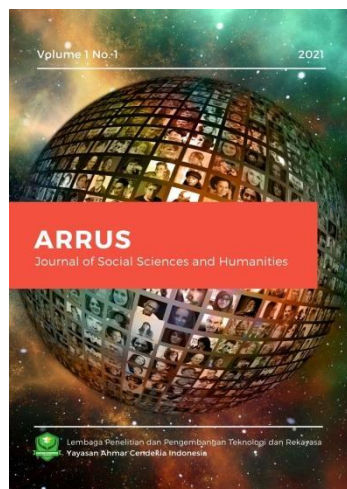




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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theatrical Analysis of Newspaper Reportage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.

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Abstract: This study is a content analysis of some selected Nigerian newspapers (*The Vanguard* and *The Guardian*) to determine their level of coverage of the coronavirus disease in Nigeria between February 2020 and February 2021. The study's specific objectives included determining the frequency of coronavirus reports, the media's presentation of coronavirus issues, the reports' key information sources, and the extent to which print media are attempting to set a public agenda for coronavirus based on the significance of effective media coverage in disease prevention and management. Findings revealed that most of the reports were in news format showing that the newspapers performed more of an information role than an analytical role. Even the numerous reports on the disease had little or nothing from the angle of infected individuals, which could stir up doubts regarding the actual existence of COVID-19 in the country. Findings also revealed that in terms of frequency of reports, position and space, the newspapers gave prominence to the disease. The researchers recommend that attention should be giving to providing more analytical contents bothering on the disease, with a focus on reporting from the angle of infected individuals, as they will help wade off the emergence of doubts and ultimately grind the virus to a halt in Nigeria.

Keywords: Newspaper, COVID-19, Pandemic, Mass Media, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

The global community in recent times has witnessed an increase in outbreaks of diseases that pose great danger to human existence. Pandemics have dotted human history over the years. On 27 February 2020, Nigeria recorded its very first coronavirus disease (COVID-19) case in Lagos. According to the Federal Ministry of Health, the index case was an Italian who had just returned to Nigeria from Milan, Italy (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020). Following the index case in February, Udeh (2020) noted that more than 50,000 Nigerians tested positive for the disease, resulting in about 1000 deaths and daily new cases. Szymanski, Smuniewski, & Platek (2020) observed that, as of June 2020, SARS-CoV-2 had caused more than 5 million confirmed cases worldwide, resulting in approximately 300,000 deaths.

Pandemics do not respect international borders; therefore, they have the potential to weaken many societies, political systems, and economies simultaneously (WHO, 2). Babalola (2020), observed that SARS-Cov-2, renamed COVID-19 by the WHO in February 2020, has created a major offset in the financial, economic, religious, social, and political structures world-over,



as evinced by the near collapse of the stock market, a staggering rate of retrenchment and unemployment, the closure of transactional borders, restrictions on social and religious gatherings, and a drastic fall in foreign direct investment flows, among others. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the global economy shrank by 4.4% in 2020. The organization described the decline as the worst since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

According to reports, the federal government's lockdown to stop the virus's spread may have contributed to an increase in rape cases (Owonikoko, Momodu, & Suleiman, 2023) and banditry (Akanmu et al., 2021; Ezeibe et al., 2024), with the number of such incidents in the country doubling during the lockdown period. According to Itoro Ezeanaba, the Executive Director of Partnership for Justice, a non-profit organisation that offers medical and psychosocial services to survivors of sexual violence, "the lockdown led to an over 50 percent increase in the number of reported cases of sexual violence at their centre, with 85 percent of those cases being children" (Ejiofor, 2020). Thus, Kola (2020) noted that the anti-COVID-19 measures affected the security situation in the country, particularly in the Northwest where armed bandits took advantage of the restriction of movements to attack people in their homes which led to loss of several lives and properties.

