
MEDIA COVERAGE OF CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19 PANDEMIC) IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE EDITIONS OF VANGUARD, DAILY TRUST AND THE SUN NEWSPAPERS.

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ABSTRACT

The mass media, which is the watchdog of society, plays significant roles in addressing critical societal issues and improving the people's general well-being. In recent times, promoting public health and preventing the spread of dangerous diseases has become an integral part of the mass media. This paper carried out an overview of how online newspapers in Nigerian played a significant role in enlightening the public about the Coronavirus (COVID19 pandemic). The content analysis research method was used for four months, from 28th February 2020 (a day after the pandemic's first case was recorded in Nigeria) to 29th June 2020. The online editions of Vanguard, Daily Trust, and The Sun newspapers were analyzed, taking into cognizant the Covid-19 news stories, opinion, and editorials in order to find out the extent to which online newspapers in Nigeria paid more attention to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the area of educating and enlightening the community about the fatal nature of the disease and how to live with it. The result shows that all the three newspapers analyzed gave special consideration to the Covid-19 pandemic in their daily reporting. The paper recommends that public health issues and the outbreak of a deadly disease should be given more attention. The journalists covering such issues should be well equipped and research-oriented in their newsgathering and reporting.

Keywords: Coronavirus (COVID-19), newspapers, Health Communication, Agenda Setting theory and Social Responsibility theory.

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Introduction

The COVID -19 is a viral infection from a virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which has not been traced in humans. It was first found in one of china's city, which is called Wuhan, in December 2019. It also subsequently spread to other 201 countries and territories. Since its discovery, its geographic distribution continues to evolve (Phuong La V. et al., 2020). The Global COVID-19 Tracker Map at John Hopkins University, as of April 4, 2020, more than 1,123,024 individuals have been infected, and more than 59,140 persons lost their lives as well. On April 8, 2020, the Covid 19 cases have increased from 1,123,024 to 1,450,343 globally. The statistic shows that more than one hundred and fifteen differences countries have found many cases. As for

April, China, the USA, Italy, Iran, and South Korea reported the highest cases (www.wikipedia.org). At the beginning of the disease, the other parts of the globe, including the African region, did not take serious prevention measures to contain the emerging outbreak, which in recent time resulted in major public health challenges, social turmoil, and economic difficulties not only in Wuhan, China where the pandemic originated but in all the global continents including Africa and Nigeria. According to Ahmad et al. (2020), as of April 13, 2020, the outbreak has resulted in estimated 1,776,867 cases and 111,828 deaths globally. The virus can quickly spread within society in the same way as influenza through respiratory droplets when an infected person sneezes or coughs in society. It normally takes five days before showing symptoms. Fever and higher temperatures, cough, and difficulty in



breathing are the most popular symptoms of the virus. Acute respiratory distress syndrome and pneumonia are the most complicated diseases associated with the virus (www.wikipedia.org).

Even though currently there is not any vaccine to use for Covid-19, but many scientists and medical doctors committed to the creation of a vaccine. However, many suggestions and recommendations are provided by experts in the field to prevent the spread of the disease. Such recommendations and suggestions include daily hygiene like washing hands regularly, avoiding crowded areas, wearing a face mask, one to two-meter distance, etc. (WHO) (www.wikepedia.org).

2.2 The Mass Media and the Challenge for Serving the Nigerian Populous

The mass media aims to improve the well-being of the people through its news reporting and emphasize critical issues like coronavirus and other deadly diseases. One of the significant roles of communication in modern society is to educate people about the risk and prevention of the spread of any virus (Onekutu & Ojebode 2007.p 83). The mass media has global effects on people's lives by improving education, economic, cultural growth, and continued existence of a nation irrespective of the society it operates. The mass media educate the people about public health and diseases and how to prevent the spread of diseases.

The media's primary function is to provide information that could educate, entertain, and inform the target audiences. The various mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, internet, etc.) used many strategies to call the readers and listeners' attention on any issue that needs people's attention (Uwom & Oloyede, 2014). They also argue that media provide adequate information to society on many issues, including health matters (ibid, 2014). The mass media, journalists, and educationists teach and educate people and mobilise them toward achieving government goals and policies on national development. Both prints and electronic propagate some of the government's agenda and convince the public to follow them. Journalists also play a vital role in monitoring society and publishing some news based on what they have monitored (Asemah, 2009). The mass media act as a mirror to humanity or a "window to the world" and is used as resources

to understand the community O' shaghness (1999). However, a study (Fremuth, Greeberg and Dewith jean (1984) in Ghanta (2012) show that many individuals depend on information received from journalists for their related health issues.

