

The Press And Social Responsibility: Newspaper Coverage Of The 2014 Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak In Nigeria

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Abstract:*The study is a retrospective analysis of how the Nigerian press covered the 2014 Ebola virus disease outbreak in Nigeria. It employed the content analysis technique in analyzing two national newspapers – The Punch and The Nigerian Tribune, to determine the extent of coverage and the direction/slant of news presentation by the two newspapers. It concludes that Nigerian newspapers, especially the ones studied, were alive to their social responsibility obligations to the society; that at the core of their operations is a firm devotion to public welfare and safety, which they amply demonstrated by giving prominent play to news stories, features and editorials on the dreaded Ebola virus disease, with the view to inform and safeguard the public.*

Keywords:*Nigerian Press, Social Responsibility, Newspaper Coverage, Ebola Virus, Disease*

I. INTRODUCTION

The indispensable role of newspaper as a lamp of enlightenment to the people could have inspired the third president of the U.S. Thomas Jefferson's popular and timeless remark cited by Ndolo (2006:39), "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 later."

The above statement obviously underscores the value universally placed on newspapers as a melting pot for all sorts of beneficial messages. Newspapers perform many important functions in the Nigerian society. Esimokha (2011:10-11) notes that newspapers serve the public by keeping readers informed, entertaining readers, informing authorities of the needs of the public, educating readers and helping readers live more comfortable.

Anaeto, Solo-Anaeto and Tejumaiye (2009) as cited by Agbanu (2013:79) contends that newspapers provide the news of the day...It brings to the readers recent information and provides them with what is happening around them. While Chowdhury (2014) posits that the function of the media is to observe the society closely and continuously warn about threatening actions to the mass audience that are likely to happen in future in order to decrease the possible loss. Thus, it can be said that newspaper in the modern society provides the people with the day's intelligence, acts as the mirror and the guardian of the society.

Uwom (2012) cited by Agbana and Usman (2014:131) says "the role of the mass media in health reportage would go a long way in putting health issues in the minds and lips of everyone...The media are significant source of health-related information and can shape the way we think about and discuss health issues." Media coverage may influence individual health decision and also help to prevent bad health and lead to changes in public policy and public perception (Stryker, Moriarty and Jensen, 2008).

Ukonu (2013) avers that ever since modern civilization bequeathed human kind with the newspaper institution, it is ever aware of its sacred responsibility in society. The newspaper has been extolled as conscience of modern society. It coordinates social communication and furnishes a vital check on other institutions of the nation, few other establishments can compare with the newspaper on the magnitude of social influence.

Meanwhile, one of the basic tenets of the social responsibility theory is that the press should serve public interest. Thus it presupposes that newspapers must have social conscience, be devoted to public welfare and public service; they should be responsive to problems in the society. Furthermore, the press must be accountable to "to their audiences, to whom they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorializing" (Owens-Ibie, 1994). Hence, to accept to practice the noble profession of journalism is to accept the vocation to contribute to the progress of the society, and be concerned about the wellbeing of the society and the welfare of the people.

However, in spite of the travails of the Nigerian print media industry in the 21st century, occasioned by high cost of printing materials, low purchasing power of the average Nigerian, paucity of fund, proliferation of FM stations,

emergence of social media and online newspaper and magazines; newspaper seems not to have lost its alluring appeal as it is widely consulted by Nigerians for comprehensive, credible, accurate and authoritative information at the times of national emergency and crisis.

These enduring attributes of newspaper are derived from its inherent strengths of resources and space devoted to issues which enables it to provide depth and breadth to stories. Thereby providing readers with more meaty, more informative, more analytical and more descriptive stories... which could help them to live their lives meaningfully (Okoye, 2006).

1.1 Background of the Study

According to Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, an *Ebola* contact was a person who had a known exposure to a confirmed, probable, or suspected case. Contacts were actively monitored for 21 days after the date of last exposure. The contacts were further classified by their exposure to the case as Type 1 -- contact with body fluids such as blood, vomit, saliva, urine, or feces of a confirmed patient; Type 2 – direct physical contact with the body of a confirmed patient or decedent; Type 3 – contact with linens, clothes, or dishes/eating utensils and Type 4 – a history of sleeping, eating, or spending time in the same household or room as a patient. Contacts were reclassified as suspected cases if they reported fever, vomiting, diarrhea, or bleeding from stool or mucous and membranes or had two additional symptoms including headache, myalgia, arthralgia or weakness. It is noteworthy to state that before July 20, 2014, there was no reported case of *Ebola* virus victim in Nigeria. Though, the Nigerian press was filled with the narratives of how the disease was ravaging two West Africa countries – Liberia and Sierra Leone which decimated lives in their thousands, dislocated socio-economic activities and brought the fragile countries to their knees.

