



HEALTH EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION AMONG NEWSPAPERS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF *THE PUNCH*, *DAILY SUN* AND *VANGUARD*'S COVERAGE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

¹NDUKWU, Mishack
²ANYANWU, Joy Chinwe
³ANUKAM, Vera Oluchi
⁴ODIONYENMA, Chimeremeze Uzundu

¹Department of Film and Multimedia Studies, Imo state University, Owerri, Nigeria

²Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Bida, Niger State.

^{3,4}Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri, Imo State

Corresponding author: Ndukwu Mishack, Mishack.cj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic may have become a thing of the past, but its impact has huge lessons that the world can learn from it. Health emergency communication preparedness among journalists is one issue that has attracted less investigation. The key objectives were to ascertain the frequency, depth and dominant tones used in reporting the pandemic. The study was anchored on the crisis emergency risk communication model (CERC). Content analysis was used as the research design, as the researchers content analysed sample size of 126 editions of *The Punch*, *Daily Sun*, and *Vanguard* Newspapers got through the Wimmer and Dominick's composite week Sampling technique. Findings revealed that the frequency with which COVID-19 issues were reported was high and impressive. Sufficient space was also accorded the pandemic. Regrettably, most of the reports were harsh and alarming. Meaning that they only focused in reporting numbers of new cases, death rate and those in isolation centers. Not much reports focused on giving hope and making the people emotionally stable. Conclusively, Nigerian newspapers, despite their humongous coverage of the pandemic never used any health emergency communication guidelines in their Reportage. The study therefore recommends among others that Media practitioners should report health emergencies in a way to reassure the public about a possible solution and not just raising the alarms. This can only be achieved by a proper health emergency communication training among journalists.

Keywords: Health Emergency, Communication Newspapers, Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic may have become a thing of the past, but its impact has huge lessons that the world can learn from it. When properly gleaned and analysed, these critical issues will position Nigeria and the world to be more prepared for health emergencies like that. Sahu et al. (2020), note that the novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019. It has emerged as a respiratory infection with significant concern for global public health hazards. Starting with initial suspicions of animal-to-human transmission for earlier cases, the paradigm has shifted towards human-to-human transmission via droplets, contacts, and fomites. Mustapha et al. (2020) noted that Nigeria's first confirmed case of the disease was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, involving a Nigerian citizen who had contact with an Italian citizen (Ebenso & Out, 2020).

The relationship between the mass media and the spread of disease is complex and mutual. On one hand, media reports about COVID-19 may influence the attitude of the public toward the disease and enhance their self-protecting awareness. People informed by the media reports may change their behaviours. They may take correct precautions, such as frequent hand washing, wearing protective masks, and keeping social distance (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Iheanacho et al., 2021). Moreover, the degree of mass media attention to COVID-19 will inform the public of the severity of the outbreak. So, it is no wonder that the mass media have long been recognized as a powerful force for shaping how we experience the world and ourselves (Zhou, 2020).

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services & Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, (2014), research has shown that the public's belief that an emergency response was effective correlates with how much access to information they had during the crisis. The fundamental challenge is speed versus accuracy where both are important. If information is accurate and released after the public has moved on to another issue, it has little value. If it's out fast but is not accurate, the best-case scenario is to admit it and move on; the worst case is that the inaccuracy causes harm to the public. The rules of good journalism apply, with or without a crisis. There will be pressure to move the process along at a pace that reasonable reporters and other people will perceive as responsive and credible (US Department of Health and Human Services & Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Also, studies have proved that the contributory role of the media towards any developmental goal (including health issues) is in its power to design, package, and distribute effective messages, which inform, educate and to a certain extent reshape the behavioural tendencies of the target audience towards controlling health hazards or combating health-related challenges before they get out of control (Adekunle & Adnan, 2016). It is on these premise that this study seeks to investigate how the aforementioned newspapers reported the pandemic in keeping with the health emergency communication guidelines.

Statement of the Problem

The coronavirus pandemic brought about a major disruption in every aspect of world activities. The sudden nature of the pandemic left the entire world population in a huge shock. With the unexpected compulsory lockdown, many people had a very negative impact on their mental health. In times of global pandemics such as COVID-19, crisis communication is indispensable in dispelling fear and uncertainty and unifying citizens in a collective fight against disease (Wu et al., 2020). Olagoke et al., (2020) noted that the severity of COVID-19 has made media attention to be disproportionately focused on pandemic-related news, which could further affect individuals already facing more significant health challenges.