Despite the growth and expansion of health facilities in Nigeria, the general health care and living conditions of Nigerians are still feeble. Shortages of health equipment, including ventilators, isolation centres, drugs, and personnel, are still in vogue in the health sector. In 2005, only 57% of Nigerians had access to clean drinking water and adequate sanitation. These increased the threats of infectious disease. Nigeria has an average life expectancy of 46.5years (UNDP, 2007, cited in Okidu 2005.p.10).

2.3 The Role of Mass Media in Health Promotion and education amid Covid-19 Pandemic

Journalists used newspapers, radio, social media, and television to educate and persuade the target audiences to embrace new activities or to remind them of critical information and have played significant roles in the promotion of health education among people dwelling in both urban and rural areas (Boyd et al., 2009). This is evident with the efforts made by both local and international media in the area of public awareness and health education when the virus starts. USAID (2009). Due to media's vital position in society toward providing information on public health, USAID (2009) argues that media provides correct information on how people should follow a good lifestyle to improve their health and prevent the spreading of any kind of disease. But to provide enlightenment, the journalists have to interact with the specialists on such particular disease to get knowledge and understanding it; this allows them to communicate with society and inform them all the issues surrounding the disease. This practice of people working in the media is also happening during this pandemic (Coronavirus). Mass Media such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Aljazeera International, and Voice of America (VOA), among others, have dedicated time to different sensitization programmes with the view to mitigating the spread of the deadly virus. For instance, BBC and VOA have dedicated hours for their air-times to keep people up-to-date about the

Covid-19 pandemic using both official and local dialects.

However, in Nigeria, both broadcasting and print media intensified efforts to inform and educate Nigerians on the ongoing pandemic. Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), through its networks nationwide, performed miraculously in the area of daily awareness and enlightenment programmes on the Covid-19 pandemic as it was advised by Effiong et al. (2020) to maintain its effort in the enlightenment campaign on the pandemic. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and states' owned radio stations dedicated different sensitization programmes, jingles, and drama in local dialects with the view to containing the Corona Virus epidemic. Nasarawa Broadcasting Services, Lafia, and Freedom Radio in Kano introduced similar programmes in Hausa vernacular named " Life with Corona Virus" (Rayuwa da Korona) in which people are educated and updated about the Covid-19 pandemic. The Daily Trust, Vanguard, and the Sun online newspapers have equally joined the crusade in which they reported the daily update of the Covid-19 pandemic in most of their daily publications.

The mass media generally also assist those working in a healthy environment to educate the community on any health-related issue. Because both print and electronic media serve as a face-to-face channel of interaction, which sometimes needs many workers and resources to target the community without considering whether the community is small or larger. Most of the time, mass media provides information on health issues to the people living in a rural area (USAID, 2006). Despite the increasing daily number of the Covid-19 cases in Nigeria, health education and information often rely on the mass media remain the only option that helped tremendously towards reducing the number of deaths and increasing numbers of those recovered from the pandemic. The Weekly Epidemiological report released by the NCDC official website shows that out of 113,575 suspected Coronavirus cases, 19,808 people across 35 states, including Federal Capital Territory (FCT), are now confirmed to have COVID-19 pandemic with the record of 506 deaths.

Table: 2 The Weekly Epidemiological report released by the Nigerian NCDC on June 20, 2020

| Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) As at week 25 | | | |
|---|------------------------|---------------|---|
| Suspected cases | Confirmed cases | Deaths | Number of States and LGAs affected |
| 113,575 | 19,808 | 506 | States: 35+ FCT |

2.4 Research Objectives

The mass media (Radio, Television, Newspapers, Magazines, and New media) have the autonomous power to influence health-related behavior among the public. The study analyzed online editions of the three selected newspapers, namely, Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun online editions, concerning public enlightenment about Coronavirus's outbreak in Nigeria and beyond. The main objective is to unveil the coverage of health-related issues in terms of prominence, the extent of coverage, and frequency in reporting the Coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria. It is believed that the mass media's social responsibilities are to give prominence to health-related issues and inform the public about the dangers of any ailment. According to Adelakun, Adenle, Uyo & Aliede (2013), media roles in health-related issues include:

Staging health related programs such as health talks,

Inform and explain to the public new government policies on health,

Collaborate with health organizations (government and non-governmental) to assist people with health-related issues,

Report epidemics before it spreads,

Report the findings of health researchers to help in health decision making.

with the above-expected roles of the mass media, the current study is set to achieve the following objectives:

1. to understand the role of online newspapers in covering the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. to determine the extent of coverage given to Coronavirus issues by the Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun online newspapers from 29th February 2020 to 29th June 2020.
3. to examine the prominence given to the coverage of Coronavirus by Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun Online Newspapers.
4. to evaluate the frequency of news reports, opinion, and editorials on Coronavirus pandemic by Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun Online Newspapers within the study period.