Eventually, the dreaded *Ebola* virus disease made its devastating stopover in Nigeria through an American-Liberian, Patrick Sawyer, who was sick from acute *Ebola virus* infection. He arrived at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos from Monrovia, Liberia on July 20, 2014, to attend the Economic Countries of West African States (ECOWAS) meeting in Calabar, Cross River State. On arrival in Nigeria, he became acutely sick and was admitted in a private hospital in Lagos. Subsequently, he was diagnosed with *Ebola virus*. Unfortunately, Sawyer who eventually died on July 25, 2014, was reportedly exposed to 72 persons at the airport and the hospital, which included the industrious Senior Consultant/endocrinologist of First Consultant Medical Centre, Lagos, Dr. Stella Ameyo Adadevoh, who got killed by the deadly disease.

Hence, the *Ebola* virus menace was no longer a tale from foreign lands but a concrete reality; and the news reports that the dreaded disease had at last sneaked into the country sent Nigerians into tailspin and confounded the government. In order to contain the *Ebola* virus outbreak, rapid response units were set up using all available public health infrastructures, subsequently, the Federal Ministry of Health in collaboration with Lagos State government and international partners activated an Ebola Incident Management Centre which later transformed into Emergency Operations Centre.

According to Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in its Mobility and Mortality Weekly Report of October 3, 2014, “as of September 24, there were 19 laboratory-confirmed Ebola cases and one probable case in two States, with 894 contacts identified and followed during the response. Eleven patients with laboratory-confirmed Ebola had been discharged, eight patients had died (seven with confirmed Ebola; one probable).” It was further reported that a total of 19 people were infected, out of which seven died. However, no new cases had occurred in the country since August 31, 2014, suggesting that *Ebola* outbreak in Nigeria might have been contained. On October 20, 2014, Nigeria reached the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended 42-day mark when no new cases have been detected, and was consequently considered free from *Ebola* disease.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Critics of Nigerian press are of the opinion that Nigerian newspapers in terms of news coverage are heavily biased toward politics and allied subjects that revolve around the activities of government and their agencies. But the outbreak of *Ebola* virus disease in the country seemed to have temporary buck the trend. Therefore, the thrust of the study is to examine the extent of coverage and the direction or slant of news presentation by the Nigerian press on the outbreak of *Ebola* virus in the country between June and December 2014.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To determine the extent of the coverage of the *Ebola* virus disease by the Nigerian press.
2. To examine the direction/slant of news presentation on the *Ebola* virus disease by the Nigerian press.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions are the framework for the study:

1. What is the extent of coverage of the *Ebola* virus disease outbreak by the Nigerian press?
2. What is the direction/slant of news presentation by the Nigerian press on the *Ebola* virus disease outbreak?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study would show that the press is alive to its social obligations of being responsive and responsible for the safety and general welfare of people in the society. Also, the study would underscore one of the fundamental roles of the press as the purveyor of information which would help people to live a meaningful and comfortable life.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study falls within the framework of Agenda-Setting Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory.

2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory was first introduced in 1972 in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald Shaw who revealed the basis of the theory in a study during the 1968 US presidential election. They surveyed 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the election how that compared to what the local and national media reported were the most important issues.

Freeland (2012:2) says “in its most basic sense, agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. The two most basic assumptions of agenda setting theory are: the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues”. Hence, the agenda setting theory is relevant in this study because the study seeks to find out the extent of coverage given to the *Ebola* virus disease outbreak, as this would invariably determine the importance or status conferred on the issue by Nigerian press.

2.2 Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility Theory was propounded in 1956 by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm who were inspired by the landmark Hutchins Commission report headed by the then president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins. At the heart of the social responsibility theory lies the concept of public interest. More specifically, social responsibility theory entails the necessity for the journalist to keep society’s interest as a priority (Middleton: 2009). Baran (2004) cited by Nnaane (2010:8) argues that the media must remain free of government control, but in exchange, they must serve the public. The social responsibility theory is appropriate in this study because the press is duty bound to serve public interest and always be concerned about the welfare and safety of the people by providing “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning”.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Uwom and Oloyede (2014:83) affirm that to be in good health, people need adequate information and knowledge on health matters. “They need information on healthy lifestyle practices, preventive health measures, health conditions and diseases, and government health care programmes. The mass media are to help in creating awareness, accelerating information flow and mobilizing the populace towards attainment of national goals and aspirations to ensure a total transformation of the society”.

