

# Nigerian Online Newspapers Coverage of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Wole Alawode, Chukwudinma Okoji

*Department of Mass Communication, The Federal Polytechnic, Offa, Kwara State Nigeria.*

*Department of Mass Communication, The Federal Polytechnic, Offa, Kwara State Nigeria.*

Submitted: 20-06-2022

Revised: 29-06-2022

Accepted: 01-07-2022

## ABSTRACT

The press is influential in determining what people think and say. The frequent reportage of issues reveals how important the press wants the audience to place on such matters. Unlike previous reportage of health issues, the coronavirus pandemic became a global health threat, with life-threatening conditions and easily transferrable. This study examined Nigerian online newspaper coverage of the coronavirus pandemic to understand the frequency and depth of coverage, emerging themes, and tone of framing. This study employed the agenda-setting theory while three national and widely read online newspapers – Punch, The Vanguard and Nigerian Tribune were purposively selected and content analyzed. The study period ranged from March 2020, when the pandemic forced the Federal Government to announce a nationwide lockdown, to November 2020, when the lockdown started to ease away gradually. The results revealed extensive coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, mostly reported as short articles. Also, dominant themes focused on news updates on infection and death rates, while these articles were reported with more negative frames using fear appeals. Although the Nigerian press extensively carried out their agenda-setting functions, they were mixed with fear appeals. For health pandemics such as the coronavirus, it is recommended that the press should focus more on positive frames and less on negative frames.

**Keywords:** coronavirus reportage in Nigeria, COVID-19, media reportage, agenda-setting, Nigerian online newspapers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus (also known as COVID-19), from the family of Coronavirus (others include SARS, H5N1, H1N1, and MERS), is a contagious respiratory illness transmitted through the eyes, nose, and mouth via droplets from coughs and sneezes, close contact with infected persons and contaminated surfaces. Coronavirus was first

identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (ECDC, 2020), where it spread worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared COVID-19 a global health pandemic as statistics as of January 3, 2021, reveal that an estimated over 83 million reported people were infected with the virus, with over 1.8 million deaths globally since the pandemic started (WHO, 2021). The contagion could lead to severe respiratory problems or death, particularly among the elderly and persons with underlying chronic illnesses. However, some infected persons are carriers of the virus with no symptoms, while others may experience only a mild illness and recover quickly (Sauer, 2020).

On February 27, 2020, the index coronavirus case in Nigeria was recorded when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. A second incidence of the virus was recorded in Ewekoro, Ogun State, on March 9, 2020, involving a Nigerian who had contact with the Italian (Mustapha, Adedokun & Abdullahi, 2020). Several precautionary measures were advocated against contracting the virus, with social distancing and a global lockdown among the few globally recognized measures. However, more recently, vaccines against coronavirus have been created and distributed worldwide as people seek to contain the spread of the virus. Among the several means of disseminating coronavirus information is the media, which is a potent means of reaching millions of people at once. Since its outbreak, all forms of media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, social media, among others) have embarked on sensitization and awareness programmes. These media also reported updates on death rates, infection rates, and efforts by different governments to combat the virus.

Unlike previous health cases, the coronavirus pandemic is a global health threat, with life-threatening conditions and easily transferred once there is contact with a carrier. The elderly are equally vulnerable and more threatening to those with underlying ailments. Hence, the media are

credible sources of coronavirus information. They are also capable of influencing the opinions and attitudes of people through their reportage of issues. They play significant roles in shaping society's perceptions and views on issues. They are one of the major avenues people depend on for social, political and economic news. Cohen (1963) asserts that the media may not be successful in telling their readers what to think but are stunningly successful in telling their readers what to think about.

Similarly, Vreese (2005) reports that the media is credited with its ability to influence public opinions. This means that the media can change and shape public opinions through their coverage and framing of news. Onekutu and Ojebode (2007) also believe that one of the primary roles of the media is to educate people about the risk and prevention of spreading any virus. Hence, information from the media is expected to assist the public in making decisions. Therefore, this study examines Nigerian newspaper coverage of the coronavirus pandemic to determine its frequency and depth of coverage, dominant themes, and tones of frames. These selected newspapers include the Punch, Vanguard and Nigerian Tribune. Thus, the objectives of the study include:

1. To ascertain the frequency and depth of coverage given to coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria within the given period;
2. To understand the emerging themes from the media's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria during the given period;
3. To ascertain the tones of the frames (positive, neutral and negative) in the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria during the given period.

