Newspaper Coverage of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) in Nigeria

Erere Joy Anho, PhD & Nyerhovwo Muoboghare
Department of Mass Communication
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-uku, Delta State, Nigeria
erere2k7@yahoo.com; +2347069009788
nyerhovwo.muoboghare@yahoo.com; +2347019056444

Abstract
The researchers examined media coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria with a focus on the frequency of coverage, prominence given to the issue, story format, news sources and media tone. Three widely read newspapers *(Guardian, Vanguard and Punch)* published between January 2020 and February 2021, were content analysed. Results revealed that the newspapers gave much attention to COVID-19 reportage; however, they did not give much importance to COVID-19 in terms of story placement and space allotment. Furthermore, much depth was not given to the reports. The newspapers predominantly used straight news reports without pictures to provide information about the pandemic. Consequent upon the above, it was recommended among other things that considering the strategic importance of pictures in telling stories, media organisation should utilise them more in their reportage of COVID-19 in ways that would facilitate believability of the situation.

Keywords: Newspaper Coverage, COVID-19, Pandemic, Vaccine

Introduction
Pandemics have played a significant role in shaping human history throughout the ages. In time past, the world has endured diverse pandemics such as the Antonine plague (165 - 180 AD), the Black Death (1346 – 1353), the Spanish flu (1918 – 1920), the Asian flu (1956 – 1958), the HIV (1981 – present), the Ebola (2014) among others (Newman, 2020). According to Cennino (2021), the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19), is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2), which had not previously been identified in humans and was characterized as a pandemic on 11th March, 2020.

This deadly virus, which was first detected in Wuhan, China, affected almost every country in the world, infecting and killing millions of people. In Nigeria, the index case was recorded on 27th February, 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. A second case involving a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State on 9th March, 2020; and prior to this time, the nation's leading public health agency, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) commenced point of entry screening for travelers and also strengthened the National Reference Laboratory with diagnostic capacity for epidemic-prone pathogens. The NCDC also supported some states of the federation to establish emergency operation centres and train rapid response teams in all the 36 states (Ihekweazu, 2020).

In a bid to control the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria, there was immediate prohibition of social gathering and religious activities and lockdown of the major epicenters of Lagos, Ogun and Abuja, and this was later followed by a total lockdown, which lasted for almost two months in the first phase before gradual easing in subsequent phases. Within this period, relevant public

health information regarding the nature of the disease, its mode of transmission and prevention were made available by the NCDC and other stakeholders to the people, who in turn circulated same on various social media platforms. However, a lot of persons received such messages with some reservations; particularly because of the daily increase in the number of confirmed cases, which many believed were exaggerated for political reasons. Importantly, while advanced nations of the world gave detailed reports of confirmed cases of COVID-19 with relevant videos and pictures that made the situation real and believable, the situation was not the same in Nigeria. Consequently, so many conspiracy theories came up which heightened skepticism and disbelief about the disease among Nigerians. Ironically, no meaningful outcome can be attained under such scenario, without the full involvement of the conventional media in ensuring effective health communication, as the fourth estate of the realm. According to a USAID report (2009), "The media is an important ally in any public health situation. It serves the role of being a source of correct information as well as an advocate for correct health behaviours."

All over the world, people's perceptions of health issues are not only shaped by their experiences and impression received from other people but also by news media reports on various issues relating to health (Ahmed & Bate, 2013). Media reports on various health issues can have overbearing effects on the populace over time. Several health communication studies have examined this domain and found that health information in newspapers affects the health behaviours of newspaper readers (Wakefield, Loken & Hornik, 2010; Wang *et al* 2009; Feeley & Vincent, 2007). It is against this background that the researchers examined COVID-19 reportage in the Nigerian newspapers with a focus on *The Guardian,* the *Vanguard* and the *Punch* newspapers.

Research Questions
The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:
1.   What is the frequency of coverage given to COVID-19 in the sampled newspapers?
2.   What is the level of prominence given to COVID-19 reportage in the sampled newspapers?
3.   Who are the dominant news sources in COVID-19 reportage found in the sampled newspapers?
4.   Which story formats are predominant in the COVID-19 reportage?