Middleton (2009) asserts that “in seeking to clarify what it means for the press to be socially responsible and in the interest of improving the media’s service toward society, studies have underlined the profound influence that health news reporting can have on citizen’s lives. In one analysis of the effectiveness of communication between medical scientists and health news reporters, it was found that in almost all examples of journalists’ ‘failures to be accurate, to identify vested interests to follow up on stories, and to cover important health issues’, the negative consequences are ultimately borne by patients”.

United for Sight cited by Agbana and Usman (2014), in its communication course Module 5 opines that “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 behavior”.

In a study of newspaper coverage of poliomyelitis in Nigeria, a content analytic study of *The Nation* and *The Sun* Newspapers”, Agbana and Usman (2014) found out that the newspapers did not give prominence to polio issues in Nigeria in 2012. “It was also discovered that majority of the stories published on the health issue were in news form which means the newspapers did not give in-depth analysis on polio”. They assert that “presenting polio issues in prominent positions and with maximum coverage will expand the knowledge of the public on the issue of polio...the media indeed, has enormous power to influence the public and to determine what they think is more important based on the placement, space and size of page given to polio issues”.

Uwom and Oloyede (2014) in a content analysis study of newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria between January 2010 and December 2011, found that newspapers did not give prominence to the selected health issues; health-related stories were not given front prominence, while spaces allotted to health news stories were small and inconspicuous; and majority of the stories were in news format.

Okpolo and Azienge (2014) in another study on press coverage of maternal mortality in Northern Nigeria found that “the issue of maternal mortality in northern Nigeria was not given adequate coverage by the

print media used and the press was supposed to be balanced, fair, unbiased and accurate in its reportage of issues, but it had not been so when it came to women health issues”.

Finally, in a study on content analysis of cancer news coverage in Appalachian Ohio community newspapers, Lovejoy (2007) citing Hodgetts and Chamberlin (2006) avers that “media enjoy the position of being instrumental to and explicitly involved in society’s shared understanding and knowledge of health issues”.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The research technique employed for the study was content analysis. It was used because of its appropriateness in dealing with press coverage of various issues. The manifest content of the two selected newspapers, such as news, features and editorials were carefully examined, coded and analyzed, in order to meet the objectives set out for the study.

4.1 Population of the Study

The population of the study was all the Nigerian newspapers published between June and December 2014.

4.2 Sample of the Study

The Punch and *The Nigerian Tribune* newspapers were the sample of the study. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the two national newspapers. *The Punch* newspaper, one of the nation’s leading dailies, was established by the late Chief OluAboderin and his friend, a veteran journalist, Sam Amuka. It is published in Lagos and Circulated nationwide. *The Nigerian Tribune* was established in 1949 by the renowned Nigerian politician Chief Obafemi Awolowo. It is the oldest surviving privately-owned newspaper in Nigeria. It is published in Ibadan and circulated nationwide.

Therefore, the sample size consisted of all the editions of the two newspapers which covered the period of the *Ebola virus* disease outbreak and its eventual containment (from June to December 2014). The researchers employed census sampling technique as all the 428 editions published by the two newspapers (*The Punch* and *The Nigerian Tribune* published 214 editions apiece) were content analyzed.

4.3 Unit of Analysis

News was basically the unit of analysis, but the frequency of other editorial contents such as features and editorials were also analyzed.

4.4 Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using raw figures, frequency tables and simple percentage. They were subjected to qualitative quantitative analysis based on the research questions.

4.5 Validity and Reliability

For the purpose of achieving a reliable and valid result, inter-coder reliability system was employed in order to forestall the biases of the researchers. Hence, an independent research was used to double-check the coding and the categorization of the relevant editorial contents being analyzed.

Calculation of Inter-Coder Reliability

Using Holsti’s (1969) formula:

$$\text{Reliability} = 2M/N_1+N_2$$

Where M, is the number of coding decisions agreed on by the two coders.