### **Media and Health Pandemic Reportage**

Events of public concern, such as health issues, definitely attract media attention. This can take the form of print, electronic, internet, or social media attention; in most cases, a combination of all. Whichever form it takes, what matters most is the level or impact of media intervention in a health crisis, especially a disease outbreak. The mass media cannot cure a virus but can cure its spread (Adelakun and Adnan, 2016). This statement explicitly underscores the role of mass media in health reporting, especially in curbing the spread of infectious diseases. Asaolu, Ifijeh, Iwu-James and Osayande (2016) noted that the media was crucial to reporting health-related information, especially during a pandemic, to keep the public informed and assist in allaying their fears about such pandemics.

Indeed, most of the world's population rely on health news and information from the media. The media are mandated with the fundamental role of educating, creating awareness, and informing the public during a pandemic (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). Apuke and Tunca (2019) noted that the media could perform their statutory roles to the public through the high frequency of coverage, prominence/depth of coverage, news and visual framing and the framing tone. Hence, through agenda-setting, the media decides the agenda – in the form of issues – it sets, which influences the public discussions.

One significant aspect of the media's reportage of a health pandemic is misinformation. Misinformation represents a severe challenge in addressing a viral epidemic or other public health crisis. During the COVID-19 outbreak, individuals worldwide struggled to decipher fact from fiction. Some have embraced beliefs or practices that deepen, rather than mitigate, health risks. Governments are right to take the threat of misinformation seriously. They should develop policies to effectively halt the spread of myths and counter deliberate disinformation campaigns (Tabbaa, 2020). Misinformation not only disrupts public health efforts; it can also lead to the violation of other human rights. Despite the threat posed by misinformation, any restrictions on the dissemination of supposedly false information must comply with the requirements of legality, legitimacy and necessity and proportionality described above. In assessing these criteria, it should be noted that protections under the right to freedom of expression are not limited to truthful statements or information (Zhang, 2020).

### **Media and Coronavirus Pandemic Reportage**

On the coronavirus pandemic, Onwe et al. (2020) note that the world relied on the media for a must-win-war against the virus as the media creates awareness, educates, sensitizes, and mobilizes people against the pandemic. Studies have shown the media's potential in preventing the spread of infectious diseases. For instance, Bowen's (2013) study on the media and malaria pandemic in Cameroon revealed that media messages persuaded Cameroonians to use treated nets to prevent themselves from mosquitoes and ultimately reduced the spread of malaria. Similarly, Zhong, Luo, Li, Zhang, Liu, Li, and Li (2020) reported the importance of the media in creating awareness around the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. They reported that the media created awareness and educated the public on safety measures to contain the spread of the SARS.

In Nigeria, the mass media are used independently or complementarily in health promotion activities to achieve positive lifestyle changes. The role of mass media in health promotion and intervention goes beyond just creating awareness on a particular health issue or disease outbreak; it also entails emphasizing the angle or direction of reportage of such issue or outbreak. Adelakun (2017) asserts that these media angles of presenting health issues take the form of media framing to influence public perception and induce an attitudinal response, leading to positive behavioral changes. Similarly, the Nigerian media has also been credited with assisting the public in making informed health decisions through awareness and sensitization programmes on health pandemics. For example, Nwankwo and Orji-Egwu (2017), as cited in Onwe et al. (2020), revealed how radio message frames on public health campaigns and awareness were critical to Nigerian's disposition towards Lassa fever.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda setting describes the powerful influence of the media's ability to tell us what issues are essential. This theory emanated from Chapel Hill's study on media effects and its salience on issues among the publics after the presidential election of 1968 in America. The study was done to understand the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the mass media messages used during the campaigns. The theory ascribes the media as exerting enough powers and influence in determining news stories that the people should see as important. McCombs and Shaw (1972:175) stated that "agenda-setting shapes political reality as citizens not only learn about an issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information and news story it projects to the citizens."

Similarly, Wu and Coleman (2009) explained that agenda-setting is the phenomenon of the mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others. Thus, the media sets a public agenda by not exactly telling citizens what to think but what to think about. There are two fundamental assumptions of the agenda-setting theory. 1. The media (press) do not reflect reality, instead, they assist in filtering and shaping it; 2. media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

The agenda-setting theory helps understand the influential function of the media. Cohen (1963) notes that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. Cohen's assertions strengthen the agenda-setting theory as the media (press) is influential in providing the people with what to discuss through its frequency of reportage of the issues. For example, if a news item is frequently reported, the media audience will likely see such issues as important. For coronavirus coverage, the agenda-setting theory will assist in understanding the frequency and depth of reportage which will further reveal the media's agenda (as found in the themes). These issues will assist in shaping public opinions since they are regarded as important.

