

Radio Stations Framing of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Borno State

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Abstract

The researchers examined radio stations framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in Borno state. The objectives of the paper were to examine the frequency of framing, issues framed, prominence given to issues, frames used and the direction of news framing of COVID-19 pandemic in the state. The researchers used content analysis method. The arguments of the study are theoretically grounded on framing and social responsibility theories. The findings showed that radio stations in Borno state did not frame issues of COVID-19 adequately; this shows that the stations did not meet the aspects of social responsibility theory and this might have contributed to the failure of Nigerians in Borno to appropriately respect and observe COVID-19 safety guides. It was recommended that radio stations should have a deliberate and written policy that will guide them on how to frame any public health emergency like COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Radio Framing, Radio Stations, News Framing

Introduction

Radio as a channel of mass communication is deployed by health experts through various strategies to inform, educate, create awareness and mobilise people to participate in development, strengthen values and shape public perception on public health emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic through news framing (UNESCO, 2020). Radio performs important functions via framing and reporting contemporary issues such as health that have impacts on the lives of peoples at various. Framing involves identifying, analysing and producing content like news on newsworthy events such as COVID-19. The process also requires access, immediacy and analytical skills (Fenton, 2010). Thus, news framing and reporting are journalistic fundamental activities of news media that ensure relevant occurrences that happen within an environment are reported. The occurrences could be international or local like COVID-19, which was first discovered in Wuhan, China in 2019 and later became a global pandemic. The media, therefore, is assumed to provide ethical and accurate information about it through framing that can minimise rumours, disinformation and fear and anxiety.

In Nigeria, the first index case of COVID-19 was recorded in Lagos on February 27, 2020, and in Borno state on April 19 (NCDC, 2020). The governments came up with quarantine measures to stem the spread of the infection. This effort was

coordinated at the national level by a 12-person Presidential Task Force PTF on COVID-19. The committee included government officials, public health experts, WHO representative and the media (State House, 2020). The committee had series of media briefings to avail citizens with information on the COVID-19. The briefings were covered by journalists who tried to ensure that issues surrounding the disease were framed in news. Also, the government through Ministry of Information and Culture, which supervises National Broadcast Commission (NBC), granted license waivers and debt relief to radio and television stations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Onyedinefu, 2020) because revenue generation of media organisations significantly dropped and the organisations were unable to pay taxes and empower their reporter to cover the pandemic (Obadofin, 2020). This, therefore, was aimed at encouraging radio stations to cope with impacts of the virus and participate in fighting it via journalistic activities. Similarly, the Borno State Government constituted a State Task Force (STF) on the pandemic, and some local government areas also established committees to work in a similar direction. The STF collaborated with PTF, WHO, and local government committees to coordinate the COVID-19 responses in the state in designing, equipping, and funding isolation centres; providing PEP tools and information on quarantine measures to the public through mainly radio stations. The responses include institutionalisation of COVID-19 Heroes Campaign that sought radio stations support because of their dominance in reaching audience (WHO, 2020a). Thus, radio stations were used as players in reducing the spread of the disease via the dissemination of information for awareness creation (WHO, 2020b).

The news framing of COVID-19 and other public health emergencies is to create awareness among publics to make right decisions that can help in protecting and preserving individuals and nation-states from viruses (Basch *et al* 2020). Media and journalists like medical health workers risk their lives and cover COVID-19 global pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). This demonstrates that news media is a pillar in addressing global and local public health challenges. Pan American Health Organisation PAHO (2020) stated that media should be socially responsible in framing COVID-19 by sourcing and reporting truthful information on causes, responses, and measures of the pandemic. Thus, news framing on the pandemic is evolving just like the disease globally, not to talk of framing by local radio stations in Borno state, which is plagued with Boko Haram insurgency and poor medical facilities. Hence, the way radio stations framed COVID-19 issues in terms of causes, symptoms, vaccines and preventive measures can impact public perception and acceptance and adherence to safety behaviours. The direction and intensity of the impact are not readily known which provides a knowledge gap to be filled. Thus this study was motivated by the need to determine the framing of the COVID-19 Pandemic by radio stations in Borno State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the frequency of radio stations news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in Borno State.