National security, in the classical sense, refers to the protection of the territorial integrity of a nation and sovereignty, as well as its essential international interests (Oshewolo & Nwzor, 2020). The National Academies Press (2017) notes that national security extends beyond safeguarding against state and non-state actors; it also includes protection against new infectious illnesses and other health issues that might jeopardise a nation's economic viability and way of life. Every nation faces threats that could be social, such as aggression from a neighbouring country, infiltration from a terrorist group, or global viral pandemics—the coronavirus is a perfect example (Upadhyay, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates how widespread diseases challenges not only human security but also the socio-economic security of a country which makes it a threat to national security.

Based on the widespread nature of coronavirus, particularly with regards to its threat to national security, the disease has become a subject of public interest and interventions. However, amongst the Institutions whose intervention could be viewed as most critical is the mass media, owing to the importance of information in the fight against diseases and the obligation of the mass media to provide such information. According to the WHO (2021), the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the coronavirus, its causes and how it spreads. The mass media provide information about health and make people aware so as to prevent the spread of various diseases (Uwom, 2012). Nwabueze, Obiora and Ezeoke (2012) add that the media set agenda on health burdens and contribute through effective health communication in mobilizing efforts towards addressing the problem.

Since the mass media is saddled with the responsibility of providing information to aid the prevention and spread of diseases, it is imperative we ascertain the Nigerian media's responsiveness or otherwise to this onerous but necessary task. Thus, this paper seeks to assess newspapers' reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (between February 2020 and February 2021). Specifically, the study seeks to ascertain the:

- (1). Frequency of Newspaper reportage of COVID-19 in Nigeria within the study period.
- (2). Form in which reports on COVID-19 were majorly presented.
- (3). Main sources of news reports on the disease.
- (4). Dominant COVID-19 themes carried by the newspapers.

2. Literature Review

The study is anchored on the agenda-setting and social responsibility theories of mass communication. According to Baran & Davis (2009) agenda-setting theory establishes an important relationship between media reports and people's ranking of public issues. Agenda-



setting occurs because the press is selective in reporting the News. Windahl (1981) observe that the media by simply paying attention to some issues while neglecting others will have effect on public opinion; adding that the hypothesis would seem to have escaped the doubts which early findings had on the powerful media effects view. Thus, it refers to media audiences' acceptance of important issues, events and people because the media have made them so for people to think and talk about. Nwabueze (2006) aver that "agenda-setting posits that by frequently covering and giving prominence to issues in the media, the audience attaches importance to those issues more than others. By so doing, the mass media set agenda for public discussion". Newspaper reports (news, features, editorials and opinions) on COVID-19 will help expand the public's knowledge about the virus. Frequent reportage of issues pertaining to the disease, and placement of such reports in crucial positions in newspapers (such as the front page, middle page or back page) can heighten public concern on the disease.

Social Responsibility media theory on the other hand sees freedom of the mass media as an overriding objective but such that carries a concomitant responsibility; the responsibility of professionalism and devotion to issues bothering on public interest. Ebeze (2002) explained that the theory places emphasis on the moral and social responsibility of persons who, and institutions which operate the mass media. Such responsibilities include obligation to provide the public with information and discussion on important social issues. Thus, it recognizes the right of the people to information, and the responsibility of media personnel to provide such information and in turn reflect the society's plurality by serving as a platform for diverse views. Ralph Akinfeleye in *The Guardian* report of March 24, 2020 opined that the mainstream media should take as a social responsibility creation of awareness so that people can know how to protect themselves from coronavirus. Akinfeleye's remark affirms that information is crucial in wading off COVID-19. Thus, Media organisations must understand that people have a right to information on COVID-19 which must be served by the mass media.

