

Agenda- Setting Role of the Nigerian Press: A Case Study of the Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is a general acceptance of the profound role the press play in addressing critical social needs and in improving the lives of the people in any society. In modern climes, promoting public health and to a large extent preventing the spread of dangerous communicable health diseases have become an integral part of the press. This paper thus carried out an overview of the agenda-setting role of the Nigerian press on the Ebola Virus Disease outbreak in Nigeria. Content analysis research methodology was adopted by the study. Content of *The Punch* newspaper was analysed from May to October ie six months period. The findings of the study revealed among others that the Ebola Virus Disease was given significant coverage and that the issue received prominence in terms of story type, but not in the aspect of page placement. The paper recommends that newspaper editors must ensure that issues that have to do with the outbreak of deadly pandemic diseases should be given placement on the front pages of their paper. Also in same manner, journalists covering issues must begin to focus on issues of research in their news gathering and reporting.

Keywords: Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), Mass media, Health Communication and Agenda Setting Theory

INTRODUCTION

The Ebola hemorrhagic fever disease is one of the world's deadliest viruses ravaging the West African sub-region. Ebola death toll is already put at more 7,000 from over 14,000 cases of infected persons each passing day (Silverbird Television, 2014). The spread of the virus worsens with time due to non-availability of a cure, and lack of full understanding of its nature and knowledge as to how to contain it immediately. The World Health Organisation (WHO) regards it as "the most severe acute health emergency in modern times". Peter Piot, the man who is acclaimed to have given Ebola its name, in 1976, reportedly said, "This isn't just an epidemic. This is (a) human catastrophe" (*The Punch* newspaper, 2014, p: 26).

The first outbreak of the disease occurred in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo). It had 318 reported human cases, leading to 280 deaths. Within the same period, another outbreak occurred in Sudan (now South Sudan) which led to 284 cases and 151 deaths. In 1995, an outbreak in Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) led to 315 reported cases and at least 250 deaths. From 2000-2001, a Ugandan outbreak resulted in 425 human cases and 224 deaths. Similarly, from 2001-2002, another outbreak occurred at the border of Gabon and Republic of the Congo (ROC), which resulted in 53 and 43 deaths on the side of Gabon and Republic of the Congo side, respectively (*CNN Facts on Ebola*, 2014).

In a similar report, an outbreak of the virus occurred in the Republic of the Congo from December 2002 to April 2003 with 143 reported cases and 128 deaths. In 2007, another reported outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), 187 out of 264 reported cases resulted in deaths. Also, in the late 2007, an outbreak in Uganda led to 37 deaths out of 149 reported cases (*CNN Facts*, 2014).

According to a recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Guinea has 1,878 recorded cases of Ebola, 1,142 deaths; Liberia with the highest number of 6,822 cases, and 2,836 deaths; Mali recorded 4 cases, with 4 deaths; Nigeria has 20 cases, with 8 deaths; Sierra Leone with second highest with 5,368 cases and 1,169 deaths; Spain and the United States of America has 1 and 4 cases and 0 and 4 cases respectively. The figures so far keep changing on a daily basis (WHO/CDC, 2014). The United Nations (UN) agency had reckoned that by December, 10,000 new cases will be recorded every week. But that figure seems to have been surpassed as at the present. In the opinion of the President of the World Bank Group, Jim Yong Kim, "... the international community must find ways to get past logistical road blocks and bring in more doctors and trained medical staff, more hospital beds and more health and development support to help stop Ebola in its tracks" (*The Punch* newspaper, 2014). Also, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), "There is no specific treatment or vaccine" for Ebola Virus Disease and the fatality rate can be up to 90%. Patients of the disease are given supportive care, which includes providing fluids and electrolytes and foods.

As a member of the West Africa community, the deadly virus was brought to Nigeria by a Liberian-American, Patrick Sawyer, who is a top government official in the Liberian Ministry of Finance. The victim later died at a local hospital in Nigeria. Beginning from the period the deadly Virus was brought to Nigeria, the media became not only agog with the news, but also alive to its responsibilities.

The discipline of communication is dedicated to addressing critical social needs as well as improving lives of the people. In modern society, promoting public health and preventing the spread of dangerous health risks has become an integral communication function (Onekutu&Ojebode, 2007. p.83). There is a global acceptance of the profound effects mass media activities have on the lives of people; by extension on the education, growth, development and continual existence of a nation-irrespective of the socio-political milieu within which they operate. Mass media displays information about health and make people aware so as to prevent the spread of various diseases. The primary functions of the mass media are to inform, educate and entertain. The various mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet, etc) have the power to direct people's attention to certain issues and this is evident in the agenda setting function of the mass media (Uwom and Oloyede, 2014). In their view, to be in good health, people need adequate information and knowledge on health matters. People need information on healthy life style practices, and diseases, and government healthcare programmes. Thus, the mass media help in creating awareness, accelerating information flow and mobilizing the populace towards attainment of national goals and aspirations to ensure a total transformation.