2. Ascertain the prominence of radio stations news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Find out how COVID-19 issues were framed on the radio stations.
4. Ascertain the direction of news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic by radio stations in Borno State.

COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency

The COVID-19 outbreak became one of the public health emergencies that are conceptualised as diseases that attack and have imminent power to create negative health impacts on human beings. The public health emergencies could be pandemics like COVID-19 or epidemics. The world has wrestled many man-made public health emergencies and natural disasters such as earthquakes (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). There are four categories of public health emergencies based on concerns, geographical magnitude and impacts on public, hazard severity and supremacy and capacity of an emergency to spread. The categorisations are Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), Public Health Emergency of Regional Concern (PHERC), Public Health Emergency of National Concern (PHENC) and Public Health Emergency of Community Concern (PHECC). When such outbreaks occur, countries in the world would have a substantial, moderate and minimal presence and impact of public health emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic is considered an emergency of international concern that has grounded global community with substantial effects with consequences such as increased mortality rates, morbidity and acute malnutrition (Boyd *et al* 2017; Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo, 2020). The spread of the COVID-19 prompted the WHO to declare the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30th January 2020 (Mustapha & Adedokun, 2020). The pandemic has symptoms such as severe fever, cough, sour throat, breathing difficulty, and other severe respiratory illnesses. Vaccines to prevent COVID-19 were discovered but acceptance remains a concern besides safety measures such as regular hand wash, physical distance, wearing a facemask. The COVID-19 has attracted multi-sectoral response that included establishment of laboratories, testing centres and awareness creation plan through media (Nasidi & Harry, 2006).

Media and Public Health Emergencies

Media is a significant subsystem in society; it influences perception and behaviours (Odorume, 2015; PAHO, 2020). The essentiality of media in public health emergencies is well-recognised in the 21st Century (WHO, 2005). The media's role in public health involves campaigns and framing toward sustainable healthcare system and diseases such as COVID-19 for appropriate attitudes and public practice (CDC, 2014; Odorume, 2015). Media like radio had provided public health campaigns against poliomyelitis, immunisation, malaria control, HIV/AIDS pandemic, and Ebola Virus Disease (Odorume, 2015). Radio sets public agenda, serves as discourse forum, informs and educates via frames on health matters (Oyama & Okpara, 2017). Olubunmi, Ofurum &

Tob (2016) argued that the efficacy of public health messages is dependent on the effectiveness of the broad communication strategy. They found radio to be effective media in reaching out to Nigerians because it reaches larger adults' audience in Maiduguri environs. The framing of emergencies such as Ebola, Lassa fever and COVID-19 differ based on virus nature, health infrastructure, environment, media organisations, and service delivery (Smith & Smith, 2016; WHO, 2018; Wogu *et al* 2019).

Framing and Reporting of COVID-19

There are studies on newspaper framing and COVID-19 (Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo, 2020); broadcast media framing and COVID-19 (Effiong *et al* 2020) and online media and coverage of COVID-19 pandemic and how patients can relate with health professionals (Basch *et al* 2020; Ogbodo *et al* 2020). Smailhodzic, Hooijsma, Boonstra & Langley (2016) submitted that social media is used to frame and guide relationships between patients and healthcare professionals that is why Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) stated that social media usage in contact tracing for COVID-19. Ogbodo *et al* (2020) said human interest and fear frames dominated online media framing of COVID-19 pandemic and framing lacked coherence and sufficient self-efficacy due to media obsession for breaking news. In study on framing COVID-19 by BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and the *People's Daily*, Mutua & Ong'ong'a (2020) found that the stories were framed on economic consequence, human interest, attribution of responsibility and health difficulty frames. They stated that media should stop the repetition of themes and narratives that relate to discrimination and stigmatisation (p.7).

Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo (2020) found that framing pattern adopted by newspapers helped Nigerians to take precautionary measures due to provision of effective awareness. Effiong *et al* (2020) examined the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) campaigns on COVID-19. They found that the campaign has made an impact on audience behaviour to curb the spread of the virus. The America's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC (2014) found that radio provided 24-hour coverage of COVID-19 because it had power to influence public and stimulate responses. Basch *et al* (2020) stated that online video framing of COVID-19 in the USA had more death frame' while preventive frame was given little attention. Hence, media framing is mix-grilled that involves factual information and fake information.