2.1. Review of Related Literature

One of the primary functions of the media in any society is to facilitate public health communication. Public health communication is primarily concerned with using communication to foster healthy living in a country. Maibach and Holtgrave (1995) define public health communication as "the use of communication techniques and technologies to positively influence individuals, populations, and organisations for the purpose of promoting conditions conducive for human beings. Public health is focused on preventing diseases, prolonging life, and promoting health and efficiency through organized community effort (Winslow, 1920 cited in Rubens, Ramamoorthy, Saxena and Shehadeh, 2014)). Using communication methods to achieve the aims of public health is the focus of public health communication. Uwom (2012) explain that:

Communication methods are used to create and increase public awareness of a disease; educate the public about a disease; change individual behaviour to prevent or control a disease; advocate for policy changes in favour of disease prevention and control; and create social norms that favour healthful living.

To achieve the aims of public health, people need to be fully aware of the happenings around them, particularly those that affect their health. The mass media are expected to provide such information. They have the capacity to influence health behaviours through their information, education and agenda setting functions. The mass media have a broad reach and a multivariate content structure that appeals to a diversified heterogeneous audience which makes it possible to influence the health behaviours of the various categories of people in a society. Uwom (2012) corroborate that the media's wide reach and ever present nature make them valuable for promoting awareness on health issues. They play an important role in influencing public awareness and understanding as well as government responses to major health issues (Matenge, et al, 2017). Okoro, Ukonu, Eze & Odoemelam (2014) note that

communication is critical to health intervention strategies, especially in helping to raise agenda on the intervention objectives. Via the media's agenda-setting function, they are able to tailor the minds of Nigerians around a certain health issue, making it a subject of public concern which fuels the urge for prompt action. Nwabueze, Obiora and Ezeoke (2012 p.138) posit that the media set agenda on issues of public importance, such as health burdens and contribute through effective health communication in mobilizing efforts towards addressing the problem.

COVID-19 is a public health problem. Smith et al. (2020) say the disease is caused by a novel coronavirus called acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and has an incubation period of 14 days. Its symptoms include: cough, fever, tiredness and shortness of breath/ chest pain in extreme conditions (WHO, 2020). SARS-Cov-2 phylogenetically belongs to the Pisuviricota and the Coronaviridae family, an umbrella of viruses that primarily target the respiratory system. According to Pal et al (2020) amongst the family of Coronaviridae, the genus coronavirus are the largest group of viruses causing respiratory and gastrointestinal infections. COVID-19 is highly transmittable and has become one of the primary causes of deaths across the globe since its outbreak in 2019. According to a 2020 report by the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), as of December 2020, COVID-19 tragically claimed more than 1.5 million lives. Currently, there is no licensed medication to cure COVID-19, resulting to a mass dependence on media reports for timely and accurate information required to make informed decisions, particularly in the era of the social media where lies are presented as truths. This confirms an earlier observation by USAID (2006) that describes the media as an important ally in any public health situation in that they serve the role of being a source of correct information as well as advocate for correct health behaviours.

Since no treatment has been discovered for the disease, adhering to the precautionary measures established by the WHO appears to be the sure way to prevent spread and contraction of the disease. A lack of public awareness can lead to confusion, fear and misconceptions that may lead to adoption of practices and protocols that may expose the citizenry to risks and worse case scenarios (Asaolu et al., 2016). As public health educators and trusted sources of information, newspapers can play the media advocacy role of creating awareness on the preventive measures and help clear misconceptions about the disease. Manoff (1998) cited in Melone et al. (2002) corroborate that the media function of information and education helps in securing a free flow of accurate and constructive information that counteracts misconceptions and helps in building a consensus.