Literature Review
Newspaper has been identified as a channel for disseminating health information such as health risk, disease outbreak, prevalent health issue in society etc. to members of the public (Torwel & Rodney, 2010). Over the years, health communication researchers have focused on examining newspaper coverage of health issues, the extent to which they disseminate information and portray various health problems in society. For instance, Cohen *et al* (2008) examined differences in the amount and nature of cancer coverage in newspapers and found that cancer was the main topic in a higher proportion of health stories in black newspaper than in general-audience newspapers in Canada. Breast cancer was also identified as the most commonly reported cancer in both black and general newspapers.

Davidson & WallacK (2004) examined the content of national newspapers in the United States with regard to the presentation of non-HIV STDs. They tried to provide a baseline assessment on how the problem of STDs was being presented by newspapers to the American

public and found that only 19 percent of articles in the total sample mentioned the causes, consequences, prevention, signs or symptoms, screening, transmission, treatment, trends or rate of STDs. Thus, low reporting of STDs in the newspapers contributed to the high prevalence of STDs among the American public.

For Lawrence, Kearns, Park, Bryder & Worth (2007), newspapers are a major channel in measuring the media portrayal of health issues effectively. They examined newspapers reports on the portrayal of tuberculosis in the three major cities of New Zealand and found tuberculosis occurring in the three major cities; but indicated that tuberculosis predominantly occurs in Auckland. The study then concluded that representation of tuberculosis in New Zealand print media is partial, mirroring the reality about tuberculosis prevalence in New Zealand. Bertrand, O'Reilly, Denison, Anhang & Sweat (2006) studied the effectiveness of newspaper messages and HIV/AIDS-related behaviour in developing countries and found that HIV-specific communication in newspapers directed members of the public towards acquiring new medical knowledge, increased their knowledge of HIV transmission and reduced high risk sexual behaviour among the populace. This implies that newspapers and the mass media in general have the potential to influence the health behaviour of members of the public.

In Nigeria, Okidu (2013) studied communication models in HIV/AIDS coverage in selected Nigerian newspapers and confirmed the strategic roles newspapers play in setting the contextual agenda to complement the multi-sectoral and community-based response to HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support adopted by the government. Okoro & Anho (2015) also investigated newspaper coverage of health-related millennium development goals in Nigeria; by content analysing the *Vanguard* and the *Punch* newspapers published between July 2011 and June 2014. The findings revealed that the two newspapers did not give as much attention to the health goals as with the issues of politics and insurgency, which were constant and had prominent features within the period investigated. Contrary to this outcome studies have shown that media reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria was high (Smith, Smith & Ajayi, 2020; Apuke & Omar, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the purview of media effect, but specifically anchored on the agenda setting theory proposed by McCombs & Shaw in 1972. According to Baran & Davis (2009, p. 279), the theory posits that there is a significant relationship between media reports and people's ranking of public issues. By implication, the media determine what issues should be considered more important by society. The media accomplish this through frequency of reporting and prominence given to the reports, etc. The agenda setting theory is established on the three assumptions and principles as listed by Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso (2008). They are:

1.   The mass media do not reflect social reality because news is filtered, chosen and   shaped by newsroom staff and broadcasters.
2.   People get their news from limited sources because people do not pay attention to   all outlets, thus they rest on mass media.
3.   Few media agenda which were chosen by professional gatekeepers, lead people to perceive given issues as important.

Relating this theory to the study, it is believed that the prominence the media give to COVID-19 through frequent reportage and proper placement of stories can influence people's opinion and

reactions towards the pandemic. Again, it will increase their awareness and inform them about the precautionary measures to adopt to prevent further spread of the disease.

