ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Assessment of Frequency and Prominence of *Guardian* Newspaper Reportage of Coronavirus in Nigeria

EZINNE PRECIOUS IDIH (Fpd-cr) & IRELE ABIGAIL OLUBUKOLA (Ph.D)

Department of Mass Communication and Media Technology, Lead City University Ibadan, Nigeria. zinnidih@gmail.com
Department of Mass Communication and Media Technology, Lead City University Ibadan, Nigeria. bukkyirele2006@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Nigeria Centre for Disease Control confirms that Coronavirus is a deadly disease and therefore deploys all known means to contain the spread of the virus. Nigerians were not only alerted about the prevalence of the virus in the country, but they were also warned to strictly adopt the measures put in place to stop its spread as the death tolls continue to rise astronomically all over the world. The need to look into news reports of the virus also became a concern to researchers in the field of mass communication; hence, this paper assesses Guardian newspaper reportage of coronavirus in Nigeria between 28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021. The Guardian newspaper was selected being one of the oldest and most popular medium. The quantitative research design is adopted with the content analysis approach used in examining the manifest contents of the Guardian newspaper in addressing the research objectives. The study adopted the agenda-setting theory as its theoretical framework. Findings showed that the Guardian newspaper published 215 (58.7%) newsprints daily between 27th February, 2020 and 28th January, 2021; and also 62 (17.0%) weekly; 65 (17.8%), bi-weekly; as well as 24 (6.5%) monthly more frequently. The study also found out that the newspaper gave Coronavirus reportage prominence by publishing it in both front and back pages. It also had more of hard news stories. The study recommended that newspapers should constantly cover and report cases of Coronavirus in order to inform and educate the society, and also give importance to health issues especially those of pandemics.

**Keywords:** Newspaper Reportage, Reportage Frequency, Reportage prominence, corona virus, Guardian Newspaper

## Introduction

Coronavirus is a viral infection. It is caused by a painful acute respiratory syndrome known as 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus emerged around the end of December 2019, in Wuhan, China spreading around the globe like a wild fire. Virus is highly infectious and pathogenic. Just after the first fifty days of the outbreak of the disease, the disease killed over 18,000 and infected more than 70,000 people worldwide (WHO, 2020). The virus, COVID-19, is deadly compared to SRAS-COV in 2003 that infected 8,098 individuals with a mortality rate of 9%, across 26 countries in the world (WHO, 2020). On the other hand, Coronavirus in 2019 infected 120,000 individuals with a mortality rate of 2.9%, across 109 countries (WHO, 2020). The virus was said to have been caused by a strange and novel severe type of Coronavirus typified as severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCoV-2). It was found that the infection had no cure at that time because there was no vaccine for its treatment. It became a worldwide pandemic causing significant morbidity and mortality. However, a few broad-spectrum antiviral medications evaluated against Coronavirus in clinical tests have significant consequences in clinical recovery. A record of 1,603,428 confirmed cases, 356,440 recoveries from the illness and 95,714 deaths worldwide as of April 9, 2020 were observed (Worldometers, 2020).

In Nigeria, precisely on 27th February, 2020, an Italian citizen, who was on a business trip in the country became the index case for COVID-19 (FMH, 2020). As at April 9, 2020, there was a record of 288 laboratory-confirmed cases of Coronavirus cases in Nigeria. Within this period, 51 patients were already discharged while 7 were dead (NCDC, 2020).

The Nigerian media have no doubt monitored and have become core health indicators for all areas of public health (Oyekanmi, 2020). These include coverage of immunization for developing antigens, knowing if there is prevalence of risk factors for non-communicable diseases, identifying if there is effectiveness of interventions against these diseases.

The mass media may not be able to cure virus infections but can curtail its spread by massive campaigns and awareness creation. By constantly reporting health issues, the mass media carry out their agenda-setting function in the society which has the primacy of focusing the attention of the audiences to their health and healthy living. Reporting of issues in the media is quite different from one content to the other (Ewodage, 2020). It is also different in the area of the methods, patterns and objectives of reporting. Differences also exist in the influence of each report, including the effects of the reports on the audience (Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019). These differences in reporting are caused by certain factors, which range from the type of issues involved, the essence of the media, their motives, aims and objectives, the interests of the audience; all are seen as constituting pulling forces that shape the output and/or influence the outcome.