Previous researches have shown that mass media communications have been effective in creating awareness on health issues, resulting in positive changes in health behaviours (Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010; Leavy, Bull, Rosenberg, & Bauman, 2011)... For instance, the findings of a 2019 study on the linkage of mass media and HIV awareness among adolescents in Uganda suggest that the frequency of exposure to mass media increases both adolescents' likelihood to get tested for HIV and their HIV knowledge score (Lompo, & Bago, 2018; Bago & Lompo, 2019).. In another study by Patil et al. (2019) on the effectiveness of radio in promoting awareness about Tuberculosis (TB) in rural India, findings revealed that majority of the people got to know about TB through the radio medium. Radio messages on TB positively influenced behavioural changes in the people and all awareness measures were positively aligned with behavioural responses confirming the veracity and completion of the mass mediated TB messages. With regards to Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), Adeyemi (2014) quipped that the media's public awareness campaigns helped a great deal in preventing the spread of the disease in Nigeria. These findings imply that the mass media are crucial to public health in any society and can be used to tackle the menace of COVID-19.

3. Research Method and Materials

Content analysis, descriptive statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage and inferential statistic; Chi-square were adopted for the study with a focus on Vanguard and Guardian (Nigerian variant) newspapers. The choice of these techniques was hinged on



scholarly affirmations to the credibility of the method in evaluating communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner. As Berelson (1952:18) puts it, this analytic technique is sufficiently systematic, objective and quantitative to analyze or describe the manifest content of a mass medium of communication.

In Nigeria, there are 51 offline newspapers published in the country (see Nigerian finder.com), however for want of time, only two newspapers were selected for the study. The choice of the newspapers selected (The Vanguard and The Guardian) was on the basis of their reputation as media institutions, national reach, private ownership pattern (hence not directly influenced by government unlike the case of government owned newspapers). They are also registered with the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN).

The population of the study comprised all the editions of both newspapers published in the country between February 28, 2020 and February 28, 2021 (a day after the first index case was reported in the country). A total of 394 editions were published by both papers on an individual basis within the study period, making the study's population a total of 788 publications. Using the constructed week sampling method, a total number of 54 editions (for each paper) were drawn from the population, making it a total of 108 editions studied. To make the selection systematic, the researchers adopted six days interval in the selection of days.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Question One: Print media's devotion to Coronavirus reports

Table 1. Total number of stories related to the covid-19 theme

Newspaper	Frequency (%)
The Vanguard	601 (49%)
The Guardian	617 (51%)
Total	1218 (100%)

From the table above The Vanguard newspaper had a total of 601 (49%) coronavirus reports within the study period, while The Guardian had 617 (51%) reports, making the entire studied reports a total of 1218 reports.

Table 2. Space Allotment of reports in the newspapers

	The Vanguard	The Guardian	Total
Full page	82 (14%)	102 (17%)	184 (15%)
Half page	117 (19%)	152 (25%)	269 (22%)
Quarter page	296 (49%)	268 (43%)	564 (46%)
Insignificant spaces	106 (18%)	95 (15%)	201 (17%)
Total	601 (100%)	617 (100%)	1218 (100%)

According to spatial allotment, the table above reveals 14% of The Vanguard's Coronavirus reports appeared in full pages, 19% in half pages, 49% in quarter-size pages and 18% in insignificant page spaces. While, in The Guardian 17% of coronavirus reports appeared in full pages, 25% in half pages, 43% in quarter-size pages and 15% in insignificant spaces.

Table 3. Report(s) placement

	The Vanguard	The Guardian	Total
Front page	54 (9%)	65 (11%)	119 (10%)
Inside page	524 (87%)	519 (84%)	1043 (85%)
Back page	23 (4%)	33 (5%)	56 (5%)
Total	601 (100%)	617 (100%)	1218 (100%)

According to the placement of coronavirus related reports, 9% of The Vanguard's total story appeared on front pages, 87% on inside pages (some of which were dedicated coronavirus pages and health pages) and 4% on back pages. In The Guardian, 11% of her stories appeared on front pages, 84% on inside pages and 5% on back pages.