$N_1 + N_2$ is the total number of coding decisions by the first and second coders respectively.

$$\text{Thus Reliability} = 2(238)/276 + 276$$

$$= 2 \times 238/552$$

$$= 476/552$$

$$= .9$$

Thus Reliability is .9

From the result, it shows that the findings are reliable since the margin of error is small.

4.6 Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 276 news stories were generated from 428 editions of the two newspapers published on the outbreak of the *Ebola virus* disease in the country spanning seven months (between June and December 2014). *The Punch* coverage of the dreaded disease generated 178 news stories, while *The Nigerian Tribune* had 98 news stories on the epidemic.

The data are presented in tables showing the extent of coverage, direction/slant of news presentation and the placement of news items in the newspapers.

Table 1 Distribution of editorial content of *The Punch* on the coverage of *Ebola virus* disease

Content	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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News	178	74.5
Feature	41	17.1
Editorial	20	8.4
Total	239	100

Table 1 shows that out of 239 editorial content published by *The Punch* on *Ebola* virus disease, 178, representing (74.5%) were news stories, feature 41 (17.1%), and editorial 20 (8.4%).

Table 2

Distribution of editorial content of *The Nigerian Tribune* on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease

Placement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
News	98	90.7
Editorial	6	5.6
Feature	4	3.7
Total	108	100

Table 2 shows that out of 108 editorial content of *The Nigerian Tribune* on *Ebola* virus disease, 98 representing (90.7%) were news stories, editorial 6 (5.6%) and feature 4 (3.7%).

Table 3

Placement of news stories by *The Punch* on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease in Nigeria

Placement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lead story	124	48.0
Front page	43	16.7
Inside page	83	32.2
Back page	8	3.1
Total	258	100

Table 3 shows that *The Punch* published 124 lead stories, representing (48.0%), front page 43 (16.7%), inside page 83 (32.2%) and back page 8 (3.1%).

Table 4

Placement of news stories by *The Nigerian Tribune* on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease in Nigeria

Placement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lead story	38	28.8
Front page	20	15.2
Inside page	72	54.5
Back page	2	1.5
Total	132	100

Table 4 shows that *The Nigerian Tribune* published 38 lead stories, representing (28.8%), front page 20 (15.2%), inside page 72 (54.5%) and back page 2 (1.5%).

Table 5

Direction/slant of news stories by *The Punch* on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease in Nigeria

Direction	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Favorable	105	40.7
Unfavorable	86	33.3
Neutral	67	26.0
Total	258	

Table 5 shows that 105, representing (40.7%) of the news stories published by *The Punch* on *Ebola* virus disease were favourable, 86 (33.3%) were unfavourable, while 67 (26.0%) had a neutral slant.

Table 6

Direction/slant of news stories by *The Nigerian Tribune* on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease in Nigeria

Direction	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Favorable	54	40.9
Unfavorable	42	31.8
Neutral	36	27.3
Total	132	100

Table 6 shows that 54, representing (40.9%) of the news stories published by *The Nigerian Tribune* on Ebola virus disease were favourable, 42(31.8%) were unfavourable, while 36(27.3%) had a neutral slant.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A total of 276 news stories on the *Ebola* disease were found in 428 editions of the two newspapers studied. It is evident from the data analysed that overwhelming majority of the editorial content on the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease was in the news form. Findings from tables 1 and 2 show that out of 239 editorial content published by *The Punch* on *Ebola* virus disease, 178(74.5%) were news stories, feature 41(17.1%) and editorial 20(8.4%); while out of 108 editorial content of *The Nigerian Tribune* on *Ebola* virus disease, 98(90.7%) were news stories, editorial 6(5.6%) and feature 4(3.7%). This finding is in consonance with the findings of Uwom and Oloyede (2014), in a study on Newspaper Coverage of Health Issues in Nigeria (A Study of *The Guardian* and *The Punch* Newspapers January 2010 to December 2011), and Agbana& Usman (2014), in a study on Newspaper Coverage of Poliomyelitis in Nigeria: a Content Analytic Study of *The Nation* and *The Sun* Newspapers; in which it was revealed that newspapers do not provide depth and breadth to health stories. They performed more of information role, that is, they “report health news just as they occur and do not give an elaborate analysis of the reports in the form of features”.