Framing and Social Responsibility

The study uses framing and social responsibility theories because they can explain radio stations' framing of COVID. Studies (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) have suggested that framing theory pushes the arguments of agenda-setting that talks about the emphasis news media give to an issue. The framing of news by radio would help in knowing how an audience should be more informed and awareness about COVID-19 in Borno State. This can be achieved through construction of news via frames, amount and consistency of coverage to an issue that is considered salient; prominence given to an issue; and direction. COVID-19 has been framed

through coverage by radio stations in Borno state which might have likely contributed to the way citizens in the state believed, and behaved concerning the pandemic. Therefore, framing theory provides a framework for how news on COVID-19 is created and presented by radio stations.

On the other hand, the argument for the social responsibility of radio is that media should be professional in whatever it reports and ensures public trust (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Asemah, Nwammua & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) said public trust as a claim of social responsibility theory and it is the obligations of media such as radio and journalists to ensure that news such as COVID-19 pandemic is framed to serve society, support and maintain public order. This should be done through professional standards, and self and governmental regulations. The information media provide through framing would guide the public to make informed decisions in relation to COVID-19 pandemic (Asemah *et al* 2016). Therefore, radio stations in Borno state are expected to frame news on COVID-19 in a manner that suits the nuances of the audience who had been bastardised by years of insurgency, terrorism, a pocket of communal and farmer-herder conflicts, and emergencies, to ensure they believe, accept and act accordingly.

Methodology

This research used content analysis method to examine the news contents of radio stations in Borno State. They are eight (8) broadcast media stations (two television and six radio stations). Out of the six (6) radio stations, three stations - BRTV FM, Peace FM, Dandal Kura FM- were purposively selected because they had qualified journalists to produce news content, they had the equipment and they had a wider audience in the state. The selection of the radio station was also influenced by the twin issues of ownership and control representations. The researchers purposively selected March, April, May, June, and July 2020 which was period when the first index case of COVID-19 was discovered in Nigeria as a whole and Borno state in particular (NCDC, 2020) to when travel restrictions began to ease out.

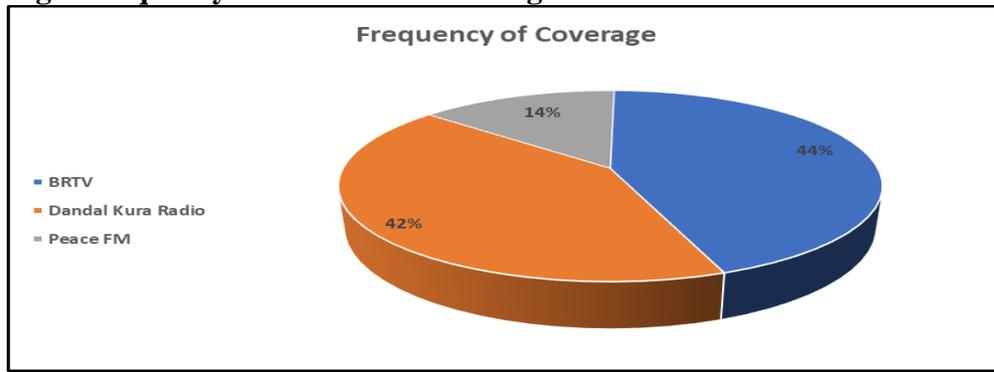
The population of this study is the total news bulletins produced by the selected media organisations within the selected period. The total population was Four Hundred and Fifty-Nine (459) news bulletins, One Hundred and Fifty-Three (153) daily news bullets from each station. The study adopted a Constructed Week as sampling technique. Firstly, all Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays of each selected month were stratified into different strata. Thereafter, in each stratum, a day was selected through a simple random selection process that led to the emergence of a constructed week in each month. This process was differently applied to each of the three select radio stations. The process produced three (3) Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays each in the selected months. Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin & Chang (2001), one week Constructed Week sample is adequate to represent six months. Therefore, one constructed week in a month constructed gives representation. The sample size was 105 days from the three stations. The unit of analysis was lead paragraph of news items broadcast by the select stations. This study only examined the content of news items on COVID-19. News items were counted and examined to determine issues and frames in the pandemic coverage. The lead of news items was selected because it professionally contains most important information. The frame categories are

symptoms, preventive measures, reported cases, death, and vaccine. A coding sheet was used as an instrument that contains the frame categories identified above. The sheet was validated and piloted.