Nigeria newspapers, (which include *The Punch*, *Daily Sun* and *Vanguard Newspapers*) as a medium of mass communication do not just exist to report only news stories and leave them there. Their responsibility extends to balancing information in the public domain, giving perspective to issues of public interest, dispelling fears, and rekindling hope in times of global uncertainties and disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A whole lot may have been done on finding out the level of coverage, the dominant tones used in covering the pandemic, the public perception of newspaper reporting of the pandemic and more. But not much has been done to evaluate these coverages in relationship or adherence to the health emergency communication guidelines. It is based on these perceived limitations that the researchers undertook this study.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to assess how Nigerian newspapers covered the COVID-19 pandemic with particular reference to health emergency communication guidelines. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Ascertain the frequency of the coverage of *The Punch, Daily Sun and Vanguard* newspapers' reports on the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Examine the depth of coverage of *The Punch, Daily Sun and Vanguard* newspaper reports on the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Identify the dominant tones of *The Punch, Daily Sun and Vanguard* newspaper reports on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Concept of Newspaper

Sandman (1976) cited in Konkwo (2014) sees the newspaper as an unbound, printed publication issued at regular intervals, which presents information in words, often supplemented with pictures. This definition agrees with that of Chinedu-Okeke and Uzochukwu (2020) who see a newspaper as an unbound printed publication that is issued at regular intervals (daily, weekly, or monthly etc) which usually carries information often supplemented with pictures. A newspaper can be defined as a printed product created on a regular (weekly or daily) basis and distributed to a large number of people" (Ndolo, 2006).

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without Newspapers, or Newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter" (Thomas Jefferson, 1787). The above quote by Thomas Jefferson in 1787 underscores the value universally placed on newspapers. 'The great importance of the newspaper as a mass medium derives from its role as a carrier of current information or news. This is a role which the newspaper has played from its very inception. It is also a role that it plays much better than any other mass medium. The newspaper is the oldest and traditionally the most important source of current information. Even today, the average daily paper contains far more news than is available on television or /elsewhere (Konkwo, 2014). In recent times, computerization has affected every aspect of mass communication, professionally as well as in the industry. As a result, significant changes have taken place in the way newspaper, radio, television and publishing companies conduct their activities (Konkwo, 2012). All newspaper organizations, regardless of size and reach, have three major sections: the editorial, business/commercial and production sections. Each with a variety of sub-divisions that may differ from one organization to another, according to size and operation (Chinedu-Okeke & Uzochukwu, 2020).

Health Emergency Communication

An attempt to define health emergency communication will not be effective without first the definition of crisis communication as health emergency constitute a crisis. As such a clear definition of crisis communication also apply to health emergency situation. Crisis communication is the information that is exchanged by and between public authorities, organizations, the media, affected individuals and groups before, during and after a crisis (Swedish Emergency Management Agency, 2008). By this definition, it is right to infer that health emergency communication is the information disseminated during and after a health crisis either within a given country or globally. In times of global pandemics such as COVID-19, crisis communication is indispensable in dispelling fear and uncertainty and unifying citizens in a collective fight against disease (Wu, et al., 2020).

The Media are the primary source of information and plays a vital role in educating the masses. However, when overly eager sources spread information without proper verification, not only can it be harmful but it can have unintended consequences (Anwar et al., 2020). World Health Organization (WHO, 2005), observes that effective media communication requires trust and understanding between public health

officials and the media. The media depend on public health officials for timely and accurate information.” Public health officials depend on the media to get their messages out before, during and after an emergency. This means that for health emergencies to be combated effectively, there must be synergy between media practitioners and health public health officials. What remains unclear in Nigeria is how health officials and the media synergized or are synergizing to improve on health emergency communication in the country.

Concept of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illnesses. Anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age (WHO, 2020). Cable News Network (CNN, 2020) on the 11th of march, 2020 reports that ‘The World Health Organization on Wednesday declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. There are 118,000 cases, more than 4,000 deaths, the agency said, and the virus has found a foothold on every continent except for Antarctica.’”

A pandemic is an outbreak of infectious disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and that is of high prevalence, generally affecting a significant proportion of the world's population, usually over the course of several months. Pandemics arise from epidemics, which are outbreaks of disease confined to one part of the world, such as a single country. Pandemics, especially those involving influenza, sometimes occur in waves, so a post-pandemic phase, marked by decreased disease activity, may be followed by another period of high disease prevalence (Rogers, 2022).