The role of communicating health related issues is expected to be more of social responsibilities that depict the mass media as information custodians for the wellbeing and development of the entire segments of the society (Olatunji et al., 2020). In consideration of this situation in health information coverage and delivery, it is noteworthy therefore that it poses a concern on the role the media play in their contributions in a society free of shortfall in relevant health information (Millet, Du, Cabooter & Weijters, 2022; MacIsaac, 2017; Ian, 2017).

Newspapers keep the society aware of their health hazards by providing adequate information regarding anything that is capable of threatening people's health (Catalán-Matamoros, 2020). Thus, the Nigerian newspapers have the responsibility of reporting the deadly coronavirus pandemic ravaging the world of which Nigeria is not an exception.

Differences in media reports describe how the changes in language or wording of the highlights of a situation or an event could influence the way the public perceive the situation. Research shows that news dealing with pandemics and crises, like the COVID-19, influences public perceptions and concerns. When such events cause destruction in the society, it severely affects members in that community. Generally, those issues enable researchers to study the extent to which media select news and shape its contents (Mudavadi, 2019).

**Statement of the Problem**

Newspaper coverage of disasters, outbreak of diseases, epidemics, health issues etc., in Nigeria has over time been a veritable source of understanding how people perceive and deal with public health problems. This, no doubt, could enhance a more robust and broad-based attempt at dissecting media contents and highlighting their importance to the readers. However, a lack of studies on the media coverage of Coronavirus reports has created a lacuna in the understanding of whether the news media create enough awareness and influence public perception of the virus. Also, whether the Guardian newspaper was involved in frequent, up – to- date reportage of the Coronavirus pandemic was not known. This constitutes a problem and of course a gap-in-knowledge which this present study seeks to fill.

This study, therefore, sets out to assess Coronavirus reportage in the Guardian newspaper. To achieve this, the study assesses the patterns of frames used in reporting the novel Coronavirus in the select newspapers. It also assesses the volume, prominence, and frequency of coverage used in the coverage of the novel Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper in Nigeria. This will help uncover public understanding of the disease and its short- and long-term effects; whether there is adequate information that can influence public perception of the virus, and also how, what, and why decisions were made regarding the disease by key players involved in the issue which includes the government, industries' representatives, consumers and commerce. Thus, this study seeks to assess Guardian newspaper reportage of coronavirus between 28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021.

**Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to assess Coronavirus reportage in Nigerian newspapers with a particular focus on the Guardian newspaper. Specifically, the

study evaluates the following objectives:

1. Assess the frequency of coverage of the Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper within the period of the study;
2. Assess the prominence given to the coverage of the Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper within the period of the study.

**Literature Review**

Overview of the Origin of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)

The novel Coronavirus tagged (COVID-19) is a viral infection. It is caused by a painful acute respiratory syndrome known as 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus originated in Wuhan, China and spread around the world. Virus is highly transmittable and pathogenic (Shereen et al, 2020). The common source of origin and transfer of the novel Coronavirus to humans is not known. However, the rapid transmission of Coronavirus from human to human was confirmed widely. The confirmation held that there is presently no clinically approved antiviral drugs or vaccine available for use against COVID-19 (Shereen et al., 2020). However, a few broad-spectrum antiviral medications evaluated against COVID-19 in clinical trials, resulted in clinical recovery.

The novel virus called COVID-19 by Chinese researchers is deadly compared to SRAS-CoV in 2003 that infected 8,098 individuals with a mortality rate of 9%, across 26 countries in the world (Cui, Li & Shi, 2019). On the other hand, the novel Coronavirus in 2019 infected 120,000 individuals with a mortality rate of 2.9%, across 109 countries.

Initially, the patients infected with Coronavirus-induced pneumonia in China were thought to have visited the seafood market. Further investigations, however, showed that some individuals, who contracted the infection, had not visited the seafood market. (Riou & Althaus, 2020).

**Coronavirus Case in Nigeria**

An Italian citizen on business trip to Nigeria became the index case for COVID-19 in Nigeria. In Nigeria, within the period of April 9, 2020, there was a recorded 288 laboratory-confirmed cases of Coronavirus with 51 discharges and 7 deaths (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

In an attempt to forestall further spread of the virus, various stake holders including civil societies and government agencies embarked on enlightenment campaigns preaching good hygiene and social distancing. (Ewodage,2020). In a similar situation, on 30th March, 2020, the Federal government introduced various measures to contain the spread of the virus. These range from closing of the national borders and airspace, schools, worship centers and other public places, canceling of mass gathering events (Olatunji, 2020).