Results Presentation

The study counted 434 news items from the sampled bulletins from the sampled radio stations. Out of the coded news items, 133 (30.65%) news framed are on COVID-19 related issues, while 301(69.35%) news framed are on other issues. This indicates that only 31% of the total news items were on COVID-19 related issues. This is also indicative of the level of attention given to the pandemic by the radio stations.

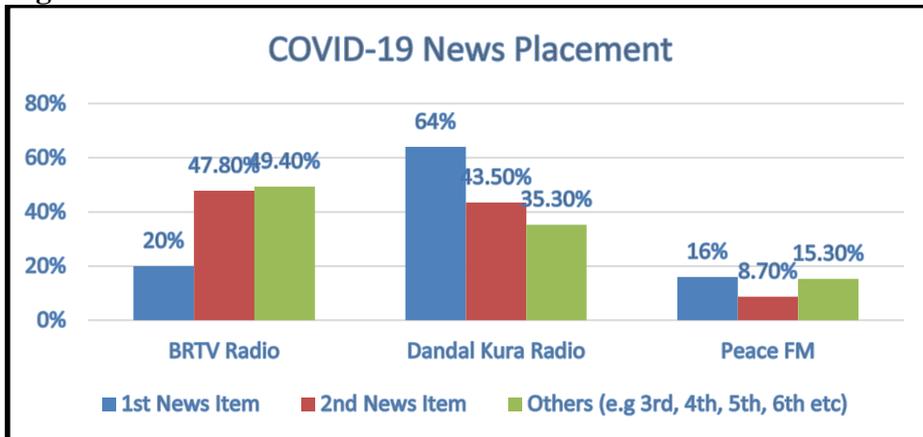
Fig.1 Frequency of COVID-19 Coverage



Field Study, 2021

Fig. 1 indicates that the BRTV and Dandal Kura Radio have higher coverage of COVID-19 news stories with 44% and 42% respectively while the FRCN’s Peace FM has only 14% of the total coded stories on Covid-19.

Fig. 2 Placement of framed News on COVID-19



Field Study, 2021

Fig. 2 above shows the outcome of placement of framed news on the COVID-19 pandemic. It indicates the prominence given to the issues framed by the radio stations. Of all the COVID-19 stories that were 1st item on the bulletin, 64% were on Dandal

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Kura radio, 20% were found on BRTV radio and 16% on Peace FM. Relatively, Peace FM seems to give more prominence to COVID-19. For the 2nd news item in the bulletin, BRTV had a record 47.8% compared to 43.5% for Dandal Kura Radio and 8.7% for Peace FM. COVID-19 news placed in other positions on the news bulletin showed that BRTV recorded 49.4% as compared to 35.3% for Dandal Kura and 15.3% for Peace FM.

Table 1: COVID-19 related Issues framed in News

Radio Station	Causes	Symptoms	Prevention	Vaccine	Confirmed Case	Discharged Case	Death	Others
BRTV Radio	00	00	34	00	01	01	00	22
Dandal Kura Radio	00	00	21	02	12	00	03	18
Peace FM	00	00	05	00	05	00	00	09
Total	00	00	60 (45.11%)	02 (1.50%)	18 (13.53%)	01 (0.75%)	03 (2.25%)	49 (36.84%)

Field Study, 2021

Table 1 above shows issues on COVID-19 framed by the radio stations. The result shows that prevention issue takes the highest portion with 45.11%. This issue is followed by others with 36.84%, confirmed cases 13.53%, deaths 2.25%, while issues of vaccine and discharged cases took the least with 1.50% and 0.75% respectively. No news item was identified that covered issues of causes and symptoms of the virus.