Thus, to study a society there is need to turn to its media- films, novels, and television series, and popular stories. These will reflect what people feel and think, how they behave, and so on. The media act as a mirror of society, or a 'window on the world', can be used as a resource to understand the society, O'Shaughness (1999). Freimuth, Greeberg and DeWitt Jean (1984) in Ghanta (2012) have shown that many people rely on the news media for their health-related information.

Despite considerable expansion of the health service system in the last two decades, general health, health care and living conditions of Nigerians are still poor. There are shortages in the supply of medical facilities, drugs, equipment and personnel. In 2005, only 57% of the population had access to safe drinking water, and a slightly lower percentage had access to adequate sanitation. These increased the threat of infectious diseases. The country has an average life expectancy of 46.5 years (UNDP, 2007 cited in Okidu 2005, p. 10).

RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

The mass media which comprise the radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the new media have enormous potential to influence health-related behaviours and perceptions. Much research has focused on how the media frames health issues; eg, Kreps, 1990; Brown and Walsh-Childers, 1994; Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, & Parker, 1999; Gibney& Kearney, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Seale, 2002; Okidu, 2005; Uwom and Oloyede, 2011; Leask, Hooker and King, 2010; Ghanta, 2012, etc. The study at hand focuses on the coverage of health related issues in a Nigerian newspaper-*The Punch* newspaper. The objective is to unveil the coverage of health related issues in terms of prominence, extent of coverage and the issue salience given the Ebola Virus Disease outbreak in Nigeria.

There is an expectation of the role expected of newspapers in covering health issue. Apart from staging health programmes which help in health decision making, mass media are the avenues through which policies on health are explained to people. Media roles in health issues Adedokun, Adenle, Uyo, & Aliede (2013) state thus:

- Staging health related programme such as health talk;
- Inform and explain to the populace new government policies on health;
- Collaborate with health organizations (governmental and non-governmental) to assist people in solving health related problems;
- Report epidemics before it spread;
- Report the findings of health researchers to help in health decision making.

With the above expected role of the media and by implication the newspaper in covering the EVD, the specific objectives the study set out to examine are as follows:

- 1) To determine the extent of coverage given to the EVD by *The Punch* newspaper from May to October, 2014.
- 2) To examine the prominence given to the coverage of EVD by *The Punch* newspaper from May to October, 2014.
- 3) To evaluate the issue salience as covered by *The Punch* newspaper in its editions from May to October, 2014.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The field of mass communication is replete with many theories which explain media coverage of issues. One of such theory is the agenda setting theory. This work is hinged on the agenda setting theory of the press which presupposes that the media has the power to influence peoples thinking by taking a lead in the debate of important issues in the society. Severin and Tankard (1979, p. 253) view the agenda setting theory as "the capability of the mass media to select and emphasize certain issues and thereby cause those issues to be perceived as important by the public". Folarin (2002, p.75) explains that agenda setting implies that mass media

predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in society. Baran and Davis (2003) cited in Soola (2007, p.10-11) basically establishes a strong positive correlation between the emphasis of mass media coverage and the salience of issues in the public domain. Nwanne (2010, p. 59) see this theory as addressing the role of the mass media in bringing important issues to the attention of their audiences. According to Okoro and Agbo (2003, p.31) in Ate, (2008, p.41), the media can set agenda or ascribe importance to an issue through:

- The quality/frequency of reporting
- Prominence given to the report
- The degree of interest generated in the reports and
- Cumulative media –specific effects over time.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was the research methodology used by the study. Stacks and Hocking (1992) defined content analysis as “a research method or a measurement technique that involves the systematic study of content of communication messages”. Berelson (1971) cited in Umuerri (2006, p.98) argues that it “is a research technique for the objective, systematic and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication”. Eleanor (1989) cited in Shah and Gansinger (2012), describe it “As a set of procedures for collecting and organizing information in a standardized format that allows analysts to make inferences about the characteristics and meaning of written and other recorded material”. While Holsti (1969) offered steps in carrying out content analysis research such as selecting, and defining categories; defining the unit of analysis; deciding on a system of enumeration; and carrying out analysis. Hartmann and Husband (1974) opined that “despite its limitations, content analysis enables us to say something about what is being called ‘event news’-that is, the version of the world daily laid before the public as a kind of suggested agenda for their thought, discussion and action”. To measure the nature and frequency of EVD coverage in Nigeria, one of the leading newspapers was selected as a universe and sampling purposes for the content analysis for the study. Primary data was gathered by the researcher and six 300 level students of the Caleb University, Lagos. The content analysis was conducted on health related messages that appear in *The Punch* newspaper, which is based on the Mondays to Friday’s edition of the daily within the six months (May to October) period the study sample was taken. This gave the researcher insight into the involvement of the media on health issues. The major issue here is the attention newspapers in Nigeria gave to the coverage of the Ebola Virus Disease. Out of a total number of 165 health related stories, 103 or 79.2% have to do with the Ebola Virus Disease.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1: *The Punch* newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria from May to October, 2014