1. Theoretical framework

The theories used to guide the current study are: Agenda Setting Theory and Social Responsibility Theory.

1.1 Agenda Setting Theory (AST)

The AST claims that journalists can use media to influence individuals' thinking because it influences the nation. Through media, people use to change many things in their communities and their nation at large. Kunczick (1988:192) argues that the chance for agenda-setting by the mass media becomes improved when the value structure is in a state of flux.

According to Okoro and Agbo (2003.p.31), as cited in Ate, (2008.p.31), the mass media can set an agenda through:

- The quality or frequency of reporting on an issue.
- Prominence given to the report-through headlines display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, film, graphics or timing on radio and television.
- The degree of conflicts generated in the report and
- Cumulative media-specific effects over time.

Lang and Lang (1960) lay more emphasis on two important parameters in agenda-setting.

1. The reciprocal effect that more or less has to do with the media presence at the scene of an event and
2. The landslide effect which has to do with the effect made by media handling and reporting.

Besides, Kunczick (1988:192) maintains that suitable methods for investigating agenda settings are to compare what the journalists are saying within a given period and the people's views on such a particular issue. The greater the consonance, the more the agenda-setting hypothesis is confirmed. Marshall McLuhan (1968:204) claims that the media can colour incidents by manipulating them and using them in a specific path or ignoring them. This theory is suitable for current research. It enhances understanding of how the mass media set an agenda to the public about the Coronavirus pandemic by emphasizing the disease by providing several media contents through accurate, objective,

and balanced reports.

1.2 Social Responsibility Theory (SRT)

This theory is an expansion of the libertarian theory of the press, which places focus more on the ethical and community responsibility of persons as well as institutions that operate the mass media (Okoro & Naji, 2012). The theory is based on the principle that the press must represent all aspects and interests in society. In other words, the theory suggests that the mass media must represent all strata of society (Stephen, 2014). Capturing it succinctly, it presupposes that newspapers must have a social conscience, be devoted to public welfare and public service they should be responsive to problems in the society (Johnson, Layefa, Taiwo, 2016, p. 7). Denic McQuail (1987:117-118) identified the below principles within the SRT:

- . That media should focus on its primary responsibilities for societal integration.
 - i. That the above responsibilities should be met through prioritizing on professionalism and news values such as higher standards of accuracy, truth, objectivity and balance.
 - ii. That media should always be guided by the institutional law to be able to carry out its primary functions in the society.
 - v. That Media practitioners should refrain from any report that may cause social unrest such as violence, crime, civil disorder or cause hatred to minority groups in the society.
- . That the media practitioners should always consider the diversity within the social system and allow the individual input in the process of discharging their primary responsibilities.
 - i. Taking into consideration the principle (i) above, the society has the right to hold the media responsible for ensuring a peaceful and efficient environment for all the citizenry.
 - ii. The society and the employers within the media industries are to be held responsible for actions and inaction of the practitioners.

In linking this theory to this study, the media in executing their social duty are expected to shape opinion and provide avenue for understanding the Coronavirus pandemic in the society. Thus, it is the social responsibility of the Nigerian press to constantly report issues about the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

2 Methodology

For this paper, the content analysis research approach was employed. Content analysis is an approach used to study or investigate the content of messages within daily communication (Stacks and Hocking, 1992). For Barelson (1971) cited in Umuerri (2006, p.9), it is a procedure or research technique used to describe the communication systematically and qualitatively. At the same time, Asemah et al. (2012) argue that Content analysis is an analysis based on the mass media message's manifest content. It is the systematic method of analyzing message content. It is appropriate when one aims to examine the manifest content of communication in the print media.

The current research population is all the newspapers that have online versions in Nigeria. Only three Nigerian national dailies (Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun Online Newspapers) are published from 28th April to 29th June 2020 were purposively selected as the study's sample. The analysis units are the news stories, opinions, features, and all editorials found on the online editions' front and inside page, especially those relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.1 Data Analysis and Result

A total of 87 editions covering Covid-19 related news stories, editorials, opinion, and features from three selected newspapers (Vanguard, Daily Trust, and the Sun newspapers) were generated and analyzed. The data analyzed were collected between 28th February 2020 (a day after the pandemic's first case was recorded in Nigeria) to 29th July 2020. The tables below show the extent of Covid-19 coverage in respect of the three selected newspapers.