### Methodology

The study employed a quantitative content analysis method by analyzing coronavirus content of the online versions of three Nigerian newspapers – Punch, The Vanguard and Nigerian Tribune. These newspapers were purposively selected due to their broad circulation nature in Nigeria with a large readership base. They also have a solid online presence with correspondence in the entire thirty-six states in Nigeria and report extensively on national and international news. Therefore, it is assumed that they would likely provide in-depth coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. The coverage was from March 2020, when the pandemic forced the Federal Government to announce a nationwide lockdown, to November 2020, when the lockdown started to ease away gradually. Also, the search was limited to coronavirus stories within Nigeria.

A keyword search was conducted on these online newspapers with words such as "COVID-19 in Nigeria," "coronavirus outbreak," "COVID-19 outbreak," "coronavirus updates in Nigeria," "COVID in Nigeria," "coronavirus pandemic," "COVID infection in Nigeria." These articles needed to focus on coronavirus news in Nigeria. Those that reported coronavirus news from other countries were excluded from the analysis. The online search retrieved a total of 1899 articles which comprised a combination of news stories, features, editorials, columns and opinion articles. The Unit of analysis was a news story that focused on coronavirus information in Nigeria.

## III. RESULTS

The study's first objective was to analyze the frequency and depth of coverage given to the

coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria within the given period. The results reveal that a total of 1899 articles were published in the three selected

newspapers from March 2020 to November 2020. The results are presented in Table 1

**Table 1: Frequency of Coronavirus coverage in selected newspapers**

Newspaper	Retrieved Stories	Percentage
Nigerian Tribune	551	29%
Punch	712	37.5%
Vanguard	636	33.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1899</b>	<b>100</b>

Results from Table 1 reveal that from a total of 1899 retrieved articles, Punch newspaper reported the most, 712 (37.5%), followed by Vanguard newspaper 636 (33.5%) and NigerianTribune newspaper 551 (29%). This result also reveals that these newspapers reported extensively on the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, with at least three (3) stories daily on the pandemic.

In addition, the articles are categorized as news story formats, features, editorials, columns,

and opinion articles. There were more news story articles and fewer editorials and opinion articles. Also, the articles were categorized as either short, medium, or long for the depth of analysis. The articles that were within 1 – 200 words were categorized as short, those within 201 – 400 words were medium, while articles that were 401 words and above were categorized as long. The findings of the depth of analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Depth of coronavirus coverage in Nigeria in selected newspapers**

Newspaper	1 – 200 words	201 – 400 words	401 words – above	Combined Total
Nigerian Tribune	296 (26.8%)	133 (28.5%)	122 (37.1%)	551
Punch	427 (38.7%)	175 (37.5%)	110 (33.4%)	712
Vanguard	381 (34.1%)	158 (33.9%)	97 (29.5%)	636
<b>Total</b>	<b>1104</b>	<b>466</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>1899</b>

The results from Table 2 reveal that all three newspapers published more short words of 1104 articles between 1 – 200 words, followed by medium words of 466 articles and long articles with 329 reported articles. Furthermore, the results reveal that Punch newspaper reported the highest short words of 427 articles, followed by Vanguard newspaper with 381 (34.1%) articles and Nigerian Tribune newspaper with 296 (26.8%) articles. The results, therefore, imply that the shorter words reportage of the coronavirus pandemic could have made it easy for the readers to read through the

short messages in less time. This way, they will likely understand the content of the messages.

The study's second objective was to examine the dominant themes used in the reportage of coronavirus pandemic news in Nigeria. The results are presented in Table 3.

#### Dominant Themes

The results from the content analysis revealed the themes of reportage used by the newspapers in reporting the coronavirus pandemic. Table 3 reveals the dominant themes:

**Table 3: Themes of Coronavirus Reportage**

S/N	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
1.	News updates on number of infected people	517	27.2%
2.	Fear, Panic and Anxiety	155	8.2%
3.	Quarantine	121	6.4%
4.	Travel bans	46	2.4%
5.	Risk on Health workers	84	4.4%
6.	Government Measures to contain the spread	112	5.9%
7.	Public and Media Enlightenment	144	7.5%
8.	Financial Impact on businesses	52	2.7%
9.	Death Rates	202	10.6%

10.	Corruption	61	3.2%
11.	Cancellation of events	27	1.4%
12.	Shortage of supplies	76	4%
13.	Testing and screening	117	6.2%
14.	Victim experiences	87	4.6%
15.	Working from Home - Technology	62	3.3%
16.	COVID-19 donations	36	1.9%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1899</b>	<b>100</b>