Month	Ebola (%)	Malaria (%)	Cancer (%)	HIV (%)	Diabetes (%)	Others (%)	Total (%)
May	01(25%)	(0.0)	(0.0)	01(25)	01(25)	01(25)	04(2.4)
June	(0.0)	01(8.3)	02(16.7)	(0.0)	(0.0)	09(75)	12(7.3)
July	07(100)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	07(4.2)
August	52(100)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	52(31.5)
September	40(86.9)	(0.0)	01(2.2)	(0.0)	(0.0)	05(10.9)	46(27.9)
October	22(33.3)	04(22.2)	03(11.1)	02(0.0)	02(11.1)	11(22.2)	44(26.7)
Total	103 (79.2)	03(2.3)	04(3.1)	01(0.8)	02(1.5)	17(13.1)	165(100)

Most of the health related issues that accounted for *The Punch* newspaper stories within the six months period of the content analysis was the Ebola Virus Disease 79.2% (n=103). Other stories not related to those that form the content categories accounted for 13 % (n=17), cancer accounted for 3.1% (n= 4), malaria accounted for 2.3% (n=2.3), diabetes 1.5% (n=2), while HIV accounted for 0.8% (n=1).

Table 2: Nature of coverage of stories on health issues by *The Punch* newspaper in Nigeria

Month	Healthwise (%)	News (%)	Opinion/Viewpoint (%)	Education (%)	Others (%)	Total (%)
May	03(75)	01(25)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	04(2.4)
June	09(75)	00(0.0)	02(16.7)	(0.0)	01(8.3)	12(7.3)
July	02(28.6)	02(28.6)	03(42.9)	(0.0)	(0.0)	07(4.2)
August	08(15.4)	31(59.6)	02(3.8)	01(1.9)	10(19.2)	52(31.5)
September	07(15.2)	30(65.2)	01(2.2)	04(8.7)	04(8.7)	46(27.9)
October	16(36.4)	12(27.3)	08(18.1)	02(4.5)	06(13.6)	44(26.7)
Total	45(26.7)	77(46.7)	18(10.9)	10(6)	23(13.9)	165(100)

On the nature of the coverage of health issues by *The Punch* newspaper, within the period under study, news accounted for 46.7% (n=77), healthwise, (a health page) accounted for 26.7% (n=45), other stories that fall

outside the listed categories accounted for 13.9% (n=23), opinions/viewpoints accounted for 10.9% (n= 18) while education accounted for 6% (n= 10).

Table 3: The placement of Health stories by *The Punch* newspaper from May to October, 2014

Month	Cover (%)	Inside (%)	Back (%)	Total(%)
May	(0.0)	04(2.7)	(0.0)	04(2.4)
June	(0.0)	11(7.4)	(0.0)	11(6.7)
July	01(6.3)	05(3.4)	(0.0)	07(4.2)
August	11(68.7)	40(27.0)	(0.0)	52(31.5)
September	04(25)	47(31.8)	01(100)	50(30.3)
October	(0.0)	41(27.7)	(0.0)	41(24.9)
Total	16(9.7)	148(89.7)	01(0.6)	165(100)

In terms of the placement of health stories in *The Punch* newspaper, inside pages accounted for 89.7% (n=148) of health stories placed in the paper, the cover page accounted for 9.7% (n=16), while the back page accounted for 0.6% (n=1).