4.1.2. Question Two: What form were the reports on coronavirus majorly presented?

Table 4. Story form

Forms of Presentation	The Vanguard	The Guardian	Total
Straight news stories	395 (65%)	366 (59%)	761 (62.4 %)
Feature articles/columns	27 (5%)	33 (5%)	60 (5%)
Editorials	25 (4%)	21 (3%)	46 (4%)
Cartoons	35 (6%)	60 (10%)	95 (8%)
Opinion articles	76 (13%)	63 (10%)	139 (11%)
Special reports/ interview	20 (3%)	44 (7%)	64 (5%)
Others	23 (4%)	30 (5%)	53 (4%)
Total	601 (100%)	617 (100%)	1218 (100%)

The Vanguard newspaper published 395 coronavirus related stories in straight news format, representing 65% of its total coronavirus related stories. 5% of its stories appeared in feature format, 4% in Editorial format, 6% in Cartoon format, 13% in Opinion article format, 3% in Special report/Interview format and 4% in other formats.

On the other hand, in The Guardian 59% of coronavirus reports appeared in straight news format, 5% in Feature format, 3% in Editorial format, 10% in Cartoon format, 10% in Opinion article format, 7% in Special reports/Interview and 5% in other formats.

4.1.3. Question Three: What were the main sources of news reports on the illness?

Table 5. Major story source

	The Vanguard	The Guardian	Total
Government Officials	249 (41%)	243 (39%)	492 (40%)
International Organisations	23 (4%)	25 (4%)	48 (4%)
Medical experts	106 (18%)	112 (18%)	218 (18%)
Economic/ Financial analysts	98 (16%)	117 (19%)	215 (18%)
NGOs	43 (7%)	48 (8%)	91 (7%)
Patients	3 (1%)	2 (0.3%)	5 (0.4%)
Advertisers	5 (1%)	2 (0.3%)	7 (1%)
Financial Institutions	20 (3%)	25 (4%)	45 (4%)
Individual writers	54 (9%)	43 (7%)	97 (8%)
Total	601 (100%)	617 (100%)	1218 (100%)

According to the data in the table above, 41% of The Vanguard's coronavirus reports were from Government officials, 4% from international organisations, 18% from medical experts, 16% from economic/financial analysts, 7% from NGOs, 1% from patients, 1% from advertisers, 3% from financial institutions and 9% from individual writers. On the other hand, in The Guardian, 39% of her coronavirus reports were from Government officials, 4% from international organisations, 18% from medical experts, 19% from economic/financial analysts, 8% from NGOs, 0.3% from patients, 0.3% from advertisers, 4% from financial institutions and 7% from individual writers.

4.1.4. Question 4: What were the dominant coronavirus themes carried by the Print media?

Table 6. Dominant Covid-19 issues as carried by the sampled newspapers

Dominant Covid-19 issues	The Vanguard	The Guardian	Total
Prevention & Control	87 (14%)	91 (15%)	178 (15%)
Testing centres & facilities	71 (12%)	69 (11%)	140 (12%)
New cases of Infection	50 (8%)	65 (11%)	115 (10%)
Death (s)	15 (2%)	25 (4%)	40 (3%)
Discharge/ successful cure	10 (2%)	5 (0.8%)	15 (1%)
Vaccine	5 (1%)	10 (2%)	15 (1%)
Economic Impact of COVID-19	70 (12%)	85 (14%)	155 (13%)
Donations	78 (13%)	82 (13%)	160 (13%)
Palliatives	77 (13%)	83 (13%)	160 (13%)



Lockdown enforcement	75 (13%)	60 (10%)	135 (11%)
School/ church/ Mosque Resumption	25 (4%)	27 (4%)	52 (4%)
COVID-19 funds	26 (4%)	10 (2%)	36 (3%)
Other subject matter	12 (2%)	5 (0.8%)	17 (1%)
Total	601 (100%)	617 (100%)	1218 (100%)