The results from Table 3 reveal the themes used in the coronavirus pandemic reportage in the selected newspapers. The results indicate that news updates on the number of infected cases (27%) were the most recurring theme in coronavirus reportage, followed by news on the death rates from the virus (10.6%). Also, news on fear, panic and anxiety (8.2%) was a recurring theme, followed by public and media enlightenment (7.5%) and themes on quarantine (6.4%) and test and screening information (6.2%). In addition, the

theme of government measures to control the spread of the virus (5.9%) was rampant with stories of victims' experiences (4.6%), risk on health workers (4.4%), and the theme of shortage of supplies (4%). Other emerging themes in the reportage of coronavirus include public awareness (3.7%), travel bans (2.4%) and its impact on business and finances (2.7%), working from home (3.3%), corruption (especially from the government – 3.2%) and COVID-19 donations made to Nigeria (1.9%)

**Table 4: Tone of coronavirus Frames (Positive, Neutral and Negative) in Nigerian newspapers**

Newspaper	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Combined Total
Nigerian Tribune	157	279	115	551
Punch	312	353	49	712
Vanguard	119	443	72	636
<b>Total</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>1075</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>1899</b>

The results from Table 4 reveal the tones of coronavirus framing in the selected newspapers. The results reveal that there was more negative coronavirus news (1,075) than positive (588) and neutral (235). This shows that the newspaper framing of the coronavirus pandemic was more damaging and alarming than positive. Much of the news stories focused on the death and infection rates of people, which kept increasing daily, fears and panic from the citizens who had not come to terms with the realities of the pandemic, apprehension about the government's handling of the pandemic, and lack of trust in the government, among others.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

This study examined Nigerian newspapers' coverage of the coronavirus pandemic to understand the frequency and depth of coverage, dominant themes, and tone of coverage. The findings revealed that the three newspapers published extensively on coronavirus within the timeframe. The Punch newspaper (37.5%) had the highest number of coronavirus stories, followed by Vanguard newspaper (33.5%) and Nigerian Tribune (29%). These revealed a total of 1899

coronavirus stories between March 2020 (when the lockdown was announced) and November 2020 (when the lockdown was relaxed in Nigeria). It could be stated that the Nigerian media often provided coronavirus information to the public.

For the depth of coverage, the results from this study indicated that there were more short-worded stories than long-worded ones. This study categorized short-word stories as those containing 1 – 200 words, medium stories containing 201 – 400 words, and long stories with 401 – above words. The findings from this study reveal more short-word stories than long-words. This could be because the media was focused on providing simple and direct messages to the people during the pandemic. This study's findings with respect to the depth of coverage are similar to those of Apuke and Omar (2020), who also found short news stories as dominant in the depth of coronavirus news coverage. However, Apuke and Omar (2020) suggest that the short-word coverage was a lack of in-depth writing to explain more about the virus. They also believed that journalists are under pressure to deliver quick content in the digital news environment. Medium stories were also more than long-worded stories, thereby suggesting that the

media less often discussed and reported coronavirus in longer depths. These articles on coronavirus were a combination of news stories, features, editorials, columns (interviews, health), and opinion articles.

The study's findings on the dominant themes revealed more news on the rates of infection and deaths from coronavirus. The newspapers focused on casualties from the pandemic. This led to apprehension, panic and anxiety among the people. When there were constant reports of casualties, the media further reported how the people were scared and how they (the media) and the government were involved in public enlightenment. Public enlightenment on coronavirus became necessary to reduce the people's fears and provide necessary awareness on the proper preventive measures to take. In addition, there was a focus on self-quarantine at home and in the hospitals and essential measures to stay safe. Furthermore, there were few themes on the risk and impact of the virus on health workers, the shortage of supplies of equipment sent to Nigeria, the travel bans in many states in Nigeria, and its impact on all aspects of life, including social, financial, religious, etc. This study's findings on its dominant themes are similar to those found in Basch, Kecojevic and Wagner's (2020) study.

The tones of framing also reveal more negative (1075 stories) than positive (588 stories) framing. This finding agrees with the recurring themes in the preceding section as the findings revealed more negative news, which caused fear, apprehension, and anxiety among the people. The newspapers reported more on the virus's infection rates and death rates. Hence, they created fear in people's minds instead of having more positive frames. Odoemelam (2020) reported similar findings in his study of the media's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. The author found that the media's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic caused fears and uncertainties by focusing on spreading the virus globally. In addition, although the media created awareness about the coronavirus pandemic, such awareness had more negative frames than positive. This was what Apuke and Oman (2020) referred to as panic reporting, which can destabilize and create more confusion among the people.