Methodology
A quantitative content analysis was employed to study newspaper reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Three national newspapers (*Guardian, Vanguard* and *Punch*) were purposively selected because of their wide reach and readership. By implication, the one thousand two hundred and seventy-five issues of the three newspapers published between January, 2020 and February, 2021 constituted the study population. In a bid to get a representative sample for the study, the composite week sampling technique, where one day is drawn every week of every month throughout the study period was adopted to select 60 issues of each of the three newspapers. Sundays were excluded and the overall sample size was 180. Riffe, Aust & Lacy (1993) cited in Okoro & Anho (2015, p. 170) said the composite week sampling technique is superior to both a random sampling and a consecutive day sampling techniques when dealing with newspaper content.

The instrument for data collection was the coding sheet and it contained all the relevant content categories such as frequency and forms of coverage, prominence, tone and sources of reports. The units of analysis were news, features, editorials, opinions, columns, and special reports on COVID-19. Descriptive statistics involving frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the data obtained and the data were presented in the form of tables for easy understanding.

Data presentation and Analysis
In this section, data obtained are presented and analysed with a view to draw inferences and conclusion. In all, 161 out of the 180 issues sampled for the study had COVID-19 reportage while 19 issues (*Guardian* - 3, *Vanguard* - 11, and *Punch* - 5) had none. The data are presented in the tables below in line with the research questions.

Table 1: Frequency of Coverage given to COVID-19 by the Sampled Newspapers

Newspaper	Number of stories covered	Percentage
Guardian	251	44%
Vanguard	192	33%
Punch	132	23%
Total	575	100%

The above data show the frequency of coverage given to COVID-19 reportage within the period of the study. Comparatively, a significant difference was found in the coverage of COVID-19 by the three newspapers; with the *Guardian* newspaper having the highest coverage, 251 representing 44% while the *Vanguard* and *Punch* newspapers had 192 (33%) and 132 (23%) respectively. A cursory look at the raw data revealed that most of the COVID-19 reports were covered in the month of April by all three newspapers (*Guardian* - 88, *Vanguard* – 51 and *Punch* - 26).

Table 2: Prominence given to COVID-19 by the Sampled Newspapers

Newspaper	Front Page	Inside page	Back Page	Dedicated Page	Combined Total
Guardian	21(8%)	211(84%)	-	19(8%)	251(100%)

27

Vanguard	11(6%)	171(89%)	-	10(5%)	192(100%)
Punch	9(7%)	115(87%)	-	8(6%)	132(100%)
Total	**41(7%)**	**495(86%)**	**-**	**39(7%)**	**575(100%)**

Table 2 shows the prominence given to COVID-19 in terms of placement of stories. Evidently, 41 (7%) stories appeared on the front page, bulk of the stories, 495 (86%) were placed in the inside pages while 39 (7%) stories appeared on the dedicated health pages. Comparatively, the *Guardian* newspaper had more COVID-19 stories on the front page than the *Vanguard* and *Punch* newspapers.

Table 3: Prominence given to COVID-19 by the sampled newspapers in terms of space.

Space Allotted	*The Guardian*	*Vanguard*	*Punch*	Combined Total
Over Full Page	9(4%)	2(1%)	3(2%)	14(2%)
Full page	26(10%)	9(5%)	12(9%)	47(8%)
Over Half Page	33(13%)	20(10%)	6(5%)	61(11%)
Half page	48(19%)	27(14%)	19(14%)	92(16%)
Less than Half Page	135(54%)	134(70%)	92(70%)	361(63%)
Total	**251(100%)**	**192(100%)**	**132(100%)**	**575(100%)**

Data presented in table 3 also focused on the prominence given to COVID-19 in terms of space allotment. The data reveal that only 14 (2%) stories were given more than a page, 47 (8%) stories appeared on full page, 61 (11%) appeared on over half page, 92 (16%) COVID-19 stories appeared on half page while a vast majority, 361 (63%) were published in less than half page.