However, the quantity of editorial content generated from the coverage of *Ebola* disease outbreak in Nigeria by the two newspapers (*The Nigerian Tribune* 108 (31.1%) and *The Punch* 239 (68.9%)); underscores the dailies devotion to the welfare and safety of the society, as they were in the vanguard of sensitizing and educating the public on how to cope with the *Ebola* menace. And this finding is in tandem with the tenets of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press which states that the press is duty bound to serve public interest by providing the people with timely, factual and comprehensive information which they can use to live a meaningful life. In view of the findings in tables 3 and 4 it can be inferred that for maximum effects and attention, the two newspapers afforded the news stories generated from the coverage of *Ebola* virus disease outbreak in the country prominent positions. Hence, in order to sensitize the public on the dreaded *Ebola* disease, the newspapers gave maximum exposure to *Ebola*-related stories, as many of such stories (*The Punch* 167(64.7%), *The Nigerian Tribune* 58(44%)) received special treatments on the front page and well given prominent play as lead stories. However, unlike similar studies by Uwom&Oloyede (2012), Agbana& Usman (2014) and Okpolo&Azienge (2014); which reveal that the coverage of health issues were given peripheral treatment by the Nigerian press, as health-related stories were buried in the inside pages, allocated obscure positions, given smaller headlines and without photographs.

Also, further findings show that 347 editorial contents (which include news, editorial and feature) were generated on the coverage of the disease by the two dailies within a period of seven months. It is noteworthy to state that while it lasted, stories on *Ebola* virus disease dominated the Nigerian press and it was the major talking point among Nigerians of all social classes. This affirms the assertion of Kunczick (1988) cited in Folarin (2002:76) that “appropriate procedures for examining agenda-setting involve comparisons between media content over a certain period and the subjects that most people in the society are discussing”. It was evident from the findings that the coverage of the *Ebola* virus disease also bucks the trend in the Nigerian news reportage. Some of the regular and reliable beats from which the press source news are politics, business and the economy, the government, police and crime, the legislature, the judiciary and sports. Traditionally, news from these beats automatically grabs the headlines, and is given prominent play. But the outbreak of the dreaded *Ebola* virus disease temporarily halts this trend. For many weeks, because of its devastating health implications and threats to the socio-economic wellbeing of the Nigerian society, *Ebola*-related stories displaced many “traditional” front page stories to occupy prominent positions in the newspapers, such as the front and back pages – the pages that command the highest readership.

Findings from tables 5 and 6 show that the direction/slant of many of the stories by the newspapers on the coverage of *Ebola* disease outbreak was favourable, that is, they were positive stories that helps to reassure the public that the health crisis engendered by the dreaded disease would soon be brought under control. Some of the positive stories were about the efforts of government, health workers and international organizations to curtail the spread of the disease; victims being isolated and responding to treatment; efforts of researchers at developing vaccines to treat those infected; donations by foreign countries and non-governmental agencies towards treating infected persons; successful eradication of *Ebola* disease in the country, among others. Hence, this finding agrees with the assertion of Ganiyu (2010:48) that “reporting the activities of the society is a serious business and the job must be carried out with a high sense of responsibility by the reporter...that he does not misled the public deliberately and does not unnecessarily inflame public passion as to cause riot, chaos or disorderly conduct in the society”.

VI. CONCLUSION

The results of the study clearly show that Nigerian newspapers, especially the ones studied were alive to their social obligations to the society. During the harrowing period that the *Ebola* virus disease raged in the country, *The Punch* and *The Nigerian Tribune* relentlessly performed their surveillance, educative and persuasive roles, all in a bid to conscientized the Nigerian public about the mortal danger of the disease and the preventive measures against it. And while the epidemic lasted, the press played its social responsibility to the hilt by providing accurate, timely and comprehensive information on the dreaded disease which helped their audience to cope with the epidemic.

The newspapers have shown that at the core of their operations is a firm dedication to public welfare and safety. They amply demonstrated this by publishing news stories, features and editorials aimed at informing, educating through continuous advocacy and reorientating the public on the *Ebola* virus disease. The two dailies gave prominent play to *Ebola* related stories on their front page for maximum impact. In order to effectively tackle the *Ebola* virus disease outbreak, their resourceful editors put troops on the trail of health workers, government officials, etc. to ferret stories which turn the spotlight on the dreaded disease.

It is the contention of these researchers that the extent of coverage given to the outbreak of *Ebola* virus disease and the vigorous public awareness campaign mounted by the Nigerian press, alongside the unwavering support of other stakeholders such as government, health workers, development agencies, international organizations, among others played crucial roles in successful containment of the dreaded *Ebola* virus disease.

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