Table 2: COVID-19 Frames in News

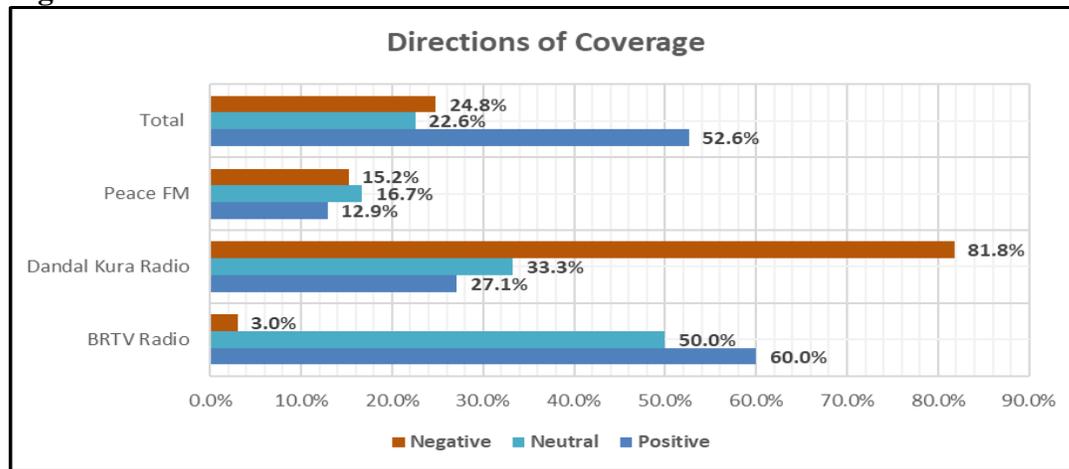
Radio Station	Origin & Facts	Emergence Reasons	Agents Involved	Solutions	Panic & Fear	Socio-political & Economic Impacts
BRTV Radio	01	00	01	39	00	17
Dandal Kura Radio	03	00	04	20	19	10
Peace FM	00	00	00	04	06	09
Total	04 (3.00%)	00 (0.00%)	05 (3.75%)	63 (47.36%)	25 (18.79%)	36 (27.10%)

Field Study, 2021

The study also identified different frames that the news coverage is based on. The result showed that news items were mostly framed based on solutions to the pandemic, which has the highest coverage with 47.36%. This was followed by news items framed to

reveal the socio-political and economic impacts of the pandemic on the lives of people with 27.10%, and those framed showing public panic and fear have 18.79%. The result also shows that news items that are framed based on origin and facts about the virus and agents involved have 3.00% and 3.75% respectively. The result shows that there were no news items framed based on the reasons for the emergence of the virus.

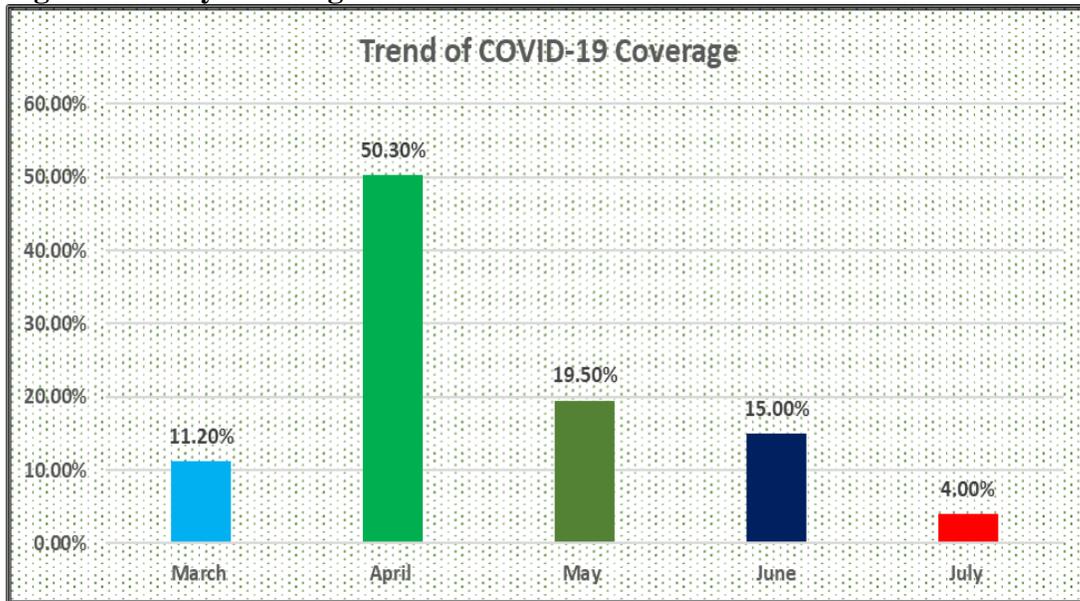
Fig.3: Direction of News Frames on COVID-19