Table 4: Dominant sources of COVID-19 reports in the sampled newspapers

News sources	*The Guardian*	*Vanguard*	*Punch*	Combined Total
Media	25(10%)	19(10%)	6(5%)	50(9%)
NCDC	18(7%)	14(7%)	4(3%)	36(6%)
Other Govt. Officials	97(38%)	89(46%)	67(51%)	253(44%)
Medical Personnel	29(12%)	25(13%)	27(20%)	80(14%)
International Org	14(6%)	5(3%)	3(2%)	22(4%)
Patients/ Parents	12(5%)	7(4%)	-	19(3%)
Others	56(22%)	33(17%)	25(19%)	115(20%)
Total	**251(100%)**	**192(100%)**	**132(100%)**	**575(100%)**

Research question three sought to determine the sources of newspaper reports on COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. From the data presented, media had 50 (9%), NCDC had 36 (6%), other government officials had 253 (44%), medical personnel had 80 (14%), international organisations had 22 (4%), patients and parents had 19 (3%) while others such as public analysts, clerics, NGOs etc. had 115(20%).

Table 5: Format of COVID-19 Reportage in the sampled Newspapers

Story Format	*The Guardian*	*Vanguard*	*Punch*	Combined Total
Straight News	161(64%)	137(71%)	99(75%)	396(69%)
Feature	15(6%)	17(9%)	12(9%)	44(8%)
Editorial	9(4%)	5(3%)	3(2%)	17(3%)
Opinion	16(6%)	4(2%)	4(3%)	24(4%)

Column	8(3%)	8(4%)	2(2%)	19(3%)
Letter	5(2%)	3(2%)	5(4%)	13(2%)
Special Report	37(15%)	18(9%)	7(5%)	62(11%)
Total	251(100%)	192(100%)	132(100%)	575(100%)

Table 5 shows the various formats used by the media in presenting information on COVID-19 to the people. Evidently, more than half of the COVID-19 stories in the newspapers 396 (69%) were presented as straight news and this was followed by special reports that had 62 (11%). Feature had 44 (8%), editorial had 17(3%), opinion 24(4%), column had 19 (3%) while letters had 13 (2%). Although, the researchers did not include pictures as one of the units of analysis, it is important to observe that only 13 COVID-19 related pictures were found in all the sampled newspapers with the *Guardian* newspaper having the highest number (8).

Discussion of Findings
This study focused on newspapers coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria from January, 2020 to February, 2021. The aim was to ascertain how well the media helped in creating awareness about the pandemic among Nigerians. It is believed that the seriousness that people attach to the disease depends on the agenda set by the media. From the analysed data it was observed that the media gave much attention to COVID-19 reportage, which helped to create awareness about the disease. Evidently, 161 out of the 180 sampled issues had 575 stories about the pandemic. This outcome is consistent with similar studies conducted by various scholars, which revealed that news reports on the pandemic was high (Smith *et al* 2020; Apuke & Omar, 2020) and a possible explanation for this wide coverage is the fact that COVID-19 is a global pandemic. This finding agrees with the assumption of the agenda setting theory that the more attention the media give to an issue; the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important.

Regarding prominence, it was observed that the newspapers did not give much importance to COVID-19 in terms of story placement and space allotment. While 495 (86%) stories were tucked in the inside pages, 361 (63%) stories appeared in less than half a page of the newspapers; a situation which suggests a lack of in-depth writing about the disease.

Furthermore, various news sources were identified in this study. However, the dominant source was government officials such as ministers, governors, presidential spokespersons which had 253 (44%), while the least was patient/parents which had 19 (3). It is generally believed that news sources play a significant role in assigning importance to certain issues and having government officials as major news source greatly affected how the disease was viewed in the country. It is our view that if more victims of COVID-19 were used as news sources, with relevant pictures, it would have been easier for Nigerians to believe the presence of the disease in the country. The findings also showed that various news formats were used in COVID-19 reportage within the period investigated. However, straight news was predominantly used by all three newspapers. Although the newspapers did well in adopting diverse news formats in telling the story about COVID-19, their dominant use of straight news only suggests that they did not do much in-depth investigation about the virus to educate the populace.

