

## **MEDIA COVERAGE OF EBOLA VIRUS DISEASE IN NIGERIA USING GUARDIAN AND PUNCH NEWSPAPERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Health issues are germane to the survival of the human race. Issues relating to health are considered very important to all strata of persons in the society irrespective of their socio-economic and political status as well as their political affiliations. It is in view of this that countries of the world take health matters particularly those on epidemics seriously because if they are left unattended to they can result in great catastrophic. It is to avoid catastrophic that countries of the world go all length to nip such problems in the bud. Anchored on the Information, Social Responsibility and Agenda Setting Theories, this paper found out how much attention was paid by The Guardian and Punch Newspapers on the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) especially in helping to enlighten the public of the deadly nature of the virus and the generally acceptable best practices in dealing with the EVD. The paper ascertained the extent to which media coverage helped in not only creating awareness on the epidemic but also how much coverage is been giving to the spread of Ebola. Using the content analysis method, The Guardian and The Punch newspapers were critically analyzed along the lines of their news report; feature stories, articles, opinion, advertorials as well as editorial write up in order to ascertain how well media coverage helped in stemming the tide of Ebola. It was observed that both newspapers paid close attention on the Ebola Virus Disease.*

**KEYWORDS:** EVD, Health Reporting, Health Promotion, Media

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The World Health Organization (WHO) in its report on Africa for 2013 identifies that over 62% of the population of Africa have poor health status while over 75% of the population lack access to proper medical care thereby being responsible for the low life expectancy rate which is said to be on the further decline with life expectancy ratio for men being as low as 45 years and that of women being between 50 – 62 years. Some of the major areas of health concern is the high rate of malaria cases which is said to be responsible for more deaths than even HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality, infant mortality, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, Cholera, cancer and the most recent and threatening situations is the current spread of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). A lot of evidence on the health situation in Africa have shown that poverty, poor standard of living and poor access to basic amenities of life including portable water, clean environment/ air, good food for consumption are some of the issues threatening the living standard of Africans.

However, a lot is needed to ensure better health and living standard for Nigerians by both the private sector, Non-Governmental Organizations, Government at all levels and their parastatal as well as the mass media. The mass media is said to be at the fourth estate of the realms, hence it is seen as having the responsibility of helping to promote better health standards and living across Africa through its interpretative reports and other educative/ enlightening programmes.

Advanced societies of the world have shown concern on those factors that can affect meaning exchange and have led to urbanization and industrialization. The contemporary society has assumed an ever increasing complexity. Urbanization and industrialization have thus radically reconstructed the realities around man in virtually every aspect of life. We are today in a mass society. Mass society comprises people of widely varying tastes, education, social classes, economic standing, religious and moral learning, languages and every other conceivable attributes of human society... communication, the lifeblood of human co-existence, expectedly, is bound to take newer dimensions. Apart from improving ways of communication between known parties, there is a need to devise and use means that extend man's sense of speech, sight and hearing. These senses are at the fulcrum of the encoding-decoding interface. This need finds fulfillment in the mass media of communication, which are specialized technical channels for society-wide message dissemination to receivers of widely varying characteristics (Agba, 2000)

According to a USAID report (2009) it states, "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 behaviors. But before the media can take on that role, it needs to understand the virus, the issues surrounding it, policy and practices, and finally, recommended correct behaviors."

Pulitzer (1994), in the North American Review states that, "Nothing less than the highest ideals, the most scrupulous anxiety to do right, the most accurate knowledge of the problems it has to meet, and a sincere sense of moral responsibility will save journalism from a subservience to business interests, seeking selfish ends antagonistic to public welfare".

In a nutshell, this paper focuses on the role of the media in health reporting but in this case, reporting Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) using The Guardian and Punch Newspapers for the study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW/ THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) is a deadly disease which medical science have confirmed is a very deadly disease with capacity to kill the host body in a matter of weeks depending on the individual's immune system. It spread so fast especially through contact with an effected body and resulting in the death of so many people including health workers. There are a lot of speculations and assumptions about Ebola with so much ignorance making the rounds. It is the lack of knowledge and information that resulted in the death of more people than should have been as friends and relatives of the infected had contact with those who have contacted the virus and died as a result of this. Those who died from the virus were also improperly disposed or buried further leading to wide spread of the virus as World Health Organization reports on Ebola confirmed that the virus does not die in the host after the death of the host hence contact with the corpse by others could lead to their infection as well.