Presently, the spread of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria continues to record significant increase as the latest statistics provided by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control reveal Nigeria as at 19th of July 2020, has 36,663 confirmed cases. 15,105 cases have been discharged and 789 deaths have been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Oyekanmi, 2020).

**Concept of the Mass Media**

Diverse definitions of the mass media show their diverse roles in the society. One of such definitions has it as any device that gathers information and takes them to a large number of people at the same time. Reading newspapers, magazines or books, listen to radio or watch TV, people are seen engaging in mass communication. The term mass communication describes the academic study of diverse means through which people and bodies relay information to large segments of the population simultaneously through the instrumentality of the mass media ((Donomme, Grimsley & Chapel, 2021). Variously, both mass media and mass communication can be used interchangeably or referred to as the same thing.

The term mass media refers to technology which intends to get to a mass audience at the same time. It is seen as the main element of the process of mass communication used to reach the vast majority of the general public. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet are the most common platforms for mass media (Duru, 2020). People generally depend on the mass media to provide information regarding socio-political **and**

economic issues, health issues, entertainment, and news.

The responsibilities of the mass media as a social institution cannot be over emphasized. It is not therefore an over statement to point out here that the co-existence of the society and the functionality of government and its agencies are the reason the mass media exist (Tolley, 2016).

The mass media owe the society the duty of always upholding the principles, views, ideas and acts that promote stability, unity and mutual co-existence in the society. The mass media have two important sociological characteristics: first, very few people can communicate to a great number and, second, the audience has no effective way of answering back (Donomme, Grimsley & Chapel, 2021).

**Theoretical Framework**

**The Agenda Setting Theory**

The agenda setting theory was postulated by Macombs and Donald L. Shaw in the year 1972. The major assumption of the theory is that the media set the agenda for what issues the people considered important for discuss at a given time in a society. In view of the theory, there is a relationship between what the media presents as news and information and the level of importance the public gives to news and events in the society. Again, the theory further notes that the media do not have the power to determine what the society actually thinks, but they do have the power to determine what the society thinks about (Owen, 2018). The above can be linked to the work of Benard-Cohen who 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, 1963).

Supporting the above, "the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Defleur, 2016).

Agenda- setting theory is relevant to this study, in that, the media sets the agenda of issues that the public see as important to them. The dominant frames highlighted in the news media would help to build public perception, understanding and the opinion they would form on the novel COVID-19 pandemic. More so, the press can play a vital role in directing the audience towards understanding the how novel Coronavirus can be contained without further spread.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study evaluated the Guardian newspaper reports of Coronavirus in which content analysis method was employed. The qualitative content analysis approach helped the researcher to answer the questions raised in the study. The population for this study was the Guardian newspaper in Nigeria. The study presented the Guardian newspaper environment as constituting the universe from which the samples were selected for analysis. The target population consisted of all the issues/editions (including weekends, based on the fact that the updates on Coronavirus were also carried out during the weekends) of the Guardian newspaper. However, editions of the Guardian newspaper between 28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021 constituted the actual population of the study.

The period under study was between 28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021. This gave us 12 months (52 weeks, 366 days). The duration enabled the researchers to have a well-defined period for evaluating the Guardian newspaper reports of Coronavirus in Nigeria. This means that the actual population for the study is 366 editions of the Guardian newspaper. The sample size for the study is all the population of the study (366 editions), which consisted of all the publications of the Guardian newspaper between 28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021.

**Sampling Technique**

The study adopted the census sampling technique. The rationale for the choice of the method is because it provides a true measurement of the population (no sampling error) from which a benchmark data may be obtained for future studies.

Detailed information about this period (28th February, 2020 and 27th January, 2021 was purposively acquired. The motive to study the total editions (census) was based on the assertion that if the period of the study is within a short period of time, the entire content could be studied so as to ensure reliability of data.

**Unit of Analysis**

The unit varies with the nature of data and the purpose of the research. Thus, it might be a single word, a letter, a character, themes' items, a symbol, a theme (a single assertion about a subject), a news story, a short story, a character, the theme, article and news contents of the newspaper under study that will be adopted as units of analysis for the study.