Field Study, 2021

Fig. 3 above shows the direction of news framing on COVID-19 issues by radio stations in Borno. The result shows that each of the radio stations has framed COVID-19 news from positive, negative, and neutral perspectives. The data indicate that most of the stories in BRTV are framed in the positive direction with 60% then followed by Dandal Kura with 27.1% and Peace FM with only 12.9%. This shows that the station framed the stories in more positive frames. This is followed by neutral frames in which BRTV accounted for 50%, Dandal Kura 33.3%, and Peace FM had 16.7%. On the negative frame, Dandal Kura has 81% of the stories that were framed negatively while Peace FM has 15.2% while BRTV has only 3.0%. This shows that it is only Dandal Kura that framed most of the stories in negative frames. Furthermore, the result shows that the radio stations in Borno state have collectively framed the stories on COVID-19 in more positive frames representing 52.6%, which is followed by negative frames representing 24.8%, while the direction of news frames on neutral represent 22.6%.

Fig. 4: Monthly Framing of COVID-19 News



Field Study, 2021

Fig. 4 shows the frequencies of monthly framing of COVID-19 news reported by radio stations. The result shows that in March there were 11.2% of news items on COVID-19 framed. This was a few days after the first index case of COVID-19 was recorded on 27th February 2020 in Nigeria. However, the framing of COVID-19 news tripled in April of 2020, reaching 50.3%. Then the framing of the COVID-19 issues suddenly dropped from 50.3% to 19.5% and 15% in May and June 2020 respectively. Furthermore, the number of stories framed by the radio stations dropped in July to only 4%. This indicates that within the early months of the pandemic, the radio stations did not provide consistent framing of the issue to create awareness and guide people to understand the virus.

Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that the three radio stations framed the pandemic differently. The stations allocated less space for the COVID-19 related news compared to other issues. The space for COVID-19 stories was 31%, while other issues had 69%. This shows that there is significant space meant for other news than the pandemic. Fig. 1 indicates that the BRTV and Dandal Kura Radio provided higher framing. Altogether, the findings showed that news stories on COVID-19 took 30.65% of the entire news coverage of the stations. This is also indicative of the attention given to the coverage. These findings justified that when the COVID-19 issue started, the media assigned enormous airtime to covering the trends. Despite the continuous occurrences of issues on business, politics, entertainment, and the Boko Haram conflict, the radio stations provide space and attention to the pandemic. This is because the outbreak generated panic and fear among the populace. This is an allusion to how WHO (2015) described

public emergency issues as “events of imminent threats and power to create serious negative health impacts on human beings and that efforts to address such threats require more coordinated actions from various stakeholders such as health experts and media.” The findings of this study indicated a firm connection between the radio stations and the frequency of media coverage the media give the issues of COVID-19 that might have emanated from the activities of the COVID-19 response teams at state and national levels. It is also the justification for the WHO declaration that the COVID-19 pandemic is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) that requires coordinated attention (Mustapha & Adedokun, 2020).

