage to COVID-19 issues, they fail to give a significant prominence to those issues covered and published in their newspapers.

In assessing the reportorial approaches used in the coverage of COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria, the study found that majority of the entire stories studied were presented as straight news stories, followed by features to advertorials/campaigns. This outcome is consistent with the research of Apuke and Omar that found that the newspaper examined essentially made use of straight news in reporting the impact of COVID-19 on Nigerian economy [12]. Thus, the study therefore maintained that Nigerian newspapers used more of straight news because they are more concerned with delivering the first hand news on COVID-19 to the public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

COVID-19 is an endemic and a highly contagious disease that can result to critical health conditions and death. Hence, the role of the media becomes very crucial to the prevention and control of COVID-19 in Nigeria. From the research findings, the study therefore conclude that Nigerian newspapers have been instrumental to providing vital information to the public on the nature, symptoms, prevention, control and medication of COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the news placement, space allocated for the news and frequency of reporting of such issues in the selected newspapers, the study therefore concludes that though Nigerian newspapers gave wide coverage to COVID-19 issues, they did not give a significant prominence to COVID-19 issues in the country.

The study also concludes that the majority of COVID-19 coverage and reports in the selected Nigerian dailies were published in the forms of hard news, advertorials/campaigns, features and pictorials.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nigerian newspapers should intensify publications on outbreak, symptoms, prevention and control of COVID-19 in Nigeria.
2. Media houses, by means of corporate social responsibility, should organize enlightenment programmes on COVID-19 in local languages in order to disseminate vital information to the rural dwellers who cannot afford to buy or read newspapers.
3. The government, health institutions, non-governmental and private sector organizations should actively partner with media houses in a bid to providing steady and relevant information and updates on COVID-19 to the public.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable

Conflict of Interest

None

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Author's Contributions

Chinedu-Okeke led, conceptualized, and wrote the paper; Agbasimelo reviewed the relevant literature; Onyejelem and Obi analyzed the data. Chinedu-Okeke and Agbasimelo supervised and critically reviewed the manuscript. All the authors have read and agreed to the final version of the paper.

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