Abone (2013) asserts that the mass media are referred to as a critical component of global strategy for sustainable health issues. They play a vital role in every society as they shape culture, influence politics, affect people's attitude, play important roles in health and business, and affect the daily lives of millions. The findings of this

study have revealed that the Nigerian press coverage of the coronavirus pandemic was intense. They assisted in setting the agenda by frequently reporting news on the pandemic. However, this study's findings revealed that the Nigerian press employed more fear-appeal reportage of the coronavirus pandemic. However, the Nigerian media frequently reported on the coronavirus pandemic, thereby fulfilling their information dissemination role. This explains why Mustapha (2014) avers that it would be impossible for health promoters and stakeholders to disseminate information and monitor and coordinate the activities of the various countries on health issues without the media.

## V. CONCLUSION

The media have the power to direct our attention toward certain issues; they can do this by setting the agenda through the repetition of health crisis reports. The coronavirus pandemic generated extensive reportage from Nigerian newspapers. It could thus, be said that there was as much coverage of the virus as possible. The Nigerian print media has proven to perform their statutory information dissemination roles. This article contributes to the growing number of studies on media coverage of pandemics. This article concludes that although there was extensive coronavirus coverage, most reports had negative frames and focused more on fear appeals. These media messages were not reassuring but focused on the negative aspects of the virus. For health pandemics such as the coronavirus, it is recommended that the press should focus more on positive frames and less on negative frames.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Abone, C. (2008). Mass Media: Effective Instrument for Promoting Health Programmes in Africa In Nwosu, I.E, Soola, O. E & Nwodu, L.C. (Eds.) Communication for Health and Sustainable Development in Nigeria.
- [2]. Adelokun, L.A. (2017). Newspaper Framing of 2014 Ebola Outbreak in Nigeria: Assessing the Nexus Between Audience Perceptions and Message Influence [dissertation]. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya.
- [3]. Adelokun, L.A. & Adnan, H. M. (2016). Communicating health: media framing of Ebola outbreak in Nigerian newspapers. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication.*, 32(2):362-80.

- [4]. Apuke, O. D., & Tunca, E. A. (2019). A comparative content analysis of television and blog coverage of internally displaced persons in Nigeria. *Social Science Journal*, 56(2),168–182.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2018.12.009>
- [5]. Asaolu A, Ifijeh G, Iwu-james J, Osayande O. (2016). Newspaper Coverage of Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic in Nigeria: Implications for Prevention and Control. *The International Journal of Communication and Health*. 54-58.
- [6]. Basch, C. H., Kecojevic, A., and Wagner, V. H. (2020). Coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the online versions of highly circulated U.S daily newspapers. *Journal of Community Health*, 45: 1089 – 1097.
- [7]. Bowen, H. L. (2013). Impact of a mass media campaign on bed net use in Cameroon. *Malaria Journal*, 12(2), Article 36.
- [8]. Cohen, B. C (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [9]. ECDC, (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic increased transmission in EU/EEA and the UK-seventh update. Available at [www.ecdc.europa.eu](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu), accessed on April 17, 2020.
- [10]. McCombs, M. E. & Shaw, D. (1972) “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media” *POQ*, 36; pp.176-187.
- [11]. Mustapha, J. O., Adedokun, K. A., Abdullahi, I. N. (2020). Public health preparedness towards COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria. *Asian Pacific Journal of Tropical Medical* 13: 197.
- [12]. Odoemelam, C. E. (2021). The COVID-19 health crisis and its framing: approaches used by the print media for coverage. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 8(3): 115– 142.
- [13]. Onwe, E. C., Chukwu, J., Nwamini, S. C., Nwankwo, S. U., Elem, S., Ogbaeja, N. I., Nwasum, C. J., Nwakpu, E. S., & Ogbodo, J. N. (2020). Analysis of online newspapers’ framing patterns of COVID-19 in Nigeria. *European Scientific Journal*, 16(22);217–237.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n22p217>
- [14]. Sauer, L. M. (2020). What Is Coronavirus? Available online at <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus>
- [15]. Vreese, C. H. (2005) *News Framing: Theory and Typology*. *Information Design + Document Design* 13(1), 51 – 62.
- [16]. World Health Organization (2020). Clinical Management of Severe Acute Respiratory Infection when Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Infection is Suspected: Interim Guidance.  
[www.who.int/publications/item](http://www.who.int/publications/item) Accessed date December 15 2020.
- [17]. Zhong, B., Luo, W., Li, H., Zhang, Q., Liu, X., Li, W., Li, Y. (2020). Knowledge, Attitude and Practices towards COVID-19 among Chinese Residents during the Rapid Rise Period of the COVID-19 Outbreak: a quick online cross-sectional survey. *International Journal of Biological Sciences*, 16(10): 1745-1752.