All these are pointers to how much the lack of information or the availability of information and proper sensitization could have helped to remedy the situation and result in the salvaging of more people and families from the scourge of the deadly Ebola Virus. And this is where the media becomes imperative. Okunna (1999) identifies that, "the mass media performs a number of functions, which benefits the individual as a member of a society. These function range from serious informational and educational functions to other lighter functions.

## **Role of Media in Health Promotion**

“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 behaviors. But before the media can take on that role, it needs to understand the virus, the issues surrounding it, policy and practices, and finally, recommended correct behaviour” (USAID, 2009).

The local and international media play a vital role as the link between health workers and the larger public. Health authorities educate and entrust the media with essential health information, which is then relayed to the public in readily accessible formats through a variety of media channels. For instance, in order to disseminate information about the avian influenza to the wider public, the U.S. Government tasked the Academy for Educational Development with the responsibility of developing a training program to help the local media understand the complexity of this disease so that they would be able to report about it effectively.

The mass media helps health workers expand their audience reach, which is crucial considering the fact that face-to-face channels of communication often require too many human resources and reach only a small number of people in large, underserved rural areas. The mass media provides an important link between the rural residents and vital health information (USAID, 2006)

According to Boyd et.al (2009) “the mass media, in the form of the radio, television and newspapers are an effective way to persuade target audiences to adopt new behaviors, or to remind them of critical information. Besides informing the public about new diseases and where to seek help, they can also keep the public updated about immunization campaigns. The mass media can “empower rural populations to fight major causes of infant mortality such as diarrheal dehydration and diseases which can be prevented through vaccination, inform large numbers of people of seasonal or daily variations for such activities as an immunization campaign or availability of a new product or service, teach new health skills such as how to mix oral rehydration solution, promote new health behaviors such as taking ivermectin once a year, motivate ad hoc or organized listening groups, and increase community acceptance of health workers.”

### **Case Study: Messages for a Vaccination Campaign**

In order to increase the number of children less than a year old receiving vaccinations in Manila, Philippines, radio and television broadcasts were created because almost everybody utilized one or both media channels. According to a study done later to determine the efficacy of the campaign, using the radio and television “resulted in more children being vaccinated on schedule...These results show that in places where people use mass media regularly and vaccinations are available, effective radio and television spots can increase vaccination rates and extend the reach of health workers.”

### **Reaching Out to Rural Communities: Radio Spots**

"The backbone of our mass media program is the 45 second promotional spot. Why start with spots? Because they are quick and easy to produce and broadcast. In the same spirit we make low cost tools, such as the gazety, accessible to large numbers of families, we broadcast dozens of spots on over ten fm stations every day, day in and day out. With the spots working for us, we developed short rural radio programs by recording local skits and brief interviews with

parents. Powerful synergy between two communication channels is achieved when village skits are broadcasting on local radio stations” (Goether Peter, 2009).

In places where radios are still popular, they can be used, with great success, as health communication tools. Not only are they cheaper and more readily available in rural areas, their programs can also be adapted to suit local needs in terms of language, culture and values. In Africa, radio spots or advertisements are used to combat malaria. However, owing to diversity, education and others some rural dwellers have access to newspapers while more urban dwellers read newspapers either purchase or at the news stand thereby providing a means to keep abreast with the happenings around them.

### **Case Study: Using Radio for Diarrheal Disease Control in Swaziland**

To prevent the deaths of infants and young children from diarrhea, radio broadcasts were used to train health professionals to treat the disease, distribute relevant health materials and set up places where mothers could learn how to prepare medication properly. According to the evaluative study performed later, “given a similar level of staff effort but the far greater coverage achieved by radio, it was found that more than twice the number of mothers learned the correct procedure for mixing SSS (the medication) from the radio than did those who learned it from face-to-face communication.” This provides strong evidence that the radio campaign was a successful health communication strategy.

### **The Internet Revolution**

As Internet access continues to expand, it will increasingly serve as a rich health resource in environments that lack health expertise. Regardless of location, the Internet allows people to gain access to a wide array of health-related information from worldwide at a mouse click. It has also provided avenue for consumers of information to even access and read newspapers online. The Guardian and Punch newspapers are usually some of the many favorite places visited by information seekers when look out for news item. The local cyber café may even begin to serve as a health information hub. Since the Internet transcends geographical barriers, there is plenty of potential for websites to provide a valuable source of health information, thus enhancing health and wellbeing for people in developing countries.