The *Punch* newspaper coverage of issue salience on the Ebola Virus Disease from May to October, 2014

Month	Research	Organisation	Treatment	Transmission	Information	Death	Others	Total
May	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)
June	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)
July	(0.0)	1(6.3)	3(13.0)	4(15.4)	6(25)	3(42.9)	2(3.2)	19(11.5)
Aug.	2(33.3)	2(12.5)	9(39.1)	9(34.6)	4(16.7)	(0.0)	22(34.9)	48(29.1)
Sept.	3(50)	8(50)	6(26.1)	12(46.2)	5(20.8)	4(57.1)	27(42.9)	65(39.4)
Oct.	1(16.7)	5(31.2)	5(21.7)	1(3.8)	9(37.5)	(0.0)	12(19)	33(20)
Total	6(3.6)	16(9.7)	23(13.9)	26(15.8)	24(14.5)	7(4.2)	63(38.2)	165(100)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

It seems difficult though not impossible in a study of this nature to use a single newspaper in undertaking a content analysis of health related issues in a Nigerian newspaper. The problem may lie in the absence of a newspaper that may serve as a comparative medium that is, comparing *The Punch* newspaper with that of any other newspaper. The result of the findings of this study shows that out of a total of 165 health related issues covered by *The Punch* newspaper within the six months period under review, 103 Ebola related issues were covered by the newspaper. This gives 3.6% (n=) coverage of Ebola Virus Disease per edition of *The Punch* newspaper within the six months period the study covered as against other health issues. Going by this statistics, this will be adjudged as adequate and in support of Folarin (1998, p.68), that the mass media in any society play the role of agenda setting-agenda setting does ascribe to the media the power to determine what the people are thinking about. This is done through the frequency of reporting given to the reports, and the degree of conflicts generated in the reports.

In reporting, the hard news stock is regarded as information and messages that affects individuals on a day-to-day basis. This study found that among the nature of coverage given to the various health related issues, news has the most with (n=66) or 46.7% out of a total of 165 issues given coverage within the six months period covered by the study. It therefore means that within the period the study covered, *The Punch* newspaper took the issue of the Ebola Virus Disease serious since it affected the health of Nigerians. Health we all know is wealth, and a healthy nation is a wealthy one. But looking at the placement of the Ebola stories, *The Punch* newspaper did not give the coverage of the Ebola Virus Disease the prominence it deserves. In the finding of the study, out of a total of 165 issues the newspapers content analysed, 16 or 9.7% were placed on the front page of the newspapers as compared to (n=148) or 89.7% of the stories placed inside the newspaper pages within the period.

Another revelation of this study is in the area of issue salience, where research was among the least area of coverage by *The Punch* newspaper. It goes to show that the psyche of Nigerians is yet to be attuned to research issue salience. One will want to find out why research was not accorded the Ebola health issue in one of the nation's leading dailies. Perhaps, issues like the insurgency, the 2015 election and others form the salient issues the paper(s) may have focused on. For one, the death toll as result of the insurgency in the Nigerian North East could have reduced the impact of the Ebola reports in the nation's daily-*The Punch* newspaper.

One other revelation of this study is in the aspect of issue coverage, where information was among the most issues given coverage by *The Punch* among the many others. After other reports on the Ebola with 38.2% (n=63), followed by report on the transmission of the disease, 15.8% (n=26) while information on the virus followed with 14.5% (n=24). This finding may be in line with the uses and gratifications approach that assumes that the audiences use the mass media for various reasons; one of which may be to be well- informed on the Ebola issues. Off course the report may be said to have served the uses and gratifications of the audience readers in answer to the question: "what does the audience use the media for?"

CONCLUSION

The mass media have created much awareness since the outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease in July, 2014 in Nigeria. Gupta and Sinha (2010) in Uwom and Oloyede (2014) “newspapers reach many people, very quickly; and by implication the press can play a very important part in increasing people’s knowledge about health”. The Nigerian Minister for Health, Professor Onyebuchi Chukwu in his often held media brief, updated Nigerians on health and cleanliness habits. It will be recalled that before the virus made it way through Patrick Sawyer as its vector, some countries in the sub-region have been ravaged by the pandemic. The world being a global village, such information was equally carried by the media. Hence, the Nigerian publics were much aware of the EVD. Perhaps, the general information provided by the media like hand washing, avoiding crowded areas, avoiding eating bush meat, etc. may have resulted in the early departure of the deadly virus from the shores of this country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The paper recommends that newspaper editors must ensure that issues that have to do outbreak of deadly pandemic diseases should be given placement on the front pages of their paper.
- The press should do a follow-up and sustained coverage of health related issues, like having serial features stories, opinions, interviews, viewpoints, etc on the issue and not do a one –time news report at once since the newspaper has the advantage of permanency.
- Newspaper reporters should undertake investigative journalism in the area of doing stories in preventive medicine as prevention is better than cure.
- Journalists should be adequately trained to ensure that they give insightful and well-rounded views and facts on health related issues.

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