**Content Category**

They are coded as follow:

a) Frequency of Reports
   a. daily intervals
   b. weekly intervals
   c. monthly intervals
b) Prominence given to Reports
   a. Front page
   b. Inside page
   c. Back page.
c) Ethical Standards
   a. Editorial Independence
   b. Accuracy and fairness

**Description of the Research Instruments**

The coding sheet was used in collecting data for the study. The coding sheet was adopted to bring the real manifest contents of the Guardian newspaper on Coronavirus. The code was constructed based on the unit of analysis and content categories. In addition, the choice of the coding system is because it has an advantage of converting data generated into easily specified attribute of given variables.

**Content Coding Sheet: Content analysis checklist on Coronavirus Reportage (CACCR).**

The study assigned numbers to the categories to organize the data according to their homogenous subset as they were being collected. The design for the content code sheet of this study is as follows:

1) Frequency (A)

| | |
|---|---|
| Daily intervals | A1 |
| Weekly intervals | A2 |
| Bi weekly interval | A3 |
| Monthly intervals | A4 |

2) Prominence (B)

| | |
|---|---|
| Front page | B1 |
| Inside page | B2 |
| Back page. | B3 |

**Method of Data Analysis**

The method of data presentation and analysis is descriptive and contextual analysis in an essay form.

**Results and Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question One:**

Table 1: Frequency of reportage of Coronavirus stories in the Guardian newspaper between 27th February 2020 and 28th January 2021.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Daily | 215 | 58.7% |
| Weekly | 62 | 17.0% |
| Bi-weekly | 65 | 17.8% |
| Monthly | 24 | 6.5 |
| Total | 366 | 100% |

Table 1 shows that the Guardian newspaper published Coronavirus reports 215 (58.7%) daily between 27th February, 2020 and 28th January, 2021; 62 (17.0%), weekly; 65 (17.8%), Bi-weekly; 24 (6.5%) monthly.

**Research Question Two:** What is the prominence of coverage of the Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper within the period of the study?

Analysis of data in Table 2 shows that the Guardian newspaper published 192 (52.5%) front page stories, 102 (27.9%) Inside page stories and 72 (19.6%) back page stories within the period of the study.

Table 2: Prominence/placement of Coronavirus stories in the Guardian between 27th February, 2020 and 28th January, 2021

| Prominence/Placement | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Front page | 192 | 52.5 |
| Inside page | 102 | 27.9 |
| Back page | 72 | 19.6 |
| Total | 366 | 100 |

Source: Content Analysis, 2022

**Discussion of Findings**

This study was guided by two objectives from which two research questions were formulated.

**Research Question One:** What is the frequency of coverage of the Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper within the period of the study? Data gotten from the coding in research question one show that the Guardian newspaper published Coronavirus reports 215 (58.7%) daily between 27th February, 2020 and 28th January, 2021; 62 (17.0%), weekly; 65 (17.8%), Bi-weekly; 24 (6.5%) monthly.

The analysis shows an indication that there was proper coverage of Coronavirus issues within the period of the study in terms of frequency or the number of times the newspaper was able to carry news stories about the pandemic within the period of the study. This finding is supported by an earlier submission as reported in the literature reviewed in the study, which maintained that the press is expected to constantly draw the attention of the audience to the problems around them. The attention would not only keep the citizens abreast of the happenings but would also prepare them on how to manage its menace. Given the frequency of coverage of Coronavirus epidemic, it can be said that the Guardian newspaper has not failed in their responsibilities within the period under review.

**Research Question Two:** What is the prominence of coverage of the Coronavirus reports in the Guardian newspaper within the period of the study? Data gathered from the coding in research question three show that the Guardian newspaper published 192 (52.5%) front page stories, 102 (27.9%) Inside page stories and 72 (19.6%) back page stories within the period of the study. Based on the finding, the agenda- setting theory showed that the media can give prominence to news stories via layouts, which include, front page, inside page and back page in the newspaper. This is because it is stated that media concentration on a few issues and subjects could lead the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. Accordingly, the Guardian newspaper directs their readers' attention to issues of Coronavirus. This means that readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much important to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position in the newspaper.

Similarly, the Social Responsibility theory imposed on the press an obligation to be socially responsible in discharging their duties, which was fulfilled by highlighting the incidents and happenings in and around the country in their publications. Therefore, if placement of stories at strategic areas in the newspaper could make them prominent than others, it can therefore be said that the media do more than stimulate interest. Being the newspaper directed attention to these concerns, it provided a context that influenced how people would talk about these matters. It, therefore, more than directed attention to a problem. It also influenced how the people think about the problems.