However, there is one important caveat. As the amount of information grows at an unprecedented rate, so does the amount of false, and potentially harmful information. Misinformation, either due to inaccurate information, misleading information or misinterpretation of health information, can have potentially dire consequences, triggering mass panics, misleading uninformed policy-makers etc.

*“As access increases in the developing world, many health-related crises could parallel social and political movements that have resulted, at least in part, from these technologies (e.g., the use of the Internet by the Falun Gong in China or the role that SMS played in the destabilization of a Philippine government). Hong Kong, for example, narrowly missed mass panic as a result of misinformation being posted to a falsified website concerning SARS. Elsewhere, decisionmakers have been misled by, or chosen to misuse, information found on the Internet (e.g., South African President Mbeki’s stance on HIV/AIDS). For health communication programs, the Internet may become a countervailing factor and an obstacle as a source of misinformation and myth, particularly in the areas of infectious diseases and HIV/AIDS” (Maxfield, 2009).*

## **Health Reporting in the Media: What to Believe?**

The view of Grant Thompson (2005) Conference of the International Foundation for Functional Disorder states that:

Most people learn of medical progress through the media. Whether through short clips on radio or TV or detailed articles in the press, scarcely a day passes without a report of a health development, and how it might affect you. Yet this news is often unhelpful. Exaggerated cures, contradictions, and plainly misleading information can do harm. While health care policy is a public issue and freedom of the press mandates the free dissemination of health news, misinformation may be expensive, personally harmful, and detract from issues that are more important.

While public education has changed attitudes towards smoking, seat belts, and impaired driving, much reported information is confusing and counterproductive. One day, margarine is safer than butter, but later we learn that it too may harm arteries. Dietary fiber was once thought to prevent colon cancer, but now we are not so sure. Some reports, but not others suggest saccharin, a boon to diabetics, causes bladder cancer. Such contradictions perplex those unfamiliar with the workings of science. The problem is not the science, but how journalists report it, and how the public interprets it. This essay aims to help readers make sense of health news.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper is anchored on the following theories:

#### **The Information Process Theory**

This theory is a persuasive theory propounded by Williams McGuire (1968). In his work, he identified a change in attitude as one of the basis for communication and went further to point out six steps by which attitudinal change occur, these include:

- (i) There must be a communication of the persuasive message from the source.
- (ii) The receiver is expected to attend to the message.
- (iii) The receiver is also expected to understand the message.
- (iv) The receiver yields to and is convinced by the message.
- (v) The newly adopted position is retained.
- (vi) The desired behaviour takes place.

#### **Social responsibility theory**

According to Denic McQuail (1987:117-118) the following principles guide this theory:

- i. That media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society.
- ii. That through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met.

- iii. That media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities.
- iv. That whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder or offence to minority groups should be avoided by the media.
- v. That the media should reflect its society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and grant all the right to reply.
- vi. Based on principle (i) the society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media. Intervention can only be justified to secure public good.
- vii. Accountability of media professionals should be to the society, employers and the market.

### **Agenda setting theory**

Lippman (1922) states that the media help to “put pictures in our heads”. The explains the **power of the mass media to set the agenda and raise issues of public importance.** McCombs and Shaw (1972) adds that, “audience not only learn about public issues through the media, they also learn how importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it”. Trenemen and McQuail (1961) adds that, “there is evidence that people think about what they are told but at no level do they think what they are told”.

### **Relevance all theories to the study**

It is evident that through the Agenda setting function of the mass media the media get to set the stage for public discourse. A whole lot of issues are mostly at the front burner and remain for so long because the media keeps laying emphasis on it. It therefore requires that the media be more proactive and careful, that is, being social responsible enough to promote positive issues that can impact positively on the society such as enlightenment and proper coverage of health related issues as Ebola. The media also, uses its platform to provide issues (information) for members of the public who then process such information

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

This study adopted content analysis research design. This method involves examination of the manifest contents of communications. Kerlinger (2000), cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2011), content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. This method was considered appropriate for the study because the study focused on examination of stories in the selected newspaper.

Two Nigerian Newspaper –The Punch and the Guardian were selected for the study. The study covered a period of four months - from the period of July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014 when the first Ebola virus was recorded in Nigeria to 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2014 when Nigeria was finally declared Ebola free by the world Health Organization.