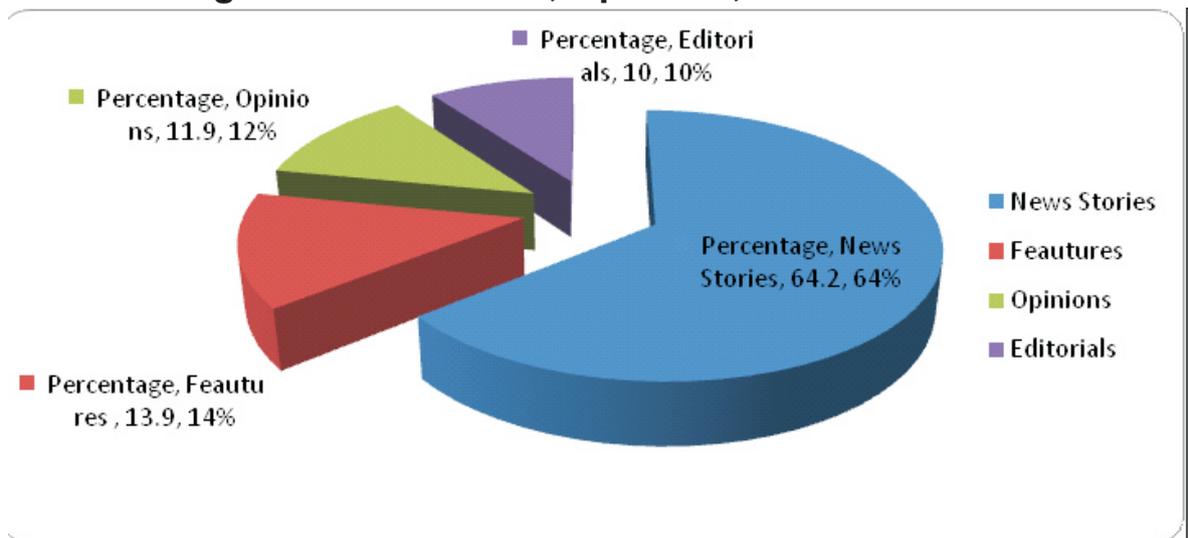
Table 3: General Summary of all Three Publications on Covid-19 Pandemic

| Newspapers | News Stories | Opinion | Features | Editorials | Total | Percentage |
|--------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| Vanguard | 264 | 62 | 49 | 51 | 426 | 36.4 % |
| Daily Trust | 249 | 49 | 43 | 37 | 378 | 32.3 % |
| The Sun | 237 | 52 | 48 | 29 | 366 | 31.3 % |
| Total | 750 | 163 | 140 | 117 | 1170 | 100 % |

Table 3 above indicates that the Vanguard online edition has 427 news stories, opinion, features, and editorials representing 36.4% of all Covid-19 reports appeared on the three newspapers within the

period under review, followed by the Daily Trust online edition with 378 news stories, opinion, features and editorials representing 32.3%.

Percentage of News Stories, Opinions, Futures and Editorials



The pie chart above has shown that the news stories on the Covid-19 pandemic dominated the three online newspapers under review, with 64.2%, followed by features with 13.9%. Opinions on Covid-19 also came third with 11.9%. Editorial on

Covid-19 pandemic came last with 10%. Thus, there is a need for online newspapers in Nigeria to give more priority to Covid-19 and other deadly viruses when writing editorials.

Table 4: Distribution of Lead Stories on Covid-19

| Newspapers | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| Vanguard | 36 | 36.4 % |
| Daily Trust | 34 | 34.3 % |
| The Sun | 29 | 29.3 % |
| Total | 99 | 100 % |

Table 4 above shows that 99 lead stories on the Covid-19 pandemic appeared on the front pages of all three publications throughout the period under review. The Vanguard online newspaper has 36 stories representing 36.4%. Daily Trust online newspaper also carried 34 leads stories on Covid-19

representing 34.3%, followed by The Sun online newspaper with 29 lead stories representing 29.3% of the entire lead stories on the Covid-19 that appeared in all three publications. This indicates that all three online newspapers analyzed paid more emphasis on the Coronavirus (Covid-19 pandemic).