The dominant issues sampled on both newspapers include, prevention and control, testing centres and facilities, infections, death, discharges/successful cure, vaccine, economic impact of covid-19, donations, palliatives, lockdown enforcement, school/church/mosque resumption, covid-19 funds and other subject matters. From the table above, 14% of coronavirus reports in the Vanguard were hinged on prevention and control, 12% on testing centres and facilities, 8% on new cases of infection, 2% on death, 2% on discharges/successful cures, 1% on vaccines, 12% on the economic impact of covid-19, 13% on donations, 13% on palliatives, 13% on lockdown enforcement, 4% on school/church/mosque resumption, 4% on covid-19 funds, and 2% on other subject matters. In the Guardian, 15% were hinged on prevention and control, 12% on testing and prevention, 10% on new cases of infection, 3% on deaths, 1% on discharges/successful cures, 1% on vaccines, 13% on economic impact, 13% on donations, 13% on palliatives, 11% on lockdown enforcement, 4% on school/church/mosque resumption, 3% on COVID-19 funds, and 1% on other subject matters.

4.2. Discussion

The study mainly examined the extent of Newspapers' reportage of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria between February 2020 and February 2021. The findings of the study showed that the total number of COVID-19 related issues published by both newspapers were 601 for The Vanguard and 617 for The Guardian. Findings also revealed information regarding the total number of COVID-19-related stories reported by both newspapers, the space allotment, i.e., full page, half page, quarter page and, insignificant spaces and story placement, i.e., front page, inside page and back page. Considering the fact that there were only 54 editions or paper issues studied within the study frame, the numbers show the Nigerian media were awake to their responsibility as the vanguard of the society especially in the area of setting public agenda which they seem to have achieved with their numerous coronavirus reports. Also, in terms of spatial allotment i.e., full page, half page, quarter page and insignificant spaces, table 1b revealed the bulk of coronavirus reports occupied quarter page spaces, closely followed by stories occupying half page spaces, then insignificant spaces and the remaining occupying full pages. On an individual note, compared to The Vanguard, The Guardian had more reports occupying full pages than insignificant page spaces, 17% and 15% respectively. However, the culmination of the stories on the full pages, half pages and quarter pages in both papers clearly outnumber the few in insignificant spaces. Thus, we can infer that the media gave commendable attention to coronavirus reports in terms of space.

Findings also revealed that coronavirus-related reports were mainly in straight news format, followed by opinion articles, then cartoons, features, and other forms, closely followed by special reports. This shows the Print media have performed more information roles than analytical or correlation roles as far as coronavirus is concerned. With a disease of such magnitude, especially one that portends a threat to the country's security, it is expected that there should be more analytical reports in form of editorials and features.

The study further revealed that the major information source of the coronavirus-related stories published by both newspapers within the study period were chiefly Government officials, Medical experts, Financial analysts and Individual writers. Surprisingly, there was close to nothing from the angle of patients. While The Vanguard had only three stories sourced from patients, The Guardian had just two stories, representing 1% and 0.3% of the entire coronavirus reports published by both newspapers (among the studied newspapers). The lack of reports from the angle of infected individuals could stir up skepticism regarding

the actual status of coronavirus in the country and in turn could mar efforts towards the extinction of the disease in Nigeria.

Additionally, findings show that the dominant coronavirus themes of stories on COVID-19 published by both newspapers were solely on prevention and control of the disease, testing centres and facilities, economic impact of the disease, donations, palliatives, and reports on new cases of infection with a major focus on prevention and control of the disease. The themes serve as a proof that the media as vanguards of the society provided the public with all round information required in making effective health decisions and adopting new health behaviours.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt posed a threat to human existence globally. The Print media have a role to play in creating awareness on the disease and making COVID-19 a public agenda. The study revealed that The Vanguard and The Guardian newspapers were devoted to disseminating COVID-19 related issues within the study period. However, the researchers recommend that attention should be given to providing more analytical reports on the disease and providing reports centered on the actual conditions and experiences of COVID-19 patients and survivals. This will aid clarity, believability of news contents and help clear misconceptions bothering on the disease.

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