**Table 1: Distribution of Publications**

Publication	No. of Days	No. of editions used	No. of Ebola Stories
The Guardian	91	45	108
The Punch	91	45	91

Under table 1, a total of 91 editions each were published by both The Guardian and The Punch newspapers covering the period under review. From the above table, a total of 45 editions were each content analyzed from both The Guardian and The Punch newspapers resulting in 108 stories on Ebola in The Guardian and 91 stories on Ebola in The Punch newspapers under the period of review.

**Table 2: Distribution of the News story in the publications**

Name of Newspaper	Front page	Percent	Back Page	percent	Inside Page	Percent
The Punch	12	40	-	-	48	61
The Guardian	18	60	-	-	31	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>			<b>79</b>	

Under table 2, the content indicates that there are more front page news stories as carried by The Guardian newspaper on the Ebola Virus Disease than The Punch newspapers. Thereby indicating that The Guardian is seen to have given more focus on the Ebola Virus Disease than The Punch newspaper.

**Table 3. Features, editorials and advertorials/public notices**

Publication	Features	%	Editorials	%	Articles	%	Opinion	%
<b>The Punch</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100</b>

Under table 3, fifty-three percent of the editions within the period under review had feature stories on the Ebola Virus Disease in The Punch newspapers while forty-seven percent of the feature stories were on the Ebola Virus Disease on The Guardian newspapers. This therefore shows that The Punch newspapers had more feature stories on the EVD than The Guardian newspapers.

On the Editorial content of both papers, The Punch newspaper possess sixty-seven percent of the total number of editorial stories amongst the two newspapers in the period under review with The Guardian newspapers having just thirty-three (33%) percent of the total sum in the period under review.

There are however more articles on the Ebola Virus as published in The Guardian newspapers when considering the period under review. These articles range from interviews to long essays by professionals as well as professional bodies as represented by fifty-seven percent of the total

sum under the period of review. Personal opinion as well as special columns made up fifty percent of the publications each.

**Table 4: Distribution of Lead Story on Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)**

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>The Punch</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Under table 4, a total of 18 stories making 62% of the entire publications under review carried stories on the Ebola Virus Disease on their Front page and as the major or most important story in those editions in The Guardian newspapers while 12 stories, representing 38% of the entire cover editions for the period under review in The Punch newspapers. This therefore go to show that The Guardian newspaper laid more emphasis on the Ebola Virus Disease especially on its cover pages which is more likely to attract more readership from even passersby.

## CONCLUSION

It is no gain saying that the Ebola Virus Disease was nothing short of an epidemic seen to not only be horrific but terrified not only Nigerians but Africa and the world at large. Owing to this, the following conclusions could be reached of media coverage of the Ebola Virus Disease:

- i. That the mass media, particularly of the Guardian and The Punch newspapers could be said to have given adequate attention to the issues of the Ebola Virus Disease owing to its covering of the EVD on its cover page as well as lead stories more than The Punch.
- ii. That the Guardian and The Punch newspapers provided varied forms of information from both straight news, to editorials, to feature reports as well as opinion pages thereby giving the audience more access to news on the development and spread of Ebola.
- iii. Based on findings, The Guardian newspaper is seen to have dedicated more front page story than The Punch newspapers when reporting the Ebola Virus Disease.
- iv. Similar to the aforementioned, The Guardian newspaper is seen to have also dedicated more of its lead or cover story to the news on the spread and management of the Ebola Virus Disease.
- v. On the Editorial comments, The Punch newspaper dedicated more editions to the discussions on the issue of Ebola than The Guardian newspaper's editorial page. It could therefore also be concluded that the management of the Punch newspapers equally is a socially responsible publication.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The media are said to set the agenda for public discuss as well as being expected to be socially responsible enough to promote societal development. Therefore, first and foremost, the researcher suggests that the media should be more proactive in handling societal issues by not always adopting only the watchdog method but should also act a a whistle blower, pre-empting and responding prompt enough in averting disasters of this nature. This is informed by two premise; first is that the EVD had long been existing in other west African country before it came to Nigeria hence they could have championed public discourse on the EVD as well as other important public issues.

The second premise relates to the comment by Professor Adebukunola Ositelu, a consultant Ophthalmologist, College of Medicine, UNILAG on how they tried to provide early information as well as assistance on EVD to both the government and major media houses who paid deaf ears to the claims. This kind of attitude can only be inimical to growth, development and security of lives and properties.

Again, the researcher recommends that the media, the government at all levels as well as all stakeholders must invest so much in research as well as the development of Nigeria's capacity to respond promptly when the need to tackle health issues as the wealth of the nation lies in the health and life expectancy indices of its citizenry

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