Empirical Review

In a study conducted by Apuke and Omar (2020), on how do Nigerian newspapers report the COVID-19 pandemic? The implication for awareness and prevention. This study objective was to examined media coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria with attention to the frequency and depth of coverage, story format, news sources, media tone and themes. Four widely read newspapers were content analyzed between February 2020 and April 2020. Results indicated that the Nigerian media performed well in terms of covering the pandemic, which in turn created awareness. However, the coverage was not in-depth as most of the reported stories were short and were predominantly straight news. It was also observed that the media cited more of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and government officials. Further findings disclosed that most of the stories were alarming and induced panic. The most common topics were coverage of cases in Nigeria, death rates and concerns about Nigeria's preparedness. Public sensitization and education were sparingly covered. Ethics healthcare workers could adhere to received minimal attention. The media should focus more on sensitizing and educating the public on the necessary steps to take in curbing the virus. They should refrain from over usage of alarming and panic tones in presenting the stories of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria

Also, Aderogba (2021), studied Nigeria's Media Framing of COVID – 19 Pandemic: A Content Analysis of Selected National Dailies. The study examined the role of the Nigerian press in providing needed coverage of the pandemic by supplying needed information on the novel coronavirus. The content analysis research method was used for this study, and three national daily newspapers are examined. The researcher found that the Nigerian press is more interested in the effect of COVID-19 on the economy and less concerned about the development of vaccines/drugs, testing, isolation/treatment as well as the state of the health facility.

Furthermore, Su, et al. (2021), conducted a study on the Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19 Media Coverage: The Need for Effective Crisis Communication Practices. The objective of the study was to identify ways that legacy media reports on COVID-19 and how social media-based infodemics can result in mental health concerns. The researchers found that media reports that include infodemics regarding the influence of COVID-19 on mental health may be a source of the adverse psychological effects on individuals. Owing partially to insufficient crisis communication practices, media and news organizations.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored the CERC Model of crisis emergency risk communication. In October 2002, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched an innovative course for public health officials following an integrated model entitled CERC (Reynolds et al., 2002). The CERC was developed primarily as a tool to educate and equip public health professionals for the expanding communication responsibilities of public health in emergency situations. Although it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review of the CERC framework here, it is important to describe some of its unique features. First, CERC is a compilation of many risks and crisis communication principles within a general unifying framework. This includes principles that are theory-driven, research-driven, and practice driven. We characterize CERC as a framework or paradigm developed through grounded theory and influenced by the health, risk and crisis communication disciplines.

What makes the CERC program different from the classification model of crisis (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994, cited in Coombs, 2007) is the systematic approach that requires ongoing and escalating communication processes throughout the stages of the pre-crisis, initial event, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation. In each stage, specific communication activities are described along with the expected relationships between the communication activities and outcomes. Because the recommendations are contingent on the crisis type, "the model is advanced as a tool for health communicators to assist in managing complex public health threats, including crises and disaster events as well as an emergent threat to public health such as infectious disease outbreaks and potential bioterrorist attacks" (Ballard-Reisch et al. 2007, p. 207).

This model is relevant to this study because it established a framework for effective health, crisis and emergency communication. Through this model, it can be said that media practitioners have a blueprint or modalities for emergency health communication during the pandemic that is capable of keeping the public informed as well as dousing the tension, in order to mitigate negative mental situations. It is based on the provisions of this model that this study will evaluate the performance of Nigeria newspapers in reporting the pandemic

This model/framework is faulty. In many ways, it does not carry the study. First, it's a model for disease control and prevention by the American CDC. It has no origins on media or newspaper research. Second, it was to "to educate and equip public health professionals for the expanding communication responsibilities of public health in emergency situations"...unless this is a participant observation study or a focus group study of medical personnel communication strategies, this model does not fit the work. Third, it does not align with the research objectives which is mainly descriptive – a report of what is seen in the selected newspapers through content analysis. Risk Communication Theory is recommended.

Research Methodology

This study adopted quantitative content analysis to analyse the content of newspapers on covid-19 pandemic. Ohaja cited in Obayi et al., (2016, p.4) refer to content analysis as "the examination of the

manifest content to discover the pattern existing therein.” The study population consists of all the editions of *The Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Sun* newspapers published within the period of April 2020 to September 2020, which is the main period of the COVID-19 lockdown. The addition of these six months will give 183. When multiplied by the three newspapers will give a total of 549 editions of newspapers which is the population for the study. Wimmer and Dominick composite week was used to determine the sample size. This will give seven editions of newspapers in each month. When multiplied by the six months under study and further multiplied by the 3 different newspapers, the total sample size will be 126 editions of *The Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Sun* newspapers. The researcher used a multi-stage sampling technique for the study. Code sheet was used for the data collection. The essence was to effectively analyse the various units of analysis and content categories that the researcher adopted to guide the coding process of the study.