Conclusion and Recommendations
The researchers conclude that the overwhelming burden of new cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria cannot be attributed to diminished media coverage since the outcome of this analysis revealed that the newspapers paid much attention to the issue of COVID-19. However, much depth was

not given to the reports. The newspapers predominantly used straight news reports without pictures to provide information about the pandemic. Again the alarming tone predominantly seen in the reports is counterproductive. Consequently, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1.   Considering the strategic importance of pictures in telling stories, media   organisation should utilise them more in their reportage of COVID-19 in ways that would facilitate believability of the situation.
2.   The coverage of COVID-19 and health related issues should go beyond straight news as revealed in this study and many others. More attention should be given to other news formats such as features and interview involving medical personnel who are in a position to give valid and accurate information about the situation.
3.   The media should refrain from being too alarming in their reportage in order to   prevent panic. Rather, they should reassure the populace by focusing more on ways of curtailing the spread of the virus.

References
Ahmed, R. & Bates, B. R. (2013). *Health communication and mass media: An integrated approach to policy and practice.* Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
Anaeto, S. G., Onabajo, O. S. & Osifeso, J. B. (2008). *Models and theories of communication.* Bowie, Maryland, USA: African Renaissance *Books*, Incorporated.
Apuke, O. D. & Omar, B. (2020). How do Nigerian newspapers report COVID-19 pandemic? The implication for awareness and prevention. *Health Education   Research,* 35(5), 471 – 480.
Baran, S. J. & Davis, D. K. (2009). *Mass communication theory (5thed.).* Boston, Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
Bertrand, J. T., O'Reilly, K., Denison, J., Anhang, R. & Sweat, M. (2006). Systematic   review of the effectiveness of mass communication programs to change   HIV/AIDS-   related behaviour in developing countries. *Health Education   Research,* 21(4), 567 – 597.
Cassell, M. M., Jackson, C. & Cheuvront, B (1998). Health communication on the internet: An effective channel of health behaviour change? *Journal of Health   Communication,* (1), 71 – 79.
Cennimo, D. J. (2021). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Retrieved from http://emedicine.medscape.com
Cohen, E. L., Caburynay, C. A., Luke, D. A., Rodgers, S. Cameron, G. J. & Kreuter, M.   W. (2008). Cancer coverage in general-audience and black newspapers. *Health Communication,* 3(5), 427 – 435.
Davidson, A. E. & Wallack, L. (2004). A content analysis of sexually transmitted diseases in the print news media. *Journal of Health Communication,* 9(2), 111 –   117.
Feeley, T. H. & Vincent, D. (2007). How organ donation is represented in the United   States. *Health Communication,* 21(2), 125 – 131.
Ihekweazu, C. (2020). Steps Nigeria is taking to prepare for cases of coronavirus (the conversation). Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/steps-nigeria-is-taking-to-prepare-for-cases-of –coronavirus-130704.
Lawrence, J., Kearns, R. A., Park, J, Bryder, L. & Worth, H. (2007). Discusses of diseases: Representations of tuberculosis within New Zealand newspapers 2002 –   2004.   *Social Science and Medicine,* 66 (2008), 727 – 739.

Okidu, O. (2013). A comparative study of two communication models in HIV/AIDS coverage in selected Nigerian newspapers. *Global Health Action,* 6, 18993– http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/gha.v610.18993.

Okoro, N. & Anho, E. J. (2015). Newspaper coverage of health-related millennium development goals in Nigeria: A content analysis. *Benin Mediacom Journal,* (9), 163 –179.

Smith, S., Smith, S. & Ajayi, A. (2020). Content analysis of mass media reportage of coronavirus–19 (COVID-19) in Nigeria from six widely circulated Nigerian newspapers. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities,* 6(3), 88 – 99.

Towel, V. & Rodney, C. (2010). Newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria. *African Communication Research,* 3(2), 235 – 251.

Wakefield, M. A., Loken, B. & Hornik, R. C. (2010). Uses of mass media campaign to change health behaviour. *The Lancet,* 376 (9748), 1261 – 1271.

Wang, A. L., Duke, W. & Schmid, G. P. (2009). Print media reporting of male circumcision for preventing HIV infection in Sub-Sahara Africa. *Bull World Organisation,* 87, 595 – 603.