**Conclusion**

From the findings in this study, it is concluded that the Guardian newspaper used seven frames in reporting the Coronavirus stories. The newspaper published Coronavirus reports more on a daily basis with 215 (58.7%). The newspaper showed a high level of prominence in reporting the Coronavirus stories as it published more of front page and back page stories. It also had more of hard news stories.

**Recommendations**

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- As the Fourth Estate of the realm and the

watchdog of the society, Newspapers should constantly cover and report cases of Coronavirus in order to inform and educate the society on the dangers of the spread of Coronavirus in Nigeria.

- As part of their agenda setting function, Newspapers should give importance to health issues especially that of Coronavirus pandemic as the media are saddled with the responsibility to filter and shape reality and to make the public perceive issues as more important than other issues based on media concentration.

**References**


Catalán-Matamoros, D. (2020). Exploring the relationship between newspaper coverage of vaccine and childhood vaccination rates in Spain. Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics, 16(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/21645515.2019.1708163

Cohen, B. (1963). The press and foreign policy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton.

Defleur, M. L. (2016). Mass communication theories: Explaining origins, process and effects. New York eBook.

Donomme, D. Grimsley, S & Chapel, L. (2021). Mass communication overview & examples, (2021). https://www.study.com

Duru, H.C, (2020). Press coverage of ethnic interest groups in Nigeria; A study of selected national dailies. Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of Communication and Media Studies, 1(2), (2020).

Ewodage, R. (2020). COVID-19: How we plan to implement social distancing in Lagos markets, transport system – Sanwo-Olu. (March 2020). https://www.channelstv.com/2020/03/22/covid-19-how-we-plan-to-implement-socialdistancing-in-lagos-markets-transport-system-sanwo-olu/ (5th August, 2020).

Ezebuenyi, E.E, Obi, I, & Agbo, R.N. (2020). Framing analysis of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria: A study of The Guardian, Daily Sun and Vanguard Newspapers. NTAtvc Journal of Communication, 4 (2),168-178.

Federal Ministry of Health. (2020). Health minister: First case of Covid-19 confirmed in Nigeria, (2020), https://www.health.gov.ng Retrieved on April 15, 2021.

Ian, T. (2017). Media relations of the anti-war movement: The battle for hearts and minds. Taylor and Francis. Amazon.com 2017.

Lai, C. Shih, T, Ko, W, Tang, H, & Hsueh, P. (2019). Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and coronavirus (COVID-19). Nat RevMicrobiol, 17 (3), 12- 22.

Maclsaac, E. (2017). AIDS represented within the media. Vol.13 Spring (2017). DJIM School of Information Management, Dalhousele University.

Millet, K. Du, G. Cabooter, E. & Weijters, B. (2022). The limited impact of positive cueing on pro-environmental choices. Journal of Environmental Psychology 79(101732),

Nigerian Centre for Disease Control. (2020). Covid-19 Update in Nigeria: (2020). Retrieved from 2020.

Nwabueze, C. & Ezebuenyi, E. (2019). Newspaper framing of Biafra agitation under Buhari's administration and its influence on public support for the struggle. African Journalism Studies. (2019). https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1570296.

Olatunji, S. O., Ayandele, O., Ashirudeen, D., Olaniru, O. S. (2020). "Infodemic" in a pandemic: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in an African Country. [http://www.shbonweb.com.IP: 10.232.74.26]

Oyekanmi, S. (2020). Coronavirus COVID-19 updates in Nigeria. https:www.worldometers.info>nig

Owen, D. (2018). The new media role in politics. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. USA.

Riou, J. & Althaus, C. L. (2020). The Pattern of first human-to-human transmission of Wuhan 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), December 2019 to January 2020. Euro Surveillance, 25(4), (2020).

Shereen, M. A, Khan, S, Kazmi, A, Bashir, N. & Siddique, R. (2020). COVID-19 infection: Origin, transmission, and characteristics of

human coronaviruses. China: Wuhan University Press.

Tolley, E, (2016). Qualitative methods in public health: A field guide for applied research. Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 37(7), 12-49.

World Health Organization (2020). Official updates of Covid-19 in Nigeria. Retrieved from 2021.

Worldometers, Coronavirus Update (Live). (April 2020). https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ (4th August, 2020)