To ensure that the instruments which include a code sheet, coding guide will yield data that can be consistent and reliable, they were subjected to face validation otherwise known as content validity by the co-researchers and other senior academician the department of mass communication, Imo state university. To establish reliability, pilot coding was carried out by the master coder and re-coded by a trained assistant coder independently. The data generated individually from coded content was tested using the Pearson product-moment correlation statistical formula. The result that was gotten showed a high level of consistency at 0.9. See the formula below:

$$r = \frac{\sum (x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x - \bar{x})^2 \sum (y - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Two trained coders used the code sheet that was vetted and corrected by the senior academic to code the content. This was also guided by the various units of analysis and content categories listed above. The study made use of frequency tables with simple percentages to obtain results for data generated during the analysis of manifest content in the selected newspapers.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The tables below show the data retrieved from the 126 editions of newspapers studied which provide answers to the research questions. The data was derived from the code sheet used to tally each report on the COVID-19 pandemic which was analyzed in order to gather the result.

Table 2: Research Question One: What is the frequency of the coverage of newspaper reports on the COVID-19 pandemic?

Item	Frequency				Percentage (%)
	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	
Covid-19	550	576	508	1634	70%
Herders	112	77	80	269	12%
Rape	202	85	126	413	18%
Total	864	738	714	2316	100%

Analysis of data from table 2 above revealed that 70% of issues on straight news, opinion articles and feature articles centred on the COVID-19 pandemic. This confirmed that majority of reports during this period was about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3: Research Question Two: What is the Depth of coverage of newspaper reports on the COVID-19 pandemic?

Item	Frequency				Percentage %
	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	
1-5 inches	40	66	42	148	9%
6-10 inches	80	120	96	296	18%
11-15 inches	150	120	144	414	25%
16 & above	280	270	226	776	48%
Total	550	576	508	1634	100%

Analysis of data from table 3 above indicate that 48% of issues on straight news, opinion articles and feature articles got from The Punch, Daily Sun and Vanguard newspapers were published within the space of 16 inches and above. This confirmed that majority of reports about the COVID-19 pandemic were accorded enough space in the daily publications during the pandemic lockdown.

Table 4: Research Question Three: What are the dominant tones of newspaper reports on the COVID-19 pandemic?

Item	Frequency				Percentage (%)
	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	
Fear/Alarming	252	228	214	694	43%
Neutral	128	184	166	478	29%
Reassuring	170	164	128	462	28%
Total	550	576	508	1634	100%

Analysis of data from table 3 above indicate that 43% of issues on straight news, opinion articles and feature articles got from The Punch, Daily Sun and Vanguard newspapers were written in a fearful and alarming tone. This confirmed that majority of reports about the COVID-19 pandemic were mostly fearful and alarming.

Discussion of Findings

With respect to this research question that was raised in order to find out the level of attention given to the issue of the pandemic during the lockdown. Findings from data gathered from the editions of newspapers coded revealed that the frequency of the coverage was high and impressive. This is because 70% of stories obtained from straight news, feature stories and opinion articles are centred on the COVID-19 pandemic. To ascertain the highness or lowness of the frequency, Wimmer and Dominic (2011, p.170) postulate that “the researcher needs some benchmark for comparison.” By content analyzing one or two other trending issue of period under review. To this end, the researcher decided to content analyse newspaper coverage of issues of farmer herders’ crisis and rape during the period under study. The choice of these other two issues was because they are the most burning issues during the pandemic lockdown. Also, the data further revealed that of the three newspapers study within the six months, *Daily Sun* had the highest number of reports with 576 reports on the pandemic. *The Punch* came second with 550 reports while *Vanguard Newspaper* reported 508. Though the disparities are not so high, but it is Worthy to note that *Daily Sun* may have done more reports because of it is reputation as a sensational newspaper. This finding corroborates the findings of Apuke and Omar (2020) who in their study found that the Nigeria media performed very well in terms of the coverage of the pandemic for the purpose of awareness

creation. This finding is further supported by the finding of Chinedu-Okeke et al. (2021). Their study also agreed that Nigerian newspapers gave wide coverage to COVID-19 issues. Theoretically, this finding aligns with the agenda-setting theory. The theory holds 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". It further holds that the media also tell people how to think about the issues specifically and the social world generally. This means that frequent reporting of COVID-19 by the media can make the readers pay more attention to the messages they convey.