It can be inferred that the COVID-19 news frames did not get the prominence they deserve. The placement of news is another indication of the importance attached to a particular issue of public concern as contained in the core assumption of the framing theory. Based on the findings on frequency, there were spots allocated for COVID-19 related stories, but the spaces were not prominent. These spaces were allocated as part of the social responsibility role of the stations to address issues. The stations, however, did not have deliberate, written policies that address COVID-19 news. Most of the stories were buried in the third, fourth, fifth or sixth slots while few were presented on first or second slots. Therefore, COVID-19 related stories were not given the required prominence which might have provided a direct or indirect connection with the prevalent issues of flouting the quarantine protocols. The emphasis a news medium gives to an issue through prominence may influence how the audience attach importance to an issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

It was found that COVID-19 preventive measures dominated the news framing by radio stations as the least attention was allotted to causes and symptoms of the virus. The global, national and local health authorities were more concerned with identifying and isolating infected persons to protect the public, as a result, the news content during the pandemic focused on educating people about the preventive measures. The core activities during the response were media programmes and jingles as well as publishing hygiene and public health protection measures; contact tracing and media briefing. The issue of preventive measures got the highest portion because the crux of the COVID-19 campaign centred on communicating preventive and quarantine measures. The health authorities showed that the best way to fight the virus was to enact and educate people with effective preventive measures. Consequently, the media also focused on the issue.

The findings showed that framing of COVID-19 allotted attention to strategies of stemming the virus and socio-political and economic impacts than discussing its origin, facts, emergence and agents. These parameters used to frame the pandemic are based on journalism context. It is based on the McQuail (2005, p.555) stated that framing relies on the “way news content is typically shaped and contextualised by journalists.” The attention radio gave to preventive measures also made them frame COVID-19 issues within frames such as origin and facts, solutions, panic and fear,

socio-political and economic impact and agents involved. Most of the news stories were framed within the prism of solving the global, national and local health crisis created by the outbreak of the virus. Using the proposition of framing theory, the framing by the radio stations took place at the first and second levels; thus, one, at the level of a sender - like journalists who select what to report- text - content produced by journalists (Entman, 1993). Framing focus on the central idea(s) selected and principles of selection of an idea from an event – during the COVID-19 briefings based on what reporters and editors perceived as reality; making the selected idea more relevant via emphasis by using journalistic skills in a news bulletin to promote a problem definition, casual interpretation, make moral evaluation and treatment and make recommendations on how the problem defined should be solved in a news report (Entman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Significantly, reporters and editors considered the issue of solution as salient and thus framed most of COVID-19 related stories within this prism. It can be inferred that this was done to complement the coordinated response such that the task forces are focusing on the actual implementation of the quarantine measures, and the media is focusing on framing its content toward solving the pandemic. This is a parcel social responsibility of media in society, especially the developing countries.

The findings further showed that the radio stations positively framed the pandemic. The core assumption of the social responsibility theory is that the media should operate with freedom, but be vested with certain responsibilities (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Because of the money media organisations can generate from a news, they may decide not to give the required framing in a positive direction. Despite the profit maximisation factor, the radio stations have performed their social responsibility by positively framing the issue of COVID-19 to impact the people's behaviours towards the public health emergency. The monthly framing shows that the framing the pandemic fluctuated. The findings also showed that when the index case was recorded in Nigeria, the issues of the pandemic were framed in news for two months (March and April). But they kept dropping. More so, radio stations reduced interest in framing the pandemic after the first two months even though the pandemic was on and people were dying. This kind of framing seems to have lowered the social responsibility roles of the radio stations that are expected to provide objective and fair information consistently so that people have sufficient information to make informed decisions (Asemah *et al*).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers conclude that local radio stations framed COVID-19 pandemic. The radio stations framing was done to create awareness on the public health emergency created by the virus. The way the radio stations framed the pandemic could not be unconnected to the individual journalists' socio-cultural and religious understandings and predispositions on COVID-19 as suggested by framing theory. Based on the monthly framing of the issue, the radio stations downplayed the pandemic after two months of the outbreak; even though it continued to ravage many countries around the

world. The stations, therefore did not meet some of the international obligations in terms of provision of information consistently on the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, BRTV radio, Dandal Kura, and Peace FM radio stations, within the period of this study, did not adequately perform their social responsibility in responding to the COVID-19 public emergency as ought to be within social responsibility theory and framing so that people would be fully aware of the event and probably act accordingly. Thus, the researchers recommend that local radio stations should have a deliberate and written policy that will guide them on how to frame any public health emergency like COVID-19 and also perform and sustain their role in the information dissemination until the crisis is tamed.

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