Table 5: Distribution of Editions with special Update on Covid-19 on the Front page

| Newspapers | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| Vanguard | 8 | 27.6 % |
| Daily Trust | 21 | 72.4% |
| The Sun | 0 | 0 % |
| Total | 29 | 100 % |

Table 5 is about distributing editions with a special update on the Covid-19 pandemic among the three online newspapers analyzed. Out of 29 Covid-19 special updates appeared on all papers' front pages, the Vanguard online edition carried 8 Covid-19 special updates representing 27.6%. Daily Trust online edition carried 21 Covid-19 special updates representing 72.4%, while the Sun online edition did not carry any Covid-19 special update on the front page throughout the period under review. This shows that apart from routine reporting on Covid-

19, the Daily Trust and Vanguard online newspapers paid more attention to informing the public about the Coronavirus pandemic by publishing the Covid-19 special updates on the front pages. This, however, justified the commitment of the online newspapers in Nigerian by complimenting the effort of the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) towards containing the pandemic.

Table 6: Contents of the 99 Lead Stories on Covid-19 in the Three Selected Online Newspapers

| Content of Three Newspapers | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Contact Tracing and New Covid-19 cases, | 12 | 12.1% |
| Death and Patience Discharge | 6 | 6.1% |
| Quarantine/ Isolation/ Lockdown, Traveling banned and Covid-19 status | 34 | 34.3% |
| Use of Face Mask and sanitizers | 7 | 7.1% |
| Comparing Covid-19 with other Diseases | 4 | 4.0% |
| Socioeconomic effect of Covid-19 | 6 | 6.1% |
| Palliatives, Donations and funding of Covid-19 | 7 | 7.1% |
| Sensitization and measures of Prevention to take | 12 | 12.1% |
| Discrimination of Covid-19 patient | Nil | Nil |
| Response on Covid-19 test and Clinical/medical Trial | 11 | 11.1% |
| Total | 99 | |

Table 6 shows the distribution of lead Stories' contents of the three online newspapers analyzed. News reports on Quarantine, Isolation, lockdown, traveling banned, and Covid-19 status dominated all the editions with 34 news reports representing 34.3%, followed by Contact tracing and new Covid-19 cases with 12 news reports representing 12.1%. Sensitization and measures of Prevention to take by the public equally has 12 news reports representing 12.1%, followed by Response on Covid-19 test and Clinical/medical Trial with 11 news reports representing 11.1%. Other news reports appeared on the three online newspapers include Palliatives, Donations/funding of Covid-19, and Use of Face Mask /sanitizers news report, each representing 7.1% for each one. Topics on Socioeconomic effect of Covid-19 followed by Death and Patience Discharge has six news reports, each representing

6.1% of the total 99 lead stories that appeared on the three online editions. Four (4) lead stories representing 4.0% focused on the Comparison of Covid-19 with other Diseases. The above findings reveal that the three online newspapers analyzed gave more emphasis on News reports on Quarantine, Isolation, lockdown, traveling banned, and Covid-19 status.

5.1 CONCLUSION

Coronavirus (Covid-19 epidemic) has resulted in estimated cases of 14,454,023 and 605,619 death worldwide. (Worldometer, 2020). The pandemic equally caused socioeconomic turmoil not only in China and some Western countries but in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. The markets, schools, and places of worship were locked down due to the fear of the pandemic. To reduce the confusion and

mayhem caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Mass media (Television, Radio, Newspapers, and their online editions) paid particular attention to educating and informing the public about the danger of the pandemic. Analysis of the three online newspapers studied from 28th February to 29th June 2020 has shown that all the editions have given adequate attention to different issues of the Coronavirus pandemic. Vanguard online edition carried 36 lead stories on the Covid-19, followed by the Daily Trust online edition with 34 lead stories. The Sun online edition came last among three editions with 29 lead stories. The finding has equally shown that all three online editions provided diverse forms of information on Coronavirus, from straight news to editorials to feature reports and opinion. The Vanguard and the Daily Trust online editions have dedicated more of their space, especially on the front page for the Covid-19 special update.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the slow compliance with the prevention measures of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the study recommends that the mass media generally must invest to a large extent in audience related research with the view to understand the audience perception in relation to the pandemic and other health issues.

The study also recommends that the issues concerning public health and the outbreak of deadly diseases should be given more attention by both the government and media. The journalists covering news reports related to viruses and other serious ailments should be well equipped and research-oriented in their news gathering and reporting.

The government should encourage the online mass media outfits by giving them special support; this will enable the online mass media to concentrate more on reporting serious issues of public concern.

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