The implication of this finding is that the tendency for people to focus more on the COVID-19 pandemic due to the frequency of reportage given to it by Nigerian newspapers is high. This is also capable of generating positive or negative reactions both mentally and psychologically among tertiary institution students.

With regards to this research question raised to find out the depth of coverage given to reports on the COVID-19 pandemic by Nigerian newspapers. The finding from this study revealed that 25% and 48% of the issues were reported within the space of 11 to 15 inches and 16 inches and above. This shows that sufficient space was accorded to issues about the COVID-19 pandemic as these are the highest space a story can be given in a typical newspaper in Nigeria and beyond.

This finding agrees with the finding of Yusuf and Jude (2021). Their finding revealed that the media devoted more space to the coverage of the COVID-19 preventive measures and issues of COVID-19 palliatives. Smith et al. (2020), in their study revealed that Nigerian media played a great role in the reportage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. They concluded by noting that the level of consideration accorded to the pandemic by the press helped Nigeria to effectively wage war against the pandemic. Anyanwu et al. (2022) found in their study that while the media had effective coverage of the outbreak of the pandemic, the Nigerian government paid lip service in its response to COVID-19, and this reflected in citizens' indifference to the virus. This is to say that the depth of coverage of reports on the pandemic was considerably impressive. This also means that less was done by the government in the area of public sensitization and enlightenment.

The implication of this finding is that the space accorded to COVID-19 issues will enable news readers to be properly informed on the pandemic if the newspapers reported more educative content to their audience which will help in the fight against the pandemic. Sadly, Yusuf & Jude observed that most of the reports on the COVID-19 pandemic were centered on awareness creation and palliative distribution. This could imply that the media did not share message that tries to keep their audience mentally stable, messages reassuring them that the situation is under control, and how best to manage their emotions and ensure mental stability, during the pandemic lockdown. This is very disturbing and calls for concerns.

Analysis of data from this research question revealed that 43% of the reports were alarming in nature. This implies that these reports possessed a higher tendency to generate anxiety and depression. This means that newspaper readers were exposing themselves to content that has the capacity to induce depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

This finding resonates with the finding of Aderogba (2021). In his finding, he observed that the Nigerian press were more interested in the effects of COVID-19 on the economy and less concerned about the development of vaccines/drugs, testing, isolation/treatment as well as health facility which is simply alarmist in nature. Apuke and Omar (2020) also agreed with this finding as their study found that most of the stories on the news were alarming and induced panic. This entails that media reports contributed to triggering mental health issues among tertiary institution students as well as the general public. This finding is not in tandem with the theory of the CERC model which establishes proper guidelines for reporting crisis situations like the pandemic in a way that will not jeopardize the emotions and mental health of the public. Should the principles enshrined in the CERC have been adhered to in

reporting the pandemic by media practitioners, there would have been fewer alarming reports with particular respect to the emotions and mental health of media consumers in general.

The implication of this finding is that media practitioners paid less attention to the principles and procedures of health emergency communication in the cause of reporting the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences were widespread fear and anxiety, depression, trauma and other mental health concerns. This study has also shown that media practitioners lack adequate training that will enhance their reporting skills on the issue of health emergency. This is truly very worrisome and must be addressed with the right actions and approaches.

Conclusion

It is clear that Nigerian newspapers in their endeavours during the COVID-19 pandemic reported extensively to keep the general public informed. This is so as they accorded COVID-19-related stories sufficient space in their daily publication. Regrettably, the majority of these reports only succeeded in raising the alarms about the pandemic with no significant regard to health emergency communication guidelines and principles. This has also shown that reporters did not follow any particular health emergency communication guidelines during this period. This pattern of coverage must have contributed to a significant increase in mental health issues such as depression, Anxiety, eating disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. in the country. We therefore concluded that Nigerian newspapers despite their humongous coverage of the pandemic never used any health emergency communication guidelines in their Reportage. This study has contributed to knowledge on how Nigeria media report health emergency situations in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend the following:

1. *The Punch, Daily Sun, Vanguard* and other Nigerian newspapers should keep up their effort in constantly updating their audience in a crisis situation, but try to follow a crisis communication strategy like the CERC guidelines in order to balance their reportage.
2. *The Punch, Daily Sun, Vanguard* Nigerian newspapers should segment their space to report events as well as provide tips for survival and staying mentally stable and strong during health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Media practitioners should report health emergency situations in a way to reassure the public about a possible solution and not just raising the alarms. This can only be achieved by a proper health emergency communication training among journalists.

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